

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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Nontraditional Students in Nontraditional Graduate Programs  
in Education: Coping with the Conflicts Between Family and  
Career Responsibilities and the Institutional Demands of  
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Abstract approved: \_\_\_\_\_

Karen *Higgins*

This qualitative study was designed to identify factors that might affect the psychological and educational wellness of nontraditional students in nontraditional graduate programs in Education.

Specifically, informants were selected purposefully from three Oregon State University extended-campus graduate programs in Education. Student informants were working professionals with family obligations. Faculty informants were selected because of their extensive involvement in the delivery and instruction of these programs.

The informants shared their experiences and opinions in focus group and in-depth interviews. The initial focus group interview yielded basic concepts and categories that guided subsequent in-depth interviews with nine students and three

faculty members. Transcripts of the in-depth interviews, along with focus group data, were crafted into narrative profiles of the informants. Analysis and comparison of the informants' profiles enabled examination of patterns and commonalities that appeared to be present among their experiences.

The following conclusions were generated from the findings:

1. Family support and involvement are foundational factors in the attainment of the degree.

2. Financial implications must be of prime concern in the student's preliminary plans to enroll in a graduate program.

3. Wellness, both psychological and physical, can be significantly impacted by preoccupation with the academic demands of the program.

4. Time management is basic to successfully balancing family and career responsibilities and the institutional demands of higher education.

5. Workplace support and the field application of course work are critical elements in maintaining career momentum while undertaking a meaningful learning experience.

6. Institutional and program requirements must be clearly understood by the student at the time of admission.

7. The program coordinator and the student's major professor are the main agents for institutional interface and outcome attainment.

8. Flexibility is required on the part of all stakeholders in these programs. This is especially important in three areas: (a) scheduling, (b) delivery, and (c) curriculum and instruction.

9. The cohort model provides a "second family" that is generally the best coping mechanism within the program.

This study has implications for all stakeholders in nontraditional higher education: administrators, faculty, students, and employers.

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Nontraditional Students in Nontraditional Graduate Programs  
in Education: Coping with the Conflicts Between Family and  
Career Responsibilities and the Institutional Demands of  
Higher Education

by

Allan A. Brazier

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# Nontraditional Students in Nontraditional Graduate Programs in Education: Coping with the Conflicts Between Family and Career Responsibilities and the Institutional Demands of Higher Education

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

### The Problem

Few innovations in higher education have met with more ready acceptance by a diversity of people and institutions than non-traditional study and its various forms--external degree, Extended University, Open University, University Without Walls, and others. Although the movement that gave birth to these models and plans is difficult to define with any precision, people share a common understanding about the nature of this new concept of education. Its greatest departure from traditional education is its explicit recognition that education should be measured by what the student knows rather than how or where he or she learns it. Beyond that it builds on two basic premises--that opportunity should be equal for all who wish to learn and that learning is a lifelong process unconfined to one's youth or to campus classrooms. Few would quarrel with the logic of these concepts, but the implementation of educational programs to meet such new needs requires considerable imagination, thought, and study. (Cross & Valley, 1974, p. 1)

A catalyst to the growth and accessibility of graduate programs is the increased participation of nontraditional adult learners (Lynton & Elman, 1987). The ever upward progression of an educated adult population and work force and increased educational requirements for high-paying jobs

might be the single most powerful factor in this continued influx of adult students (Brazziel, 1989). The need for continuing professional development has grown dramatically as budget constraints demand more efficiency and employment opportunities become more competitive (Swenson, 1995). For many, however, it is economically impractical to take leave from work in order to study, and there are few guarantees that re-entry after graduation will be at the same level, let alone in the same department.

Adults generally prefer more active approaches to learning and value opportunities to integrate academic learning with their life and work experiences (Benshoff, 1991). An emerging trend involves outreach or extended-campus delivery of programs for working professionals, where a graduate degree can be pursued concurrently with full employment. Success of this nontraditional education depends on respect for individual learning styles, schedule differences, family responsibilities, and professional commitments (Sheehan, McMenamin, & McDevitt, 1992).

The intent of program planners is to provide an opportunity for professionals to fulfill personal and career growth requirements while maintaining the security of full employment. The reality is that this evolution is generally guided by the academic standards and administrative procedures that define traditional degree programs.

Problems can and do occur when these programs do not adequately provide for the unique needs and characteristics of the students that are recruited (Cross, 1981).

### Statement of Purpose

This qualitative study seeks to gather data that may help promote the psychological and educational wellness of nontraditional students in nontraditional higher education programs by informing planners and beneficiaries of extended education of the human issues involved in the experience. The study is comprised of the stories of nine educators who have found themselves pursuing graduate degrees while coping with the responsibilities of full-time employment and adult and family life, and the reflection of three instructors with whom they have worked. The intended audience includes students, instructors, coordinators, administrators, and program planners whose own experiences with higher education have been on-campus and traditional.

This study has particular personal significance to me. I had been hired as a full-time outreach program coordinator in higher education just prior to the time I enrolled in the doctoral program of which this study is a part. It soon became evident to me that I needed to obtain a post-graduate degree if I was to maintain my position and attain any

advancement. The doctoral program in which I enrolled was designed to provide continuing professional development for a cohort of experienced practicing educators: public school teachers and administrators, district level administrators and consultants, higher education faculty, and state department specialists. The emphasis of the program was to bridge the gap that can occur between theory and practice when too much time elapses between research and application. The focus of the course work was on presenting the most current thinking on issues that are affecting education in Oregon today.

When I finally undertook submitting my program of studies for approval, I began to appreciate the enormity of the journey upon which I had embarked. My time and energy were focused on my job and on establishing a new home for my family, and so the first few terms of the program seemed to be a string of somewhat unrelated classes. I did not have a sense of direction and found it difficult to develop a passion for the content of these evening and weekend courses. Consequently, I had difficulty completing assignments and so accumulated several incomplete grades. There also seemed to be a role conflict between being a graduate student and being a full-time member of the university faculty, especially in attending meetings that dealt with graduate program issues.

This raised my stress level considerably and caused me to rely on coping skills I never knew I had. I began to talk openly about my concerns with peers and colleagues. My major professor helped me think through ways to personalize the assignments that were overdue. I articulated the first statement of my research question. This helped me begin to impose a more personal pattern to the materials that had been covered in the preceding terms.

As I worked through the internship requirements of the program, I began to involve myself more in the literature in an effort to put my observations and reflections in perspective. My internship was closely tied to my job and focused mainly on the continuing professional development of elementary and middle school teachers. It seemed that by studying my own practice, I finally took some ownership in the interpretation of the content of the course work. With this personally meaningful focus, I was motivated sufficiently to reprioritize my time in order to remove the incomplete grades.

Where things began to break down for me again was when I neared the end of the academic part of the program and began to struggle with the logistics of research, writing, and working full time. At this same time, the Oregon State University Graduate School ruled that I could not receive a graduate degree from the same academic department that

employed me. I chose to leave my full-time employment and became a full-time student for two academic terms in order to cope with the anticipated demands of program completion. I wondered if there might have been another way to achieve this goal.

### Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study are (a) to identify points of conflict between family and career responsibilities and higher education institutional demands experienced by nontraditional students in nontraditional graduate programs, (b) to examine successful coping skills and strategies for managing these conflicts, and (c) to suggest ways program planners and beneficiaries can apply these findings.

### Rationale

In comparison with traditional students, relatively little is known about the adjustment of the rapidly growing population of nontraditional college students. Even less is known about the adjustments required of the students enrolled in the recent phenomenon of nontraditional graduate programs (Ashar & Skenes, 1993; Chartrand, 1992). In a review of studies of the graduate school experience, Baird (1995) found that most of the research on which these

analyses were based had been conducted in a select group of universities and did not include the major segment of the graduate student population who pursued pragmatic career-oriented fields, usually master's programs, often part-time and often after, or simultaneously with, full-time employment. Baird concluded with a recommendation for research on the experiences of these students.

According to Locke (1989), the adequacy of a research method depends on the purpose of the research and the questions being asked. Much of student research, however, has been characterized by carefully circumscribed and narrowly focused questions (Bloland, 1992). Sechrest and Scott (1993) suggested that traditional research has accessed such variables as age, ethnicity, sex, and test scores, which are readily available measures, and has ignored what might be more significant factors that are more difficult to define and measure, such as motivation and personal conflicts involving work, nonacademic career opportunities, and family. By continuing to rely on the same measures in study after study, we are limiting our scope of inquiry and ultimately our understanding of the problem.

Concerned that the interior life of the college student is largely inaccessible to objective instruments and quantitative approaches, Bloland (1992) recommended the use of qualitative research approaches to greatly expand the

breadth and depth of our understanding of the student in higher education as a developing participant in his or her own learning process.

Lipschutz (1993) acknowledged that, inevitably and beyond the control of graduate schools, factors in the lives of graduate students will bear in significant ways on whether and how quickly they complete their programs. These factors include: (a) economic and employment considerations, (b) personal or family illness, (c) responsibilities for children or parents that cannot be delegated to others, and (d) spousal (or significant other) considerations. My goal is to examine these situational "life" factors in the experiences of nontraditional students.

### Delimitations

Seidman (1991) defined the researcher's task as looking for connections among the experiences of the individuals he or she interviews and presenting these stories in a way that opens the possibility for readers to connect their own stories to those in the study. Seidman further stated that interviewing a sample of participants who all experience similar structural and social conditions gives enormous power to the stories of a relatively few participants.

This study has been delimited to interviews of purposefully selected students enrolled in three extended-campus graduate programs of the Oregon State University School of Education: (a) masters degree with an Adult Education major and a concentration in Adult Basic Education (Ed.M./ABE), (b) doctoral degree with an Education major and a concentration in Community College Leadership (Ed.D./CCL), and (c) doctoral degree with an Education major and a concentration in Middle-Level Education (Ed.D./MLE).

#### Definition of Terms

The following definitions clarify terms that have been used in the study:

Adult Education: A process whereby persons whose major social roles are characteristic of adult status undertake systematic and sustained learning activities for the purpose of bringing about changes in knowledge, attitudes, values, or skills (Darkenwald & Merriam, 1982).

Nontraditional programs: Programs that are unconventional with respect to location, schedule, students, faculty, methods of instruction, and curricular content (Cross & Zusman, 1977).

Nontraditional students: People who combine adult responsibilities of job, home, and family with educational activities (Cross & Zusman, 1977).

Self-directed learner: Differentiated from learning in more traditional formal settings in that the learner chooses to assume the primary responsibility for planning, carrying out, and evaluating those learning experiences (Caffarella, 1993).

## CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### Introduction

This study investigated the experiences of selected students and instructors who participated in three Oregon State University extended-campus graduate programs in Education. These informants shared their experiences and opinions in focus group and in-depth interviews. The goal was to advise prospective students and inform program instructors and administrators by identifying factors that might affect the psychological and educational wellness of nontraditional students in nontraditional graduate programs.

The first section of the review of literature focuses on learning in the context of the changes and role conflicts that ensue during the cyclical periods of adult life. Characteristics that distinguish nontraditional students from the adult students traditionally served by higher education are identified. Recommended modes and methods of instruction are presented.

The second section considers nontraditional ways of providing services and graduate programs for working professionals, including a discussion of the issues of persistence, retention, and completion.

## The Adult Learner

The inseparability of the learner from the adult, the family, the cultures, the profession or occupation, and the emotions of being human creates the fabric of the older individuals who enroll in higher education programs (Heimlich & Norland, 1994).

Cross (1981) observed that no single profile can be regarded as representative of the adult learner, even when one looks at that small group of nontraditional adults who choose to pursue graduate degrees. Their experiences are extensive and varied; they have individualized perceptions of themselves and where they are going; and they are pursuing education for a great variety of reasons.

### Characteristics of the Adult Learner

Adult students have diverse characteristics and life circumstances that affect their participation in education. These characteristics, described by Knowles (1980) in his andragogical model of teaching, include: (a) the possession of a wealth of previous experience and an intrinsic motivation for learning, (b) the need to be self-directing, and (c) the preference for a task-centered orientation of learning (Knowles, 1980; Merriam & Caffarella, 1991; Sargent & Schlossberg, 1988).

### Developmental Stages and Life Plans

Recognition of the developmental stages of careers, families, and individuals provides a better understanding of the stresses and conflicts arising from various roles, especially when high-demand stages of two roles occur simultaneously (Miller, 1986). Systems theory emphasizes the interrelatedness of individual, career, and family and identifies how satisfaction or dissatisfaction in one area affects the others (Schneider, 1990).

In her work with adults as learners, Cross (1981) identified three types of life plans: (a) linear life plan (education when young, work through the middle years, leisure when elderly); (b) redistribution of work, education, and leisure into recurring cycles; and (c) blended life plan (combining leisure, work, and study activities concurrently throughout life). Cross predicted that the trend toward longer, healthier life spans would result in greater emphasis on the blended life plan.

### Transitions and Change

Sargent and Schlossberg (1988) suggested that adult behavior is determined by transitions, not age. Adults are motivated to make transitions by a continual need to belong, control, master, renew, and take stock. One explanation for

transition may be found in Hughes and Graham's (1990) work. These researchers identified six life roles (relationships with self, work, friends, community, partner, and family) that go through cycles of initiation, adaptation, reassessment, and reconciliation. An individual may be at a different stage in each role simultaneously. The conflict or lack of congruence between two or more of these role cycles may spur the process of career change.

For Sargent and Schlossberg (1988), adult readiness for change depended on four factors: (a) self, (b) situation, (c) support, and (d) strategies. Leibowitz and Lea (1985) provided a list of coping skills for managing transition: (a) perceiving and responding to transitions, (b) developing and using internal and external support systems, (c) reducing emotional and physiological distress, and (d) planning and implementing change.

### Self-Direction

According to Knowles (1970), one of the almost universal initial needs of adults is to learn how to take responsibility for their own learning through self-directed inquiry, how to learn collaboratively with the help of colleagues rather than to compete with them, and especially how to learn by analyzing one's own experience.

The concept of self-directed learning has received more attention and has more proponents than any other area in adult education (Garrison, 1992). Three recent books on self-direction in adult learning were written from three different points of view: (a) Candy (1991) discussed self-direction from the framework of constructivist sociology, (b) Piskurich (1993) used behaviorism and instructional systems design to frame his discussion, and (c) Brockett and Hiemstra (1991) used the perspective of humanism in their work on self-direction.

Caffarella (1993) concluded that the ability to be primarily responsible and in control of what, where, and how one learns is critical to survival and prosperity in a world of continuous personal, community, and societal changes.

### The Nontraditional Adult Learner

Cross (1980) defined the nontraditional student as an adult who returns to school full- or part-time while maintaining family, employment, and other responsibilities of adult life. Cross noted that these students have also been referred to as adult students, re-entry students, returning students, and adult learners.

Despite the increasing numbers of nontraditional students, we have little information on their learning styles or on how their approach to academics differs from that of the traditional student (Sheehan, McMenamin, & McDevitt, 1992). Nontraditional students come to university with life experiences that are both quantitatively and qualitatively different from those of traditional students (Kerka, 1989). Most nontraditional students have already established a career and they enroll in course work for practical reasons, such as the enhancement of vocational and avocational opportunities. Traditional students are more likely to attend college for social and economic reasons and because it is the traditional path to take upon graduation from high school (Tinto, 1975).

Nontraditional students may also be "first-generation students," the first in their families to attend a postsecondary institution. Although few American colleges or universities keep precise statistics on the number of first-generation students enrolled, there is general agreement that those numbers are growing as a college degree becomes a prerequisite for more and more jobs. These students often face unique challenges in their quest for a degree. Conflicting obligations, false expectations, and lack of preparation or support are among the factors that may hinder their success (London, 1992).

Some nontraditional students may be considered "high-risk." For example, an older student might also be academically under prepared. In addition to inadequate academic backgrounds, students interviewed by Richardson and Skinner (1992) cited lack of experience with or knowledge of time-management, the economic realities of college life, and the impersonal, bureaucratic nature of institutions of higher education as obstacles to getting a degree. Jones and Watson (1990) insisted that at the institutional level, administrators, instructors, and advisors must engage in behaviors that facilitate persistence and completion of the program

The differences between traditional and nontraditional students suggest different student needs. Programs and services that emphasize career attainment, academic self-efficacy, and family support are likely to become more important as the nontraditional student population increases (Chartrand, 1992).

### Adult Education

Despite rapid growth in recent years, programs of graduate study and research in adult education are still a very small presence on most university campuses. Usually attached to schools of education, but seldom enjoying full

departmental status, programs for the preparation of adult educators typically exist in an anomalous situation, striving for understanding and a niche in an environment heavily oriented to the education of young people (Darkenwald & Merriam, 1982).

While the concept of education has been analyzed extensively in recent philosophical literature, the concept of adult education has not been so clearly delineated. The research literature suggests, however, that adult students must do more than just listen; they must read, write, discuss, or be engaged in solving problems. To be actively involved, students must engage in such higher-order thinking tasks as analysis, synthesis, and evaluation (Elias & Merriam, 1995).

### Learning Environment

This concept, introduced by Knowles (1970), suggested that activities conducted prior to and during the first session could greatly affect the learning environment. These activities included: (a) promotional materials and announcements; (b) activities designed to assess learner needs prior to the event; (c) physical arrangements; and (d) the opening session, including greeting, learning activity overview, introductions, and treatment by the instructor.

More recently, adult educators are recognizing that factors in the learning environment related to psychological, social, and cultural conditions also exert a powerful influence on the growth and development of learners (Hiemstra, 1991).

Many institutions have fairly rigid policies regarding registration, attendance, and the format for classes. Some evidence indicates that time away from formal schooling affects the graduate experience and results in a different and probably more difficult transition back to formal study for older graduate students (Lipschutz, 1993). McCabe (1989) suggested that student services should depend heavily on information technology for accurate and timely information in order to offer good advice and direction to students, to accurately monitor their progress, to give continual feedback, and to provide the correct intervention strategy based on accurate information.

#### Teaching Methods and Curriculum

Zwerling (1992) claimed that teaching methods that are based on rote learning are not useful to adults who enroll primarily to search for meaning and redefinition. Rather, a pedagogy that emphasizes critical and analytical thinking is likely to be far more relevant to them. In addition,

Zwerling felt that colleges should rethink the curriculum, organize requirements into coherent clusters of interdisciplinary courses that center around themes, and offer them in organized blocks of time so that adults could more easily fit their academic activities into an already busy schedule.

Baker (1996) emphasized that, as a course developer, the professor should design the course in ways that actively engage students in the learning process. Assigned readings can be used for basic knowledge acquisition and classroom time can be used for application of concepts, thereby allowing students to practice decision making and problem solving in as realistic a setting as possible. Palmer (1996) cautioned, however, that sensitivity to practitioner demands for applied studies need not lead to the vocationalization of graduate curricula. Instead, the details of how to perform specific jobs might best be left to internships, on-the-job training, or continuing education administered separately from degree programs.

A number of grading traditions may be in place that penalize adult learners who wish to set their own pace or level of achievement, such as limitations in the use of learning contracts, pass/fail grades, and incomplete grades. Brockett and Hiemstra (1991) stressed that administrators who can affect decisions regarding education should be

helped to understand the theory, research, and teaching-learning approaches related to self-direction in learning.

Journal writing is a less formal, less threatening way for older reentry learners to approach writing in a course. This writing form is closest to natural speech, according to Schneider (1994), and "flows" without self-consciousness or inhibition. It reveals thought processes and mental habits, it aids memory, and it provides a context for healing and growth. Journals are a safe place to practice writing daily without the restrictions of form, audience, and evaluation.

### Collaborative Learning

Brookfield (1986) observed that one of the most frequently mentioned characteristics of adult education is the fact that it should be collaborative or participatory in nature. Collaborative learning assumes that knowledge is socially, rather than individually, constructed by communities of individuals and that the shaping and testing of ideas is a process in which anyone can participate. Furthermore, it stresses the importance of common inquiry in learning, a process through which learners begin to experience knowledge as something that is created by them rather than something that is transmitted from the

facilitator or teacher to the learner (Novotny, Seifert, & Werner, 1991; Sheridan, 1989).

The most frequently mentioned problems and issues in the literature about collaborative learning include: (a) cultural biases toward competition and individualism that mitigate against collaboration, (b) the traditional class structure that frequently does not allow sufficient time for true collaboration to occur or for group members to establish trust and a sense of group security, (c) the difficulty in providing feedback that accommodates the needs of both the group and the individual, (d) the reluctance of learners to accept their peers as legitimate sources of knowledge, (e) the inability of facilitators to relinquish their traditional role, and (f) the development of appropriate and meaningful collaborative learning tasks (Novotny, Seifert, & Werner, 1991; Sheridan, 1989).

### Barriers to Adult Learning

Cross (1981) suggested that there were at least three types of barriers that inhibit adult learning in formal educational settings:

1. Situational barriers are those arising from one's situation in life at a given time, such as lack of time due to job and home responsibilities.

2. Institutional barriers consist of all those practices and procedures that exclude or discourage working adults from participating in educational activities.

3. Dispositional barriers are those related to attitudes and self-perception about oneself as a learner.

Overcoming these barriers and expanding access to higher education has long been a theme in American society. According to Rohfield (1996):

The search for greater access continues. Still, barriers of culture and class exist. Can academic institutions help build bridges between themselves and unreached populations? Incorporating the ability to address students' situational and developmental needs as a criterion of quality higher education programs eased access for many adults during the last 40 years. Now, at the end of the 20th century, accredited higher education institutions offer a broad array of undergraduate and graduate programs for working and nonworking students of all ages. Perhaps new ways of focusing on student needs can continue the expansion of access to higher education in the future. (p. 65)

### Nontraditional Graduate Programs

Graduate students, particularly in professional fields, are frequently mature adults who bring an array of experiences to the graduate classroom. Furthermore, a great many graduate students choose to pursue their degrees on a part-time basis, balancing study with employment and family responsibilities. For many such individuals, these

responsibilities preclude pursuing a degree in a traditional format with such requirements as a period of residency (Brockett & Hiemstra, 1991).

Several factors have caused a rethinking of how graduate programs are delivered and what is expected of graduate students: (a) external pressures for accountability and relevance of degree programs, (b) student expectations for usable training, (c) technological developments, and (d) societal needs for trained professionals (Isaac, Pruitt-Logan, & Upcraft, 1995).

The task of nontraditional education is to reach new learners by new methods with the content they want and need, while maintaining quality educational programs (Cross & Valley, 1974). Benshoff (1991) cautioned that all aspects of the college environment must be reconsidered and often reconfigured to respond to this growing student population because developmental needs, issues, and stressors for adults differ considerably from those faced by younger, traditional-age students. McLuhan (1964) has said that the anxiety of our age is the result of trying to do today's job with yesterday's tools and concepts. Senge (1991) insisted that those who have responsibility for developing institutional policies need to be willing to think about new and different ways of viewing learning organizations, in particular placing high value in the human resources.

Cross (1980) recommended that post-secondary education should be directed toward making people more self-directed learners. Colleges can contribute very constructively to that goal if they are encouraged to think beyond institutional survival to providing for the real needs of adult learners. Cross (1981) found that older and more mature learners are somewhat more likely than younger, less well-established adults to select a program that departs from the traditional. She predicted that nontraditional programs might attract some of the best and most serious students in all higher education.

### Persistence

Most of the research on persistence is focused on traditional students in four-year residential institutions, and has as its base the Tinto (1975) model, which assumed that persistence and attrition are largely determined by a student's integration into the social and academic systems of the institution (Chartrand, 1992). Bean and Metzner's study (as cited in Kerka, 1989) suggested that the main difference between the persistence of traditional and nontraditional students is that nontraditional students are more affected by their external environment than by the social integration variables that affect traditional

students. Cabrera, Nora, and Castaneda's study (as cited in Falk, 1995), found significant evidence to support their hypothesis that the largest total effect on persistence was accounted for by intent to persist, followed by GPA, institutional commitment, encouragement from friends and family, goal commitment, academic integration, finance attitudes, and social integration.

Cullen (1994) stated that adult learners in higher education must cope with multiple roles and responsibilities of student, partner, and worker while tackling education; may have had negative past experiences of school or lack confidence in their ability to return to study; and may face financial difficulties, employment, and child care conflicts, or opposition to their continuing education from significant others.

### Retention and Completion

Kerka (1989), in her review of literature on retention of adult learners in higher education, listed psychological influences of coping skills, self-confidence and self-image, anxiety about schooling based on prior experience, and beliefs or expectations about outcomes. Suggested solutions included: (a) communication of accurate, timely information stressing anticipated benefits and realistic expectations;

(b) special attention to advising and counseling; (c) training advisers to deal with adults; (d) basic skills assessment; (e) developmental assessment (setting long- and short-term goals and reality testing); (f) learning and study skills; (g) placement testing; (h) mentoring by successful adult students; (i) peer support groups; and (j) prioritizing life roles.

Fisher and Ellis (1993) showed that the power of group dynamics could be used to increase the likelihood of educational success, since group members create a collective identity such that the success of the group means the success of the individuals, and vice versa.

In studying 25 adult managers or prospective managers in business classes, Ashar and Skenes (1993) found that social integration had a significant positive effect on retention, when the unit of analysis was the class and not the institution. Small groups of peers at the same level of career maturity created a social environment that motivated adult learners to persist. Learning needs alone appeared strong enough to attract adults to the program but not to retain them.

Sheridan, Bryne, and Quina (1989) noted that only one-half of doctoral students in Education ultimately complete their degrees, often because their needs were not being met.

Dorn, Papalewis, and Brown (1995), in their study of 108 doctoral students in eight universities, found that educators who work together as a team earning doctorates benefit from the experience, share those benefits with their workplaces, and most importantly, tend to find the motivation to complete their doctorates.

### Summary

According to Knowles (1970), Caffarella (1993), and others, adult learners have a need to be self-directing, possess extensive previous experience, are very motivated to learn, and prefer career-oriented learning. Much of this research has focused on adults in traditional higher education programs.

Nontraditional students need many kinds of support and assistance from family, friends, and institutions of higher learning. Cross (1981) has written about the barriers to learning for nontraditional adult learners, citing lack of self-confidence in their ability to learn, inconvenient schedules and locations of traditional programs, and job and home responsibilities. Research evidence suggests that both sexes have difficulties juggling the roles of student, worker, and family member (Muench, 1987). The need to learn brings the student to the program, but retention and

graduation depend on collaboration and accommodation on the parts of both the institution and the student.

My own experience as a nontraditional graduate student involved coping with three identities that contended for time, resources, and energy: (a) adult family member, (b) full-time working professional, and (c) graduate student. The literature reviewed in this chapter has substantiated these as a priori themes to guide my research. This study is significant in that it accounts for all three aspects of the informants' lives as it examines their experiences in nontraditional graduate Education programs.

## CHAPTER 3. METHODS

## Introduction

This study examined the experiences of a number of Oregon educators and administrators who chose to pursue a graduate degree while coping with the responsibilities of full-time employment and adult and family life. Specifically, the study focused on students enrolled in three Oregon State University extended-campus graduate programs in Education (see Table 1).

Table 1  
OSU Extended-Campus Graduate Programs in Education

Degree	Description
Ed.M./ABE	masters degree with an Adult Education major and a concentration in Adult Basic Education
Ed.D./CCL	doctoral degree with an Education major and a concentration in Community College Leadership
Ed.D./MLE	doctoral degree with a major in Education and a concentration in Middle-Level Education

This chapter presents the research design, describes the researcher and the informants, and explains the processes of data collection and data analysis.

## Design

Because human experience is shaped in particular contexts and cannot be understood if removed from those contexts (Kincheloe, 1991), I chose an interpretive design using focus groups and interviews of purposefully selected informants (Guba & Lincoln, 1981; Patton, 1990).

### Rationale for Design

As a researcher, I expected mainly to use my data not to answer questions like "how much" and "how often" but to solve qualitative problems, such as discovering what occurs when an adult with a family life and full-time employment pursues a graduate degree, the implications of what occurs, and the relationships linking the occurrences. Solutions to these problems required that I examine the personal experiences of my informants. Even though related literature and my own experience as a nontraditional student provided a priori themes, these questions could not be answered by identifying the component variables in advance because I did not know the full dimensions of the phenomenon being studied until I talked with the informants (Bloland, 1992).

Although my goal was to have the meaning being made in the interviews as much a function of the informants' reconstruction and reflection as possible, as the human

interviewer, I have recognized that this meaning is, to some degree, a function of the informants' interaction with my role as the researcher and the instrument in the interview (Patton, 1989).

### Researcher

I first experienced nontraditional graduate course work in 1986, during the time I was the principal of a middle school in Canada. I needed professional development in the area of personnel supervision and evaluation and I enrolled in an extended-country Master of Education program delivered by the University of Oregon in a community college in Saskatchewan. I took a leave of absence from the program in the second semester because I could not keep up with the assignments and fulfill my obligations as a school administrator and teacher. The following year I resigned from my position and completed the degree at the University of Oregon as a full-time student.

Since 1992, I have been employed by Oregon State University, primarily in the area of outreach education. My job has been to establish and coordinate extended-campus programs. For the most part, I worked with nontraditional students who were pursuing graduate degrees concurrently with full-time employment. Fall term, 1993, encouraged by

their success, I enrolled in a doctoral program that was designed for working professionals in Middle-Level Education. This time I managed to complete the course work before I found it necessary to leave my job in late 1995. I accepted a half-time appointment as a graduate research assistant for two terms, with the goal of having the time and energy to conduct my dissertation research. I resumed full-time employment with another OSU department in 1996, once again planning and managing extended-campus course work. These experiences created within me a strong need to learn first-hand from others who have managed to complete their degrees without having to leave either employment or studies.

The assumptions and biases resulting from my education and life experiences have influenced the research design of my study. The design assumes that an adult enrolled in a traditional campus-based graduate program would have great difficulty maintaining full-time employment and fulfilling family obligations. A further assumption is that, even though nontraditional graduate programs have been designed to accommodate the students' career and family schedules, there are human issues of psychological and educational wellness that need to be considered by program planners and prospective students.

## Participants

### Focus Group

The study began with a focus group interview of 26 students enrolled in the Oregon State University Ed.M./ABE extended-campus program resulting in a masters degree with an Adult Education major and a concentration in Adult Basic Education; the first cohort, which I interviewed, completed the program in Spring of 1996. These students were employed in teaching, administration, or other roles in Adult Basic Education programs in community colleges, Job Corps sites, or social services agencies. Their career advancement, and, in some cases, professional survival, meant that they needed to earn a graduate degree. They had family and personal commitments and could not afford the time and financial costs of attending a regular campus-based program. This program had been collaboratively designed by representatives of their employers and the OSU School of Education.

### Student Informants

I chose three informants (see Table 2) who had demonstrated in the Ed.M./ABE focus group that they had significant stories to tell. I relied on relevant literature and personal experiences and judgment to make these

selections. This purposeful sampling gave much power to the stories of a relatively few informants. From these information-rich cases I was able to learn a great deal about the issues of central importance to my research (Bogdan & Bicklen, 1992; Borg, Gall, & Gall, 1993; Charles, 1995; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 1990; Seidman, 1991).

The next interviews were with selected students (see Table 3) enrolled in the Oregon State University Ed.D./CCL extended-campus program leading to a doctoral degree in Education with a concentration in Community College Leadership. This three-year program, developed in collaboration with Oregon community colleges, prepares professionals for leadership roles in community and technical colleges. Course work is delivered off-campus at sites and times convenient to working professionals and concentrates on the application of research to the participants' work assignments. This is an on-going program, with the fifth cohort of students having commenced in 1997. The selection of informants was based on recommendations from my colleagues in the Oregon State University faculty. They identified individuals who had participated effectively in class and who might be amenable to being interviewed. A conscious effort was made to maintain a balance of male and female respondents.

This was followed by interviews with three informants (see Table 4) from the Oregon State University Ed.D./MLE extended-campus doctoral program with a major in Education and a concentration in Middle-Level Education (of which I was a cohort member). This pilot three-year program was designed to provide continuing professional development for a cohort of experienced practicing middle level educators: public school teachers and administrators, district level administrators and consultants, higher education faculty, and state department specialists. The selection of informants was based on my interaction with these individuals during the course work phase of our program. I purposefully requested interviews with those who participated significantly in class discussions, and who were willing to share their personal experiences and opinions.

Table 2  
Informants Enrolled in Ed.M./ABE

Pseudonym	Age	Spouse	Children	Employment
Fred	36	yes	elem. elem. middle	ABE instructor
Art	42	divorced	elem. elem.	ABE instructor
Mary	43	yes	high high	ABE consultant

Table 3  
Informants Enrolled in Ed.D./CCL

Pseudonym	Age	Spouse	Children	Employment
Sue	41	yes	elem. middle	dept. chair
Bill	53	yes	middle high	college admin.
Fay	50	partner	none	dept. chair

Table 4  
Informants Enrolled in Ed.D./MLE

Pseudonym	Age	Spouse	Children	Employment
Ted	45	yes	elem. middle	school teacher
Jane	50	yes	elem. middle high	district admin.
Alice	51	yes	college college	consultant

#### Faculty Informants

The final piece of the inquiry was to interview three university faculty members (see Table 5) involved in extended-campus course instruction and program management.

Table 5  
University Faculty Informants

Pseudonym	Program(s)	Role
Ray	Ed.M./ABE; Ed.D./CCL	instructor
Joel	Ed.M./ABE; Ed.D./CCL	coordinator/instructor
Anne	Ed.M./ABE	teaching asst./instructor

My selection process relied on the availability of the informants and the continuity of their involvement in these programs. The faculty informants were asked to share observations and experiences from their interactions with nontraditional students in the School of Education's nontraditional graduate programs. They were encouraged to offer advice to prospective and current students, and to make recommendations for future program planning and development.

#### Ethical Considerations

The privacy of the informants was considered both before and after the study. Informants were informed in conversation and in writing (Appendix A) of the purposes and activities of the research, and also of the benefits or risks that were involved in their participation. Those who

agreed to be interviewed were invited to sign consent forms (Appendix B) prior to any data collection. I further ensured confidentiality by assigning pseudonyms to each informant, and kept all records in a locked file in my office at home.

### Data

There were two types of data in this study:

1. The focus group interview prompts covered all aspects of the Ed.M./ABE program and the tapes and transcripts provided a rich description of the extended-campus graduate program experience.

2. Profiles constructed from transcripts of the in-depth interviews conducted with nine students and three faculty members from three extended-campus graduate degree programs illuminated the individual experiences of the nontraditional students.

### Focus Group

The Ed.M./ABE program planning committee had called for a program evaluation. When they requested that a focus group interview be conducted with members of the first cohort of the program, I volunteered to act as technical support and recorder. Susan Fish (1995), another OSU doctoral student, served as the facilitator and authored the focus group

interview summary. The purpose was to get high-quality data in a social context where the participants could consider their own views in the context of the views of their cohort.

### Data Collection

The focus group interview was held at one of the monthly week-end class meetings. The cohort of 26 was divided into two sections and we had two one-hour blocks of time scheduled for us by the program coordinator. Discussion prompts (Appendix C), based on topics provided by the program planning committee, included delivery, content, support, and outcomes.

Audio and video tapes were used to record the sessions, and the facilitator wrote and displayed notes on a flip chart during the focus group interviews. These notes were then summarized as data for a program evaluation report.

### Data Analysis

The focus group interview had been arranged to gather data for an evaluation of the Ed.M./ABE program. My motivation to participate in the focus group interview was not to evaluate the program, but to develop an understanding regarding the human issues involved in being a student in the program. I examined the data from the flip charts,

noting responses that referred specifically to coping with the concurrent issues of family, career, and study. I played and replayed the audio and video tapes, identifying informants who gave the most comprehensive responses to the prompts. Much later, I reviewed the focus group interview summary to check my analysis with the conclusions of the author.

By reflecting together, the subjects stimulated each other to talk about topics which I pursued in the individual interviews that followed (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Krueger, 1994; Patton, 1990).

### Individual Interviews

The external validity of the study was enhanced by individual in-depth interviews with multiple informants in multiple settings. The themes of being concurrently members of a family, workers in a career, and students in higher education shaped the protocol of questions that I developed to guide the interviews (Appendix D). Within this framework, I moved freely in any direction that appeared interesting as I responded to the informants' world views (Miles & Huberman, 1984; Patton, 1990; Tierney, 1991).

### Data Collection

The interviews averaged one hour and usually took place in the evening because of our work schedules. Six interviews were face-to-face; six were long distance telephone conversations. Six informants were female and six were male. With the knowledge and consent of each informant, all interviews were audio taped and then transcribed.

### Data Analysis

The challenge was to make sense of massive amounts of data, reduce the volume of information, identify significant patterns, and construct a framework for communicating the essence of what the data revealed.

Interview transcripts were word-processed using *WordPerfect 6.1 for Windows*. I read each transcript a number of times, using the side margins to note anything that struck me as interesting or significant about what the informant was saying. I used key words to capture the emerging categories.

I used three broad themes to organize the data:

(a) personal and family issues, (b) work-related issues, and (c) program-related issues. Each was assigned a distinct highlighter color and all significant passages were coded. Next, I

reduced the data by writing 12 narrative profiles, told in the words of the informants, using these three categories to organize their stories. Finally, cross-case comparisons, organized on large chart paper, displayed the patterns that emerged from the data.

The profiles were mailed to each informant for review, amendment, and verification. When these validated profiles were returned, I refined them in response to the informants' written comments. As well as providing data reduction, the profiles were a basic form of case analysis. Subsequent content analysis was variable-oriented, seeking broad patterns based on intercorrelations of themes that cut across the profiles, rather than the dynamics of the cases themselves, so very little case-to-case comparison occurred (Lather, 1986).

Using large chart paper, I recorded the key points of each profile in what ultimately became a series of displays that could be manipulated and reconfigured as the analyses proceeded. Conclusions, vague at first, then increasingly explicit and grounded, were verified by follow-up telephone conversations with informants, and consultations with colleagues. This increased the validity of my findings and provided a measure of source triangulation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 1988; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 1990).

In qualitative research, the goal is to discover new insights into a previously ill-defined phenomenon, not to determine causation or describe the distribution of known phenomenon (Merriam & Clark, 1991). Since a nonrandom sampling technique was used, my findings cannot be generalized in a statistical sense to a larger population of adult students (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992).

Rather than statistical generalization, this study has what Stake (as cited by Merriam & Clark, 1991) called "naturalistic generalization," which draws on tacit knowledge, intuition, and personal experience. Likewise, "user generalizability" will be determined when the reader considers the applicability of the study's findings to his or her own particular situation (Merriam & Clark).

### Summary

By moving along the continuum from exploratory to confirmatory inquiry, the description of informant experiences, balanced by the analyses of their profiles, led into my interpretation of the psychological and educational wellness issues of the beneficiaries of these programs. The study concluded with the extrapolation of critical issues for consideration in future program planning, participation, and research (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 1990).

## CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

### Introduction

Focus group and in-depth interviews were conducted with a selected group of students and instructors, participants in three Oregon State University extended-campus graduate programs in Education, to identify factors that affected the psychological and educational wellness of these nontraditional students in nontraditional graduate programs. Transcripts of the in-depth interviews, along with the focus group data, were crafted into narrative profiles of the 12 individuals who were informants in this study.

### Focus Group

As I replayed the tapes and reviewed the transcripts of the focus group interview, the dialogue was about content, delivery, and outcomes of the program, but the context of the discourse was rich in the social and personal experiences of the participants (Mishler, 1986). Consistent with the literature and my own experiences, there appeared to be three main issues vying for priority throughout the students' pursuit of a graduate degree: (a) personal and family issues, (b) work-related issues, and (c) program-related issues. A summary of these issues follows.

### Personal and Family Issues

Focus group interview informants spoke of the factors related to being a family member and how the time and attention demanded by the program affected the members of their immediate and extended families. The financial drain of tuition, textbooks, and travel and lodging was an important consideration in family budgets. There was also the issue of jealousy on the part of the home family as an almost family-like relationship developed within the program cohort.

### Work-related Issues

Another life being lived was that of the student as worker in a career. The respondents talked of the need for understanding and support from co-workers and supervisors. Such items as time off to attend classes and exams, tuition support, and adjusted workload were listed. There were occasions of conflict between what was prescribed at work and what was taught in class.

### Program-related Issues

Finally, these adults were graduate students in a very intensive three-year program of study. They were relatively

satisfied with the locations, schedules, and formats of meetings in their program. They indicated that the program coordinator was instrumental in the success of the program by providing advocacy in advising, logistics, and dealing with institutional issues. They called for more support from the university in the areas of clear expectations and requirements, smoother admission processes, better technical support, and acceptance as a student by institutional departments outside the School of Education. They recognized the special efforts their instructors had made on their behalf.

### Discussion

There was a consensus that the Ed.M./ABE program more than met the students' expectations in many ways. They felt that the instructors treated them as experts in their field and provided theory to support their practice. "What I've been doing now has a name" is how one informant expressed this. This first cohort created a formula, "theory plus practice equals remembering," to describe how they were encouraged to immediately apply the program content in their work. They expressed appreciation of the program and of their own and each other's hard work.

## Individual Student Interviews

A few months after the focus group interview, I conducted a series of individual student interviews, beginning with three members of the focus group. I then interviewed three cohort members from each of the two other OSU extended-campus graduate programs in Education.

In the discussion that follows, informants are identified by pseudonym and program. Generally, there was little distinction between the overall experiences of the doctoral and masters program informants. In those cases where data were significantly specific to a program, it is so indicated.

Although no single profile can be representative of all nontraditional adult learners (Cross, 1981), I have chosen to include one student profile as a sample of the nine student informants interviewed in my study. "Mary" has successfully coped with the pressures and requirements of being at once a wife and mother, a career professional, and a graduate student. Her profile is rich in significant data and I have found it appropriate to use selected quotes from her narrative in the ensuing discussion of my findings.

Sample Profile: Mary (Ed.M./ABE)

This was sort of a family program. I involved them as much as possible. My husband is in education and he was very understanding and supportive. My kids helped me with some of my projects and research such as watching for leadership metaphors and other things [that were part of assignments]. I consider that family includes my extended family, especially my parents. They, too, needed to be aware that there was going to be stuff that I couldn't do, because for this three-year period I had this other thing that came up high on the priority list. It required give and take on their part, knowing that I wasn't going to be there one night a month, or one night a week.

One time my son was in a State competition at the same time as a cohort meeting was scheduled and so that was a really hard decision: "Do I go to the one-time family thing or do I go to the cohort meeting?" I struggled with the conflict of knowing I should be doing both, but I could only do one. I chose to be with my son. Along the line, everybody missed a little bit of something for some reason or another. These occasions required negotiation [with program personnel], taping a session, or sharing class notes.

And my health suffered. I gained 20 pounds which I have not lost yet. Now I understand why they put physical education credits in undergraduate programs! There were lots of health problems in the cohort. Students have a tendency to think, "I should be doing this [studying, reading, writing] rather than taking a walk," or, "I'll just drop out of this for a little while," and this upsets the balance [of your life]. When the cohort was together, we took walks and did things together and laughed a lot. Folks [in the cohort] made allowances for those who couldn't sit in one place for very long, or stand up for very long, or had to lay down on the floor--accommodations that couldn't easily be done in a formal classroom. Because of the nature of the cohort you felt more like you could ask for help to make it through the three-hour session than in a single, isolated class. But when we were on our own we didn't take care of mental and physical health as much as we should have. We were on a tight schedule which included a 40-hour work week and travel to course work, and there was this guilt thing of having to stay back and read this or finish that.

There needs to be a wellness emphasis in the program. It could be part of orientation and a part of check-in every term. It could even fit into the leadership class. And maybe, since we pay health fees, the institution could provide some counseling.

Speaking of fees, you [future cohort members] need to keep in mind that if you stay in teaching it's going to take a long time to earn back the cost [of the degree]. Students need to find ways to cut the initial costs; it's worth the effort to look around for financial aid or grants. There's money out there and you don't need to be lower-income, you just need to fit a niche. You need to find out if there's professional development money you can use to help pay tuition. If you're away on a Friday, does that count as work or do you have to take time off? In our cohort, we had to have a letter from our employer saying we would have release time. But some supervisors didn't honor that and in some cases the supervisor changed. So you need to have all the specifics in writing and put that letter in a safe place.

My employer kept the agreement and was very supportive; I think that was a key piece [in completing the degree]. And work didn't suffer. Course projects were intended to be work-related but sometimes they were not totally applicable, or we had no chance to use them because job responsibilities shifted. But they added to the curriculum [for other people].

There were a lot of mysteries involved in the university institution and we had to keep a sense of humor. It took us until the very end to figure out parking: if you're not registered you can park for free, if you are

registered you have to pay. We didn't even know where to park safely in order to go to parking office to buy a permit! Perhaps we should have been given some free parking passes to facilitate our times on campus [for summer courses, advising, business transactions, and portfolio presentations]. Even a tour of the campus to figure out where things are would have helped a lot.

We seemed to be always going to an office window, only to find out we had to go to another window. The [institution] departments were out of step with each other; no one knew who we were or where we fit. When we came to campus in summer, we paid on-campus fees [such as health fees] even if we didn't need or use the services. Library cards were a confusion. The coordinator would say everything was fine, then we'd find out it wasn't, and just because it worked one term was no guarantee that it would next term. I never did use the library in three years!

One major issue is that not everyone comes in with the same knowledge base and there may be some basics you're expected to have. That's where electives should apply, especially if your first major was not in education. So some key background information might have been missed by some students, which made them feel that they started out already behind the rest of the group. Some of the cohort did not do much writing in their [baccalaureate] major areas and others

had been away from having to produce written material at that level. My advice is to expect a lot of writing and be ready to get comfortable with it. Some instructors encouraged early drafts and peer evaluation and cooperative editing. The [final] portfolio is in written form and that's what we are judged on. If you [new cohort member] need help with writing, tell your advisor and get extra help or extra time really early on because it will affect your whole program.

Another complication was non-cohort students plugging in for selected course work. We couldn't just say we covered "this" in an earlier course because not everyone had taken that course (as would have been the case in a true cohort-limited program). It slowed the old-timers [cohort] down and made the new people feel like outsiders. So if the program adds and takes out people within a cohort, there really are some problems that both sides have to be prepared to accommodate.

Some people had a hard time tolerating ambiguity and got hung up on instructions like, "Make a presentation," and, "How long does the paper have to be?" We pushed ourselves to do more than we had to or than was really necessary; once you get into an issue or project you get deeper and deeper and can't dig your way back out. We did supplementary work, trying to do our very best to make sure

it was as good as what everyone else was doing. Incomplete grades are to be avoided; if it's planned ahead as an incomplete to equalize tuition costs, that's one thing, but don't take an incomplete at the end of the regular term when the project is due. Rather than moaning and groaning, we needed to realize that we were in control.

The method of course delivery was also a factor. One class was totally on-line. It was a great experience and worked very well for me because I was already on-line. But the institution didn't know what to do with us when it came time for registration. Ed-Net [interactive television originating on campus and delivered to remote sites] was an experience that was better for some than others. They [program designers] need to be aware that "local sites" are not necessarily close or convenient for all students. For me, it actually meant an hour drive on winter roads. After the first term I found an alternate site at a local high school library and became a cohort of one. We did this for most of one year. It was a novelty for the instructors as well as the students and we found that it was not good to use Ed-Net for lecture delivery because it was so difficult to sort out who was talking.

But some instructors worked hard at learning the technology and we talked about this as part of the class. One instructor stopped and said, "I've reviewed the tapes

and we need to reassess the whole thing, shift gears, and try another approach."

The distance-delivery approach was a worthwhile sample experience. Meeting off campus three times per term on weekends turned out better, however. If activities were varied enough, it [saturation] wasn't a problem. The instructors changed teaching styles to match the weekend situation. They brought in a variety of speakers and varied the format. We were more likely to be engaged on a Saturday afternoon than at 10:00 p.m. on a Thursday night after working all day, plus having an hour drive home [after class], and then going to work the next day. Those who lived close to Interstate 5 found it easier to attend than others who lived off the corridor.

Right now, there's only one cohort member left to complete [the degree], although some dropped out really early on after getting an idea of what was expected [in the program]. And one changed to a different program to get specific courses [that matched job needs].

I dig school; I could do it for a long time. For me a lot of stuff was review [lesson planning, developmental psychology] and I was not surprised at the amount of work to get that amount of credits in that amount of time, with no time provided to get behind. Three years is long enough for completion.

### Analysis of Student Profiles

I analyzed the nine profiles in the order of the three a priori themes: (a) personal and family issues, (b) career-related issues, and (c) program-related issues. As Sue stated, "You juggle, depending on whatever the current crisis is: family, work project, paper."

#### Personal and Family Issues

The personal and family lives of the students involved in these nontraditional programs have many facets that must be considered. As Art said, "Education does not happen in a vacuum. Adults have big, full lives outside of the classroom."

Impediments. Some informants, such as Fred, had memories of unpleasant experiences in earlier pursuits of education and so began with some trepidation. "Grade school was just hell for me and that was typical for a lot of my cohort classmates." Bill and others came into the program lacking all the necessary prerequisites and this immediately put them one step behind the majority of their classmates.

My background was not in Education and going into the program I did not have one of the main entrance requirements (Basics of Education Research). And so I had to take it the first

Winter quarter, every Tuesday evening, 6:00 p.m. to 9:00 p.m., in Portland. It worked because my wife, bless her heart, drove the car so I could be reading and preparing as we traveled. That's called "just-in-time" learning!

In many cases, there was not a local university where a graduate degree could be obtained. Most informants, such as Art, are place-bound because of family and career responsibilities. "I support my children and I take the obligation happily and that requires a full-time salary. I could not have quit my job and there is no university nearby [to home and work]."

Support from family. The support and understanding of a spouse and prior successes of siblings were sources of strength and motivation for the majority of those interviewed. Older children can be very understanding and collegial. Alice's program overlapped with her son's university enrollment and her daughter had graduated two years earlier. "The kids were very supportive, and my husband said, 'Seems like you've always been in school, so why not? Then you'll be finished!'"

Sue and other parents of younger children felt that there was an important role model function being served by their pursuit of a graduate degree. "It's a good model for kids; they know that we [parents] value education."

Family problems. Family life pays a price. As Jane stated, "You have to do a complete evaluation, look at yourself in the mirror, at your personal life, marriage, children, and family. Try to figure out what in your life you can give up to do this program, because it can't be an add-on." Marriages can suffer and weekend classes are tough on family activities. Travel time to and from classes needs to be factored into the equation. Vacation days get used up for classes and summer sessions. There are opportunities missed that can never be replaced. The degree has to take high priority, and so everybody seems to have had to miss something. Young children, in particular, miss out as these sacrifices of time together must be made, and their family-life experience is not as complete as it could have been. In Fred's words:

But the whole family bit has been rough. The first six to eight months, I'd take Saturday afternoon and pack up a bunch of books and go to the library and read and just take time out. [And now] as I walk around (our yard), I go, "Ya, we were going to put a tree house here, I was going to finish this play area here, and I was going to do this, and we were going to get that done." And a lot of those projects didn't get done because of this [the degree program]. So there's a piece of my kids' childhood missing there; the kids are okay with it but it's just something I would have liked to have gotten done. Opportunities missed.

Financial considerations. It is critical to have a financial plan in place at the outset and to explore all avenues of available support. Having a family requires earning while learning, without any interruption in the full-time salary. Fees and travel costs are high and so the program is a major financial drain. The reality is that the actual cost in dollars may never be replaced. For Fay, this was "a life-changing, painful, expensive decision. The price is far higher than anybody realizes. I'm not talking just dollars; they will never be replaced unless you're less than thirty-five and get an enormous step increase in salary because of the degree."

Those informants, such as Bill, who have been able to get at least partial sabbaticals from their institutions, have been in a much better position to finish within the three-year time frame than those who did not have that benefit. "It ranges all the way from those of us who are paying our own way, to full sabbatical. But even if you don't have the sabbatical, it's still do-able."

Wellness. Life's balance tends to be upset as the program takes priority over normal routine. Because of this, wellness is an issue of serious concern. Fay warned that there is a tremendous drain of energy as life gets doubled by the program requirements. "Take a look at your own energy

and health level. Significant problems that people develop during this are health-related because of stress, and energy level-related because you're now trying to double your life."

Sue cautioned that there is a high level of stress because the program issues are always present. "It wears on you. Even when you're not working on it, you think you should be; there's always this guilt thing out there." Weight fluctuations occur due to lack of time for exercise, poor eating habits, and exhaustion.

Planning and time management. Fay stressed the importance of including all family members in the decision and planning. "You must talk to your family. You're not going to be available on weekends for a long time. Vacations and so on that used to be free time are now going to be dedicated. We did a contract (in our family) and took a look at what it was going to take; and we underestimated significantly." Sue spoke for herself and others when she advised, "You really have to know why you are doing this because it takes an extraordinary commitment to finish it. Make sure you can carve out the time [out of your family and your professional life] that it's going to take to get through."

Time management is critical because education does not occur in a vacuum. Schedules need to be juggled, adjustments and re-adjustments must be made, and some things are given up. Time must be found. In Alice's case:

Besides classroom teaching duties, I had a lot of roles that were taking time, so it [enrolling in the program] became just one more thing to juggle. It takes a while to realize that this really might happen. You have to have been thinking about it for a while. That's a key piece. It allowed me to stay with my job, work full time, stretch my capacity, and somewhat direct my own learning.

### Career-related Issues

These are working adults. Career was a vital issue in their decision to seek a graduate degree, and their jobs tended to be impacted throughout the duration of the program.

Motivation. In many cases, employers require the masters degree for continuation of employment. Both masters and doctoral degrees are significant factors in career advancement. Although curriculum content is not always synonymous with what is actually going on in the field, the learning process stimulates a rethinking of current best practices and so the degree is seen as an enhancement of the quality of service that can be expected.

Doctoral degrees tended to be more of a personal choice than a career requirement. Jane recalled, "I was surrounded by people with Ph.D.'s and I appreciated that perspective. It gives that added measure of thinking skills. And a doctorate is an insurance policy because you always have the option of doing something else."

Art confessed that work was used as an excuse to pursue the degree. "I think my liking the idea of going back to school and getting my masters degree because I had to, relieved the idea of 'Should I?' or 'Do I want to?' and so I just decided to enjoy it."

Support in the workplace. In many situations there was direct support from the employer. This took the form of professional and sabbatical leaves, tuition support, and reduced workload. For Fay, "The thing that took the most pressure off me was having significant administrative support from my school." In Sue's case, "My supervisor gave me time to write during the regular work week and provided a collaborating instructor [for the research project] with a stipend because of the extra hours that were spent doing research."

Jane found it necessary to take a full year leave of absence in order to concentrate on dissertation writing. "It was extremely difficult to give up the job that I loved,

even though it was high pressure. It was either do that or quit the doctorate. I could not do both."

In some instances, informants such as Alice reported no support from their employer. "They [the school district] never availed themselves of my new expertise and knowledge nor even acknowledged what I was doing [studying for the degree]." Many reported having to use personal and vacation days to meet class attendance requirements. Members of one cohort cited instances of colleagues whose jobs were terminated because their employers perceived they were too preoccupied with studies.

Co-workers can be key factors in pursuit of the degree. They can shoulder some of the load and make allowances for shortfalls in contributions by the aspiring student. Bill recalled, "Some [co-workers] may feel that I'm not pulling my fair share all the time, but most of them appreciate the level of support I have given them in other ways, and so I think it's worked out reasonably well." They can assist with research and provide encouragement for implementation and application of relevant areas of program curriculum. Jane, however, reported rejection by co-workers. "I went over the line as I was no longer a peer to my fellow teachers; I spouted too much research."

Balancing work and study. It is not an easy task to prioritize the allocation of time and energy. It is a reality that there will likely be some strain in the workplace brought on by the energy drain of the degree program. There was a significant trend to become more reactive than proactive at work. Ted and others reported not being as dedicated at work, with job effort cut back to the basics. "This year, for the first time in my career, I have had families question my working with their kid because I hadn't done some of the small things that I would have done in the past; instead, I was writing."

#### Program-related Issues

"A great feature is that this program lets you keep involved in the field while you study, rather than having to step out for two or three years. It's a program that has been specifically designed for people that are working full time." This statement by Bill was echoed by all informants. Art added, however, "After our first big meeting, I knew it wasn't going to be like anything I had experienced before."

Preconceptions. Although most informants confirmed that they knew what to expect in terms of the rigor and amount of work involved in a graduate degree program, some

doctoral students were surprised at how traditional the program turned out to be. Ted, on the one hand, stated, "I had done my homework. I've been around other people working on advanced degrees, and this is the way I knew it was going to turn out to be. Universities have certain standards and this, for me, is right on target." On the other hand, Alice found that, "Two parts [of the program] were a surprise: I didn't expect to go through a standardized 'take this course and then this course,' and it didn't give me the literature base that I needed (for my dissertation)." And for Fay, "One of the disappointing things was that the realms within which research was allowed were limited. It had to be a traditionally-structured dissertation, yet this wasn't a traditionally-structured program."

Clarity and flexibility of program. To dispel the mysteries of the initial advising, Ted said that he needed to find "someone at the university level who knew the culture, could filter out the hype, and could get down to what was the true story." Sue added that, "for a student who is not on campus during that process [advising], sometimes some of the systems [paper work, locations of things] were very vague and you sort of find out about them by word of mouth or accidentally or after the fact." Fred said he relied heavily on the program coordinator. "I had no real

desire to learn that part of OSU. I joined the program to learn teaching practices and praxis, not a university culture 200 miles away."

There can also be problems for students caused by poor communication and lack of understanding within the departments of the institution. Fay reported that, "The departments were out of step with each other; no one knew who we were or where we fit." In Fay's words, "You have to be flexible because the program may change as it goes along. The university is not particularly good at keeping its word because there is always another department that can be blamed."

There was a strong call from Alice and others to clearly state the non-negotiable parts of the program up front. "If there are things that are going to be requirements that have to be met as far as content (in order to be a graduate of OSU), put them on the table."

All informants emphasized the need for a program schedule that was responsive to the demands of employment and to the human issues affecting these students. Jane observed that, "The individual professors give good support, run interference, and understand that this needs to be a professional training model. But there can be a human piece missing in the institutional view."

Jane advised that program planners must be responsive to individual needs and be willing to change and adapt to life happenings.

All the people in the program have been sort of change agents. It's kind of easy to get comfortable in higher education and say, "This is the way we've done things, and this is the way we need to continue." But the world out there is changing; students are older and people's lives are changing and you [higher education] really need to be adaptable and flexible.

Scheduling and delivery of classes. Nearly everyone agreed that the intensive summer terms could be an ordeal, especially if too many credit hours were packed into these periods of time on campus. For some, summer became a time to get away from the real world. For most, this part of the program was more enjoyable than any prior traditional course work, even though students tended to do more work than was required. Art described his experience.

Going to campus [in the summer] was expensive and inconvenient but we had to do it because the university would not yield [on the residency issue]. We overdid it the first summer and everyone was just beat and it got to the point where it wasn't fun anymore. The workload was a killer. The second summer seemed easier even though it wasn't, workload-wise. It was just the way things fell. Everything was planned, everyone was prepared, and we knew what was done wrong the year before. So the second summer was a sheer delight. I thought I was missing something because it was so easy.

The Ed-Net delivery of weekly class sessions was generally viewed as ineffective and unnecessarily burdensome. Mary had this advice for planners. "They [program designers] need to be aware that 'local sites' are not necessarily close or convenient for all students. For me, it actually meant an hour drive on winter roads." For Sue, "It was once a week and it wasn't really a big hit. Learning that way takes a different mind set. When the instructor is not there [present in your classroom], it's pretty easy to turn it off mentally. If you [instructor] are not actively engaging the students, it's pretty easy to lose them."

Sue observed that the weekend classes (three per term) were by far the most popular, both for convenience and for learning. "Meeting once a month is probably the only model I could have functioned under. I needed 30 days to schedule my work around. On a weekly basis, that couldn't have happened and I would have been behind all the time."

Relevance of curriculum. The need for more latitude in assignment topics was also an issue, particularly in the doctoral programs. Informants reported a tendency for topics to be chosen because of convenience (for the instructor) rather than applicability in the field. Alice and others were disappointed in the lack of relevance to their own

particular interests and needs. "It was jumping through hoops, taking us in directions we did not want to go in the first place. Some of content was redundant because I had already matched theory with practice [at work] with much of the 'new ideas' that were presented." Ted stated, "The satisfaction with the program is directly related to how much we worked in individual classes on projects to do with things that were truly relevant to us."

The masters degree informants, including Art, felt that their program of study was right on target. "We were encouraged, actually required, to combine our school [projects and assignments] with our work setting. It made it very real. I think my program improved my work and I think it will continue to do so."

Modem, mentor, and buddy support. Electronic mail was positively embraced by all of the informants. In Bill's cohort, "Between e-mail, fax, and conference calls, we were able to do a lot of project work between monthly meetings." It was frequently suggested that program elements such as advising could be much more accessible if put on-line.

Securing a mentor with previous experience in a similar program is highly desirable. This was encouraged in the Ed.M./ABE program. The doctoral students found value in this concept as well. Ted advised, "I'd want to know from A to Z

from this person what to look for, to help me set time lines, expectations, some skills that I need to fine tune going in." Ted added another piece of advice. "I'd also find someone at the university level who knew the culture, could filter out the hype, and would get down to what was the true story."

Fred reported that his cohort had established a buddy system early in the program. "It can be really helpful if you can find somebody who has been down the road. They can be great editors, too." For Art, the psychological support of a buddy was a key factor in his persistence. "I had somebody to hold my hand and I needed this. I had it way better than most. But those who started solo eventually formed partnerships. Everybody kind of made the best of it."

In Jane's cohort, "Those who have already defended [their dissertation] walked us through what they had to do, and we placed ourselves in that continuum. Then we talked through all the issues about what we needed to have happen."

The cohort model. All programs in this study were cohort-based (a defined group of students beginning and completing together a lock step program of study). For Jane, the cohort was the strength of the program. "A cohort system is superior to just taking classes where your only connection is with your instructor. I liked the cohort

concept because what it gave me was a connection to the school and to some people whose opinions I valued."

There is potential for negative effects to occur in a cohort model. For some, being in a cohort simply meant that they all paid tuition at the same time, and that their numbers guaranteed the viability of the program for the institution. For Alice, geographic groupings were a problem. "We never interacted with new people. Like-job roles grouped together (administrators tended to separate from teachers) and it tended to be people who knew each other in many cases. This was a divisive thing in the cohort." Ted experienced that a cohort can influence and discourage an instructor if the collective attitude is not self-directed. "It's amazing how a cohort that has a large number of members with the same attitude and level of expectation and ability, can outweigh the professors and have such an affect on the outcomes." One case in point was a course with a theory-based syllabus that was modified mid-term to become a series of skills-based training sessions, when the instructor became frustrated with resistance by several students.

Non-cohort drop-ins were seen by Mary and others as an unnecessary distraction and an impediment to continuous progress. "We couldn't just say we covered 'this' in an earlier course because not everyone had taken that course,

as would have been the case in a true cohort-limited program. It slowed the old-timers [cohort] down and made the new people feel like outsiders."

The program coordinator seemed to be the main influence in the success of the cohort, but Alice insisted that rapport must be established early. "We needed a framework or structure to make sure people stayed connected; maybe a two-to three-day start-up, with samples provided by each of the professors--a preview in order to be some part of the total design."

Art observed that, "People form relationships in discussion and lecture classes too, but nothing like this. I've seen many lifelong friendships formed here; it's an astounding network across the State, now." Fred concluded with some advice for new students. "Bond with the other students, rally for each other, become interdependent. The cohort is stronger than the sum of the individuals."

Factors for success. Attrition occurred either very early in the program, or not at all. Once in, failure or dropping out was not an option. Mary commented about the inadvisability of taking an incomplete grade for summer courses, or any courses for that matter. "If it's planned ahead as an incomplete to equalize tuition costs, that's one thing, but don't take an incomplete at the end of the

regular term when the project is due. Rather than moaning and groaning, we needed to realize that we were in control."

Journaling was highly recommended by Art, both as an advising medium and a writing tool. "Get communicating; start journal writing right away. Even if it is not required for class, make it a habit. Come portfolio time, that's where the real stuff is."

Writing skills were a major issue for Mary's cohort and for the cohorts of the other informants. There seemed to be a need for concentration on these skills early on in the program. "My advice is to expect a lot of writing and be ready to get comfortable with it. If you need help with writing, tell your advisor and get extra help or extra time really early on because it will affect your whole program."

Connecting with the major professor was a turning point for Ted. "I think the major professor is still the most important person as we go through this. When mine came on board, it was very timely. Any earlier, I hadn't really invested enough energy and time to truly understand."

For the doctoral students, the dissertation research and writing made the program the most meaningful. In Sue's final analysis, "My dissertation and the people I was working with [graduate committee] helped me to get what I wanted out of the program. The course work was hoops to jump through to get to the dissertation stage."

Jane sums it up with this reflection:

I have never studied so hard in my life. There were times that everyone sensed a frustration from the faculty with the politics of these add-on programs and whatever else was going on; we felt in the middle of all of that. But the flip side is that, had we not had this program, we'd be nowhere. It was an experiment that will end up producing some very valuable dissertations and research.

### Summary

The prolonged graduate student status, during a period when these students are developmentally well into adulthood, creates special problems. This may magnify the stress that is related to family responsibilities, relationships, career roles, and strained economic resources. All stakeholders in the program must consider the multiple stressors students may feel and the life transitions they are experiencing. Successful completion of the degree program is highly dependent on an environment in which students can feel reasonably secure in their personal, social, and physical needs (Caple, 1995).

The experiences reported by the student informants of this study can be categorized as generally positive and successful. Throughout the interviews they expressed an appreciation of the efforts of the institution and their own and each other's hard work. Without this type of program,

delivered at times, places, and ways convenient for working professionals, getting a graduate degree would have been impossible for most of the informants.

### Faculty Interviews

During the period of time that I was conducting student interviews, I also arranged to talk with three Oregon State University instructors who had worked extensively with the Ed.M./ABE program. I shared elements of the data from the student interviews and invited the instructors to comment. We also discussed aspects of the program that were significant to them. Our conversations were recorded on tape and I developed individual written profiles from the interview transcripts and my notes. These profiles were subsequently shared with the instructors and they reviewed and verified them.

### Analysis of Faculty Profiles

Ray and the other faculty informants stressed that the institution must acknowledge that these students can't possibly balance the varying levels of responsibility simultaneously.

Nontraditional students may assume that they can be a full time parent, be a full time wage earner,

be a primary source of inspiration to their spouse and siblings, make professional contributions, make presentations and hold offices and belong to organizations, and hold even a half-time graduate load, and do that with the kind of commitment that would allow them to make reasonable and acceptable grades, and demonstrate that they have learned. It's probably not possible for any but the most exceptional people to balance all those things simultaneously and continuously.

When there is crisis in one segment of the student's life, this affects the other elements directly and substantially, and priorities tend to shift. Ray cautioned, "To take the stance that a nontraditional student can be everything to everybody, and to their program, is probably an unreasonable assumption, so we have to be thinking about how much is a reasonable load for these people."

### Family-related Issues

Joel observed that the student's family is an important support system, even though being single might be easier. Certainly, families with young children place high demands on time and energy. "Where we find people having some trouble is if the kids are in grade school. Those folks are really caught between being mom and dad and being a student. Others who are single tend to have a little easier run through because they don't have all those commitments."

Anne talked of one student whose daughter was finishing high school. "She just wasn't sure it was worth it [to stay in the program and not spend that time with her family]. But in the final analysis, she said it was worth it and she didn't mean to be this negative."

The "new family." Being away from home and family is a growth experience for the students. Anne cautioned, however, that the cohort can take on the role of family, and this can cause problems if the family at home becomes jealous of the time and attention that is focused on the cohort family. "It wasn't easy for everybody but it was a very powerful thing. They bonded so strongly with the new family. Maybe this is a cultural thing where you have to let go of your old culture before you can become acclimated to the new one."

Time factor. Joel pointed out that teaching in these nontraditional programs requires a great sensitivity on the part of the professor to the needs of their adult learners. "When the students needed to take time out, I would give them the time; often they became pressured with family issues and with work at their schools."

Time was universally a scarce commodity and Joel considered the one-weekend-per-month schedule to be the easiest on the family. "They only spend one weekend per

month away from home. We have spouses who actually come for the weekend. They just kind of hang out and do other things; they become part of the cohort. We know them and it's a nice situation."

### Career-related Issues

Joel reported that some students were sent to the program by their employers because the degree is a type of certification. "The field [community college, Job Core, etc.] has said that, if you don't have a graduate degree, you're not going to be able to move through the ranks in terms of leadership positions."

Ray said that the pursuit of the degree, for some students, was an escape from family and work pressures. All three instructors agreed, however, that most students had a motivational desire to change and the emphasis was on how the degree would affect them professionally.

Anne gave this advice to prospective students. "Look at it as how it would affect you professionally and intellectually. You'll be more affected by this than you would by any traditional program."

### Program-related Issues

The instructors were most anxious to share their thoughts on program issues related to providing opportunities for nontraditional students to earn graduate degrees. The background and work experience brought to the program by these students was a strength, but there were deficiencies at admission that were problematic.

Admission deficiencies. Ray was adamant that graduate programs shouldn't remediate, they should enable. "That's not to say that everyone comes to us with everything they need. We ought to help them understand educational theories and problems; that's where the focus ought to be, not on teaching them how to read, write, or develop good study practices."

Most students were more self-directed than in their earlier education endeavor. If the program wasn't at the top of their priority list, however, they tended to opt in and out, resulting in the accumulation of many incomplete grades. Joel explained that, although grades weren't important when these students were undergraduates, "Now, when they come back, they're more self-directed, fighting for an A out of an A-. Self-directed learning is often contextual or domain-based. Get them in a subject area or

topic that is not very comfortable and they'll demand that you set up the steps."

The instructors and program planners struggled with determining how much was reasonable to expect from students in these circumstances. There is a great amount of reading required in any graduate program, and these programs were outcome-based, focusing on a final portfolio or dissertation which required strong writing skills.

Ray found that, under this pressure and with no other access to the degree, "The attitude can be, 'Don't expect me to do anything in this course because I work full time, I have a family, I'm a single parent. These are just hoops. If you are sensitive to me as a nontraditional student, you'll get out of my way.'" He therefore cautioned, "That creates a relationship that puts the responsibility on the faculty member instead of the student. The instructor begins to be perceived as the obstacle and not the person who is concerned with nurturing the growth of the student."

Cohort model and coping. Ray and the other two instructors saw the cohort system as the way to address many of these concerns. "The cohort model works; we've done it on campus. What it takes to foster the learning community aspect is a genuine desire to engage in the kinds of teaching and learning that we know will contribute to

intellectual gains and increased confidence and ability to do what it is we want people to do [finish the program]."

Joel explained that, "The key to the cohort system is often the initial contact with the professors in the program, especially the coordinator (who has the role of keeping the new cohort members supported and nurtured, maintaining that they can succeed in such a program, as well as becoming their advocate)."

The supportive team environment of the cohort learning community, rich in experience, facilitated collective nurturing and application-driven learning. Anne was surprised when an administrator in the cohort had a problem with why she should have to learn about learning and how to teach. "She went back and forth on this, but eventually decided it was a good idea. (I believe) we really need to be focusing on the teachers as learners looking at their own learning so they can keep track of how learning feels."

Joel and the other faculty informants recommended the cohort model as a solution to many of the problems inherent in a nontraditional graduate program for nontraditional students. "I'm a real believer in the cohort model--adults in a group together, with experiences. Your environment is so rich because of the individuals. As an instructor, it is hard to have more experiences than all of these students put together."

Teaching and delivery methods. Anne considered the summer sessions to be an important piece in developing the strength of the cohort and providing blocks of learning time away from other influences and distractions. "It was a way of committing to the program and it was also a way of bonding with the cohort." According to Ray, given the students' circumstances of limited preparation and commitment, the summer sessions were more effective for teaching and learning. "That is, the sort of four [days] plus four [days] with a month in between was more effective than the Ed-Net which met once a week for 10 weeks for a conventional period of time [three hours per week]."

Joel expressed concern that Ed-Net delivery of course work tended to be impersonal. "They found that what they missed was seeing each other. It was really hard to develop a sense of community and social learning." Learning was highly dependent on the ability of the instructor to adapt to the medium and to engage the learners. Joel continued, "Depending on the receptivity of the instructor, that's how that class was good or bad. Some of us loved interacting and other teachers did not like speaking to a television camera." Anne agreed. "I had a lot of content credibility on Ed-Net, but the personal stuff came later."

The monthly weekend sessions were the most effective and the most highly preferred by the students, according to

Anne and the other faculty informants. "In terms of learning, they thought it was the best deal. Part of that is the way those classes were taught, not with someone lecturing for 12 hours, but taught in mixed ways with lots of activities, lots of reflection, and work in between."

Joel said that there was very little testing in the weekend format, with the emphasis on application of learning and the creation of a final product. "We look for them to demonstrate their learning because they have to come in prepared to present. Students do a lot of reflecting and critical thinking, demonstrating proficiency in the end products of the course, rather than tests."

In Anne's experience, "Lower-order learning turned into higher-order learning by the final year, with more application. They constantly were talking about, 'I went back and I tried that, and it was wonderful and it worked great.'"

For Ray, "It depended on the kinds of things we talked about and the individual's degree of motivation, previous learning, and background. These are all variables and some people brought more than others to each of the courses."

Joel concluded, "It changes how you teach. My teaching style has changed so drastically because you have to think about interaction and how you're going to keep these people alive and awake, especially at 3:00 p.m. on Saturday."

### Summary

The instructors observed that there were numerous factors that higher education faculty members must consider in planning and delivering programs to meet the needs of nontraditional students: (a) showing sensitivity to the needs of adult learners, (b) determining what is a reasonable yet sufficiently rigorous work load for students, (c) emphasizing the importance of the cohort model and the positive aspects of on-campus summer sessions, (d) recognizing that intensive weekend courses seem to be the most effective and accepted format for course delivery, (e) guiding students to look at themselves as learners, (f) helping students understand educational theories and problems, and (g) requiring students to provide demonstrations of learning rather than evaluating them by testing.

### Overall Summary

Nontraditional students need many different kinds of support and assistance from family, friends, and institutions of higher learning. The data suggest that both sexes have difficulties juggling the roles of student, worker, and family member. Adult students need help in building their self-confidence as students, in acquiring or

refreshing study skills, and in managing their time and other resources while in school. In addition, adult students benefit from opportunities to interact with their peers and need to be actively involved in the educational process through sharing their relevant work and life experience. Institutions of higher education need to be responsive to the uniqueness of these nontraditional students in planning and delivering graduate programs that are not only accessible but also attainable.

Working with nontraditional students in nontraditional programs poses challenges for instructors and coordinators and provides opportunities to develop, explore, and evaluate alternative methods of delivery and instruction. Careful attention must be given to providing effective and efficient ways for fulfillment of institutional requirements. In the planning and delivery of all aspects of the program, faculty must consider the special needs and unique experiences of these students, while not compromising program quality and rigor. The cohort-based model provides an essential support system in maintaining student wellness and contributes significantly to the likelihood of degree completion.

## CHAPTER 5. CONCLUSIONS

### Introduction

Seidman (1991) provided guidance for the concluding part of the interpretation and analysis of the findings of my study:

In some ways, it is tempting to stop at this point, to let the profiles and the categorized excerpts speak for themselves. But one final step in the process is usually called for: asking what you learned from doing the interviews, studying the transcripts, marking and labeling them, crafting profiles, and organizing categories of excerpts. What connections are there among the experiences of the participants you interviewed? What do you understand now that you did not understand before you began the interviews? What surprises have there been? What confirmations of previous instincts? How have your interviews been consistent with the literature? How inconsistent? How have they gone beyond?...Much of what you learn may be tentative, suggesting further research. (p. 100)

The central research question of this study asked how nontraditional students were able to cope with and manage the conflicts between family and career responsibilities and the institutional demands of higher education.

Informants were selected purposefully from cohorts of three Oregon State University extended-campus graduate programs in Education. All student informants were working professionals with family obligations. Faculty informants

were involved extensively in the delivery and instruction of these programs. An initial focus group interview yielded basic concepts and categories which guided subsequent in-depth interviews with nine students and three faculty members. Narrative profiles, developed from these data, were analyzed and compared for patterns and commonalities that appeared to be present among the experiences of the informants.

This chapter is divided into four sections:

(a) my findings in terms of nine conclusions derived from the data, providing advice for prospective students and recommendations for consideration by instructors and administrators of similar programs; (b) some limitations of the study; (c) suggestions for further related research, and (d) my personal reflections of this study.

### Conclusions

For the most part, the experiences of the informants paralleled my own experiences as a nontraditional student in pursuit of a graduate degree in Education, as summarized at the end of this chapter.

Literature about nontraditional students in nontraditional graduate programs is currently limited in breadth and depth, however the seminal works of Cross (1980)



and Merriam (1988) on adult learning and adult education are substantiated by my findings.

I have organized the results of my study non-hierarchically with the following nine conclusions.

#### Conclusion One

Family support and involvement are foundational factors in the attainment of the degree.

Study displaces time that could otherwise be spent with the family and so opportunities are lost, particularly with children of public school age or younger. The immediate and extended family of the prospective student must be part of the initial decision to enroll in the degree program so that they can become an understanding support system.

It's a family commitment. The importance of these relationships to graduate students can be verified by browsing through the dedication and acknowledgment pages of several theses and dissertations to see who is listed and the reasons why (Cambra, Schluntz, & Cardoza, 1984).

#### Conclusion Two

Financial implications must be of prime concern in the student's preliminary plans to enroll in a graduate program.

Ongoing family life must be adequately supported. Financial aid avenues need to be thoroughly explored; sources of funding are not always apparent or widely advertised. Sabbatical leave options and vacation time have to be leveraged to full advantage; this time can be worth more than money, especially during the periods of research and dissertation writing.

Marriage, families, and financial responsibilities all loom large in the minds of this diverse population. McWade (1995) advised that prospective graduate students should prepare to adjust their lifestyles. Careful consideration of the type of support available should help them make informed decisions about the pursuit of graduate degrees.

### Conclusion Three

Wellness, both psychological and physical, can be significantly impacted by preoccupation with the academic demands of the program.

The stress of being a graduate student is added to an already full life. Because the student cannot be everything to everyone, feelings of guilt tend to pervade the conscience and can interfere with the pursuit of exercise, relaxation, and proper nutrition.

Fisher (1994) emphasized that, within the intrinsic pressures of scholarly endeavor and advancement of knowledge, students are expected to be not only successful in their chosen endeavors, but also to survive a number of psychosocial pressures such as major transitions away from the daily balanced routine of family and work life. Increasing recognition is being given to the role played by these factors in mental and physical health, and to the responsibility of the university in being openly supportive of students as people.

Paul G. Risser (personal communication, November 24, 1997), president of Oregon State University, advised in a letter to the Oregon State University community, "As faculty and staff, we may underestimate the tremendous role we each play in having a positive impact on the intellectual, psychological, and emotional lives of our students."

#### Conclusion Four

Time management is basic to successfully balancing family and career responsibilities and the institutional demands of higher education.

This has been described by several informants as a juggling act, where responsibilities, obligations, and deadlines constantly vie for priority in the students'

lives. Institutional sensitivity to this reality is essential. The one-weekend-per-month schedule was easiest on the students' families and interfered less with work routines and projects.

Similarly, students interviewed by Richardson and Skinner (1992) cited lack of experience with or knowledge of time management, along with the economic realities of college life and the bureaucratic nature of higher education, as an obstacle to getting a degree.

#### Conclusion Five

Workplace support and the application of course work in the field are critical elements in maintaining career momentum while undertaking a meaningful learning experience.

Supervisor support and understanding are crucial in finding ways to creatively meet the institutional demands of the degree program. Colleagues in the workplace can be both mentors and substitutes if they are included in the consideration of pursuing the degree. Internships, projects, and research that all have a career focus tend to allow the student to keep pace with as well as to enhance the work environment.

Senter and Senter (1997) found that when students report a high level of fit between their graduate program

and their work, they are more likely to experience positive occupational changes and to credit such changes to their educational program.

### Conclusion Six

Institutional and program requirements must be clearly understood by the student at the time of admission.

The institution must outline specifically the non-negotiable aspects of the program of study. Prerequisites, time lines, and outcomes must be stated clearly up front. Program costs need to be accurately estimated. There should be no surprises after enrollment, however students must take some responsibility for getting essential information. These are graduate degree programs and therefore students need to expect graduate level reading, rigor, and outcomes.

The Council of Graduate Schools (1995) supported this position with a call for students to learn about and be responsible for a host of issues that affect their lives, such as how curriculum can affect their careers, resources for financial support, the emotional impact of graduate study, and policies and procedures governing degree completion.

### Conclusion Seven

The program coordinator and the student's major professor are the main agents for institutional interface and outcome attainment.

Successful development of the cohort model is dependent on the facilitation skills of the program coordinator. The coordinator becomes the main link between students and the institution, demystifying the culture of each for the other. This person serves as the initial adviser and, at the same time, is the de facto representative of all institutional departments involved in delivering and maintaining the program. The coordinator must ensure that institution requirements and deadlines are communicated in a timely and understandable fashion. It is the coordinator who advocates for the student when the realities of the student and the rules of the institution collide.

The major professor is seen by the student as the true mentor and source of specific guidance in the completion of program requirements. It is strongly recommended that the major professor be selected as early as possible in the student's program so that readings and research can become increasingly focused on the final product. Otherwise, the course work could be completed without the student having settled on the portfolio or dissertation topic.

Vernon, Parco, and Marsick (1993) observed that changes in how learning is defined and managed are driving changes in roles demanded of educators. As institutions and programs assume increasing responsibility for the whole person, educators are managing the multiple linkages that are required to nurture the affective, familial, and cognitive development of their students.

### Conclusion Eight

Flexibility is required on the part of all stakeholders in these programs. This is especially important in three areas: (a) scheduling, (b) delivery, and (c) curriculum and instruction.

The traditional three-hours-per week class schedule tends to conflict with family and work obligations. Intensive on-campus summer sessions have mixed reviews, but can provide team building opportunities early in the program, as well as opportunities to integrate curriculum topics. Most students (and instructors) prefer the three-times-per-term, intensive-weekend class meetings.

The Ed-Net delivery of course work tends to impersonalize instruction and appears to have all the drawbacks of the traditional system (three hours per week and travel to a central location) for the nontraditional

student. When this is considered in light of the high cost of establishing and operating down-link sites, Ed-Net should be de-emphasized as a method of course delivery.

Assignments and projects must be somewhat negotiable due to the diversity of the experiences and needs of the students. Emphasis needs to be on the application of learning and preparation for the creation of the final product. Instructors must be knowledgeable in the current theory and practice of the field; dissertation and project topics should be relevant to the workplace. Teaching styles must provide ways to engage students who can be preoccupied with family and job-related issues, should facilitate interaction and collaboration, and need to accommodate a variety of logistical and institutional realities.

### Conclusion Nine

The cohort model provides a "second family" that is generally the best coping mechanism within the program.

Students who begin a program of study together tend to complete the program together. Particularly in the Ed.M./ABE program, informants found their primary emotional and educational support in each other. This concept of mutual support, if deliberately infused when a new cohort is established, tends to flourish during the program and can

develop into an effective network after graduation. To lessen the potential of this second family becoming a threat to the importance of the student's own family, the program coordinator should provide an opportunity during the first year of the program for some form of socializing among the students' family members.

This supports the study of Dorn, Papalewis, & Brown (1995), whose findings indicated that graduate programs, specifically those designed for practitioners in the Education field, need to incorporate cohort group dynamics to improve retention and persistence rates.

#### Limitations of the Study

- The study was limited to students in graduate programs in Education.
- The study was limited to one department of one college of one university.
- Informants were from first or second cohorts of new programs.
- The population sample, though purposefully selected, was small.
- The emphasis was on the Ed.M./ABE cohort, although the doctoral informants' experiences were congruent.

### Suggestions for Further Research

- Additional inquiry could show if the conclusions of this study are applicable to nontraditional graduate programs for nontraditional students in other academic departments.
- A long-term study might determine if completion of a graduate degree program enhances a professional's workplace efficacy. A parallel study might consider the effects of degree attainment on the psychological and physical wellness of the graduate.
- A comparative study of the efficacy of Ed-Net, modem-based, and intensive-weekend delivery systems could provide useful data for program planners.
- The authenticity of assessment by portfolio and project versus dissertation or thesis should be studied.
- Alternate ways of advising students and transacting institutional business should be examined.
- Private and public institution program quality, cost, and completion rates might be compared.

### Personal Reflections

Reflecting on my experience as the researcher and the author of this thesis, I feel compelled to add these personal footnotes to the final chapter of my study. I never before have persisted at such a level of commitment as has been required in order to complete the requirements for this degree.

I now recognize very clearly that this was not an endeavor I could have accomplished alone. There was a significant amount of accommodation by my immediate and extended family when "the paper" took precedence over vacations, visits, and vacuuming the house. Even with this level of support and understanding, feelings of guilt sometimes overwhelmed my resolve to persist, and the whole process occasionally bogged down. What kept me going was the collective sense that this goal of a graduate degree was worth foregoing a "normal" family life for a period of time.

In contrast to what was reported by many of the informants in this study, the cohort model was not a major source of support for me. The collaborative learning component in the majority of our course work was somewhat contrived; group work outside class time consisted mainly of hurried meetings in the hallway just prior to presenting our projects in class. This can be attributed to student

differences in interests, schedules, and personalities. It is possibly evidence of family and work responsibilities taking priority over study. It may also be symptomatic of a lack of understanding and experience in this approach to learning on the part of the institution.

There were efforts, after the completion of the program course work, to extend the cohort experience by sporadically scheduling some meetings, but I viewed these as a social obligation rather than an opportunity for support. The research and thesis writing processes have been very personal and singular tasks for me, however I have maintained individual contact with a limited number of cohort members. Being able to continue this link has been extremely helpful to me in coping with what otherwise would have been a very lonely endeavor.

The six months that I spent as a graduate research assistant did not provide the kind of quality research and writing time that I had envisioned. For one thing, I took the opportunity during this period to teach a course at a local community college, and I became very preoccupied responding to the new environment and the needs of my students. As well, I was required to move to another department at Oregon State University, and this also involved some "cultural" adjustments. The months passed quickly, and I was once again working full time, with little

research and no writing having been accomplished. I attribute my lack of progress partially to the fact that this leave from full-time employment was unplanned, and consequently I did not get full value for the time taken. This points out how crucial it is to establish a clear set of goals and a time line at the outset of any leave or sabbatical. This experience is also evidence that I am a less than totally self-directed learner and it supports Brockett's (1994) discussion of the implications of the "myths of self-direction" in adult learning.

In general terms, Oregon State University must be recognized for making this opportunity available to working professionals. In particular, the faculty members of the OSU School of Education deserve credit for providing their services largely as an add-on to their regular assignments. As my employer, the School of Education allowed me flexibility in my work schedule so I could complete my internship and course work, and the assistant director was instrumental in securing my appointment as a graduate research assistant.

Through all this, my major professor was consistently positive, encouraging, and concerned. She helped me establish realistic time lines, provided extensive written and oral feedback to the iterations of each chapter, and shared a wealth of experience gained from writing many

published manuscripts and articles. The other members of my committee were equally supportive and were quite prompt at responding to my drafts with constructive questions and concerns.

In conclusion, although there were significant barriers throughout the process, earning this degree was a worthwhile experience for me. I feel that the knowledge and expertise I have gained from the course work and thesis writing have strengthened my analytical and presentation skills and enhanced my ability to do research. As a true lifelong learner, I look forward to exploring the challenges of facilitating the learning of other adults in distance and continuing higher education.

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## APPENDICES

## APPENDIX A

## Information Letter

date

Dear cohort member:

I would like to invite you to participate in a study about your experience in an OSU extended-campus graduate program in Education. My intent is that this research will expand our knowledge about how practicing educators cope with the dual and concurrent role of full-time student. Research of this nature is especially important to inform the design and delivery of extended-campus graduate programs where this level of continuing professional development has been identified as a critical need.

This is a qualitative study which will begin with a preliminary focus-group interview to identify general themes. Then, between now and November, 1996, I will conduct a series of in-depth interviews, beginning with three selected informants from the focus-group interview. The interview questions will deal with your coping and negotiating experiences throughout the duration of your program. Each session will last about one hour and will be taped.

I will analyze the data (tapes, transcripts, etc.) as they are collected, using a method of constant comparison in order to uncover themes or categories and the relationships among them. Specific theories concerning coping and negotiating strategies will consequently emerge from the data rather than precede its collection.

In order to protect the confidentiality of research informants, pseudonyms known only to the informants and researcher will be used on the interview tapes and in the transcripts. The same pseudonyms will be used in the study. I will also use imaginary information concerning locations and other specifics to maintain confidentiality. Tapes, transcripts, field notes, and the key to the pseudonyms will be stored in a locked filing cabinet in my home.

Participation is voluntary and you may withdraw without prejudice at any time. If you decide to participate, please keep this letter for your own records and sign the consent form on the next page.

Allan Brazier

## APPENDIX B

## Informed Consent Form

I agree to participate in interviews about my experience in the: (Ed.M./ABE) (Ed.D./CCL) (Ed.D./MLE) program.

I will participate in the interviews under the following conditions:

1. I will allow the interviews to be tape recorded and the tapes transcribed.

2. I agree to allow Allan Brazier to use the information from the interview in the research project, report, and publications. I understand, however, that my privacy and confidentiality will be protected by disguising names and any other identifying information.

3. I understand that I have a right to receive and review written transcripts of the interviews. After reviewing and discussing the transcript with Allan, I can suggest modifications for accuracy, clarity, or new information.

4. I can withdraw from the interviews at any time without prejudice.

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Signature

---

Date

## APPENDIX C

## Ed.M./ABE Focus Group Interview Discussion Prompts

1. You've had such a variety of modes: modules, weekends, Ed-Net. Are there any you would recommend against using again?

2. How was the support from OSU? From your employer? What information should a new cohort have?

3. Is there anything in the actual subject matter of your courses that you could have done without? Is there anything you think should be added? What about the sequence? Did anything come too early or too late in the overall program? Are there courses that should be offered after certain others?

4. What are you particularly satisfied about even though the program isn't over? Are there any expectations that you had or others had for you that have not been realized? What would you tell someone thinking of enrolling?

## APPENDIX D

## In-depth Student Interview Guide Questions

1. What advice do you have for students just beginning a new cohort in your program?
2. Tell me about your family:
  - (a) Were they involved in the decision to enroll?
  - (b) How have they been affected by your studies?
  - (c) How have you been affected, personally?
3. Tell me about your work:
  - (a) Were you encouraged/required to enroll?
  - (b) What was the level and extent of support?
  - (c) Has study affected work?
4. When you were admitted to the program:
  - (a) What were your expectations?
  - (b) Has it met those expectations?
5. Tell me about the program:
  - (a) Advising and University Culture
  - (b) Cohort
  - (c) Curriculum and Instruction
  - (d) Schedule and Delivery
  - (e) Assignments and Final Product
6. What advice do you have for planners of similar programs?