



AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Michelle R. Benoit for the degree of Master of Science in Education presented on April 12, 2011.

Title: Key Motivating Factors for Rural Adult Women Entering College

Abstract approved:

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Darlene F. Russ-Eft

This qualitative study seeks to gain knowledge about the motives and barriers of rural adult women students and how these factors impact their decision to pursue postsecondary education. As more adult women choose to enter or return to higher education, it is important to examine the factors that influence their decision to enroll, as well as to identify barriers that may impede their chances for academic success. The results of this study will provide insights about the types of services the college could offer to facilitate these students' success as well as additional perspectives and approaches in the delivery of services. The methods used in this study include individual interviews with six rural adult women students at Southwestern Oregon Community College (SWOCC). A constant comparative approach to analysis was

undertaken to identify recurring themes and patterns among the data. Major themes that emerged were that (a) motivations to enroll are largely tied to personal and career aspirations and are influenced by the timing of other factors or life events, (b) barriers are focused primarily on fear, financial limitations, and multiple role demands, and (c) support programs and services most desired are peer mentoring and support groups, additional help in completing the financial aid process, and better communication of the programs and services that are available both at the college and in the community.

*Keywords:* women reentry students, rural college students, nontraditional students, rural community colleges, motives, and barriers.

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Key Motivating Factors for Rural Adult Women Entering College

by  
Michelle R. Benoit

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presented on April 12, 2011.

APPROVED:

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Major Professor, representing Education

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Dean of the College of Education

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Dean of the Graduate School

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

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Michelle R. Benoit, Author

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## Key Motivating Factors for Rural Adult Women Entering College

### CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

*True courage is not the absence of fear - but the willingness to proceed in spite of it.*  
*-Anonymous*

As an academic advisor at a rural community college, I meet adult students every day. Many are women who for years have put their own aspirations on hold so that they can tend to the needs of others, be they children, spouses, employers, or others. These students often face considerable obstacles to pursuing higher education. Frequently I perceive fear and uncertainty in their eyes as they prepare to embark on their educational journeys. To some the very notion of college is terrifying. In all probability, each of these women will make numerous personal sacrifices and endure significant challenges on the way to achieving their educational goals. Some will persist until their goal is met, while others will suspend their enrollment and return “when the time is right,” and still others will never reach the academic goals they set out to achieve. I am inspired by these women, even those who fall short of reaching their goals, as so many of them share a common trait: courage. I want to understand them, to find out what compels them, despite seemingly overwhelming circumstances, to pursue higher education. I want to know what barriers they face, and what we as educators can do to facilitate their academic success. Discovering the answers to these fundamental questions will help us to pave the way for even more rural adult women to realize their dream of completing a college education.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The number of adults entering postsecondary education continues to rise. According to a report for the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), enrollment for adults aged 25-34 is expected to increase by 25 percent between 2007 and 2018 and by 12 percent for adults 35 and over (Hussar & Bailey, 2009). Furthermore, enrollment figures for women during the same timeframe are projected to be nearly double those of men (Hussar & Bailey, 2009). In another report for the NCES, Horn and Premo (1995) pointed out that many of the characteristics shared by so called nontraditional students put them at risk of not completing their educational programs. The same researchers also found that the majority of students who possessed these characteristics tended to be women.

Nontraditional students also tend to be less academically prepared for postsecondary education than traditional students (Choy, 2002). According to Horn and Premo (1995) academic under preparedness may significantly contribute to the decision to postpone enrollment in college. Nevertheless, researchers have argued that external, non-academic stresses had an even greater negative impact on student success and persistence than low academic preparedness (Bean & Metzger, 1985; Johnson, Schwartz & Bower, 2000). Therefore, mitigating these obstacles is of vital importance in helping students to attain their educational goals and something to which educational institutions should be deeply committed.

Finally, Horn and Premo (1995) also suggested that these risk factors were strongly interrelated and that students who had one risk factor were very likely to have

more than one. Further, the more risk factors a student exhibited, the more likely he or she was to enroll in a short-term certificate or associate degree program such as those offered at two-year colleges and trade schools. For this reason, this study examined the experiences of nontraditional women students at a rural community college.

### **Purpose of the Study and Research Questions**

The purpose of this study was to gain knowledge and understanding about the factors that influence the decision of rural adult women to enter postsecondary educational programs at Southwestern Oregon Community College (SWOCC). Data collected included the factors that motivated participants to return to school, the barriers they encountered both prior to and subsequent to becoming college students, and the institutional and community support they require most.

In this research I sought to answer the following questions:

1. What motivates rural adult women to pursue postsecondary education?
2. What barriers do rural adult women face in attaining their educational goals?
3. How can the college and/or community better provide support services to facilitate the attainment of rural adult women's educational goals?

The results of this study will assist college personnel in adapting services to address the unique needs of this student population. Furthermore, I believe the outcomes of this study will assist rural community colleges in attracting and retaining more adult women students through the creation of more welcoming learning environments for them.

## **Significance of the Study**

Throughout the nation nontraditional students outnumber traditional students on college campuses today (Choy, 2002). While there is abundant research dedicated to the topic of nontraditional students and women reentry students in general, there is little research to be found with respect to *rural* adult women students, their reasons for entering college, the barriers they face, and the support services that are most beneficial to them. While it may be possible to generalize the findings of previous studies within the nontraditional student arena, there is a need for additional research that specifically examines the unique experiences of rural adult women students in the United States. Furthermore, this study may reveal new information that could apply to a broader population of students who exhibit nontraditional characteristics. Given the fact that a majority of undergraduate students exhibit at least one nontraditional characteristic (Horn & Premo, 1995), the study results may prove useful to colleagues in a broad range of educational institutions, and not strictly to those situated in rural communities.

## **Definition of Terms**

**Nontraditional student.** The term *nontraditional student* is defined differently by different people. It is sometimes used to refer to postsecondary students over the age of 24 (Horn & Premo, 1995; Padula, 1994), but it also can refer to students who exhibit a variety of characteristics not traditionally associated with being a college student. Horn (1996) defines nontraditional students based on seven criteria relating to enrollment status, financial status, family status, and high school graduation



status. These seven criteria are (a) delayed enrollment, (b) part time enrollment, (c) financial independence, (d) full time employment while enrolled, (e) having dependents other than a spouse, (f) being a single parent, and (g) not having a standard high school diploma. Any one of these traits would place a student in the nontraditional category.

The terms *adult learner*, *adult student*, *adult reentry student*, and *returning adult student* are other ways of referring to nontraditional students. For the purposes of this study, these terms will be used interchangeably to refer to any student who exhibits one or more of the aforementioned nontraditional characteristics.

**Traditional student.** For the purposes of this study, traditional students are defined as those who (a) earn a conventional high school diploma, (b) enroll in college immediately after high school, (c) attend full time, (d) work little or not at all during the school year, and (e) rely on their parents for financial support (Choy, 2002).

**Risk factor.** A risk factor is any characteristic or condition that places students in greater peril of not completing their educational program. This includes such conditions as (a) delaying enrollment in postsecondary education, (b) not graduating from high school, (c) working full time while enrolled, (d) attending part time, (e) having dependents, and (f) having to commute long distances to work or school (Horn & Premo, 1995).

**Rural.** The U.S. Census Bureau uses the term *rural* to classify people who live in places with small populations or unincorporated areas with population density less than 1,000 per square mile. Further, any territory, population, or housing unit

located outside of a Census designated urbanized area or urban cluster is classified as rural (U.S. Census, 2009).

### **Summary**

As more adult women choose to enter or return to higher education, it is important to examine the factors that influence their decision to enroll, as well as to identify barriers that may impede their chances for academic success. Knowledge of these factors will provide college personnel a more comprehensive understanding of the complexities of these students' lives. This understanding will help them to design programs and services that afford rural adult women meaningful opportunities to achieve their educational goals.

## CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The purpose of this study was to identify what motivates rural adult women to enter or return to college. Secondly, it was important to discover what barriers they face that may put them at risk of not completing their educational programs. A better understanding of these motivations and barriers may allow college personnel to design support mechanisms targeted to the special needs of this at-risk population.

In researching the topic of rural adult women students a variety of information sources were utilized. These included books, scholarly journals, electronic databases such as Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) and Academic Search Premier, as well as internet search engines such as Google Scholar. Keywords used in electronic searches included (a) women reentry students, (b) rural college students, (c) nontraditional students, (d) rural community colleges, (e) motives, and (f) barriers.

The literature review provided an overview of previous research pertaining to the subject of rural adult women students and provided the background and context for this study. As research that specifically focused on *rural* adult women students was limited, studies conducted on the motives and barriers of nontraditional and women reentry students in general were included. The literature review was organized around the subjects of (a) rural communities and the circumstances of rural women, (b) community colleges and their appeal to adult women students, and (c) adult women students and the motives and barriers that influence their decision to enroll in postsecondary educational programs.

## **Rural Communities and Women**

At one time in the not so distant past, rural communities conjured images of a Norman Rockwell painting – an idealized setting in which Dad went off to work each morning and Mom stayed home to care for the children. Family wage jobs were plentiful in industries such as manufacturing, timber, and fishing. There was little need for education beyond high school (Valadez & Killacky, 1995). The same cannot be said today. Manufacturing jobs have largely moved overseas, and jobs that rely on natural resources such as timber and fishing are in danger of becoming extinct (Chesson & Rubin, 2002).

Today's rural community is likely to be economically distressed as a result of a combination of factors. Gillett-Karam (1995) summed it up thusly,

Today, the rural United States is known by a set of identifiers that include the words low, slow, and high – low population density, low total populations, low per capita income, low levels of educational attainment, slow job growth, high poverty, high unemployment, and high rates of illiteracy (p. 43).

Poverty rates in rural communities have continued to be far higher than those in urban or metropolitan areas, and the more rural the community, the higher the poverty rates (USDA Economic Research Service, 2004). According to the USDA (2004), 37.1 percent of rural single-adult female-headed families lived in poverty compared to 16.6 percent of rural single-adult male-headed families, and 27.1 percent of metropolitan single-adult female-headed families.

The option to stay at home and raise the children is simply no longer practical for many rural women. However, often the only jobs available to women with little or

no education and training in rural communities are low-level jobs in the service industry. Furthermore, unemployment rates among rural women are significantly higher than those for women living in non-rural areas. Due in part to the low levels of education and skills among the rural labor force, many businesses are reluctant to locate in rural communities (Gillet-Karam, 1995). All of these factors contribute to the high rates of poverty among rural adult women and perpetuate what Gillet-Karam called “the cycle of less” in rural communities.

### **Community Colleges and Women**

Studies have shown that when women reenter college they overwhelmingly choose to enter programs at community colleges (Bundy & Smith, 2004; Choy, 2002; Horn & Premo, 1995). Community colleges offer greater access, affordability, and flexibility to higher education than most four-year institutions (Bundy & Smith, 2004). They tend to provide open enrollment, smaller class sizes, and convenient locations. Community college classes frequently are offered in a variety of flexible schedules and formats, i.e. evening or online classes, which more conveniently fit into adult students’ busy lives. Additionally, community colleges offer short-term certificate and applied science programs that adult women students find especially appealing (Horn & Premo, 1995). These students tend to enroll in shorter programs so that they can more quickly meet their educational objectives and enter the workforce. According to Horn and Premo (1995) the more risk factors for non-completion that a student exhibited, the shorter the educational program she was likely to undertake. Consequently, when adults return to school, community college is often their first

choice (Hardin, 2008). This may help to explain why the average age of a community college student is 28 years old (American Association of Community Colleges, 2011).

For students who are uneasy about entering college, community colleges offer a less intimidating entry point. According to Hardin (2008), adult students often shared characteristics that hampered their chances for academic success and put them at risk of not completing their educational programs. These characteristics included “delaying enrollment into higher education until adulthood, enrolling part time, working full time, being financially independent, being financially responsible for others, having family responsibilities, and having academic deficiencies” (p. 50). All of these factors have the potential to cause extremely high levels of stress for adult students even before setting foot on a college campus. Given the large number of adults enrolled at community colleges, college personnel must strive to remove or reduce the impact of the barriers these students face. In order to do that, it is necessary to gain a more comprehensive understanding of them.

### **Adult Women College Students**

**Motivations.** Women enroll in postsecondary education programs for any number of reasons. Previous research has found that women were often motivated to further their schooling following a life-altering transition such as divorce or loss of a spouse, job displacement, or children leaving home or starting school (Bates & Norton, 2002; Genco, 2007). The fulfillment of personal aspirations, the desire to be a good role model for their children, and a sense that “it was time” were also identified as common motivating factors in several studies of adult women students (Furst-Bowe

& Dittmann, 2001; Genco, 2007; Mohny & Anderson, 1988). Some researchers found that women cited career-related reasons as their primary reason for seeking postsecondary education (Bates & Norton, 2002; Bauman et al., 2004; Furst-Bowe & Dittmann, 2001; Mohny & Anderson, 1988). Likely it is a combination of life events and personal motivations that prompt women to further their education (Mohny & Anderson, 1988). Studies have also shown that throughout their lives women tend to factor heavily the needs of others into their decision-making processes (Mohny & Anderson, 1988). The implication is that women are motivated more frequently by external factors than by internal ones (Bates & Norton, 2002). As a result, women are likely to delay enrollment in postsecondary education until they perceive it will not inconvenience or harm others who rely on them (Mohny & Anderson, 1988).

**Barriers.** Many adult women face substantial barriers to enrolling in college. Barriers may be defined as circumstances which prevent, delay, or suspend enrollment, or which impede student success and persistence toward their academic goals. According to Mohny and Anderson (1988), frequently barriers were related to the high demands placed on women as a result of the multiple roles they must play in their daily lives. In their study, family obligations were the role demands most commonly cited; however, employer needs also presented challenges to enrollment and persistence. Because most women today work outside the home, yet their obligations to home and family have largely remained unchanged, many women find that they lack sufficient time to add the role of student to their hectic lives. As a

result, the timing of women's enrollment in postsecondary programs often coincides with a perceived lessening of their role demands (Mohney, & Anderson, 1988).

Fear was often cited as a barrier for women in pursuing their academic goals (Genco, 2007; Johnson et al., 2000). Johnson, et al. (2000) listed the fears of (a) failure, (b) unfamiliar environment, (c) the unknown, and (d) not being accepted by others as common causes of apprehension among women students. These and other factors only contribute to the high degree of stress experienced by many adult women students.

Lack of sufficient finances is a barrier that is highly common among adult women students (Genco, 2007; Gillet-Karam, 1995; Johnson et al., 2000; Padula, 1994). Eifler and Potthoff (as cited in Hardin, 2008) "found that finances were a crucial concern of older students" (p. 52). Financial supports that are uncertain or unsteady often result in adult women once again delaying or abandoning their educational aspirations (Gillet-Karam, 1995).

The life experiences and obstacles faced by adult women differ from those of traditional college students and likely result in a unique set of support needs (Hardin, 2008; Kasworm, 2008; Padula, 1994). Postsecondary institutions have both the ability and obligation to increase women's access to higher education and improve their chances of success by providing resources designed to reduce the barriers and enhance the educational experiences of these students. Furthermore, Bauman et al. (2004) found that adult students would be very likely to use on-campus support services that addressed their needs. This evidence further supports the notion that developing



programs to assist adult women students is an important and worthwhile endeavor for colleges to undertake. Examining the experiences and challenges of adult women students in order to gain a clearer understanding of their impact on academic success and persistence will help college personnel to develop support programs and services tailored to meet the specific needs of this growing population of students.

### **Summary**

This review of the literature introduced the background and context for the study of rural adult women students. It provided an overview of the circumstances of many adult women living in rural communities. These women often had little or no education or training, were unemployed or underemployed, and lived in poverty. Women students were often attracted to educational programs at community colleges because of their ease of access, short duration, flexibility, and relative affordability. Adult women's entry into postsecondary education was often motivated by personal and career aspirations, as well as a sense that the time was right in their lives to do so. Barriers to goal attainment revolved mainly around financial constraints, fear, and multiple role demands. This study was grounded in the findings of previous research on nontraditional and women reentry students. A more comprehensive understanding of the experiences of rural adult women students will assist college personnel in developing support programs and services designed to meet the specific needs of this at-risk population.

## CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

### **Design of the Study**

This design of this qualitative study was inspired by Genco's (2007) study of the experiences of adult re-entry students prior to enrolling at a rural Appalachian community college. Genco's (2007) study identified five research questions that inquired into (a) the life transitions that preceded adult re-entry students' enrollment in community college, (b) the barriers these students faced, (c) the support services provided by the college that were most beneficial to them, (d) the ways in which the college could better facilitate the transition process, and (e) the transition experience of recent graduates as compared to that of current students. Subjects participated in individual, face-to-face interviews with the researcher.

For the purposes of this study, I developed three research questions pertaining to the experiences of rural adult women students. The key questions are:

1. What motivates rural adult women to pursue postsecondary education?
2. What barriers do rural adult women face in attaining their educational goals?
3. How can the college and/or community better provide support services to facilitate the attainment of rural adult women's educational goals?

I then developed an interview guide in which the interview questions were structured around the three key research questions (Johnson & Christensen, 2008). Interview questions were open-ended in order to obtain rich and detailed data regarding the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of study participants in relation to their decision to enroll in college. In addition, I created a nine item demographics sheet in order to

collect descriptive information regarding each participant's (a) program of study, (b) age, (c) marital status, (d) children and dependents, (e) employment status, (f) prior education level, and (g) parents' education level.

### **Study Population**

**Selection criteria.** The selection criteria for the study subjects included female students at Southwestern Oregon Community College (SWOCC), a rural community college located in Coos Bay, Oregon with satellite campuses in Gold Beach and Brookings, Oregon. These female students aged 25 years or older, resided within the college district but lived 25 miles or more from the main campus. Subjects were required to be currently enrolled at SWOCC and working toward a degree or certificate either part time or full time or be recent graduates of the college. Subjects also were required to have been separated from a formal educational setting for at least two years prior to their current enrollment at SWOCC. This is an example of purposive sampling (Johnson & Christensen, 2008).

These selection criteria were specifically chosen because women in these circumstances almost certainly face greater barriers to obtaining a college education than students who live within close proximity to the main campus or those who have recently been enrolled in school. Issues such as access to classes, programs, services, and transportation are likely to significantly impact these women's ability to go to college. Furthermore, women who have been out of school for an extended period of time may find the idea of being a college student and confronting all the associated challenges more difficult to imagine than those who recently have been students, thus

requiring them to give more careful thought and deliberation to their decision to enroll. Because these factors affect so many rural adult women students, I believe it was important to include them in the selection criteria for the study participants.

**Participant recruitment.** Participants were recruited with assistance from SWOCC personnel. A recruitment email was sent via socctalk, the college's internal listserv. Recruitment flyers were also posted on each of the three SWOCC campuses. Potential candidates were then contacted by email or telephone where I introduced myself, briefly stated the purpose of this study, and verified that they met the selection criteria. Those who expressed interest were emailed copies of the informed consent document and the interview guide (see Appendix A) to further aid them in their decision whether to participate in the study. Of the potential candidates, six agreed to take part in the study were selected as participants.

**Participant profiles.** The participants in this study were six adult female students at SWOCC who have declared a program of study and who reside at least 25 miles from the college's main campus. Three participants attended classes on the main campus in Coos Bay, and three attended either at the Gold Beach or Brookings satellite campuses, located roughly 70 miles and 100 miles from Coos Bay respectively. Five were full time students working less than 10 hours per week, and one was employed full time and taking one or two classes per term. All participants were enrolled in two-year associate's degree programs. Their ages ranged from the late twenties to mid-fifties. All participants had been separated from a formal educational setting between eight and 25 years prior to enrolling at SWOCC. Five of

the students had considered enrolling in college for 10 to 24 years prior to doing so, while the sixth participant only considered enrolling for a year prior to becoming a student. Three participants earned their GED at SWOCC's testing center before deciding to go to college, one was a licensed cosmetologist, one had a bachelor's degree, and one had taken a college class now and then over the years since graduating high school. One participant's parents had earned bachelor's degrees, another's each had associate's degrees, and the remaining four had parents who did not hold college degrees. Five of the six were married at the time of their interview, and one was a single mother. Five participants had at least one child still at home, and the sixth had a child who had recently graduated from high school and was away at his first year of college.

### **Data Collection**

**Interviews.** Data collection included semi-structured interviews with study participants. Interviews were arranged according to the needs of both subjects and researcher. One took place in a participant's dining room, two at the workplace of one participant, and three in the researcher's office at SWOCC. Subjects were required to sign a letter of informed consent prior to their interview indicating that they understood their rights and agreed to take part in the study and be audio recorded. Pseudonyms were assigned to participants to protect their identity. Interviews averaged approximately 30 minutes in length. Recordings were transcribed verbatim, and transcripts were emailed to participants to verify their accuracy. All participants agreed that the transcripts were accurate; however, one participant requested that extra

caution be taken to protect her identity as some of the information she shared could cause her some embarrassment were her identity to be revealed. Due to the intimacy of the small satellite campus where this student attends classes, demographic data for this study is reported only in aggregate form to protect the anonymity of this and other study participants.

### **Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness refers to the criteria by which the rigor and merit of a study are evaluated. Several techniques were employed to ensure the trustworthiness of this study and are outlined below.

**Member checks.** Member checking is a technique used by researchers to increase the accuracy and validity of a study by soliciting feedback from respondents during the data analysis process (Russ-Eft & Preskill, 2009; Willis, 2007). For the purposes of this study, interviews were recorded and transcribed by the researcher. Transcripts were emailed to participants so that they could verify their accuracy. In addition, any questions regarding interpretation were forwarded to participants at this time for further clarification. Interpretation was then revised or maintained as appropriate.

**Extended experience in the environment.** Willis (2007) argued that “another way of supporting hermeneutic (understanding) research is to spend time in the environment under study” (p. 220). The researcher works on a daily basis with the type of students who participated in this study and, therefore, possesses a heightened understanding of the experiences of rural adult women students.

**Peer review.** Peer review involves the input of other scholars in areas such as (a) the design of the study, (b) the methodologies employed, (c) data analysis, and (d) emerging conclusions (Willis, 2007). The researcher presented these elements to two professors and a fellow classmate during regular thesis meetings over the course of several months. Peers reviewed and provided valuable input to this study. Suggestions were made during the data analysis phase that included categorizing motivations and barriers as either *internal* or *external*, as well as incorporating a section about the ways in which participants overcame barriers. In addition, suggestions were made for potential follow up questions to participants.

**Audit trail.** The researcher attempted to provide documentation of her work throughout the process of this study. This included notes and observations captured during all phases of the study, preliminary analysis of the raw data, initial data displays, and refined data displays.

### **Personal Disclosure Statement**

My interest in the subject of this study is based in part on my experience as an academic advisor working with rural adult women students at SWOCC. My experience at a rural community college has been a particularly poignant one. I have witnessed numerous examples of students who came to community college with little or no academic preparedness but, through hard work and determination, were able to realize their dreams. Community colleges have the potential to radically transform people's lives from the oppression of poverty to the relative comfort of middle class and beyond. I would like to work to increase access to higher education to citizens in

rural communities. My hope is that the findings of this research project will contribute to that end.

In addition to my work at SWOCC, I am also a graduate student in the department of Adult and Higher Education at Oregon State University working towards a master of science in Education. Thus my interest in the topic of rural adult women entering college extends beyond the professional and is of personal interest to me, as I, too, am a rural adult woman returning to school after a long hiatus. In my decision to reenter college I experienced many of the same motivations and barriers as the participants in this study. My main incentive for returning to school was a desire to further my career in higher education; however, it had also been a long-held personal aspiration of mine to earn a master's degree. After earning my bachelor's degree in French I spent several years trying different lines of work and searching for a career that was satisfying, that provided a reasonable standard of living, and which I could sustain. I finally landed in higher education in 2006 when I was hired as an academic advisor at SWOCC's satellite campus in Brookings and discovered the passion and purpose for which I had been searching. It quickly became clear, though, that if I wanted to advance my career in higher education I would need an advanced degree. Now that I had found a career I loved, I felt the time was right to consider getting a master's degree. It was something I wanted to do for myself alone. I faced several barriers as I mulled over the idea of graduate school, the greatest of which was fear. I was afraid that graduate school would be too difficult, that I did not possess the skills to do the work, and that I would not have the time to successfully complete my



school work in addition to working full time. Essentially, I feared failure. In addition, I feared that it would create an unmanageable financial burden. These were very real and daunting concerns for me which resulted in my delaying my education. I also faced several external barriers to returning to school. Living in a remote rural community on the Oregon coast severely limited my access to degree programs. I needed to find a program that would not require me to leave my job and home to relocate to a university campus. Furthermore, my income at the college was not enough for me to afford graduate tuition rates. I knew I would need to take out student loans; however, having a strong personal aversion to debt, I was reluctant to do so. I searched for grants and scholarships, but discovered that I was unlikely to find enough funding to cover all of my educational expenses without student loans. Ultimately, I deliberated enrolling in graduate school for about three years before I finally applied.

### **Data Analysis**

The constant comparative method of data analysis was undertaken to analyze interview transcripts. Willis (2007) identified six recursive steps that comprise the essential process of the constant comparative method. These include “(1) start data collection, (2) organize data into units such as sentences, events, or paragraphs, (3) associate similar units and develop categories for the data, (4) look for links, associations, and relationships between the categories, (5) develop broader, more generalized explanations from the categories and their relationships, and (6) repeat the process” (p. 307). Once the accuracy of the transcripts was verified, the process of

coding began. Words, phrases, and statements were underlined, and notations were made in the margins indicating initial thoughts about which research question they addressed and categories in which they might fit. As broad categories began to emerge I created a data display in a Word document in which I coded the categories and listed them in an outline format. As I continued to read the transcripts I expanded the categories and began listing relevant statements below them along with the first initial of the pseudonym of the participant who contributed it. As I came across others who made similar statements I added their initial to the outline in order to provide a frequency count. From this exercise I began to identify patterns and themes in the data set. I repeated this process until I was able to recognize associations among the data. At this point I began to develop hypotheses and theories that would inform my interpretation of the data. I continued this recursive process until I was satisfied that I had extracted all possible meaning from the data. From here I developed the theories on which the findings and conclusions of this study are based.

### **Protection of Human Subjects**

Both the principal investigator and the student researcher successfully completed the Course in the Protection of Human Research Subjects through the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) and are certified to conduct research on human subjects. The procedures and interview questions were approved by the Oregon State University (OSU) Institutional Review Board (IRB). All of the procedures were followed during the research.

**Summary**

The methods employed in this qualitative study sought to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of rural adult women students at SWOCC. Face-to-face interviews provided rich and detailed data, and a demographics questionnaire collected additional information that provided descriptive information about the participants. Trustworthiness of the data was achieved through member checking, the researcher's extended experience in the environment, peer review, and the creation of an audit trail. The data were analyzed using the six recursive steps of the constant comparative method. The OSU IRB reviewed and approved the research procedures.

## CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

This study was designed to gain knowledge and understanding of the experiences of rural adult women students at a community college. Research was focused around three key questions:

1. What motivates rural adult women to pursue postsecondary education?
2. What barriers do rural adult women face in attaining their educational goals?
3. How can the college and/or community better provide support services to facilitate the attainment of rural adult women's educational goals?

Table 1 presents a summary of the major themes that emerged from the data. In terms of motivations and barriers, participants cited both internal and external conditions that influenced their decision to enter college. Institutional and community support services that were most desired centered on peer mentoring and support groups, additional assistance for completing financial aid processes, and better communication about available services. These findings will be discussed in detail in this chapter. Study participants have been assigned pseudonyms in order to maintain their anonymity.

Table 1

*Research Questions and Major Themes*


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Research Question	Themes
What motivates rural adult women to pursue postsecondary education?	<p data-bbox="894 636 1143 667">Internal Motivators</p> <ul data-bbox="894 674 1403 705" style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Strong personal desire, dream, or goal</li> </ul> <p data-bbox="894 747 1154 779">External Motivators</p> <ul data-bbox="894 785 1349 999" style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Laid off or reduced hours at work</li> <li>- Pressure from employer</li> <li>- Stability &amp; regular work hours</li> <li>- Access to nursing program</li> <li>- Support from spouse</li> <li>- Role model for children</li> </ul> <p data-bbox="894 1041 992 1073">Timing</p> <ul data-bbox="894 1079 1333 1289" style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Combination of enabling events</li> <li>- Change in employment</li> <li>- Lessening of role demands</li> <li>- Financial ability</li> <li>- Earned GED</li> <li>- Personal sense that “it was time”</li> </ul>
What barriers do rural adult women face in attaining their educational goals?	<p data-bbox="894 1335 1105 1367">Internal Barriers</p> <ul data-bbox="894 1373 976 1404" style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Fear</li> </ul> <p data-bbox="894 1446 1117 1478">External Barriers</p> <ul data-bbox="894 1484 1260 1551" style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Lack of financial resources</li> <li>- Multiple role demands</li> </ul>
How can the college and/or community better provide support services to facilitate the attainment of rural adult women’s educational goals?	<ul data-bbox="894 1593 1403 1766" style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Peer mentoring</li> <li>- Nontraditional student support groups</li> <li>- More assistance with financial aid</li> <li>- Better communication of available services</li> </ul>

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## **Motivators**

Women enroll in college for many reasons. The main reasons cited by study participants are outlined here and are categorized as internal and external motivators.

### **Internal motivators.**

*What I am looking for is not out there; it is in me.*  
*-Helen Keller*

Five of the six participants in this study cited a strong personal desire, dream, or goal as a motivating factor in returning to school. Kate and Nadia each had a long-held dream of being a nurse. Sandy had longed to work in the medical field since the age of five, and Gina aspired to work in an office with regular hours and health insurance. Joy had “always wanted to go to college” and desired to help people. On the contrary, Meg never wanted to go to college but felt pressure at her job to earn a degree. Interestingly, though, when that urgency subsided due to a change in leadership, Meg’s motivation shifted from external to internal. She stated, “I’m still not particularly thrilled to have to do this, but I don’t want to be a quitter like I have been in the past. . . . I started so I don’t want to stop.” Internal motivators were very powerful for these women.

**External motivators.** All six women stated work-related reasons for returning to school. Nadia, Kate, Meg, Sandy, and Gina were either laid off or had a reduction in hours at their jobs. Meg was quickly hired elsewhere, but as stated above, felt pressure from new superiors to “get the paper.” Others mentioned the need for stability and regular hours as motivating factors. For the two nursing students it was finally having access to the program that motivated them to enroll. Previously they

would have had to drive more than two hours several days a week to take classes on the main campus and attend clinical sites. Thanks to technology they could now access nursing classes at the satellite campus closer to where they live and attend clinicals locally.

An external motivator that was cited by all six participants was encouragement from others, especially family. Spousal support appeared to be crucial to success and persistence for all but one of the married students. Meg relayed how her husband's support got her through some of the most difficult times, like the math class that literally brought her to tears.

You know, it's like, I can't do this. I don't get it . . . And he's like, 'You can do this. You can do this.' And so . . . he was my cheerleader. I think if he hadn't been supportive, I don't know if I'd have been able to hang in there. . . . He doesn't have a degree, so I think . . . he's proud of me.

They used phrases like "my awesome husband," "he's very supportive," and "he's like a watchdog" to describe the men who provided support and lessened their role demands at home. Four of the participants also wanted to be good role models for their children. Sandy expressed her sentiments as follows:

It sets a good example for my son to see, look, Mom may have waited a lot of years to go back to school, but there was a reason she went back, and it was really important for her to make it through. And as bad as he does in school. . . . He actually brought homework home last week. First time EVER! So you go, maybe he is seeing something.

**Timing.** Five of the six participants had wanted to enroll in college for years, but for whatever reason it was not the right time. All six participants experienced an interaction of seemingly random events that made it possible for them to finally enroll.

These women recognized an opportunity to alter their lives, and they seized it. Gina was unexpectedly pregnant at age 36 and found public assistance programs for single mothers that allowed her to quit her job as a hairdresser and go to school full time. Nadia was laid off after 10 years of working in a health-related career, and Kate had a drastic reduction in work hours right around the time the nursing program became available to them at their local outreach site. Joy was treated for cancer and consequently qualified for Social Security Disability benefits which help her make ends meet while she studies to be a teacher. In addition, when Joy's youngest child entered Head Start one of the teachers there encouraged her to get her GED and go back to school. This individual also was instrumental in helping Joy to apply for a lucrative scholarship that she was later awarded. Joy then encouraged her relative, Sandy, to go back to school by paying for her GED and college application when Sandy became unemployed. Sandy had always wanted to work in the medical field but had put off going to college for more than 25 years. Now that she was receiving unemployment benefits and had earned her GED, Sandy said that Joy told her matter-of-factly, "Now you have no excuses." To which Sandy replied, "She's right. . . . I need to be able to get a normal career instead of these little jobs here and there. It was time. . . . So here I am."

### **Barriers**

Barriers are defined here as any circumstance that prevents, delays, or interrupts students' enrollment in college or that puts them at risk of not completing their educational program. They are categorized here as internal and external barriers.



**Internal barriers.** A common barrier for the majority of the participants was fear. It was the first word out of most of these women's mouths when asked what had prevented them from enrolling sooner. Fear of failure, of not fitting in, and of the unknown all caused great anxiety for Kate, Gina, Sandy, and Meg before they enrolled in college. Gina relayed her feelings when she first went back to school. "I was a wreck that first day. But it's the unknown; anything that's unknown is scary. . ."

Sandy described her experience thusly:

Anxiety, fear, totally and utterly. The butterflies were not like butterflies. They were like dinosaurs fighting in your stomach. The whole idea of just sitting in there and going, 'Who am I going to talk to? I have nothing in common with these teenagers. . . . What am I gonna do? How can I get out of this?'

**External barriers.** External barriers were numerous. One that was ubiquitous among all participants was money. Financial support was cited as being vital to the continuation of their studies. Federal financial aid was essential for these students, yet three of them had experienced great difficulty in completing what Meg described as a "ridiculously complicated" process. Delays in financial aid have been especially troubling for Nadia and Meg, both of whom attend at outreach sites. They stated that communication with financial aid evaluators on the main campus had been difficult and that outreach staff often lacked the expertise to assist them. One has had to finance her tuition on a credit card, and the other has had to suspend her enrollment altogether until she receives her aid.

Participants also cited challenges in balancing multiple role demands. Finding enough time in the day to get everything done was a constant struggle for the majority

of them. Feelings of guilt often accompanied the need to spend more time on their studies and less time with family. Time with family, social and personal enrichment activities, adequate sleep, and the desire for a tidy home frequently were forfeited to academic demands. Such personal sacrifices were cited by all study participants as conflicts with which they continually grappled. In addition to missing the birth of her grandchild and giving up her community service work, Nadia stated with a sigh,

I had to quit having dinner with my family because my classes are in the afternoon and evening. I was out from . . . two or three in the afternoon until 9:00 at night four nights a week for the whole year last year. . . . My kids don't call me anymore because my phone's always off because I'm always in class.

### **Overcoming Barriers**

There were several ways in which participants overcame the barriers they faced.

#### **Internal barriers.**

*You gain strength, courage, and confidence by every experience in which you really stop to look fear in the face. You must do the thing which you think you cannot do.*

*-Eleanor Roosevelt*

All of the participants who experienced fear prior to enrolling in school stated that it subsided when they discovered that there were other older students in class. They did not become the outcasts that some of them had feared they would. Furthermore, as they experienced academic successes, their sense of self-efficacy improved, they became more confident, and their enthusiasm for learning increased. Having been out of high school between 10 and 25 years, several participants were surprised when they earned good grades. All participants stated that good grades were

important to them and gave them a sense of pride. Kate, who started out working toward her GED, relayed the chain of events as they occurred for her:

I got more confident, more excited. The more I was getting confident and excited, my family was getting more supportive and friends, and so all those silly little things started to kind of fade out. And it was fun because then, as I found confidence, I found myself and some of the other students helping the other people in GED – friends of mine that haven't taken their GED or want to go back to school – helping them to, like, think about it.

In addition to increased self-confidence, several women stated that finding support among friends and peers helped to sustain them and helped them to overcome personal and academic difficulties. Having someone to talk to or go through school with was cited as helping to relieve some of the associated stresses of being an adult student. When Joy decided to return to school, she pushed her sister-in-law, Sandy, to join her.

When I got my GED I felt so good about myself. And she was talking about it for a long time, so I paid for her to get her GED. And she got her GED and I made her come here with me and register. . . . I paid for her admissions and stuff to get her started, so, because I wanted, not just somebody to do it with. . . . I wanted to like, help her better her life, too, like I'm trying to better mine. So I figure we could just better ourselves together.

Forming study groups or studying with their children were other strategies that helped participants to increase their academic success and persistence.

**External barriers.** Lessening role demands was one way participants found more time to devote to their studies and persist in school. Family members and/or friends helped with the cooking, cleaning, laundry, shopping, and childcare for five of the six participants. Spouses provided the bulk of the support, supplemented by the

efforts of other family members, friends, and children. Meg's friend at work also was going to school. They traded favors with each other by filling in at work when the other needed extra time to study. Meg also stated that her husband helped her to manage her time in order to keep her from overextending herself.

In fact. . . he's almost like a watchdog, you know? . . . 'you need to make sure you. . . say no to this person because you need extra time to do this.' . . . He's been. . . trying to keep people away from me.

Sandy cited a similar experience with her husband who makes sure her homework is complete each evening. She and her son hold each other accountable for completing their studies prior to watching television or participating in family time.

All six participants cited financial aid as being absolutely essential in funding their education. Without it they could not continue their studies. Some also received various forms of financial assistance from family members. Two students shared housing with their parents or in-laws. Others stated that family members provided help with transportation either by doing maintenance on their vehicles, loaning a spare car when needed, or contributing to the cost of fuel and upkeep. Gina relayed a story about an anonymous donor during the holidays. "The first year, I believe, I came to school at Christmastime. I come home from school one day and there was this big bag of presents for my children. . . . It was very nice." To this day she has no idea who provided the gifts.

### **Support Services**

While there was a good deal of consistency among study participants' responses pertaining to motivating factors and barriers, responses varied widely

regarding what college and community support programs they found most helpful. Some students sought almost no support and were not aware of any support programs available to them either at the college or in the community. Others had found a wide array of support services both at the college and in the community which helped them to overcome some of their barriers. This section approaches support services from the perspective of those currently in use that participants found most beneficial and those that they desired but that, to their knowledge, were not currently offered.

**Support services in use.** There was a marked difference between the services in use among participants who attended at the main campus and those who attended at satellite campuses.

All three participants from the main campus belonged to Student Support Services (SSS), a program funded by a federal grant which is intended to provide extra support for disadvantaged students. Students must be first generation college students – in this case meaning that neither parent holds a bachelor’s degree – to participate in the program. SSS provides intrusive support and advising for its member students. This advising model is characterized by high levels of advisor involvement and contact with students. Services are situated in one location and include (a) a tutoring and study area, (b) three full time staff members consisting of an advisor, a counselor/advisor, and a program coordinator, and (c) a kitchen equipped with a refrigerator, microwave, dishes, sink, tables, lockers, whiteboard, and computer work stations. There was a strong sense of camaraderie among SSS members. Joy stated, “It’s a fantastic place. . . . If you need help with anything there’s always someone

willing to help you no matter what it is: writing, history . . . whatever.” Sandy concurred,

The SSS office is the best. . . . I think that if I didn't have that I don't know how well . . . even though there's other (tutoring centers), you know, with the writing lab, computer lab, but they're more standoffish, where this is more like a family thing. I like that. It's more personable.

Furthermore, SSS members are provided annual visits to campuses at four-year schools throughout the state of Oregon, as well as assistance in applying to those schools. Some scholarship money was also available through the program. Because the grant was site-specific, SSS was not available to students at SWOCC's satellite campuses.

In addition to SSS, college services that participants attending at the main campus found most helpful were tutoring and writing labs and new student orientation.

Main campus participants also utilized support programs from within the community including programs for low income populations such as Section 8 housing assistance, the Oregon Health Plan, Head Start, food stamps, and cash assistance; as well as unemployment benefits; and Social Security Disability.

Students at the satellite campuses cited few support services available to them, at least as far as they were aware. Kate received a local scholarship through the college and another through her former employer, but Nadia and Meg had neither sought nor received support services from the college or community. They stated that they had no idea what services were even available. Both of these participants expressed that they were “fairly self-sufficient;” however, they would like to be informed of services that may be helpful to them.

**Desired support services.** Peer mentoring and support groups for nontraditional students were listed as college programs that participants would find most helpful. The nursing students in particular would like access to recently graduated nurses so that they may ask questions and gain the perspective of those who have successfully completed the program. Other students stated that support groups for older students would have helped them to feel less isolated and out of place when they first returned to school. Gina provided her thoughts:

For men and women my age there isn't a lot for us (to do) to socialize. Just basic socializing. I don't know about education, but sometimes just half the battle when you're frustrated is having somebody to say, 'Oh yes, I've been through that. Here's what I did.' Or just somebody else to talk to. It doesn't have to be a complete problem solved.

Two participants from the satellite campuses and one from the main campus stated that they would like more support and assistance in completing the financial aid process. Meg, who attends at a satellite campus, had experienced long delays in receiving her financial aid due to some additional steps that she was required to complete. The letter she received informing her as to what steps she needed to take was confusing. When she asked local college personnel to clarify what she needed to do they were unable to tell her. Meg stated that her attempts to contact financial aid staff at the main campus were unsuccessful. She summed up her experience by saying, "I feel like I'm just swimming by myself." As stated previously, she has had to stop taking classes because the expense of tuition and books was too much of a financial burden for her family without the benefit of financial aid. At the time of the interview she had all but given up out of frustration. In addition, Nadia's financial aid

had been delayed because she was not advised to apply for it in time to meet SWOCC's deadlines. As a result, she was financing her nursing courses on a credit card, which caused additional financial stress for her and her family as she pursued her education.

Finally, the one thing that nearly all participants would like was better communication from the college about programs and services available to them both at the college and in the community. They would like college personnel to become more knowledgeable about community programs so that they are better able to refer students to social services for which they may be eligible. Gina found several public assistance programs that have been instrumental to her academic persistence. Most of them she discovered by doing a great deal of time-consuming legwork. She stated, "It was a little hard to figure out exactly where to go, and I know there's still things out there." She believed that many more students would benefit from these programs if they were made aware of them.

### **Summary**

This chapter presented the findings of this study. Participants cited personal aspirations, career-related reasons, and the encouragement of others as the key motivating factors for pursuing postsecondary education. Barriers primarily revolved around finances, fears, and multiple role demands. Support services participants most desired were peer mentoring and support groups for nontraditional students, more assistance completing the financial aid process, and better communication of available services available both at the college and in the community.



## CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this study was to gain knowledge and understanding about the factors that influence the decision of rural adult women to enter postsecondary educational programs at a community college. The key research questions were (a) what motivates rural adult women to pursue postsecondary education, (b) what barriers do rural adult women face in attaining their educational goals, and (c), how can the college and/or community better provide support services to facilitate the attainment of rural adult women's educational goals?

This chapter will (a) address the three key research questions and relate the current findings to previous research on the topic, (b) describe the limitations of this study, and (c) suggest implications for further research and practice.

### **Discussion of Current Findings as Related to Previous Research**

This section examines the three research questions: (a) key motivating factors, (b) barriers, and (c) support services. The findings will be discussed in light of previous research.

**Key motivating factors.** Findings of this study revealed that participants were motivated to pursue postsecondary education largely due to personal aspirations, career-related reasons, and the encouragement of others. The timing of events in their lives, sometimes referred to in the literature as *life transitions* or *enabling events*, also played a role for many of them in finally making it possible to pursue their educational goals.

It is difficult to look at these factors as discrete circumstances that motivate women to enter college. Rather, it is likely the interaction of certain life events that enabled these women to pursue their educational goals at a given time. Genco (2007) found that, of the adult students in her study, half cited job loss and the other half cited a personal sense that “it was time” as triggering events prior to entering college. Mohney and Anderson (1988) discussed enabling factors as “role demands lessened, support from others, financial ability, available classes, and self-image needs” (pp. 272-3). These previous findings were consistent with the experiences of the participants in this study. Five of the six had had a change in employment status that resulted in lessened role demands at work due to either a reduction in hours or being laid off. These same five also cited a strong personal desire, dream, or goal as a motivating factor in returning to school. Availability of nursing classes played a significant role in motivating Nadia and Kate to enroll in school. Five of the participants also listed strong support from others, especially a spouse, as encouraging them to pursue their educational goals. Other family and friends also contributed to the lessening of role demands for these students by helping with the household chores, cooking, childcare, and financial support. This finding was similar to that of Glavan (2009) in a study of persistence of African American female students attending an urban community college. This may suggest the importance of family support for returning female students regardless of the location or institution. While each participant in the current study experienced a unique set of events that enabled her to

enroll in college, the complex interaction of several events acted as a catalyst for each of them to embrace a different life opportunity (Kasworm, 2008).

**Barriers.** The decision to enroll in college caused tremendous stress for several study participants given the numerous barriers they encountered. Barriers that were most prevalent among participants centered on fear, finances, and multiple role demands.

Four participants stated matter-of-factly that fear was a significant barrier to enrolling in college. Fear of failure, of not fitting in, and of the unknown caused a great deal of distress for these women. These findings were supported in the research of Genco (2007) and Johnson, et al. (2000). Johnson et al. (2000) argued that “no matter how well-prepared or eager a person may be, returning to the classroom is almost always a threatening experience” (p. 291). This was clearly the case with participants in this study. Even the two students who were eager and excited to learn alluded to the fact that they felt uneasy about whether they would feel out of place among younger students.

Financial concerns were of great importance to study participants. The majority of them came from modest means, and without the assistance of such financial supports as financial aid and scholarships, these women would be forced to abandon or further postpone their studies. Three participants cited difficulties in completing the financial aid process. They found the process confusing and more complicated than necessary, whereby contributing to the high degree of stress experienced by adult reentry women. In her study of women and minorities in rural

community colleges Gillet-Karam (1995) found that “difficulties in obtaining financial aid” (p. 46) was a barrier these students frequently encountered; and Glavan (2009) also found that financial issues affected persistence. Johnson et al. (2000) recommended providing newly enrolled women students with advisors who are specially trained to address their specific needs and circumstances. Furthermore, they suggested that providing this specialized service would illustrate the college’s commitment to these students’ success as well as help to create a more welcoming learning environment for them.

Balancing multiple role demands was a fact of life for the women in this study. The needs of spouses, children, employers, and others competed with academic demands. These students were often faced with difficult and sometimes heart-wrenching choices as they pursued their educational goals. Many times participants cited feelings of guilt and loss when they were forced to sacrifice time with family and personal interests for the sake of their schooling. Multiple role demands were cited in several studies of adult students as barriers to enrollment in college (Genco, 2007; Mohney & Anderson, 1988). According to Gaillard-Johnson (1996) adult women students often reported “a feeling of being overburdened with responsibilities and stressors outside of school more so than the demands of an education” (p. 292). In a review of the literature regarding women reentry students, Padula (1994) cited a study that compared female and male reentry students. Gilbert, Manning and Ponder (as cited in Padula, 1994) found that women with children tended to report that family demands caused role conflict and emotional distress” (p. 73), whereas, “although all

the men in the study were parents, not one mentioned family demands as a source of role conflict” (p. 73). Thus it is important for college personnel to provide services especially designed to help women students to reduce the stresses that put them at risk of not completing their educational programs.

**Support programs and services.** Participants stated that the support programs and services that they would find most beneficial were peer mentoring and support groups for nontraditional students, more assistance with the financial aid process, and better communication about support programs and services available to them both at the college and in the community.

Several study participants expressed a desire for peer mentoring and support groups for nontraditional students to help ease the transition into college as well as to find support and advice in dealing with the multiple barriers and stresses associated with being a woman reentry student. Such groups could promote a feeling of connectedness to the college and to peers whereby reducing feelings of isolation and insecurity among adult women students. Several studies recommended peer support and advising programs for adult reentry women (Johnson et al., 2000; Padula, 1994; McAtee & Benshoff, 2006). Johnson et al. (2000) asserted that peers can more readily assist newly enrolled students than can college personnel. In the current climate of reduced staffing at educational institutions, this may be truer than ever.

The financial aid process has been maligned by many as being too complicated, confusing, and lengthy. The participants in this study were no exception. Three of the six students complained about how needlessly confusing the paperwork

was, and two students were growing frustrated at the length of time they had had to wait between applying for financial aid and actually receiving it. As stated previously, Johnson et al. (2000) suggested that newly enrolled adult reentry women have access to specially trained academic and financial advisors who are well-acquainted with the issues commonly encountered by these students. They also argued that “adult women often return to pursue an education at a time when they are particularly vulnerable. They may have experienced a recent loss, such as a divorce, older children moving away, or a job change” (p. 294). As each of the participants in this study reported having suffered one or more of these types of loss prior to enrollment, one could presume that they also experienced a certain degree of vulnerability. Providing a safe environment in which to discuss their feelings and challenges with peers may increase their chances of success in college.

Five of the six participants expressed a desire for more information about support programs and services available to them at the college and in the community. They suggested that college personnel should become more knowledgeable about resources available within the community so that they may refer students who may be in need of these services. According to Hardin (2008), “many institutions have found that an effective way to provide necessary information to returning adult students is through a directory of resources that includes both on- and off-campus organizations” (p. 52). Such a directory would put this important information in the hands of students who could use it as they navigate their educational journeys. Placing directories and brochures in highly visible locations that students frequently visit, such as the book

store and Student First Stop center, would help to ensure that students were aware of their existence.

### **Limitations of the Study**

This study examined the experiences of six rural adult women students attending Southwestern Oregon Community College, a public two-year college located in Coos Bay, Oregon with satellite campuses in Gold Beach and Brookings, Oregon. Whether findings could be generalized to other regions of the country or to the experiences of other rural adult women students is yet to be determined. Similar research conducted in rural areas in different parts of the country could provide additional insights on the experiences of these students regarding their motivations and barriers in the pursuit of postsecondary education. Such studies may help to identify a set of common factors that could then be used in a national survey.

The students who participated in this study did so willingly. Eligible students who chose not to participate may have had experiences that would alter the findings of this study. Furthermore, three of the six participants belonged to SSS, a fact that was unknown to the researcher prior to interviewing them. While it is unlikely that SSS membership affected these students' motivations and barriers prior to enrollment at SWOCC, the program may have provided them with an educational experience that differs from those of the general student population and particularly other rural women who are not members of SSS. A study specifically targeting non-SSS students may provide additional insights about the types of services the college could offer to

facilitate the success of rural adult women as well as providing additional perspectives and approaches in the delivery of these services.

### **Implications for Further Research**

As discussed above, the localized and qualitative findings of the present study cannot be generalized. These findings suggest that similar interview studies of rural women be undertaken in other regions of the country. Similar research conducted in rural areas in different parts of the country could provide additional insights on the experiences of these students surrounding their motivations and barriers in the pursuit of postsecondary education. Such studies may help to identify a set of common factors affecting rural women. These factors could then be used in a national survey.

As suggested above, there may be similarities and differences between reentry women from rural and from urban areas. Another possible study would be to undertake a comparison of two groups of demographically similar women: those from urban areas and those from rural areas.

One of the criteria for participation in this study was that students must have declared a program of study. Each of the women in this study cited a strong personal goal or aspiration as a motivation for enrolling in college, and each had chosen a program that would help them to achieve that goal. A study of undecided students who lack a strong personal desire, goal, or aspiration may deliver quite different findings and provide additional insights into the motivations, barriers, and support needs of this significant population.



This study found that earning a GED helped participants to overcome feelings of inadequacy regarding their academic abilities and increased their excitement about learning. Additional research could provide a deeper understanding of the positive impact of earning a GED on feelings of self-efficacy and how those feelings influence students' decision to enter postsecondary educational programs. This knowledge could prove helpful to college personnel who would advise these students on their postsecondary educational options after earning their GED. Furthermore, a study of those who do not continue on to college after earning their GED may identify a distinct set of barriers for this population that provide insight into why they choose not to enroll.

Each of the women in this study had developed strategies for overcoming the challenges they faced. Much research has been conducted on the barriers faced by nontraditional students; however, additional research focused on their strategies for success and the impact these strategies have on goal attainment could furnish useful insights for the design and delivery of support programs and services for nontraditional students.

Participants who attended at satellite campuses had limited access to student support services as compared to those at the main campus. Further investigation of the impact of this deficiency may prove useful to college personnel in determining the allocation of funds for satellite campuses, as well as in designing and delivering support programs and services that better meet the needs of students at these sites.

Finally, the growth in women's enrollment in postsecondary educational programs is expected to be double that of men by the year 2018 (Hussar & Bailey, 2009). A similar study that examines the key motivations and barriers of adult male students may reveal the primary reasons why men are enrolling in fewer numbers than women. This knowledge may assist college personnel in developing programs and services that better address the needs of adult male students.

### **Implications for Practice**

The results of this study suggest several questions for practitioners. Community college personnel at institutions with large numbers of rural adult reentry women, such as SWOCC, might consider whether resources should be devoted to designing and implementing additional services that target the needs of this special population. College personnel might also examine the feasibility of organizing peer mentoring and support groups for nontraditional students. These groups could include face-to-face meetings or e-support networks designed to enhance the experiences of these students. Such groups may provide a network of students who could share resources such as transportation, childcare, and textbooks, potentially reducing some these students' expenses. Another question for practitioners would involve the issue of the need and the resources to provide specialized training to certain college personnel so that they may become the "experts" on issues that pertain to rural adult women students. Specialized training may include strategies to help these students cope with issues such as emotional stress, multiple role demands, financial and academic challenges, obtaining social services, transportation, child care, and

resistance from spouses or employers regarding their schooling. If the cost of training these individuals is prohibitive, perhaps the college could identify capable peers who not only have had first-hand experience being rural adult reentry women but who might also be willing to volunteer their time or use the opportunity as an internship experience.

Students at satellite campuses appear to be in greater need of services than they are currently provided. An examination of the persistence of these students may indicate a need for additional allocations of resources to enhance the services at these sites. Further examination may be needed to determine whether additional staff training or additional personnel may be necessary to better meet the needs of students at satellite campuses. Financial aid, while crucial for the majority of students, can be a complicated and confusing process. If local staff is unable to adequately serve students' financial aid needs, perhaps financial aid staff from the main campus could schedule monthly visits to the satellite campuses so that students may more readily obtain the help they require.

Colleges with large numbers of reentry adult students may want to examine the possibility of instituting a nontraditional student orientation. This could be the best opportunity to reach out to these students and to provide them with vital information that will enhance their educational experiences and increase their chances of academic success.

## Conclusions

I undertook this study in hopes that it would provide college personnel with a more comprehensive understanding of the experiences of rural adult women students, and that this understanding would lead to the development of support programs and services that would increase the academic success and persistence of this population. Many of the motivations and barriers faced by the study participants were similar to those found in studies of nontraditional students in general.

This was a very personal journey of discovery and learning for me. The women who participated in my study were inspirational to me for so many reasons, but especially for their resilience, their persistence, and their courage. They all faced multiple barriers to their education, yet each of them when asked what advice they would give other rural adult women considering enrolling in college provided encouraging words of wisdom and hope such as, “It won’t be as hard as you think because you’re so much smarter having lived” and “If I can get through math anyone can!” Each gave enthusiastic responses like “Go for it!” and “You can do it!” and “It’s the best thing you can do for yourself and your family.” I liked Sandy’s no-nonsense advice and will allow her to have the last word. “Do it. Absolutely do it. . . . Make the drive, carpool, take the bus, take a taxi, whatever it takes, and get your butt there, because nobody else can do it but you.”

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APPENDICES



## APPENDIX A

## Interview Guide

1. What were you doing before you enrolled at SWOCC?
2. Before your current enrollment at SWOCC, how long had it been since you were enrolled in a formal educational setting (high school or college)?
3. How long did you consider returning to school before you actually enrolled?
  - a) What factors kept you from enrolling sooner?
4. Why did you decide to go back to school?
  - a) Describe any changes or transitions that occurred in your life which may have prompted your decision or made it possible to return to school.
  - b) What life factors did you have to weigh in your decision?
5. As a non-traditional student, describe the emotions you experienced prior to your first class at SWOCC.
  - a) How have your feelings changed since then?
6. What sacrifices have you had to make as a result of becoming a student?
7. What challenges do you face now that you are a student?
8. Describe the attitudes of significant others, such as friends and family members, surrounding your decision to pursue a college education.
9. Describe the support you receive from your personal relationships that helps you to succeed in college.

10. Describe the support you receive from your community that helps you to succeed in college.
11. Describe what support is essential to the continuation of your studies.
12. What student support services or programs have you utilized at the college?
  - a) Which of these services or programs have you found most helpful to you?
13. What support services or programs have you utilized within the community to help you attain your educational goals?
  - a) Which of these services or programs have you found most helpful to you?
14. Describe any support needs you have that are not being met by either the college or the community.
15. What support services, programs, or resources could the college offer that would be most beneficial to you?
16. What support services, programs, or resources could the community offer that would be most beneficial to you?
17. What else can you share with me that might help me to understand your decision to return to school?
18. What advice would you give other women in rural communities who are thinking about returning to school?

## APPENDIX B

## Demographics Questionnaire

Please answer the following questions to assist researchers in analyzing data for this study.

1. What is your program of study (major) at SWOCC? \_\_\_\_\_
2. Please indicate the length of your program.
  - Two-year associate's degree
  - One-year certificate
  - Less than one-year certificate
3. What was your level of education prior to your most recent enrollment at SWOCC?
  - Prior college degree (please circle one – associate's, bachelor's, master's, PhD)
  - Certificate
  - Some college
  - High school diploma
  - GED
  - Did not finish high school or obtain GED. List highest grade completed. \_\_\_\_\_
4. What was your parents' highest level of education attained?
  - Bachelor's degree or higher
  - Associate's degree
  - Certificate
  - Some college
  - High school diploma
  - GED
  - Did not finish high school or obtain GED. List highest grade completed. \_\_\_\_\_
  - Other
  - Unknown

5. What is your age?

- 25-34
- 35-44
- 45-54
- 55-64
- 65-74

6. What is your marital status?

- Married
- Divorced
- Separated
- Widowed
- Never married
- Other (please indicate) \_\_\_\_\_

7. How many dependents do you have at home?

- Children (list number living at home) \_\_\_\_\_
- Other dependents (list number of family members or others you are responsible for providing for) \_\_\_\_\_

8. How many children do you have who no longer live at home? \_\_\_\_\_

9. What is your current employment status?

- Employed (select number of hours per week)
  - 31 or more
  - 21-30
  - 11-20
  - 10 or fewer
- Employed on an irregular basis
- Not employed

