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The Role of Interaction with Faculty in Retaining Nontraditional Community College Students

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The role of interaction with faculty in retaining

nontraditional community college students

By

Amanda Marie Hood

A Dissertation
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The role of interaction with faculty in retaining

nontraditional community college students

By

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The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the role of student-faculty interaction in retaining nontraditional community college students. There are a large and growing number of nontraditional students, especially at the community college level. Being labeled as nontraditional typically implies that there are multiple competitors for the time and resources of these students. Often, nontraditional students are less connected to their institutions, and exploring the relationships between faculty and student is a way to meet them where they are: in the classroom.

As a result of the label nontraditional being difficult to define, the researcher used seven characteristics to provide a variety of contexts for the interviews. The study included 10 students age 24 or older who had completed 12-36 hours and attended a community college in the southeastern United States. They were asked to participate in 30-minute, one-on-one interviews regarding their interactions with faculty and the role of these interactions on their decisions to persist.

Findings suggest that continuity decisions are largely based internally. However, 20% of the participants attributed their decisions to continue to interactions with their

instructors. Attributes that contributed to making the instructors more approachable were openness, being oneself, and speaking to students as peers, rather than subordinates.

Throughout the interviews, the participants admitted to seeing themselves differently than traditional students, but they did not feel like their instructors treated them differently. They assumed the responsibility of initiating contact, but they also appreciated initiation and acknowledgement by the instructors. Formal interaction did not appear to be as important as casual interaction.

Even students who appear to be doing well can benefit from interaction, leading the researcher to conclude that interaction can be beneficial as both a preventative and a prescriptive measure. Educating both faculty and nontraditional students on the seemingly untapped value of interaction can help increase the retention rates at the community college level.

DEDICATION

I am so grateful to my family and friends who have supported my decision to go back to school. Without their encouragement, this would not have been possible. I hope they all know how very much I have appreciated their laughter when I needed the joy, their prayers when mine felt inadequate, their ears when I needed to vent, their silence when I needed to think, their shoulders when I needed to cry, and their love through all of it.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

Community colleges across the United States enroll approximately half of all undergraduates each year. Unlike most 4-year institutions, community colleges typically have open door policies and provide options for students who are not prepared for college level instruction. Examples are adult basic education programs and developmental courses. Other reasons a student might choose to attend a community college are lower priced tuition, smaller campuses and classes, and ease of access. There are more than 1100 community college campuses nationwide, and they serve many curricular functions to address the needs of their students such as academic transfer and vocational-technical options (Cohen & Brawer, 2014).

A large percentage of a community college's population is nontraditional students. Approximately 50% of community college students are 24 or older (Juszkiewicz, 2014). The number of nontraditional students who attend community colleges is increasing, and research shows that they differ in terms of student support and that addressing their needs would benefit both student and institution (Goncalves & Trunk, 2014; Keith, 2007; Ross-Gordon, 2011; Scott & Lewis, 2012; Smith-Morest, 2013). Although dated, in her market analysis of the nontraditional student for Carl Sandburg College (CSC), Sundberg (1997) encourages the college that "because this is

one of the fastest growing segments for colleges, CSC should capitalize on their ability to provide this product" (p. 13). The changing economy, life transitions, a goal of advancing in their career, veteran status, and GED completion are major contributors to growth of the number of nontraditional students.

The retention of students is a major issue from a financial perspective for educational institutions. It costs more to recruit a new student than it does to retain a current student (Webster & Showers, 2011). Many types of practices have been proven to increase student retention. One of those ways that appears frequently in research is increased campus involvement (Blake & Mangiameli, 2012; Chaves, 2006; Kuh, 1995). This includes the interaction between students and faculty. This particular connection may be even more important for nontraditional students who have barriers to participation such as work, family and community involvement. Kasworm (2003) found that most experiences and involvements of nontraditional students were centered around the classroom.

Many types of practices have been proven to address the variables and needs of the nontraditional student and to improve student success. While not as prevalent in K-12 education, where teachers are considered to be central to success, one of the most significant practices that has been linked to persistence toward degree completion is student-faculty interaction. Even as diverse as the community college student population is and as it is constantly evolving, the relationship between instructor and student remains relevant. Hadfield (2003) suggests viewing and treating adult students as customers, where customer service is everyone's job, including that of the faculty. She also says that "If we do our job correctly, they will be back" (p. 19). This implies that if relationships

are formed, then students will return if they have an interruption or delay in their completion.

Problem

Although most colleges recognize and attempt to provide resources for nontraditional students, many of the resources are available exclusively outside of the classroom. Because of the very things that classify a student as nontraditional, he or she may be unaware of or unable to take advantage of such programs, despite the fact that the programs may be created with the goals of improving success rates. As a result, exploring the interaction between students and faculty could provide insight into the value of connection, and subsequently, improve nontraditional student retention.

Hagenauer and Volet (2014) found that there are inconsistencies in the literature that cover student-faculty interaction, making it a difficult topic to analyze. They point out that, in much of the literature, student-faculty interaction is not treated as the dependent variable, but rather the independent variable, and the quality of the interactions are not accounted for.

Most of the research on retention and student-faculty interaction relies heavily on quantitative methods. A qualitative approach could provide a more in-depth view of the nuances of the interactions between students and faculty. In addition, the narrow focus on nontraditional students at the community college level fills a gap in the research. Its importance lies in the fact that nontraditional students represent the majority at the community college level and that retention is more cost effective than recruitment.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to examine the role of interaction with faculty in retaining community college students. If faculty-student interactions are effective in increasing the retention rates of nontraditional students, further study needs to be done to develop a list of best practices to increase the number and quality of these interactions. Due to constraints already placed on the time and human resources of instructors, efforts need to be taken to make these interactions effective and efficient. Buy-in would be needed from both administration and instructors. Community colleges are often commuter campuses, decreasing the likelihood that students will form a connection with their college. Studies such as this could serve the purpose of convincing these parties of the importance of meeting nontraditional students where they are—in the classroom.

Research Questions

The research questions investigated by this study include the following:

1. Does student-faculty interaction have an effect on the retention of nontraditional community college students?

2. Which types and levels of student-faculty interaction have the most significant effects on the retention of nontraditional community college students?

Definitions

In this study, the following common terms will be used in exploring the retention of nontraditional students:

1. Community college is "any not-for-profit institution regionally accredited to award the associate in arts or the associate in science as its highest degree" (Cohen & Brawer, 2014, p. 5).

2. Institutional retention is "the measure of the proportion of students who remain enrolled at the same institution from year to year" (Hagedorn, 2006, p. 15).

3. Nontraditional students are students with one or more of the following factors: not enrolling in the same year as completion of high school, attending part-time, being financially independent of parents, working full-time, having dependents other than a spouse, being a single parent, and not having a high school diploma (NCES, 2015).

4. Student-faculty interaction is any formal or informal experience between students and faculty that can take place in person or virtually.

Theoretical Framework

Tinto's (1993) Theory of Interaction and Astin's (1984) Theory of Involvement will be used to guide this study. Tinto has done extensive research on student retention and learning communities which has developed into his Theory of Interaction. Similarly, Astin's Theory of Involvement emphasizes several categories of involvement. Astin (1984) reported that student-faculty involvement is the most important of the categories. He has concluded that students who feel disconnected are more likely to drop out. When they feel integrated, they are more likely to complete their studies. Tinto (1993) found that students who interact with their instructors feel more connected to their college and subsequently persist in their education. He has written, "Engagement in the community of the classroom can become a gateway for subsequent student involvement in the

academic and social communities of the college" (as cited in Chaves, 2006, p. 142). For nontraditional students, classroom experiences may be the only source of involvement they experience.

Delimitations

1. This study will be limited by the students and institution being studied at the given time.
2. This study will be limited by the choice of definition for nontraditional student.

Significance

Although extensive research about student-faculty interaction has been done at 4-year institutions, community colleges have not received as much attention. The research from the 4-year level could prove inapplicable at the community college level because of the availability of the faculty—community college instructors are in the classroom more, while university instructors are more involved in research activities.

Within the community college setting, two things seem to separate students and faculty from interacting more: the student population of community colleges are more likely to be nontraditional, and commuters and faculty members are increasingly part-time and non-tenured. Bringing awareness to the importance of student-faculty interaction has the potential to prevent the placement of additional time commitments on nontraditional students and to reverse the trend of replacing full-time faculty with part-time faculty.

Understanding how to retain students is also fiscally important. From a financial perspective, increasing the retention of any type of student is important in a number of

ways. For the students who persist to graduation or certification, they can expect to earn

more over their lifetime. For the institution, retaining students equals more funding and

opportunities for growth. In addition, communities gain productive citizens (Cohen &

Brawer, 2014).

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Chapter I provided the background, problem, purpose, research questions, definitions, framework, methodology, delimitations, and the significance of the study. Chapter II presents a review of the multiple definitions and complexity of the term nontraditional and the implications of such labels, the variety of methods that have historically been employed to meet their needs, and the role of the community college. In addition, the theories regarding student-faculty interaction and the role it plays in addressing the needs of nontraditional students with the goal of increasing retention will be discussed.

Nontraditional Students

Historical Definitions of Nontraditional Students

The label "nontraditional student" varies depending on which report is being read and which institution is applying it. The most widely used, applied, and accepted definition is based on age and is typically a student who is at least 24 years old. Besides age, there is also a tendency to incorporate the student's background and/or at-risk behaviors, such as outside commitments. Sometimes other terms are used altogether in order to narrow down the appropriate group. There may be subgroups identified such as "educationally disadvantaged," "first-generation," or "minority." Some of the other common terms are "adult learner," "adult student," and "reentry students" (Kim, 2002).

Kim (2002) also states that "using the single term nontraditional to refer to these varied populations of students makes it difficult to understand which students are being discussed and which of their many characteristics are being emphasized. And, in some cases, differences between traditional and nontraditional students can be attributed to factors beyond the defining criteria" (p. 84).

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2015) has identified seven factors that contribute to their definition. They are: not enrolling in the same year as completion of high school, attending part-time, being financially independent of parents, working full-time, having dependents other than a spouse, being a single parent, and not having a high school diploma. Under these guidelines, 68.5% of community college students have two or more of these risk factors, while only 38.9% of undergraduates at public 4-year institutions have the same (NCES, 2015).

Jinkens (2009) suggests using whether or not students have experienced a life changing event in order to best address their needs and approach to education. He conducted a qualitative study of 30 accounting faculty which led him to the conclusion that age may not be the best way to define nontraditional. Faculty listed criteria such as work experience, seeing the larger picture, motivation, and family life when trying to create a definition. Leonard (2002) discusses classifying by assigning the adjective moderately or highly nontraditional based on the number of NCES characteristics that the student possesses. It might even be easier to say what they are not by choosing to define the traditional student, even though the two are not clearly dichotomous. Regardless of the definition, however, these students are plentiful and deserve to have their concerns addressed in higher education.

Variables

The characteristics of students when they enroll in an educational institution are varied and that can make identifying causal relationships difficult. Chartrand (1992) studied the effect of many important variables, which were divided into:

> …background variables (age, educational goals, and high school GPA), academic
> variables (major certainty, course advising, satisfaction, and perceived study
> skills), and environmental variables (family/friend support, finance education,
> hours employed, family responsibility, social integration, institutional
> commitment, academic adjustment, and absence of psychological distress. (p.
> 194)

Her study defined nontraditional as students over 24 years old who lived off-campus, and her participants were at a large southeastern university. She sought to identify predictors of intended continuance in school. Those variables that showed the most significant direct effects on the student's intent to continue were major certainty, family/friend support, social integration, and absence of psychological distress, which is different from those in the research on traditional students.

At two universities with large adult populations, Wlodkowski, Mauldin, and Campbell (2002) surveyed 128 students who had been enrolled in fall of 1999 but did not re-enroll in fall 2000. The survey and subsequent telephone interviews with 62 of the students examined two sets of variables as to why the students left: those under the students' control and those under the control of the institution. While nearly three-fourths reported that they intended on returning, the researchers found that top themes were time and money (student controlled) and quality of advising, quality of teaching,

and peer interaction (institution controlled). Giancola, Grawitch, and Borchert's (2009) research of adult students led them to emphasize the role of the multiple types of stressors that affect their success rates.

Bennett, Evan, and Riedle (2007) compared motivation and accomplishments among traditional, nontraditional, and distance education college students. Their findings suggest that nontraditional students are more learning-goal oriented, focus more on increasing their knowledge and skills, seek out challenging tasks, and are persistent and effective problem solvers. They also determined that they tend to have higher grade point averages and spend more time studying.

Student Support and Academic Needs of Nontraditional Students

Keith (2007) sought to discover whether potential barriers increased the usage of services in his study of 138 nontraditional students at a Midwestern university. The services in question were new student orientation, learning lab, career services, child care services, financial counseling, mental health counseling, stress management, and legal aid. He found little evidence that the existence of barriers was related to the number of services utilized by the students, even though the service may have been focused on a specific need of these students. In fact, three variables appeared to be significant in determining increased use of services. Those variables were age, employment status, and stress from increased tuition. Ironically, younger students, unemployed students, and those with financial stress used more of the services. Cannady, King, and Blendinger (2012) document the improvement of the library services at a land-grant university in the Southeast. As a result of a new department being created at this university which offered only graduate degrees, all of their students were adult learners. Another unique factor for

the programs was that they were all offered through distance education. This meant that the class material was delivered via online methods or over weekends. Because of these types of instructional delivery methods, library services, specifically research assistance, were not as readily available. To address this problem, the librarian collaborated with the faculty of the new department with the goal of increasing student success and decreasing anxiety. They placed importance on faculty and staff who were flexible, hours that were extended, and alleviating "technostress" by making technology and websites easy to navigate and troubleshoot. These actions facilitated the students receiving help sooner, students being introduced to a variety of useful sources of information, and greater communication of faculty members at the university.

Understanding the best practices of attending to these students' needs is important because of the different ways that they interact in the college settings and the different ways in which they learn. Merriam (2001) covers the background of what she calls the two "pillars of adult learning theory:" andragogy and self-directed learning. Introduced by Malcolm Knowles, andragogy refers to the practice of helping adults learn. Self-directed learning was comprehensively described by Allen Tough. It is a model that defines how adult learners as different from children. Jack Mezirow proposed a version "transformational learning," which involves transforming the adults' core frames of reference.

Hood, Poulson, Mason, Walker, and Dixon (2009) compared transformational and transactional research through a survey of 150 students at a college in the rural southeastern region of the United States. They found that different teaching methods do not necessarily attract traditional versus nontraditional. However, with regard to the

actual learning environment, Scott's and Lewis's (2012) observations while conducting a pilot case study with five nontraditional students, lead them to conclude that nontraditional students "may experience hostile or uncomfortable learning environments that impede their learning opportunities" (p. 8). Thess data were collected through both interviews and classroom observation. Leonard's (2002) research concludes by referencing a "reciprocal relationship." She maintains that "interaction and collaboration between the campus and the community can facilitate the personal, academic, and social growth of all groups of students" (p. 72). Kelly (2013) also notes that collaborative service learning, which "combines the more traditionally recognized concept of volunteering with relevant higher learning objectives requiring application and synthesis of knowledge gained from the learning experience," can be an option that is a benefit for nontraditional students because of their need to derive meaning from their experiences (p. 82). However, she warns that because they see their time as a scarce resource, that instructors should encourage them to involve their families, allow them to utilize class time for the activity, and to review outcomes and their impact.

Social Needs of Nontraditional Students

In her qualitative study at a rural Appalachian community college, Genco (2007) interviewed 24 participants who were at least 25 years old and had been out of any educational setting for at least five years. She asked about their transitions in their lives prior to entry into the community college, personal and/or institutional barriers, beneficial services and resources. She also asked for suggestions to improve the transition process for students like themselves. Her questions brought out that the anxiety and apprehension associated with interacting with traditional-aged students needed to be addressed by an

orientation as well as a need for child care services. Goncalves and Trunk (2014) also conducted personal interviews with 10 nontraditional commuter students at a small private college in New Jersey. The participants were asked to about interactions with other students (traditional and nontraditional), faculty, and staff. They also discussed extracurricular activities and campus life with regard to their needs and obstacles as a nontraditional student. In answering the research questions, the researchers found nontraditional students reported feeling isolated and alone and welcomed the idea of having a club or organization dedicated solely for them. However, half of the students gave positive feedback about their professors contributing to "an enriching experience on campus" (p. 168).

Smith-Morest (2013) writes that "community colleges bridge cultures and educational gaps by offering students a chance to become college students regardless of past academic performance and family background" (p. 319). She goes on to say that "the widely accepted structures of American higher education are opaque and confusing to a population of students who have not been socialized to its norms by family and friends outside college" (p. 327). She is referring mainly to students who are first-generational. However, it is an important aspect to consider since a vast majority of these two labels intersect. Edirisingha (2009) also linked these labels together while pointing out that there is a need for institutions to invest in helping these students create cultural and social capital since it "is an asset accumulated by families with access to knowledge, language, and culture" (para. 8). Lastly, Davis (2011) likens the nontraditional population to those diagnosed under the autism spectrum in the way that they might feel out of place and not know how to bridge the gap of becoming a member of the culture.

14

They may share the characteristics that making friends or being involved in co-curricular activities is difficult for them, although for different reasons.

The results reached in the research conducted by Goncalves and Trunk (2014) suggest that more work needs to be done to cultivate on-campus services and activities. They point out that even the website, which is sometimes the first "face" a student sees of a school, can be altered to reflect the growth of the percentage of nontraditional students. They remind that the needs of the nontraditional are unique. Whether it be a result of their maturity level, life experiences, wisdom, self-identification, and/or their learning style, they are different. As Ross-Gordon (2011) states, "reentry adults' multiple roles and commitments increase the likelihood they will look for degree and certificate programs that provide them flexibility in time and locations for both course completion and for access to key student services" (p. 27).

Student-Faculty Interaction

There are many ways beyond the typical interaction between students and faculty, meaning where the faculty member is concerned with the transfer of content knowledge inside the classroom. These interactions can be formal or informal, in or out of the classroom, face-to-face or digital, friendly or professional. However, both students and faculty have to take care to maintain a professional balance and to not let the interaction become inappropriate. Kuh (1995) has called it "the other curriculum." In his study, Cole (2007) grouped student-faculty interactions into three categories: course-related faculty contact, advice and criticism from faculty, and establishing a mentoring relationship with faculty.

Wirt and Jaeger (2014) used second hand data from a sample of 5,000 students from the Community College Survey of Student Engagement to study 15 variables that predict the student-faculty interaction of community college students. They found that the strongest predictor of student-faculty interaction was a student's participation in a learning community, which they defined as "a progressive approach where faculty from different disciplines collaborate to teach a cohort of students who are enrolled in two or more classes together" (p. 990). A student's GPA and participation in an orientation program/course were also significant predictors. They report that orientation and learning communities are underutilized at the community college level.

While student-faculty interaction has been shown to be beneficial for all students, minority students may reap the most benefits. Cole (2010) found that interactions with college peers and faculty members affects their GPA more than the non-African American students in the study. He also reported that, consistent with prior research, minority students' academic performance was negatively affected when the interaction dealt with the adequacy or quality of their academic work. When they interviewed students at an Hispanic serving institution (HSI) community college in Texas, Cejda and Rhodes (2010) noted that "the students indicated that faculty members were the primary influence in their decisions to remain enrolled and complete the certificate or degree" (p. 253).

Peterson (2016) studied the common subpopulation of student-parents. She interviewed 15 student-parents who had a delay from high school graduation to college, were working part time, and had at least one child who had not yet entered the K-12 system. With regard to student-faculty interaction, she found that student-parents

appreciated instructors who demonstrated a holistic interest in them as well as one-on-one time. They expected the material they learned to be relevant to their lives. Encouragement from instructors fostered engagement, and those who were proactive in their availability to students established trust.

Hiring part-time faculty members is one way that community colleges have chosen to reduce costs. Part-time faculty are less likely to hold office hours or be involved in out-of-the-classroom campus activities, and this has a negative effect on student retention (Jaeger & Eagan, 2011). In a study of approximately 25,000 students in the California community college system, Eagen and Jaeger (2008) found that the more a student was exposed to part-time faculty, the less likely he or she was to transfer to a 4-year college or university.

An instructor's demeanor in the classroom may encourage openness for contact outside of the classroom. If a student perceives an instructor as giving these types of signals, they may be more likely to initiate interaction. Cox, McIntosh, and Terenzini (2010) suggest subtle indicators exist such as tone of voice, facial expressions, and other non-verbal signals from the instructor. Males and females tend to differ in these variables. In addition, female instructors are more prevalent in the K-12 setting and are viewed as more personable. Therefore, her interest in a student is seen as nothing extraordinary, whereas a male instructor displaying the same practices might defy the expectations of the student and be perceived as uniquely interested in the student.

Tatum, Schwartz, Schimmoeller, and Perry (2013) studied the classroom dynamics of both male and female students and instructors, finding that male and female instructors behave differently. "Female instructors were more likely to follow up on

students' comments, praise students' verbal participation, and provide more corrections to students" (p. 78). Students also responded to questions approximately four times more often for a female instructor. They also found that the percentage of male students in the classroom affect the behavior of hand-raising and voluntary response of females. One of the findings in Lester, Yamanaka, and Struthers' (2016) study on gender microaggressions was that the instructor's behavior could be a catalyst for other interactions in and out of the classroom. They suggest that faculty intentionally contradict gender microaggressions—both physical and intellectual, in an effort to maintain open communication. In addition, when Hagedorn, Maxwell, Rodriguez, Hocevar, and Fillpot (2010) asked if the student-faculty relationships of community college students differ by gender, they found that "female students more often discussed their career plans with faculty, found it easier to develop close relations with faculty members, and reported higher levels of satisfaction" (p. 594).

Factors such as class size, campus design, facilities, and programming also affect interactions. Cotten and Wilson (2006) explored interaction in their qualitative study conducted with 49 students at a mid-sized public research university in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States. They noted that interaction decreases as the size of the classroom and the number of students increases. Students feel that their instructors do not even know who they are. Size also affected how busy the student perceived the instructors to be. In addition, campus size and layout can separate or facilitate interaction. A student is more likely to initiate interaction when it is more convenient. One student in the study suggested, "A lounge for students near faculty offices would be a more helpful place for students to hang-out than the Commons or the library" (p. 506).

While faculty typically refer to themselves as professionals, when working closely with their "clients," there is often some emotional labor involved (Robson & Bailey, 2009). Ironically, Cotten's and Wilson's (2006) interviews with students suggest that interaction with a faculty member who was not their instructor tended to be more academically important, while social interaction with a faculty member who was their instructor was more beneficial. They posit that "once a personal connection has been established, students note a desire to please their instructor and to avoid disapproval" (p. 511).

Without a doubt, in-class interactions are much more frequent than out-of-class interactions. Under the heading of out-of-class interactions between faculty and first-year students, Wilson, Wood, and Gaff (1974) broke exchanges down into casual or substantive and found casual interactions to be approximately twice as common. They also report that male faculty members have more casual interaction, as do White and full-time faculty members.

In terms of initiating interaction, either party may do so. Factors that may affect the connection between the two may include not recognizing the potential benefits of frequent and meaningful interaction, undervaluing the resources of one another, or having mismatched expectations.

In 2000, as part of their accreditation process, New Mexico State University implemented a faculty development program called Gaining Retention and Achievement for Students Program (GRASP), which, in part, documented intervention strategies such as learning and using students' names, asking students to re-state material, and reaching out to "border-line" students to discuss their course work. They saw a 9% increase in

student retention and achievement from the previous semester (McShannon, 2001). The concept of approachability has also been addressed in the literature. Denzine and Pulos (2000) assigned categories to teacher behavior such as knowing a student's name (approachable) and talks down to students (unapproachable).

Summary

Being labeled as nontraditional can mean many things. These students' rates of failure and attrition are higher than those of the traditional student. Compared to the traditional student, they learn differently. Their motivators are different. Their personal resources are being competed for more strongly, and typically, they have lower levels of social/cultural capital. Research also shows that nontraditional students have a lower chance of being involved in extracurricular activities. Various techniques, programs, and models have been developed and tested in order to diagnose what can be done to change those statistics. By examining the extent of student-faculty interaction, those in the business of education may have a better chance of retaining these students (Bye, Pushkar, & Conway, 2007; Goncalves & Trunk, 2014; Hood, et al., 2009; Wlodkowski, Mauldin, & Campbell, 2002).

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Chapter III of this study discusses the methods and procedures used to facilitate the study. This chapter includes a description of the research design, research questions, research site, population, sampling procedure, data collection procedures, and data analysis procedures. The nature of this study was qualitative. It consisted of interviewing nontraditional community college students. The focus was to provide a deeper understanding of how the different levels of interaction that nontraditional students have with their community college instructors affect their retention. The researcher wished to allow those involved to express their thoughts, concerns, and feelings regarding these interactions and to avoid trying to label or prescribe a solution for this issue.

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative cross-sectional correlational research design with the purpose of examining the relationship of student-faculty interaction and the retention of nontraditional community college students. Qualitative research was chosen on the basis that interactions are not easily measured, and they are difficult to capture (Creswell, 2013). Barnett (2011) also found that survey instruments do not allow the individual voices of the students to be heard. A cross-sectional study was chosen because

21

of time constraints and the desire to have students to be able to recall their recent interactions with the faculty.

The researcher used a pragmatic approach for the research because the goal was finding what will be useful in a real college setting. The researcher used both deductive and inductive reasoning to analyze data. Deductive reasoning was used in an attempt to support the hypothesis that student-faculty interaction is significant with regard to student retention while inductive reasoning was used to identify applications to increase the most significant types of student-faculty interaction. Guiding the research was the theoretical framework based on Astin's Theory of Involvement and Tinto's Interactionalist Theory. The participants of this study included 10 nontraditional students of a rural community college in the Southeast United States.

Research Questions

The research questions investigated by this study included the following:

1. Does student-faculty interaction have an effect on the retention of nontraditional community college students?

2. Which types and levels of student-faculty interaction have the most significant effects on the retention of nontraditional community college students?

Research Context

The study took place on the three campuses of a rural community college in the Southeast United States. The three campuses that make up the community college were the main campus, which is the only site where dormitories are available as well as the location for the collegiate sports teams. The other two satellite campuses were both

commuter campuses. The two commuter campuses had a higher percentage of nontraditional students. The sites were selected based on the access to a large percentage of nontraditional students and the variety that the three campuses provide.

Participants

For the purpose of this study, nontraditional students were initially defined as those 24 years old or older. From that group, only those who had completed at least 12 but not greater than 36 semester hours by the fall semester of 2016 will be included. Having completed at least 12 semester hours ensured the students had a certain amount of experience in the classroom on which to reflect. Having no greater than 36 semester hours ensured that the students would not be completing an associate's degree by the end of the fall 2016 semester. A list of these students from the fall 2016 semester were provided to the researcher by the community college.

The researcher sent out an email survey (see Appendix A) to the students on the list that was provided to obtain willing interview participants. Participants were asked to answer 12 questions via email. This survey (created through www.surveymonkey.com) collected the following information: name, gender, age, year of high school or GED completion, year beginning college, full-time/part-time status of fall 2016 attendance, financial dependence/independence from parents, employment status, marital status, number of dependent children, and willingness to participate in face-to-face interview. Purposeful sampling was used to target respondents to obtain 10 interviewees. Students who responded to the email were contacted via the telephone number they provided in the email survey using a verbal script (see Appendix B) in order to set up an interview time.

23

Five students were from the main campus, and 5 students were from the two satellite campuses.

Instrument

In 2015, the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE, 2015) provided a survey instrument in which experiences with faculty were measured. Some of the indicator items were: talked about career plans with a faculty member; worked with faculty on activities other than coursework (committees, student groups, etc.); discussed course topics, ideas, or concepts with a faculty member outside of class; and/or discussed your academic performance with a faculty member. Open-ended, researcher-developed questions were adapted in part from the Student-Faculty Interaction and Quality of Interaction sections of the NSSE and from the research of Cotton and Wilson (2016) (see Appendix C).

Data Collection Procedures

A letter requesting permission to conduct research at River Oaks Community College (a pseudonym) was sent to the vice-president of instruction at the main campus, and to the campus vice-presidents at the two satellite campus. An email of approval was received from each of the three vice-presidents. An application was sent to the administrator of the NSSE requesting permission to adapt questions for the interview process. Permission was received for their usage and adaptation. A letter was sent requesting approval to use questions from the previous research of Cotten and Wilson (2016). An email of approval was received for their usage and adaptation. An application of approval was submitted and approved by the Mississippi Association of

Community and Junior Colleges. This information was included in the application to the

Mississippi State University Institutional Review Board (IRB), which was also approved.

Data was collected from 30-45 minute, voice-recorded, one-on-one interviews with

nontraditional students who responded to the researcher's email request. Participants

were asked to read and sign an informed consent form. The data was then transcribed.

Data Analysis Procedures

Data from all interviews were coded, and the researcher conducted ethnographic

analysis through the lens of the research questions in order to identify meaningful data to

report. In addition, the academic standing of the nontraditional students who were

interviewed was assessed. They were identified as enrolled full or part time, or not

enrolled. Initially coding analyzed the frequency and types of student-faculty interaction

and reasons for remaining or leaving college. More specific coding was then applied

based on the categories that emerged from the responses provided by the participants.

Regular patterns were identified and analyzed and presented in a narrative format.

Summary

The goal of this research was to validate the claim that student-faculty interaction

is a significant determinant in the retention of nontraditional community college students.

The importance of this research is based on the premise that nontraditional students

represent a majority in the community college setting, and student retention is more cost

effective than student recruitment. While there are many factors that may influence a

nontraditional community college student's choice of continuity at a college, student-

faculty interaction may be a vital variable. While quantitative data is both relevant and

necessary, hearing the voices of the students is equally important and provides richness

that may otherwise be overlooked.

CHAPTER IV

DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Chapter IV presents the data analysis and results of this study. The results are presented in a narrative format. Demographic data are presented in a statistical format, followed by a narrative of the responses of the interviewees.

Research Questions

The research questions investigated by this study included the following:

1   Does student-faculty interaction have an effect on the retention of nontraditional community college students?

2   Which types and levels of student-faculty interaction have the most significant effects on the retention of nontraditional community college students?

Profile of the Participants

The following tables present profiles of the 10 participants. Table 1 organizes the survey responses by participant. Table 2 gives the frequency distribution of the participants' survey responses to the questions which were included in the survey tool.

Ten students were interviewed for this study. Five of the students were from the main campus of River Oaks Community College. Five of the students were from the two satellite campuses. Seven of the students were female, while 3 were male. Nine out of the ten were financially independent of their parents, and nine out of the ten were

attending full time at the time of the interviews. Three were married, five were single,

one was divorced, and one was widowed. One two were financially supporting children.

Of those two, one was supporting two grandchildren.

Table 1

Profile of Participants

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Type of Diploma	College Enrollment after Receiving Diploma	Fall 2016 Enrollment Status	Financially Dependent on Parents	Employment Status	Marital Status	Number of Dependent Children	Campus
Anna	Female	24	high school diploma	immediate	full time	no	unemployed	married	0	1
Ben	Male	27	high school diploma	immediate	full time	no	unemployed	single	0	2
Caleb	Male	40	high school diploma	immediate	full time	no	unemployed	single	0	2
Crystal	Female	47	high school diploma	delayed	full time	no	employed part time	single	2	1
Diana	Female	54	GED	delayed	full time	no	unemployed	married	0	1
Melody	Female	38	high school diploma	immediate	part time	no	employed full time	single	1	2
Mia	Female	30	high school diploma	immediate	full time	no	employed part time	married	4	1
Michelle	Female	36	high school diploma	immediate	full time	yes	unemployed	widowed	0	3
Nick	Male	35	high school diploma	immediate	full time	no	unemployed	divorced	0	1
Tonya	Female	25	high school diploma	immediate	full time	no	employed part time	single	0	2

29

Table 2

Frequency Distribution of Email Survey Responses (N=10)

Variable	*Choices*	*Total and Percentage*
Gender	Male	3 (30%)
	Female	7 (70%)
Age	24-34	4 (40%)
	35-44	4 (40%)
	45-54	2 (20%)
	55-64	0 (0%)
	65-74	0 (0%)
	75 or older	0 (0%)
Type of Diploma Received	high school diploma	9 (90%)
	GED	1 (10%)
Immediate College Enrollment after Receiving Diploma	Yes	8 (80%)
	No	2 (20%)
Fall 2016 Enrollment Status	part-time	1 (10%)
	full-time	9 (90%)
Financial Dependence on Parents	dependent	1 (10%)
	independent	9 (90%)
Fall 2016 Employment Status	not employed	6 (60%)
	part-time	3 (30%)
	full-time	1 (10%)
Marital Status	married	3 (30%)
	divorced	1 (10%)
	single (never married)	5 (50%)
	widowed	1 (10%)
Number of Dependent Children	0	7 (70%)
	1	1 (10%)
	2	1 (10%)
	3	0 (0%)
	more than 3	1 (10%)

Research Findings

Educational History of Participants

In order to build a complete history of the participants' educational history, each participant was asked in Interview Question 1: "Can you provide some information about the continuity of your education?" Two prompts were used to obtain more details. Question 1a asked: "Have you had a break in continuity since you began college?" Question 1b asked: "Have you ever considered leaving and not returning?" For nine out of the ten students, this was their 2nd or 3rd attempt at attending college. A variety of reasons appeared when discussing the reason for their stop-out from college. Family obligations were frequently cited. While Anna's poor performance on a major midterm while in the nursing program was the reason she left school the first time, the underlying factor to this failing grade was a significant argument with her husband that kept her from adequately preparing. On another attempt to continue her education, transportation issues and family-planning doctor's appointments kept her out of class enough to end her second try.

Major family illness also affected the students. Like Anna, Ben was also currently working towards a degree for the third time. His first stop-out was a result of having to move with his family to care for his sick grandmother. His second attempt was cut short due to diabetes-related seizures that he had while at school and work. Initially, Diana's disability and the birth of her grandchild kept her from attending college, but once she did get started, her daughter was in a car accident that nearly ended her life. Diana took off a year to care for and spend time with her as she recovered. Melody was also called on to care for a sick mother.

Pregnancy kept both Crystal and Nick from attending as traditional students. Crystal had her daughter immediately after high school and postponed college for about six years, while the unplanned pregnancy of Nick's girlfriend led him to make the decision to stop attending school and begin working full time. In his case, Nick's departure also caused him to lose the scholarship he was receiving at the time that he left. Originally, Mia planned to continue her education throughout her pregnancy, but following the birth of her child, post-partum depression played a significant role in the loss of her scholarship due to suffering grades.

Both Michelle and Tonya cited poor grades as their primary reason for leaving school during their first period of attendance; Tonya admitted that she was "partying too much." Caleb was financially independent of his parents at the time of the interview, but even in his first time of enrollment, he was also financially independent. He decided to withdraw after realizing he wanted to avoid having any student loans.

Types and Frequency of Student-Faculty Interaction

Participants were also asked about their current school year with Interview Question 2: "During the current school year, can you tell me about any instances where you did the following? 2a) talked about career plans with a faculty member; 2b) worked with a faculty member on activities other than coursework (committees, student groups, etc.); 2c) discussed course topics, ideas, or concepts with a faculty member outside of class; and 2d) discussed your academic performance with a faculty member." This interview question sought to establish the types of student-faculty interactions each participant had experienced in order to address Research Question 2: "Which types and levels of student-faculty interaction have the most significant effects on the retention of

nontraditional community college students?" During this line of questioning, students shared information about the quality of the interactions, the ease of the interactions, and how much influence these interactions had on both their attitudes and continuity decisions.

Instructors provided an avenue of information and support for career choice for most of the participants. Only two of the students had never discussed their career plans with an instructor. However, one of these two students did recount an activity in the classroom where she was asked to stand and share her career plans with the class. Caleb, a nursing major, has had multiple conversations with his Anatomy and Physiology instructor. Nick discovered that several of the mathematics faculty had attended the university that he plans to attend, and he has "picked their brains about what to expect if this is the path I'm going to walk on." Tonya was interested in physical therapy but was surprised to find out the university she planned to attend did not offer that program. Her College Algebra instructor invited her to her office to share the experience she had with her own daughter in order to help Tonya decide where to transfer. This made her feel like, "Yeah. I can do this. Even though it's costing a lot of money and stuff."

Besides being guided by instructors, many of the students volunteered that they were strongly influenced in their career choices by forces outside of the school. Anna chose cosmetology because her sister and sister-in-law had been through the program and encouraged her to do the same. Ben had uncles who were tradesmen in lawn care, automobile mechanics, and automation and controls workers. The exposure he had while spending time with them helped develop his love of manual trades. Mia had two family members who had been diagnosed with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease. This

33

sparked her interest in the Respiratory Care program. Michelle's personal experience with gastric-bypass surgery and her parents' diabetes diagnosis led her to pursue studies in the field of nutrition. As a veteran, Nick made use of the Veterans Affairs representative for educational advice.

Clubs and organizations appeared to be low of the list of priorities of most of the students. Most found the time commitment to be an excluding factor. Two of the students had instructors who were advisors for the on-campus honors society. One student was a member of the Science Club, of which his instructor was the advisor. Three other students had not been involved but expressed an interest of being involved in the future. Nick was the only student who gave a reason other than time for choosing to not be more involved in clubs. "I haven't really pursued any club involvement. I feel kind of being as old as I am, and it just…I'm not going to say it's off-putting, but it would feel…it would feel kind of weird to me. Maybe taking these trips with a bunch of 18 year olds—I'm almost twice their age." However, he did not feel that the instructors had any influence on these feelings. He stated that he was the reason he felt this way, not anyone else.

Traditional Students Nick was not the only participant who volunteered thoughts or feelings about traditional students. This topic emerged multiple times throughout the interviews without prompting. Whether recalling their own behavior as a traditional student or describing those of their current classmates, it was clear that the nontraditional students saw themselves differently. Nick looked back and thought he was not "right for college at that point in my life." Now at 35 years old, he says, "I feel like it's a different dynamic between me and the instructor than a traditional, right-out-of-

high-school, 18 year old student and an instructor. I've been all over the world, worked all kinds of different jobs. I have a more varied life experience than most people. Most of them are probably still living with their parents, staying in the dorms." Anna expressed similar sentiments. "I'm not going to say all, but a large majority of straight-out-of-high-school students are there because their friends are there and because they don't want to live at home anymore or because it's free. If it's free or someone else is paying for it… That's not me." Diana, who is 54 years old, felt like traditional students probably need the instructors more. "I know they're [instructors] here to help us, but, you know, by me being of the age that I am, I said, 'Well, these little younger children probably going to be swamping them.' So I don't try to put more on them than I feel is necessary, even though that's what they are here for." Tonya said that if she has the chance to give some advice to herself when she was first in school or to another traditional student, she would tell them, "Enjoy your dependence because when you graduate from your parents and high school, independence is hard."

Ease and Quality of Interaction

Interview Question 3 stated: "In the instances that we just discussed, can you describe how the interaction was initiated and by whom?" Interview Question 3a asked the participants: "Did you find that some faculty members were easier to interact with than others?" Interview Question 3b asked the participants: "What attributes did the faculty members possess that encouraged you to interact with them?" These questions addressed Research Question 2: "What types and levels of student-faculty interaction have the most significant effects on the retention of nontraditional community college students?" There were several attributes that were mentioned. The most prevalent

characteristics were openness and being oneself. Anna described an instructor who was in his late 30's as "very open. He likes to laugh, and he likes to goof off. He tries to make it like he's one of you, like he's one of us. There's no sore subject. He'll embarrass you in a minute in class. But if he embarrasses you, he'll turn around and embarrass himself." Melody felt the same way towards her instructors who are open. "I feel that the instructors, let's just say…being their self. Just be yourself around us. Don't come in the class like, 'I'm the teacher, you the student.' I don't like that. The ones who just come in, be their self, open-door policies, you feel more comfortable with them." She also felt that if an instructor lets you know, "I'm human. I make mistakes," then students feel more comfortable coming and talking to them. After losing her own mother, Tonya found herself opening up to a counselor who she saw as a mother figure. She attributes this relationship to her recognition of how this type of vulnerability in these relationships could serve as a benefit to her. Nick offered perspective with how a student views his or her teachers. "Teachers are people, too. People have different personality traits. Some are more approachable than others. Even the ones who maybe aren't so approachable as some, are still approachable."

Three more recurring characteristics were the impression that the instructor cared, the tone with which the instructors spoke to the students, and the instructors' enthusiasm with regard to the content in the classroom. Anna described talking to one older male instructor about scholarships. "He just…it's just the way he talks to you, I guess. In class, outside of class. It makes it seems like he enjoys being there, and it's not just a job. He's there because he wants to be there and because he wants to see you succeed." Although most of Mia's classes were online, she got a feeling from the online presence of

the instructor. "At the beginning of the semester, you can kind of tell by the way their syllabus is written and by the way their course content is laid out. It seems to me anyways. But you can kind of tell if they're going to be a more clinical or more laid-back, approachable type." She also shared about an Anatomy and Physiology instructor who has her Ph.D. She found this to be intimidating at first, but agreed that the instructor was very knowledgeable, which she appreciated. Michelle recognized that she was approximately the same age as a few of her instructors. Most of her student-faculty interactions were positive. She attributes this to the way they talked to her. "They don't talk down to me like I'm just a student. They talk to me like I'm an adult. They will talk way different and if they just talk to me like I'm one of them, then we have great communication, because I would never talk down to them. Most of the time, I talk up to them. I respect them as a teacher because they know more than I do."

Real-life applications were also mentioned in the interviews more than once. Although Ben dropped out of the Automation and Controls program, he felt his instructor taught about life pertaining to your job as well. "Like what you're going to do when you graduate out of this course, what it will do for you, how will it help you. That will help you get stronger and make sure you graduate so you can do that. Definitely." Caleb did not feel confident in his mathematics or science classes, but some of those teachers "gave real-life stories that related to the material so you could actually see a comparison to what was being taught." Michelle changed her major after taking a class in nutrition. She attributed it to the instructor making the material very interesting. "It was like he gave a damn about it. And when I told him what I was thinking about doing, he said, 'If that's

the route you prefer to go strongly, it's not going to be easy.'" She respected his advice and appreciated his honesty.

Even if they felt differently, none of the students interviewed mentioned ever being treated differently by the instructor. Anna felt that her age made it easier to talk to her instructors. However, even at 27 years old, Ben shared his feelings of being different from his peers. "I feel like I fit in with my classmates even though I'm older than them. The instructors make sure you fit in, too. They don't say things like, 'Well, you should already know this since you're older.' It's not like that. Everybody's even. If the instructors and the students are being real with each other, then you have nothing to hide." Melody, a single mom who works full time, feels more mature than she did previously. When she referred to the maturity level of some traditional students, she said that the first pressure that some of them feel causes them to leave. That does not seem to be the case with her now. "I feel like once your mind is one what you want, you aim for it, no matter what." Making a connection with her instructors has been easier for her, too. "I feel more connected now with my instructors than I did back then. I don't know if it's maturity back then or what it was, but I just couldn't connect with my professors." Anna believed that her instructors saw her differently in terms of their expectations of her as a nontraditional student. "I think my instructors know that I'm there for a reason. I think my instructors expect more from me, like they recognize that I know why I'm there, and I'm determined."

Several of the students opened up about a special moment between themselves and an instructor. Anna always thought of herself as a weak science student until this meaningful conversation. "I made a comment [to my science instructor] about how I

enjoyed his class and how he made it interesting, really easy to understand, because I had never been good at science. And he told me that there was absolutely no way that I could make him believe that I was not good at science because he had watched me over the semester understand what he said the first time it came out of his mouth and was able to explain to somebody who doesn't understand it in a way that they can easily understand it. And that no matter how much convincing I tried to do, I could not convince him that I was a bad science student. I had never thought of that before. Somebody that didn't know me from Adam before this class had that much faith in me, regardless of the faith that I have. Whether I think I can do this or not, there's somebody else who know that I can do it, so I'm going to do it." Mia used the word "phenomenal" to describe her computer concepts teacher. "One of her first activities was this mapping activity where we just filled in spaces about why we were in school and why we were taking computer concepts and she wanted to know if we had kids, if we were married, what kind of pets, what our favorite food was, and I just thought it was such an interesting activity. And then after we submitted that activity, she left a comment telling us what she thought was interesting and she hoped she could…Oh! One of her questions was what do you think made a good instructor, and she told me that she hoped she could live up to her expectations as a good instructor. So I thought that was really neat. She seemed just so interested in our success and our personal life."

The quality of the interactions ranged from very positive to very negative. While some of the positive interactions did seem to influence the students, negative interactions did not. Diana said she has only had one difficult situation with an instructor. The situation first began in the classroom where Diana said the instructor did not want to

repeat instructions. Diana is legally blind and relies on the accommodations that this disability affords. She went to the instructor's office outside of class. "I'm like, 'OK, when I try to talk to you in class, you had an attitude with me. Let's sit down and work this out before I take it to another level—to your supervisor.' Things were different after that." Mia had one instructor who mentioned dropping the class to her. She did not understand why the instructor was asking her to drop because her grades at the time were good. Mia says she told her, "If you're telling me to drop the class, you got another thing coming." Mia stayed in the class, and the instructor apologized. She was still not sure what caused her teacher to encourage her to drop, but she speculated that it was because it was an online English course, and the instructor may not have wanted a weak student in her class.

Participants were also asked in Interview Question 3: "In the instances that we just discussed, can you describe how the interaction was initiated and by whom?" More often than not, students assumed the responsibility of contacting the instructor when they needed help. This appeared to be a result of two factors: instructors telling them to "let me know if you need help" and the students' admittance that contacting the instructor was not necessary unless they needed something specific. Mia admitted that she could see how some students may be intimidated when trying to contact an instructor, she was not. "I'm not very shy. If I have a need, I'm going to address it." Caleb said that he has initiated all of the contact he has had with his instructors outside of class, stated that "the instructor doesn't know you need help unless you ask for it." Crystal felt that instructors always had time for her, but in the same way Caleb mentioned, she felt the responsibility was hers. "If I feel like I need to talk to them about my grades, I go to them. I'm doing

pretty good now so I don't…it's not a reason for me to go talk to them." Diana repeated that sentiment. "This is just me, personally. I am one of those…I try to figure it out myself, and if I can find another avenue of getting help, I try to go that avenue. I'm just one of those that don't bother people a whole lot. I try to do the best I can with what I got. And when push gets to shove, where I just can't do it, then I will go to them for help." Mia's College Algebra teacher messaged her class weekly with specific resources for those who may have struggled on a topic, but Mia had also contacted her to schedule an online appointment for more personal help. Anna said that she had instructors stop her on more than one occasion to talk about scholarship opportunities that she might consider. She described these interactions as casual; for example, they might be walking down the hall in the same direction after class.

The availability of an instructor to meet with a student never appeared to be a problem. Appointments did not seem to be necessary, either. Nick said his instructors were always available, always willing to help, and always open to talk about any topic. "It's been my experience that they have an open-door policy. If you show up, they put down what they're doing and help you." In fact, on the day of his interview, he had stopped by his English instructor's office. Although she was in the middle of something, she put it all down and addressed his needs. Caleb's experience at a 4-year college helped him appreciate the smaller and more personal classroom of the community college. "There's more time for one-on-one interaction, and no one has ever said, 'I'm busy' or 'I can't do it.'" He felt like he could not address his instructor at the 4-year university, who referred students with questions to his teaching assistant after lecturing to an auditorium full of students. Ben noticed that his instructors studied the classroom as

41

they taught. "They can tell if you're not getting a particular problem or anything. They can see that. It's like when they observe or pay attention to the class, they can see if you're not getting that or if you're not paying attention or wandering off. They're like, 'OK, well, I'm going to talk to him or her after class because I can see what's going on with that.' After one paper or grade, they can see your work, and they can come to you. That helps because some students are shy. I wouldn't want to bring it up in class because I wouldn't want to feel like my classmates were smarter than me. I would rather talk about it after class to make sure that I got it."

Faculty Influence on Continuity Decisions

Interview Question 4 asked: "Have any of the faculty interactions I have asked you about had an effect on your continuity decisions? If so, which were the most significant?" When it comes to the influence that instructors had on the continuity of the students, two students gave specific examples of how their instructors had been a part of keeping them in school. When dealing with her blindness, Diana stated that her instructors were very accommodating of her disability. She stated that this influenced her decision to stay in school because she felt the way they treated her mattered. Mia described being in the 4th week of her classes and having reservations about staying in school. She had made her first B, which she admitted was not a bad grade, but when everything up to that point had come easily, this was a disappointment. Although she did not share these concerns with her instructor, her worries were addressed when her College Algebra instructor sent her class a message. "She told us all that we had done so well and that she was so impressed and that we needed to keep doing what we were doing and we'd be successful. And then I don't know if she messaged everyone else, but she

made sure to message me. After my first proctored test, I had made like a 93 on it, and

that wasn't bad, that was still an A, but that one question I missed, I was like, 'Man, that

was such a dumb mistake.' I had missed doing one of my signs correctly, and she

message me directly and she said, 'I see that you did so well on your test. I am so very

proud of you.' Because I had actually spoken to her about how this was my 3rd time

taking Algebra. I was not very good at math. I was more of an art-brained kind of

person, and she made sure to go out of her way to tell me I was doing a phenomenal job,

and she was so very proud for me, and if I would just keep studying the way I was and

utilizing the resources that I would do just fine. And so I just applied that to my other

classes as well."

　　　None of the students suggested that their interactions with instructors had a major

influence on these initial decisions to delay their educational plans. However, Nick did

recount the story of being late on the first day of class for one instructor who had actually

written the chemistry textbook from which she taught and who he called "notorious."

Her strong reprimand in front of his classmates left a lasting impression on him as could

be imagined for a student who admitted to having "a touch of social anxiety" at that time

in his life. Although her grades were the factor that caused Anna to leave nursing

school, she remembers her instructor bringing her into her office and telling her that she

could tell the potential that she had, even as an 18 year old. The instructor also told her

that she knew Anna could pass and be a great nurse eventually. She admits that this

conversation made her feel like she had let the people who supported her down, but it

also "made me feel good because somebody who doesn't know me from Adam has that

much faith in me."

43

The other students maintained that they were the ones in control of their continuity decisions. Melody did not provide a specific example, but said she had "felt intimidated, but not to the point of leaving. I'm not that easy. I'm not a pushover." When his diabetes kept him out of school for a couple of years, Ben battled depression and feelings of low self-worth. His reasons for staying in school including feeling better about himself and helping his family. Mia felt that the expectations she had experienced as a traditional students had become more internal versus external. "You're expected to go to college when you get out of high school, but if you quit, people don't expect you to go back. This is strictly for me and my family this time."

Summary

Research Question 1 of this study asked: "Does student-faculty interaction have an effect on the retention of nontraditional community college students?" Two students said yes to this question. While that is not the majority of the participants, it still represented 20% of the group. Research Question 2 was: "Which types and levels of student-faculty interaction have the most significant effects on the retention of nontraditional community college students?" With only two students who answered yes to the first research question, this research question was difficult to answer. Although Diana did not have a specific instance of how interaction had affected her retention, her response was that how instructors treated her mattered. However, Mia went into a detailed story of how she was considering leaving when an instructor sent her a positive electronic message. Many of the participants' responses suggested less of this type of external influence on their continuity decisions and more of an internal drive they

possessed. Even still, many had stories of comfortable and confidence-building

interactions with faculty members.

CHAPTER V

SUMMARY, DISCUSSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary and Discussion

As a college, trying to find ways to meet the needs of students with the resources available can be similar to assembling the pieces of a puzzle. A student is an individual, with a unique background, experiences, and capabilities. An educational institution can be just as unique, with emphases placed in different fields of study, limited or varied course offerings, and part-time or full-time faculty members. Being everything to every student is not possible, and categorizing students is not always the best way to serve them.

The purposes of this qualitative study were to: (a) provide a deeper insight into the definitions of nontraditional as opposed to the mutually exclusive categories of traditional and nontraditional, (b) allow the students themselves to share their interaction experiences with faculty members, (c) determine if student-faculty interaction was a significant factor in the retention of nontraditional community college students, and (d) determine what makes some of the interactions more significant.

In order to complete this study, 10 community college students were interviewed. Like Kim (2002) suggested, it is very difficult to clearly define nontraditional. However, the conventional age criterion was used for the initial identification: 24 years old or older. I further categorized the students based on the seven characteristics outlines by the NCES

46

(2015). Out of the 10 participants, half of them had one or two nontraditional characteristics, and the other half had three or more nontraditional characteristics. There may be value in what Leonard (2002) suggested as labeling the students as moderately or highly nontraditional.

In the interviews, it became apparent that many of the participants' continuity decisions were internally based. This is consistent with Bennett, Evan, and Riedle's (2007) study that found them to be more goal-oriented and persistent. However, unlike Goncalves and Trunk (2014), the interview data did not suggest that the students would like to have a club designated for them. Time was too much of a factor for almost all of the students when choosing whether or not to be involved in a club or organization outside of the classroom.

With regard to bridging the cultural gap between traditional and nontraditional students, although it was not specifically asked in the interview questions, many of the participants brought up the subject as a part of an answer to other questions. As Davis (2011) points out, differences are present and can affect how the students see both themselves and their relationships with their instructors.

Casual interactions were clearly more common, which is consistent with Wilson et al. (1974). In addition, the instructor characteristics of openness and being oneself was consistent with both Peterson's (2016) study of student parents and Cox et al.'s (2010) research on the subtle indicators that instructors display in the classroom. Nearly all of the participants in this study referenced these types of behaviors from their instructors, including two of the three student-parents.

47

No significant differences in the gender of the instructor were discovered, unlike what Tatum, Schwartz, Schimmoeller, and Perry (2013) found. However, the female participants in this study did provide more stories of personal connections with their instructors, much like the study by Hagedorn et al. (2010) suggested.

Based on the responses to the questions about the ease of interaction and the attributes of the instructors who were easier to interact with, it is apparent that the data collected in this study is consistent with that of Cotten and Wilson (2006), from which part of this study was based. In the GRASP program (McShannon, 2001) found that approachability of instructors increased student retention by 9%. Approachability could be identified as simple as an instructor knowing the name of the student, and non-approachability could be the act of talking down to a student. If instructors were aware of the importance of even small actions, they might be willing to implement some the best practices. Willingness to share openly and vulnerably with students seemed to be important to the participants. Without exception, the participants accepted the responsibility for being the initiator for interaction with faculty members. However, in some of the stories of the instructors who were easiest to interact with, interactions had been initiated by the instructor.

Once interviews were conducted, it was clear that the survey that allowed identification of the nontraditional characteristics of the participants would not have been sufficient to create the bigger picture that the conversations provided. In agreement with both Jinkens (2009) and Chartrand (1992), a variety of background variables makes the participants much like snowflakes when they are carefully examined in detail. While

four of the students answered almost identically to the survey questions, their stories were very different.

Recommendations for Practitioners and for Future Research

Without attempting to examine too far below what may be superficial responses, and if a student's continuity decision is truly based internally, the question remains if : more students would attribute these decisions to some type of interaction with a faculty member if there were more interactions on which to reflect. In other words, would the bond between student and school be stronger? If instructors operated under the assumption that all students need them, retention may be increased, and this retention, however small in numbers, would be worth the effort.

Based on these findings, it is worth the effort to educate faculty members in initiating contact with students who do not seem to need them for a specific reason. However, it may take more significant results to convince instructors to include these practices for all students, even those who are high performing or ones who would not otherwise be targeted as needing some type of intervention.

Questions for future researchers on this topic could address the formality of interaction. Is a short email or a kind word in the hallway enough to change a wavering mind? Is policy as simple as this? Does there need to be a program outlining a certain number or specific types of interactions each semester? If so, would there be compliance with such a policy? Would that remove the genuineness of these open and honest interactions? Would it become a checklist on an already long list of things that overworked faculty members are required to do? Could the anecdotes contained in this study be shared in such a way as to encourage more instructor-initiated, meaningful

contact and as a result encourage the continuity of a large and growing sector of the

community college? The results of this study may be shared with faculty members,

administrators, and other involved parties to help them be better equipped to serve

students' educational needs.

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51

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APPENDIX A

IRB APPROVAL

NOTICE OF APPROVAL FOR HUMAN RESEARCH

DATE: November 04, 2016

TO: Hood, Amanda, M Ed, Educational Leadership

FROM: Roberts, Jodi, HRPP Officer, MSU HRPP

PROTOCOL TITLE: The Role of Interaction with Faculty in Retaining

Nontraditional Community College Students

PROTOCOL NUMBER: IRB-16-446

Approval Date: November 04, 2016

Expiration Date: February 28, 2017

This letter is your record of the Human Research Protection Program (HRPP)

approval of this study as exempt.

On November 04, 2016, the Mississippi State University Human Research

Protection Program approved this study as exempt from federal regulations pertaining to

the protection of human research participants. The application qualified for exempt

review under CFR 46.101(b)(1, 2).

Exempt studies are subject to the ethical principles articulated in the Belmont

Report, found at www.hhs.gov/ohrp/regulations-and-policy/belmont-report/#

If you propose to modify your study, you must receive approval from the HRPP

prior to implementing any changes. The HRPP may review the exempt status at that time

and request an amendment to your application as non-exempt research.

In order to protect the confidentiality of research participants, we encourage you to destroy private information which can be linked to the identities of individuals as soon as it is reasonable to do so.

The MSU IRB approval for this project will expire on February 28, 2017. If you expect your project to continue beyond this date, you must submit an application for renewal of this HRPP approval. HRPP approval must be maintained for the entire term of your project. Please notify the HRPP when your study is complete. Upon notification, we will close our files pertaining to your study.

If you have any questions relating to the protection of human research participants, please contact the HRPP by phone at 325.3994 or email irb@research.mssatee.edu. We wish you success in carrying out your research project.

Roberts, Jodi

Review Type: EXEMPT

IRB Number: IORG0000467

APPENDIX B

PARTICIPATION EMAIL

Dear Participant,

The purpose of this study is to conduct qualitative research for a doctoral dissertation. Data will be collected In two ways: through responses the following survey and through a follow up interview with the researcher. All responses to the following survey will be kept confidential as will the transcriptions of the interviews.

You are not required to participate in this study, and should you wish to withdraw from participation at any time, you are free to do so without any effect on your relationships with your college. Please do not hesitate to ask questions before, during, or after the study. Should you wish to have a copy of the findings of the study once it is complete, one will be provided to you.

There are no known risks associated with this study. However, the potential benefits of having participation in a qualitative study are to further the study of issues affecting students like yourself.

If you wish to affirm your participation, please continue to the survey link and provide answers to the questions that are included.

Amanda M. Hood, Doctoral Candidate

APPENDIX C

SURVEY QUESTIONS

7. Do you currently attend full-time (12 semester hours) or part-time (less than 12 semester hours)? Full-time/Part-time

8. Are you financially independent of your parents? Yes/No

9. If you are employed, do you work full-time (at least 40 hours per week) or part-time (less than 40 hours per week)? Full-time; Part-time; I am currently unemployed.

10. What is your current marital status? Married/Divorced/Single/Widowed

11. How many dependent children do you have? 0/1/2/3/more than 3

12. Are you willing to be contacted by the researcher for an interview? yes/no

13. Phone number: _____

APPENDIX D

TELEPHONE SCRIPT

Hello, my name is Amanda Hood, and I am a doctoral candidate at Mississippi State University. I am conducting a research study about the role of interaction with faculty in retaining nontraditional community college students. The reason I am contacting you is because you recently completed a survey that was sent to your school email.

I would like to confirm that you are still willing to participate in a 30-45 minute, one-on-one interview with me. The interview will consist of me asking you a few questions about your continuation in community college and your interactions with faculty members. I am willing to meet you at school at a time that is convenient to you, and I will also be providing lunch.

Please understand that your participation is voluntary. Your refusal to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You may discontinue your participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits.   When would be a good time that we could meet? If you need to cancel or reschedule for any reason, please call or text me at XXX or email me at XXX.

APPENDIX E

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1) Can you provide some information about the continuity of your education?

   a) Have you had a break in continuity since you began college?

   b) Have you ever considered leaving and not returning?

2) During the current school year, can you tell me about any instances where you did the following?

   a) Talked about career plans with a faculty member

   b) Worked with a faculty member on activities other than coursework (committees, student groups, etc.)

   c) Discussed course topics, ideas, or concepts with a faculty member outside of class

   d) Discussed your academic performance with a faculty member

3) In the instances that we just discussed, can you describe how the interaction was initiated and by whom?

   a) Did you find that some faculty members were easier to interact with than others?

   b) What attributes did the faculty members possess that encouraged you to interact with them?

4) Have any of the faculty interactions I have asked you about had an effect on your continuity decisions? If so, which were the most significant?