Returning to School: Unraveling the Model of Barriers and Baggage

Julia Suzanne Sarris
University of Colorado Boulder, jl80303@gmail.com

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RETURNING TO SCHOOL:
UNRAVELING THE MODEL OF BARRIERS AND BAGGAGE

by

JULIA SUZANNE SARRIS

B.A., University of Virginia, 1981
MBA, University of North Carolina, 1986
M.A., University of Colorado, 2007

A dissertation submitted to the
Faculty of the Graduate School of the
University of Colorado in partial fulfillment
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This dissertation entitled:
Returning to School: Unraveling the Model of Barriers and Baggage
written by Julia Suzanne Sarris has been approved for the School of Education

Dr. Leonard Baca

Dr. Kathy Escamilla

Dr. Lucinda Soltero-González

Dr. John Hoover

Dr. Michael Radelet

Date________________

The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.

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Abstract of the Dissertation

Despite the apparent growth in the population of adults returning to school following an interruption in their schooling, current research on this population is negligible. Furthermore, the little research that does exist relies on a decades-old model of barriers and baggage: that this population faces so many barriers and carries so much baggage holding them back that a return to school and completion of a program of study is unachievable.

This qualitative study extends this model with a conceptual framework that focuses on assets possessed by returning students. These assets include the social capital – the network of family, friends and acquaintances – that the returning student can leverage to support their return to school. Using a combination of in-depth interviews and document analysis, this study illuminates the experiences faced by nine adult returning students as they enter a new and unfamiliar academic environment and the social capital they can leverage as they return and complete a program of study. Study participants have all experienced an interruption in their schooling, and have returned to school via a structured community college program for paraeducators that leads to an associate’s degree in education.

Findings show that the participants of this study do have significant social capital that they leverage effectively to support their return, and that the leveraging of their social capital has contributed to their transformation into confident and creative problem solvers. However, this appears limited to the participants’ home front. The participants’ social capital seldom appears to support their navigation of the complex academic environment that includes relations with their
cohort and interactions inside the classroom. This study further finds that the academic environment posed challenges for several of the participants, challenges that included having to cope with poor instruction and problematic interactions with cohort members. The participants found few resources to assist them in resolving these problematic situations. These findings encourage program directors, community college administrators, and policy makers to develop new programs and improve instruction to better support returning students such that they can complete a program of study and earn a degree.
Dedication

This study is dedicated to the study participants

Ana, Ed, Kelly, Lenny, Lucy, Lia, Maria, Pati, and Victoria

You took time out of your zooming and flying lives to gift me with your time and your stories.

Thank you.

And to all the returning students who have filled my classrooms over the years. You challenged the barriers and baggage model as you forged your way back to the educational system.

You are an inspiration to us all.
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And finally and most importantly, to my family.

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Chapter 1

Returning to School

The number of adults returning to formal schooling has been growing, to the point where more than one third of students in higher education were aged 25 or older (Digest of Educational Statistics, 2013). An unknown number of these adult students have experienced an interruption in their formal schooling, either by leaving school before earning a high school diploma or college degree, or by not matriculating directly from high school to college. They are returning to the educational system. Yet despite the apparent growth in this population, current statistics and research are scant. For example, the latest detailed statistical report from the National Center for Educational Statistics concerning this population, labeled “non-traditional students,” is twelve years old (Choi, 2002), and does not specifically address the numbers of students who have experienced an interruption in their schooling. Hagedorn (2014) writes that “(f)requently, adult learners are cast into the diverse and heterogeneous category of “non-traditional” students” (p. 309). The aggregation of different adults into a single category obscures data and research, thereby making it difficult to provide programming and policies that would support returning students’ persistence and completion of a program of study. Not all adult students have experienced an interruption in their schooling; many continue directly from high school to college and thence to graduate school without an interruption. Aggregating these two distinct groups of students and their potentially disparate needs does little to support either group.

This study directly addresses this under-researched population of returning students – adult students over the age of 25 who have experienced an interruption in their schooling before completing a degree or receiving a diploma. As this study will show, returning students are very different from the other adult students in that their interruption renders formal education
potentially to be unfamiliar territory. As such, the support they need to re-enter the formal educational system and complete a program of study is likely to be very different as well. Without research to inform policies and programming, it is unlikely that their different needs will be met. This study contributes to that research base by focusing on returning adult students.

**Problem Statement**

The research regarding returning students is generally grounded in a classic work by Cross (1981). In her book Cross identifies three categories of “barriers” (p. 99) faced by adult students: situational, institutional, and dispositional. Situational barriers include lack of time due to job and family responsibilities, lack of childcare, lack of financial resources, etc. Institutional barriers include inconvenient class schedules, inconvenient locations, full-time studies required, etc. Dispositional barriers include lack of confidence in academic abilities, concern about being too old, etc. (Cross, 1981, p. 98). This model is still widely used not only in extant research and government reports (see, for example, Goto & Martin, 2009; Hardin, 2008) but also in practitioner journals (Bell, 2012; Spellman, 2007). Indeed, Bell (2012) writes that non-traditional students “often bring extra baggage to campus” with them when they return. Spellman (2007) relies on Cross’s model as a conceptual framework in her theoretical piece, and writes that adults “often confront a variety of barriers such as lack of academic preparation, lack of finances, social issues, cultural issues and overwhelming family responsibilities” (p. 63). Williams (2012) writes of “the baggage that often accompanies adult students, from pressing family obligations to the emotional stress of a lost job.” In their book published in 2014, Bostock and Wood write that “difficulty arises when a student’s previous experiences of education have not been positive and they bring with them baggage that impedes their ability to learn” (p. 4), and Philibert, Allen, and Elleven (2008) write of more young students “who now seem to carry burdens and baggage previously associated with the old” (p. 592).
The continued reliance on this “barriers and baggage” model is problematic for a number of reasons. The first and most important reason is the overreliance on the model, almost to the point where it has become overused and worn out. The researcher of this study does not deny that returning students have challenges that complicate their return to school and completion of a program of study. The researcher herself has returned to school following an interruption of almost 20 years, and has herself faced “barriers” of considerable family responsibilities and profound self-doubt. These “barriers” are real and often feel relentless and unresolvable. Yet large numbers of adults do return to school and do complete a program of study. Woo, Green, and Matthews (2013) analyzed data from national longitudinal databases for the academic year 2007-2008. They found that 13.3% of bachelor’s degrees were awarded to individuals aged 30 or over (p. 5). Of those bachelor’s recipients who were aged 30 or over, 16.8% were unmarried with dependent children and 43.5% were married with dependent children (p. 20). Further, 26.2% of bachelor’s recipients aged 30 and over experienced an interruption between high school and enrolling in a post-secondary institution of greater than 60 months (p. 61). These data do not include adult students who are enrolled in 2- or 4-year institutions but have not yet graduated, nor do these data include students who have earned an associate’s degree or a graduate degree. Clearly a large number of adults are overcoming these “barriers.” Given these data, perhaps a model that focuses on “barriers” presents an incomplete picture of returning students and no longer fully describes them as the model may have three decades ago.

Second, continued reliance on “barriers and baggage” offers little that is new or innovative to the research and to our understanding of returning students. After 34 years, the model has become so overused that it is almost pedestrian and predictable. It is almost ingrained into conventional wisdom, as evidenced by its common use in the popular press (e.g. Bell, 2012;
While the model certainly remains useful as a point of departure, returning students would benefit from fresh conceptual models that extend the model and might provide new insights and better inform new policies and practices that serve returning students.

Third, the model frequently undergirds a deficit view of returning students as problems. Hardin (2008) and Spellman (2012) both write that returning students often face “educational barriers” upon their return, which she defines as being academically underprepared for college. Hardin (2008) lists a variety of reasons, one of which is making “poor choices” such as dropping out of high school or not taking college-preparatory coursework in high school. As will be seen in this study’s literature review, these are seldom choices made by a student; they are most often created by systemic factors over which students have little control. Further, it is difficult to consider “baggage” as an asset or even a positive term, particularly when it is followed with a list of “the core problems associated with nontraditional students” (Bell, 2012), which he then lists as situational, institutional, and dispositional barriers. Placing the fault on the returning student promotes a deficit view of the student and does little to illuminate the commotion faced and overcome by returning students. Rather, perhaps the burden should lie with the educational and social system in which returning students live and function. This deficit view of returning students is also evident in the research concerning the reasons for the return, often referred to as “catalysts.” (e.g. Gallacher et al., 2010). Catalysts for a return often include a job layoff (e.g. Genco, 2007) or a life change such as divorce or birth of a child (e.g. Metzer, 1997) These are events over which an individual has little control and little agency. These situations push people back into school. Perhaps it is it possible that adults can instead choose to return to school by way of an attractive opportunity.
Fourth, the continued reliance on barriers and baggage fosters a deterministic attitude toward returning students. Returning students cannot jettison their families, or change their age, or roll back the clock to erase the interruption in their schooling. The deterministic attitude is reflected in the literature’s reliance on *predictors* to non-completion of a program of study. For example, a large amount of quantitative studies (e.g. Choi, 2002) write of predictors to attrition, such as having dependent children in the home or being a single parent. Choi (2002) writes that non-traditional students are “more likely than traditional students to leave postsecondary education without any degree” (p. 13). Crosta (2013) writes of “chaotic enrollment patterns” of community college students “in response to personal work, family, financial, and academic considerations” (p. 27). These are factors over which a student has little overt control. Perhaps these *predictors* to attrition actually be *assets* to support a return and completion?

Finally, some of the “baggage” identified in the literature (e.g. Bell, 2012; Spellman, 2007; Williams, 2012) includes families and children. Children are not “baggage.” Instead of identifying children as liabilities, perhaps family and children could instead be assets to a return to school by providing motivation, such as a desire to better provide for the family or to be a role model to children.

The model of barriers and baggage remains as a point of departure and important foundational work. However, space remains for new conceptual models to advance our understanding of returning students. By understanding who returning students are and the assets they bring with them and develop to support their return and completion of a program of study, programming can be better developed to support them. The deficit, defeatist “How to overcome your barriers and baggage” changes to the empowering “How to leverage your assets.”
This study addresses these problems directly. First, this study extends the barriers and baggage model. This study instead looks at returning students through a new and different lens – a lens that examines the assets that returning students possess based on an assumption that adults do return to school, complete a program of study, and earn a degree. In this manner, the study’s audience is program managers, college administrators and academic advisors who, informed by the results of this study, will be better able to develop programming and more appropriately advise returning students. Second, this study is qualitative in nature, which adds depth to the quantitative data and generates new variables that can be incorporated into surveys and other types of quantitative analyses to more accurately examine attrition. Third, this study focuses on a clearly-defined, diverse population of returning students, a population that includes culturally and linguistically diverse students, single parents, older individuals, men, and women. This study argues that returning students bring a wealth of assets with them to support their return and completion of a program of study. This study further argues that considering assets can more appropriately inform policies and programming that better support returning students to continue on their educational trajectory. With this view comes a new focus: instead of a focus on students being “college ready,” perhaps higher education could also focus on themselves being “student ready;” ready to receive returning students and ensure their completion of a program of study. This study does not argue that that returning students do not have challenges and commotion in their lives that requires managing time, setting priorities, and make sacrifices that students who are in the 18-22-year-old demographic do not have to make. This study does argue that challenges and commotion does not necessarily constitute insurmountable barriers; instead, commotion can be mitigated and resolved by creative problem-solving and leveraging assets available to returning students.
Unfortunately, research specifically addressing returning students is sorely lacking. Research instead appears to focus on the 18- to 22-year-old demographic that matriculates directly from high school to higher education and addresses predictors for graduation. Little of this research applies to returning students, most of whom are demographically dissimilar from 18- to 22-year old population in that many have jobs and families and are financially independent from their parents. For example, research shows that freshman students who live on campus earn higher grades than do those students living off campus (De Araujo & Murray, 2010). Dormitory living is not generally an option for a returning student who has school-aged children at home. Research along these lines is vitally important for the 18- to 22-year-old demographic but is a moot point for many returning students.

Additionally, existing studies that do address returning students predominantly have as their participants white, middle class men and women in higher education or graduate school rather than community colleges or GED programs (e.g. Hensley & Kinser, 2001; Suitor, 1998; Widoff, 1999). In short, very little research addresses students from culturally diverse backgrounds - low-income, first generation, or students of color. Fewer still address students returning to a community college setting.

What little research does exist on returning students appears to be heavily reliant on quantitative analysis using data from large-scale databases (e.g. Choi, 2002). These data are based on US Census data and other survey data collected by the US government and available through the National Center for Educational Statistics (e.g. The Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study; the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, etc.), and are predominantly demographic in nature, addressing, for example, gender and ethnicity.
However, these quantitative data do not describe how these returning students actually made their return – the paths they followed back to the educational system or the catalysts for their return. Nor do they address the social networks that returning students may have at their disposal to support their return. The disparate paths followed by returning students and their social networks could have an important impact on their programming needs. For example, a student who returned via a GED may need very different types of support than would a student who is a college graduate returning to school to support a career change. A returning student with a large support network may need different types of support than would a returning student with fewer resources. A returning student who has experienced an interruption of 20 years many be unfamiliar with new technology, such as graphic calculators and on-line discussions. Quantitative data and analysis can only partially inform these issues. Qualitative data would add depth and nuance to the quantitative data by explicating how these returning students made their way back to the educational system and how they leveraged their social networks to ensure their success. This in turn would make it more likely that the policies and programming could extend beyond one-size-fits-all and truly support not only returning students’ return but also their completion of a degree.

Additionally, qualitative data would generate new variables that extend beyond demographic variables of race, ethnicity, and gender. These new variables could then be included in statistical models that could offer more accurate predictors of completion of a program of study, predictors that could in turn inform programming for returning students.

Purpose
This study began as a means to address these issues directly. The researcher herself is a returning student, and has taught adults, most of whom are also returning students, for over three decades. Through the years she has heard the same stories repeatedly, stories of challenges that
returning students faced and overcame, stories of multiple demands on their time, sacrifices, late nights, rushing through the day to accomplish everything, feelings of guilt when some things remained unaccomplished. Turning in papers thinking “if I had two more hours I could make this paper a lot better. But I don’t have two more hours. So it is what it is.” The researcher has lived these experiences herself as a doctoral student sandwiched in between aging parents and two teenagers, and discovering a shot in the dark: caffeinated coffee with a shot of espresso to get her through her days. This study takes as a point of departure the words of Chavez (2007), “we are who we study,” a returning student studying other returning students. A returning student who had grown weary of the dearth of research specifically addressing returning students, research that would inform more effective instruction and programming for students. The researcher developed and began her own study, a study that captures and foregrounds the voices of the students and their experiences as they return to school following an interruption in their schooling.

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore the experiences of nine returning students enrolled in a community college program leading to an associates’ degree in education. The analysis focuses on the assets that returning students possess to leverage their return to school, navigate the unfamiliar academic community, and complete a program of study. This study seeks to provide empirical evidence about how returning students persevere and persist in their educational trajectory. Through in-depth interviewing, these student’s voices are foregrounded, adding depth and nuance to the existing research.

The students who agreed to participate in this study represent the diversity inherent in the returning student population. Female and male, mid-20s to mid-60s, some with grown children, others with school aged children at home, one single parent, Latina/o and Anglo. All nine
participants are members of a structured Career Ladder program, a federally-funded scholarship program housed in a community college setting. The program implements a cohort model for para-educators and other individuals to return to school and earn an associate’s degree in education. The goals of these Career Ladder programs, which are located across the US, are “(a) to increase the number of minorities entering the field of education and (b) to train individuals who are able to meet the linguistic and academic needs of culturally diverse LEP” (Bernal & Aragon, 2004). The participants in this study are enrolled in one Career Ladder program located in a western state. The program will be described in greater detail in the Methods chapter.

**Significance**

The study makes several contributions to program directors in institutions of higher education and researchers. First, by discarding the deficit barriers model so widely used to study this population, program directors in institutions of higher education can design more effective programming to support returning students, programming that shows returning students how others have leveraged assets and navigated challenges to support their return and ways in which they can do the same. Second, this study generates new variables that can be used by quantitative researchers, variables that include not only the individuals in a returning student’s life (e.g. dependent children), but the supporting roles that these individuals can play.

**Research Questions**

This study responds to three research questions:

**RQ1:** Who are returning students? What are their characteristics, why did they leave school, and what motivated their return?

**RQ2:** What types of assets and supports enable students to return to school and complete a program of study?
RQ3: How do returning students navigate a new and possibly unfamiliar academic community?

Key Terminology

Social capital is an important construct framing this study, and will be discussed at length below. Returning students do not return to formal schooling alone. They bring with them family, friends, friends of friends, acquaintances, co-workers, supervisors, a veritable throng of other people. These other people form the returning student’s social capital – the network of individuals who provide resources to returning students (Bourdieu, 2008). The construct of social capital was used to guide the development of the research questions, particularly RQ2 as well as the data analysis. Returning students’ social capital is an asset upon which they can draw to support their return and completion of a program of study. However, returning students’ social capital does not appear in the extant research that is framed by the barriers model.

This study addresses several social constructs that require clarification to eliminate confusion and imprecision. These constructs are defined here and will be used throughout the study.

**Adult/young adult/nontraditional/returning student**: According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (Choi, 2002) these terms are notoriously difficult to define. Exceptions to any definition, and overlap among definitions, are common. However, for the purposes of this study, and guided by Choi (2002) and Kena et al. (2014), both of which are reports disseminated by the NCES, the following definitions will be used throughout this study:

**Adult student**: students above age 22

**Young adult student**: students aged 18-22
**Nontraditional student:** a student who has *one or more* of the following seven characteristics:

1. Does not enroll in formal education immediately after high school;
2. Is employed more than 35 hours per week;
3. Has dependent children;
4. Attends school part time;
5. Is financially independent from their parents;
6. Is a single parent; and/or
7. Did not complete high school.

It should be noted that nontraditional students can be of any age, and may have any combination of the seven characteristics. It should also be noted that non-traditional students may or may not have experienced an interruption in their schooling.

**Returning student:** a student who returns to formal education following an interruption in their schooling. Although this appears similar to nontraditional students, the emphasis here is on the interruption rather than characteristics of the student. For the purposes of this study, returning students have not participated in formal education for greater than four years. This four-year timeframe was chosen for two reasons: to ensure that participants in this study were outside of the young adult designation and to ensure that participants did not experience an interruption in their schooling due to the luxury of a gap year abroad or a similar type of experience. However, considering the immense size and diversity of the population of returning students, a narrowing of the population of interest for this study provided depth, nuance, and a strong foundation for future research.
Interrupted schooling: an individual who has not participated in formal education for a period of time has experienced interrupted schooling. Participants in this study have experienced an interruption in their schooling for greater than four years.

Formal educational system/schooling: for the purposes of this study, these terms apply to educational programs of coursework provided by institutions and programs that are accredited, or are recognized by the state as awarding professional certificates and degrees.

Higher education: institutions that are authorized to offer 2- and 4-year degrees as well as occupational and vocational programs (Kena et al., 2014, p. 230).

Community college: for the purposes of this study, community colleges include only those post-secondary educational institutions that offer 2-year associates’ degrees and professional certificate programs.

University: for the purposes of this study, university is defined as those institutions that offer a 4-year degree and higher.

Persistence/completion of a program of study: a student persists/completes a program of study when she/he earns sufficient credits to receive a professional certificate or a 2- or 4-year degree.

Diversity: the inclusion of individuals who are outside the majority population and under-represented in higher education. For the purposes of this study, this includes students who are outside of the 18- to 22-year-old, white, middle class, native English speaking, population.

Culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD): individuals who are outside the 18- to 22-year-old, white, middle class, native English speaking, population.

Cohort/learning community: a group of students who enter and proceed through a program of study together and who take the majority of their classes together.
Conceptual Framework

As discussed above in the problem statement, this population of returning students has been most often studied based on a “barriers and baggage” model that not only views returning students from a deficit perspective, but also focuses on the individual student in isolation rather than also accounting for the social environment in which returning students are situated. This study has counterbalanced that approach by developing and employing a new conceptual framework grounded in adult learning theory synthesized with a sociocultural perspective that positions returning adult students in her or his social and cultural context. This new framework, which the researcher is entitling the *social milieu*, is operationalized into three conceptual dimensions: social capital, the academic community, and habitus. Each of these three dimensions is defined briefly in the following diagram, and will be discussed more thoroughly in this section, following a discussion of the *social milieu* framework.

![Diagram showing the social milieu framework](image)

**Adult learning theory.**

The subjects of this study are adults who are returning to school following an interruption in their schooling. Because they are adults, adult learning theory appears on the surface to be a
logical and appropriate foundation upon which to build a conceptual framework. However, adult learning theory is often perceived as less theory and more a set of characteristics of adult learners (Illeris, 2011; Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2012). Cross (1981) explains that this difficulty in developing theory for adult learners is due to marketplace orientation of adult education, the lack of funding in academia that results in few scholars who could develop adult learning theory, and the multidisciplinary nature of the field (p. 110-111; see also Bonk and Kim, 1998). As a result, rather than theory, conceptual models have been developed to describe the characteristics of adult learning (Illeris, 2011) and how adults differ from children in their learning (Illeris, 2011; Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2012). A synthesis results in the following four major characteristics that separate adult learners from children:

- Adults are selective in their learning, take greater control of and responsibility for their own learning and do not necessarily rely on an instructor. Adults are not generally motivated to learn anything that does not interest them or that is not meaningful and important to their lives. Children’s learning, on the other hand, “is comprehensive and uncensored… the child places utter confidence in the adults around her” (Illeris, 2011, p. 49).

- Adults have greater and deeper life experiences upon which they can draw in their learning. “The comparatively richer life experiences of individual adults have been cited by nearly all writers as a key factor in differentiating adult learning from child learning.” (Merriam et al., 2012, p. 423).

- Adults face greater life events that require changes that in turn require learning (e.g. being laid off, losing a spouse to death or divorce, the birth of a child). “Many of the life events and transitions that adults face are peculiar to adulthood and require adjustments –
adjustments often made through systematic learning activity” (Merriam et al., 2012, p. 425).

- Adult learning in formal schooling environments is generally considered voluntary, while children’s learning in such an environment is generally considered compulsory. “Through home and school, children learn to be adults; going to school is a full-time job… Adults, in contrast, typically add the role of learner to other full-time roles and responsibilities” (Merriam et al., 2012, p. 428).

These four major differences described above, however, focus on the individual adult learner, and pay scant attention to the social context, the social milieu in which the adult student lives and functions.

This study extends adult learning theory by synthesizing it with a sociocultural perspective to address this deficiency in adult learning theory and to create a new social milieu framework. This social milieu framework focuses less on the characteristics of the adult students and more on the context in which these adult students are situated. A sociocultural perspective places individuals in their social and cultural context and foreground the relationship between society and individuals; in her synthesis of theories of Vygotsky, Gibson, Piaget, and Dewey, Rogoff (1993) states that “the individual is not an independent or separate entity, but is inherently bound to the environment” (p. 123). Bonk and Kim (1998) suggest a need to “examine the activity settings of adult learners” (p. 76, emphasis added) in order to more appropriately instruct adult students. Hansman (2001) adds “In contrast to psychological and behavioral understandings of learning, sociocultural models posit that learning is not something that happens, or is just inside the head, but instead is shaped by the context, culture, and tools in the
learning situation” (p. 45, emphasis added). Merriam (2008) begins her chapter with a vivid statement of why including a sociocultural perspective is important to adult learners:

> Whether we are assisting adults in preparing for the GED, coaching executives in a Fortune 500 company, or demonstrating a new agricultural technique in a developing country, the more we know about how adults learn the better we are able to structure learning activities that resonate with those adult learners with whom we work. (Merriam, 2008, p. 93)

Extending adult learning theory by synthesizing it with a sociocultural perspective provides this deeper, more nuanced understanding of how adults learn that is called for by these authors. This study takes as a point of departure the importance of extending adult learning theory to include a sociocultural perspective and recognizing the connection between the individual and her or his environment: the social milieu in which the individual lives and operates and from which she or he cannot be separated.

A sociocultural perspective, however, is not widely used in the study of adult students. “In most writing on adult learning, the sociocultural perspective has been widely neglected in favor of the predominant orientation to the individual learner and how to facilitate her or his learning” (Merriam et al., 2012, p. x). As the literature review in the following chapter will show, few studies of this population utilize a sociocultural perspective. The sociocultural perspective used in this study extends adult learning theory specifically into the arena of social forces with which the adult student must contend as she or he returns to school. This study, then, synthesizes a sociocultural perspective with adult learning theory to create a social milieu framework with three dimensions: social capital, the academic community, and habitus. This new framework supports a shift away from examining the individual student’s barriers and baggage toward a more nuanced examination of assets and advantages that returning students have at their disposal to support their return to school.
The social capital dimension.

The first dimension of the social milieu framework is social capital – the resources available to an individual through their membership in a social network. These individuals can be relatives, friends, acquaintances, neighbors, any member of the social network who can provide some type of support, be it encouragement, information about jobs, childcare, etc. Because social capital relies on the individual’s social network, it is an important component of the student’s social milieu and is central to this study.

Social capital is defined in various ways by different authors; Lappé and du Bois (1997) described social capital as “a wonderfully elastic term,” and Lin (2005) writes that “the notion of social capital has generated multiple definitions, conceptualizations and empirical measurements” (p. 1). Exemplifying the elasticity and multiple definitions of the term, Coleman (1988) defined social capital by its functions of “facilitating certain actions by actors” (p. S98) and discussed three forms of social capital that include obligations and expectations, information, and social norms. Adler and Kwon (2002) define social capital as “the resource available to actors as a function of their location in the structure of their social relations” (p. 18). Lin reiterates a clearer definition from an earlier work:

Social capital is defined as resources embedded in one’s social networks, resources that can be accessed or mobilized through ties in the networks (Lin 2001a: Chapter 2, and quoted in Lin, 2005, p. 4).

All of these definitions rely on foundational work of Bourdieu, who has written extensively on various types of symbolic capital – intangible assets and resources available to an individual.

Bourdieu (2008) expounds on several different types of capital – assets possessed by a person. He specifically addresses economic capital (e.g. financial assets) and cultural capital (e.g. diplomas and certifications). These types of capital are highly tangible. However, Bourdieu discusses social capital as a far less tangible network of personal connections that an individual
can deploy to provide access to economic capital. “The volume of the social capital possessed by a given agent thus depends on the size of the network of connections he can effectively mobilize and on the volume of the capital (economic, cultural or symbolic) possessed in his own right by each of those to whom he is connected” (Bourdieu, 2008, p. 51). Social capital, then, involves relationships among people in groups interacting with each other and providing support to each other. As such, social capital is essentially about individuals, groups, and organizations (Portes, 2000), which grounds it firmly in basic tenets of sociology. “The term social capital simply recaptures an insight present since the very beginnings of the discipline” (Portes, 2000, p. 44). However, Portes (2000) continues that the term social capital draws attention to the positive aspects of membership in a group and at the same time “calls attention to how such nonmonetary forms can be important sources of power and influence” (Portes, 2000, p. 44). Adler and Kwon (2000) add that social capital is grounded in “the idea that the actions of individuals and groups can be greatly facilitated by their membership in social networks, specifically by their direct and indirect links to other actors in these networks” (p. 90).

Lin (2005) extends these definitions by distinguishing between social networks and social capital, writing that “while social capital is contingent on social networks, they are not equivalent or interchangeable terms” (p. 11). Social networks are individuals to whom a person is connected, either intimately (e.g. a family member) or distantly (e.g. an acquaintance from church). Social capital is resources possessed by the social network that can be leveraged to gain other resources. Through this theoretical piece, Lin uses an example of a job search, with the social network being individuals known to the job searcher and social capital being job leads and advice that are provided by members of the social network. Social capital, then, is more than simply the sheer number of people to whom an individual is connected through a social network.
Social capital is not just *any* people, but people who have economic and cultural capital of their own and are *willing* and *able* to use that capital to support another individual. Social capital involves expectations of action and reciprocity among the group, as in “I’ll scratch your back, you scratch mine,” and is strongly predicated on trust among the group members (Adler & Kwon, 2000).

Because of the intangibility of networks, connections, power, and influence, social capital is often operationalized by one or more of its *aspects* or functions (Coleman, 1988; Robison, Schmid, & Siles, 2000). Social capital resides within a group rather than one individual, and operates between the members of the group (Adler & Kwon, 2000; Portes, 2000; Putnam, 2001), forming a network of ties between family, friends, friends of friends, and acquaintances. Social capital derives from these network ties and the network’s shared norms and beliefs (Adler & Kwon, 2000), and provides benefits to group members, including social solidarity, reciprocity, and trust (Adler & Kwon, 2000, Portes, 1998). Social capital can be used for such benefits as acquiring academic credentials (Coleman, 1998), increased economic goals (Robison, et al., 2002), and information on such necessities as jobs and childcare (Coleman, 1998; Robison, et al., 2002). In order for social capital to function, members of the group must be sufficiently sympathetic to each other to provide preferential treatment over other non-members of the group (Robison, et al., 2002). Robison et al. (2000) add that in addition to sympathy, social capital can result in economic services (e.g. individuals using each other for work), social services (e.g. care and regard to and from others), validation services (e.g. feedback and support to bolster others’ self-esteem), and information services (e.g. moral support and acceptance) (p. 9).

Although Bourdieu elaborated on the effect of social capital in providing or restricting access to economic resources, he devoted much less time to explicating various types of social
capital. Several studies (e.g. Briggs, 1998; Domínguez & Watkins, 2003) have focused on two different types of social capital: *social support* and *social leverage*. Social support networks support an individual in their daily lives, such as occasional childcare and rides to the grocery store, while social leverage networks support an individual in accessing opportunities to progress in their careers and education (Briggs, 1998; Domínguez & Watkins, 2003). In the study conducted by Domínguez and Watkins (2003), the lives of low-income African-American and Latina women showed the importance of social support networks from extended families and friends in the form of sharing housing and living and childcare expenses and providing emotional support and encouragement. The same study found that social leverage networks from co-workers and managers provided these women with information about job openings and employment training programs.

This begins to illuminate in greater depth the social capital to which returning students may have access but which have not been widely studied due to the lack of inclusion of a sociocultural perspective. Specifically, the extant literature’s focus on the individual student rather than on the social context in which the student lives is grounded firmly in adult learning theory but neglects a sociocultural perspective. This presents a need to examine the students’ social capital more deeply. The first dimension of the conceptual framework used in this study does just that: it illuminates how returning students leverage their social capital in their return to school following an interruption, and in doing so addresses this study’s second research question concerning the social network and social capital available to returning students. By including social capital as a dimension of this study’s conceptual framework, the returning students’ social capital can be operationalized into variables that can then be used for quantitative studies.
connecting these variables with persistence and attrition as well as for professional development workshops for program managers to support their students in leveraging their social capital.

The resource aspect of social capital and its mobilization, as discussed in Lin (2005) is central to this study’s inclusion of social capital in the conceptual framework. Rather than addressing only the social network available to returning students, this study is grounded in the concept of resources possessed by returning students’ social networks, not simply the network itself. Further, this study examines not simply the resources but the mobilization and leverage of the resources possessed by returning students’ social network.

**The habitus dimension.**

The second dimension of the conceptual model used in this study is habitus. Although habitus is often attributed to Bourdieu, it has a lengthy history. “The concept of habit (Greek hexis; Latin habitus) has long been recognized by philosophers as playing a central role in human intentional practical activity, in the acquisition and solidification of practical knowledge, and in the formation of character and selfhood” (Moran, 2011, p. 53). Moran begins his article with an historical survey that begins with Plato and continues through to Bourdieu, through which he argues that habitus can mean different things to different philosophers who “disagree about the amount of intelligent purposiveness and awareness involved” (Moran, 2011, p. 55).

Bourdieu (1990) defines habitus as systems of structured, durable, transposable dispositions (p. 53), developing over time and with repeated conditioning and inculcation. Habitus includes “dispositions to speak and act in certain ways, and schemes of perception that order individual perspectives along socially defined lines” (Hanks, 2005, p. 69). Husserl, however, describes habitus as “individual ways of behaving but include lasting decisions, values, and judgments made by an individual that have been adopted in the course of his or her life. In
this regard, Husserl says that the word ‘custom’ (Sitte) summarizes this idea of habitual action and behaviour in the social sphere” (Moran, 2011, p. 62).

The difference between these two views of habitus appear to hinge on consciousness and the social nature of habitus. Bourdieu (1991) writes that “the ‘choices’ of the habitus …are accomplished without consciousness or constraint, by virtue of the dispositions which, although they are unquestionably the product of social determinisms, are also constituted outside the spheres of consciousness and constraint” (p. 51). Bourdieu’s quotes surrounding choices implies that he believes that individuals have few true choices in life; that choices are limited by the social environment and social class to which the individual belongs. Husserl, on the other hand, “tries to find a way to account for the operation of habitus both at the individual and social level, and to document the transformations undergone in the move from one level to another” (Moran, 2011, p. 66). While habitus has a passive, non-cognitive nature (Moran, 2011, p. 62; Welton, 1999, p. 320), it also entails involvement of the ego (Moran, 2011, p. 62).

On the surface, these differences appear insurmountable, but in actuality they point to the subtle differences in the worldviews of a social theoretician and a philosopher; they are examining the same thing from different angles. While Bourdieu explains, Husserl identifies and describes (Moran, 2011, p. 70). Despite this differences in worldview, both Husserl and Bourdieu recognize not only society’s contributions to habitus, but they both also recognize the endurance of habitus. Husserl describes the habitus as “abiding” (Welton, 1999, p. 308), while Bourdieu (1977) uses “durable” (p. 72). However, abiding and durable do not mean static. Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) write of an irreversible disposition (i.e. habitus) as “a disposition which cannot itself be repressed or transformed except by an irreversible process producing in turn a new irreversible disposition.” (p. 42). Husserl writes of the dynamism of the self and
habituation, and that an individual “acquires the habitus of others” (Moran, 2011, p. 66).

Although neither are explicit in their writings, it is clear that they both ascribe a dynamism to

habitus that allows for change. And that change occurs in a social and cultural context.

The concept of habitus has only recently become used in educational research, and much

of the research that uses habitus as part of its conceptual framework studies students from low-

income families attending elite universities (e.g. Lee & Kramer, 2013; Lehmann, 2013). These

studies have operationalized habitus and ways in which it can be transformed by education, ways

that include a change from fear to confidence, from feeling of disempowerment to

empowerment, from self-doubt to pride, from changes in lifestyle, expectations, possibilities, and

plans for the future. Habitus can also include factors such as changes in tastes and beliefs, such

as food, music, political views (Lehmann, 2013). The literature addresses these changes in tastes

and beliefs rather directly as a loss of connection and a cause of tension and conflict between the

student and their homes, families and old friends. Lee and Kramer (2013) use as one of the sub-

headings the words “On becoming a snob” (p. 26); two of their interview subjects “describe a

new difficulty communicating with friends and family because their interests, ideologies, and

expectations have changed” (p. 26). One of Lehmann’s (2013) interview subjects

insists that she has not become better than her parents, she has nonetheless become less

accepting of their lives and their views. This disruption cuts both ways, as her comments

suggest a relationship in which neither no longer understands or relates to the other (p. 9).

It should be noted that Lehmann (2013) uses some problematic expressions, such as family and

former friends being “left behind” (p. 11) and “(w)ithout a doubt, outgrowing one’s parents and

teenage peer group is a positive development toward independent adulthood” (p. 11). Use of

these terms projects a deficit view of the families and friends of low-income students. Education,

particularly a college education, changes the habitus of every student (Pascarella & Terenzini,

2005), not only the habitus of low income students in elite universities.
Because of the paucity of research that uses habitus at all, let alone in a positive way, habitus is incorporated into this study as part of the conceptual framework as a means of extending the research into a new and constructive direction. The second dimension of the conceptual framework used in this study illuminates how returning students leverage the dynamism of the habitus in opposition to the durability of the habitus as they return to the educational system and navigate the new and unfamiliar academic community that they are entering.

**The academic community dimension.**

The academic community dimension of the conceptual framework illuminates how adult returning students navigate the academic environment that may be unfamiliar to them. Academia has its own practices and requires students to adopt those practices and adhere to them as requirements for successful attainment of academic goals. How students learn, or don’t learn, the practices required of the academic community for student success, and how this learning/non-learning changes the students, is addressed by this third dimension of the conceptual framework used in this study.

Adult learning theory makes clear that adult returning students add the job of student to their preexisting jobs in the workplace and in their home (Illeris, 2011; Merriam, 2011). However, returning to school means more than simply taking on another job; it means entering an environment, a community of practice, with which returning students may be unfamiliar. *Communities of practice* are social groups that develop over time for the continual activity toward common goals or purposes (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). By extension, individuals engage in learning through participating in a community of practice: learning as social participation.
Participation here refers not just to local events of engagement in certain activities with certain people, but to a more encompassing process of being active participants in the practices of social communities and constructing identities in relation to these communities…Such participation shapes not only what we do, but also who we are and how we interpret what we do (Wenger, 1998, p. 4).

As participants enter the community of practice, they often do so on the margins, reaching full participation as their skills and experiences grow, moving from peripheral participation into full membership (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Lave and Wenger (1991), however, do not directly address the idea that an individual’s participation may be contested by the community of practice. Lea (2005) addresses this contestation in higher education “when participants are excluded from full participation in the practices of a community; for example, where students struggle to engage in the unfamiliar discourses or literacy practices of the academy” (p. 184).

This contestation and challenge may be particularly profound for returning adults who have been outside of the educational system for lengthy periods. O’Donnell and Tobbell (2007) write

Adult students are potentially more vulnerable to difficulties in the management of these transitions because of their (often) minority status in HE, because they may have little recent experience of formal education, and because they may have additional life pressures out of university (p. 313).

Increased use of technology, such as electronic dropboxes for submitting assignments or graphing calculators, may present challenges to participation in the community of practice. This may be particularly true if the students had been tracked in high school such that they had little access to these practices before returning to school.

It should be noted that the participants of this study are members of a cohort in a Career Ladder program – a formal preservice teacher preparation program. They all have a specific goal of attaining an associate’s degree in education, and some aspire to transfer to a 4-year university to complete a BA and earn a teaching license. They are participating in this endeavor for a
sustained period. They take many, but not all, of their classes together, and some may and some may not study together. These factors support viewing them as participants in a community of practice. In particular, their inclusion as members of a cohort strengthens this view. Cohort models have been found to result in a number of positive benefits to the students, including reduced attrition, greater reported satisfaction and support systems, and a sense of community for students (Barab, Barnett, & Squire, 2002; Beck & Kosnik, 2001; Sumson & Patterson, 2004).

However, a community of practice may not always be so benign; institutional practices, social and cultural contexts, and other members of the community of practice can present an environment that is hostile to the returning student (Barab, Barnett, & Squire, 2002; Bernal Sati 2005; Sumson & Patterson, 2004) rather than an environment that supports the returning student. This may occur regardless of whether the student is a member of a cohort or not. In fact, it is possible that tensions and hostility can exist within cohorts (Greenlee & Karanxha, 2010; Sapon-Shevin & Chandler-Olcott, 2001). Greenlee and Karanxha (2010) found little effect between cohort and non-cohort groups in the areas of participation, intergroup communication and collaboration, and senses of influence and empowerment.

This third dimension, then, views returning students’ experiences through a lens of the community of practice of the academy, and how that community may or may not contest their acceptance as full members rather than remaining as peripheral participants.
Chapter 2

Literature Review

Despite the apparent growth in the population of adults returning to school following an interruption in their schooling, current research on this specific population is scant, and is often conflated with “adult students” or “non-traditional students.” Furthermore, the little research that does exist relies on a model of barriers and baggage: that this population faces so many barriers and carries so much baggage holding them back that a return to school and completion of a program of study is unachievable. This literature review discusses how returning students have been studied, and includes studies that have conflated adult, non-traditional, and returning students to provide context and a point of departure for the findings and discussion. This literature review also exposes gaps that this study fills.

This literature review is organized first by the point in which individuals leave the educational system, important because of the impact these reasons can have on the return to school. Boylan and Renzulli (2014) analyzed data from the Education Longitudinal Study (ELS:2002) and found that students’ reasons for leaving high school affected their return to school. “Two reasons relating to the school stand out as particularly influential on reengagement behavior: not getting along with your teachers or other students and not feeling like you fit in or belong” (p. 18). They add that these findings suggest that “school is an unwelcoming place for some students” (p. 18), which in turn impacts the students’ return. They further found that students who left school for reasons such as supporting the family or becoming pregnant were less likely to return and more likely to earn a GED than students who left school for other reasons. This part of the literature review illuminates how returning students have been studied in the past in terms of their attrition from the educational system. The participants in this study
have all left the educational system at some point, and are now returning. Their attrition is an important part of this study, and where their attrition fits in the literature is an important component of this study and guided this part of the literature review.

Following this review of attrition is a review of the research surrounding motives for a return to school. Next, the research surrounding the experiences of returning students is reviewed, first by their social capital, then by the academic environment into which they are entering. Finally, because the participants in this study are enrolled in a structured program for para-educators, a review of this literature is included. Many of the studies referred to in this literature review are based on national longitudinal dataset, and are identified as such. These longitudinal datasets are collected and maintained by the U.S. Department of Education’s National Center for Educational Statistics. The dataset most widely used in studies in this literature review is the Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study (BPS), which surveyed three cohorts of students at the beginning of their postsecondary education and for several years following. The 1990 cohort was resurveyed in 1992 and 1994; the 1996 cohort was resurveyed in 1998 and 2001; the 2004 cohort was resurveyed in 2006 and 2009. A new cohort started in 2012 and will be resurveyed in 2014 and 2017. Reports and studies using data from BPS 2012 have not yet been released to the public; therefore, studies released recently are likely to have used earlier data. For these reasons, the sources for tables throughout this literature review appear below each table, and dates of the data appear clearly at the top.

**Attrition from the educational system**

Returning students have at some point left the educational system. This section of the literature review focuses on this attrition, organized by various places in the educational system.
High school attrition.

The number of students who leave high school before graduation has been declining but remains high, particularly for low income students and students of color. Analysis of national datasets (the Current Population Survey and the American Community Survey) show that the high school attrition rate 7% in 2012 (Kena et al., 2014, p. 142), representing a decrease from 12% in 1990. These data represent 16- to 24-year-olds who had attained neither a high school diploma nor a GED and were not enrolled in school.

Table 1

| High school attrition by gender, race/ethnicity, and income, 1990 and 2012. |
|---------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|
|                                 | 1990 attrition rate | 2012 attrition rate |
| Sex                             |                  |                  |
| Males                           | 12%              | 7%               |
| Females                         | 12%              | 6%               |
| Race/ethnicity                  |                  |                  |
| White                           | 9%               | 4%               |
| Black                           | 13%              | 8%               |
| Hispanic                        | 32%              | 13%              |
| Income                          |                  |                  |
| Lowest quartile                 | 24%              | 12%              |
| Middle quartile                 | 15%              | 9%               |
| High middle quartile            | 9%               | 4%               |
| Highest quartile                | ~1%              | ~1%              |

Source: Kena et al., 2014, pgs. 142 – 144

Disaggregating these data show that despite decreases in attrition rates for all genders, race/ethnicity, and income, disparities remain. White student attrition is half that of Black students and a third of Hispanic students; attrition for students in the two highest income quartiles is a quarter that of students in the lowest two quartiles. Kena et al. (2014) augmented these data by using only the American Community Survey and further disaggregating these data based on whether the individual had been born inside or outside the United States.
Table 2

**High school attrition rates by race/ethnicity and nativity**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race/ethnicity</th>
<th>Born inside the US</th>
<th>Born outside the US</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pacific Islander</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native American/Alaska Native</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>18%‡</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two or more races</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Kena et al. 2014, p. 147

‡ Interpret data with caution. The coefficient of variation (CV) for this estimate is between 30 and 50 percent. The authors do not provide a reason for this, although the typical explanation is a small sample size.

The authors did not disaggregate their data by whether English was a first or additional language for returning students. Indeed, according to 2000 Census data analyzed by Capps et al. (2005) 77% of English learners in grades PreK – 5th and 56% of English learners in grades 6 – 12 were born inside the United States (p. 17). This apparent conflation between race/ethnicity and linguistic diversity continues throughout the extant literature, and constitutes a significant gap in the research, which will be addressed in the conclusion at the end of this chapter.

The research on high school attrition does illuminate several factors that are correlated with attrition. It should be noted that the research surrounding high school attrition is large and complex, often relying on intricate psychological models, quantitative data from large-scale longitudinal databases, and/or diverse theoretical bases. This section of the literature review is therefore limited to representative studies published since 2005.

A number of studies point to student disengagement from school as one factor contributing to attrition, with engagement generally defined in the literature as “comprised of participatory behavior and some affective component” (Reschly & Christenson, 2012, p. 11).
Henry, Knight, and Thornberry (2012) analyzed quantitative data collected from almost 1,000 high school students in New York found that students with a high level of disengagement were more likely to leave high school than those with low scores. In a departure from the quantitative literature, Finn and Zimmer (2012) reviewed the research literature surrounding student engagement and found a connection between higher engagement and school and classroom practices. These practices include teacher warmth and supportiveness, instructional practices such as cooperative learning and inquiry-based instruction, smaller schools, safety of the school environment, and clear and fair disciplinary practices (p. 105-106). Bowers and Sprott (2012) extended those data by examining data from the Educational Longitudinal Survey (ELS:2002), conducted by NCES, and finding that the lack of these factors contributed to leaving school, that a third of those leaving school “indicated that they did not like school, that teachers were not as interested in them, that school rules were neither fair nor equally applied, and that they found their courses somewhat uninteresting and unchallenging” (p. 136).

The safety of the school environment comprises several factors, one of which is pervasive teasing and bullying (PTB). This topic has been widely studied, and the connection between PTB and high school attrition has recently been empirically established. Cornell, Gregory, Huang, and Fan (2013) analyzed survey data of 9th grade students and teachers from 276 high schools throughout Virginia concerning school climate and safety. They found a statistically significant correlation between PTB and high school attrition, that “the level of teasing and bullying reported by both ninth-grade students and teachers was predictive of cumulative dropout counts over 4 years after the cohort reached 12th grade” (p. 145). Schools reporting PTB one standard deviation below the mean compared to schools reporting PTB one standard deviation above the mean showed attrition rates of 5.7% vs 10.2% respectively. The authors further postulate that a
“pervasive climate of peer victimization may have a general effect on all students and not simply on those who are the immediate targets of aggression, so that there may be a schoolwide impact on dropout rates” (p. 139).

School climate and safety is also related to school disciplinary practices, which can also impact attrition. Marchbanks et al. (2013) analyzed three years of data from student records collected and maintained by the state of Texas, and found that those students who experienced at least one episode of exclusionary discipline (e.g. in-school suspension, out of school suspension, etc.) were 23.5% more likely to leave high school (p. 64). The authors also found that students of color were disproportionately represented in the numbers of students experiencing exclusionary discipline: 75% of African American and 65% of Hispanic students vs. 49% of White students (p. 62).

Students who have been labeled with a disability are also more likely to leave high school. Kent et al. (2011) analyzed quantitative data from a longitudinal study of students in Pittsburgh with and without an ADHD diagnosis, and found that students diagnosed with ADHD were eight times more likely to leave high school than students without such a diagnosis. Zablocki and Krezmien (2013) analyzed quantitative data from the National Longitudinal and Transitional Study 2 database and found that students who had been labeled as emotionally and behaviorally disabled (EBD) were significantly more likely to leave high school than those without such a label. They add, however, that the interrelationship between an EBD label and other factors such as exclusionary suspension, grades, and grade retention could be mediating factors in their findings.

These studies all reflect factors internal to the school that push students out – student engagement, instructional practices, disciplinary practices, etc. Bradley and Renzulli (2011) add
to these studies by analyzing data from the Educational Longitudinal Survey (ELS:2002), conducted by NCES, and found an additional category of reasons for leaving high school before completion. They found that students may be pushed out by factors external to the school, such as a need such as having to work to support the family. They found further that Latino students were more likely than White students to be pushed out, even after controlling for socioeconomic status (p. 539). Their data show that 31% of Latinos and 30% of Latinas left school to support their families compared to 7.8% of White males and 14.6% of White females (p. 527).

**High school to college attrition.**

A review of the literature surrounding attrition reveals systemic issues that push diverse students out of the educational system once they have finished high school, preventing them from immediate matriculation to college. Immediate matriculation to college is important because delay in matriculation is highly correlated with non-completion of a degree (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Kena et al. (2014) analyzed national longitudinal data to examine matriculation directly from high school to college. Table 3 below shows these data as percentages of students who transitioned to college directly after graduating from high school by race/ethnicity and by family income. These data show a clear disparity in matriculation by family income: low income students matriculate at a lower rate than do high income students (52% vs. 81% respectively).

**Table 3**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>2-year institutions</th>
<th>4-year institutions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Further, it appears from these data that White, Black, and Hispanic students matriculate directly from high school at similar rates, 67%, 62% and 69% respectively. In fact, according to these data more Hispanic students matriculated directly to college than did White students (69% and 67% respectively). However, these data are not disaggregated by whether the receiving institution is a 2-year or a 4-year institution. This is unfortunate; without disaggregation between 2-year and 4-year institutions is it difficult to determine if disparities of race/ethnicity and/or income exist. A search for disaggregated data revealed little that is available to the public. As shown in Table 4 below, enrollment in different institutions is vastly different when viewed by race/ethnicity and income. However, Table 4 shows percent enrollments of all students, those who matriculated directly from high school as well as returning students, so the data in Table 4 cannot be synthesized with the data in Table 3. Nevertheless, the disparities in enrollments disaggregated by race/ethnicity and income shown in Table 4, suggest the unlikelihood that disparities in the receiving institution do not exist.
Table 4

Percent distribution of total enrollments by race/ethnicity for 2-year and 4-year institutions, Fall, 2012

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Total Public</th>
<th>Private non-profit Public</th>
<th>Private for-profit Public</th>
<th>2-year institutions Public</th>
<th>Private non-profit Private for-profit</th>
<th>4-year institutions Public</th>
<th>Private non-profit Private for-profit</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pacific Islander</td>
<td>&lt;1%</td>
<td>&lt;1%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>&lt;1%</td>
<td>&lt;1%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>&lt;1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native American/Alaska Native</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>&lt;1%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two or more</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: numbers may not add to 100% due to rounding.

As these data show, students of color are more likely to be enrolled in a 2-year institution than in a 4-year institution; 55% of students enrolled in public 2-year institutions are White while 45% are students of color. In contrast, 63% of students enrolled in public 4-year institutions are White while 37% are students of color. Disparities become more marked when examining enrollments in for-profit schools; 48% of students enrolled in for-profit institutions are White while 52% are students of color.

Tracking.

There are numerous reasons suggested for this discrepancy. One systemic issue is the tracking in high school of students of color and first-generation students away from advanced-level courses, such as AP and honor-level classes, which in turn limits their access to 4-year
colleges. Without this advanced coursework, students’ chances of being admitted to a 4-year college are greatly reduced due to the heavy weight admissions committees place on AP coursework (Gándara & Contreras, 2009). Tracking began in US public schools early on, and accelerated in the 1960’s in response to the federal government’s perceived need to promote science and technology in response to national security during the Cold War (Walker & Pearsall, 2012). Students identified through test scores and grades as gifted and talented were placed into advanced-level classes, particularly science and math. This ability grouping, or tracking, of students based on perceived academic ability has continued to the present day; proponent view it as a means to facilitate instruction by making classes more homogeneous, resulting in advanced students not becoming bored when they are held back by slower students (Ansalone, 2009). Since that time, researchers and practitioners alike have realized that low-income students and students of color have been underrepresented in these advanced-level classes, and that tracking perpetuates significant educational inequities (Ansalone, 2009).

Tracking is not the only reason for the underrepresentation of students of color in advanced-level classes. Walker and Pearsall (2012) conducted focus group interviews with four Latino students and seven of their parents to identify additional reasons for their not enrolling in AP classes. They found three of the four students were “afraid on not doing well in AP courses,” and two said that they feel uncomfortable in AP classes, “being the only Brown kid in class” (p. 18). However, tracking is not always the issue; in many school, AP classes are often not offered at all or in only a very limited selection. According to statistics from NCES, 69% of US public high schools report offering AP and/or International Baccalaureate classes, leaving 21% without such advanced-level course offerings (Thomas, Marken, Gray, & Lewis, 2013).
Financial aid.

Although lack of financial resources for college is frequently cited as a reason for not going to college, a lack of knowledge and information about financial aid (e.g. scholarships and grants) can also be a contributing factor. Zarate and Pachon (2006) reported data collected from a survey of 400 18-24 year old Latino individuals in California and found that 15% of college students and 42% of students not in college could not name any source of financial aid. Further, 39% of all respondents reported misperceptions that grants required high grades and therefore they did not apply, while over half mistakenly thought that the student had to be a US citizen to apply for financial aid (p. 4). In response to this, Bettinger, Long, Oreopoulos, and Sanbonmatsu (2012) reported on a randomized field experiment in which tax professionals offered FAFSA assistance to low-income adults who were initially seeking help completing tax forms. They found that this FAFSA assistance resulted in statistically significant increases in college enrollment and receive aid. This effect applied not only to high school students, but to adults who had been out of school for some time; enrollment rates for adults out of high school with no previous college attendance increased 16% (p. 1207). Drotos and Cilesiz (2014) conducted classroom observations and interviewed 76 students from six high-poverty urban high schools and found that “When parents do not file their federal income taxes properly or keep appropriate documentation, it may hinder the student’s financial aid application” (p. 16). Drotoz and Cilesiz (2014) also mentioned other financial demands, such as the $100 application fees charged by many 4-year colleges.

Teachers and counselors as social capital.

Students who are the first in their families to apply to college may not be able to rely on parents or other family members for advice, and must instead rely on others in their school.
Bryan, Holcomb-McCoy, Moore-Thomas, and Day-Vines (2009) examined the role played by high school counseling in students’ applying to college. They analyzed data from the Educational Longitudinal Study (ELS:2002) and found students’ perceptions of their counselor’s expectations for them impacted their contacting their counselor for college information, that “students who believed that the counselor had any other expectation for them other than college were less likely to report student-counselor contact for college information” (p. 287). A subsequent study (Bryan, Moore-Thomas, Day-Vines, & Holcomb-McCoy, 2011), found that students who contacted their high school counselor for college information were more likely to apply to college than were students who did not contact their counselor.

McKillip, Rawls, and Barry (2012) conducted a review of the literature surrounding the role of high school counselors on students’ applications to college, and found that a shifting role of counselors from strictly college-going information to increased amounts of administrative and mental health counseling, budgeting policies that reduced the number of counselors and thereby increased their case load, lack of pre-service preparation for their jobs, lack of collaboration between counselors and teachers, and lack of information about colleges that counselors and teachers share with students all contributed to a lack of effective counseling for students.

Further, Tierney and Hallett (2012) conducted and analyzed interviews with 123 homeless youth. They found access to college was limited for these youth because their frequent moves prevented them from developing the relationships they needed to transition to college. Drotos and Ciletsiz (2014) echoed this finding, stating that “Students who spend more years in the same school are able to build relationships with school staff. It is an asset to work with teachers who already are aware of some of the student’s strengths and weaknesses” (p. 11). School staff and teachers provided school-based social capital that students can leverage to apply
and transition to college; these assets are not available to students who move from school to school frequently during a school year.

Similarly, Walker and Pearsall (2012) found that three of their four focus group Latino students “identified teacher encouragement and school and college outreach as particularly significant in influencing Latino student decisions regarding college aspirations and AP course enrollment” (p. 18).

Lack of information has important consequences. Drotos and Cilesiz (2014) found that many of students in their study did not understand the difference between a 2-year college, a 4-year college, and a technical school, were not familiar with admissions requirements, and were not familiar with the connection between specific jobs and the amount/type of education required to attain that job (p. 14). “Students may face barriers to 4-year college enrollment because they have difficulty managing the process of college application and miss important steps. Because they lacked an understanding of the enrollment process, students also failed to meet important deadlines in the application process” (p. 15).

**Parents and family role models as social capital.**

The lack of information provided by school counselors is sometimes negated by other role models in the students’ lives. Walker and Pearsall (2012) found that 4 of the 7 focus group parents identified positive role models, such as other adults in the students’ lives, encouraged their students to enroll in the AP classes that support acceptance into college. Ceja (2006) interviewed 20 first-generation Chicana students and found that returning students’ parents were unfamiliar with the college application process and therefore could not provide information. However, the parents could and did provide vital emotional support and encouragement, important to returning students because “even though it did not entail concrete information about
college, it did represent the strong value their parents had always placed on getting a college education” (p. 93). Ceja further found that older siblings who had already transitioned to college served as important role models for their younger siblings in navigating the application process.

These reasons contribute to explaining some of the disparity in diverse students reduced rate of transitioning directly to college. Table 3 above shows percentages of students who transitioned to college directly after graduating from high school by race and by family income; African-American, Latina/o, and low income students are far less likely to transition directly to college than are white and high income students. The implications are profound; delaying this transition to college is highly correlated with non-completion of a degree (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

**Community college attrition.**

Many students begin their college studies at the community college level, either directly from high school or following an interruption in schooling. Additionally, national data show that community colleges “enroll a diverse group of students, with various reasons for going to college, and have larger percentages of nontraditional, low-income, and minority students than 4-year colleges and universities” (Provasnik & Planty, 2008, p. iii). Horn and Nevill (2006), who also analyzed national data, found that “Compared with students attending 4-year colleges and universities, community college students are more likely to be older, female, and from low-income families and are less likely to be White” (p. 9). Community college students are also more likely to be single parents; 17.2% of community college students are single parents compared to 6.3% of students in 4-year institutions (Provasnik & Planty, 2008, p. 40). The following table shows community college student demographics compared to 4-year public institution student demographics, and show a clear disparity of race/ethnicity, gender, and family structure between these two types of institutions.
Table 5

Enrollments in public 2-year and 4-year institutions by selected demographics, 2003-4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Public 2-year institution</th>
<th>Public 4-year institution</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>40.9</td>
<td>45.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>59.1</td>
<td>54.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race/ethnicity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>59.9</td>
<td>70.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>15.3</td>
<td>10.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>14.4</td>
<td>8.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>5.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indian/Alaska Native</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pacific Islander</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than one race</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total students of color</td>
<td>40.1</td>
<td>29.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18 or younger</td>
<td>9.3</td>
<td>10.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19–23</td>
<td>37.7</td>
<td>60.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24–29</td>
<td>18.2</td>
<td>15.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30–39</td>
<td>17.5</td>
<td>7.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40 or older</td>
<td>17.3</td>
<td>5.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital status</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not married</td>
<td>70.4</td>
<td>85.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>27.3</td>
<td>13.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Separated</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single parent</td>
<td>17.2</td>
<td>6.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents’ highest level of education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school or less</td>
<td>40.8</td>
<td>26.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some postsecondary education</td>
<td>27.1</td>
<td>22.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor’s degree or higher</td>
<td>32.1</td>
<td>50.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial dependency</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dependent students</td>
<td>38.8</td>
<td>65.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent students</td>
<td>61.2</td>
<td>34.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Provasnik and Planty (2008). Table SA-9, pg. 40

According to these data, which are based on the NCES’ National Postsecondary Student Aid Study from 2004, 59.9% of community college students are White compared to 40.1% of community college students who are students of color. In contrast, in 4-year public institutions, 70.2% of students are White and 29.8% are students of color. Financial dependence on parents
shows a dramatic difference; more than 61% of community college students are financially independent from their parents, while less than 35% of public 4-year institution students are independents. These data are almost completely reversed for financial dependence: more than 38% of community college students and over 65% of 4-year institution students are financially dependent on their parents. The data do not disaggregate students by linguistic diversity, so it is difficult to illuminate the percentages of students for whom English is a first or additional language.

Although community colleges serve a diverse population, attrition from these colleges remains high. Crisp and Nora (2010) analyzed data from NCES’s Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study with a focus on Latina/o students. They found predictors for attrition that included delaying enrollment directly from high school, finances, part-time enrollment (p. 189-190).

Additional factors contributing to attrition appear in the literature as well. One is the correlation between being a non-white middle-class student and being placed into remedial coursework. Although community colleges are generally open-access, most administer a placement exam that can place students into as many as three semesters of remedial reading, writing, and math before students can enroll in college-level coursework. Non-white middle class students are disproportionately represented in remedial courses; 18.0% of White students enrolled in one or more remedial course in 2007-2008 compared to 24.7% and 23.3% of African-American and Latina/o students respectively (Aud, Fox, & KewalRamani, 2010, table A-22.1). Furthermore, placement into remedial coursework delays completion because these classes do not count toward a degree but still cost tuition and fees for the student. Additionally, remedial coursework has been found to have little benefit; a longitudinal quantitative analysis of Texas K-
16 data was found to “no significant positive effects of remediation on academic or labor market outcomes” (Martorell & McFarlin, 2011, p. 449). Additionally, remedial coursework is highly correlated with non-completion of a degree; data from national longitudinal datasets show that “students enrolled in remediation are less likely to earn a postsecondary degree or certificate” (Wirt et al., 2004, p. 63).

An additional factor in community college attrition is the lack of advisors, counselors, and instructors despite the importance of these individuals. Ryan (2013) compared two groups of students in 14 sections of a freshman seminar at a community college, and found that students who received intensive advising from instructors were more likely to continue their education and had higher grades than students who did not receive such advising. Aligning with these findings, Tovar (2014) surveyed 394 Latina/o students enrolled in a community college, and found that more frequent meetings between faculty and students outside of class resulted in higher GPAs for the students. Further, they found that student participation in support programs that included meetings with counselors increased both GPA and intent to complete a program of study. Karp (2011) conducted a review of the literature surrounding non-academic support in community colleges, and found that creating spaces for students to develop meaningful social relationships with instructors and other students contributed to students’ integration into the academic environment and their receiving information, which then contributes to completing a program of study. These spaces can include learning communities, enhanced advising, and mentors.

However, the high use of part-time adjunct faculty in community colleges may impact this advising function. Jacoby (2006) analyzed national data and found a strong correlation between part-time faculty and student graduation, that “increases in the ratio of part-time faculty
at community colleges have a highly significant and negative impact upon graduation rates” (p. 1092). This may be due to adjunct faculty being less available to students outside of class, using less-effective instructional techniques, having fewer campus resources (e.g. phones, mailboxes), and being paid substantially less than full time faculty (p. 1085). The use of adjunct faculty in community colleges has been rising due to budget constraints, yet clearly impacts student outcomes.

**Transfer from 2-year to 4-year college.**

Many students enter higher education through the community college system, with the intent to transfer to a 4-year university. The program in which the participants in this study are enrolled encourages and supports student transfer to local 4-year institutions following their completion of an associate’s degree. This transfer function is an important pathway to college for low-income students and students of color, particularly considering the overrepresentation of the population of non-traditional students in community colleges as shown above in Table 5.

Defining *transfer* is notoriously difficult due to the fact that individuals often return to the educational system many years after leaving and are therefore not captured by national longitudinal datasets. Students may transfer several times before earning a credential, and they may have earned credits that are not accepted by the receiving institution. Many community college students do not intend to transfer, and are attending community college to learn a trade or for personal enrichment. Students may start in a 4-year institution and transfer to a 2-year community college, which is seldom captured in the data. Further, unlike K12 students, enrollments for postsecondary students are not followed over lengthy periods of time. Finally, there are some community colleges that do offer bachelor’s degrees, so the data that report students who begin in a community college and then earn a bachelor’s are not completely indicative of transfer. Therefore, recent statistics from national longitudinal datasets are difficult
to locate, difficult to interpret, and represent data from a variety of different national longitudinal datasets containing data collected in different years. Given the challenges of locating and interpreting current data, the following review of the literature synthesizes the available data for illustrative purposes.

According to national longitudinal data analyzed by Horn and Neville (2006), 36% of students who enrolled in community colleges in the 2003-2004 academic year did so with the intent to transfer to a 4-year college and earn a BA. However, of students who intend to transfer, few actually do, and fewer persist and earn a BA. National data of students enrolled in the academic year 2003-4 analyzed by Horn and Weko (2009) show that only 11% of those intending to transfer to a public 4-year institutions actually did so within three years (p. 27). Similar results were found by Skomsvold, Radford, and Berkner (2011, Table 6.0-B). Their analysis of students enrolled in the academic year 2003-4 show that 17.1% of students enrolled in a public 2-year institution transferred to a public 4-year institution within six years. However, neither Skomsvold, Radford, and Berkner (2011) nor Horn and Weko (2009) disaggregate these data by gender, race/ethnicity, or any other demographic. Horn and Skomvold (2011) analyzed and disaggregated their data from national datasets, albeit into separate tables, which are synthesized below.
Table 6

Transfer from 2-year to 4-year. Percentages of students who intended to transfer from a 2-year to a 4-year institution, students who did transfer, and students who completed a BA within five or six years, by selected demographics.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Intended goal to earn a BA or above*</th>
<th>Transferred to a 4-year institution***</th>
<th>Earned a BA within 5 years (by 2008)**</th>
<th>Earned a BA within 6 years (by 2009)****</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All students</td>
<td>81.4</td>
<td>21.1</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>11.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>83.6</td>
<td>21.8</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>11.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>79.7</td>
<td>20.5</td>
<td>6.4</td>
<td>12.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race/ethnicity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>79.1</td>
<td>23.0</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>13.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>83.0</td>
<td>16.0</td>
<td>3.7‡</td>
<td>6.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>85.4</td>
<td>15.9</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>8.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian/Pacific Islander</td>
<td>88.8</td>
<td>31.6</td>
<td>9.2‡</td>
<td>18.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indian/Alaska Native</td>
<td>55.5</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>‡</td>
<td>‡</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lowest 25 percent</td>
<td>84.2</td>
<td>21.5</td>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>10.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle 50 percent</td>
<td>82.3</td>
<td>22.0</td>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>12.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highest 25%</td>
<td>76.8</td>
<td>18.7</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>10.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: Horn and Skomvold (2011). Tables 1-A, 2-A, 3-A, and 5-A

Note: ‡ Interpret data with caution. Estimate is unstable because the standard error represents more than 30 percent of the estimate. The authors did not provide a reason for this.

‡ Reporting standards not met, generally due to too little data reported

*Table 1-A
**Table 2-A
***Table 3-A
****Table 5-A

Horn and Skomvold’s (2011) data are drawn from the three cohorts tracked in the Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Studies (BPS). The three cohorts were tracked from 1990–94, 1996–2001, and 2004–09. The data in the table above are for the 2004–2009 cohort. This cohort was not tracked after 2009; it is therefore not known if more students transferred and/or completed a BA after that date. However, these data illuminate disparities in the transfer function. Overall, the goal of 81.4% students enrolled in a community college was to earn a BA, yet only 21.1% had transferred to a 4-year institution and only 11.6% had earned a BA within six
years of starting. Disaggregating the data shows greater disparities; Black, Hispanic, and Native American students are less likely to transfer to a 4-year institution than are White and Asian/Pacific Islander students.

Dowd and Melguizo (2008) further analyzed statistics from two national longitudinal studies that included high school graduates from 1982 and 1992, and found that “transfer access has not improved for poor students, who are severely underrepresented among the transfer cohorts in both decades” (p. 380). They found instead that more wealthy students transferred than did lower-income students, which they said suggests that policies aimed at increasing the transfer function were “ineffective in reducing socioeconomic inequities in transfer access for the poorest students, whom many consider the primary constituency of the community college” (p. 393). Further, Wassmer, Moore, and Shulock (2004) examined 3-year and 6-year transfer rates at 108 community colleges in California, and found that those with higher proportions of African-American and Latino students had the lower transfer rates (p. 664).

Based on these studies, it becomes clear that the transfer function is not necessarily functioning as intended, with student of color transferring at lower rates than White students. Few studies examine reasons for this disparity. One such reason could be the environment toward transfer students in the receiving 4-year institutions. In their theoretical article, Jain, Herrera, Bernal, and Solórzano (2011) point to the low transfer rates in California for students of color, propose a framework to build a “transfer-receptive culture” for 4-year institutions. The authors “define a transfer receptive culture as an institutional commitment by a four-year college or university to provide the support needed for students to transfer successfully—that is, to navigate the community college, take the appropriate coursework, apply, enroll, and successfully earn a baccalaureate degree in a timely manner” (p. 257). Their framework includes not only academic
and financial resources but also less-tangible factors such as recognizing the funds of knowledge and family that students bring to campus and recognizing that transfer students are fundamentally different from students who matriculate directly from high school (p. 258). The fact that they are proposing this model implies that individual 4-year institutions may not currently project such a transfer receptive image, which may in turn result in fewer transfers and more attrition once a student has transferred. Laanan (2007) surveyed 717 undergraduates who transferred to a public 4-year institution in California, found that transfer students often experience “shock” when they transfer from a community college to a 4-year university, partly because university campuses and classes are generally larger, and faculty do generally conduct research and are often less available and approachable than faculty at community colleges.

These factors may contribute to the failure of the transfer function, although the transfer function continues to be poorly studied. An analysis of articles published by The Community College Journal of Research and Practice in 2014 conducted by the present author showed a myriad articles on community college leadership (e.g. what makes a good campus president) but only one article in the past year on community college transfer to 4-year institutions. This lone article analyzed the visibility of articulation agreement and its effect on transfer (Fincher et al., 2014). These authors analyzed transfer articulation information available on the websites of 14 community colleges in Arkansas, and found four trends: that articulation agreements were difficult to find, did not describe articulation as one pathway to a BA, were negative and discouraging to transfer, and referred to counselors at receiving institutions with no contact information (p. 690-691).

Little data are available on outcomes for transfer students. Some research takes the approach that returning students are successful because they transfer, not despite their transfer.
Metzer (1997) adds, however, that transfer students cannot be compared to non-transfer students because the two groups are too demographically diverse to allow a comparison.

The subject of community colleges in general and the transfer function in particular is beginning to attract attention. For example, President Obama’s 2012 and 2015 State of the Union addresses focused on college for all, and Dr. Jill Biden (wife of Vice President Joe Biden) who, until just recently, taught at Northern Virginia Community College, has promoted this issue. Similarly, articulation agreements between 2-year and 4-year institutions has set out to make transfer easier, thereby providing additional attention on the community college system.

**College attrition.**

Diverse students who do make it to a 4-year institution directly from high school leave before completing a degree at higher rates than do white students, and for different reasons.

*Table 7*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race/ethnicity</th>
<th>% who left in 2004</th>
<th>Academic problems</th>
<th>Scheduling problems</th>
<th>Not satisfied</th>
<th>Financial reasons</th>
<th>Family responsibilities</th>
<th>Personal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>15.0</td>
<td>11.2</td>
<td>11.0</td>
<td>15.4</td>
<td>30.7</td>
<td>19.3</td>
<td>52.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>20.5</td>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>19.8</td>
<td>28.7</td>
<td>24.7</td>
<td>46.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latina/o</td>
<td>18.0</td>
<td>26.0</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>23.9</td>
<td>35.2</td>
<td>19.1</td>
<td>53.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>10.4</td>
<td>xx</td>
<td></td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>18.6</td>
<td>28.9</td>
<td>89.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Ross et al., 2012, Table 38-1, page 190

This report does not explicate “not satisfied” and “personal reasons;” however, the following literature fills some of these gaps. Much of the literature addressing retention in higher education relies on a complex retention model developed by Vincent Tinto (Tinto, 1993), which posits that a student’s engagement and academic and social integration with the college environment enhances retention. The model has become “the paradigm of choice when examining student departure” (Kuh & Love, 2000, p. 196). However, in their theoretical work, these authors state that the Tinto model has been only partially validated by empirical research, much of which has
not addressed diverse students. Additionally, definitions of “engagement” and “integration” may be very different for different populations, presenting challenges in operationalizing these terms (Kuh & Love, 2000). Critics of the Tinto model point to its foundations in interactionalist theory, which is rooted in an acculturation/assimilation framework. For example, Rendón, Jalomo, and Nora (2000) write in their theoretical work:

> the assumption that minority students must separate from their cultural realities and take the responsibility to become incorporated into colleges’ academic and social fabric in order to succeed (with little or no concern to address systemic problems within institutions or to the notion that minority students are often able to operate in multiple contexts) becomes central to the critique of Tinto’s student departure model. (p. 129).

Several critics echo Rendón et al. (2000) in suggesting that the responsibility lies with college campuses to adapt to accommodate students from diverse backgrounds (Kuh & Love, 2000; Tierney, 2000). In particular, Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, and Gonyea (2008) analyzed National Survey of Student Engagement data collected from 18 universities, four of which were historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), and three of which were Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs) (p. 543). They found a strong correlation between student engagement and GPA and persistence. They further suggest that engagement can be influenced by universities in the form of more effective teaching practices and interventions that include high quality advising, learning communities within the classroom, cooperative learning, and peer mentoring (pp. 556-7).

**Campus climate.**

More of the recent literature points to campus climate as contributing to student attrition. Some of this literature is of a theoretical perspective (e.g. Kuh & Love, 2000; Rendón, Jalomo, & Nora, 2000). Jain, Herrera, Bernal, and Solórzano (2011) posit a conceptual framework that addresses students of color who transfer from community colleges to 4-year universities, and suggest that these universities are not currently welcoming of transfer students, which increases
their attrition from the educational system. Empirical research supports these theoretical and conceptual frameworks. A survey of 717 diverse transfer students in California found that high student perceptions of competition among students and the inapproachability of faculty impacted academic difficulties, which in turn impacted attrition (Laanan, 2007).

Emerging research further shows that attrition of diverse students from college can often be linked to racial microaggression, subtle acts that can be perceived as exclusionary at best and overtly racist at worst. Microaggressions are “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults to the target person or group” (Sue et al., 2007, p. 273). These include overt racial slurs and name-calling, subtle snubs and put-downs, and invalidating the feelings and experiences of people of color (p. 274). These racial microaggressions occur in a variety of college settings. Sue, Lin, Torino, Capodilupo, and Rivera (2009) conducted two focus groups with 14 students of color in a large private university, and found that all of the participants related their experiences with microaggression in their classrooms. Focus groups conducted with 81 students of color at a predominantly White institution found acts of microaggression, including racial slurs written in common areas, occurring in residence halls (Harwood, Huntt, Mendenhall, & Lewis, 2012). This microaggression can have profoundly negative effects on the targets. Yosso, Smith, Ceja, and Solorzano (2009) conducted focus groups with 37 Latina/o undergraduates at three universities, and found that microaggression created stress for their students, that “students expended an enormous amount of time, energy, and stress trying to respond” to racial jokes (p. 671) and other forms of microaggression. The authors further suggest negative cumulative effects of microaggression on students’ health and academic achievement (p. 676), which the authors refer
to as “battle fatigue” (p. 676). O'Keefe, Wingate Cole, Hollingsworth, and Tucker (2014) fill this gap with their survey of 405 students of color at a large university. Their findings “supported the presence of a positive relationship between RMAS (racial microaggression) and suicidal ideation,” which, they add, “is the first (study) to demonstrate a relationship between RMAS and suicidal ideation” (p. 7). Positive relationships have also been found between microaggression and alcohol abuse. Blume, Lovato, Thyken, and Denny (2012) surveyed 684 students, 178 of whom were students of color, at a predominantly White university; their findings “suggest that college students of color who experience greater numbers of microaggressions may be at increased risks for higher anxiety and underage binge alcohol use as well as the aversive consequences of drinking alcohol” (p. 49).

Why Adults Return to School.

Once and individual leaves the educational system, the extant research shows that there is often a specific reason, a catalyst, that precipitates a return to school. One overwhelmingly common reason is economic – the loss of a job or the desire for a better job. Genco (2007) interviewed 24 returning students at a rural community college and found that half cited the loss of a job as the reason for their return. Speight, Russian, Ross-Gordon, & Muñoz (2008) interviewed seven adult Latina/o students enrolled in a 4-year university in Texas; one of their subjects said he had returned to school because his current job had an element of danger, saying that “It is rare to see someone who is not injured…” (p. 30). Deutsch and Schmertz (2011) conducted focus groups and interviews with 13 women returning to a 4-year university, and found that 20% said that they returned to school because they had been passed over for a promotion at their jobs. One of their subjects said she “was really tired of working for dummies” (p. 490). Kennamer and Campbell (2011) cited enrollment data from their community college in
Alabama that showed that the enrollment of adults over aged 40 increased 106% between 2005 and 2009; they attribute this increase to job layoffs in the area during the 2008 recession.

A second common reason for a return to school is a change in the family structure. The research in this arena usually focuses on women, and is related to economic reasons – the need for either a job or at least a better one. One of Deutsch and Schmertz’s (2011) subjects was recently divorced, with limited child support, which motivated her return. They further found that a transition of children out of the house was also a catalyst; that the women’s stories “had a sense of turn-taking – their children had achieved their educational goals and now it was the mother’s turn” (p. 487). Sealey-Ruiz (2007) interviewed three dyads of African-American women and their daughters, and found that divorce or separation and the accompanying need to support themselves and their children motivated the women’s return to school. In one poignant narrative described by Sealey-Ruiz, one of the mothers returned to school due to one son’s incarceration and another son’s being stabbed, which inspired her to work toward becoming a social worker; she viewed her return to school “as the way to eventually alleviate her sons’ problems, serve as a role model to them, and get herself on track to becoming an advocate for teens in trouble with the law” (p. 148).

Active encouragement from another person also motivated a return to school. Several of Deutsch and Schmertz’s (2011) subjects said that their children talked them into returning to school. Deutsch and Tong (2011) interviewed 78 childcare center directors, and found that their encouragement of their employees to return to school was highly correlated with the employees’ decision to return to school. Sealey-Ruiz’s (2007) subjects each said their return to school was a strategy to encourage their daughters to go to college, a strategy that appeared to be successful;
all three daughters said “their mothers’ insistence that attending college was the way to change
their circumstances caused them to seriously think about college” (p. 150).

Encouragement can be active, as above, or it can be indirect. The literature shows that the
desire to act as a role model for their own children or other family members is a powerful
motivator for a return to school. One reason cited by Sealey-Ruiz’s (2007) women subjects who
returned to school was a desire to be a role model for their daughters. Rosser-Mims, Palmer, and
Harroff (2014) interviewed 14 African-American men who had returned to school, and found
that many did so for the same reason. One man said “Well, I look (sic) at my life and realized
that I wanted to show my three boys that they must get a good education and that will require
them staying in school and going to college” (p. 64). Vaccaro and Lovell (2009) interviewed 28
women enrolled in a small Midwestern women’s college. One of their subjects “found it
hypocritical to expect her children to excel in school if she did not obtain a degree herself” (p. 9).

Indirect encouragement from others, either family, friends, or coworkers, can also
motivate a return to school. One of Ryken’s (2006) case study subjects, a young Latino man,
returned to school after his co-workers asked him why he wasn’t in school. Ryken quotes him as
saying “That’s the time I started thinking. Do I really want to be in San Diego? By the age of 25
still doing the same thing, not having really nothing to look forward to.” (p. 603). Extended
family can also encourage adults to return to school. Several of Vaccaro and Lovell’s (2009)
women subjects received encouragement and inspiration from aunts and grandmothers.

Personal reasons that are less concrete than economic reasons can motivate a return to
school. Vaccaro and Lovell (2009) further found dreams and goals – personal reasons – as
inspiration. They quote one of their subjects as saying “Well, you know, this degree is not for me
to get promoted with my company. I’m ready to retire. This is something personal to me” (p. 11).
Vaccaro and Lovell (2009) further found that their subjects were “investing in their personal growth” and “were far less concerned about being productive workers than about being better women” (p. 12). Half of Genco’s (2007) interview subjects reported “as personal sense of it being the time” to return to school, the “time to grow up” (p. 4).

The majority of these studies address women returning to school; Widoff (1999) filled this gap with her study of men who returned to school and were enrolled in an undergraduate degree program. She conducted a survey with 243 returning male students, two focus groups with 13 students, and interviews with six students, and found that the majority returned to school due to work-related events, including advancement, job dissatisfaction, relocation, or changes in physical health and abilities (Widoff, 1999). Her participants also expressed the challenges in time management and juggling responsibilities; one participant “admitted he ‘put off his wife’ when projects were due, knowing the course work deadline was within the next few days and his wife would be there next week” (p. 21).

**Social capital/network/experience/family**

Once an individual has left the educational system and returned later, they face a variety of experiences that are not well addressed in the literature. One such area is the students’ social capital – their network of individuals who can provide assistance, information, and knowledge that the student can then leverage to support their return to school and completion of a program of study. While students’ social capital in K12 environments has been well-studied (e.g. Coleman, 1988), adult returning students’ social capital has not. And this social capital can be as important to returning students as it is for K12 students. Chartrand (1992), surveyed 347 adult undergraduate students, 83.3% of whom were white and 66% of whom were women, at a large university and found that “support from family and friends influenced both psychological distress and intentions to continue” (p. 200). A survey of 196 adult undergraduates conducted by
Lundberg, McIntire, and Creasman (2008), confirmed those findings, that emotional and instrumental support from friends and immediate family was an important factor in the students’ persistence. The women in Deutsch and Schmertz’s (2011) study cited financial, academic, and emotional support from their family as important to their academic success. Moreover, these women felt that instrumental support made them feel that the family valued their academic identities (p. 494).

However, the literature further shows that this support might not always be forthcoming. Kirby, Biever, Martinez, and Gómez (2004) surveyed 566 adult undergraduate students, more than half of whom were students of color, enrolled in a weekend college program. They found that although returning students experienced less stress when they received emotional support from their family, only 70 respondents (15%) said that they actually received this support (p. 73). Plageman (2011) interviewed 13 women, four of whom were women of color, who returned to school and asked them where they receive support. Although Plageman’s subjects said their husbands were particularly supportive, the “level and type of support differs significantly” between her participants (p. 219), and additional support was found in extended family members and friends. Suitor (1987) interviewed 37 married women who returned to school and also found mixed levels of support these women received from their mothers. She found that the daughters with better-educated mothers reported more positive attitudes than did the daughters of less-educated mothers; “the higher the mother's educational level, the more likely the daughter was to report her mother's attitudes as positive.” (p. 439). Furthermore, “Seven respondents, five whose mothers had not completed high school and two whose mothers were high school graduates, indicated that their relationships with their mothers had become strained because of the return to school.” (Suitor, 1987, p. 439). Babineau and Packard (2006) surveyed 70 returning students,
63% of whom were women and 42% were students of color. They further interviewed a subset of 14. They found that “for many participants, financial barriers or discouragement from family made pursuit of college or even comprehensive career exploration extremely difficult.” (p. 116), thereby requiring the students to locate other sources of support.

The literature shows that returning students receive support family and friends that involves emotional (e.g. encouragement and interest) and/or instrumental (e.g. household chores). Social capital from this source, however, appears in the literature to be limited to the home front. Returning students do not appear from the literature to be able to receive information, knowledge, and experiences concerning college from their family and friends. Instead, the literature focuses on students finding this type of support from institutional agents – college administrators, program directors, academic advisors, counselors, faculty, and other students. As discussed above, these individuals have always been important to K12 students in supporting their completing high school and moving to college. Their role in providing social capital for adult students returning to school, non-traditional students, and students of color, has been less well researched.

This lack of research is only recently beginning to change. Lott (2012) fills part of this gap with her survey of 321 students, over 60% of whom were students of color, who completed a GED and are now enrolled in entry-level coursework at two community colleges. She found that “more than half of all respondents did not possess essential contextual awareness or “college knowledge” prior to entry into post-secondary education” despite their participation in adult literacy and GED preparation programs (p. 99). Museus and Neville (2012) interviewed 60 Asian, African-American, and Latino students in three universities and one community college. They found that institutional agents provided support to minority students in their building social
capital by providing a single point of contact for students for all of their academic and non-academic advising needs and by being proactive and seeking out students for their advising. They also found a strong connection between agents and students when they shared a common cultural background and when the agents were authentic and showed real caring for the students’ success (p. 445). In a previous study, Museus (2010) interviewed 65 faculty, administrators, staff members, and students of color in two universities and a community college. He found that targeted support programs, such as dedicated space for minority students to work and socialize, academic tutoring, advising, created social capital through establishing and maintaining connections and relations between students of color (p. 24). The participants in these two studies, however, were all traditionally-aged students (aged 18-22).

**Para-educator programs (Career Ladder)**

Because the participants of this study are enrolled in a structured cohort-based program specifically designed for para-educators, the extant literature surrounding these programs and the students enrolled in them was also examined in this literature review and is included here.

In describing these types of programs, Genzuk and Baca (1998) offer a retrospective of their “para-educator-to-teacher pipeline” program at the University of Southern California, which trains Latina/o para-educators and supports their earning a BA degree. Their program had been in place for five years at the time the article was written. They identified “support components” designed to “help participants overcome the key obstacles that para-educators often face in completing their undergraduate degrees and obtaining teaching credentials” (p. 81). These components include financial assistance, the use of cohorts, on-site faculty mentors, academic support classes, social activities to promote family support, meetings with school personnel to promote their support for the para-educators, professional development and conference attendance support. Although the authors describe the program thoroughly, there is no discussion
of the students enrolled in the program beyond demographic information. Bernal and Aragon (2004) fill this gap with focus group interviews of 34 adult students enrolled in two similar para-educator programs in a different state, although it is unclear how many of their study participants experienced an interruption in their schooling. The focus group participants reported that support from family, the program advisor, and other cohort members was most critical for their completion of an Associate’s degree (p. 210). Additional support from tutors, scheduling of classes on nights and weekends, and financial support also contributed to their completion. Both Genzuk and Baca (1998) and Bernal and Aragon (2004) confirm the importance of a structured program in promoting their students’ completion of a program of study.

Bernal-Sati (2005) extended these findings in her qualitative study that included interviews and focus groups of six Latina para-educators in a bilingual elementary teacher preparation program at a 4-year university. She found the cohort model to be a significant support in providing “caring individuals,” and also found that the participant’s experiences conflicts rooted in family and academic issues similar to those found by Bernal and Aragon (2004). Additionally, Bernal-Sati (2005) found that her study participants discussed a problematic academic environment as well as professors with whom they had negative experiences which included poor instruction. Shroyer et al. (2009) confirmed Bernal-Sati’s (2005) findings in their study in which they conducted interviews, focus groups, and surveys of 15 Latina/o adult students enrolled in a joint community college-university program to train culturally and linguistically diverse teachers. Like Bernal-Sati (2005), all of Shroyer et al. participants were bilingual. They found what they labeled as “barriers, including family commitments, juggling multiple demands on time, and finances. They also found academic “barriers” that included challenging coursework for which they were underprepared, “negative
faculty/student interactions,” and language barriers. Shroyer et al. (2009) further identified what they called “bridges” to the adult students’ persistence and completion of the program of study, which included support from family, friends, their cohort, administrators, and their own goal-orientation. Sandoval-Lucero, Maes, and Chopra (2011) extended these findings to graduate rates; their study that included an analysis of graduation rates of 21 Latina/o undergraduates in a structured cohort learning community in an urban university showed an 88% first-year retention rate for cohort members. This compares to graduation rates at that university of approximately 60% for non-cohort Latina/o and White students.

This extant research shows the importance of a structured program and support systems from adult students’ social network in their completion of a program of study. It is, however, unclear in these studies how many of their study participants experienced an interruption in their schooling. Further, it is unclear the roles played by members of their social network or specific ways in which they leveraged their social network to reduce or eliminate conflicts. It should also be noted that these studies alluded to or specifically mentioned barriers, and Bernal-Sati (2005) is the only study that examined the academic environment faced by the study participants.

Gaps in the literature

This review of the literature illuminates several gaps in the research surrounding returning students. The first is the apparent conflation between “adult,” “non-traditional,” and “returning” student. Not all adult students are returning students, and not all non-traditional students are adults. A young parent may continue her or his education without interruption; that student would be non-traditional by virtue of being a parent but would not be returning. Conflating three disparate groups of students obscures who returning students are, why they left the educational system, why they returned, and what social capital they have at their disposal to facilitate their return. This study fills this gap by focusing on returning students, students who
have experienced an interruption in their schooling. The distinction between returning students and adult and/or non-traditional students is important. With their being out of the educational system for a period of time, returning students may have needs that are distinct from adult and/or non-traditional students, needs that can be met by specialized programming. For example, over the past 20 years, the use of computers, graphing calculators, and other technology in the educational system has increased rather dramatically. Students who have experienced an interruption in their schooling may not be familiar with this technology. The researcher is currently teaching in a local community college, and this semester is supporting two returning students who have never used a computer before and are having difficulty using an on-line drop box for assignments, contributing to on-line discussions, and typing their papers in a word processor. The researcher herself returned to school for a master’s in 2004 and a PhD in 2009 following an interruption of 20 years. She conducted research as she did as an undergraduate in the 1970’s, putting on her shoes and socks and going to the library’s Periodicals room to page through journals to locate articles for her papers, and then photocopying what she found. She was unaware that she could search for journal articles on line and download them for free to her computer until a librarian in the periodicals room took pity and showed her how to use ERIC, jstor, and Google Scholar. Aside from making the researcher feel rather ridiculous, the incident made her wonder what else she had missed during her interruption from the educational system. It turned out that she had missed quite a lot of sociological, critical, and feminist theory that had developed over those two decades of her interruption, requiring her to spend a great deal of time and effort in independent reading to catch up with the other students in her PhD program. It seems unlikely that students who have continued their education without an interruption would have similar experiences when they reach the PhD level.
The second gap is the continual use of the “barriers and baggage” model. As discussed above in this study’s problem statement, this model forms a useful point of departure, but the literature review shows that the departure has not really happened yet. The examination of returning students’ assets, their social capital that they can leverage to support their return, the academic community they are entering, and their habitus and how it changes from the experience of returning, appear absent from the literature. Indeed, although some studies have focused on supports networks available to non-traditional students (e.g. Plageman, 2011), the complexity of the roles played by individuals in the network has not been closely examined. The research has not fully examined where returning students go for the “college knowledge” that may be absent and might not be filled by family members. Further, much of the research is grounded in psychology and counseling, with less attention paid to the social milieu in which returning students live and function. This study fills that gap by departing from the barriers and baggage model and using social capital, the academic community, and habitus as a conceptual framework. In doing so, the complexity of returning students’ lives and how returning students navigate and negotiate these complexities emerges.

Finally, much of the literature uses quantitative analyses of large-scale, longitudinal datasets, particularly in the attrition literature. With this reliance on quantitative analyses comes an associated reliance on demographics (e.g. gender, race, and age), and attributes of returning students (e.g. dependent children, full-time work etc.). For example, this literature review has shown that high school attrition is strongly correlated with the student being labeled with a disability, or being low income, or having low grades. However, qualitative research using ethnographic classroom observations and/or interviews with students who left high school, research that foregrounds the voices of the students and illuminates the real reasons for the high
school attrition, is lacking. Without this qualitative research, it is difficult to dig deep into the true reasons for attrition, and our understanding of attrition is likely to remain superficial and solutions are likely to be less effective. Interviews with returning students, all of whom left the educational system at some point, would begin to fill some of this gap. This study does utilize in-depth interviews that include questions about why the participant left the educational system and their reasons for doing so, thereby providing nuanced information that could inform targeted programming to keep students in school and completing a program of study. The qualitative methods used by this study adds to the quantitative analyses nuance and greater understanding of returning students.

Conclusion

The research shows that adult students who experience an interruption in schooling have been considerably understudied. The field of higher education has little knowledge and understanding of returning students beyond sociodemographic characteristics. Little of the current research illuminates their experiences and the meaning these student derive from those experiences. Without this understanding of these individuals’ experiences, programming, policies, and instructional practices cannot be adequately developed. This study will fill these gaps by examining adult students in their return to school, foregrounding students’ voices and enriching the data by illuminating the assets they bring with them to support their return and completion of a program of study.
Chapter 3

Methods

Design

This study employs a basic qualitative design (Merriam, 2009) to explore the experiences of adult students as they return to school following an interruption in their schooling. Qualitative research focuses on an experience and the meaning that individuals ascribe to that experience. “Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding the meaning people have constructed, that is, how people make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world” (Merriam, 2009, p. 13). Specifically, this study uses inductive and emergent data analysis, collection of multiple sources of data, development of a complex account and interpretation of the participants’ experiences and the meaning that the participants themselves make of their experiences are foregrounded (Creswell, 2009; Hatch, 2002). A qualitative design was chosen to more deeply explore returning students’ experiences, to study returning students in a manner that does not include the problematic deficit “barriers and baggage” model, and to respond to the following research questions:

RQ1: Who are returning students? What are their characteristics, why did they leave school, and what motivated their return?

RQ2: What types of assets and supports enabled students to return to school and complete a program of study?

RQ3: How do returning students navigate a new and possibly unfamiliar academic community?

Institutional Review Board

The researcher applied for permission to conduct the study from the university’s Institutional Review Board (IRB), which responded with Expedited approval as well as a
requirement to obtain signed informed consent from all participants at the beginning of the first interview. Documents relating to recruitment of participants and the consent form can be found in the appendix.

**Sample Selection**

In identifying a sample, Laverty (2003) suggests that the researcher “select participants who have lived the experience that is the focus of the study, who are willing to talk about their experience, and who are diverse enough from one another to enhance possibilities of rich and unique stories of the particular experience” (p. 29). Creswell (2007) describes this as a “criterion” sample (p. 120 and p. 128); that individuals must meet a specific criterion – they must have experienced the phenomenon – to be included in the sample. This study utilized such a criterion sample selection. This study’s criterion is individuals who are currently enrolled in a community college and who have experienced an interruption in their schooling of greater than four years. This criterion was chosen to ensure that all participants were outside of the 18- to 22-year-old demographic that has already been well studied, which would respond more appropriately to this study’s research problem and the purpose of this study (Creswell, 2007). Additionally, this criterion ensured the exclusion of adult students who continued their education directly from high school to undergraduate to Master’s to Doctorate. The researcher felt that adult students who did not experience an interruption in their schooling are a different subset of adult students and would not address this study’s research problem and purpose.

The identification of recruitment of participants who met the criterion was particularly challenging due to the wide dispersal of returning students and the fact that there was no one place where they congregated. Local community college administrations and instructors also limited access to their students for reasons that are unclear and were not stated, but could include unfamiliarity and discomfort with qualitative research, researchers for outside their institution,
and classroom observations. It was also important that participants feel sufficiently comfortable that they would share with the researcher their stories about their experiences of returning to school.

**Recruitment of participants**

Due to the challenges of recruiting participants for this study as described above, participants were identified from a program for para-educators directed by the researcher’s advisor. This program, referred to as a Career Ladder program, is designed to recruit para-educators from local school districts that serve primarily low-income and culturally and linguistically diverse students. The program leads to an associate’s degree in education and supports the participants’ transfer to a 4-year university for completion of a bachelor’s degree and teaching license. Career Ladder programs are in place throughout the US, and are generally housed in community colleges.

Career Ladder programs were created and funded by the US Department of Education with several goals in mind. The first is to encourage culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) and bilingual para-educators back into the educational system and provide them with the training and education they need to better teach CLD and bilingual students in the public schools. The second, related, goal is to encourage CLD and bilingual para-educators to transfer to a 4-year university and earn a bachelor’s degree and teaching license, thereby increasing the number of licensed CLD and bilingual teachers in the public schools.

In the Career Ladder program in which the study participants these goals are addressed through pro-active outreach in the form of recruitment emails and informational meetings from the program director. The program provides funding for tuition, fees, books, and tutors, which removes much of the financial concerns faced by returning students and generally exceed the funding available from the institution. The program director assists students in navigating the
college bureaucracy by advising them in the classes they should take, enrolling them in their
classes, and assisting them in completing financial aid paperwork. The program director also
brings in admissions/transfer advisors from local 4-year universities to talk with the students and
complete their transfer paperwork. In this way, the program in general and the program director
in particular provide scaffolds for the students that the institution is not always able to provide.
Career Ladder programs in general have a history of success in reaching the stated goals.
Sandoval-Lucero, Maes, and Chopra (2011) analyzed retention and graduation data from one
Career Ladder program consisting entirely of Latina/o students. They found that the one-year
retention rate for the participants in their Career Ladder program was 88%, far exceeding the
63% retention rate for White full-time students. Five-year graduation rates were similarly higher
for Career Ladder students compared to White full-time students; 24% vs. 17% respectively. The
authors attribute this success to the support mechanisms provided by the program.

The students in the Career Ladder program from which the study participants were
recruited number 25, and are a highly diverse group that includes men and women, Anglos and
Latinos, and a wide range of ages and family situations. Most are first-generation college
attendees, and most are low to moderate income. All have experienced an interruption in their
formal education; however, a few had not experienced an interruption long enough to participate
in this study, and were excluded from the sample.

Following several meetings with the Career Ladder’s program director to discuss data
collection and to obtain his written support, the director sent an email to the students in his
program requesting volunteers. This email is included in the appendix. Ten students responded;
one was eliminated because he had not been away from formal schooling for long enough to
meet the criterion. 14 students did not respond to the email. It should be noted that the researcher
had previously taught a semester-long class to these participants. The nine participants in this
study were therefore acquainted with the researcher. This prolonged engagement with the
participants established trust between the researcher and participants, as recommended by
Creswell (2007) and Merriam (2009). The participants’ sociodemographic and attribute
information is summarized in the table below. Detailed profiles that transcend
sociodemographics and attributes of each participant can be found in the following chapter.
These profiles include theirs and their families’ experiences in formal education, an analysis of
their length of their interruption in their schooling and their pathway back to formal education.

Table 8

Participant sociodemographic and attribute data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Age range</th>
<th>First gen?</th>
<th>Approximate length of interruption</th>
<th>First language</th>
<th>Second language</th>
<th>Number of school-aged children in the home</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ana</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Latina</td>
<td>20’s</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>10+</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Some Spanish</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ed</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Anglo</td>
<td>30’s</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>10+</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kelly</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Anglo</td>
<td>30’s</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>10+</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lenny</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>60’s</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>40+</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Some Spanish</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lia</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Latina</td>
<td>40’s</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>20+</td>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lucy</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Anglo</td>
<td>50’s</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>30+</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Some Spanish</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maria</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Latina</td>
<td>60’s</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>40+</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Fluent Spanish</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pati</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Latina</td>
<td>30’s</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>10+</td>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victoria</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Latina</td>
<td>20’s</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>5+</td>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: all names are pseudonyms

This table shows vividly the diversity of the participants. Simply on the surface it becomes clear
that none share the same attributes: the participants represent both genders, both Anglo and
Latina/o, and a variety of ages, first languages, family structure, and length of time out of school.
Data Collection

This qualitative study utilized two forms of data collection: two participant interviews and analysis of the documents included in the participants’ application dossiers. The consent form signed by the participants provided for the researcher’s access to their dossiers and transcripts.

Interviews

The primary form of data collection for this study was qualitative research interviews with each participant. A research interview is a meeting and conversation between the researcher and a participant for the purpose of allowing the participant to discuss a topic in their own words and from their own perspective (Seidman, 2006). The conversation is guided by the researcher.

Interviewing was chosen as a primary data source for several reasons. First, this study is focused on the stories of returning students as told in their own words and their own voices. “Telling stories is essentially a meaning-making process” (Seidman, 2006, p. 7). Interviewing provided space for the participants to tell their stories and engage in this meaning-making process. With only a single participant at a time with the researcher present at the interview, each participant had a time set aside for her or him to tell her or his stories and talk about what is important to them. This time set aside for a single participant allowed for reflection and deep thinking in response to researcher questions; during the interviews conducted by the researcher for this study, the frequent pauses following a question from the researcher pointed to the participants reflecting deeply as they formulated their responses. This deep reflection and thought generated rich data and allowed for greater illumination of the participants’ return to school and the meaning their return held for them. Interviewing foregrounded these voices, thereby responding to this study’s research questions and theoretical and conceptual frameworks as well as filling this gap in the extant literature.
An interview format of focused, in-depth, open-ended questions was chosen for this study. This format guided the participants to stay focused on the topic of their return to school, but at the same time allowed participants the space to discuss, with detailed narratives, what was important to them. This in turn would be more likely to result in rich descriptions of events, feelings, and interpretation of the meaning that their return to school held for them (Seidman, 2006; van Manen, 1997). This format, therefore, would more likely result in data that would respond to this study’s research questions within the conceptual framework.

**Development of the interview protocol questions.**

Before beginning interviews, the researcher developed an interview protocol to prepare for the interview and make the most of the time gifted to her by the participants. Protocol development was guided by Seidman (2006), van Manen (1997), Moustakas (1994) and Hatch (2002). Hatch (2002) suggests using “guiding questions” that specifically relate to the topic addressed by the study.

Guiding questions for studies using interviewing as the primary data source require researchers to develop questions based on their research purposes, knowledge of their informants, and hunches about the phenomena they are studying (which may or may not be informed by the theoretical and research literature in that area) (Hatch, 2002, p. 102). However, Seidman (2006) adds “there is no recipe for the effective question. The truly effective question flows from an interviewer’s concentrated listening, engaged interest in what is being said, and purpose in moving forward (p. 93). van Manen (1997) suggests the researcher write a detailed memo on her or his own description of the experience being researched (p. 57).

The researcher took this advice to heart in developing the questions included on the interview protocol. She began the development of the protocol by memoing, in detail, about her own returns to school, her reconstruction and memories of her own thoughts and feelings, and her experiences, both positive and negative, as suggested by van Manen (1997). During her
memoing, the researcher reflected on her own social capital, her own habitus, and her own experiences entering an academic environment that had changed dramatically in the 16 years that she had been away from school. She included her own experiences being interviewed for a qualitative research study, which influenced the wording of the interview questions to ensure they were questions and not interrogations. Analysis of the memoing of the researcher’s own experiences, coupled with Seidman’s (2006) suggestions for asking open-ended questions but at the same time avoiding leading questions (p. 84-85), formed the foundation of the interview protocol.

Building from this foundation, throughout their books, Seidman (2006), van Manen (1997), Moustakas (1994) and Hatch (2002) all included specific examples to illustrate their general suggestions, examples that provided additional support for this study’s protocol. The researcher found that several of her own questions were similar to those suggested by the above authors; these are noted with each question on the protocol below. The beginning question requesting background was particularly important to “get the informants talking about familiar information, get them used to the interview context and recorder, and ease their concerns about what the interview might be like” (Hatch, 2002, p. 103).

During the actual interviews, follow-up questions probed for additional details. These probing questions were based on participant responses, and generally consisted of questions of the type “Can you tell me more about that?” and “How did you feel about that situation?” The researcher allowed the participants great latitude in how they responded to the interview questions, and very often a participant’s response would overlap two or all three research questions. In particular, participants frequently discussed their social network (social capital) in
their responses without prompting. Below is each question on the protocol, the underlying source of the question, and this study’s research question addressed by the interview question.

**Interview protocol 1 (for first interview).**

- Tell me about yourself, a mini-biography. This question led to numerous follow-up questions tailored to participants’ responses, particularly about previous experiences in K12 and higher education, work experiences, and social networks. (Hatch, 2002, p. 103; Seidman, 2006, p. 85) (RQ1 and RQ2)

- How did the idea of returning to school enter your mind? Can you tell me more about that? How did you learn about the Career Ladder program, and how did you decide to apply? What were you feeling and thinking as you were completing the application? Were other people involved in your decision? (researcher’s memo; Moustakas, 1994, p. 116; van Manen, 1997, p. 67) (RQ1 and RQ2)

- Now that you are in school, what has the experience been like for you? Can you tell me in as much detail as possible what you were thinking and feeling on your first day of class? (RQ2 and RQ3) (researcher’s memo; Moustakas, 1994, p. 116)

- Can you describe for me, in as much detail as possible, a typical day in which you go to school, from start to finish? (researcher’s memo; Hatch, 2002, p. 104) (RQ3)

- In thinking about the experience of returning to school, are there any events that stand out for you? Any individuals who stand out? (RQ2) (researcher’s memo; Moustakas, 1994, p. 116)

**Interview protocol 2 (for second interview).**

The second interview followed-up with the same participants to request clarification, additional details, and elaboration on responses from the first interview. All questions for this protocol developed from themes and analytic memos that began to emerge from the first
The second interview also served as a member check for data collected in the first interview to ensure consistency between interviews. Questions such as the following were asked, with continued probing for more details based on responses (e.g. “Can you tell me more about that?” and “Who was involved?”):

- Tell me about your summer. What classes were you taking? Can you describe a typical day this summer on a day when you had class? (RQ3) (this question was asked specifically because the participants were enrolled in more classes in the summer than in the fall and spring semesters. Additionally, the classes took place during the day rather than in the evening, and the summer semester was compressed to 10 weeks instead of 16. In the first interviews, participants expressed increased stress at the different class schedule. This question was designed to elicit these additional details).

- It is now fall semester. What classes were you taking? Can you describe a typical day this fall on a day when you have class? (to serve as a member check) (RQ3)

- In the last interview, you and all the other interviewees brought up your math classes. Can you tell me a little more about your experiences in your math classes? (based on topic of developmental math that emerged during interview transcription and to serve as a member-check) (RQ2 and RQ3)

- Have you ever wanted to quit? (either yes or no) Can you tell me more about that? Why didn’t you? How do you keep going? To whom do you turn for encouragement? (based on topic of stress that emerged during interview transcription, the withdrawal from the program from one study participant, and to serve as a member-check) (RQ2)
• Can you describe for me the positive experience since you’ve returned to school? (RQ3) (based on topic of cohort and instructor support that emerged during interview transcription and to serve as a member-check)

• The most negative? (based on topic of cohort conflict that emerged during interview transcription and to serve as a member-check) (RQ3)

• Has anyone in your life been particularly supportive? Who? How/in what way? (based on topic of cohort and social capital support that emerged during interview transcription and to serve as a member-check) (RQ2)

• Any bad guys? (based on topic of conflict within the cohort that emerged during interview transcription and to serve as a member-check) (RQ3)

• How has your return to school changed you and your relations with family members and co-workers? (based on conceptual framework component of habitus that emerged during interview transcription and to serve as a member-check) (RQ2 and RQ3)

• This program prepares you for being a teacher. If there had been a scholarship for being a plumber or a nurse, do you think you would have returned to school? (based on potential conflicting/complementing topics of “return to school” vs. “becoming a teacher” that emerged during interview transcription and to serve as a member-check) (RQ1)

• Do you think you would have returned to school if there had not been a structured program? (based on topic of the role of the program director that emerged during interview transcription and to serve as a member-check) (RQ1 and RQ3)
• You will be graduating this spring. What’s next for you? Will you transfer and continue for a 4-year degree? Why/why not? (based on topic of future plans that emerged during interview transcription as well as conceptual framework component of habitus and to serve as a member-check) (RQ3)

• What does your return to school and your graduation mean to you? (based on conceptual framework component of habitus that emerged during interview transcription and to serve as a member-check) (RQ1 and RQ3)

Interview schedule.

The researcher contacted each participant individually via email, and scheduled the first face-to-face interview at a time and location that was convenient to the participant. This was most often a public location, such as a coffee shop or library near the participant’s home or work. With two participants, interviews occurred in the schools in which they taught. At the beginning of the first interview, signed consent was obtained. Second face-to-face interviews were scheduled via email. Second interviews were conducted to clarify details and explore in greater depth the meaning that the participants ascribe to their return to school. Each interview lasted for approximately one hour.

Each interview was audio recorded using a Sony IC digital audio recorder, which generated a recording in standard mp3 digital format. The researcher also took fieldnotes during the interview as a backup and to triangulate the data and the analysis. Following each interview, the mp3 file was immediately copied onto the researcher’s laptop computer. Each interview was transcribed verbatim by the researcher using ExpressScribe software and AltoEdge footpedal. During transcription, the researcher added minute markers so that segments could be quickly located on the audiotape for verification of direct quotes. The researcher then exported every transcript from ExpressScribe to Word for Windows to add line numbers to the transcript. The
researcher then exported every transcript from Word to pdf format using CutePDF Writer and imported each pdf file into Atlas.ti for coding. Atlas.ti ostensibly works with Word documents, but the researcher’s experience is that Atlas.ti works with Word documents very slowly and with frequent freezing and errors in autocoding. The researcher’s experiences with Atlas.ti is that it works with pdf documents more quickly and reliably. The researcher then compared large segments of the pdf documents with the original ExpressScribe version to ensure accuracy. No conversion errors were found.

Throughout this process, all data files, including transcriptions, were stored on a password-protected laptop and backed up on a password-protected jump drive. The jump drive was stored in a locked drawer in the researcher’s office. The dossiers were stored in a locked safe at the researcher’s home. The signed consent forms were stored in a locked drawer in the researcher’s home.

**Student Documents**

The program director provided the researcher with the application dossiers and transcripts for each participant; the consent forms signed by the participants provided the researcher with access to the dossiers and transcripts. These data were collected for several reasons. First, the dossiers included letters of recommendation written by others, which provided data of how others saw the participant. In addition, these data allowed for co-occurrence analysis, particularly concerning who did, or did not, write the letters and other roles those individuals may have played in supporting the participant’s return. Second, the application dossiers contained the participants’ own written application essays. These writings enabled the researcher to glean additional nuance about each participant that transcended sociodemographic information, such as work history, career plans, interest in teaching, and self-promotion. This last is particularly important, as the participants had to have sufficient self-confidence to explain in their essays
why they should be accepted into the program. These data served as a baseline to compare with their level of self-confidence as they reach the end of their program of study, which would in turn inform an analysis of their change in habitus. Third, these data triangulated the interview data and contributed to the accuracy of what the participants discussed. For example, community college transcripts in the application dossier verified the courses taken by the participants and were able to be reconciled with interview data.

**Data Analysis**

The data were analyzed using the following process synthesized from Creswell (2009) and Merriam (2009).

1. Organize and prepare the data.
2. Read through the data to “obtain a general sense of the information” (Creswell, 2009, p. 185) and identify segments connected to the study’s research questions (Merriam, 2009, p. 176).
3. List emerging themes and topics, convert them into categories and sub-categories, sort the categories and data, and assign names to categories and sub-categories.
4. Use the categories and sub-categories to create codes that generate a thick description of the participants and the emerging themes. Use these codes to code the data.
5. Analyze data for patterns, outliers, and co-occurrences. Decide how to represent participant description and emerging themes.
6. Interpret the description and themes, and write these as Findings and Discussion chapters.

The researcher followed these six steps, as discussed in this section below. Because the researcher transcribed all interviews herself, the researcher was intimately familiar with the data and was able to organize interview data into electronic folders (step 1) and was able to attain a general sense of the data during transcribing (step 2). Additionally, during transcription of the
interview data, segments connecting to the study’s research questions were identified and noted in informal analytic memos (step 3). Following completion of the transcribing, the researcher read back through all transcripts and the participant dossiers, identifying additional segments (step 2 and 3 repeated).

**Coding system development.**

Common themes and patterns that aligned with this study’s research questions and conceptual framework began to emerge during transcribing, and these were written as brief analytic memos and drawn into a coding tree (step 4 from above). This coding tree underwent multiple revisions during transcribing, with existing codes moved into different categories and new codes added with each transcription. These developed into an initial coding system, to which the researcher assigned names. Categories and their connection to the conceptual framework and research questions, as well as the final full coding system, including definitions and examples from interview data, are shown in Appendix A.

**Data analysis.**

Following transcription of the interviews, the codes and sub-codes that emerged during transcription were created in Atlas.ti and assigned to the interview data in multiple iterations. In keeping with this study’s conceptual framework, first, the data were coded for aspects of social capital possessed by the participants. Second, the data were coded for aspects of the academic and cohort community that the participants navigated upon their return to school. Third, the data were coded for attitudes towards school as a component of the participants’ habitus. Each of these three coding iterations were conducted several times to ensure complete and consistent coding. During this coding process, new codes were added due to the deeper reading of the transcripts. For example, the original *Spouse* code was split into *Husband* and *Wife* codes to allow a deeper, more nuanced analysis of the roles that different individuals may take in
providing different types of support (social capital) to the returning student. Coding was checked with the researcher’s peers during weekly meetings to ensure interrater reliability.

Following the coding, similarities, patterns, and common experiences that addressed each research question were written as analytic memos. Co-occurrences of codes were analyzed in Atlas.ti, and patterns and outliers that emerged were included in these analytic memos. For example, the participants’ social network, their social capital, and the roles played by different individuals were combined into a table and analyzed as to which roles were played more frequently by which individuals. These co-occurrences are included in the Findings chapters.

In addition to similarities, patterns, and common experiences, the analysis also included unexpected data that stood out from other participants and other narratives. Outlying narratives that did not fit into the others necessitated the creation of new codes and closer examination. Several of these outlying narratives were discussed with colleagues to add interrater reliability to the coding. Finally, the researcher combed through the transcripts, reflected deeply, and met with colleagues to identify what was missing from the narratives. Following this, the coding system was finalized, and appears in Appendix A.

Codes categories were then sorted into three sections that aligned with the study’s three research questions. During this process, it became clear that several sub-categories addressed multiple research questions. For example, data relating to family structure and specific number of school-aged children in the home addressed participant profiles (RQ1) as well as social capital (RQ2). This overlap informed additional iterations of co-occurrence analysis in Atlas.ti, which were then written as analytic memos and included in the Findings. Finally, the results were written into three sections of findings, followed by a discussion that explicates the meaning that the return to school holds for the returning students.
Dossier analysis.

In addition to the interview data, the researcher collected dossiers from each participant, dossiers that included the participants’ application materials, including letters of recommendation and the participants’ own application essays. Educational transcripts from the community college were also included. Educational transcripts were not coded, but rather were examined for developmental coursework and grades, which appear in the participant profiles. Information from the transcripts was also used to verify interview data through triangulation.

Letters of recommendation were coded manually to identify the writers’ relationship to the participant and to verify interview data. Participant application essays were coded manually for beliefs and values, as well as for information that might not match the interview data in order to establish validity through data triangulation. Coding was done manually due to the brevity of the letters and essays compared to the time-consuming and highly labor-intensive process of scanning them into pdf format to import to Atlas.ti for coding.

Following the coding of dossier documents, analytic memos were written that summarized the data in each participant’s dossier. For example, each participant’s analytic memo included the individuals who wrote the letters and relevant quotes about the participant. Finally, each participant’s dossier documents and interview transcript were reviewed together to compare data and contribute to establishing validity through triangulation.

Validity

Qualitative research in general rejects the positivistic view toward validity. Instead, issues of quality of craftsmanship (Kvale, 1996), credibility (Maxwell, 2005), and authenticity (Seidman, 2006) are foregrounded. To establish validity, the following strategies were used:

Two interviews for each participant. Seidman (2006) suggests that multiple interviews will contribute to internal consistency across the interviews, ensuring that the participant is not
making something up. Multiple interviews will also “account for idiosyncratic days.” (Seidman, 2006, p. 24). Multiple interviews are also more likely to produce rich, varied, and detailed descriptions and provide credibility for interpretations and conclusions (Maxwell, 2005, p. 110; see also Tracy, 2010). In this study, each participant was interviewed twice during a six month period, and the participant’s transcripts were compared during coding for internal consistency.

**Multiple participants.** Interviewing several participants allows comparison and connections across what participants say (Seidman, 2006, p. 25). This study included nine participants.

**Prolonged engagement with the participants.** The participants were former students of the researcher and were acquainted with her. Because they volunteered to participate and be interviewed by the researcher, they were likely comfortable with the researcher, and a level of trust had previously been established (Creswell, 2007, p. 207).

**Multiple sources of data.** “Probably the most well known strategy to shore up the internal validity of a study is what is known as **triangulation**” (Merriam, 2009, p. 215), or the collection and comparing of multiple sources of data (Merriam, 2009, p. 216). This study used three sources of data: two interviews conducted at different times and one dossier analysis, as discussed above. This allowed for triangulation of data, thereby contributing to internal consistency and credibility.

**Peer review and debriefing.** This strategy provides “an external check of the research process” (Creswell, 2007, p. 208) and contributes to both reliability and validity. For this study, the researcher discussed coding, findings, and interpretations with other advanced doctoral students in the School of Education. In particular, two advanced doctoral candidates initiated a dissertation writing group that met once a week; the researcher participated in these meetings.
Participants of this writing group not only reviewed, edited, and discussed each other’s writing but also provided feedback and fresh insights to each other’s data and data analysis. Attendance at these meetings ranged from 12-25 advanced doctoral students representing all program areas in the School of Education. Feedback and input from this group provided interrater reliability to the code development, the coding of interview data, and the analysis and interpretation of the data.

**Clarifying bias.** This process provides transparency in the interpretation of interview data. The researcher biases have been explicated in the Researcher Bias section below (Creswell, 2007, p. 208; Maxwell, 2005, p. 108).

**Clarifying reactivity.** In a manner similar to clarifying bias, this process provides transparency in the interpretation of interview data. Interviewers always influence the participant in some way; “understanding how you are influencing what the informant says, and how this affects the validity of the inferences you can draw from the interview” is important (Maxwell, 2005, p. 109). Throughout interviewing, the researcher reflected and wrote analytic memos on the way in which interviewees may have been influenced by the interviewer in such a way that the interview no longer reflects the participant’s experience. (Maxwell, 205, p. 215; see also Tracy, 2010). These reflections have been included in the Discussions section of the study.

Generalizability is not usually addressed in qualitative studies. Generalizability is typically replaced with “a compelling evocation of an individual’s experience,” (Seidman, 2006, p. 51), and enables recognizing similar patterns and themes in other locations and situations (Larsson, 2009, p. 34). For these reasons, no claims for generalizability are made in this study.
Researcher Bias

Seidman (2006) contends that research has autobiographical roots, and it is “crucial for interviewers to identify the autobiographical roots of their interest in their topic.” (p. 32). My own personal statement explicating the autobiographical roots of my research follows.

During my three decades as a teacher of adult students, I heard stories of my students’ return to the educational system following an interruption. Returning students and their stories inspired me to myself return to the educational system after a lengthy interruption. I completed my first masters, an MBA, in 1986, and began teaching computer software in various venues to a highly culturally and linguistically diverse population of students, then found a home in the community college system. I returned to formal education in 2002 for a certificate in teaching English as a second language, then to CU-Boulder in 2005 for an MA in Linguistics/TESOL. Following two years of full-time teaching in an intensive English program, I returned again for a PhD in education. I am a classic returning student, moving back and forth between the educational system and employment, with similar situational challenges of balancing family, work, and studies and the same sense of self-doubt and apprehension as my students have expressed to me over the years.

I was drawn to doctoral studies to contribute to the research addressing the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse adult students. I sensed that it was time for me to advocate for my students outside of the classroom in addition to advocating for them inside the classroom. Throughout my three years of coursework, I was able to speak for my students in class and in essays, challenging my own assumptions and those of others. My experiences as a teacher have guided my research; with every step I see my students’ faces and hear their names, and those faces and names have not only enriched my research but have also deepened my commitment to
conducting research that will support them in their educational trajectory. They have inspired this study.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has discussed the methods used to collect and analyze the data for this qualitative study. The following chapters explicate the findings, the discussion and interpretation of the findings.
Chapter 4

Participant profiles

In his ethnography, Rose (2012) wrote eloquently about students in one community college developmental English class and stated clearly that labeling returning students with words such as lazy or alienated do little to inform practices and programming for returning students. He pinpointed the need to know more about the students. This study argues that, as Rose stated, more needs to be known about returning students to support the development of more appropriate policies and programming.

This chapter speaks directly to Rose’s quote above as well as this study’s first research question by introducing each of this study’s participants, including their educational trajectories, reasons for leaving school, and motivations for their return. The diversity of these participants comes through vividly and transcends the simple demographic and attribute data so frequently used to study this population. For example, Pati and Ana are both Latinas with a young child at home, but that is almost all they share in common. They had different experiences in their previous schooling and they followed different paths in their return to school. Detailed profiles, synthesized from interview data and dossier analyses, illustrate the uniqueness of each participant and their return to school. This analysis of the participants’ diversity shows clearly that one-size-fits-all programming is unlikely to support all returning students; a student who was pushed out of high school will likely need different types of programming than would a student who returned to school following a job layoff. In this way, this chapter responds to this study’s first research question: Who are returning students? What are their characteristics, and what educational trajectories do they follow in their return?
Ana

Ana’s return to school suggests a strong motivation to better provide for her family, but also some regrets that she did not return earlier.

Ana: Because now I got the experience of working without a college degree and knowing what I could have had if I had one. That might see 24-year-olds 22-year-olds that are in the field that I'm trying to go into, and knowing that I could have been there already.

Ana is a Latina in her mid-twenties. She was born and raised in the town in which she still lives. She said she graduated from the local high school, but added that she did not continue to college because of money. A single mother of a preschool-aged boy, she talked frequently about her son and reported a cordial relationship with the boy’s father, who also lives in the same town. Ana said her son frequently stays with his father, which she reported was extremely helpful for her this summer while she was taking five classes. Although she reported that she does not speak Spanish, her son’s father does, and she reported being pleased that her son is learning Spanish.

Throughout both interviews, Ana spoke of her family – her parents and her younger sister – and the significant amount of support they have given her in her return to school. “Luckily my family's always been there. They've been a big help with my son.”

Ana presented herself as a soft-spoken, reserved woman who appeared very good at juggling multiple demands on her time: she arrived for the first interview with her son in tow, but had also brought a tablet PC with games installed to keep him entertained while we talked. Ana described herself as shy, and when asked about writing her application essays, she replied “I was nervous. You know, having to write about myself and why I thought I deserved to go to school again was really I'm not one to talk about myself so it was I was a little nervous.”

1 All names used in this study are pseudonyms.
Ana has worked for the school district as a significant support needs special education paraprofessional for seven years. Her students require one-on-one attention. The individuals who wrote letters of recommendation described her as patient, dedicated, tenacious, and a hard-working, dependable leader. She said she enjoys her job, and she clearly takes pride in the skills as she works with her special education students in the general education classroom; when asked about her job she responded: “I’ve noticed a lot of regular ed teachers don't know how to handle the students’ behaviors. And it kind of makes them nervous working with our kids.” Although she said she enjoys her job, she added that her return to school was an opportunity “to better myself and get hopefully get a better job.”

Through her sister, who works at a different school, Ana learned of the Career Ladder program by chance. Ana said she decided it would be a great opportunity for her, so she applied. She said she had to ask her principal and a teacher for letters of recommendation, a process she described as reassuring. “They thought it was great that I was going to go back and so they were really encouraging me to go back. A lot of teachers in the school had told me “go back” you know it'd be great for you. You're great with the kids.”

With her graduation now approaching, Ana said she is planning to continue to work towards a bachelor’s degree, and said she is considering the University of Phoenix due to the flexibility offered by on-line classes. She said on-line classes appeal to her because they would allow her to spend more time with her son.

Ana: I just kind of feel bad because I'm not you know going out and doing things with him. He has to kind of sit and entertain himself. And that's the only thing for me. He's really good and he lets me work. It's knowing that he sitting in front of an iPad or (laugh) playing by himself.
The first in her family to attend college, Ana expressed pride in reaching a goal she set for herself in her return to school – she will be graduating with an associate’s degree and moving toward a bachelor’s – and that her parents shared that sense of pride in her accomplishment.

Ed

Ed’s schooling followed a path that started off as so many do – matriculating directly from high school to college, but then stopping out, without any real sense of direction.

Ed is an Anglo in his mid-30’s. He grew up in the area and graduated from a local high school. His parents divorced when he was in elementary school; he and his siblings lived with their mom, who attended a technical school to become a nurse to better support the family. Ed is physically a big guy, a former defensive lineman for his high school football team. He began tutoring in a nearby elementary school as part of his high school coursework, during which he discovered that he loved teaching. “And then I did a you know I enjoyed it so much that I did it even on my free time I would go over there and help out.” He was offered a full scholarship to a university in a neighboring state in their school of education, and attended that university for a single year. He said he withdrew after one year because “you know, I left my girlfriend behind. I left you know first time I’d lived away from home… and I just I don’t think my heart and soul was in it.” Following his withdrawal from university, Ed said he returned home.

Ed: and you know I pretty much bounced around. Odd jobs. Used car salesman. (laughter) I’ve done a lot of jobs. Like I said, I toured my buddy’s band for a while, and then when I came back I got a temp job with the school district. Mowing the lawns….I was a lunch lady (laughter) for a little bit.

Ed currently works in the grounds and maintenance at a local school district, but voiced a strong desire to be an elementary school teacher.

Ed: And I know when I was in school around that age group, it was the time my mom and my dad got divorced and kind of feeling lost. You know, my mom working and not having a lot of time for us and so a lot of the strong support people in my life were my
teachers. And school was kind of like a haven to get away from home you know at times.”

This quote suggests that Ed’s attachment and commitment to the teaching field are positive and deeply personal, and therefore important motivators for his pursuit of a career in this field. However, Ed did not actively pursue a return to school and continuation toward a teaching career. Rather, the catalyst for his return was a vague sense of needing to “settle down” and “become an adult,” coupled with being in a school’s break room and serendipitously seeing a printout of an email about the Career Ladder program. He decided to apply, and described himself as “surprised” when he was accepted. Additionally, Ed said he is engaged to be married to a woman with a young child; the frequency with which he mentions them suggests a growing sense of need for a better job with a better salary to support his new family.

Ed presented himself as a big guy with a big heart; gentle, warm, and friendly, the big brother that everyone wishes they had. During the interview, he was thoughtful and open with his ideas and opinions, nervous during the interviews, constantly adjusting his baseball cap. He frequently spoke of his success in the Career Ladder program, suggesting pride at his accomplishments and his high grades. His college transcript showed a 4.0, supporting his claims. He needed only two developmental classes, one in math and one in English.

More so than other participants in this study, Ed repeatedly and continuously mentioned the cohort of which he is a member, and used strongly positive terms to describe the cohort. “We've all gotten to be really really close. All of us. Thick as thieves as they say.” The cohort model in general, and specifics of this cohort in particular, is a theme common to all interviews, and as such will be discussed in detail in a subsequent chapter.
Kelly

Kelly’s experience with the education system can be characterized as one of significant challenge, graduating from high school due to the efforts of one of her teachers and returning due to the efforts of a close friend.

An Anglo woman in her late-thirties, Kelly is a single mother of a special needs 11-year-old son. With enviable auburn hair and freckles, Kelly presented herself as personable, friendly, and very self-aware, saying of herself “It’s not been easy. I’m not the best of students. I have a hard time organizing my thoughts and um keeping on task. But uh I sure like being back in school. I love learning. I love learning. I do.” During the interview, Kelly spoke frequently of her passion for children and for safe driving; she said that her father’s death in a car accident in 1999 fueled her interest in keeping children safe. Individuals who wrote letters of recommendation for her described her as creative, tenacious, patient and compassionate with the students on her route, and devoted to her son. One writer said that Kelly “always has a kind word for everyone and a smile on her face.” Although only two letters of recommendation were required, Kelly provided four.

Kelly said she grew up in the state in which she still lives and was able to graduate from high school despite having been diagnosed with dyslexia in the third grade. She said she entered high school reading at the 4th grade level, and struggled throughout her K-12 schooling, frequently skipping class and turning in assignments that were late and poorly completed. This situation changed for Kelly in 9th grade, when she said she began receiving support from one of her teachers.

Kelly: a very dedicated teacher…and he he was not my favorite teacher at all to say the very least. Because he demanded he had expectations for me. He actually wanted me in class.
With his support, she was reading at grade level at the end of 9th grade and completed high school. She said she credits this teacher for turning around her academic situation.

Kelly was not a paraeducator when she was accepted into the Career Ladder program and returned to school. She drives a school bus, a position that is clearly more than just a job to her. She said that she drives 68 students on her route and knows all of them by name.

Kelly: So, you know, the first you know month or so you’re learning names. You’re building relationships. You’re building rapport with these kids. Cuz that’s so important when you drive them. To get them to respect you. The way that I have been most successful in doing that is to let them know that I care about them….I mean, it’s not anything unusual to see me come in 15 minutes early on my route to make phone calls home. You need to get up I’ll be there in 15 minutes.

It does not appear that this dedication to her job and the students on her route is simply talk. She arrived at the first interview with a bruise on her face, saying that she had been in a physical altercation during her route involving the boyfriend of one of the students she drives, a student she referred to as “my little girl.” She discussed the incident in detail prior to the interview, and returned to it during the interview; details she provided were consistent with each other.

But Kelly’s words also suggest that she was sensitive to being a bus driver in a program designed for paraeducators, and that this sensitivity may have contributed to self-doubt. When discussing her application to the program, she said

I sincerely did not think I had a snowball’s chance. I’m a bus driver. Not a paraprofessional. Not somebody who works with kids for eight hours a day. And then I'm thinking there are so many other more qualified people. More you know, that have more to offer. I don't know why they would pick somebody like me.

Less than 10 minutes later Kelly repeated these thoughts, discussing herself and other student:

We're bus drivers, not paraprofessionals. Not the teachers. Not teachers. We're odd people out. Everyone else in the program were uh were paraprofessionals. People who seem to have a whole lot of knowledge with kids.

Through these words, Kelly expressed her thoughts that regardless of her hard work and commitment to the high school students she drives, she was somehow inadequate, that she did
not have as much to offer as the other students who were paraeducators. Her words also suggest a sense of not belonging in the program, describing herself and the other students as “odd people out” compared with the other students in the program.

Despite her negative experiences in high school, Kelly applied for the Career Ladder program at the encouragement of a friend, who had also returned to school. Her community college transcript showed two developmental math classes and one developmental English class taken there. However, despite earning 28 credits with a GPA above 3.0, Kelly withdrew from the Career Ladder program and did not respond to a request for a follow-up interview.

**Lenny**

Lenny’s path to school took him directly from high school to college, but once he had reached college he seems to have stepped back and wondered why he was there. After a single year at a state university, he reassessed his college experience and decided to withdraw.

Lenny: I was somewhat successful at school at college but there were some classes that I didn't do well in….they were okay, but I really didn't have like a good idea of why I was there. What was my purpose? Other than going to college and having the experience.

Citing the high costs of college tuition, Lenny said he withdrew “to pursue something else,” that “something else” being a 35-year-career in the airline industry. This quote points to the importance that Lenny places not on education for the sake of education but education for a purpose. To Lenny, college itself is not the goal; college seems to be the conduit for the attainment of other goals.

Lenny is a Latino in his early 60s. He has lived most of his life in the area in which he now lives with his wife. His children are adults and have children of their own. All of Lenny’s extended family lives in the area, and in the interviews he expressed sadness and regret that his being in school has taken him away from some family activities.
Lenny: And I think my family, not my immediate family but my extended family is suffering, seeing my father enough, seeing my brother and sister enough. There's events within the family that I can't attend because I'm doing work for school. So that's my personal life is suffering.

This quote demonstrates the value that Lenny places on his family, but also vividly illustrates the sacrifices that he has had to make in returning to school, sacrifices he is willing to make but which cause him obvious distress.

After Lenny withdrew from college, he began working for a national airline in customer service, food service, and other jobs; he worked for that airline for 35 years and retired five years prior to his return to school. At the encouragement of a career coach and motivated by a retirement income that was too low to support himself and his wife, he began working with a local school district. This began his journey into his second career in the public school system, a career that he described in his program application as “a labor of love and a way to give back to my community.” He began this second career as a school security officer, then moved into a position as a classroom para-educator in severe special needs and English language arts. He said these are jobs which he enjoys and which have supported his motivation to return to school.

Lenny also mentioned working in a school environment, surrounded by teachers with college degrees, as a motivation for returning to school.

Lenny: I really felt when I first got into the schools pretty intimidated by teachers. And their credentials. So that was hard at first when you realize where you landed. It's kind of like ‘I think I'm a little short here. Can I even have conversations with these people?’

Lenny mentioned that one benefit of returning to school has been an increase in his own confidence in talking with teachers and being treated with greater respect and value; he said teachers now ask for his input in working with students.

Lenny presented himself as a friendly, almost avuncular, figure. He is calm and thoughtful; the individuals who wrote letters of recommendation described him as having a
strong work ethic, a passion for students, and “non-stop cheerfulness.” One individual described the strong relationships he has forged with his students; both individuals described his kindness, patience, and caring attitude toward the students. Lenny mentioned in his application that in addition to his job he volunteers as a court appointed special advocate for children. In both interviews, Lenny spoke frequently about his students and how much he loves his new career.

Lenny discovered the Career Ladder program by way of an email from the school district, applied, and was accepted. Although his placement test placed him in four semesters of developmental math, he said he retook the test and placed into only one semester. That one semester of math, however, turned into a significant challenge. Although all participants in this study discussed challenges with math, Lenny did so more frequently, in far greater detail, and with more vehemence that did others. Experiences with math and how the participants met those challenges proved to be a major theme that cut across all interviews; as such it will be addressed more deeply in a subsequent chapter.

Lenny has progressed through the program, and is likely to graduate with an associate’s degree in the spring, which he said represents a big accomplishment. He added that he might not transfer immediately to a 4-year college for a bachelor’s degree due to his wife’s illness. “as far as my education as far as (.) I think (.) I want to keep learning. But I think that as far as formal education so to speak attending college I think this is probably it for me. Yeah.” This was spoken with multiple pauses and hesitations, and Lenny’s body language and tone of voice suggest that his wife’s illness was painful for him to discuss.

Lia

Lia’s path to school can be characterized by a strong desire for a diploma and the job opportunities and status that that diploma would afford. “I’d always wanted a college degree but
it I’ve always been busy either having kids or raising them or whatever. Other things." Like
being in a car with a flat tire, she had a clear goal but was not able to move toward it.

Born and raised in Madrid, Spain, Lia married an American, immigrated to the US, and
landed in a western state near the town in which her husband was raised. She has two daughters,
one in elementary school and one in middle school. Although Lia’s in-laws live nearby, her own
extended family all live in Spain. In the past, she and her husband and daughters have frequently
gone to Spain for 5-6 weeks during the summers to visit her family, but these trips have tapered
off due to Lia’s summer coursework. She said that when she graduates this spring, she will take
the family to Spain for an extended visit; she added that it will be her first trip back home since
her mother died, so she expected it to be an emotional trip but one she is looking forward to.

Lia identified herself as bilingual and bicultural, and a letter of recommendation written
for her by the principal at the school in which she works stated that she is certified by the school
district as an interpreter and translator. Lia currently works as a health room paraprofessional at a
dual-language elementary school; she recently expanded her work duties to include Native
Language tutoring for 4th and 5th grade students in Spanish and math. Lia presented herself,
through her body language and tone of voice, as confident and competent; she laughed easily and
made jokes through the interview. Individuals who wrote letters of recommendation for her
describe her as highly organized, efficient, personable and easy to work with; one added that she
has established excellent relations with students, parents, and staff at the school in which she
works. Her office, in which the first interview took place, is covered with artwork from students
she has helped in the health room.
These attributes are traits Lia has tried to instill in her daughters. She said she has taught them how to cook simple meals for nights that she is in class, but she has also balanced that with appropriate expectations and a sense of humor.

Lia: Last night the girls fixed dinner for (my husband). And them. And when I came the kitchen was a big mess but they were fed and showered. And had done their homework.

This quote illustrates ways in which Lia keeps her life in balance and ensures that the logistics of managing a family are addressed, but also how she keeps things in perspective to reduce her own stress. The kitchen could wait; what was important was that the family was fed and clean and homework was done. And she was not the one who had to do it all.

Lia described her K12 schooling as Spain as academically rigorous, and following graduation she attended a fashion design school and a school that offered certification as a preschool teacher. She has worked as a preschool teacher for several years both in Spain and in the US, but expressed through the interviews a strong desire for a college degree and a teaching credential to become a teacher. The following quote exemplifies both her desires for a degree and her sense of humor:

Lia: …early childhood is always my interest and if I want to do what I want to do I need more education and and I don't know um I've always been self-taught and I've read so much it just seems silly that I wouldn't have a college education you know what I mean? And then the jobs you can access are very limited. Even if you want to create your own a lot of people don't. Having a college education gives you more credibility. Not to say that everybody with a college education is credible (laughter). Or not everyone that doesn't have a college education is not credible. But unfortunately society has said that.

This quote points to the status that Lia appears to afford a college degree, and suggests her strong desire to earn that status and respect that would come with a degree. As with most of the participants in this study, working in a school environment, where paper credentials make a difference in job status and pay, can prove to be an important catalyst for a return to school.
Lia said her desires for her future include continuing her education at a 4-year university and then a Master’s. These plans reflect the high value she appears to place on formal education that leads to a degree: the diploma that represents opportunities for a fulfilling career that would allow her to realize her commitment to bilingual language development for Latino children.

Lucy

Lucy’s path to school can be characterized by frustration that what she had been doing for so many years allowed her to see her lifelong goal but not reach it. She said she has always wanted to be a teacher but she couldn’t become a teacher because she lacked the specific academic credentials.

Lucy: I have been sitting around wishing I was a teacher. Because my sociology degree was not getting me my teaching license. It wasn't doing it. And I had spent I've spent several years with it and it's helped me get jobs that it's helped me be successful in my jobs. But it didn't get me what I truly wanted in my heart.

Lucy is an Anglo woman in her late 40s. She lives in the area with her husband; her two sons are grown. Lucy said she grew up in the rural Midwest in a town with a population of 300. She moved to this area following her graduation from high school at the encouragement of a cousin, who was enrolled at a university in western state. Lucy said she enrolled at this university but for only one semester:

Lucy: I came from a small town of 300 people and I would go to lectures you know and the lectures had more than that in the entire hall… And that was tough for me coming from a small town. and you know, you know everybody and everything. And then you go to a place that's like so foreign and and I'm you know I graduated from high school when I was 17 years old you know. And here I am at (university) and that was I I only went there a semester. I didn't do it any more after that.

This quote suggests that Lucy was overwhelmed by the size and impersonality of a large university and was also distracted by the newness of the experience and the diversity of this new environment. However, she said that a few years later she enrolled in a distance learning degree program through a university in New Zealand. Follow-up questioning about how she managed to
enroll, obtain a passport, and actually travel to New Zealand periodically, she revealed that a friend of hers was already enrolled in that program and he guided her through the process. She said she earned a BA in sociology through that program; a diploma from that university was hanging on her office wall. Lucy did not discuss her grades or specific dates of attendance; there were no transcripts from that university in her file.

Lucy did return to school previously: she took two classes at a local community college in the 1990s, and an additional 50 credits in the mid-2000s. Unfortunately, only 15 of those credits applied toward her current program of study. Additionally, she placed into three semesters of developmental math, delaying her degree completion and adding to her frustration.

Lucy: So I started to get really really frustrated because I'm like I'm going to have like as many years as a doctor has by the time I'm done. And still I don't have a teaching degree. Although presenting herself through her body language and tone of voice as a strong, confident woman, Lucy spoke hurriedly, in breathless half-sentences, almost talking over herself, suggesting a level of nervousness during the interviews. Further, she described herself as “just a scared little chicken baby inside” while she was going through the Career Ladder application process. She said she did not attend the first informational meeting because she was too scared. “I was petrified of not fitting in,” she said. Throughout the first interview she reported a great deal of fear, angst and self-doubt as to her qualifications for the program. However, this changed rather dramatically in her second interview; in discussing her upcoming graduation and transfer to a 4-year university, Lucy said with a confident voice “I don't see any reason why they wouldn't accept me.” This change is also reflected by other participants in this study; as such, it will be examined in greater detail later in this chapter.

The individuals who wrote letters of recommendation for Lucy described her as hard-working, creative, organized, and determined. One individual wrote that Lucy “shows a true
passion and dedication for working with young children.” Lucy currently works as a director of an extended day kindergarten program at a local elementary school, and during the summers she directs a full day licensed childcare program at that school. She said she has been in this line of work for 25 years, and although she enjoys her job she desperately wants to be a teacher.

Lucy: You see the job that I'm in now? This is as close as I could get to teaching. Without having a teaching degree. This is what I've done this job for 25 years. Because this is the closest I can get to teaching without teaching. Without having the teaching credentials.

Her return to school leads to the teaching credentials that Lucy so greatly wants.

Maria

Maria’s life history and her return to school reflect significant hardship. “So, you know I've been from a long line of poverty. So college wasn't an option for me.” Maria described in detail her hardscrabble childhood and urgent need to work to support her family, which led to her withdrawal from high school before graduation. But the desire to go to college was always there.

Maria: I'm proud of myself too walking into (the community college) made me feel real proud that here I am finally finding my dream of going to college cuz I had always wanted to go to college. Just never could.

Maria is a Latina in her 60’s; she has three grown children and several grandchildren, all of whom live nearby. The youngest of eight children, Maria’s parents divorced when she was four years old. She said her mother worked as a maid cleaning hotel rooms to support the family, and in a particularly poignant narrative Maria described herself and her sisters working in their mother’s place when she got sick.

Maria: And then sometimes we had to miss school when she was sick. And go take her place at work. And her boss allowed all that. So she didn't lose any pay. We didn't gain any pay (laughter).

Maria seems to have worked all her life. She did earn a GED many years ago, which enabled her to reach a relatively well paying job as a receiving clerk at a department store, a job at which she worked for many years. After she was laid off from that job, Maria began working as a bus
driver for a local school district, a job she said she enjoyed until she was injured practicing an evacuation through the bus’ emergency exit. Maria said she broke her leg, an injury that she said required two surgeries, 17 screws, two rods, and a plate to mend. She did negotiate with the district through a workman’s compensation attorney, and was given a choice between taking a different job or leaving work on disability.

Maria: I don't want to stay home. I don't want anything free. What am I going to do at home? It's not like I have little kids anymore. If I would have been younger had little kids I might have been different. But I wanted to just continue to work. I didn't want to be paid to stay home. I didn't want free anything.

This quote speaks to the value that Maria places on work as well as toughness and ability to stick up for herself. Another participant in this study referred to Maria as “a spitfire.” In her lengthy narrative of her negotiations over receiving disability for an injury she sustained at work, Maria demonstrated her street smarts by retaining her own lawyer, too wary of a potential conflict of interest with the union lawyer. The negotiations led to the school district offering her a position as a para-educator in a local middle school.

Maria’s street smarts were a strong theme throughout her interviews, and were demonstrated by several instances of creative problem solving. She said she learned Spanish from a co-worker when she was 27 years old.

Maria: I decided I wanted to learn I worked with a girl from um Colombia? She had blonde hair and green eyes and she spoke nothing but Spanish. She was here trying to learn English. And she was working. We both worked together and so she would teach me a word in Spanish and I would teacher her a word in English, every day. And at the end of the week we would test each other.

When she first returned to school, she was faced with writing her first essay in her English class and did not know how to get started. She enlisted help from her daughter, who had returned to school several years earlier. As she struggled through her developmental math classes, she was fortunate enough to have an instructor who meshed with her needs. She did well in this
instructor’s class, and followed her to another campus to take the next math class with her, even though the other campus was further from her home.

As Maria’s graduation approaches, she is uncertain about continuing. She said that as much as she would like to continue to a 4-year university, her family provides other, more attractive, outlets for her.

Maria: No I haven't decided. Well, you know the other day my daughter said gee mom you don't ever have time for you to do your grandmotherly role anymore. And it's true. Like yesterday was my grandson's birthday my little 6-year-old. 5-year-old he turned 6. And I forgot to call him because I was so stressed about my classes. I went from here to school and then I don't get out of school until nine thirty. I didn't even have time for dinner. yeah. So go straight from work to class. at 9:30 he's in bed. you know. When I thought to call him his bedtime's 8:30. So, I didn't have a chance. I'll make it up to him. So, but yeah, it has hurt my family life style a lot.

Maria’s words point not to barriers and baggage but to attractive life choices. Children are not baggage. They contribute to a healthy, balanced, enriched life. Missing her grandson’s birthday because of stress and work, without time for dinner, clearly weighs heavily on Maria, and will clearly be a factor in her final decision to continue her education. But for the time being, she has realized her goal of going to college and earning a degree.

Pati

Pati’s return to school shows multiple starts and stops. But as often as she stepped out of school, she always stepped back in. She is now poised to graduate with an associate’s degree, the first in her family to even attend college, let alone graduate.

Pati is a young Latina who lives with her husband and elementary-school-aged daughter in a small town on the eastern plains. She is petite and so soft-spoken that her voice was frequently obscured by the background conversations between customers and baristas in the coffee shop where her interviews took place. Pati’s demeanor is calm and gentle, and the
individuals who wrote letters of recommendation for her described her as compassionate, kind, hard-working, and encouraging toward other students.

Pati immigrated from Mexico as a child, and started her schooling in the US in third grade without speaking any English. Her extended family lives close by, and she described a positive relationship with her siblings. However, she said her relationship with her parents, particularly her father, are slightly strained due to what she described as discouragement for her continuing her education. “But, he like he doesn't support us right now. ‘Well, you're married. You're already married. You have children. Why why would you want to be you know in school.’” Pati, in both interviews, attributed this discouragement to cultural differences, yet she adds that she believed her parents are secretly proud of her; she said of her father “I'm sure he's proud of me. Even though he doesn't show me, I know he is.” Given Pati’s soft-spoken and gentle demeanor, it appears contradictory that she would not only disregard her parents’ opinion but actually stand up to them and persist in her education, suggesting a quiet inner strength and determination that she seldom seemed to display to others.

Pati said she did not complete high school; she left in the middle of ninth grade because, she said, she did not have the support of her parents to continue. She also described her experiences in middle and high school negatively.

Pati: I didn't have a good experience when I was in school. I mean, when I was in middle school I can hardly remember any the other teachers and how my classes were. And when you think about that kind of teacher that was always there and pushing you to do better. Those are the kind of teachers you remember. And going back I don't remember one teacher in middle school who did that for me. Because I was behind on everything.

These words suggest estrangement and alienation, both of which are strongly associated with students being pushed out of high school. Yet they also suggest Pati’s motivation for returning to school and her dreams for herself. Throughout her first interview, she described individuals in the GED program by name and a lone Spanish-speaking teacher in middle school who
encouraged and supported her, adding “I want to be one of those teachers who who cares for their students. And because you know my other role models like in my GED program can that’s what I see that really help their students to go on.” These words support an interpretation that her desire to become an elementary school teacher is grounded in her own negative experiences in her own schooling and fueled by individuals who have made a positive impact on her life.

Pati said she began working after she was pushed out of high school, and with the encouragement of her sister she re-entered the educational system by way of a GED. She said she attended a high school equivalency program (HEP), and added she often stepped out of the program to work and help support her parents, with whom she was living during this time. She said that whenever she stopped attending HEP classes her instructor and the program staff called her on the phone and encouraged her to return. Pati persisted and earned her GED in 2010, and through encouragement of her HEP instructor immediately began coursework at the community college through the college’s College Assistance Migrant program (CAMP), which paid her tuition, fees, and books for her first year. She then applied for and was accepted into the Career Ladder program, and will soon be graduating with an associate’s degree.

Despite working and studying for her GED, Pati’s community college transcript showed that she spent four semesters in developmental math, writing, and reading coursework. In direct contrast to the extant literature, which shows a high correlation between developmental coursework and non-persistence, Pati has persisted, and has earned 66 credits and a GPA of 3.5. She attributes her persistence as an adult student to the encouragement she received from her HEP instructor and staff, and to the CAMP staff, who Pati spoke of by name frequently in both interviews. A subsequent chapter of this study will discuss in greater detail how the study participants leverage the social capital available to them, but it is clear that Pati gravitated toward
individuals who positively impacted her persistence and who have inspired her to enter the teaching profession.

Pati said she does not work outside the home for pay; she volunteers at her daughter’s school and at her church’s Sunday school, which in her application essay she described as having led her to her life’s work. As a volunteer at her daughter’s school, she said she helps with reading groups, field trips, and classroom parties, and described a good relationship and open communication with her daughter’s teacher. She described her work as enjoyable and rewarding; she identified seeing the growth in the students as a rewarding aspect of her work. These positive experiences suggest additional reasons for wanting to become a teacher: working in a classroom successfully has shown her that this is a career she enjoys and at which she could excel. Coupled with her desire to be a role model for her daughter and her siblings, Pati’s history and her present point to a future teaching career for her and suggest her persistence to a BA.

Victoria

Victoria’s return to school appears to be circuitous and relatively smooth compared to other participants. Having returned to school previously, a decade earlier, Victoria seems to have had few challenges in this most recent circuit. She spoke frequently of the amount of support she receives from her husband and their daughters, from her colleagues at work, and from the Career Ladder program. Victoria spoke of what happened in her family once she was accepted into the program.

Victoria: And we actually sat down and had a little talk because it was going to be a challenge. So you know. We're going to have to work some things out, like because I am married, so maybe my husband picking up the girls some days. You know, and I explained to the girls you know I'm going back to school and yeah. So the first thing I did was let them know and they were happy, but they knew that there was going to be some changes.
Earlier in the interview she explained that she does not do schoolwork on Saturdays because her daughters play soccer “so I just leave that as a family day.” Additionally, Victoria spoke of negotiating with one of her instructors to take a class via independent study so she could be at home with her daughters more often to assist with homework. The quote above and these additional vignettes suggest that Victoria not only values her own and her daughters’ education but also has negotiation and planning skills that she leverages to maintain balance in her life.

Victoria is a Latina in her 30’s; she, her husband, and their two middle-school-aged daughters live in the area. She grew up in the area, attending and graduating from a local high school. She said that both of her parents are originally from Mexico, and that she grew up speaking Spanish at home. Petite and soft-spoken, she smiled often, and her body language showed pride in her accomplishments in her return to school. In her application essay, she wrote that her own mother was single, and that Victoria took her first job at the age of 14 to help support her family. She currently works as a para-educator in a dual-language elementary school, and identified herself as bilingual English and Spanish. Following her high school graduation, Victoria earned certificates in early childhood education from a local community college in 2005 and 2006. The individuals with whom she works and who wrote letters of recommendation for her described her as dedicated, knowledgeable, caring, hard-working, good-natured, and easy to work with. These letters and her application essay align with her interview data. Unlike the other participants in this study, Victoria had not met the researcher prior to the interview.

In her first interview, Victoria arrived late due to needing to work with a student. She presented herself as a very quiet, reserved woman. At one point she laughed and said “I’m so shy so I’m just a really shy person. She seldom spoke of her personal life, frequently redirecting her responses to open-ended questions back to her job; in the initial question asking for a biography,
she began with “after I graduated from high school…” She did not speak of her childhood, but did mention one high school teacher by name; saying that that teacher “encouraged me to do well and she was always on top of teachers you know making sure that I was doing well in high school. So she was a great person there.” However, despite her claims of being shy and the soft-spoken demeanor she presented, Victoria reported actually picking up the phone and calling the program director, whom she did not know, to request application materials, suggesting an inner strength and confidence concealed by a quiet and reserved exterior.

Following Victoria’s graduation from high school, she was encouraged by an aunt to begin working for the local school district as a para-educator. She said she has worked in several different schools in various grade levels and job responsibilities, and currently works as a para-educator in a dual language elementary school, tutoring students in both Spanish and English. Victoria learned of the Career Ladder program through another para-educator at her school, and several of the classes that she had taken in a previous return to school transferred and applied toward her Career Ladder program. She described an overall positive experience in her classes, citing the amount of support she received from the instructors.

Victoria did suggest that she intends to continue her education at a local 4-year university once she graduates this spring. However, she did not respond to a request for a follow-up interview, so her specific plans for her future are unclear.

**Analysis of Emerging Themes**

In these profiles, few patterns emerged. Each participant followed a different path, unique to her or his own situations and previous experiences with schooling. The diversity of these participants’ life situations and educational trajectories illustrates vividly the inappropriateness of lumping all of returning students together in one single box labeled “returning students,” or conflated with the label of “adult student” or “non-traditional student.” The diverse nature of the
interruptions in the schooling of these participants distinguish them clearly from adult students and non-traditional students who did not experience an interruption in their schooling. These data add depth, richness, and understanding to the way in which returning students should be studied.

However, despite all the uniqueness among the participants and their divergent pathways back to school, all participants shared similarities in their previous experiences with schooling, their beliefs toward school, their juggling of multiple demands on their time, their growing confidence, the reasons they may have left and the reasons they returned.

**Leaving school.**

All of the participants in this study experienced an interruption in their schooling, and as such they left the educational system at some point: Pati and Maria withdrew from school before completing high school; Lia, Ana, Kelly, and Victoria completed high school but did not immediately matriculate to college; Lucy, Lenny, and Ed all matriculated to college but did not stay longer than two semesters. Reasons that they gave for leaving ran the gamut from not having money to attend college (Ana) to having to work to support the family (Pati and Maria), to being homesick (Ed), to being overwhelmed by the size of a research university (Lucy). Kelly said she struggled throughout her school years because of dyslexia; Victoria and Ana both were non-committal about their previous experience in school. However, digging deeper into the interviews with the study participants suggests more nuance than the participants’ overtly stated reason. Analysis of participant narratives shows that every participant had either a highly negative experience in their previous schooling, or at the very least an ambivalent one.

Pati and Maria both said they left high school to work to help support the family; according to the literature this is a common story. However, analyzing their stories about high school adds nuance to that story. Pati spoke painfully and eloquently about her experiences in high school, saying “I don’t remember having good teachers.” She added
Pati: because I didn’t have a good experience when I was in school. I mean, when I was in middle school I can hardly remember any the other teachers and how my classes were. And when you think about that kind of teacher that was always there and pushing you to do better. Those are the kind of teachers you remember. And going back I don’t remember one teacher in middle school who did that for me. Because I was behind on everything.

Being a student and having poor quality teachers is one thing. Being a student without a single teacher to advocate or offer support, encouragement, and mentoring is quite another thing. For Pati to not having had a teacher who pushed her, and at the same time feeling pressure at home to work to support the family, it should not be surprising that she withdrew from high school at the beginning of 9th grade.

Pati was not the only participant to speak of a negative experience with her teachers. Lia’s experience stands out as an extreme example of how much damage can be done by a high school teacher whose words created difficulties for Lia even years later:

Lia: My math teacher in high school was (long pause) either burned out or she really wasn't her calling and she just got in to teaching because you know society pushed her into that whatever. The fact is that she always made me feel like I was math stupid.

Lia added that this teacher actually called her and her class “stupid.” In response to a follow-up question about the effects of these words on her, Lia responded:

Lia: I don't think it was a conscious conscious thing. you know. I think I just uh survived then. and and then when I didn't have to deal with math anymore I never did. So I didn't have to visit that feeling any more so. when I had to when I had to actually the first time I felt like that I had to revisit that feeling was to get this job.

Studying, reviewing, and successfully passing the math test for the job she currently has appeared to boost her confidence:

Lia: and and then I passed! And I passed with a 100%. And I'm like "hum. Well maybe well" And then I thought well I'm still just an elementary math right? And then I had to take an Accuplacer? And that put me in Algebra 1. And I started and I was started learning I started remembering a lot of it. And I started getting and then I wanted to call the teacher I had because I liked it. And I remember liking it when I was a kid. and I just wanted to call her and say "You know what? You're a jerk." (laughter). I may be math
stupid, you are teaching stupid. Because you made a kid who liked math hate it." And it's not fair! you know.

Maria spoke of the racism she faced as a Latina in junior and senior high school.

Maria: Walking to school with a burrito they made fun of you. They called you beaner. yeah. It was very prejudiced. back in when I was in junior high school. yeah. So we would sit there with our bologna sandwiches yeah. We'd take our own lunch. But if you pulled out a burrito the kids in the cafeteria made fun of you. yeah. So we didn't ever do that.

These narratives were offered by the participants without prompting for specifics. The researcher had simply asked for a “mini biography.” Yet Pati, Maria, and Lia all volunteered experiences from their previous schooling that were strongly negative. The length and detail of these narratives suggest that the participants still remember the experience vividly, and still feel hurt and pain years or decades later.

Yet in contrast to these three negative stories, two opposing narratives emerged, one from Pati and one from Kelly. These two narratives show the exact opposite of the two above: the positive power of a caring and gifted teacher in ensuring the successful completion of a program of study. Pati might not have had a middle school teacher who took any interest in her, but during her enrollment in a GED program, both the administrator and the teacher, Joe, did take interest in her. She said the administrator called her on the phone and emailed when she had not been in class, and Joe stayed in touch with her after she had earned her GED. “It was very it was very how would you say you never forget those you know those teachers. Always there for you.” She said Joe encouraged her to continue taking classes at the community college, he encouraged her to apply for the Career Ladder program, and he wrote one of the letters of recommendation for her. He was a teacher who was there for her. Pati spoke of Joe several times throughout her first interview, suggesting that the attention she received from him and from the GED program administrator made a big impact on her and was important to her continuing her education.
Kelly also had a teacher in high school who was there for her, Mr. Moore, who she said went out of his way to support her in overcoming her dyslexia and learning to read.

Kelly: I had a very dedicated teacher by the name of Mr. Moore. And he he was not my favorite teacher at all to say the very least. Because he demanded he had expectations for me. He actually wanted me in class.

Kelly said that Mr. Moore tutored her in reading during lunch periods and signed her up for theater to encourage her to read scripts.

Mr. Moore did that to me and I was so angry with him. I did not like him at all. But sure enough within a year I'm coming out of the end of my 10th grade year and I tested out of special education. And I went from a 4th grade reading level to a 9th grade reading level within a year. So. that's the motivation of a good teacher. a dedicated teacher. that's I think that's what has kind of embedded in me you know.

Similarly to Pati’s narrative about her GED program administrator and instructor, the length and detail of Kelly’s narrative suggest the positive impact that a caring, dedicated teacher can have. Decades later the memories remain. Further, in Kelly’s story of Mr. Moore, she says his dedication had “embedded” in her and inspired her own desire to be a teacher. Pati made a similar comment in her interview, that having a strongly negative experience in middle school but a contrasting positive experience in her GED program inspired her to choose teaching as a career, saying that she wanted “to be one of those teachers who who cares for their students.”

It is important to note that correlations between the experiences related here and attrition cannot be made and are not being made here. The experiences related by the participants here show that there is likely to be more to the story than simply “I left high school to work to support my family.” Absent of strongly positive experiences, it is possible that the educational system held little attraction for them. This will be taken up further in the Discussion chapter.

**Returning to school.**

Despite these negative experiences, the participants are back in school and progressing towards an associate’s degree. The reasons for returning appear to be very similar. None of the
participants returned because of a job layoff, divorce, or other negative push so often cited in the literature as catalysts for a return (e.g. Genco, 2007; Metzer, 1997). None of them had been actively seeking out a program or college. For each participant, their return was almost serendipitous, motivated by the fortuitous coincidence of seeing a Career Ladder program recruitment email. Ed happened to be in a school lunchroom and saw the email laying on the table. Maria, Ana, and Kelly were given the email by others. The other participants received the email directly, and instead of pressing the Delete button they stopped and said to themselves “why not?” The program presented opportunities to attain a better job (Ana, Pati, Ed, Victoria), realize a lifelong goal (Lucy, Lia, Maria), gain respect (Lia, Lenny), and fill a desire to work with children (Kelly). Some participants returned because of the opportunity to fulfill a life-long dream, Lucy to be a teacher, Lia to have a degree. In their own words, the participants said they returned to school because they saw an opportunity, and they decided to grab that opportunity. Ana stated “I thought it was a great opportunity so I went for it.” Lenny said “I decided to pursue it. It sounded like something that I've always wanted to do was to go back to school…” Lucy was more effusive in talking about receiving the email about the Career Ladder program.

Lucy: Well, I uh I always watched it and I noticed it and but I wasn't a para. So I never thought that it applied to me. But um as I started getting older and more years worked with the district I kept seeing it and I thought well maybe you know maybe I should check in to that.

It is important to reiterate here that the Career Ladder program in which the participants are enrolled is a structured program housed in a community college, with a pre-determined curriculum leading to an associate’s degree that aligns with the participants’ career goals. The program has a director who support the participants in navigating the academic environment and provides financial support. It is not clear how much of an impact these factors had on
encouraging the participants’ return to school. This will be discussed further in the Discussion chapter.

**Staying in school.**

As discussed in chapter 2, the literature is replete with studies involving attrition and reasons why individuals leave the educational system at various points. The participants in this study did leave the educational system, and at various points. Pati and Maria left before completing high school. Ana, Kelly, Lia, Victoria did not matriculate directly to college. Ed, Lenny, and Lucy gave college a try and left after one or two semesters. As all of the nine participants were still in the community college, it is unclear how many will transfer to a 4-year institution and complete a bachelor’s degree, although most of the participants said they did plan to do so. But adding to the literature are reasons, from the participants themselves, why they stayed this time and completed a program of study.

In the second interview, the researcher asked each of the participants why they did not quit; what kept them going and enrolling and progression toward an associate’s degree. Each of the participants gave a different spin on the same reason: they were making well-defined progress despite the difficulties they encountered. Lia articulated this clearly. “I just say, well, one more one less, so you get over with it and then it's done. you know? One more you do, one less you have to do.” The program in which they were enrolled had a predetermined curriculum with a list of classes required for the associate’s degree; each participant had the list in their dossiers with a checkmark and date of completion of the class. As Lia stated, the participants complete a class and can check it off the list, one less that they have to do. Measurable success and progress are visible, providing encouragement and inspiration.

The participants cited several other reasons. Ed and Lenny both said pressure from others and from themselves kept them going. Ed said he had left school previously despite a full-ride
scholarship, and he did not want to lose that opportunity a second time. Lenny expressed concern about that others would think if he withdrew. Both Lucy and Maria said that they had thought about withdrawing because of their math classes; Maria added that she actually went to the program director to withdraw. The program director did not allow her to withdraw, but instead found additional tutoring resources to support both Maria and Lucy in passing their math classes.

The program in which the participants are enrolled provides for a mentor teacher with whom the participant works and with whom she or he can meet to discuss applying their coursework to their teaching, to answer questions she or he may have, or to be a sounding board for encouragement and support. Mentor teachers are offered graduate-level course credit for filling this role. Although some participants mentioned their mentor teachers briefly, Lucy was particularly expressive about her mentor teacher, reporting that she has become “super close with her.” Lucy added that she will need to arrange financing for the time she will be student teaching, and she planned to ask her mentor teacher for advice on how to handle the financial situation. It is unclear how large an impact the mentor teacher has on encouraging the participants to persevere and complete the program. The literature’s findings of the importance of mentors and institutional agents (e.g., Deutsch & Tong, 2011; Karp, 2011) as well as Lucy’s words suggest that the mentor teachers could play an important role in supporting the participants in completing their program of study.

It should be noted here that during the course of this study, Kelly did withdraw from the program. She did not respond to requests from the researcher for a second interview, and she did not remain in contact with the college or the program director. Her reasons for withdrawing are not known.
School as work.

In addition to sharing negative or at least tepid experiences in their prior schooling, participants all shared similar beliefs toward school. In the interview data and dossiers the theme of work emerged strongly; every participant described their employment and what they did for a living. But an additional nuance emerged from the interviews: a belief of school being work. Each of the nine participants described school as work. Throughout their narratives, the words work, hard, and difficult dominated. The word fun or enjoy never appeared. School did not appear to be a place to make lifelong friends or even acquaintances who could provide a professional network or augment their social capital. School did not appear to be a place where they would receive an education for the sake of education. School appeared to be a place to work, and work hard. In 16 interviews totally almost 20 hours, there was not one narrative that included a fun social event at school, either a birthday party or a get-together, running out for coffee or having lunch. Although each participant expressed pride in earning good grades, the participants expressed little joy in their classes. Lucy’s narrative below is illustrative. She brought up the topic of having 75 math problems assigned twice a week in her algebra class.

When asked about her feelings about that she responded:

Lucy: You know what? When I turn it in, and it's all stapled together and stuff, I have a sense of satisfaction once it's turned in. But then I know that it's coming again, so it's very short lived (laugh). Like, you know, when you turn a paper in, and you know you've done it. Or even if you've turned the paper in that you think well this is a B. At least you get that whoooo it's over. you know I've got a little breather. Even with the biology. That test is over, we don't have another test until October 10, I've got some time. I have a sense of hope. Because I think ok, within that time I should be able to learn you know what I need to learn. I shouldn't flunk the next test. With math, that sense of hope never comes back because there's that sense of dread. Because as soon as you turn something in there's another 75 (problems) that need turned in the next time. So there's no sense of accomplishment with it.

Lucy’s words show vividly her feelings toward her class assignments. She used “it’s over” to describe a paper, and “That test is over” to describe a test. She described a “sense of dread” and
“no sense of accomplishment” regarding her algebra assignments. She did not mention what she may have learned from the paper or from the classes, or any class assignment that she may have enjoyed or learned something interesting from. Only one participant mentioned one specific class assignment that he found interesting: Ed briefly described going on a field trip to an art gallery as a class assignment. While it may not be surprising that students do not enjoy exams or algebra problem sets, it is surprising that the participants’ narratives focused so consistently on school experiences being work without counterbalancing narratives of school being a positive learning experience, exciting, or engaging.

Kelly is the lone participant who expressed that “I sure like being back in school.” However, closer examination of Kelly’s statement reveals that she did not really express that she liked school; instead, she expressed that she liked being in school. In a related narrative, Lenny said that the teachers at school in which he works treat him with more respect now that he is back in school. These narratives, coupled with the preponderance of participant narratives of school being work, difficult, and generally unpleasant, suggests that the participants may separate school itself with the concept of being in school. School equals hard work. Being in school equals respect, achieving a goal, being a role model to their children, and source of pride.

School as zooming and flying.

Participants also expressed a belief that being in school was difficult to manage, that school required managing their schedules tightly in order to accomplish everything in their personal lives, in their jobs, and in school that they needed to accomplish in a day. This belief is clearly evident in the realities experienced by the participants. A synopsis of Ana’s schedule on Tuesdays left both her and the researcher breathless:

Ana: I go to work. Drop my son off at day care, go to work, go I have my math tutor at 4:30. And I get out of work at 3:45. So I rush from work to daycare, drop my son off at
my dad’s house, I rush over to Ft. Lupton, and by 4:30, I have a math class from 5 to 7, and then I go pick up my son. And that’s the same on Thursday and I’m at school until 10.

In response to probing questions, Ana said it was approximately 15 minutes between her son’s day care and her work, and 15-20 minutes between her father’s house and school; she described herself as “sometimes exhausted” at the end of the day.

When asked to describe a typical day in which he has class, Ed said:

JSS: Do you usually go straight from work to school.
Ed: every day.
JSS: and you zoom right there
Ed: every day for two years now.
JSS: and when do you have dinner?
Ed: I try to save some of my lunch. So I can and then we have these science classes and they have the labs so you’re not allowed to eat in there.
JSS: oh that’s right.
Ed: so if you're going to eat, get it done. cuz you know. And by the time I get home and I just want a shower so bad. It's all I want!

Lucy responded to a question about how she handles dinner as follows:

Lucy: because I don't even if I had enough time from the time I leave work until I get to school to like even drive through a drive through but I've got I’ve got exactly 30 minutes to get from here to there. till the class starts. and if I don't leave here right at the right at 4:30 then I'm late to the class. and then I disrupt the class when I get there. So, you can't go can't even go through a drive through or anything on your way because there's no time.

Ana agreed that dinner “doesn't always happen sometimes,” and she has frequently eaten out of the vending machines at school. These narratives illustrate the rushing that these participants routinely engage in, that being in school in addition to having a job packs the day, even for those without school-aged children in the home. These narratives also suggest that self-care can get buried in all the zooming and flying.

**School as growing confidence.**

It would be easy to view these negative experiences as baggage and barriers. That could be one way of viewing these participants’ situations. However, using a different, more positive
lens reveals that despite these experiences, the lingering memories of hurt, the incredible amount of work and juggling of responsibilities of home, job, and school, these participants are still in school and progressing towards an associate’s degree. The stories of work hide a deeper level of the value these participants place on hard work and the pride they take in a job well done. The interview data suggest participants’ growing confidence and sense of achievement that they had worked hard and reached their educational goals. Pati’s words are illustrative here. When asked what her impending graduation meant for her, she responded that it was “a huge accomplishment.” Ana’s response to the same question was “I’m proud about it.” Lenny responded “I feel like it's going to be a big accomplishment for me.” People do not derive a sense of achievement from reaching easy goals; they get that sense from reaching challenging goals. Challenging goals take work.

And that sense of achievement appears in the participants’ growing self-confidence. In her first interview, Lucy said she was too scared to attend the informational meeting, and described herself as a “scared little chicken baby.” In contrast, in her second interview, she talked about her continuing her education in a 4-year university and said strongly “I don't see any reason why they wouldn't accept me.” Lenny was full of self-doubt in his first interview; “I mean how do you um you know learn from the instructors, do I take notes do I get a laptop, do I you know what tools do I need to be able to accomplish this.” However, he added

Lenny: So that’s how since I've been in college. Kind of prioritize and things like that. Really has helped me. But I've done it before but yeah, but this gives me more confidence yeah. So I have more confidence now.

Fear and self-doubt changed to confidence since these participants have been in school. The belief that school is scary is not a surprise – the unknown is always scary. But three participants had previous 4-year college experience. Was it a fear of school, or a fear of failure? The participants can be seen as taking a big risk in returning to school. What if you don’t get
accepted to the program? Maria said she did not tell anyone she was applying to the program, saying “I didn't want to be embarrassed if I didn't get it. yeah. Pride. I'm prideful (laughter) I have my pride.” In contrast, in her second interview, Maria described herself as tough.

Maria: I have a strong personality. I don't get pushed around too easily. I like I treat people with respect, but I demand respect back. If you don't give me the respect back I deserve, then you’re not going to get it from me either. I think I am tough.

Ed said that his self-doubt and lack of confidence had changed through his return to school, not only as a student but in other areas as well. He added that this feeling was particularly pronounced after the program director wrote a letter of recommendation for his application to transfer to a 4-year institution and identified Ed as in the top 2% of students in terms of leadership potential.

Ed: But I had never been very self-confident. Especially as a student. so. But I think you know there's something to be said for results you know. So maybe there's maybe now is the time to start believing that I could be one of those people. a good teacher, a leader in society. you know, someone that can step forward and kind of you know move people to come together and to work towards a common goal.

Lia said that being in school helped her recognize the maturity and wisdom she brought to the table. She said that in her 20’s she did not have clear direction, and now that she’s older she knows what she wants and how to achieve it.

Lia: And so now I have the desire and I have direction, I have the motivation. I have the brains. And in my case my personality is the harder it is the more I want to do it. It sounds weird. Kind of like a masochist. But it’s true. The more the busier I am the more things I get done. Those days that you have all day to do one little report, you end up doing the little report at the end you know? I don't know, I think it's just maturation too.

The participants’ words show vividly how they have changed through their experiences. Further analysis reveals greater nuance, which was particularly evident in Lucy’s two interviews. In her first interview, Lucy spoke in breathless half-sentences that were difficult to transcribe. In her second interview, she spoke with noticeably less breathlessness, and her sentences were slower, more fluid, and more complete.
Meaning derived from a return to school.

When asked about what their return to school and their impending graduation meant to them, the participants of this study not unexpectedly expressed pride in their accomplishment of being in college and graduating. Maria’s expression was particularly poignant; she was able to go to college and graduate despite having grown up in poverty with few opportunities.

Maria: an accomplishment. Just something I’ve always wanted to do. It's going to mean to me somebody from the ghetto could actually grow up and go to college and finish and graduate.

Lucy expressed the transformative power of education: providing agency and self-actualization for a new career.

Lucy: This is about the process of re-developing myself. I can once I graduate and I will I fully intend to have a teaching degree right after or I mean right after I graduate. I can still have another career 15 years or so before I even retire, so that's I can have two great careers in my lifetime. Not too many people can say that.

Lucy further expressed that she was not in college for money, that her new career as a teacher would pay less than her current job. Having the career she really wanted was more important to her than money was.

Lucy: So, when I start my first year of teaching, I will make less money than I make now. but, my reward will be that I will have the career that I've always fancied myself for.

Lucy’s words in particular show that adults return to school for many reasons, some clearly articulated, some less so, and a career change often comes as a result of intrinsic motivators rather than simply finances.

Academic abilities and potential.

During analysis of the interview and dossier data, it became clear that something was missing. When the researcher compared these participants’ application materials to her own application materials for graduate school, a major discrepancy emerged: information about the participants’ academic abilities and potential.
With only one exception, academic abilities were nowhere to be found in the participants’ dossiers, which included application essays and letters of recommendation. Essays and letters spoke to the participants’ work ethic, why they would make a good teacher, and why they deserved to be accepted into the Career Ladder program. The letters and essays were replete with excitement and passion. However, even though three of the participants had attended a four-year college previously, transcripts from those colleges did not appear in their dossiers. Only one of the letters of recommendation were written by former teachers or instructors, so none of them could speak to the participants’ academic abilities. The lone exception was Pati, who had returned to school for a GED recently enough that she was able to contact her GED instructor for a letter. Her instructor described her as “an outstanding student since the first moment she walked into my classroom.”

Finally, although the community college system does not use an admission test such as the ACT, they do use a placement test – the Accuplacer – to determine placement into college level courses or developmental courses. Pati and Victoria had previous Accuplacer scores, but none of the other participants took the Accuplacer until after they had been accepted into the Career Ladder program.

The mission of the Career Ladder program is to train a diverse group of para-educators. The skill set for para-educators and all teachers includes both pedagogical skills and content knowledge. The fact that academic abilities, which relate to the learning of content knowledge, were absent from the participants’ dossiers suggests that the team reviewing participant applications may have foregrounded pedagogical potential. It is not the purpose of this study to second-guess admissions teams or to conduct a program evaluation, and this is not the intent here. The need for developmental coursework for the participants should not be a surprise given
how long many of these participants had been away from school, resulting in academic skills that may have grown stale over time. The need for developmental coursework is quite common for community college students, and has been well documented in educational statistics. However, it is clear from the dossiers and interviews that many of the participants were accepted into an academic program with test scores that placed them into several semesters of development coursework. Credits earned in developmental courses do not apply to degrees, and do not transfer, yet they still carry costs for tuition and fees and delay completion of a degree. The widespread need for developmental coursework suggests that program directors and college administrators ensure that these courses and supports are in place such that returning students can successfully complete these classes and move into degree-applicable and transfer-credit coursework as quickly as possible.

Conclusion

This chapter shows that each of the participants in this study followed their own path in their return to school. They have their own histories and their own situations. But they also share many similarities. The participants described school as work and stress, but also as an opportunity for a better job and a better life for themselves and their families. The following chapters will examine the assets and supports that they bring with them to support their return as well as the ways in which they navigate their entry into a new and unfamiliar academic community.
Chapter 5:

Assets and Supports

This chapter responds to this study’s second research question “What types of assets and supports enabled students to return to school and complete a program of study?” Participant interviews showed how heavily the participants relied upon their social capital – their social network of family and friends – to support their return to school. The participants in this study did not return to school on their own. They brought with them a cadre of other people. These people are members of the participants’ social network: family members, friends, and co-workers. In this study, members of the cohort or the community college, including those with official roles such as the program director, are discussed in Chapter 6. This chapter discusses only the participants’ social capital and the ways in which they leverage that social capital to support their return to school.

It is important to note that some participants have large social networks, and therefore a potentially large amount of social capital available to them. Others have social networks that are more limited and circumscribed. Some participants have a great need to lean on and leverage the social network that they have available to them, while others have less need. For some, their social network is geographically close, while for others their social network is more widely dispersed. Regardless, the narratives of every participant included family members and friends, and these narratives included important roles played by this social network.

In the analysis of the narratives, these roles emerged as dominant themes. These roles, rather than the actual individual or relationships, comprise the units of analysis in this chapter. This is because different members of the participants’ social capital played different roles at different times; there was little consistency. For example, parents played a supporting role for
some participants, while for other participants their parents actually resisted their return to school. In some situations, the same individual played different roles in different situations: in one situation the parents may have provided instrumental support while at the same time resisting the participants’ return to school.

Because of the multiple roles played by different social members, the roles will be the focus of this chapter instead of the relationship. This chapter also shows how the participants manage and leverage the social capital that they have available to them, and how they in turn push back on those who resist their return. Five roles dominated the narratives told by the participants; they are described as follows, and the transcripts were coded as follows:

**Cheerleaders:** individuals who reportedly strongly and actively encouraged and supported the participants’ return to school. These individuals often acted as catalysts to action that directly resulted in the participants’ return to school.

**Custodians:** individuals who reportedly provided instrumental support to the participants, including childcare, household management chores, errand-running, etc.

**Caregivers:** individuals who reportedly encouraged participants in a manner that was less active than Cheerleaders. Caregivers also provided emotional support to the participants, and looked to the participant as a role model.

**Commotioners:** individuals who reportedly pushed-back and resisted the participants’ return to school. Commotioners often created the situations that required creative problem-solving on the part of the study participants. It is important to note that Commotioners did not necessarily act in a deliberate, sinister manner. For example, for several participants, the Commotioners were pre-school aged children, too young to have a hidden agenda. In other situations, the Commotioner was a family member who developed a health issue. In neither of
these situations did the Commotioner act intentionally with the goal of derailing the participant for their return.

**Composers:** individuals who wrote letters of recommendation for the study participants’ application to the Career Ladder program. These individuals provide a significant component of social capital, as they directly contribute the participant’s access to education.

**Cheerleaders**

Three participants identified an individual who filled a role of a cheerleader who actively encouraged and supported the participant’s return to school. This role was often filled by a friend or co-worker, part of the participants’ social capital. Kelly’s friend and co-worker Cathy filled this role for her. Kelly’s narrative of her completing and submitting the application to the program vividly illustrates Cathy’s Cheerleader role. First, Cathy gave Kelly the program application and insisted that she fill it out and apply:

Kelly: she actually came during the lunch hour plopped it in front of me and said you need to fill this out. This is for your career.

Kelly spoke of angst and self-doubt she felt while completing the application paperwork, which caused her to delay submitting the application. But Cathy continued in her Cheerleader role by following up with Kelly.

Kelly: I sat on the (application) for several days. Thinking there's no way. And (Cathy’s) like have you turned it in? You're coming up on the deadline. Have you turned it in yet? and she's like dear God, if I have to come to your house and go get it myself and go (laughter) drag you by your hand and put it in, I'll be happy to do that. But I think it would be kind of embarrassing for you.

More than simply encouraging or suggesting, Cathy took an active role in Kelly’s return to school by almost forcing her to apply.
Maria also reported a Cheerleader role filled by a co-worker. Her narrative describing her application to the program shows her co-worker persuading Maria to apply despite Maria’s protests:

Maria: And my friend at work said “Maria, you should apply for that scholarship. I'm going to apply for it.” and she’s the secretary in the office. She said we could I said (the college) is too far. I don’t want to apply after all. I thought about it, and I’m changing my mind. And I said because I said I’m old and pretty soon I’m going to be retiring. I said I really don’t want to go to school. And she said but Maria she says we could ride together. We could car pool, we can have fun she said. And she’s not as old as I am. She’s maybe five years younger. And then I said well, you know, and so I let her push me into it.

As in Kelly’s situation, Maria’s co-worker took an active role in Maria’s return, not simply encouraging but persuading her to apply. These show the importance of another individual acting as a catalyst for the return to school. Both Kelly and Maria were reluctant to apply; they gave reasons why they should not apply, why they were afraid, and why there was no way they would be accepted. The Cheerleader talked them into it. On the surface, it appears that Cheerleaders are not really being leveraged by the participants; rather, the Cheerleaders are the ones precipitating the action. However, the participants who had Cheerleaders leveraged them by accepting their encouragement and persuasion and relying upon it to support their return.

Custodians

Most participants discussed people in their social networks who provided instrumental support, including childcare, transportation, and household chores: Custodians. Adult learning theory asserts that adults add the student role to their existing roles at home and at work (Illeris, 2011; Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2012; Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2012); these study participants are no different. Many of these people are parents or grandparents of young children, most have full-time jobs. Adding coursework to the mix clearly increases their workload. Yet the participants did not appear to view these issues as barriers; rather, they
leveraged their social network to fulfill their work at home as they added work from school to their lives.

**Childcare.**

For returning students with young children, these children and their care dominated the interviews. Ana expressed some of the challenges with balancing children and studying in her narrative about her day and trying to meet with a tutor:

Ana: When I did have (my son) it was hard because I had to bring him along and. I could only expect him to be patient for so long (laugh) he'd say I'm done. (laugh).

And yet the study participants solved this challenge in a variety of creative ways. Kelly’s friend Cathy was more than a Cheerleader; Kelly reported that her friend Cathy’s daughter frequently watched her son while she was in school. Ana described a relationship with her son’s father that was sufficiently positive that enabled her to leverage him to provide childcare while she was in school. Ana also described the benefits to her son in having him stay with his father; last summer her son had neighborhood kids to play with when he stayed with his father, which he did not have in Ana’s neighborhood:

Ana: So that's why it helped me out this summer. When he was with his dad a couple days a week. And he had kids to play with so it wasn't he wasn't doing nothing.

This quote shows that Ana can see the benefits, for both her and her son, of her maintaining a positive relationship with her son’s father. That Ana was able to develop and maintain this relationship for her own benefit and for the benefit of her son speaks to Ana’s willingness and ability to leverage the social capital that she has. Ana further reported that her parents and sister frequently provided childcare while she was in school, suggesting that she is very aware of the assets that her social network – her social capital – can provide in supporting her return to school and her leveraging every bit of social capital that she possesses. As further evidence of her
creativity in meeting the challenge, Ana brought her son to the first interview; she brought a tablet PC with her to keep him entertained while we talked.

Lia reported similar creativity in her narrative of her attending class during the day in summer, when her daughters were not in school. She leveraged her in-laws, who live in the area, her husband, and a friend to provide support during those weeks:

Lia: So this year I we did a different thing each week. My in-laws took them one week my husband took care of them another week, I had a friend visiting from Spain and came for 3 weeks at the end of my semester. So she was with them for about a week and a half while I was in school, and then we had a week off to do stuff. and then um and then there were different camps here and there. Some camps started much later than I started. So I hired a babysitter to come in the morning and then take them to (camp).

This narrative left both Lia and the researcher breathless. Anyone with school-aged children can connect with the annual summer juggling act that parents conduct to arrange childcare while school is not in session. Summer camps are expensive, and some run for only a week or two and/or are for only part of the day. Lia’s creativity in solving this juggling act, through a friend, her husband, and her in-laws, demonstrate her willingness and ability to leverage her social capital to provide care for her children and support her return to school.

**Household chores.**

Even though the study participants have jobs and are in school, the household chores still need to be done. Certainly laundry and cleaning fall into this category, but the study participants who discussed this theme in their narratives told stories that foregrounded cooking and meal preparation. Lia in particular spoke of the tension between cooking, eating a healthy meal, and homework; she leveraged her social capital and enlisted her husband to do some cooking:

Lia: well, I try to cook sometimes I'm doing homework and cooking at the same time. so, I um I usually cook um dinner in the morning or getting ready in the crock pot. I don’t like take out I don't like ordering. I think it's so full of not all but once in a while it's okay. But it's not as healthy. We rely a lot on salads very abundant and with a lot of different things in them. I rely a lot on soups that I make in the crock pot. And my husband can
cook a little bit. Now. (laughter). yeah, he can make burritos (laugh) and he can make you know he can make some good stuff.

In a later narrative, Lia also discussed how she has also enlisted her daughters to take on some of the cooking:

Lia: I taught my girls how to make burritos and make simple meals like salads and stuff like that and they've learned that they have to fix their own lunch or dinner.

Similarly, Pati leveraged cooking support from her sister:

Pati: at that time my sister was living with me and she was able to help me out with the cooking and the other stuff that we have to take care of.

**Caregivers**

Study participants spoke often of receiving encouragement and emotional support from others in their lives. This encouragement was less direct and less active than support from Cheerleaders, but was included in participants’ narratives so frequently that it warranted its own theme. Three areas of emotional support from these Caregivers emerged from the narrative: pride, excitement, and becoming a role model.

**Pride and excitement.**

Participants spoke often of the pride and excitement that others showed in them as they returned to school. This in turn provided emotional support, encouragement, pride in themselves. As participants spoke of this pride and excitement during interviews, their body language and tone and volume of voice changed markedly. They sat up straighter, their faces lit up, and their voices became stronger and louder. Although Ana’s words were understated, she described her family’s reaction to her acceptance with a big smile on her face:

Ana: my family was very proud and excited that I was going to be going back. That made me feel good.
Pati said that despite her father’s initial resistance to her return to school, “I'm sure he's proud of me. Even though he doesn't show me, I know he is.” Ed almost blushed in telling his narrative of showing the acceptance letter to his mother:

   Ed: Then it was um they sent me a letter and yeah I got to show my mom and she was excited.

Lenny’s easy smile became even broader as he described his family’s reaction to his return:

   Lenny: well, they I think they're pretty proud of me that you know they said they can't understand how you're doing this they said but I've got to give you a lot of credit for it.

Without young children in the house, instrumental support appears less pressing for Lucy. However, the emotional support Lucy received from her husband has clearly been important to her; he will be buying her a new car as a graduation present, and her excitement and pride showed through in her large smile and animated tone of voice as she said:

   Lucy: And the thing is that I'm not getting it, he's getting it for me. That's the difference. I'll know what I'm getting, but he's going to get it for me. And then he will put it in the driveway with a big bow on the top.

Maria, in a particularly poignant narrative, said that her return to college represents an accomplishment not only for herself but for her family as well. She said her adult children clearly appreciate her work and achievement:

   Maria: accomplishment. Just something I’ve always wanted to do. It’s going to mean to me somebody from the ghetto could actually grow up and go to college and finish and graduate. And it would represent like I want to say my siblings who never had the chance and maybe I’ll be more worthy of my children and their acceptance. They tease me a lot. It's a lot of fun to be teased by my kids. My son says gee mom he says where do you get the dedication. Sometimes I’m at the library studying I don’t understand where's the dedication I’ve never seen it before. so. And it’s probably true, right? I was being a mother and I was dedicated to that. But, where this dedication to education coming from?

This narrative is poignant on a number of fronts. First, Maria’s pride in her accomplishment vividly shows through as she describes herself as “somebody from the ghetto” who can go to college and graduate. Maria’s life story, of growing up in poverty and working in her mother’s
place when she was sick, point to her recognizing how far her educational trajectory has taken her, beyond what she could have imagined for herself before her return to school. Her words suggest that Maria recognizes how much she has accomplished and her pride in doing so. However, her words also show how much value she places on a degree. The very thought that her adult children would not think her worthy of acceptance because of her lack of a degree is rather gut-wrenching. However, her adding that it is fun to be teased by her kids suggests that she acknowledges the value of a degree but that she also acknowledges the value of her family and the support she receives from them to support her return.

**Being a role model.**

Many of the study participants discussed their return to school as providing an avenue for their becoming a role model for others, particularly their own children. This in turn gave the participants sense of self-pride. Victoria, with two daughters in middle school, said

Victoria: I feel proud. and because you know I feel like I was going to be um like a good role model for my children as well.

Some participants did not use the words *role model*, but their narratives clearly showed the positive affect that their return to school had on members of their family. This in turn provided motivation and encouragement for their continuation in school. Pati expressed a keen awareness of the impact of her return as well as her hopes that her return would inspire her siblings.

Pati: I think it gives me a sense of satisfaction. It does. But at the same time I think of what can others what could others see. or what. For example, because I’m the second in the family there’s a younger brother and sister. So, it’s also you know perhaps a they would look up to me hopefully you know how could I encourage them to follow so hopefully. It does make me it makes me feel I guess maybe the word yeah proud. It makes me feel good about myself.

Pati added that her brother is following her path: he recently earned his GED and is applying for college. Pati’s words, as well as her body language during this narrative, show how powerful being a role model can be in supporting a return.
Pati’s story shows the power that a return to school can have on others in their social network, operating in an almost symbiotic relationship. The participants derive pride in filling this role model role, which supports their completion of a course of study. The other in their social network derive encouragement and inspiration to support their return.

**Commotioners**

Study participants spoke often of individuals in their lives who pushed back, resisted, or created situations that complicated their return to school. These individuals often played multiple roles in the participants’ return to school, they were often family members, and they seldom acted deliberately; they were often young children, or ill spouses who needed attention. Although Commotioners cannot be considered social capital, their inclusion here vividly illustrates the complexity of the social network and accompanying social dynamics that the participants had to navigate to continue on their educational trajectory. The findings here show that members of the participants’ social network often played multiple and complex roles that required the participants to navigate and resolve.

The strongest and most vividly described Commotioner came from Pati’s father, who actively resisted her return to school. In the following narrative, Pati described her return to school for a GED, which began her return to school and continued through to her associate’s degree:

Pati: My sister she actually got her GED too. um and then well she was doing really good at that time….and she got her GED and got a good job with a school. a decent job. So, I thought to myself cuz at that time I was already working I was working at a restaurant. So I thought to myself well you know what I I want to get my GED too to do better and to provide you know to provide for my family. and more income. so and actually, for personal satisfaction too. Because like I said I didn’t have I didn’t graduate from high school. But you know most people say “I'm too old. why should I go back?” If I didn’t do that, I was you know when I was younger why should I do it now? And it was hard because my my parents actually my dad. He’s a very strict person and he doesn’t think you know he’s from another culture. So he doesn’t think that that um he thinks that you should do things when you’re…And I mean he is I mean has a lot of reasons to think
about that. But, he like he doesn’t support us right now. “Well, you’re married. You’re already married. You have children. Why why would you want to be you know in school.

It appears that Pati was able to push back on her father and continue her education to the point where she expects to graduate with an associate’s degree in the spring. She said she intends to transfer to a 4-year degree and earn a BA. Her interviews suggest that her determination to provide for her family and the inspiration from her sister gave her the quiet courage to continue despite the push back from her father. Seeing her sister earn a GED and land “a good job at a school. A decent job,” a job with better pay and working conditions than her restaurant job encouraged Pati to return for a GED and to continue her education.

Pati had an additional incentive to push back on her father’s resistance. Personal issues required that her husband leave home and return to Mexico for almost a year. This left Pati and their daughter with little, if any, financial support from him or his job. Financial pressures, such as a loss of a job or income, has been shown to be a powerful motivation for a return to school (Duggan & Respiller, 2007), and this may have added greater motivation to support Pati’s return and continuation.

This narrative reflects the push and pull from participants’ social network, and the tensions inherent in social dynamics. Research has shown that family members can be strong resistors to a return to school, particularly when the returner is a married woman with children (Suitor, 1987; Thompson, 2013). Suitor (1987) analyzed her data through a status similarity lens: that when daughters return to school, their status within the family changes and becomes sufficiently dissimilar from their mothers that tension and resistance arises. Suitor (1987), however, did not specifically address strategies in which her subjects navigated those tensions, although her subjects reported avoiding discussing the topic with their mothers. Thompson (2013) found that returning students implement an avoidance strategy to ignore negative
influences, which often came from family members; one of Thompson’s (2013) subjects described “detaching herself from her father who told her that she could find all that she needed to know on Google” (p. 269). Pati, however, did not appear to use this avoidance strategy in the face of being pushed back strongly by her father; she reported doing homework right in front of her parents despite some negative comments from them. Instead, she leveraged the remainder of her social capital – the inspiration and emotional supporters represented by her daughter and her sister – to support her continuation in school. Although Pati attributes her father’s resistance to cultural values, the data are not sufficient to support a claim that that is the case.

Pati is not the only participant with push-backs. Lenny said his wife is ill, and he acknowledged that caring for her will likely prevent his transfer to a 4-year college to earn a bachelor’s degree. Maria said that her adult children have pushed back on her return to school, that her return is taking her away from the family. When asked whether she would continue to a 4-year college for a bachelor’s, Maria responded:

Maria: no. No I haven’t decided. Well, you know the other day my daughter said gee mom you don't ever have time for you to do your grandmotherly role anymore. And it's true. Like yesterday was my grandson's birthday my little 6-year-old. 5-year-old he turned 6. And I forgot to call him because I was so stressed about my classes. I went from here to school and then I don't get out of school until nine thirty. I didn't even have time for dinner. yeah. So go straight from work to class. at 9:30 he's in bed. you know. When I thought to call him his bedtime's 8:30. So, I didn't have a chance. I'll make it up to him. So, but yeah, it has hurt my family life style a lot. My boys all play hockey. Hockey season's starting. So I have to pick and choose what games I can go to which ones I won't go to. I'll try to fair. Cuz I'll have three of them in hockey. And I love I love the support, the family life. It's important to me to encourage them.

This narrative vividly shows the multiple roles played by the same people in the participants’ social network. Maria received significant emotional support for being in school from her adult children. But she also received significant push back. The emotional support has so far been sufficient for her to continue and earn an associate’s degree. It is unclear whether it is sufficient for her to transfer to a 4-year collect and earn a BA.
Composers

Applications to educational programs frequently require letters of recommendation. Composers of these letters of recommendation form an additional component of social capital, a component that extends beyond family into the participants’ professional environment. The Career Ladder program to which this study’s participants were applying required two letters, without which the individual would not be accepted to the program. Given that the participants had experienced an interruption in their schooling for many years, high school teachers and guidance counselors, who are often Composers of college application letters for 18-year-olds, were not likely to be able to fill this role for these participants. Too much time had passed since the participants were in high school, and contacts and memories fade. Absent of these individuals to fill this role that is so important in academia, the participants had to turn to others. Chapter 4 presented the findings from the analysis of the content of the letters. This section presents the findings from the Composers of the letters: who they were and how they knew the participant.

Among the Composers, the principals of the schools in which the participants worked were well represented. Six of the participants worked as para-educators, and five of these participants’ Composers included teachers for whom they were para-educators. As educators themselves, these Composers could, and did, speak to the participants’ work with children and their demeanor, both of which are important traits for prospective teachers.

There were several notable exceptions due to the fact that three of the participants were not employed as para-educators, and therefore did not have principals or teachers with whom they worked available to fill the role of Composers. Whom did they ask? Pati had returned to school to earn a GED recently enough that she was able to ask her GED instructor to be a Composer for her. Among all the participants, Pati’s instructor was the only Composer who could, and did, speak to her academic abilities. Kelly and Ed faced a predicament larger than the
other participants: they were not employed as para-educators, nor were they employed inside a school. Kelly was a bus driver, and Ed worked with the school district facilities department. They therefore did not have principals or teachers to fill the Composer role for them. Both Kelly and Ed turned to their professional network: their supervisors, who could speak to their work ethic. They also turned to their personal network: their friends, who are not typical Composers for professional applications. In fact, Kelly and Ed were the only participants who asked personal friends to be Composers, and Ed’s friend wrote her letter by hand on lined paper. In many years of reviewing job applications, the researcher for this study had never seen a letter of recommendation written by hand. Both friends, however, were able to speak to Kelly’s and Ed’s relations with and demeanor toward children outside of a classroom environment, which are critical skills for para-educators and teachers.

The choices of Composes made by the participants speaks to their creative problem-solving. Without the obvious choices of principals and teachers to fill the Composer role, the participants leveraged their social network and extended it into the realm of social capital, blurring the distinction between the two. As discussed in Chapter 1, social capital is not simply a social network of family and friends; it is a social network of family and friends with resources who can and are willing to support acquisition of other forms of capital (e.g. education, a new job, etc.). In the modern, complex world in which we live, social capital is elastic and components can and do potentially overlap (Adler & Kwon, 2002). Both Kelly’s and Ed’s Composers exemplify this elasticity: Kelly’s friend Cathy began as a co-worker who became a friend, and then filled roles of Cheerleader, Custodian, and Composer to support Kelly’s return to school and attaining additional education. Ed’s friend stepped into a Composer role and wrote
eloquently about her witnessing a warm relationship Ed shared with his young nieces and nephews.

**Analysis of emerging themes**

This section of the study extends adult learning theory beyond the characteristics of adult learners and places the participants of the study in their social context by examining the social capital that participants have at their disposal and how they leverage that social capital. The purpose of this chapter is to address the research question “How do the participants leverage the social capital available to them as they return to school?” It is clear from the narratives told by the study participants that differences in their family structures impact their experiences and also their needs as they return to school. In short, some participants need more instrumental support, while others need more emotional support. This section discusses those aspects of the findings that warrant further explication.

First and foremost, the findings show that for the study participants who are parents of young children, childcare dominates their experience of their return to school, as evidenced by the frequency and detail of this theme in their narratives. The findings show a patchwork of childcare, as the parents leverage their social capital – their network of friends and family – to fill this need.

The participants have few other choices. Although the literature is replete with suggestions that campus childcare centers contribute to student retention (Karp, 2011; Miller, 2010), there is no childcare center located at this community college campus. Even if there were, it is unclear whether these parents could avail themselves of it. Few, if any, campus childcare centers are open in the evenings, when the study participants are in class and in need of childcare. Few, if any, campus childcare centers accommodate school-aged children. Most childcare centers are fee-based, and may be outside the financial means of some families.
There is also a very small but growing body of research suggesting that the care of children may be inextricably bound up in culture. Recent studies (Galarza-Heras, 2012; Liang, Fuller, & Singer, 2000; Vesely, 2013) have shown that Latino parents use childcare centers at a much lower rate than do other ethnic groups. These studies have explored the connection between childcare center use and cultural issues of childrearing. For example, white affluent families see childcare centers as preparatory for kindergarten, “as an intention-filled investment in child’s development” (Liang et al., 2000, p. 362). However, families in other ethnic groups view childcare centers as needing to be places for nurturing children and providing social experiences (Vesely, 2013). Parents may also be concerned that childcare centers many not value the young child’s home language and culture. Vesely (2013) found that many parents who speak another language at home seek out childcare centers where children can learn more English and interact with a diverse group of other students. Liang et al. (2000) show that center use declines if there is an older family member living in the home, and that person most often provides childcare when the parents are in school. Galarza-Heras (2012) found that the use of childcare centers was predicated on parental beliefs that childcare center staff is or is not culturally responsive, warm, caring, and nurturing to the child rather than providing academic skills.

Study participant echoed this situation. Victoria’s children and Pati’s daughter are too old to participate in a childcare center. Although Ana’s son is in preschool, family members take care of him in the evening when she is in school. Lia could avail herself of a structured after school programs at her daughter’s school, but she has so far declined to use it, saying she prefers to have her younger daughter be with friends after school.

Lia: and that's another big change for her that she doesn't come with me right after school. She goes and stays with a different person. But they're all friends and they all have kids who are friends with her. So, she's okay.
Lia’s words in specific, and the findings in general, suggest that the recommendations so often provided to support returning students may not in reality provide true support. Although many 4-year universities have on-site childcare centers, these benefit full-time students who have children. Community college students, many of whom are part-time students with school-aged children or who attend classes at night, are far less able to benefit from this type of support. Rather, this study shows that the participants’ social network, their social capital, is far greater a support than a campus childcare center would be.

The findings also show the complexity of the social capital available to the study participants. The same individuals who were Cheerleaders, Caregivers, Custodians, or Composers in some situations were also Commotioners in other situations. This created conflict and situations that required the participants to leverage other parts of their social network – their social capital – to continue their education. In particular, members of the participants’ own families often created the need for them to leverage other parts of their social network to resolve the conflict and solve the problem. This was very much the case for Pati and Maria, both of whom received clear and overt resistance from family members. With a small sample, the data do not support any strong claims. However, the narratives of both Pati and Maria suggest that their return to school may have created a disconnect between their hopes and dreams for themselves compared to the hopes and dreams that others have for them. Maria reported that her adult daughter told her that she was not able to attend to her “grandmotherly role” due to her being in school. Pati’s father did not appear to be opposed to continuing her education; rather, he resisted a married woman with children continuing her education. This finding aligns with Suitor (1987), who found similar tensions among mothers and daughters, particularly when the mother was less-educated. In five of Suitor’s participants, the tension was described as resulting from the
mothers' disapproval of their daughters' nontraditional attitudes and behaviors; in the remaining two cases, the tension resulted from changes in the daughters' knowledge and interests (Suitor, 1987, p. 439).

Without interviewing the family members, it is impossible to say whether the same roots of the tension and pushback are at play with Pati and Maria. Furthermore, this disconnect cannot be attributed to simply cultural differences, considering that Ana and Victoria, who are also Latinas, did not report similar resistance from family members. Clearly additional research would illuminate the complexity of this situation.

The participants’ children filled the most complex role. At times children filled a Custodian role; at other times the same children filled a Commotioner role. Co-occurrences calculated in Atlas.ti between relationships (e.g. children, parents, spouses, etc.) and roles (e.g. Cheerleader, Commotioner, etc.) show that children co-occur far more frequently with the Commotioner role than does any other relationship (34% co-occurrence). At the same time, however, they co-occur more frequently with the Caregiver role than does any other relationship (23%). The table below shows all co-occurrences of relationships with roles; children are highlighted.
Table 9

Co-occurrences between relationships and roles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Cheerleader</th>
<th>Caregiver</th>
<th>Custodian</th>
<th>Commotioner</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brother</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cousin</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coworker</td>
<td>0.24</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family in general</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>0.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friend</td>
<td>0.24</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grandkids</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Husband/ex in-laws</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td>0.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sister</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wife</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.04</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Drilling down more deeply shows interesting connections. Lia’s children filled three different roles. As Caregivers, they looked to Lia as a role model and inspired her to continue her education. As Commotioners, they presented childcare and dinner-preparation issues. Lia solved her dinner commotion by teaching her children to prepare dinner themselves, thereby converting them from Commotioners to Custodians. Rather than having her children derail her from returning to school by their being Commotioners, she derailed their commotion. Further, she enlisted the aid of her in-laws and friends to provide childcare, thereby derailing the childcare commotion.

Ana faced similar commotion from her need for childcare for her son, although her son also filled a Caregiver role by encouraging her to return to school to better provide for him. She leveraged her social capital – her family and her son’s father – to resolve the childcare commotion. Kelly’s son also needed childcare; her friend Cathy stepped in and provided that care. Maria’s daughter was a Commotioner by expressing her disappointment that Maria that no
longer had time to fill her “grandmother role,” but also filled a Caregiver role by helping Maria write her first essay.

In these ways, Commotioners did not necessarily derail these participants. Rather, it pushed the participants to become creative commotion-solvers. These participants show that commotion is not always a bad thing. Commotion and conflict can be overwhelming, but they can also create opportunities for personal growth and development of skills that can serve these returning students very well as they continue on their educational trajectory. The participants in this study had the wherewithal, the grit and determination, to derail the Commotioners instead of having the Commotioners derail them. They used what social capital they had available to them. Other people helped them resolve the commotion. Lia’s in-laws, Pati’s sister, Maria’s grown daughter, Ana’s family and her son’s father, Kelly’s friend Cathy, the list goes on and on. Without a social network, without social capital, these participants may have had a much rougher go at derailing the Commotioners and returning to school.

It is important to repeat here the important difference between an individual’s social network and their social capital, and to also acknowledge the fluid nature of these two constructs. Social network is the connection of family and friends. Social capital is the connection of family and friends who can do something, such as support a return to school in some manner, either as a Custodian, Caregiver, Cheerleader, or Composer. Yet the narratives from the study participants illustrate the fluid nature of these roles: a friend or neighbor, who is a member of the participants’ social network, shifts into a social capital role of Composer, then perhaps shifting back again.

Conclusion

Clearly this is an area in need of further research, with an eye toward supporting not only the returning student but also the returned students’ families, such that resistance can be
mitigated. None of the participants in this study mentioned family activities from the community college or the Career Ladder program, and none mentioned the program providing them with ideas or ways for navigating the family dynamics that may arise when an adult returns to school. And yet, the participants were able to find a way to leverage their social capital to minimize the commotion and support their return to school.
Chapter 6

The Academic Community

This chapter discusses the findings surrounding the community in which the participants are attempting to enter. In doing so, this section addresses RQ3: How do returning students navigate a new and possibly unfamiliar academic community? There are two components to this academic community – the cohort community and the academic community. Each of these communities will be addressed in that order.

The cohort

The participants of this study are part of a structured program and follow a specific course of study to attain an associate’s degree in education from a community college in a Western state. Although they enter the program with various needs for developmental coursework and therefore have different classes for math and English composition, they take the majority of their content classes together as a cohort. Additionally, they routinely meet with the program director as a group. They know each other well.

Cohort models in various forms are widely used in higher education. In some universities, groups of students live and study together in a separate dormitory and take three or four classes together. Community colleges often offer “learning communities,” in which two courses are combined and team taught (for example, an English composition and a history class), and students enroll in both of them, thereby forming a loosely-constructed cohort.

The benefits of cohort models in general are well supported in the literature. These benefits include increased retention (Nimer, 2009); collaboration, networking, and connections (Bista & Cox, 2014; Teitel, 1997); and a greater sense of community that contributed to learning, development of leadership skills, and greater sharing of knowledge (McPhail, Robinson, & Scott, 2008).
The participants in this study expressed similar benefits of the cohort; stories of the cohort loomed large in the participants’ narratives. Ed was the most positive and enthusiastic participant when it came to describing the cohort:

Ed: I don't know how I would have made it through without those 25 other people. We've all gotten to be really really close. All of us. Thick as thieves as they say.

In another part of the interview, Ed added that the cohort has contributed to his retention, and that he is “indebted” to the members of the cohort in supporting his completion of the program. When asked why he had never wanted to withdraw from the program, he responded

Ed: um a lot of it was the expectations from the cohort. by you know there's still 25 of us. I think one girl quit so far. So, maybe you know pride you can't let all those people down.

Ed’s words describe a strongly positive relationship with the other members of the cohort. He included “all of us” in his description, expressing inclusivity of all cohort members. His use of the expression “let down” suggests a strong emotional connection to the other members of the cohort.

Victoria said she found academic support from the cohort.

Victoria: It has because we've been well there's several of us have been really supportive of one another. So I went to Metro last semester, and it was five of us and we would get together to do our homework. If we had trouble we'd call each other. Or we would meet if we had a project to do. But we were very supportive of one another. If one you know couldn't make it to class that day we would have notes for that person. So, I like that. That we're being supportive and that we help one another.

The “help” that Victoria described here illustrates the importance of the sense of community described by McPhail et al. (2008) and how that sense of community is operationalized to support and sustain a return to school. Although Victoria might have successfully graduated by going it alone, the length and detail of her narrative suggests that she attributes at least part of her success to her connections to other cohort members.
Pati echoed Victoria’s words of receiving academic support from the cohort. When asked where she receives support, Pati responded

Pati; I would say also from the students that have already taken some of the classes. Like they kind of give me a heads up and say you know yeah, that's good class… So that kind of gives me you know an idea of what the class is going to be like. um, so I would say from students.

Knowing what to expect from a class and an instructor can help prepare a student and reduce some of the fear of the unknown that an unfamiliar academic situation can present. Lenny also said he felt that the cohort provided academic support. In response to a question about sources of support, Lenny said

Lenny: So, yeah, it's nice to have someone that you can talk to that's going through the same issues or the same classes that you're going through. So that support is just amazing. It's and I really enjoy the Career Ladder program because I've met some really great people and you feel like you're going through this together. Versus when I was in college at the beginning right after high school I was alone. I was by myself. So to have that support really means a lot. It's important to students who are trying to pursue this program and go through it.

Lenny’s comparison between his previous college experiences with this current experience, the difference between being in a group versus being alone, vividly identifies one of the cohort benefits suggested in the literature (e.g. Bista & Cox, 2014; McPhail et al., 2008). Lenny himself, through his saying “It’s important” expresses the value he places on belonging to a cohort group.

**Cohort models are great. Except when they’re not.**

But yet the participants also told stories that showed a less positive side of cohort models, which is only just beginning to appear in the research literature. Some participants in this study told stories of exclusion, bullying, racism, and disconnection. Other stories emerged that suggest that some members of the cohort became a little too close to each other and created drama involving some of their instructors.
Given the amount of research literature on incidents of microaggression and outright racism directed at students of color in higher education (e.g. Steele, 2009; Sue et al., 2007), it should not be unexpected that Latina/o students who participated in this study faced similar incidents upon their return to school. What is unexpected is that incidents came from other members of their own cohort. Further, the cohort consists entirely of para-educators and those who aspire to become para-educators in culturally and linguistically diverse public schools. The mission of the Career Ladder program is to increase the pool of diverse teachers trained to work with diverse students. Yet among the interview data, two narratives involving the cohort stand out by relating incidents that are difficult to interpret in any way other than racially-charged toward Latinas/os. Far beyond simply excluding some cohort members (Agnew, Mertzman, Longwell-Grice, & Saffold, 2008), these two incidents recount events that the participants themselves, through their own words, clearly interpreted as racially-charged.

**Maria’s story.**

The first narrative was related by Maria and involves an incident in a class that enrolled only the cohort members; no one from outside the cohort was enrolled in the class. Maria’s story is as follows (all names are pseudonyms):

Maria: so that so we help each other out in class. So things are getting better. as far as the racism, and I'm actually getting along with the ladies now that they have come to appreciate me and I appreciate them. So we get along better even though there was a little bit of racial friction

JSS: in the program?

Maria: um hum. yeah.

JSS: tell me about that. What was going on with

Maria: well, it was an ELA class. And we were talking about immigrants or whatever, and they brought up the subject of the Klu Klux Klan, and how it was back in the day there was hanging in Colorado. And a couple of the ladies said they were from the Aryan Nation. One of the gals was saying how her grandfather was remembered growing up down in the south and he would run around with his hoodie on. and stuff. and talking
among each other in back of the classroom. And they tell Adam who is Italian, Adam, come over here with us. You belong in our group. the Aryan. You belong in the Aryan nation. and he walked over and talked to them for a few minutes and then he went back. And didn't you respect them cuz they're in the classroom, but there's still that tension. That racial tension going on. And but now it's less. This year it's a lot less. Because I think they're realizing and they're learning that maybe their words were harsh, or hard. And uh and they probably didn't mean to offend anybody? They were just having fun in class but yet I was offended. big time. so. you know. And the fact that Adam didn't go and sit next to them. Really helped me. And it sometimes even in class today like I'll say it's gray they'll say it's black. If we're doing a discussion it's they're always anti whatever I say. you know. And but now I just laugh it off. I don't take it uh serious and I realize now it's not that big of an issue. They're going to have their beliefs regardless of how I feel. and so I think now they're getting more intelligent and they're realizing you know things aren't always what we think you know. Just. So I don't know.

Simply on the surface, it is surprising that anyone, let alone a para-educator, would publicly connect herself/himself in a positive manner to the Aryan Nation. Maria herself states “yet I was offended. big time,” showing that she herself found the statements offensive. The details of the narrative immediately followed Maria’s use of the words racial and racism and was offered as a response to the researcher’s follow-up question to “tell me about that,” suggesting that Maria herself found the Aryan Nation comments to be racially-charged. Her statement that Adam’s not taking up their offer to sit with them “really helped me” suggests that she may have felt she was a target of the racist attitudes expressed by the comments. This statement also suggests the hurt that she felt, hurt that extended beyond offense.

However, Maria’s words illuminate a number of additional issues. The first issue is a separation, an us/them attitude, underlying the cohort. Maria’s use of “them” throughout her narrative positions herself as separate from the “ladies” who made the Aryan Nation comments. She said she is “actually getting along with the ladies now.” suggesting that she did not previously get along with them. Her use of “actually” suggests that she is surprised that she is getting along with them. Her narrating the offer to Adam to “come over here with us. You belong in our group,” followed by Adam’s declining their offer, supports not only Maria’s own
separation from the “ladies” but Adam’s as well. Although this narrative indicates one specific incident, Maria’s description of the incident suggests that racial undercurrents are present among members of the cohort.

The second issue is the apparent need for students in the cohort to navigate not only the new and foreign academic community, but also a new and foreign cohort community within that academic community as well. Maria, being a Latina, expressed that she felt herself to be a target of the overt racism explicit in the Aryan Nation comments. After all, she was not invited to sit with the “ladies” who made the Aryan nation comment; it was Adam who was invited. This suggests that she and other Latinas/os have to navigate race and racially-charged incidences in their return to school.

Maria’s narrative suggests that she navigates this racism by accepting it as the way things are and putting up with it. She said that she laughs off the incidents that have continued with “them” constantly discounting her classroom contributions. She said “I don’t take it uh serious and I realize now it's not that big of an issue.” But she obviously did think it was that big of an issue because she herself brought it up. The researcher did not ask about racism or racially charged incidents; she asked about where Maria gets support. It was only after Maria used the terms *racism* and *racial* that the researcher asked for more information, and the narrative emerged.

Maria’s tolerance of being a target of racism is further supported by the contradiction in her narrative. At the beginning of the narrative, Maria said “I'm actually getting along with the ladies now that they have come to appreciate me and I appreciate them.” Yet at the end of the narrative she seems almost defeated as she related that “the ladies” contradict her classroom contributions; “they’re always anti whatever I say.” Other students’ constant contradiction of
classroom contributions is difficult to interpret as reflective of “appreciate.” It rather appears to be more reflective of contempt. Yet Maria appears, through this contradiction in her narrative, to rationalize, accept, laugh it off, and swallow the offense. Maria is almost making excuses for “the ladies” by reflecting that “they probably didn’t mean to offend anybody? They were just having fun in class” and repeating several times that the racial tension “this year it’s a lot less.” Maria’s contradictions suggest a common response to this type of behavior.

Deciding to do nothing by sitting on one’s anger is one response that occurs frequently in people of color. This response occurs because persons of color may be (a) unable to determine whether a microaggression has occurred, (b) at a loss for how to respond, (c) fearful of the consequences, (d) rationalizing that “it won’t do any good anyway,” or (e) engaging in self-deception through denial (“It didn’t happen.”) (Sue et al., 2007, p. 279)

It is not clear whether this one incident qualifies as “microaggression,” which is most often used to define incidents that occur repeatedly over time. However, Maria’s narrative included more than the single Aryan Nation incident. She said that the “ladies” are “always anti whatever I say” and that “there’s still that tension. That racial tension going on.” Regardless of whether this qualifies as microaggression or the reasons for Maria’s rationalizing the actions she herself found offensive and racially charged, her response suggests a need for addressing race and racial attitudes within the cohort. This will be taken up in greater detail in the Discussion chapter.

**Kelly’s story.**

Kelly shared a second classroom incident that is difficult to interpret in any way other than racially charged (all names are pseudonyms).

Kelly: They help each other. I wish that was like that for our program, but it's divided.

JSS: it's divided is it?
Kelly: oh yeah.

JSS: Do people have their special friends and things?

Kelly: cliques and if you weren't part of the clique then you're not invited to the cool to sit in the cool table. (laughter) You know especially for some of the others like Martina and um Emma it was real hard for them you know. I try real hard to embrace everyone. I know but they had a hard hard time. Emma in particular cuz she has that language barrier. The way that I kind of I view her is that she has to try harder than I do just to you know especially in speech. I remember taking her aside and saying don't feel bad about what you're doing. You have to work 10 times harder than I do. Cuz I don't feel bad about yourself. cuz you worked 10 times harder than all of us I can guarantee you.

JSS: do you think that some of the other program students have not been real embracing of other people?

Kelly: no. Sadly enough, no. It's real sad because they're the people that I think would have so much to offer. Encouragement. and helping-wise. That's something that strikes me as very sad. Because you know there you know instead of uplifting somebody and helping them out and instead of I heard you know during speech classes there was laughter and you know when Emma was giving her presentation. And you know our teacher was pretty quick about catching it and well I think we need to separate you guys. But you know, but still the damage was done. I mean Emma felt embarrassed and she didn't want to present anymore. And that was real hard. And you know on the flip side where that was her it was real hard for me to want to (laughter) embrace those people because I'm like I don't like bullies. Sorry. So on the flip side they kind of it creates a division that's part of the background. I mean you know even after the class was ended and I have those people in my class it's just getting to the point where I'm feeling slightly even remotely comfortable with them again. and that was you know something that happened over the summertime and I'm still just I guess my personality flaws that I'm I have a hard time accepting

me: was that the situation with Emma?

Kelly: yeah. They also did it to Martina too. (laughter) But Martina’s kind of a spitfire. She'll fire back. (laughter)

JSS: do you think that um has anybody to your knowledge addressed that issue? aside from your speech teacher. He kind of put an end to it. but

Kelly: um. not really. not really.

It is important to note that Emma and Martina, the apparent targets of laughter and ridicule, are both Latinas. Additionally, Emma is a student for whom English is an additional language. The researcher has met Emma and is familiar with her challenges with English syntax and
pronunciation. Emma declined to be interviewed or participate in this study, so it is unclear how she herself and in her own words felt about the situation. However, Kelly is an Anglo and was a witness to other cohort students laughing during Emma’s presentation. By describing the other students as “bullies,” Kelly appears to interpret the other students’ behavior as laughing at Emma rather than with her. Even if the other students were laughing at a joke told between themselves rather than laughing at Emma, the narrative shows that the students were not paying attention to Emma, which is on its face rude and contemptuous.

In a manner similar to Maria, Kelly points out a schism within the cohort. Kelly uses the words *divided* and *cliques* to describe the cohort, despite the researcher’s use of the phrase *special friends*. It is common for people in a group or class to form friends with whom they bond more closely than others. But there is a difference between a *group of friends* and a *clique*. Cliques are by their nature exclusive of others and use a variety of means to maintain that exclusivity, including verbal strategies (Adler & Adler, 1998). Martin, Milne, and Scantlebury (2006) add that cliques can further marginalize some students by diminishing their access to human resources (i.e., teacher and other students) and material resources (i.e., access to laboratory equipment, chemicals). This limited access to resources can have negative outcomes for non-clique students’ learning” (p. 821). Unfortunately, Martin et al., (2006) study is one of very few that have studied cliques in a college setting. Cliques seem to appear in the research as a high school phenomenon.

Kelly’s words make it clear that she does not include herself as a member of the *clique*. She positions herself as separate from “those people,” a phrase she used twice in her narrative. She referred to the *cool table*, to which no one was invited unless they were part of the *clique*. She said that she tries “real hard to embrace everyone,” which is not something that cliques do.
The section of her narrative where she consoles Emma, a Latina, by telling her that “she has to work 10 times harder than anyone else” additionally separates Kelly from the clique.

That Kelly would use the term clique to describe her cohort amplifies her use of the word divided. But the word clique adds another nuance. Cliques are high school. Adults should perhaps have grown past exclusionary practices that are the nature of cliques. Kelly herself adds that this type of behavior should not be expected in adults.

Kelly: I think you know as adults we are responsible to stop that upon ourselves. It shouldn't have to take a principal or a teacher to get adults to act appropriately (laughter). So, I just it was real disheartening to see that happening in a classroom with adults anyway.

This issue of cliques, exclusions, and division raise important issues as to how the study participants are navigating, or not navigating as the case may be, their entry into a new and unfamiliar cohort environment. First, it should be noted that because Maria and Kelly did not identify the individuals responsible for the incidents they described, it is not known whether the individuals were the same students or not. It is clear from their stories that they were cohort members. Second, both incidents suggest high school-aged behavior. Cliques are high school behavior. Bullying is high school behavior. Blatant racially-charged behavior is high school. Meekly accepting a role as a target of racially-charged behavior, as Maria did, is high school behavior. This suggests that the individuals involved in these incidents may be falling back on the behaviors and coping strategies they engaged in during high school. A closer look at other participants’ interview data add support this interpretation. In high school, Ed was a football player, well steeped in competitive behavior. It is difficult to imagine it to be coincidental that of the nine interview segments coded as Competition, every one of them was from Ed’s interviews; no other participant expressed competitive attitudes toward the cohort. Likewise, 8 of the 15 interview segments coded as Odd man out came from Kelly, who was one of the very few non-
para-educators in this cohort and was also the only participant who self-identified as having a learning disability and being in special education in high school. This issue of exclusion appears common in cohorts, (e.g., Agnew et al., 2008), and appears to be present in the cohort from this study’s participants as well.

These behaviors are particularly problematic considering that the individuals involved are para-educators in diverse school districts, most of whom want to transfer to a 4-year university and earn a teaching credential. It is unclear if these racially-charged incidences and other behaviors are related to persistence/attrition. The literature shows a relationship (e.g. Steele, 2009), but it is not known if this plays out with this cohort, as no graduation data is available yet.

**Group advocacy in the academic environment**

The narratives provided by the participants in this study suggest that some members of the cohort began to advocate for themselves and possibly supported each other in developing those skills. One situation that was discussed by several participants involved one particular instructor. According to the participant narratives, the class instructor sent her research assistant to teach the class. Participants spoke of the class being in a state of disarray, saying that the syllabus dates were not accurate, expectations were not clear, and the instructor was disorganized, unprofessional, and unfamiliar with the topic. Making the narratives more powerful was that the researcher did not specifically ask about poor instructors or classroom conflicts – the participants volunteered the information. One participant said:

Lia: There is one teacher that I really had a really hard time with because she was highly unorganized. She didn't know the material. She would come on Monday complaining how it took her who is a doctoral candidate ten hours to do the homework. that I raised my hand and said if it takes you 10 hours to do the homework and you're a doctoral candidate, what do you expect us to spend 24 hours on the homework?

Ed added:
Ed: the main classes are offered through Greenville*. So I think they offered it in Lawrenceville* so the teacher sent her graduate assistants down there. So these are people who have never taught never taught before. They're math students that are trying to fulfill an obligation and then they're trying to go off her notes and her syllabus her you know so the dates were wrong and both of the classes I've taken so far have been horrible.

This was not the only instructor who bore the brunt of the cohort criticisms of poor quality instruction.

Lucy: The other thing is and I'm just going I'm not complaining. But we have a new teacher. and he this is his first year teaching. his first class teaching. it's his first time teaching. and he's really he's kind of hard if you will. For instance, I'll say this. He teaches directly from the book. So he holds the book there. and then he does the problems on the board. and then when he gets stuck one of the kids in the class goes up and does it for him because he doesn't know how to finish.

Maria had similar comments about the same instructor:

Maria: And I have a professor and he doesn't know how to teach it. And I'm really sucking wind. and I'm struggling a lot. It's his first time teaching. and he's not even a math major. and he's in charge of some grain factory in Petersburg* somewhere.

College students frequently complain to each other and to disinterested third parties. But to complain about an instructor to the program director, the dean, and other administrative personnel moves the complaining out of the realm of typical behavior and moves it into a new arena of self-advocacy that may or may not be considered by other to be appropriate behavior.

Maria spoke briefly but eloquently about this

Maria: and all the students are really upset because they said it was a hard test, the teacher’s a jerk, he doesn't know what he's doing, and they actually emailed (the program director) and complained about him and they wanted me to email him too.

Group advocacy did not always involve the entire cohort. Maria included a nuanced observation concerning certain cohort members who she described as “critical.”

2* all town names are pseudonyms
Maria: no, I learned a lot of good things. You had your some students who were very critical. But I'm learned that in every classroom they are critical, and it's the same ones every teacher. (laughter).

Maria’s words suggest fine distinctions between student expectations, constructive criticism, and self-advocacy. The “critical” students are critical with every teacher, suggesting that the self-advocacy may be considered by others to be taken too far. Lia appears to agree, adding that the “constant” complaints were draining to her:

Lia: a lot of the students that are in the cohort they constantly complain about how much homework they have and life and stuff. and that drains me. it makes me feel drained. And nobody's forcing them to be there. So, sometimes I want to say ‘shut up.’ (laughter).

Sometimes, individuals acted alone. In the wake of the instructor discussed above, one participant added:

Ed: you know, I went to the dean I spoke with the program director. And it was kind of to no avail. It's been one of my least favorite experiences.

Maria added:

Maria: and he actually doesn't perform the math problem on the board step by step for me. and so I'm at a total loss. and we’ve complained to the supervisor of the math department. There's like five of us who have complained. We’ve talked to her on the phone. She came in and sat in. and she said well you know it’s he's doing okay. It's up to you guys to just get outside resources. So they’re not going to do anything about it.

It was not possible to conduct classroom observations and fieldwork as part of this study due to resistance from the community college administration and their institutional review board as well as from instructors. Community college instructors are not familiar with having observers in their classrooms as K-12 teachers often are, and access was denied to the researcher. This is not unexpected: few ethnographies conducted in adult education and community college settings exist. Rose (2012) is an exception, and it should be noted that Rose is a tenured professor at UCLA with significant contacts and name recognition. Without classroom observations and fieldwork, it is difficult to make strong claims as to whether the cohort members’ concerns were
justified or not. The participants’ actions concerning complaining to administrators about an instructor can, however, be interpreted as evidence of growing confidence and agency, of growing self-advocacy in insisting upon quality instruction, of growing clarity of what a “good teacher” looks like and acts like. This will be taken up further in the Discussion chapter.

The academic community

There is clearly some overlap between the cohort community and the academic community. After all, the cohort does exist within an academic community. Considering how long some of the participants had been out of school before their return, it should not be unexpected that they would be unfamiliar with the college environment and expectations, regardless of whether they were members of a cohort or not. This unfamiliarity with the academic environment manifested itself in several ways. As discussed previously, Lucy was so afraid of returning to school that she did not attend the first informational meeting for the Career Ladder program. Lenny, who had been out of school for several decades, vividly described uncertainty about college expectations.

Lenny: Well, I just didn't know how to be a student. I mean I have I was familiar with being in a classroom, so that helped me initially. But how do you be a college student? I mean how do you um you know learn from the instructors, do I take notes do I get a laptop, do I you know what tools do I need to be able to accomplish this. So that was I really needed to figure that out. And I needed to do it quickly. Because of the you know the rigor is sped up. I mean you're you don't get a lot of time to um kind of process things too much. You kind of like going from one learning assignment to the next, and so just try to stay you know afloat so to speak. And just keep going.

Maria, also having been out of school for several decades and not having any previous college experiences, expressed similar uncertainties and challenges with entering college. When asked about some of her challenges, she replied

Maria: When I began going to (the community college) the teachers were passing out syllabus. What the hell's a syllabus? I had never heard the word. And I'm sitting there wondering what the hell's a syllabus. oh my god I'm not going to make it. I don't even know these words.
Maria added that her first semester composition instructor provided the support she needed to find her feet. And now she knows what a syllabus is. Lenny said that now he has been in school for several semesters, he has learned through experience how to take notes and study. And now he does have a laptop.

Additionally, Maria, Lenny, and other participants mentioned the program director and the support he provided to them at the beginning of the program and throughout their coursework. Between his leading regular group meetings to discuss upcoming classes as well as his registering all of the students for their classes and ordering their books, he provided instrumental support to the students in navigating the administration and bureaucracy and in advocating for themselves. As discussed previously, when Victoria needed to withdraw from a class so she could be at home with her children more often, she went first to the program director. He suggested she negotiate an independent study with the instructor, which Victoria successfully did.

In addition to providing instrumental support, the program director also provided encouragement to the students. Pati described the program director roaming the halls talking with the students “saying ‘hey you guys ....how are you guys doing out there? You guys surviving the semester?’” Lenny and Ed discussed stopping by the director’s office occasionally just to chat. The program director also arranged tutoring for students, usually in the form of math tutors who provided academic support to students. The study participants mentioned their math tutors frequently but very briefly, indicating that the tutors provided important academic support but little else.

The instrumental support and encouragement provided by the program director did not emerge as a detailed theme; narratives were brief and matter-of-fact. However, the program
director was mentioned frequently enough that it warrants further analysis, which will be taken up in the Discussion chapter.

**Analysis of emerging themes**

As students return to the educational system, they may be unfamiliar with the academic environment. This is clearly the case with several of the participants in this study. Maria did not know what a syllabus was or how to write a paper. Lenny did not know whether he needed a laptop or not, and stated quite succinctly that he did not know how to be a student. And they had to get up to speed very quickly. They may have started at the margins of the community in not knowing how to use the tools of the community, but they learned very quickly and at the time of the interviews conducted for this study, they were well on their way towards their graduation. This section provides an analysis of the interview data illuminating how this shift from the margins to full participation might have happened. It also illuminates how this shift might have been contested by some members of the cohort.

Different participants related vastly different experiences involving the cohort. On the extreme positive end was Ed, who said of the cohort “We've all gotten to be really really close. All of us. Thick as thieves as they say.” He used the word “all” twice, and repeated “really,” suggesting emphasis of their closeness. Victoria and Pati also related positive experiences with the cohort. Yet at the same time, two racially-charged incidents directed at Latinas emerged, and Kelly frequently commented about being the “odd man out” and not being invited to sit at the “cool” table. Lenny said he could not get a study group together, and Lucy said she had no friends in the cohort. In a further contradiction, Ed said that all but one cohort member was still enrolled, adding “I think one girl quit so far.” It seems unlikely that people who are all “really really close” would treat each other in such an exclusionary or racially-charged manner. It also seems unlikely that people who are all “really really close” would use words like “one girl;” it
seems more likely that her name would be used, and further that it would be known for certain if she had indeed withdrawn from school. It appears instead that the cohort may be “really really close” for some cohort members but not for others.

It also appears instead that some members of the cohort are at least attempting to keep other members on the margins, contesting their inclusion and their shift into full participation in the academic environment. The racially-charged incident related by Kelly involved laughter directed at a Latina who was giving a class presentation. Ridicule is an effective form of exclusion from classroom activities and resources; in a study of East Asian international students, the researchers found “After being ridiculed for her accent, one Chinese woman avoided class presentations altogether” (Houshmand, Spanierman, & Tafarodi, 2014, p. 382). Kelly suggested that the Latina whom she witnessed being ridiculed did not want to present in front of the class after the incident, which limits her participation in the academic environment. Being excluded in informal study groups outside of class, as Lenny’s and Lucy’s interviews suggested, can also limit participation in the academic environment because study groups “served an important purpose in allowing the students to admit a lack of understanding and to experiment with this new language within a nonthreatening environment. (O’Donnell & Tobbell, 2007, p. 322). In addition to not being included in study groups, which she attributed to study groups already having been formed, Lucy added that she did not have any friends in the cohort. The sense of belonging, or not belonging, has repercussions beyond surface-level access to academic resources. Kember, Lee, and Li (2001) write that a sense of belonging contributes to retention and students completing a program of study. Little research is available to guide this analysis, particularly research on contestation of full participation in academic communities. The bulk of the literature is theoretical in nature rather than applied to students returning to school,
and much of the work that does exist is grounded in the positive nature of communities in academia. However, Lea (2005) writes “It is in this nuanced examination of how participants are excluded at the boundaries that the work has the most value for those concerned with teaching and learning” (p. 184, emphasis added). Being ridiculed in public, being excluded from study groups, and being unwelcome at “the cool table” illuminate ways in which participants are excluded at the boundaries. This will be taken up further in the Discussion chapter.

Conclusion

The findings in this section address both aspects of the community into which the participants are entering: the cohort community and the academic community, and respond to this study’s third research question. It seems clear from the findings that some participants were able to navigate their entry into both communities more seamlessly (e.g. Ed) than others (e.g. Kelly). Kelly in particular, with her relating a racially-charged incident in the classroom as well as her expressing feelings of being the odd man out, will be taken up in the Discussion chapter.
Chapter 7:
Discussion

This qualitative study was designed and conducted to explore the experiences of adults returning to school following an interruption in their schooling. Previous research on returning students is not only lacking, but also frequently relies on a model of “barriers and baggage” faced by returning students rather than the assets and advantages that they have at their disposal to support their return and completion of a program of study. This study recognizes that returning students face challenges to their return. Pressures from family, jobs, finances, and self-doubt are real, and have been well-documented in the literature and in this study. However, this study extends the “barriers and baggage” model to include an examination of assets possessed by returning students that they can leverage to support their return to school and complete a program of study. Indeed, analyzing returning students’ social capital reveals the complexity of relationships among returning students and their network of family, friends, and co-workers, many of whom played multiple roles of Caregiver, Custodian, Cheerleader, Composer, and Commotioner at the same time.

Nine individuals who had experienced an interruption in their schooling were interviewed, and their stories of their return to school were analyzed to address the following research questions:

RQ1: Who are returning students? What are their characteristics, why did they leave school, and what motivated their return?

RQ2: What types of assets and supports enabled students to return to school and complete a program of study?
RQ3: How do returning students navigate a new and possibly unfamiliar academic community?

Findings from this study will be discussed in this chapter, organized by research question, followed by how the findings fit within the literature and conceptual framework, implications, limitations, and suggestions for further research.

**Summary and interpretation of Findings**

This study argues that that returning students bring a wealth of assets with them to support their return and completion of a program of study. Rather than considering only the “barriers and baggage” that returning students face, a model that permeates the research on this population of students, this study considers the assets returning students can leverage to overcome the barriers. Certainly returning students face challenges in their return to school that are less frequently faced by the 18- to 22-year-old demographic, challenges that include balancing school, home, and jobs. The participants in this study spoke frequently of how little time they had to spend with family because of having to study and complete homework, a situation that caused them a great deal of regret. The participants who had school-aged children at home spoke of the stress involved with simply getting dinner on the table. Yes, these are challenges, and the literature shows that they are challenges faced by many returning students. But the challenges did not derail this study’s participants; they found a solution that supported their facing and overcoming these challenges. They identified and leveraged their social capital to support their progress toward a degree. As such, this study extends the “barriers and baggage” model into a new area that considers the assets possessed by returning students. This study further argues that considering assets can more appropriately inform policies and programming that better support returning students to continue on their educational trajectory. The findings of this study support that argument, and have shown that the participants of this study have
significant social capital that they leveraged to support their return. However, this study also found that this social capital did not extend into the academic and cohort environment in which these participants were entering. While the participants received support from the program director in navigating the bureaucracy, they were on their own for navigating the unfamiliar academic environment, particularly the cohort and classroom dynamics. The findings make clear that the experience of returning to school transformed these nine participants from anxious newbies into students with more agency and more confidence. This transformation, driven by the third component of this study’s conceptual framework, students’ *habitus*, emerges when findings from the three research questions are synthesized. This study utilized a qualitative paradigm that included in-depth, open-ended questions as well as analysis of program application documents in order to capture the voices of the participants, breathe life into the statistics, and paint a more complete and nuanced picture of returning students. In the process, new variables can emerge to inform further studies that move away from barriers and baggage and move toward including assets and advantages.

**Research Question 1**

This study’s first research question examines who returning students are, why they left the educational system, and why they returned. Findings that respond to this question appear in Chapter Four and correspond to the literature by reflecting the diversity of returning students. No two study participants shared even their demographics – study participants were male and female, Anglo and Latina/o, parents of young children and young adults; two were grandparents. Some had graduated from high school, some had not. Unlike individuals who proceeded from high school directly to college, they had no school counselors or teachers to write letters of recommendation to support their acceptance into a program of study; most had been out of school too long to have these individuals in their lives. Pati is the lone participant who had a
teacher recently enough to ask him to write her a letter. Other participants had to rely instead on their managers, co-workers, and friends to fill this role.

The participants in this study represent a variety of reasons for leaving the educational system and at a variety of places, reasons and places that align with the literature. The findings extend the literature by providing the voices of the students, their own words vividly describing their exits from the educational system, thereby adding nuance to the literature. Ana, for example, said she did not have the money to go to college directly after high school, suggesting that her not matriculating directly from high school to college aligns with the literature surrounding lack of awareness of financial aid. Lenny said that after one year of college he re-evaluated his college experience, thought that the financial cost was too high, and withdrew, again suggesting a lack of awareness of financial aid. Pati’s and Maria’s experiences of leaving high school to go to work to support the family also aligns with the literature as a common reason given for high school attrition. Contradicting the literature, for Ed money was not enough to complete a 4-year degree. He had a full-ride scholarship to a western university, but left college after only one year because he said he missed his family and his girlfriend. Only Maria suggested microaggression directed at Latinas/os occurring in her high school through her story about being called “beaners.” With this being the only example of microaggression occurring in high school no claims can be made that this may have contributed to attrition. As such, the findings of this study neither confirm nor deny the impact microaggression may have had on the participants leaving high school. Further, Kelly was the only student who self-identified as having a learning disability (dyslexia). Although the literature shows a strong correlation between being labeled with a learning disability and high school attrition, Kelly contradicts this literature by remaining and graduating from high school. Her interview suggests that one of her
teachers, Mr. Moore, was instrumental in her graduation. Again, with this being the only example, no strong claims can be made; however, Kelly’s story suggest the important role a teacher can play in students’ continuation in the educational system.

A variety of reasons for leaving, but in actuality the same reason: school gave them no reason to stay; school held nothing for them, nothing to keep them in school and earning a diploma or degree. None of this study’s participants described a particularly positive high school or college experience. Most of their discussions of their previous schooling were actually rather bland. Pati spoke of not having even one teacher who pushed her or took an interest in her. In contrast, Kelly’s teacher Mr. Moore took her on as a special case; his support appeared instrumental in her completing high school. In further contrast, Lenny described a conflict with one of his college teachers; he left college after one year. In this regard, the voices of this study’s participants extend the existing research to suggest that absent of encouragement and support from family or a teacher, counselor, advisor, or another institutional agent, students may see few reasons to stay in school. The students had little social capital in the school to support their continuation and completion, and absent that social capital they languished and left.

The literature further describes two categories for leaving school: “push” factors (e.g. exclusionary discipline) and “pull” factors (e.g. needing to work to support the family) (e.g. Bradley & Renzulli, 2011). Categorizing this need to support the family, cited by both Pati and Maria as reasons for their leaving high school, as “pull” factors is particularly problematic. Our society usually uses “push” for negative factors and “pull” for positive factors. We push negative things away from us and pull positive things toward us. It is problematic to categorize a minimum-wage job as a positive “pull” factor compared to staying in school. Leaving high school to take a job perhaps could be viewed instead as a push that represents a failure in the
social and educational system that encourages a 16-year-old to leave school to take a minimum wage job to support the family. It is difficult to accept a positive spin on a teenager not completing high school. Further, and perhaps more problematic, is the construct of attrition of any type being a choice. Yet Hardin (2008) stated just that when she categorized those leaving high school as “poor choosers” (p. 54.) The suggestion here is to discard the “pull” interpretation and the label of “poor choosers” and interpret any reason for leaving high school before graduation as a push out of school. This interpretation departs from the extant literature in terms of the lens through which leaving school is viewed.

One of the few things these participants share is their reason for returning to school. While the literature shows catalysts for a return to school that include a job layoff, a change in family structure (e.g. divorce, children leaving the home, etc.), or a vague “it was time to grow up,” (e.g. Genco, 2007; Deutsch & Schmertz, 2011) this study’s participants described no such catalysts. Instead, these participants appeared to be encouraged, almost enticed, to return to school. They were actively recruited through outreach from the program director, who did more than simply send out an email. He led informational recruitment sessions in accessible locations, returned phone calls promptly, and enthusiastically encouraged para-educators to apply. The Career Ladder program is an attractive structured program clear goals and a clear pathway to completion of an associate’s degree. The approachable, encouraging program director guided them in navigating the community college system and funded their tuition, fees, and books. None of the participants said that they had been considering returning to school and were looking for a program. Instead, the Career Ladder program found and recruited them. And something within them said “now.” This study is not a psychological study, and does not explore what it is that makes people snap and take action. Therefore, why these participants decided to take action
when they did is unclear. But what is important here is that these participants did take action, they did apply, they did return to school. It was a positive, enticing pull rather than a negative, discouraging push that precipitated the return. This points to the importance of having structured programs with approachable, encouraging program directors in supporting a return to school and completion of a program of study. The findings of this study, then, extend the literature on reasons for returning to school, thereby supporting implementation and continuation of programs such as the Career Ladder program in which the participants are enrolled.

**Research Question 2**

This research question is grounded in the social capital component of this study’s conceptual framework. The findings respond to this question by examining not only the people who comprise the study participants’ social capital but the roles these people play in supporting the participants’ return to school and completing a program of study. Further, the findings show specifically how the participants leverage their social capital to support their return.

The findings of this study reveal five roles played by participants’ social capital: Cheerleaders, Caregivers, Custodians, Commotioners, and Composers. Previous studies (e.g. Giancola, Grawich, & Borchert, 2009; Kirby, Biever, Martinez, & Gómez, 2004) show the importance of family members and the instrumental (i.e. Custodian) and emotional encouragement (i.e. Caregiver) support they provide. This study extends that literature in two directions. First, this study identifies an additional role of Commotioner and further identifies family members as filling multiple roles at the same time. Spouses and children both filled roles of Custodians by taking care of household chores, cooking, and childcare. Spouses and children both filled roles of Caregivers by providing opportunities for returning students to be role models. Spouses and children both filled roles of Commotioners by acting out and requiring sudden attention. Victoria’s daughter is an example: her falling behind in school required
Victoria to negotiate taking one of her classes as an independent study so she could be at home more often and help her daughter catch up. This study further identified a role of Cheerleader: as person who actively encouraged the returning student to return. Kelly and Maria both had Cheerleaders who convinced them to apply to the program. Kelly’s Cheerleader, Cathy, continued to actively support Kelly by providing childcare, making Cathy both a Cheerleader and a Custodian. These findings add nuance to the existing literature by recognizing the multiple roles, overlap, and complexity among the participants’ social capital.

This study’s findings also add nuance to the existing literature by illuminating exactly where in the participants’ lives their social capital comes into play. Social capital is more than simply a social network. Social network is comprised of family, friends, and acquaintances. Social capital is comprised of family, friends, and acquaintances who can actually do something to support returning students. Findings from this study show that the participants’ social capital is strongly at work in the home front. Family and friends held down the fort at home, cooking dinner, providing childcare, stepping up to the plate to manage the household while the other parent was in school. The participants’ social capital, however, did not appear to extend into the academic environment. This aspect of social capital has been extensively studied in the K12 environment (e.g. Coleman, 1988), but has been poorly studied in post-secondary. This study’s findings therefore extend social capital further into the realm of post-secondary education.

**Research Question 3**

This research question is grounded in the academic community portion of this study’s conceptual framework. The findings respond to this question by illuminating how the study’s participants navigate the unfamiliar academic environment they are entering. Social capital helps on the home front, but the family and friends don’t have their own academic experiences from which they can draw to support in any way other than the home front. Findings show that absent
of social capital within their family, friends, and acquaintances to provide this navigation support, the study participants had to rely on the program manager, instructors, and each other for this support. Most participants found this support in with the program manager, who registered them for classes, provided their books, and completed paperwork for them. The program manager, for example, facilitated Lenny’s taking a math class at a different community college. He advised Victoria to negotiate an independent study so she could be at home more often. He provided a sounding board for Ed’s complaints about an instructor. He arranged for tutors to help struggling students.

However, nothing prepared or supported the participants in navigating the dynamics of the cohort. The cohort model worked well for some of the participants. Ed described the cohort as “thick as thieves.” Victoria said they took notes for each other. But the cohort model worked less well for others. Lenny said he tried to create study groups but to no avail. Lucy said she had no friends in the cohort. Kelly spoke of a schism within the cohort. Narratives of two racially-charged incidents emerged from two different study participants. These findings align with a growing body of research cohorts, most specifically Agnew et al., (2008) and Sapon-Shevin and Chandler-Olcott, (2001). Both of these articles examined cohorts and found exclusion, often based on gender and race (Agnew et al., 2008), to the point where Sapon-Shevin and Chandler-Olcott questioned whether cohorts could act like dysfunctional families. Findings of this study extend this literature by adding nuance, stories in the participants’ own words, to show the hurt and pain that can be caused by exclusion. It also extends the literature by showing what can happen when social capital isn’t there or doesn’t function the way it could. While the program director and other instructors and administrators might have supported the participants’ navigating the bureaucracy of academia, there was no visible support or advice in navigating the
social dynamics of the cohort and the classroom. Findings provide some evidence that absent this navigational support, it is possible that returning students fall back on behaviors and interpretations developed in their previous schooling. Kelly articulated this most vividly in her story of the “cool table” and “cliques;” other participants did not use the word “clique” but described exclusionary practices that can be considered clique behavior. Lucy and Lenny appeared to have few friends in the cohort, and Lucy suggested that study groups had already formed by the time she had more cohort members in her class, and she did not want to intrude upon them. None of the participants mentioned cohort members as social capital for information about jobs; none of the participants mentioned going out for coffee together, babysitting for each other, or any other social activities that might be expected in a group of students who were “thick as thieves” and “really really close.”

**Synthesis: the habitus dimension**

Synthesizing findings for the three research questions and the three chapters of findings addresses the third component of this study’s conceptual framework, the habitus dimension. As discussed in Chapter 1, habitus is, according to Bourdieu (1990), a system of structured, durable, transposable dispositions (p. 53), developing over time and with repeated conditioning and inculcation. As operationalized by Lee and Kramer (2013) and Lehmann (2013), habitus includes ways of talking and interacting with others, hopes and aspirations, plans for the future, etc. Habitus as operationalized in this study is the lens through which the participants are viewed as they navigated the academic environment and leveraged the social capital that they had at their disposal. In analyzing the participants’ interview data, particularly their profiles from Chapter 4, habitus became strikingly visible when changes were examined. The interview protocol did not ask about how the participants changed in terms of their tastes, food, or politics, and none of the participants offered these topics. But the participants were asked about how they changed and
how their relationships with others changed. It became clear that the experiences of leveraging their social capital and navigating the academic environment changed them.

First, the participants changed in their way of talking about their futures: their hopes, aspirations, and possibilities, which aligns with the operationalization of habitus as posited by Lee and Kramer (2013) and Lehmann (2013). These findings extend the application of habitus from students enrolled in elite universities to students enrolled in community colleges. Ana and Lucy were perhaps the most vivid examples of a change in habitus. Ana said did not matriculate directly from high school to college because she did not have the money. Now that she is approaching her graduation, she is making plans to attend the University of Phoenix and is seeking financial aid to fund her continuation and completion of a bachelor’s degree. In her first interview, Lucy said she was full of self-doubt, too scared, “a scared little chicken baby,” to attend the first informational meeting for the Career Ladder program. In her second interview, she discussed her applications to 4-year institutions, confidently saying “I don't see any reason why they wouldn't accept me.” In their first interviews, Ed and Lia talked about getting through the program, working hard, doing homework, taking exams, and passing their classes. In their second interviews, both of them talked excitedly about applying to the same local 4-year institution and continuing for a bachelor’s degree. Ana added that being in school confirmed her choice of career, saying “I feel that I feel more coming into the career that I want to go into. I still want to do it.”

Further analysis shows that their ways of talking about themselves changed. Findings presented in Chapter 4 show that the participants’ confidence grew during their return to school and progression toward a degree. This growing confidence can be seen as contributing to their change in habitus as expressed in how they say they have changed. Maria and Lucy both said
being back in school had made them smarter, a feeling that manifested itself in subtle ways.

Maria’s words were particularly poignant:

Maria: I don't know, I've always felt knowledgeable but never adequate. So I feel more at my job more like I know more stuff. I don't know, it's, I’ve known a lot through life experiences. But it's not the same as book smart.

Through Maria’s words, she clearly thought of herself as smart, but her smarts were street smarts, not book smarts. Attaining a degree and receiving a diploma visibly demonstrates the book smarts that she thought she lacked and that may have made her feel “inadequate.” Her words suggest that she no longer feels inadequate. Lenny’s interviews suggest that his intimidation of the teachers with whom he worked has changed to pride in being able to work more effectively as a resource with them. In his first interview, Lenny said

Lenny: well, I'll tell you what, I've I really felt when I first got into the schools pretty intimidated by teachers. And their credentials. So that was hard at first when you realize where you landed. It's kind of like "I think I'm a little short here. Can I even have conversations with these people?"

However, in his second he said

So, but yeah, I do feel like I get respect. I feel like people want to ask me questions about strategies with this student or that student. Things like that. yeah, so, I feel like respected and valued.

Lenny’s words suggest that his habitus has changed in how he interacts with the teachers with whom he works, the teacher who used to intimidate him but now come to him for ideas.

Returning to school provided him with those skills that have enabled him to be a resource for others. Lia said that returning to school has made her more mature and independent.

Lia: I’m so busy with school and work and everything. A lot of friends don’t call me anymore or anything. They just they don’t want to bother me. But then I don’t get to see my friends as much. And I think that’s helped me be more independent. Because I love I’ve always been very dependent on my friends.
Pati, in alignment with the literature, said she used to “just kind of go with the crowd” when someone states an opinion that she may or may not agree with. Now that she has returned to school and progressed toward a degree, she asks more questions of herself and her beliefs.

Pati: I don't go with the crowd any more. It's like “Really? Is that what it is? No, that's not what it is.”

It is not clear if Pati vocally argues with “the crowd,” or silently thinks to herself “no, that’s not what it is.” But what is clear from Pati’s words is that her return to school has made her a stronger, more critical thinker who has changed from acquiescing to others to questioning others.

An additional change in the participants’ habitus is that in the process of returning to school and progressing to graduation, the participants appeared to become creative problem-solvers. The participants appeared to become resilient, flexible students who could balance multiple demands on their time, set priorities and boundaries, and make sacrifices (and recognize that they were sacrifices). This part of the participants’ changing habitus extends the research beyond students enrolled in elite universities (e.g. Lehmann, 2013) and into the realm of students enrolled in community colleges. This also extends the research beyond barriers and baggage; that the findings of this study suggest that returning students may be challenged but not prevented from returning to school and completing a program of study. As evidence, Lenny spoke of his distress as missing family activities because he had to study or write a paper. Maria spoke of her feelings of guilt at missing her grandson’s birthday because she was stressed because of an impending school assignment. Many of the study participants spoke of zooming and flying from home to work to school back to home and not having time for dinner, let alone time for spouses and children. Participants with school-aged children at home leveraged a veritable army of individuals to provide childcare. The father of Ana’s son and her parents frequently provided childcare, as did Lia’s in-laws and friends and Kelly’s friend Cathy. Victoria
said she did not do schoolwork on Saturday because that day was to be spent with the family at her daughter’s soccer games.

As discussed in Chapter 5, different individuals played multiple roles in the lives of the study participants. These findings extend the research by examining not only what various individuals do to support returning students, but also examining the complexity of the roles played by those individuals. The role of Commotioners was most often filled by children, but at the same time children also filled Custodian and Caregiving roles. As such, the Commotioners can be seen as having contributed to the participants becoming creative problem-solvers. Victoria’s daughter created commotion for her, commotion that Victoria resolved in a creative way by advocating for an independent study so she could spend more time at home with her daughter. Pati’s father resisted her return to school, conflict that Pati resolved by asserting to herself her desire to earn a degree and better support herself and her daughter. But Pati also expressed in her interview that she knows her father is proud of her, suggesting that she silently reminds herself of her father’s pride as a way of defusing the conflict. In a departure from the “barriers and baggage” model that views family as problematic to a return to school, the participants did not appear to view the Commotioners in their lives as negative forces. Instead, Commotioners, particularly children, appeared to be viewed as net positives, as individuals who enriched the lives of the participant. Participants spoke of their children as positive forces in their lives despite the commotion they may have created. The commotion helped the participants grow into strong, resilient individuals, which will serve them well as they continue on their educational trajectory.

This study also extends the research into the area of self-advocacy, which may be a result of the participants’ growing confidence. Participants appeared well-able to advocate for
themselves, as exemplified by Victoria and Lenny. Victoria negotiated an independent study so she could be at home with her daughter more often, and Lenny advocated for himself in taking math at a different campus in his efforts to pass his math classes. As discussed in Chapter 6, many of this study’s participants advocated for higher-quality instruction in their math classes. In the face of a disorganized, poorly-prepared instructor, several participants complained to the community college administration, although their complaints appeared to have fallen on deaf ears. For individuals who were intimidated and anxious to even apply to the Career Ladder program to then take forward complaints about an instructor to the administration shows a great deal of change in the participants’ habitus. This change reflects a certain level of courage to advocate for themselves but also a certain level of insight as to what constitutes the high-quality instruction to which they are entitled.

**Implications - what the findings mean for different people**

The implications of this study primarily apply to managers of programs for adult returning students as well as policy makers and college administrators. The findings of this study suggest that adult returning students have social capital that serve as assets to support their return and completion of a program of study. Findings also suggest that this social capital may not extend from the home front into the academic and cohort community into which returning students are entering. Findings further suggest that the community could benefit from supports and changes that in turn better support the students. As this section of this chapter demonstrate, changing the student would be relatively straight-forward. However, findings of this study suggest that the students are not really a problem. The community is the problem. And changing the community would be far more difficult but ultimately may prove to be more productive in supporting the success of all students. In contrast to much of the extant literature, which calls for
making students “college and career ready,” the findings of this study call for changing the college environment such that it is ready to receive returning students.

**New supports for students.**

The findings of this study suggest that adult returning students are well supported on the home front by their social capital. However, their social capital may not extend fully into the academic and cohort environment they are entering. If that is the case, returning students may benefit from different types of support mechanisms than they are currently receiving from the institution. The institution in which this Career Ladder program is housed is a rural, satellite campus of a multi-campus community college. The campus has limited advising and counseling staff, limited financial resources, and a handful of classrooms. There is no cafeteria, no childcare, no writing center, no student center or lounge area. Other community colleges in which the researcher has taught do have some of these resources, and certainly most 4-year universities can be counted on to provide these resources for their students. However, this campus does not.

Because these student support resources are not provided by this institution, funding from the Career Ladder program steps in and fills some of the gaps. For example, tutoring is paid for by the program, as is intensive advising and counseling from the program director. Additionally, the program director tends to paperwork and registration and supports the students in navigating the bureaucracy and transferring to 4-year universities. He acts as a point-person, a go-to person for the students to discuss problems and challenges, all of which are important supports. However, additional programming, such as frequent individual check-ins, peer mentoring from other students, reminders for self-care, and full-cohort conversations and brainstorming about how to manage Commotioners in their lives might reduce stress and provide important additional supports for returning students.
Several participants described challenges such as stress and uncertainties in their transition to academia. As Lenny poignantly stated, he did not know how to be a student after being away from school for so long. Lucy described herself as a “scared little chicken baby” upon her return. Most study participants described stressful zooming from work to school to home, without even time for dinner. A one-credit academic achievement class, common in community colleges, in which the entire cohort attends as a cohort, might reduce the uncertainties involved in the transition to academia and thereby reduce some of this angst, fear, and stress. This type of class might also support students in identifying their social capital and leveraging it to support their return, managing the Commotioners in their lives, and engaging in self-care.

Further, the findings of this study show that the participants grew their skills in their self-confidence, self-advocacy, their ability to articulate what makes a good teacher, and their agency: their habitus - their way of being in the world. These are skills that will serve them well as they continue on their educational trajectory. However, the skill of responding to systemic racism and racially-charged incidents remains to be developed for these and perhaps other students. Kelly and Maria both related racially-charged incidents in their college classrooms, yet neither reported responding to the perpetrators in a manner that evoked self-advocacy or agency. In fact, by the end of Maria’s narrative she sounded almost deflated and defeated.

Standing up effectively and appropriately to what Kelly defined as “bullies” takes guts. It also takes awareness and training. Although Boysen, Vogel, Cope, and Hubbard (2009) recommend increased training for faculty in recognizing and responding effectively to bias in the classroom (p. 228), perhaps this type of training should be included for all students, particularly those who aspire to be teachers. The participants in this study are members of a Career Ladder...
program for public school para-educators. None of them should be feeling, let alone expressing, racially-charged attitudes. While it is possible that the incidents related by Kelly and Maria were isolated incidents specific to that cohort, the fact that they occurred at all among a cohort of para-educators is problematic.

To address this issue, and adjustment to the curriculum might be called for. The curriculum and program of study for an associate’s degree in elementary education are set by policy makers and college administrators. However, there is space for students to choose two electives from a list of five classes, including Sociology of Diversity. Yet none of the participants’ transcripts showed this class or any other ethnic or multicultural studies class. Each participant had instead taken Cultural Anthropology and Art Appreciation as their two electives. It is possible that diversity-related courses are not available in a rural community college, or might be available only in occasional semesters. It is possible that these topics are addressed in other courses. It is also possible that these courses would be available and required when returning students transfer to a 4-year university. However, not all returning students intend to transfer; Lenny and Maria both suggested to the researcher that they would not. Additionally, a search on Google returned, as the second item on the list, a syllabus for the Sociology of Diversity class taught at that community college in the spring semester of 2013; the students in this program were enrolled in that community college that semester. Yes, Art Appreciation and Cultural Anthropology are important classes for creating well-rounded teachers. But so is the ability to teach in a diverse environment and the ability to respond to problematic classroom incidents. The findings of this study suggest that students might be well served by receiving this training, either by enrolling in the Sociology of Diversity class or by including this material in a separate class for the cohort, a class such as the one discussed above.
Changing the environment.
Better supports for returning students, such as those discussed above, would require policy changes and resource allocation. Changing the environment may be far more difficult, and would require the efforts and leadership of program managers, policy makers, and college administrators working together to implement the changes suggested here and make the colleges “student-ready” instead of the students being “college ready.” Policy makers have instituted “College and Career Readiness” standards for adult students, modeled on the Common Core State Standards for K12 students. Perhaps it is time for “Student Readiness” standards for colleges.

This study provided evidence that some instruction, particularly developmental math courses, were problematic for students on many fronts. Lucy related being assigned 150 algebra problems every week, which she indicated created significant stress for her. Maria said she followed a math instructor to another campus to receive instruction that better fit her learning style. Lenny said he tried taking math at a different campus in his attempts to pass his math courses. Most participants expressed significant stress related to their math classes. Most participants said they relied on tutors to support their passing math. Tutoring outside of class comes with considerable costs. The participants have to spend valuable time for meeting with their tutor, time that for them is at a premium, and the college must spend valuable finances to pay the tutors.

College administrators might be advised to view this situation as a problem and seek more cost-effective solutions than relying on tutors. They could perhaps look at improving instruction of these developmental math classes rather than relying on paying tutors. Administrators might consider beginning by asking instructors to articulate why they are
assigning 150 algebra problems every week. For the sake of argument, assuming there are 10 students in the class, the instructor receives 1,500 completed algebra problems from students every week. That the instructor would assess and provide feedback to students for that many algebra problems every week, in addition to his working his full-time job, strains credulity. Yet this type of instruction appears to be widespread, and grounded in behaviorist teaching of subskills common in developmental math classes (Grubb et al., 2011). After observing classrooms at 13 community college, Grubb et al. wrote

Many of the classes we observed were relentless in their emphasis on drill and practice on small skills, without any applications to the world outside the classroom…. The emphasis throughout is on getting the right answer, not on understanding the underlying math. Students may be able to get the right answers and pass tests, because the problems they face have been so standardized, but they seem to lack any number sense, or any understanding about what is happening when someone sets up an equation. (p. 28).

Rose (2012) described this type of teaching as “mechanistic,” writing

As Bill Gates said during a recent radio interview, we will pinpoint what a student has trouble with and then “drill in” on that skill. This approach – and note his language – doesn’t change the mechanistic theory of learning underlying such a program and doesn’t represent a robust notion of literacy or numeracy” (Rose, 2012, p. 140)

Grubb et al. (2011) further state that this type of teaching “violates almost all of the precepts for good teaching” presented elsewhere in their paper (p. 27), precepts such as presenting math in context and presenting multiple ways of solving problems. Both Rose (2012) and Grubb et al. (2011) suggest that mechanistic, skills-based, behaviorist teaching of subskills rather than constructivist teaching of math in context may be a factor in the high failure rates for students in developmental math courses, and suggest greater use of constructivist instruction that includes group work, the development of problem-solving skills in context, learning communities, and linked classes.

This study further provided evidence that the cohort model may work well for some students but not necessarily for others. While Ed and Victoria spoke very positively of their
experience in the cohort, others did not. Only Victoria spoke of cohort members helping each other with note-taking and studying together. Only Ana mentioned receiving ideas for classroom practices from other cohort members. Not one participant spoke of friendships with other cohort members, sharing information about jobs, providing professional support, having lunch or coffee together, etc. Ed, who spoke most enthusiastically about the cohort, did not mention another cohort member by name. Many participants excused this with comments that everyone’s schedules are different, and family and work commitments interfere with studying together or forming personal and/or professional relationships. However, research on cohorts (e.g. Greenlee & Karanxha, 2010; McPhail et al., 2008) state that these personal and professional relationships are important advantages of the cohort model. In fact, Cuddapah and Clayton (2011) found that the cohort they shadowed did form a close, supportive community that included peer mentoring, rapport, collaboration, sharing of classroom practices and ideas, group problem solving, and inclusion of less-experienced cohort members as full participants, which in turn created a rich “third space” for cohort members to develop their skills and take risks in a truly supportive environment.

That this community and these relationships were realized for some participants (e.g. Victoria) but not others (e.g. Kelly) is troublesome. Although there is no research that directly connects cohort experiences with retention, a sense of belonging and community is considered an important benefit of the cohort model (Greenlee & Karanxha, 2010; McPhail et al., 2008), and that without it, the potential for marginalizing, excluding, and silencing of cohort members is quite real (Agnew et al., 2008; Sapon-Sheving & Chandler-Olcott, 2001). This in turn can have very negative effects on student growth and learning; according to Cuddapah and Clayton (2011), their cohort occasionally “protected and reinforced troubling perceptions about kids and
teaching” (p. 73), suggesting that “(g)roupthink, particularly around deficit thinking or in defense of ineffective practices, can become reified and endorsed in a cohort (p. 73).

Additionally troubling is that racially-charged incidents occurred in classrooms of prospective teachers. The incident related by Kelly occurred within earshot of the instructor, who responded that maybe he should separate the students who were ridiculing the Latina speaker. It is not known if the instructor spoke with the students privately or took any other action. The incident related by Maria may not have occurred within earshot of the instructor, and it is not known if any other students who did witness the incident complained to the administration. However, these incidents clearly affected Kelly and Maria sufficiently that they related the incidents to the researcher.

These data are not sufficient to connect the lack of community with racially-charged incidents. However, taken together, it appears that this particular cohort did not work well together. Agnew et al., (2008) recommend professional development workshops for faculty who work with cohorts to preclude marginalization and silencing of cohort members. Jaffee (2007) further recommend that faculty “must understand the peer-cohort phenomenon and the interpersonal and pedagogical techniques that prove most effective with this student population” (p. 70). Watts (2013) builds on this suggestion by recommending specific practices, such as group projects for students, collaborating with students and with other faculty members, and engaging with students on a personal level. Further, faculty should receive training and support in addressing problematic incidents so that they can respond appropriately when they hear racially-charged comments or other incidents of microaggression.

Professional development workshops for faculty are not without their own challenges. Community colleges in general rely heavily on adjunct faculty who work other jobs and may
have difficulty attending a workshop. Creative solutions would be needed to address this issue, and might include distance/on-line professional development workshops combined with classroom observations, feedback, and coaching from full-time faculty. Additionally, rural community colleges, such as the site for this study, may have a more limited population of adjunct faculty from which to draw than would an urban community college, and instructors may be difficult to replace when they resign. Tighter partnerships with nearby 4-year universities may prove fruitful in recruiting and retaining quality adjunct faculty. This would all, of course, rely on strong leadership from administrators to forge new ways and overcome resistance from faculty.

**Limitations**

As a qualitative study, generalizability is not generally appropriate, and this qualitative study is no exception. The findings and discussion cannot be generalized to returning students who are not participants in a structured program, students returning to graduate school, or any other population. The findings and discussion enrich our understanding of returning students, but they cannot be generalized to other situations, contexts, or populations.

However, other limitations remain. First, the small sample size of nine individuals is an issue. As discussed in the Methods chapter, access to returning students was constrained by the institutions and by students volunteering to participate. Many students who were approached by the researcher declined to participate. Additionally, some of the individuals who did participate were not culturally and linguistically diverse, although they were low-income and/or first generation college attendees. A greater number of culturally and linguistically diverse students participating in this study would likely have generated new insights into this sector of the returning student population. Finally, this study would have benefitted from a follow-up interview with Kelly, who was the outlier among the participants. She was the only participant
who voluntarily self-identified as having a learning disability, the only participant who identified
as having a special-needs child, the only participant with an active Cheerleader who not only
convinced her to apply to the Career Ladder program but practically forced her to do so, the only
participant whose placement scores were so low that she placed into adult basic education, and
the only participant who withdrew from the program. She did not respond to requests from the
researcher for a second interview, nor did she respond to emails from the program director. She
withdrew and disappeared, and in keeping with the IRB approval the researcher did not feel it
was appropriate to hunt her down to find out the real reasons for her withdrawal. Her withdrawal
informs a need for additional research, discussed below.

Finally, the participants in this study are enrolled in a structured Career Ladder program
for paraeducators. The curriculum is clearly defined and leads to an associate’s degree in
education, which aligns with the participants’ current job and their career goals. The program
provides financial aid that pays for tuition, fees, and books. The program director provides
significant social capital through advising and assistance in navigating the academic system. It is
not clear how many returning students are enrolled in similar programs and how many are not,
and whether the experiences of returning students who are not enrolled in similar programs
would be different. Because so little research exists concerning returning students, this study
should be considered foundational and exploratory by informing future research. For example,
absent a point person in the form of a program director, would a returning student persist and
complete a program of study? This will be discussed further below.

Future research

Given the small size of the sample and the need for more data from culturally and
linguistically diverse returning students, this study serves as a foundation for further research on
that population in particular. First, this study analyzed the social capital possessed by the study
participants. In doing so, this study generated new variables of the *roles* played by individuals in the participants’ lives: Caregiver, Custodian, Cheerleader, Commotioner, and Composer. These variables could now be used in a survey or longitudinal study of returning students to determine a correlation between these roles and completion of a program of study. For example, does the lack of a Caregiver in a returning student’s social network impact their completion of a program of study? If so, how can program managers and administrators support that student in finding and leveraging a Caregiver? Would this support differ for culturally and linguistically diverse students?

Second, this study analyzed the experiences of returning students as they enter a new and unfamiliar academic environment. This study found potential landmines for returning students in their math classes in the form of instructors and methods that the participants indicated were problematic. This study also found landmines in navigating the cohort, particularly in a lack of community and in coping with problematic incidents coming from members of their own cohort. Are these experiences different for different populations of students? How can cohorts be best managed to reduce marginalization and silencing of cohort members? And how can adjunct faculty be better supported in responding appropriately to problematic incidents occurring in their classrooms?

Finally, Kelly’s withdrawal, discussed above, leads to a third area of study: why do students *really* withdraw from school? Answers such as “I didn’t have the money” or “It wasn’t for me” are almost too simplistic. This study has shown that there are deeper, systemic reasons behind a withdrawal from school, such as limited contact with school guidance counselors and lack of understanding of financial aid. Those real reasons need to be explored and addressed in greater detail. This study has shown that barriers and baggage are the too-easy answer, that nine
individuals did return to school and did leverage the assets they had at their disposal. And eight of these individuals are close to finishing a program of study.

Conclusion

This study has provided evidence that the “barriers and baggage” model so prevalent in the literature surrounding returning students is not incorrect. The participants in this study have significant challenges in completing their program of study, challenges that include juggling responsibilities at home, work, and school; building and maintaining relationships with members of their cohort; and making time for themselves. But the participants also demonstrated their ability to leverage the social capital they have at their disposal to overcome these challenges such that they can continue on their educational trajectory.

As of the writing of this study, President Obama has proposed a federal program that pays the tuition for community college students. Few details are available as of now, but according to the New York Times, the state of Tennessee and the city of Chicago have similar plans starting this year. Even if Obama’s proposal does not pass Congress, it has drawn attention to the important role community college programs play in supporting returning students as they re-enter the educational system, and has added to the dialog of college access for all. The participants in this study, low income, individuals of color, and/or first generation, perhaps never saw themselves as college students. But they saw an opportunity to return to school via a structured program located in a community college, and they seized that opportunity. There is no reason to think that other individuals won’t do the same if and when a proposal such as Obama’s presents itself. But Obama’s proposal is only a first step. Once these individuals return to school, it will be important to have programming in place that supports returning students in leveraging their social capital and navigating a new and unfamiliar academic and cohort community they are entering. In this manner, returning students will be better able to complete a program of study.
References


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http://academiccommons.columbia.edu/catalog/ac:146656


Museus, S. D., & Neville, K. M. (2012). Delineating the ways that key institutional agents provide racial minority students with access to social capital in college. *Journal of College Student Development, 53*(3), 436-452.


Appendix A: Institutional Review Board Documents

Recruiting email

I am writing to invite you to participate in a research study entitled “Returning to School.” The purpose of this study is to describe the experiences of individuals who have returned to school after an interruption in their schooling. You are being invited to participate in this study because you have returned to school after an interruption in your schooling.

Participation in this study involves being interviewed on three separate occasions at a time and location that is convenient to you. Each interview will last for approximately one hour. I will audiotape the interview to ensure accuracy. I will ask you questions such as “How did you decide to return to school?” and “What has it been like for you to return to school?” I will also ask your permission to view your educational records (such as college transcripts). I will ask you to sign a consent form; I will give you a copy of your signed consent form.

The information in this study will only be used in ways that will not reveal who you are. You will not be identified in any publication from this study. Audiotapes and transcripts will be stored on a password-protected computer and in a locked safe.

Taking part in this study is your choice. You may choose either to take part or not take part in the study. If you decide to take part in this study, you may leave the study at any time. No matter what decision you make, there will be no penalty to you in any way. You will not lose any of your regular benefits.

I hope you are interested in participating. If you are interested, or if you have questions about this study, please contact me by email at juli.sarris@colorado.edu.

Thank you!
CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY

Study Title: Returning to School
Principal Investigator: Julia S. Sarris

Key Personnel:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Department</th>
<th>Phone Number</th>
<th>E-mail</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Julia S. Sarris</td>
<td>Principal Investigator</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>720-985-8643</td>
<td><a href="mailto:Juli.sarris@colorado.edu">Juli.sarris@colorado.edu</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leonard Baca</td>
<td>Advisor</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>303-492-3353</td>
<td><a href="mailto:Leonard.baca@colorado.edu">Leonard.baca@colorado.edu</a></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Your participation in this research study is voluntary. Please think about the information below carefully. Feel free to ask questions before making your decision whether or not to participate. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to sign this form and will receive a copy of the form.

Purpose and Background

The purpose of this study is to examine and describe the experiences of individuals who have returned to school after an interruption in their schooling. You are being invited to participate in this study because you have returned to school after an interruption. You are one of 10 students being invited to participate in this study.

Study Tasks and Procedures

If you decide to participate, you will take part in three interviews. These interviews should last around one hour each. The interview will take place in a location of your choosing. During the interviews, you will be asked questions about your return to school. You will be asked questions such as:

- How did you decide to return to school?
- What has it been like for you to return to school?

This study includes audio taping. These tapes will be used for ensuring accuracy of your answers. They will be kept indefinitely. Your name or other identifying information will not be kept. The only people who will be able to hear the recordings will be me.

I will also ask to examine educational records, such as transcripts of your community college coursework, your application to the Career Ladder program, and letters of recommendation written by others to support your application, in order to develop a complete
profile on each person participating in this study. Your name or other identifying information about these transcripts will not be kept.

I will also ask you to keep a journal, to note ideas or information that you think of outside of the interview. You may choose to share or not share the journal with me.

Duration

Each interview will last for approximately one hour. The three interviews will be spaced approximately one week apart.

Risks and Discomforts

There are no foreseeable risks or discomforts from being in this study.

Benefits

You will not benefit directly from being in this study.

Confidentiality

The information in this study will only be used in ways that will not reveal who you are. You will not be identified in any publication from this study. Audiotapes and transcripts will be stored on a password-protected computer and in a locked safe.

These are some reasons that we may need to share the information you give us with others:

- If it is required by law.
- If we think you or someone else could be harmed.
- Sponsors, government agencies or research staff sometimes look at forms like this and other study records. They do this to make sure the research is done safely and legally. Organizations that may look at study records include:
  - Office for Human Research Protections or other federal, state, or international regulatory agencies
  - The University of Colorado Boulder Institutional Review Board

Compensation

You will not be paid to participate in the study.

Participant Rights

Taking part in this study is your choice. You may choose either to take part or not take part in the study. If you decide to take part in this study, you may leave the study at any time. No matter what decision you make, there will be no penalty to you in any way. You will not lose any of your regular benefits.

Contacts and Questions
For questions, concerns, or complaints about this study, call Julia S. Sarris at 720-985-8643

If you have questions about your rights as a research study participant, you can call the Institutional Review Board (IRB). The IRB is independent from the research team. You can contact the IRB if you have concerns or complaints that you do not want to talk to the study team about. The IRB phone number is (303) 735-3702.

**Signing the Consent Form**

I have read (or someone has read to me) this form. I am aware that I am being asked to be in a research study. I have had a chance to ask all the questions I have at this time. I have had my questions answered in a way that is clear. I voluntarily agree to be in this study.

I am not giving up any legal rights by signing this form. I will be given a copy of this form.

Name of Participant (printed) ____________________________________________

Signature of Participant _________________________________________________

Date ________________
Future Research Studies

Would you like to know about future research studies? We would like to contact you in the future to tell you about other research studies you might want to take part in. Research is always a choice. We are only asking you if you would like to hear about other studies.

If you check the “YES” box, you are allowing us to contact you if a study that you could take part in comes up. You can decide to stop allowing us to contact you at any time. You would need to email us and let us know if you did not want to be contacted in the future.

There will be no penalty or loss of benefits to you for deciding that you do not want to be contacted in the future. Your contact information will not be shared with anyone outside of this study.

Please tell us what would be the best way to contact you.

Phone: ____________________________
E-mail: __________________________
Mailing Address: ______________________
Initial one:
___ I agree to be contacted for future research studies.
___ I do NOT agree to be contacted for future research studies.
## Appendix B: Coding System

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code Family: social capital</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Roles</td>
<td></td>
<td>Victoria: and because you know I feel like I was going to be um like a good role model for my children as well. (Victoria 1: 251)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caregiver</td>
<td>individuals who reportedly encouraged participants in a manner that was less active than Cheerleaders. Caregivers also provided emotional support to the participants, and looked to the participant as a role model.</td>
<td>Kelly: No, she actually came during the lunch hour plopped it in front of me and said you need to fill this out. This is for your career. (Kelly 1:50)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cheerleader</td>
<td>individuals who strongly and actively encouraged and supported the participants’ return to school.</td>
<td>Lenny: And I think my family, not my immediate family but my extended family is suffering, seeing my father enough, seeing my brother and sister enough. There's events within the family that I can't attend because I'm doing work for school. So that's my personal life is suffering. And something's got to give. You can't do it all. (Lenny 1: 361)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Returning to School

Custodian individuals who reportedly provided instrumental support to the participants, including childcare, household management chores, errand-running, etc.

Lia: And my husband can cook a little bit. Now. (laughter). yeah, he can make burritos (laughter) and he can make you know he can make some good stuff. (Lia 1: 407)

Composer Individuals who wrote letters of recommendation

From document analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Individuals</th>
<th>The participant mentioned her/his aunt</th>
<th>Victoria: Well, um I started working in Boulder Valley School District's since I got out of high school. And because my um my aunt she was a para in um at here at Uni Hill. and so I kinda got interested in the job. (Victoria 1: 3)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aunt</td>
<td>The participant mentioned her/his brother(s)</td>
<td>Pati: My brother he he signed up for college next year. He did. (Pati 1: 413)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brother</td>
<td>The participant mentioned her/his school-aged child/children</td>
<td>Kelly: Often times I was running late. Especially when I have to tag along a very unwilling child who has to go to my friend's house instead of hanging out with his friends. (Kelly 1: 289).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children</td>
<td>The participant mentioned her/his cousin</td>
<td>Lucy: so my cousin who lived here said &quot;why don't you why don't you apply at CU and come out here (Lucy 1: 483)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cousin</td>
<td>The participant mentioned her/his family, without mentioning a specific member of the family</td>
<td>Ana: Luckily my family's always been there. They've been a big help with my son. (Ana 1: 246)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family (in general)</td>
<td>The participant mentioned her/his father</td>
<td>Pati: Like I said my dad is pushing me back. (Pati 2: 303)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father</td>
<td>The participant mentioned her/his friend</td>
<td>Lia: I had a friend visiting from Spain and came for 3 weeks at the end of my semester. So she was with them for about a week and a half. while I was in school. (Lia 2: 75)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friend</td>
<td>The participant mentioned her/his grandchildren</td>
<td>Maria: Like yesterday was my grandson's birthday my little 6-year-old. 5-year-old he turned 6. And I forgot to call him because I was so stressed about my classes. (Maria 2: 238)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship</td>
<td>Mentioned In</td>
<td>Example</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Husband/ex</td>
<td>her/his husband or the father of her child</td>
<td>Victoria: I am married, so maybe my husband picking up the girls some days (Victoria 1: 237)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In-laws</td>
<td>her/his in-laws</td>
<td>Lia: um, and then of course my in-laws and my friends everybody's helping (Lia 2: 367)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>her/his mother</td>
<td>Ed: So my mom had done it before. She had gone back to school. She wanted a better life for us kids. The ability to make more than minimum wage you know. (Ed 1: 23)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>her/his parents in general, without mentioning father or mother specifically</td>
<td>Lenny: my parents never went to college so I was the first one in my family to go on to college. (Lenny 1: 10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sister</td>
<td>her/his sister</td>
<td>Ana: there was an email went out to the schools. My sister actually told me about it. and I looked into it (Ana 1: 57)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uncle</td>
<td>her/his uncle</td>
<td>Kelly: And my uncle took a camcorder and recorded the whole thing for me. (Kelly 1: 368)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wife</td>
<td>her/his wife</td>
<td>Lenny: My wife is really good supportive of me so that really helps. So, if you have support at home, that's that goes a long way too. (Lenny 2: 469)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code Family: attitudes toward school</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Example</th>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>The participant said that:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>school is enriching</td>
<td>school provides a means for becoming an educated person; education for its own sake</td>
<td>None found</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>school is easy</td>
<td>their classes did not take much work or effort to earn an A or to pass the class</td>
<td>me: and what about your English classes? Your writing and reading Ana: I'm done with my English classes. I had two to take so I took those the first two semesters. And they were fairly easy for me. (Ana 1:390)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>school is welcoming</td>
<td>the school environment included all students, and</td>
<td>None found</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>Neutral</td>
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<tr>
<td>school is fun, happy, enjoyable</td>
<td>there was no bullying or exclusion</td>
<td>Me: How did you feel when you submitted the application and was accepted? Kelly: …..I sure like being back in school. I love learning. I love learning. I do. (Kelly 1:200)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>school is okay</td>
<td>school was tolerable</td>
<td>Me: How do you do all that juggling? Ana: yeah, I don't know. It's most of the time it's okay. There's day when I'm totally stressed out I just feel like I can't do it. I have so much to think about. (Ana 2: 86)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>Neutral</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>school is path to better job</td>
<td>school provided the means for a job that was better than the job or situation that they currently had</td>
<td>me: and how do you get over that you know when you're feel like that. How do you push through that. Ana: I cry first (laugh) me: oh no! Ana: and then I kind of you know just think about you know that I’m doing something to better myself and my son. you know being in a better position. (Ana 2: 90)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>Neutral</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>school isn't as bad as I thought</td>
<td>they were surprised that the experience was more positive than they had feared</td>
<td>me: so, you went to this first meeting, and you got placed, registered and everything, and here it is your first day of class. and what was that like for you? Ed: ….So I he did a good job of kind of breaking us in to that first you know the what's the word just that first feeling of trepidation and you know getting you over that hump. kind of into figuring out how a college course you know is run, what they expect. Things that they give you to help you succeed. (Ed 1: 334)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>Negative</td>
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<tr>
<td>school is distasteful, not for me</td>
<td>school was a generally negative experience</td>
<td>me: how did you decide that you wanted to be a teacher? Pati: you know what? Um because I didn't have a good experience when I was in school. I mean, when I was in middle school I can hardly remember any the other teachers and how my classes were. and when you</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>school is excluding of others/unwelcoming</td>
<td>the school environment did not include all students, that some students were excluded or bullied</td>
<td>me: Do people have their special friends and things? Kelly: cliques and if you weren't part of the clique then you're not invited to the cool to sit in the cool table. (laughter) (Kelly 1: 417)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>school is expensive</td>
<td>paying for school was a challenge</td>
<td>me: and you didn't go to college right after high school. Ana: no I did not. I didn't have the money to do that. (Ana 1: 16)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>school is hard, challenging, difficult</td>
<td>their classes took a significant amount of work to earn an A or to pass the class</td>
<td>me: which ones (classes) are they? Ed: Biology 105, so intro to biology. and then we have one for the teacher's part of it, it's called integrated science. So it's a two part class, and both of them have labs, so it's with lab. So I have two science classes with labs. It is very difficult. It takes another level of trying to understand you know what's going on. and I think we're all struggling with it. we really are. (Ed 2: 68)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>school is rushing around, juggling</td>
<td>school required managing their schedule tightly in order to accomplish everything in their personal lives, jobs, and schoolwork</td>
<td>me: if you could describe for me a typical day where you have class in the evening. Ana: I'll do a Tuesday. I go to work. Drop my son off at day care, go to work, go I have my math tutor at 4:30. And I get out of work at 3:45. So I rush from work to daycare, drop my son off at my dad's house, I rush over to Ft. Lupton, and by 4:30, I have a math class from 5 to 7, and then I go pick up my son. (Ana 1:325)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>school is risky</td>
<td>being in school presents the risk of failure</td>
<td>me: So he told you about the CAMP program? Pati: …….So I decided to to take the chance and be in the CAMP program. (Pati 1: 168)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>school is scary, uncertain</td>
<td>school is unfamiliar and unknown, and therefore intimidating and/or frightening</td>
<td>me: how did you feel when you got that letter and you opened it up and Ed:….It was scary. I was really scared. especially when they had us take the Accuplacer tests and then I placed low in English. I placed low in math, and then I'm like what am I doing. (Ed 1: 149)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Code Family: the cohort community</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Example</td>
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<tr>
<td>Accountability</td>
<td>The cohort made them accountable to remain in the program and to work hard</td>
<td>Ed: um a lot of it was the expectations from the cohort. (Ed 2: 309)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advice</td>
<td>Members of the cohort gave them advice</td>
<td>Pati: I would say also from the students that have already taken some of the classes. Like they kind of give me a heads up and say you know yeah, that's good class. (Pati 1: 321)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bad teacher/class</td>
<td>Poor quality instructor/instruction was the target of complaints</td>
<td>Pati: But I couldn't say ‘well, okay, I knew some strategies that I could teach a group of children.’ cuz I don't. I wasn't prepared. They didn't prepare us for that. So that's why when I say there's some good and bad,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activity</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Quote</td>
<td></td>
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<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>bitch sessions</td>
<td>Members of the cohort engaged in complaining between themselves.</td>
<td>Lia: a lot of the students that are in the cohort they constantly complain about how much homework they have and life and stuff. And that drains me. It makes me feel drained. And nobody's forcing them to be there. So, sometimes I want to say shut up. (Lia 2: 229)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bullying</td>
<td>Members of the cohort engaged in behavior that they described as bullying</td>
<td>Kelly: that was her it was real hard for me to want to (laughter) embrace those people because I'm like I don't like bullies. (Kelly 1: 434)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cliques</td>
<td>Members of the cohort formed groups that strictly excluded others.</td>
<td>Kelly: cliques and if you weren't part of the clique then you're not invited to the cool to sit in the cool table. (Kelly 1: 417)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study</td>
<td>They studied with other members of the cohort.</td>
<td>Ana: Last semester we did. a few times. or was it was during the summer we had an on-line class. So a lot of us got together during that time at Aims and studied together. (Ana 1: 193)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competition</td>
<td>The cohort made them feel and engage in competitive behavior.</td>
<td>Ed: I know she's one of the smarter people in the whole program. And I try to compare myself to her. I'm sure it's still competitive. I made it this far. And you know it still those competitive juices. (Ed 2: 377)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>drama triangle</td>
<td>Members of the cohort engaged in complaining between themselves and tried to recruit others into the complaining.</td>
<td>Maria: they actually emailed Dr. Aragon and complained about him and they wanted me to email him too. (Maria 2: 824)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>friendly face/familiar</td>
<td>Other cohort members provided a friendly, familiar face in the classroom.</td>
<td>Ana: But I'm more comfortable because I know who's going to be in the classroom. so, that's always good. (Ana 1: 223)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>heads up re teachers/classes</td>
<td>Other cohort members provided advice about upcoming teachers and classes.</td>
<td>Maria: I'll have to do math 121, but they're saying it's not as hard because you're learning to teach the students in that class. (Maria 2: 117)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>homework/notetaking help</td>
<td>Other cohort members provided homework and notetaking</td>
<td>Victoria: If one know couldn't make it to class that day we would have notes for that person. (Victoria 1: 75)</td>
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<tr>
<td>hyperbonding</td>
<td>Members of the cohort engaged in hyperbonding behaviors, particularly in drawing in administrators to complain about an instructor</td>
<td>Maria: and all the students are really upset because they said it was a hard test, the teacher’s a jerk, he doesn't know what he's doing, and they actually emailed (the program director) and complained about him (Maria 2: 823)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No help/study</td>
<td>Cohort members did not help with studying or notetaking</td>
<td>Lenny: So, but I tried initially to set some things up with other people and they're like &quot;Well, we'll see, I'll call you up. I'll text you I'll email you and&quot; it just never happens. (Lenny 1: 397)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not close</td>
<td>Cohort members did not meet outside of class</td>
<td>Lucy: So I don't socialize with anyone from the group. (Lucy 1:559)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>odd men out</td>
<td>She/he felt excluded from the cohort</td>
<td>Lucy: There some of the people in the math class have um have already had those relationships. Like they've been in classes all together along and they've kind of made their own study partners with each other if you will. (Lucy 1: 549)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pissy attitude</td>
<td>Members of the cohort had a bad attitude</td>
<td>Maria: They feel like um they're like angry that they have to do this kind of class that you taught. The ELA class. They're kind of like pissy. and they hate it. (Maria 1: 898)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racism</td>
<td>Members of the cohort engaged in racially-charged behaviors</td>
<td>Maria: So things are getting better. as far as the the racism, and I'm actually getting along with the ladies now that they have come to appreciate me and I appreciate them. So we get along better even though there was a little bit of racial friction (Maria 2: 571)</td>
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</tbody>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code Family: wanted to quit career ladder</th>
<th>Description:</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Yes – algebra                            | The participant said he/she had wanted to quit because of algebra | JSS: Have you ever wanted to quit?  
Lucy: oh god. yeah, every time I. No, actually, not until I will have to say that not until I got into the algebra did I want to quit. (Lucy 2: 403-405) |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code Family: attrition</th>
<th>Description:</th>
<th>Example</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>The participant said that:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Attritted in high school</td>
<td>She/he left high school before completion</td>
<td>Maria: I didn't even finish high school. I got a GED, you know? (Maria 1: 558)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attritted after high school</td>
<td>She/he left the educational system after completing high school</td>
<td>JSS: and you didn't go to college right after high school. Ana: no I did not. I didn't have the money to do that. (Ana 1: 15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attritted after attending college</td>
<td>She/he left the educational system after attending one or two semesters of college</td>
<td>Ed: Took some core classes but you know I left my girlfriend behind. I left you know first time I'd lived away from home. (Ed 1: 16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Code Family: transfer plans</td>
<td>Description:</td>
<td>Example</td>
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<tr>
<td>The participant said that:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>No – family</td>
<td>She/he did not have plans to transfer to a 4-year institution</td>
<td>Lenny: I think for me right now my wife's sick, and she's been sick for a while. so I'm thinking I need to take care of her. (Lenny 2: 124)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>She/he did have plans to transfer to a 4-year institution</td>
<td>Lucy: I'm hoping to. Everything is in place for that to. (Lucy 2: 1)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code Family: change</th>
<th>Description:</th>
<th>Example</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The participant:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Confidence</td>
<td>displayed more confidence, either in words or body language</td>
<td>Lenny: So I have more confidence now. (Lenny 2: 459)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem solver</td>
<td>displayed greater ability to resolve commotion</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accomplishment/achievement</td>
<td>Lia: It is an achievement. (Lia 2: 419)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pride</td>
<td>Pati: I'm sure he's proud of me. Even though he doesn't show me, I know he is. (Pati 2: 309)</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>