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The Lived Experience of Latina Undergraduates Enrolled in an Adult Education Program

Sandra Lee Roberts

THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF LATINA UNDERGRADUATES ENROLLED IN AN ADULT EDUCATION PROGRAM

DISSERTATION

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for

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by

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Area of Specialization: Higher Education Administration

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ABSTRACT

THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF LATINA UNDERGRADUATES

ENROLLED IN AN ADULT EDUCATION PROGRAM

Sandra Lee Roberts

Barry University, 2008

Dissertation Chairperson: Dr. Carmen L. McCrink

Purpose

The objective of this phenomenological study was to expand the knowledge base regarding academic self-efficacy as it relates to nontraditional Latina undergraduates enrolled in an adult education program. The researcher chose to focus specifically on nontraditional Latina students because, as a group, there is limited research on this segment of the population. This dearth of research has led to a lack of knowledge and understanding of these students' needs and concerns.

Method

This qualitative research study examined the undergraduate experiences of 10 Latinas, ages 25-55, to determine what factors might have impacted their access, persistence, and success, giving them a voice to address their experiences, including how identity, history, family, culture, values, and lived experience have influenced their learning and constructions. The study was conducted electronically using *Survey Monkey*™ to collect responses to open-ended questions.

Major Findings

Findings suggest the importance of earning the degree they were pursuing and those factors which influenced their decision to return to college; within this context the participants reflected on their classroom experiences, and self-efficacy beliefs toward program completion. Participants' stories also revealed anecdotes about parents, children, and work. Two additional clusters of meanings emerged from their stories. The first revolved around topics of race, ethnicity, discrimination, representation, and immigration, while the second cluster pertained to their volunteerism, engagement, and altruism.

The narratives of the 10 Latina undergraduates in this study added a new detail to the profile of the nontraditional student. The ability to view Latinas as a separate research group, apart from the category of women and Latinos, widens and sharpens the research lens by allowing the researcher to address issues of race and gender simultaneously. Data for this study served to provide a detailed appraisal of Latina nontraditional students and reaffirm the need to create awareness in the higher education terrain, evaluate adult education practice, and support the call for action to rectify social injustices and inequities in the educational system. This study underscored the need to accept multiple realities as well as celebrate differences in the quest to make higher education accessible to all who search for a better tomorrow.

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He is deeply etched into my life and work, and

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With all my love, Sandee

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Adult learners are highly represented on college campuses and in continuing education programs; however, what is known about them, particularly about students from historically underrepresented groups, is limited. This persistent knowledge gap has been fueled by three barriers. First, the higher education journal literature has historically focused on the experiences and outcomes of young, White, non-Hispanic undergraduates (Aiken, Cervero, & Johnson-Bailey, 2001; Donaldson, Townsend, & Thompson, 2003; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Ross-Gordon, 2005; Sissel, Hansman, & Kasworm, 2001). Second, adult students' voices are often misinterpreted by the assumptions and interpretations of the scholars who study this group of students (Donaldson et al., 2003). Third, is a lack of critical analysis of the dominant ideologies about adult learners (Merriam, 2001; Quinnan, 1997).

Background of the Problem

According to the U.S. Census, the Hispanic population will soon be the largest minority population in this country, but its participation in politics, education, and the economy is rather limited (U.S. Census, 2007). Sadly, the poorest of the poor in the country are Latinas (Hispanic women) and their children. In its 2007 report, the U.S. Census Bureau reported that on average, "about 22 percent of Hispanics were living below the poverty level" and that "Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, and Hondurans" had the highest poverty rates (p. 18). A complex web of issues contributes to high levels of poverty among Latinas: limited knowledge of English, low levels of education, unfamiliarity with local social, educational, and political systems, and

traditional gender roles that encourage female passivity and limit women's access to educational and professional opportunities (Gil & Vazquez, 1996; Ginorio & Huston, 2001; Market Segment Research, 2003). This researcher chose to focus specifically on nontraditional Latina students pursuing an undergraduate degree because, as a group, there is limited research on this segment of the population. The dearth of research has led to a lack of knowledge and understanding of nontraditional Latina students' needs and concerns.

One of the fastest growing ethnic groups in the United States, the Hispanic race, saw an increase in population between 1980 and 2000 of 142%, with the largest growth in the states of California and Florida (Market Segment Research, 2003). The U.S. Census Bureau, in 2000, reported that Hispanics accounted for 12.5% of the total U.S. population. Their growth is projected to continue and would place them as the second largest race or ethnic group in the U.S. by 2010 (Market Segment Research).

Statement of the Problem

Minority women face daunting structural and cultural barriers that prevent them from achieving their true potential. In a national study of adult women attending 2-year colleges, 40% of minority women cited making time for study and work schedules as barriers to taking a full college load (Seymour & Hewit, 1997).

The Latino culture is a patriarchy with a long-established social system. Women are often relegated to the roles of wife and mother. Latinas usually look toward the family as the center of culture. Being a woman in Latino culture implies responsibility to husbands or other significant males such as fathers and brothers. Family relationships are dictated by a defined authority structure of age, gender, and role (Gil & Vazquez, 1996).

Although Latinas/Latinos represent the largest ethnic minority group in the United States, 32.8 million or approximately 12% of the population (Pew Hispanic Center Fact Sheet, 2002; Therrien & Ramirez, 2000), they continue to be underrepresented in institutions of higher education (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2002). For the past two decades, nearly half of Latino students enter college immediately after high school (NCES, 2000b); yet, their enrollments are the lowest at research universities (NCES, 2000b). When examined by ethnic groups, individuals of Mexican descent have the lowest college completion rates, lagging far behind Puerto Ricans, Cubans, and South and Central Americans (Aguirre & Martinez, 1993). Of the bachelor degrees conferred from 1996 to 1997, Latinas/Latinos accounted for only 5.5%; Latinas earned 5.7%, and their male counterparts, 5.2% (NCES, 2000a). Latinas also have substantially lower college completion rates than African American and White females (Rodriguez, Guido-DiBrito, Torres, & Talbot, 2000).

Richard Fry's Pew Hispanic Center (PHC) (2000) report, "Latinos in Higher Education: Many Enroll, Too Few Graduate," cited some distressing facts and figures: findings underscoring the reality that Hispanics have the poorest college graduation rates of any minority group in America. The comparison data are bleak: while 37% of non-Hispanic White high school graduates and 21% of African American high school graduates earn a college degree by age 29, only 16% of Hispanic high school graduates earn a bachelor's degree by the same age (Fry, 2002).

Earning a higher education is important for socioeconomic mobility and independence for anybody including Latinas (Cardoza, 1991). Those with a bachelor's degree earn 82% more than those Latinas who hold only a high school diploma (NCES,

2000a). Because Latinas tend to have more stressful educational experiences than Latinos (Gandara & Osugi, 1994) and report unique educational experiences (Rodriguez et al., 2000; Vasquez, 1982; Wycoff, 1996), this study heeded Rodriguez et al.'s call for intentional and focused research on Latina students in higher education.

With changes in the workforce, higher education is becoming less of a luxury and more of a necessity. As the skill requirements of jobs continue to rise, so should access to postsecondary training for *all* students. In this ever-increasing global society, an unprepared workforce would have negative impact on this country, both socially and economically (Pusser et al., 2007).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the lived experience of nontraditional Latina undergraduate students, aged 25 or older. The population selected was adult students enrolled in an undergraduate program at a private, 4-year Catholic university in Southern Florida. This researcher sought to understand the meaning behind these women's motivation and the social construction of the group's reality as they pursue and complete an undergraduate degree (Patton, 2002). The objective of this study was to gain new knowledge regarding student academic self-efficacy to assist university academic and administrative personnel working with nontraditional college enrolled women.

Significance of the Study

This researcher believes that in conducting this study on the lived experience of nontraditional Latina students, the results of the study may offer a springboard for further studies on this particular segment of an ever-growing population of students in higher education in the United States. The researcher sees the importance of the need for

additional studies to be conducted within other institutions of higher education both in South Florida and in the country as a whole. She sees the need of educational institutions assisting this growing, and frequently marginalized population, with the opportunity of pursuing an education. The results of this study might prove useful to improve the undergraduate experience of nontraditional Latina students. In addition, the information may also be useful to higher education administrators, defining areas where colleges and universities can minimize the challenges, encourage greater enrollment, facilitate retention, and support successful program completion for nontraditional Latina students (Banks, 1997; Kymlicka, 1995).

Researcher's Interest in the Topic

The researcher's own experiences and challenges prompted the desire to study the problems and concerns of other nontraditional Latina students. The intent was to determine Latina students' educational perspectives as they relate to the challenges and barriers they face, and the coping mechanisms they use to overcome those challenges and barriers. As the research instrument, this researcher has experienced the phenomenon she proposed to study, and identifies herself with the Latina participants and their culture, their language, all of which increased her interest in pursuing the study.

Theoretical Framework

The construct of self-efficacy, which was introduced by Albert Bandura, represents one core aspect of his social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1977, 1997). While outcome expectancies refer to the perception of the possible consequences of one's action, self-efficacy expectancies refer to personal action control or agency. A person who believes he or she is able to cause an event can conduct a more active and self-

determined life course. This “can do” cognition mirrors a sense of control over one’s environment (Bandura, 1997, p. 39). It reflects a belief of being able to control challenging environmental demands by means of taking adaptive action. It can be regarded as a self-confident view of one’s capabilities to deal with life stressors (Schwarzer, 1999).

Applying Bandura’s (1986) social-cognitive theory, students’ beliefs about their academic capabilities, or self-efficacy beliefs, are good predictors of their academic achievement and of their subsequent career choices and decisions. Self-efficacy beliefs can enhance human accomplishment and well-being in countless ways and influence the choices people make and the courses of action they pursue (Bandura, 1986). Bandura’s (1977, 1997) theory of self-efficacy guided this study and is expanded upon in a comprehensive review of the literature in Chapter II

Research Questions

The following overarching research question, and sub-questions, guided this study:

1. What is the unique experience of nontraditional Latina students completing an undergraduate degree in an Adult Education Program?
    a. What factors have surfaced as challenges to nontraditional Latina students?
    b. What strategies have nontraditional Latina students employed to overcome these challenges?
    c. What factors have contributed to nontraditional Latina students’ success in undertaking and completing their undergraduate education?

Nontraditional students bring special insights and different kinds of life experiences with them to class, enriching the learning experience for themselves and their colleagues. To assess the special academic needs of these nontraditional Latina undergraduates, 10 students entering their senior year in an adult education program at a private, 4-year, Catholic university in Southern Florida were purposefully selected to participate in the study. Questions with a direct bearing on academic success, such as family support, level of motivation, past experience, and success in academics, were included. As nontraditional Latinas represent increasing proportions of college enrollment, their special needs must be recognized and addressed by academic institutions (Bash, 2003).

Research Design

This researcher sought to understand the meanings and essences behind these nontraditional Latina undergraduate students' motivations and challenges, and the social construction of the group's reality of this shared phenomenon (Canja, 2002). As such, a qualitative method of research was the most appropriate for the study. Qualitative research is a naturalistic inquiry process of understanding where the researcher builds a complex, holistic picture, analyzes words, reports on the detailed view points of informants, and conducts the study in a natural setting (Creswell, 1998). Careful, systematic, patient investigation was undertaken to discover or establish facts and relationships using a holistic, inductive approach intended to explore the topic (people, group) in a natural setting. Data were be collected and presented in a narrative report. In qualitative research, the assumption is that all research is value-laden; therefore, the

researcher admits and discusses these beliefs (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Johnson & Christensen, 2004; Patton, 1990).

Definition of Terms

Although this qualitative study was less about defining constructs and more about understanding the meaning of these constructs in the lives, experiences, and perceptions of the participants, it was important to begin with some sense of an operational definition of terms relative to their meaning for this study.

Acculturation/assimilation. According to psychologist John Berry, acculturation is an adjustment that takes place when individuals from different cultures come into continuous and direct contact with, and learn from, one another (Berry, 1990; Gil & Vazquez, 1996). Assimilation, as discussed by Berry, disregards all aspects of the migrant's native culture and demands total adaptation to the host society. Acculturation is a more gentle and gradual process, in which, without disregarding their own culture, immigrants shift attitudes and behavior toward those of the dominant culture as a result of repeated exposure (Berry; Gil & Vazquez).

Andragogy. The terms andragogy is a system of ideas, concepts, and approaches to adult learning that was introduced to adult educators in the United States by Malcolm Knowles (1975).

Adult learners. Voorhees and Lingenfelter's (2003) definition of the adult learner in postsecondary education is someone 25 years of age or older involved in postsecondary learning activities. The U.S. Department of Education defines the adult learner as anyone engaged in some form of instruction or educational activity to acquire

the knowledge, information, and skills necessary to succeed in the workplace, learn basic skills, earn credentials, or otherwise enrich their lives (NCES, 1999).

Educational researchers do not share a precise meaning of the term *adult.* Speaking chronologically (not functionally), the typical demarcation is age 25, but the literature reflects that the adult age range can start anywhere from 24 to 30. Also, depending upon the study, the upper age limit might be set at 40, 50, 60, or above. For example, the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics uses age 24 as the lower limit and reports data in 10-year increments up to age 50 (NCES, 2002).

According to Cleveland-Innes (1994), age 23 is the "acceptable place to distinguish between adult development states," claiming support in the literature based upon Merriam's 1984 work (p. 425). Citing several sources, Barker, Felstehausen, Couch, and Henry (1997) defined an older undergraduate as one 25 years of age or older. However, Kasworm and Blowers (1994) targeted adults over age 30 and Graham and Donaldson (1996) those 27 years of age or older. Functionally, scholars target the long developmental period "between the ages of 17 and 33," and claim "emerging adulthood" happens "between ages 18 and the mid to late 20's" (Baroody Butler, 2005, p. 62). For the purposes of this study, this researcher chose the age range of 25 or older because the majority of students enrolled in the Adult Education Program at the targeted university are working adults over the age of 25.

Drop-out. A student who begins college study and then stops and does not return.

Hispanic/Latino. Moreno and Guido (2005), along with other scholars (e.g., Olivarez, 1998; Suro, 2006a) pointed out that a half century ago, the terms Hispanic and

Latino did not exist, and both terms have political undertones and imply homogeneity. In reality, the labels are based on a shared language and disallow diversity across continents and countries. Garcia (2003) noted, “The only thing that these diverse peoples have in common is their marginalization and the domination imposed on them by others” (p. 23).

Hispanic is not a monolithic entity, and huge variations exist within and across the group according to geographic location, national origin, length of residency in the U.S., gender and age. In 2000, the U.S. Census Bureau amended classification of race and national-origin group designations in response to a 1997 federal mandate and defined Hispanic as “a person of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central or other Spanish/Hispanic/Latino culture or origin, and is considered an ethnic category, rather than a racial group” (Market Segment Research, 2003, p. 133). However, in spite of the U.S. Census definition and the fact that these terms may be used interchangeably, there is still continuous debate about the use of appropriate terminology: Hispanic or Latino (Roberts, 2005). For example in specific societal contexts, Hispanic is the preferred term used for Spanish-speaking people whose cultural heritage or lineage is from Spain, whereas Latino is the term of choice for individuals whose cultural heritage is from Latin America, and thus, encompasses the Romance languages derived from Latin such as Spanish, Portuguese, and French (Roberts).

Attempts to classify individuals under the umbrella of Hispanic or Latino, based on the use of the Spanish language as a unifying factor, have not always been successful as ethnicity is a socially constructed variable often times aligned within a specific historical context (Bliss & Sandiford, 2004; Woolard, 2005). For purposes of this research study, the terms Hispanic and Latino were used interchangeably as referred to

within the context of the specific literature. This researcher, whose formative years were spent in Latin America, and who self-identifies as a Latina, used that term to describe the participants of this study.

Machismo/marianismo. Machismo has been defined by Victor de la Cancela, a Puerto Rican psychologist, as a socially learned and reinforced set of behaviors in Latino society that men are expected to follow. While the word is a synonym for oppressive male supremacy in the English language, Gil and Vazquez (1996) portray the lighter side of machismo in the gentleman or *caballero*, who is a true protector in every sense of the word. The flip side of machismo, as Gil and Vazquez posit, is marianismo: "the mortar holding antiquated cultural structures firmly in place" (p. 6). Men have options; women have duties. A man's place is "in the world" while a woman's place is "in the home" (p. 6). It means that males are praised for being ambitious, while females are discouraged for that same quality (de la Cancela, 1986; Gil & Vazquez, 1996; Suarez-McCrink, 2002).

Nontraditional students. A significant portion of adult learners may also be categorized as "non-traditional students" as defined by the NCES (2002). According to the NCES, nontraditional students exhibit one or more of seven characteristics: delayed enrollment in postsecondary education, attend part time, financially independent of parents, work full-time while enrolled, with dependents other than a spouse, a single parent, and lack a standard high school diploma. This study used the NCES definition of adult learner and analyzed literature on adult nontraditional students.

Persister. This study examined factors which contribute to retention of adult nontraditional students, or those who persist in reaching the goal of graduation from a

bachelor's degree program. Persisters in this study had completed all but 12 of the credits required for graduation and were, at the time of the study enrolled, in their final or next to last semester.

Retention. The term refers to the institutional goal of keeping students through to completion of their program of study.

Stop-out. A student who interrupts the progress in completing the program of study, but who does eventually finish and graduates. Many, if not most, adult undergraduates can be categorized as stop-outs (Pusser et al., 2007).

Assumptions

There were several underlying assumptions of this study. The first assumption was that all students participating in this research project understood the research protocol and responded truthfully to the questions. Another assumption was that the research protocol was valid for its intended purpose.

Limitations of the Study

All studies have limitations and this one is no exception. The participants in the study were limited to nontraditional Latina students enrolled in an Adult Education Program at one 4-year Catholic university in Southern Florida. Therefore, the results of the study may not be generalized to other populations.

Context

The study took place at a private, 4-year Catholic university in Southern Florida. Participants were nontraditional Latina students enrolled in an Adult Education Program at the university. This university has 10 schools and offers more than 60 undergraduate programs, 50 graduate programs, including dual degree options, specialist's degrees, and

10 doctoral degrees. According to the University's Office of Institutional Research, the Fall 2006 enrollment in the university was 9,324, with 2,393 students in the Adult Education Undergraduate Program. Of these 2,393 students, 937 were male, with an average age of 38, and 1,489 were female, with an average age of 39. Ethnic background of the students is as follows: Caucasian, Hispanic: 613; Caucasian, Non-Hispanic: 718; Black Hispanic: 78; Black, Non-Hispanic: 649; American Indian: 5; Asian: 17; Alaskan Native: 1; Other: 103; Unknown: 242.

Chapter Summary

The study began with an introduction to the subject of interest: Adult learners are highly represented on college campuses and in continuing education programs; however, what is known about them—particularly about students from historically underrepresented groups—is limited. The purpose of the study was addressed by outlining the population sample and setting for this research. The justification and rationale for the study are provided, as well as the origins of this researcher's interest in the experience of nontraditional Latina students enrolled in an Adult Education Program. The theoretical framework that guided this study was the construct of self-efficacy. The qualitative research design choice was supported through the review of hallmark theorists' writings. Important definitions of terms that were used throughout the study are identified. Limitations and delimitations have been addressed and a preliminary review of the literature is provided. The next section expands on these constructs by reviewing relevant literature and theories that guided this study.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

To create a solid foundation for the study, this researcher conducted three literature reviews: substantive, theoretical, and methodological (Gehart, 2001; LeCompte & Preissle, 1993; Wolcott, 1995, 2001). The substantive review targeted several items: (a) current trends in higher education; (b) predicting success for college students; (c) nontraditional adult students and current demographics; (d) the terms minority, Hispanic and Latino; (e) women in culture, including women in the Americas; (f) women in higher education; and (g) the construct of self-efficacy. The second literature review, theoretical, targeted the philosophical underpinnings of phenomenology, critical theory, and postmodernism, as well as the merger of the latter two paradigms into a third entitled crucial postmodernism. The methodological review linked theory to approach and methods. For example, phenomenological methods are grounded in phenomenology (the philosophy), but phenomenology is both a "method and a movement," and has been adopted—and adapted—by several other disciplines (Moran, 2000, p. 1). Similarly, critical postmodernism implies that critical analyses and deconstruction are necessary in order to raise awareness about underlying themes of power and oppression (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000). This researcher also reviewed general qualitative approaches, including specific interviewing, journaling, and data interpretation techniques inspired by postmodern thinking.

The purpose of Chapter II is to share the findings from the first phase of the literature review: substantive. This should help the reader understand (a) why there is

aneed to learn more about nontraditional Latina undergraduates, and (b) that this inquiry intent (from phenomenology) will be to seek the essence of their stories. The theoretical and methodological literature reviews are summarized in Chapter III.

Search Strategies

Paralleling Galvan's (2006) suggestions, the researcher approached the literature reviews systematically. First, she defined the article selection criteria and scope of the search. Next, she identified primary information resources. Finally, she retrieved articles of interest and created a master bibliography list. As a quality check, in addition to Galvan, the researcher used Boote and Beile's (2005) standards for a comprehensive literature review that include, but are not limited to (a) justifying why articles are included or excluded, (b) examining historical literature topics, (c) synthesizing, (d) discussing ambiguities in the literature (including definitions), and (e) critiquing research methods.

The researcher used several different search strategies to locate research. First, she turned to the journal literature most familiar to the topic, that is, the area relative to adults in higher education. From those articles, the researcher followed up with many of the cited references. In addition, the researcher sought advice from faculty members on how to extend her research into other disciplines. Extensive searches were conducted through various Internet databases including government Web portals. Additional material was obtained by searching various library catalogs and shelves in the South Florida area, and several top-tier journals from 1998 forward.

As a result, the researcher was able to locate numerous refereed journal articles, conference proceedings, unpublished papers, books, chapters, and government reports on

a variety of interrelated topics pertinent to this study. The original reviews occurred in 2004-2005, updated in 2006 and 2007. Unfortunately, very little has changed substantively since 2005. However, she was able to improve her theoretical and methodological understanding through the additional study.

Current Trends in Higher Education

Daniel Yankelovich, in a 2005 "Chronicle of Higher Education" article, posed the following questions: "What will higher education look like 10 years from now if it is highly responsive to the demands of society? What external forces will reshape colleges and universities by 2015, if allowed to do so? What forms might the changes assume?" Yankelovich posited that, while these trends are not the only forces pressuring colleges, they pose an enormous challenge in the milieu of higher education.

Trend 1: Changing life cycles as the nation's population ages. Higher education is no longer the domain of the traditional 18–22 year old student. Three-quarters of today's college students are nontraditional in some way, many are already working, and more than a quarter of them are parents. Yet, institutions of higher education are most often geared toward the needs of the traditional student. Institutions of higher education will need to strengthen and expand existing programs for the growing number of adult nontraditional students or they risk losing a significant source of revenues.

Trend 2: Increasing challenges to higher education's commitment to social mobility. Tuition continues to increase, and financial aid has been unable to keep pace, a fact that damages many students access to higher education. As mentioned previously, education is directly linked to social and economic status, regardless of the race/ethnic group. Changes in a workplace that offers fewer well-paid unskilled jobs have made

higher education less of a luxury and more of a necessity (Abeles, 2001; Pusser et al., 2007).

Current Demographics: An Overview

Participation and success rates in higher education differ considerably among demographic groups. White and Asian high school graduates enroll in postsecondary education at significantly higher rates than Black and Hispanic high school graduates. The Black/White gap has narrowed slightly over the past decade, but this is not true of the Hispanic/White gap. Women have been more likely than men to enroll since the late 1980s, and the gender gap is widening (Baum & Payea, 2004).

In addition to race/ethnicity and gender, socioeconomic status plays a major role in patterns of participation in higher education. Even among high school graduates with similar levels of academic achievement, students from low-income families are much less likely than more affluent students to continue their education after high school (Pusser et al., 2007). Both income and parent education level have independent effects on the probability that students will enroll in college, and the gaps among young people at different socioeconomic levels have not narrowed measurably in recent decades (Pusser et al.). Moreover, among those who do enroll, low-income students are overrepresented in 2-year public colleges, while affluent students are more likely than others to attend private 4-year colleges and universities (Baum & Payea, 2004; Pusser et al.).

Although the discussion about participation in higher education is frequently couched in terms of access, persistence in completing a degree is also an important focus. Even among those who enroll in postsecondary institutions, degree completion is correlated with demographic characteristics. White and Asian American students are

more likely to earn degrees than Black and Hispanic students, and higher-income students are more likely than others to graduate. The differences in enrollment rates and in degree completion rates are reflected in significant differences in educational attainment patterns among the adult population (Baum & Payea, 2004; Pusser et al., 2007).

College participation rates among Whites are higher than those among Blacks, and particularly, Hispanics. In the mid-1970s, postsecondary participation rates of high school graduates were similar for all three of these racial/ethnic groups. After widening in the 1980s, the White/Black gap has narrowed over the past decade, but the White/Hispanic gap has been more persistent (Baum & Payea, 2004).

According to the U.S. Census (2004), Hispanics accounted for 14.1% of the population; in 2002, one out of every four persons (24.3%) living in poverty in the United States was of Hispanic origin. As of 2002, there were 1.656,000 Hispanics in college. In 2004, 1,130,122 Hispanics were enrolled in Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities (HACU) member institutions. Of all Hispanics over age 25 in March 2002, 27.0% had less than a 9th grade education; as of 2003, 70.4% of all Hispanics over 25 have never attended college; by March 2003, for persons 25 years old and over, only 11.4% of Hispanics had completed a college education compared with 27.7% for Whites (American Council on Education, 2006; U.S. Census, 2004).

Predicting Success for College Students

Predicting success for college students, assessing college students' needs, and evaluating the undergraduate experience are areas that have long interested educators in the field of higher education (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, & Associates, 2005).

Understanding elements that contribute to the retention of undergraduates will ultimately contribute to the success of the institution, especially when funding is more and more linked with enrollments (Kuh et al.). Losing students is costly to institutions in several ways, and research has shown that both student characteristics and institutional practices can contribute to student retention (Astin, 1993). Moreover, when institutions endeavor to retain students by providing them with a richer educational experience, better support services, and quality academic and career advising, there is greater potential for graduates to turn into satisfied and generous alumni (Astin).

Losing students is also costly for the individual student in terms of loss of human potential and self-confidence. While some levels of attrition are likely to be always present due to the uncertainty of goals and interests common in late adolescence, a time needed to explore and discover there are costs associated with dropping out. Personal disappointment associated with dropping out of college can result in lowered career and life goals. Financial costs can take a toll as well, especially with the sometimes astronomical costs associated with higher education today. Credits are sometimes lost when transferring to different majors or institutions, costing students both time and money. In addition, early failure, or even perceived failure, can make the return to college difficult for many, even when the pressure to finish college is great because of employment needs (Kuh et al., 2005; Pusser et al., 2007).

In his groundbreaking book, *Education and Identity*, Arthur Chickering (1969) introduced the idea that college plays a much more important role in the life of students than previously thought. Because developmental changes that characterize late adolescence occur during the college years, Chickering called on all of higher education

to begin to pay “special attention so that institutions of higher education can better serve society and more effectively help young persons move productively from adolescence to adulthood” (p. 2). Chickering posited that, in addition to transmitting skills, insights, and points of view, schools would be effective only when they reached students in areas they cared about and helped them to develop as individuals. This becomes increasingly important as institutions of higher education are addressing the changing demographics of the population in the United States. No longer are institutions solely the domain of the traditional 18- to 22-year-old student (Yankelovich, 2006).

Higher education has become increasingly more important for people so that they can become economically self-sufficient in this global and technological economy. Many jobs require at least some postsecondary education. Increased emphasis in the workplace is being placed on an individual having a baccalaureate degree. The U.S. population is changing, and more nontraditional students are entering the milieu of higher education, many of them ill-prepared to address the challenges for successfully completing a degree (Pusser et al., 2007; Yankelovich, 2006)). Colleges and universities, in addition to facing increased competition for student recruitment, face the task of providing a high-quality postsecondary education to these individuals; thus, both retention and success of these students are crucial (Tinto, 1975). The trends facing higher education during the 21st century speak to the need for colleges and universities to address the issue of student success if the U.S. is to continue to be a world leader or, at the very least, a world player (Pusser et al.; Yankelovich).

Nontraditional Adult Students

College campuses today reflect changes in the age of the student body (Yankelovich, 2006). The largest increase in enrollment of nontraditional students in the 1990s occurred among 40– to 50–year olds (baby boomers), and this trend has continued into the present (Imel, 1997; Merrill, 1999). Increasingly, adult women are returning to college campuses to complete a degree for academic work they began 10, 20, or even 30 years earlier (Anderman & Young, 1994; Kopka & Korb, 1996; Pitts, 1992; Rothstein, 1996; Yankelovich). Students in their late teens or early twenties, who were recent high school graduates, no longer predominate on campuses across the country. They are likely to share classrooms with nontraditional adults; often female students who have reentered the college setting. Nontraditional adult students often represent a diversity of backgrounds, socioeconomic as well as racial and ethnic. Unlike traditional students who have few responsibilities other than being a student, nontraditional adult students frequently fill multiple roles that compete with their roles as students (Pusser et al., 2007).

These changes in student enrollment patterns challenge colleges and universities, once the domain of recent high school graduates, to meet shifting needs of student enrollment. Nontraditional students, many of whom are juggling study, family, and job demands, are encountering a variety of challenges as they work to meet the rigors of academia (Kasworm & Blowers, 1994; Pitts, 1992, 1993/1994; Pusser et al., 2007; Rothsetin, 2000). Their lifestyles and needs are different from those of younger classmates (Bash, 2003; Parish, & Sperling 1991; Pusser et al., 2007; Sandler, 2000; Spanard, 1990).

Currently, nontraditional adult students comprise more than 45% of total enrollment in colleges and universities and even more if corporate universities and other learning/training situations are included (Pusser et al., 2007). In order to provide a suitable adult education undergraduate program, it is especially important for faculty and administration to understand this population: their unique needs and characteristics, along with the special challenges they pose. Unfortunately, too many campus leaders have either ignored nontraditional adult students or treated them like second-class citizens. No institution can afford this behavior in today's highly competitive market. Indeed, many of the more successful colleges and universities are consciously examining how to more fully integrate adult students into their mission and community (Bash, 2003; Pusser et al.).

Institutions must begin by identifying adult learners' needs in order to focus on those who are most at risk of failure. They must also identify the unique challenges and obligations that shape access and success in the postsecondary arena. Working with students, institutions can develop strategies to increase student confidence in managing short-term needs and longer-term aspirations (Pusser et al., 2007).

In the 21st century, the U.S. needs to maximize the potential of adult learners to face global challenges. Adult learners can support the nation's efforts to increase global competitiveness, but adult learners need their institutions to support them in the pursuit of their personal aspirations for credentials and degrees (Pusser et al., 2007).

Over the past 35 years, while public debate focused on issues of equal access and genuine diversity in higher education, an undeniable shift in the national undergraduate population was documented: more adults were enrolling and returning to higher

education. The catalyst for this unprecedented change was a complex combination of social, political, economic, and technological factors (Kasworm, 2003b; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Osgood-Treston, 2001; Pulliam & Van Patten, 1995). Since the 1970s, millions of older women and people from underrepresented racial and ethnic groups have flocked to higher education institutions for personal enrichment and career enhancement and to pursue degrees. By the turn of the century, 43% of all undergraduates in the United States were over the age of 24, and more than half (56%), were female (Horn, Peter, & Rooney, 2002). Additionally, 33% of all undergraduates were non-White, non-Hispanic, with a majority of students from low and middle-income quartiles (Horn et al.). Also in stark contrast to the college campus of a generation ago, about 73% of the current undergraduate population is now categorized as nontraditional; an extended definition that reflects students who have assumed the responsibilities of adult life, such as having dependents, being financially independent, attending school part-time, and/or working full time (Choy, 2002; Horn & Carrol, 1996).

Despite these demographic changes, research about the adult undergraduate experience has been limited (Donaldson et al., 2003; Donaldson, Townsend & Thompson, 2004; Pacarella & Terenzini, 1998, 2005; Ross-Gordon, 2003a; Sissel et al., 2001). Even by the turn of the millennium, researchers in the higher education journal literature focused on traditional patterns of study (Donaldson et al., 2003; Quinnan, 1997), such as comparing adults' campus involvement and academic performance with younger students, and attributing which factors lead to adult persistence and degree attainment. Consequently, there is much left to learn about adult undergraduates, especially students from underrepresented groups whose voices are often misinterpreted

by the assumptions and interpretations of the scholars who study these students (Donaldson et al., 2003).

A lack of breadth and depth in studies about older students (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1998) seems to have perpetuated a number of misconceptions about them, including the notion that older students do not perform as well academically as younger students (Richardson, 1994; Richardson & King, 1998). Nearly a decade ago, Richardson and King were calling for the elimination of "myths and stereotypes" about adult students (p. 82). Since then, several scholars have worked to refute the myths of academic deficiency by showing that adults consistently performed as well in college as younger students (Donaldson, Flannery, & Ross-Gordon, 1999).

Quinnan (1997) and Donaldson et al. (2003) concluded that the historic research trends were redundant, in that most "studies are done by repackaging hypotheses and reaffirming outcomes of earlier scholarship" (Quinan, p. 1). Quinnan and others called upon fellow scholars to explore new dimensions of adult undergraduate experience (e.g., Donaldson et al., 2003; Kasworm, 2002; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1998). Pascarella and Terenzini labeled the failure of higher education researchers to focus on adult students a "substantial" research bias (p. 152). Further, Kasworm, Sandmann, and Sissel (2000) concluded that the marginalization of adults in higher education is so widespread that it also encompassed public policy, programming, and mission. Specific to Latinos, Orfield, Horn, and Flores (2006) pointed out the need to address "civil rights and . . . policy decision issues at the institution, state, and federal levels" (p. 81).

The 1990s reflected little change in the higher education journal literature. Donaldson et al. (2003) analyzed 2,533 titles from three community college journals, two

student affairs journals, and three general higher educational journals from 1990-2000. They found that *less than2%* (*n* = 29) of the articles focused on older undergraduates and *none* were specific to adult students from underrepresented racial or ethnic groups.

As part of their longitudinal college impact study, Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) examined nearly 2,600 studies from the 1990s. Like Donaldson et al. (2004), they found that "the majority of post-1990 studies of [student] change in college, like those published earlier, focus on traditional age undergraduates" (p. 18). They also noted that scholars in the adult development field have published little on how college affects older adults. Further, they observed that while the scope of research topics on undergraduates has broadened, a "positivist, quantitative paradigm still dominates the total body of research" (p. 41). Lincoln and Guba (2000) explained that the inquiry aim of positivism is "explanation: prediction and control" and knowledge accumulation through "accretion-'building blocks' adding to [an] 'edifice of knowledge;' [with] generalizations and cause-effect linkages" (p. 166). The positivist literature Pascarella and Terenzini referred to are studies that attempt to predict the progress and outcomes of students or control what variables are studied and how these variables are defined. In positivist research, students' voices are not heard because control of the salient research questions, data collection, analysis, and reporting are determined solely by the researcher.

As noted, several scholars have pointed out the absence of refereed articles on adult undergraduates. They agreed that even by the close of the 1990s, knowledge about the diverse educational needs, experiences, and outcomes of adult undergraduates—especially students from underrepresented groups—remained limited (Kasworm, 2002; Ross-Gordon & Brown-Haywood, 2000). Most pointedly, Quinnan (1997) concluded that

adults are one of many "besieged groups struggling to secure their own cultural niche on campuses largely indifferent to multicultural presences and needs" (p. 27). This researcher found similar patterns while reviewing literature from 1998-2007, and offers the following summary.

Government Reports on Adult Students

The NCES publishes several documents from which statistics about adult students can be gleaned, including reports on enrollment numbers, minorities, persistence, educational attainment, and nontraditional characteristics. Beginning in the 1970s, as noted previously, the U.S. undergraduate population began a dramatic shift toward diversity, as women and minorities—many of them older adults—were joining young, privileged, White males in higher education. By 1973, the federal government began reporting data for college students aged 25 or older (Shin, 2005). In the 2000 school year, nearly 8% of the U.S. adult population—5.9 million adults age 25 or older—was enrolled as undergraduates; those numbers are projected to increase by 8% by 2010 (NCES, 2004). Colleges, universities, and vocational/technical schools provided one fifth (21%) of all the work-related adult education programs in the United States (NCES). According to the government, nearly half (44-46%) of the U.S. adult population (approximately 86-90 million adults) was engaged in adult education programs (Kim & Creighton, 1999; NCES). This included adults attending college part-time and those enrolled in non-degreed programs that would not otherwise be "counted" as undergraduates. Kim and Creighton (1999) underscored that participation in adult education was "six times the higher education enrollment in 1999" (¶ 2).

Underrepresented racial and ethnic groups. Wirt et al. (2003) reported an increase in the proportion of minority undergraduates for the 1999-2000 year over the previous decade, while the number of White, non-Hispanic students decreased. However, the percentage of White, non-Hispanic students in the undergraduate population increased with age; for example, at the start of the 21st century, 60% of all undergraduates between the ages of 24-29 were White, non-Hispanic, but after age 39, the percentage of White, non-Hispanic students grew to 70% (Horn et al., 2002). On the other hand, representation of underrepresented groups decreased with age; for example, at age 24, Black and Hispanic adult students comprised 14.3% and 14% of the undergraduate population, respectively, but those numbers dropped to 13.2% and 9.2% by age 40. The number of participating adults also declined for other minority groups and for those who identified themselves by more than one race (Horn et al.). Representation in the undergraduate population by ethnicity was slightly different. Younger students (18-23) comprised more of the White, non-Hispanic population (58%); younger students comprised less of the Black population (49.4%), while younger students comprised more of the Hispanic or Latino population (58.6%) (Horn et al.). The only other racial or ethnic group where older students outnumbered younger students was American Indian/Alaska Natives (54.8%) (Horn et al.). Government data showed that participation in adult education has increased overall: The *2005 Condition of Education* reported that more than half (51%) of all Asian American/Pacific Islanders participated in adult education, as did 46% of Blacks, 55% of Whites, 41% of Hispanics, and 36% of American Indian/Alaskan Natives (NCES, 2005).

Other adult student characteristics. In the United States, postsecondary education has long driven individual social mobility and collective economic prosperity. Nonetheless, the nation's labor force includes 54 million adults who lack a college degree; nearly 34 million of those adults have no college experience at all (Pusser et al., 2007). In the 21st century, increasing global economic competition and the rapid pace of technological change are revolutionizing the skills and educational qualifications necessary to individual job success and national economic well-being. The United States. continues to trail global competitors on a number of key measures of educational achievement (Yankelovich, 2006). For much of U.S. history, the nation's robust industrial economy has allowed many Americans to earn a comfortable living without having earned a baccalaureate degree, but those days are all but gone. The global economy and industrial production have made postsecondary education a requirement for success, both individually and nationally. To better understand how the nation can meet this challenge, the Lumina Foundation for Education funded a series of research efforts that has identified several areas of concern for the 54 million working adults. Among these are recognizing that adult learners are diverse and complex individuals with widely divergent aspirations, levels of preparation, and degrees of risk, that their life circumstances require that institutions provide convenient, affordable access and planning tools to increase student success; and, that institutions must better understand and document adult learners' patterns of enrollment in credit-bearing and noncredit-bearing courses (Pusser et al., 2007).

Adult learners typically have been treated as an afterthought in higher education (Bash, 2003; Cross, 1981; Pusser et al., 2007). A substantial portion of these students are

at great risk of failing to complete courses and degrees as they struggle to balance work and family commitments. They often lack resources and generally must adapt to a system designed to serve younger, full-time students. Increasing adult attainment of the baccalaureate degree will produce the highest individual and social return; however, this goal clashes with the structures in place to support it. Millions of adult students are seeking degrees in a system built largely for, and around, traditional students (Bash; Pusser et al.).

Within the last several years, the U.S. Department of Education released several reports that further illuminated students' backgrounds and characteristics. At least two of these reports included statistics on older undergraduates. For example, about 40% of younger adult students (ages 24-29) are from lower-income families (Choy, 2000), but nearly half (45%) of students over age 40 have higher incomes (Horn et al., 2002). Horn et al. attributed this difference to "experience in the work force," which may also explain why a majority of students over the age of 30 attend college on a part-time basis (p. 14). Low-income students ages 25 or older were also more likely to have parents with less than a high school education (Choy). Horn et al. also pointed out that 62% of adult students age 40 and older were first-generation college students, defined as their parents having no more than a high school education or equivalent.

Student retention is another topic of interest. As reported by Horn et al. (2002), factors that place an undergraduate student at risk of non-completion include delayed enrollment, part-time attendance, being financially independent, having dependents or children, being a single parent, having no high school diploma, and working full-time. According to Horn et al., "students with three or more risk factors could be in danger of

leaving postsecondary education without a degree or credential" (p. 33). They reported that adult students (ages 24 and older) are academically at risk, and that adult students over age 30 have an average of 3.8 risk factors. In a separate report, Berkner, Cuccaro-Alamin, and McCormik (1996) showed that as "age at entry into postsecondary education increased, persistence and attainment decreased," and that only 35% of students who initiated studies at 30 or older had attained degrees or were still enrolled five years later (p. 16). Although most adult students did not initiate studies at 4-year degree granting institutions (Berkner et al.), of those who did, 46% departed within the first three years (Bradburn, 2002). After controlling for other variables, Bradburn found that age was a contributing factor to early attrition. Berkner et al. suggested that other factors such as "institutional selectivity, academic preparation and individual motivation may explain the difference in persistence and attainment" among students (p. 20).

Despite attrition rates, in July 2000, the U.S. Department of Education reported that the number of White, Black, and Hispanic students between the ages of 25-29 who had attained a bachelor's degree had risen between 1971 and 1998. In 1998, 34.5% of White, non-Hispanic students had attained a degree, compared with 23.1% in 1971; for Blacks, the numbers were 17.9% in 1998 compared with 11.5% in 1971; and for Hispanics, 16.5% in 1998 versus 10.5% in 1971. The U.S. Department of Labor reported that in 1997, nearly 80% of adults over age 25 who held a bachelor's degree participated in the labor force, compared with 66% holding high school diplomas (NCES, 1998).

Researchers' Perspectives on Adults in College Classrooms

Scholarly studies conducted between 1998-2007 provided demographics on adult students (Aslanian, 2001; Bash, 2003; Kasworm et al., 2002; Kasworm, 2003b); shared

theories on adults' cognition and learning (Dill & Henley, 1998; Graham, 1998; Merriam, 2001; Richardson & King, 1998; Ross-Gordon, 2003a); described the motivations and goals of adult students (Kasworm, 2003b; White, 2001); discussed adults' family and work roles and barriers to education (Aslanian, 2001; Fairchild, 2003; Home, 1998; Johnson, Schwartz, & Bower, 2000; Kasworm, Rose, & Ross-Gordon, 2005; Kerka, 2001; Osgood-Treston, 2001; White, 2001); compared adult students with younger college students (Bash, 2003; Carlan, 2001; Dill & Henley, 1998; Graham & Long-Gisi, 2000; Howard & Baird, 2000; Howard & Henley, 1998; Jacobs & Berkowitz-King, 2002; Kasworm, 2003c; Richarson & King, 1998; Senter & Senter, 1998; Spitzer, 2000); offered strategies for recruitment and retention (Hadfield, 2003; Hagedorn, 2006; Kasworm et al., 2002; Kasworm et al., 2005); and, explained factors of persistence (Hagedorn; Hensley & Kinser, 2001; Kent & Gimmestad, 2004; Samuels, 2005). Most of the articles treated adults as one homogenous group, paying scant attention to adults' age, race, class, or ethnic differences.

A few researchers have begun to challenge labels and definitions that have historically stereotyped adult students in negative ways. For example, Adelman (1999), a government employee, and Hensley and Kinser (2001) WHO WERE THEY offered that the conventional definition of persistence comes from an institutional perspective that students must stay continually enrolled at one institution and complete studies within a period of about five years. Adelman pointed out that current statistics show more than 60% of undergraduates now enroll in more than one institution, and that many others stop out for one or more semesters before returning to studies. He advocated eliminating *persistence* as a variable measure in government studies and pointed out that, "Simply

because [a variable] has been used for decades or because a federal agency paid for it" does not mean that the variable is a valid measure of the undergraduate experience (p. xi). Like Adelman, Hensley and Kinser preferred to define persistence from a student perspective rather than an institutional one. Hensley and Kinser coined the term *tenacious persisters* with a positive tone in order to describe students who stop out or enroll in more than one institution as still making progress.

Other researchers have challenged a traditional notion that *college outcome* is equated with *degree attainment*. Donaldson and Graham (1999) pointed out that existing models of persistence and college outcomes were based upon studies of younger students and "may not fully capture the essence of the undergraduate experience for adults in higher education" (p. 25). Donaldson and Graham also suggested that adults define outcomes in a variety of ways beyond academic achievement, including, but not limited to, application of learning to life and work, improving the lives of others, and attitudinal change. In 2003, Donaldson expanded on that observation, noting that adult undergraduate outcomes are "influenced by multiple factors and not simply and only by what learners experience on campus" (p. 7).

In addition to challenging the definitions and labels used to categorize adult students, some of the literature published between 1998 and 2007 reflected researchers' attempts to illustrate the adult undergraduate experience from new perspectives. For example, Kasworm (2003a) introduced five adult student voices including "*entry voice*, *outside voice*, *cynical voice*, *straddling voice*, and *inclusion voice*," as representing adults' beliefs about the creation of knowledge and the relationship of their learning experiences in and out of the classroom (p. 86). According to Kasworm, a student with an

entry voice is one who values academic knowledge, successful class performance, and grades. In contrast, a student with an *outside voice* values applied and real world knowledge and expertise. Kasworm labeled a student who enrolls in college for credentialing purposes, with little classroom engagement, as having a *cynical voice*. However, a student who connects academic and real-world knowledge possesses what Kasworm called a *straddling voice*. Finally, those students who had more of a world view and multiple forms of knowledge Kasworm described as having an *inclusion voice*. Looking at knowledge acquisition differently, Hayes (2001) identified that "gendered ways of knowing may differ by society, culture, ethnic group, locality, and so on" (p. 39), and suggested that "if educators seek to promote social change, they might explore with learners how gendered beliefs are acted upon, recreated and transformed in the classroom" (p. 41).

Spirituality. Tisdell (2001) is one of few researchers deviating from the historical research trends. In her review of the literature on adult *spirituality* in higher education, Tisdell noted that "as the cultural fabric of North America is changing, there is greater emphasis on creating culturally relevant programs for specific population groups" (¶ 9). Referencing Barry Burke's bell hooks, Tisdell noted that "spirituality has a role in breaking the silence that erases our passion . . . [and has] a place in higher and adult education" because it leads to "culturally relevant," "emancipatory," and "transformative" education (¶ 1; ¶ 8). As the adult learner population becomes increasingly diverse—and global, educators will begin to see the application of Tisdell's work to their classroom methods. In fact, Aiken et al. (2001) listed spirituality as a strong motivating factor for African American nursing students.

Repressive tolerance. Contrasting Tisdell's (2001) pedagogical ideologies are Huber and Cale's (2001) observations that "liberal and humanistic teaching practices" such as feminist pedagogy, transformative education, and democratic discussions "may lead to the marginalization and even silencing of more progressive and inclusive oppositional voices and viewpoints" in the adult education classroom (p. 101). Citing Marcuse, they described how this *repressive tolerance* occurs:

> Democratic tolerance demands that all voices are heard…because people are indoctrinated into the dominant hegemonic thinking, they naturally reject radical or alternative perspectives that violate their formative ideological conditioning . . . oppositional voices would be marginalized, met with hostility, and finally ignored. (p. 102)

Huber and Cale (2002) contended that faculty members should remain ethical, but use "coercive restraint . . . oppositional teaching" and other methods to "delegitimize the status quo and silence the dominant majority" (p. 102). They reiterated bell hooks' position that a "teacher's role is to facilitate the challenge of structural power relations. This may mean that classrooms are not "safe" and that "students feel uncomfortable being challenged" (Huber & Cale, p. 102). In order to do this, Huber and Cale added, faculty members must be willing to "exert authority" when repressive tolerance occurs, even if it means at times they must abandon Freirean[1] methods that "downplay the distinction between learner and educator" (p. 102). The authors candidly shared reflective examples of how marginalization occurred and voices were silenced in their *tolerant* classrooms.

[1] According to Freire (2002), through dialogue, the teacher of the students and the students of the teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with students-teachers. The teacher is no longer merely the one who teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach. They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow. In this process, arguments based on "authority" are no longer valid; in order to function, authority must be on the side of freedom, not against it.

With an argument similar to Huber and Cale's (2002), Brookfield (2003) described how a "democratic" classroom environment with "self-directed learning, critical reflection, and transformative learning" methods can lead to repressive tolerance (p. 498). Not only did Brookfield expound on Marcuse's concept of repressive tolerance, he underscored the prevalent, *racialized* discourse in adult education classrooms, refuting "the myth of neutral, non-impositional, adult educators" (p. 520). Brookfield made a distinction between *racialism* and *racism*, the former being a "positive recognition of how his or her lifeworld, positionality, and sense of cultural identity comprised a set or preconscious filters and assumptions that frame how one's life is felt and lived" (p. 499). Thus, White educators of European descent, "informed by their racial histories and identities," protect and promote a "Eurocentric epistemology," values, and ideologies that predominate the racialized discourse of the typical adult education classroom (p. 522).

Kumashiro (2000) suggested there are "four approaches to anti-oppressive education . . .[including] Educating for the Other, Education About the Other, Education that Is Critical of Privileging and Othering, and Education that Changes Students and Society" (p. 25). However, according to Brookfield (2002, 2003, 2005), the task of moving away from repressive tolerance toward *liberating tolerance* is fraught with challenges for White educators, who may be perceived as insensitive and disrespectful with ill-conceived attempts at "diversity" and "inclusion." Their Whiteness remains the "invisible norm" at the center of discourse and other perspectives are merely additions to that center (Brookfield, 2003, p. 499). Edwards and Usher (1997), Manglizt (2003), Suarez-McCrink (2002) share the same view. Contreras and Gándara (2006), Watson

(2002), and others have also pointed out the importance of critical discourse to students from underrepresented groups.

Negative experiences of marginalized students. The works of Brookfield (2002, 2003, 2005), Huber and Cale (2002), and Tisdell (2001) have all been published within the past six years. Also emerging in the literature during this same period was scholarship that did not treat adults as one homogeneous group and recognized how gender, race, ethnicity, culture, and class shape the adult undergraduate experience. Examples of this emerging body of literature on marginalized groups are Hayes' (2001) study on women's learning, including African American women, Ross-Gordon's (2003b) observations on African American women in academia, and Spradley's (2001) work on education strategies for adult Black males. When these and other studies were reviewed, several consistent themes emerged about the experiences of adults from underrepresented groups—themes that revealed both oppressive and supportive collegiate experiences. This finding is consistent with Donaldson's (2003) observation that "a range of factors" can contribute to either a "supportive or non-supportive" learning climate for adults (p. 7).

Several researchers have reported that the oppressive experiences (which were more prevalent than supportive experiences) served as educational barriers to adult students of color. The oppressive themes in the current literature included the *racialized culture* of higher education (Hayes, 2001; O'Brien, 1998; Ross-Gordon, 2003b); *marginalization and otherness* (Ross-Gordon); *Eurocentric curricula* (Donaldson, 2003; Ross-Gordon; O'Brien; Ziegahn, 2001); and *racism* (Ross-Gordon). According to

Castellanos and Jones (2003), findings about younger African American and Latino students are similar.

Ross-Gordon (2003b) argued that African American adult students are the "double other," meaning that they are marginalized in classrooms because of their race and age. She pointed out how these students have a "degree of cultural dissonance with the college learning environment" in part because of racism and stereotyping, absence of faculty of color, Eurocentric curricula, and "covert and even over discrimination" (pp. 9-10). According to Ross-Gordon, Black students have a strong sense of self-efficacy; yet found that they needed to "learn the academic 'rules of the game' " (p. 8) and how to "navigate the culture of higher education" (p. 10). As it pertained to classroom practices, Ziegahn (2000) explained how mandatory student presentations in front of a class can create dissonance for "Asian and Native American students who come from a culture of reverence to those in leadership, power, age, gender or status" (p. 5), and how the "emphasis on actions, results, and deadlines . . . may create a disconnect for Hispanic learners whose time is linked to the "exploration of ideas" rather than a goal or product" (p. 6).

Supportive climates for marginalized students. The current literature also identifies supportive collegiate experiences related to *classroom climate* (Kasworm, 2003c; Ross-Gordon, 2003b; Watson, 2003; Ziegahn, 2001), *faculty attitude and accessibility* (Donaldon, 2003; Ross-Gordon, 2003b; Stebbins, 1998), *curricula* (O'Brien, 1998; Ross-Gordon, 2005; Watson), and *campus environment* (Ross-Gordon, 2003b; Spradley, 2001; Watson). Morin (2005) noted the importance of "reaffirming culture and identity" (pp. 112-113) of Latino/Latinas, while Ross-Gordon (2003b, 2005) emphasized

the importance of cultural visibility in the curricula for Black, Hispanic, and Native American adult students. Ross-Gordon and Donaldson underscored that a positive attitude from instructors toward adult students and faculty sensitivity to cultural visibility in the curricula for Black, Hispanic, and Native American students is critical for these students. Ross-Gordon (2003a, 2003b) also described how supportive peers and study groups are an important aspect of the campus environment for African Americans.

Specific to supportive environments for adult Latino/Latinas, Greenhouse Gardella, Candales, and Rocardo-Rivera (2005) identified how "learners increasingly expect to reach their educational goals as they face challenges, accept help from mentors and guides, interpret adversity, learn positive lessons, identify accomplishments and goals, and assume responsibility for others" (p. 40). The authors also wrote that "culturally meaningful support" is needed, such as family involvement, affirmation of cultural values, and connections with the Latino community and college life (p. 40). Unique to the Greenhouse Gardella et al. program, students participated in a structured mentoring program with other Latinos and could "speak in their preferred language, English or Spanish" (p. 42).

Adult Students' Voices on their Undergraduate Experience

Johnson-Bailey's (1998; 2001) work with Black reentry women in college, Aiken et al.'s (2001) study of Black women in nursing programs, and Bowl's (2001) study from the United Kingdom matched this researcher's selection criteria for this section on the adult student experience from the *students' perspective*. Similar to the previously cited literature, several consistent themes emerged from the voices of students from underrepresented groups, including *self-efficacy*, *determination*, *otherness*, *racism*, and

racialized institutional culture. The students' stories illustrated how oppressive the undergraduate experience can be for marginalized adults.

The African American women who shared their stories with Johnson-Bailey (2001) characterized their "reentry episodes as chilling experiences and depicted academia as hostile" (p. 121). Overall, she observed that race and gender oppression overwhelmingly affected them both inside and outside of the classroom. Johnson-Bailey's and Ross-Gordon's (2003b) work also illustrated another conceptualization of the *Double Other* on college campuses; in this case, those who are marginalized by both race and gender. The Black nursing students who shared their collegiate experiences with Aiken et al. (2001) described instances of both overt and covert discrimination, leading the authors to conclude that "issues of race and identity (the experience of being *Other*) and racism are the strongest barriers to participation" (p. 317). Aiken et al. shared that they found that injustices can be manifested by way of intimidation, treatment difference, silence, and being humiliated by being ignored. Aiken et al. also noted how Black women are affected in a unique manner by their struggles based on race, class, and gender as a minority in a wider White society.

The women who talked with Ross-Gordon (2003b) appeared to need help in navigating the culture of higher education. Similar to Bowl's (2001) article, Ross-Gordon's participants also reported that they needed to learn the rules of the game, which was one of many barriers experienced on campus. Bowl concluded that the role of the adult student is one who is highly motivated but becomes frustrated from being unable to gain access to support and constructive advice and that they end up blaming themselves

for their failures. Bowl also pointed to the oppression of being a "Double Other" by making the following comment:

> University entry is experienced as a dislocation and disjunction which is intensified if the learner is "non-traditional" in more than one sense. Dislocation seems to centre on class, gender, and ethnic differences between the overall ethos of the institution and that of the non-traditional student. (p. 157)

Critique of Existing Literature on Adult Students

This researcher in her review of the literature found a dearth of articles on adult students, especially about students from underrepresented groups, and not a single article about middle-age Latino/Latina undergraduates. Surprisingly, the few articles on African American and Black students were written by a core group of about eight researchers. Similar to Quinnan's (1997) literature review, this researcher also began to see repetitive research trends and found that negative images of adult students were still present in the most current literature. These findings helped the researcher to understand why Boote and Beile (2005) upheld that critical analysis and critique are integral parts of a comprehensive literature review.

According to Lincoln and Guba (2000), the inquiry aim of positivism is "explanation: prediction and control" and that knowledge accumulation occurs through "accretion 'building blocks' adding to [an] 'edifice of knowledge,' [with] generalizations and cause-effect linkages" (p. 166). Clearly, the governmental reports in this study reflect a positivist viewpoint. For example, the reports on low-income students, short-term enrollment, and nontraditional students had an inquiry aim to *predict* the progress and outcomes of adult students. Scientists *controlled* what variables were studied and how these variables were defined. Annual reports such as Condition of Education and Digest of Educational Statistics demonstrated knowledge accumulation through accretion. The

data reveal who these students were, but with little information about their collegiate experiences. Further, students' voices were not heard in the government reports because control of the salient research questions, data collection, analysis, and reporting were determined by the government—another indicator of a positivist approach to learning about adults.

Perhaps the most ludicrous finding from the government reports was that 100% of adult students (ages 24 and older) are academically at risk (Horn et al., 2002). No student who enrolls after the age of 24 may escape the label. The *at-risk* definition was based on questionable assumptions. The first was that all adult students enroll in college to complete a degree and do not waiver from that goal. The second assumption was that all students progress toward degree completion at one institution in a predetermined amount of time. Therefore, in the government's view, adults who enrolled in just a few courses for personal enrichment or those who are forced (or elect) to "stop out" for several years are unjustly identified as problematic "noncompleters" and "early departers" (p. 33). As Sissel et al. (2001) pointed out, these types of labels negatively categorize adult students "as other, as marginal, and as needy," perpetuating a political agenda for those in positions of power and privilege (p. 19).

An additional argument can be made for abandoning historic and arbitrary labels; the blanket at-risk assumption is not wholly supported by data. For example, the at-risk label held little relevance for the 34% of White, non-Hispanic, 18% of Black, and 17% of Hispanic students who did attain degrees (Horn et al., 2002; Sissel et al., 2001). The label neither explained why more adults than ever, including students from underrepresented

groups, completed degrees despite being labeled nontraditional and at risk (Horn et al.; O'Brien, 1998; Sissel et al.).

In 2004, when this researcher first began to study the government reports, she was frustrated that data on older minority students were 13 years old (Nunez & Caccaro-Alamin, 1998; Orfield et al, 2006). Not only was this a blatant disregard of students from underrepresented groups, the government's omission stifled understanding about the educational needs and experiences of this population. It also served to illustrate how "dominant cultural paradigms have produced fractured, racialized identities and experiences" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 159). Brookfield (2005) corroborates the findings of Denzin and Lincoln who found how those in power protect their research priorities and agenda, exacerbating the ongoing marginalization of students from underrepresented groups.

Specific to student attrition, the government (and some higher education researchers) held the positivist assumption that adults could be treated as one homogeneous group and "nontraditional" factors (i.e., delayed enrollment, part-time attendance, being financially independent, having dependents, and working full time) are as appropriate to an 18-year old as to a 38- or 48-year old, or as appropriate for White non-Hispanic adults as for students from underrepresented groups. Further, much of this research was based on Bean and Metzner's (1985) model for nontraditional student attrition, which was developed following a metaanalysis of dated literature from 1969-1984, when a majority of the adult student population was young, male, White, and non-Hispanic.

By the mid 1980s, many adult students had weathered civil rights and the Vietnam War, and the life roles (work and home) of men and women who were very much in transition. It appears that the researchers who were still adapting Bean and Metzner's (1985) model had forgotten how the lifeworld of adults had changed over the past 25 years and ignored the possibility that assimilation, acculturation, hegemony, or the hyperreality of postmodern times may have impacted adult lives in and out of the classroom. Hyperreality, as described by Kincheloe and McLaren (2000), is "an information society socially saturated with ever-increasing forms of representation [i.e., television, film, the Web] . . . that have shaped our cognitive and affective facilities in ways that still remain insufficiently understood" (pp. 292-293).

Cano-Garcia and Hughes (2000), Edwards and Usher (1997) Olivarez (1998) provide similar conclusions. An inference, then, is that the influence of postmodern hyperreality on college campuses is also "insufficiently understood," particularly for adult students with vast life experiences and diverse characteristics. This researcher believes there is *much* more to learn about how assimilation, acculturation, hegemony, and hyperreality may impact academic aspirations, needs, experiences, and outcomes of Latino and Latina students.

When reviewing the literature on adult demographics, motivations, and goals, it was hard to ignore Quinnan's (1997) perception that "studies are done by repackaging hypotheses and reaffirming outcomes of earlier scholarship" (p. 1). One must question why so many researchers treat adults as a homogeneous group—creating grand narratives on motivation, student involvement, and persistence, with little regard for age, gender, race, class, or cultural differences. As Moreno and Guidino (2005), Suro (2006a), and

others underscored, “few generalizations . . . are accurate” (as cited in Wircenski, Walker, Allen, & West, 1999, p. 493).

Positivist approaches to data collection and analysis (with predetermined variables set by dominant ideologies) will continue to lack the richness and depth that is needed to understand adult students’ diverse undergraduate experiences more fully. There is a need to learn how familial, social, cultural, economic, and political factors influence adult histories and current lifeworld. To broaden the scope of quantitative inquiry, new variables such as racism, injustice, culturally insensitive curricula, lack of role models, powerlessness, and otherness should be added as choices on student departure surveys. These variables more closely reflect what students from underrepresented groups are bringing to the attention of educators. Theoretically then, quantitative statistics on student departure would still show that a student withdrew due to dissatisfaction, but that student did so specifically because of, for example, culturally insensitive curricula. The inclusion of terms used by marginalized students would signal a shift toward expanded research approaches informed by students’ voices and framed by critical perspectives. Meanwhile, many researchers continue to embrace, or deny the existence of, the Eurocentric values and ideologies of a dominant White non-Hispanic culture, assuring hegemonic control over research trends and classroom practices, and reinforcing the status quo discourse on adults that has remained prevalent in higher education for more than 60 years.

Also missing from a majority of these references was a *call to action* (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). For example, NCES (2002) data show that 34% of White non-Hispanic students had attained degrees, compared to 19% Blacks and 17% of the Hispanic students. The government’s statisticians did not point to this attainment gap and call for

higher education to take action to reduce the disparity. Another example, researchers in higher education seemed content to suggest areas for additional study and offered innocuous implications for practice, but few wrote with the voice of a transformative intellectual (Guba & Lincoln, 1994), seemingly unwilling to broach a call to action. In sum, until more scholars move beyond mundane, safe examples, a deeper understanding of the diverse experiences of adults coming from a variety of social, racial, and ethnic backgrounds will not be achieved.

Negative inferences about adult students can be made from the work of Hagedorn (2006), who called middle-age students "last chancers" (p. 47), and Kasworm (2003e), who labeled adults' voices as either entry (to this researcher, sounding novice); outside (sounding *Other*); straddling (sounding indecisive); and, cynical or inclusion (value judgments based on dominant ideologies). Cleveland-Innes (1994) proclaimed that "adult non-persisters" were a "loss of human potential and wasted resources" (p. 423). As unintentional as these labels may be, this researcher believes that scholars should be more attentive to the nature of their discourse. Fortunately, this review revealed that many other researchers have abandoned horribly oppressive notions of adult students and moved scholarship in new directions. These critical thinkers have (a) challenged historic negative labels and definitions, (b) reframed traditional concepts of college outcomes and persistence, (c) identified institutional policies and classroom practices that are oppressive, and (d) employed qualitative inquiry methods in an effort to allow marginalized students' voices to be heard on themes such as otherness, racism, culturally insensitive curricula, and racialized institutional culture. Collectively, their efforts of liberating scholarship have rejuvenated the literature and initiated new patterns of critical

discourse, illuminating "institutionalism of asymmetrical relations of power and privilege," and the exclusion of groups by gender, class, race, and/or ethnicity (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000, pp. 294-295). Yet, in this researcher's opinion, there is more work to complete.

For this researcher, the most provocative dialogue came from Brookfield (2002; 2003; 2005) and Huber and Cale (2002) on repressive tolerance in democratic classrooms. They explained how they and other educators, "informed by their racial histories and identities," protect and promote a "Eurocentric epistemology," values, and ideologies, leading to a racialized discourse in college classrooms (Brookfield, 2003, p. 498). Brookfield's observation was that Whiteness remains an invisible norm at the center of discourse and other perspectives serve as mere additions to that center. His perspective helped this researcher to reshape her thinking about the historic and current literature trends on adult students. Without question, the scholarship trends over the past 60 years have been framed by White Eurocentric ideologies, and the scholarship represented in this paper, with few exceptions, is not much different. Dominant ideologies and hegemonic thinking have served as unrelenting gatekeepers, allowing select voices to be heard while others have been silenced. This is best illustrated by the pervasive use of sterile and negative governmental terms to describe adults such as "minority" and "nontraditional," researchers' treatment of adults as one homogeneous group, the repetitive nature of scholarship over more than a half a century, and the lack of scholarship on adults from underrepresented groups. Observations about underrepresented students still seem to be inserted into studies for comparisons with the White experience as the norm. Further, from this researcher's reviews, few scholars have

challenged their White epistemology (Brookfield, 2003; Manglitz, 2003; Scheurick & Young, 1997). As a result, this myopic scholarship has served only to strengthen the grip of the dominant Eurocentric discourse that prevails over the higher education journal literature, restricting the knowledge about the learning experiences of underrepresented adult students and diminishing the likelihood of any action toward liberating policies and just practices in higher education

Based upon this critique, a few suggestions for expanding the literature include the following:

1. Conduct research on the effects of institutional policy and marginalization on students' persistence and attendance at multiple institutions.
2. Change the practice of treating adult undergraduates—including students from underrepresented groups—as one homogeneous group. Even simple age breakouts (e.g., 25-35, 35-45, 45-55) would help to better understand students' developmental factors and life roles.
3. Revamp the variables used in government surveys on student departure to include terminology used by students from underrepresented groups.
4. Promote the inclusion of multiple voices, diverse perspectives, and critical theories in the higher education journal literature.

Latina Lifeworld and Values

Wircenski et al. (1999) concluded that generalizations are rarely accurate in describing adult students. In fact, how individuals define themselves is shaped in multiple ways: individual characteristics, race, gender, culture, religion, ethnicity, age, and disability, or a combination of those influences. Similarly, Moreno and Guido (2005)

pointed out how Latinas/Latinos can be diverse in socioeconomic factors such as income, education, marital, family composition, employment, as well as differences in experiences regarding class, race, and in color. Yet, generalizations about Latinas/Latinos persist to the point of becoming stereotypes that marginalize and exclude others, which also reinforces the White Eurocentric discourse that permeates the U.S. classroom.

Race and Ethnicity

A special report based on Census 2000 data showed that more than 35 million Hispanics were living in the United States, a remarkable 61% increase over the previous decade (Ramirez, 2004). However, by mid-decade, the U.S. Census Bureau (2006) increased its population estimation to 42.7 million Hispanics, the largest and fastest-growing minority group in the nation. By country of origin, 64% were from Mexico (26 million), 16% from the Caribbean countries (6.4 million), 7% from Central America (2.9 million), 6% from South America (2.2 million), and 8% (3 million) from other countries (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007). While states bordering Mexico had the highest percentage of Hispanics in their population, 14 million Hispanics live in Illinois and 2.6 million in Missouri (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007). A majority (60-61%) of all Hispanics living in the United States were born in this country (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007). Of those Hispanics living in the United States who were foreign born, 46% of the individuals immigrated to the U.S. between 1990-2000 compared to 29% in the previous decade, 15% between 1970-1979, and 10% before 1970 (Ramirez).

A 2002 PEW survey found that 42% of the individuals who identified themselves as Spanish, Hispanic, or Latino also identified themselves as being of *Some Other Race*

other than the standard governmental categories of White (48%), Black (6%), or two or more races (6%) (Tafoya, 2004). In Tafoya's opinion, the PEW survey suggests that,

> Latinos' choice to identify as White or not does not exclusively reflect permanent markers such as skin color or hair texture but that race is also related to characteristics that can change such as economic status and perceptions of civic enfranchisement. Also, social context and the nature of race relations in a given place also appear to play a role. (p. 21)

About 25% of native-born Latinos who identified themselves as being White complain that discrimination is a major problem for Latinos in this country, as did about 33% of those who identified themselves as being from some other race (Tafoya; Cano-Garcia & Hughes, 2000; Moran, 2005).

Language Spoken in the Home

According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2007), slightly more than 77% of the U.S. Hispanic population spoke only Spanish at home at the time of Census 2000, and of those 39% indicated that they spoke English very well. Individuals from Central and South American countries were most likely to speak a language other than English in the home, while individuals from Mexico and Puerto Rico were most likely to speak only English at home (Ramirez, 2004; U.S. Census Bureau). According to PEW, 72% of first-generation Latinos in the U.S. are likely to speak Spanish in the home, while 87% of third-generation Latinos in the U.S. most likely speak exclusively English in the home (PEW, 2004c). Due to the large number of Latino immigrants that have entered the U.S. in the past 15 years, the number of Spanish-speaking Latinos is greater than those who are currently bilingual and English dominant (PEW, 2004c).

Latina/Latino Identity, Culture, and Values

In 2002, the Pew Hispanic Center and Kaiser Family Foundation jointly sponsored a national survey of Latinos. The findings revealed that such terms as *Hispanic* and *Latino* were not very popular with either Hispanics born in the U.S. or with immigrants (Suro, 2006a). Half of the U.S. born Latinos in the PEW survey identified themselves as *American* while two-thirds of the immigrants defined themselves by country of origin. PEW (2004b) also examined differences in perceptions of first, second, and third-generation Latinos in the U.S. About 68% of first-generation Latinos are most likely to select their country of origin as part of their identity compared with 38% of second generation Latinos, but about 57% of third-generation Latinos will possibly use "American" as first or only description of themselves (p. 2). However, PEW also noted that "age, gender, income, country of origin" and language may be "more useful in explaining differences in attitudes" (p. 6). Both Olivarez (1998) and Suro (2006a, 2006b) reiterated the distinction between identities of Latinos born in the United States and the identities of immigrants to the United States.

When discussing ethnic identity, several scholars have noted the influences of assimilation and acculturation. Assimilation has been defined how immigrants and their offspring change as they connect with their host society, "but does not imply any superiority in the host society's views" (PEW, 2004c, p. 1). In a 2005 document PEW refined its definition:

> Assimilation is the process by which immigrants and their offspring adopt some values, beliefs, and behaviors more characteristic of the U.S. culture than the culture of the countries from which they or their ancestors originate. This is neither a complete nor uniform process, as some individuals change more than others and some attitudes change more than others. (p. 17)

The literature depicted acculturation as a different concept and the descriptions varied. According to PEW (2004c), acculturation is a process that realizes that they recognize changes in both newcomers and the host society when they come together. Anthropologists Lavenda and Schultz (2003) defined acculturation similarly. However, other interpretations negatively implied that the values and ways of the new dominant culture supersede a person's original culture, or that a person forsakes or abandons the original culture, or that a person will supplant native culture in a quest to become integrated into the new culture (Chapman & Perreira, 2005; Gans, 1997; King & Wright, 2001; InTime, 2001; Schaefer, 1996). However, acculturation has also been interpreted as a process by which one acquires a second culture and becomes *bicultural* (Korzenny, 1999).

There are also discrepancies in the literature which suggest that the Latino experience can be different. The Latinos have not readily been molded into the melting pot in the United States and they have wrestled with adapting or adopting the Anglo culture versus maintaining traditional beliefs and practices (Zanner & Stevens, 2001). Olivarez (1998) wrote, "There is as much culture 'inside' as there is 'outside'" (p. 435). The Director of the Pew Hispanic Center, Robert Suro (2006a), noted,

> We are watching a work in progress….Whatever Hispanic identity ends up being, to understand it, we're going to have to open up our thinking about race and identity and about the ways that group identities take shape. We are seeing something new unfolding before our eyes. (p. 24)

Suro (2006b) upheld that both Latinos and the U.S. culture are changing, particularly influenced by the influx of Latino immigrants. He believes that Latinos are changing, but that "this is not simply a matter of assimilating to norms . . . while shedding the Spanish language and Latin American cultural expressions and attitudes"

(p. 3). Suro described a process of "synthesis," much like a symbiotic relationship of cultures, with an unpredictable "invention of altogether new norms, expressions, and identities" (p. 3). In her examination of representations of Latinos in the U.S. media, Olivarez (1998) also noted that "cultures and identities do not evolve in isolation" (p. 427), and like Morin (2005), offered examples of how Spanish language and Latina/Latino idols have proliferated in the media and pop culture. In anthropological terms, this "mixing of elements from two or more traditions" in the acculturation process is call *syncretism* (Lavenda & Schultz, 2003, p. 187). Suro (2006b) makes the following statement:

> This is now a country of proliferating identities. Most assimilation/ acculturation/ incorporation models measure movement, or lack of it, toward a national type….Today you can look to popular culture and see many forms of synthesis and hybridization as ethnic identities drawn from migrant population blend with forms drawn from the host culture. . . . Migrants are assimilating to a national type even as they are transforming it. (p. 13)

Greenhouse Gardella et al. (2005), Falicov (2005), and Moore Hines (2005) draw attention to Latino culture and identity in a different sense: beliefs and values. Greenhouse Gardella pointed out that adult educators should "reach out to Latino students . . . [and] affirm such cultural values as *familismo*, *personalismo*, *confianza*, *respeto* and *dignidad*" (p. 42). Table 1 provides brief definitions for these and select other Latino values, but is not inclusive. Falicov noted how stressful a new culture can be when cultural meanings differ between the family and the dominant culture models. She explained how immigrants who live in the same ethnic neighborhoods can reinforce one another's beliefs and views. However, PEW (2004c) revealed that more than half (57%) of all Hispanics live in non-Hispanic neighborhoods.

Table 1

Select Latino Concepts, Beliefs, and Values

Broad concept/belief/value	Meanings
Familismo	Importance of family (Greenhouse Gardella et al, 2005). Strong identification with the nuclear and extended family; sense of responsibility and loyalty to the family, especially spouses and children (Marenro & Guido).
Personalismo	Personalized approach to communicating with others; interest in another's situation, health and well-being; may "expect a certain amount of disclosure" (Mareno & Guido, p. 94;)
Confianza	Trust (Greenhouse Gardella et al. 2005; Marceno & Guido)
Respeto	Respect, especially for the elderly and those in positions of power (Marceno & Guido); mutual respect (Greenhouse Gardella et al.).
Dignidad	Care for the dignity of other persons (Greenhouse Gardella et al.)
Simpatia	"'The good face,' implies avoiding confrontation and anger toward others, hiding true feelings when they are negative, and creating smooth relationships" (Mareno & Guido, p. 94).
Marianismo	From the image of the Virgin Mary. "Women are considered morally superior to men and therefore capable of enduring the suffering inflicted by men…Having children raises the status of women in society and is a rite of passage into adulthood" (Moore Hines et al., 2005, p. 74).
Hembrismo	Relates to gender roles. From "hembra" or female, which "contributes to the complexity of Latino gender roles" (Moore Hines et al.); "places authority and power in male figures and allows them to exercise certain behaviors prohibited to females" (Moreno & Guido, p. 94).
Collectivism	Emphasizes the needs and importance of the group rather than the individual" (Moreno & Guido, p. 94).

Note. Select Latino concepts, beliefs, and values identified in the literature as being meaningful to Latino families. List not intended to be inclusive, but as an illustration of how ideologies may also impact Latina/Latino identities.

Moore Hines et al. (2005) offered gender roles as an example of how practices and beliefs can persist. Women are the primary family caregivers. In being strong and keeping the family together, they make sacrifices and become "martyrs" of sorts, and neighbors and family members view "their sacrifices as exemplary" (Moore Hines et al.,

p. 74). While collectivism is a key value, Falicov (2005) noted that, "democracy, egalitarianism, and individualism that typify small nuclear families are making greater inroads among Latinos" (p. 141).

Hispanic or Latina/Latino

As noted, in Chapter I of this study, the U.S. government, for purposes of reporting, has adopted the term *Hispanic*, which is defined as persons of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or other Spanish ancestry or descent. Hispanic, however, is not the label of choice for many persons within or across this ethnic group for many reasons, including the association of the term with a history of colonialism and continued new-colonist action by the U.S. government (Hayes-Bautista & Chapa, 1987; Sue & Sue, 1990). In the preface of *Chicanos in Higher Education: Issues and Dilemmas for the 21st Century*, Aguirre and Martinez (1993) made a point of announcing their deliberate avoidance of defining the term *Chicano,* except as identification of a "population that consists of persons of Mexican origin, whether born in the United States or Mexico" (p. xvii). With this statement, Aguirre and Martinez acknowledge the political aspects and differences that arise with the labeling and self-labeling with a diverse ethnic group. After considering these factors, this researcher decided that it was imperative to listen to a historically, as well as currently, marginalized ethnic population for whom *self-labeling* may be one of the few powerful actions available to them. Therefore, this researcher used *Latina* as the umbrella term for women of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American descent.

Latinas are an extremely heterogeneous group with respect to country of origin, race, education, income, age, religion, marital status, time in the United States, language,

and cultural values. All these factors play a part in understanding the culture and the community of Latinas (Market Segment Research, 2003).

Latinas, as the term is used in the United States, are Hispanic women who share a historical tradition of Spanish colonization and communicate among themselves primarily in Spanish. Yet most come from very distinctive cultural groups and have very different experiences upon arrival in the United States. As a distinct population, they have gained national minority group status (Market Segment Research, 2003). According to Robinson (1992), characterization as a national minority group combines the notion of an ethnic or racial group with that of a minority group. An ethnic or racial group is distinguishable from the dominant society because it shares common characteristics; a minority group plays a subordinate role in a class society as a result of race or ethnicity. Betances (1993) defined ethnicity as "the ability of people from a similar region of the world, who find themselves in a hostile environment, to see the urgency of harnessing their numbers under a common identity so as to operate as an interest group for the purpose of removing barriers to social progress" (p. 1).

Ethnicity, in this sense, is a human invention by people who share a common experience of rejection and who agree to define themselves as positive agents of social change. Until very recently, Latinas in the Southern states were geographically scattered and too small in numbers to exert any impact at the local level (Robinson, 1992). This is changing very rapidly, yet their ethnic identification is still in formation (Robinson; U.S. Census, 2004, 2006a, 2006b, 2007; Zavella, 1994).

Zavella (1994) suggested that researchers pay close attention to what she calls "social location" when trying to understand differences among various groups of Latinas

(p. 208). To Zavella, social location is the social space created by the intersection of class, race, gender, and culture. Another important consideration is generation. Whether Latinas are first generation (born in the United States), part of a subsequent generation born in the United States, or recent immigrants has implications for language used, cultural knowledge, and self-identification. A Latina's generation affects whether she feels a sense of identification and solidarity with other Latinas, whether she feels marginalized or whether she feels more "American" than Latina.

Women in Higher Education

The American Association of University Women (AAUW) supports affirmative action programs that establish equal opportunities for women and minorities and improve gender, racial, and ethnic diversity in educational institutions and in workplaces (AAUW, 2007a, 2007b). In 1973, the U.S. Congress passed the Title IX Education Amendments to the Civil Rights Act of 1964, specifically, extending the prohibition of sexually discriminatory practices to the field of education (AAUW). Since then, women of all ethnic backgrounds have made tremendous strides in both American higher education and in American society; the proportion of women physicians rose from 7.6% to 16% from 1970 to 1990. The percentage of women lawyers and judges jumped from 4% to 16.9% from 1970 to 1990, and women accountants from 22% to 50%. Between 1975 and 1989, the number of women college and university presidents more than doubled from 148 to 328—about 11% of the total (AAUW, 2007a, 2007b).

In spite of this tangible and undeniable evidence of progress among women in general, minority women continue to under-perform in relation to White women. While 37.3% of White females aged 25 to 29 have attained at least a bachelor's degree, the

comparable figures for African-American and Hispanic women are 18.6% and 15.8% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2003). According to the National Center for Educational Statistics, 28% of all Hispanics ages 16-24 are high school dropouts. While the number of students who enroll in college immediately after completing high school increased from 49% in 1972 to 64% in 2003, Hispanics were not well represented. While White student enrollment increased from 50% to 63% during this time, Hispanic student enrollment was not that different from the rate of 50% in 1972 (U.S. Department of Education, 2005). Statistics on college completion rates for Hispanics indicated that in 2002 only 11.1% of 25 to 29-year-old Hispanics held a bachelor's degree (U.S. Census Bureau, 2004) and, in 2003, only 10% of this group held a bachelor's degree (U.S. Department of Education, 2005).

Going to college is commonly seen as a way out of poverty and is a cornerstone of the American dream (Swail, 2000). College graduates have higher earnings (Leslie & Brinkman, 1988; Perna, 2003), healthier lifestyles, more life satisfaction, and greater community participation than high school graduates (Bowen, 1997; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Research suggests that youth from low-income families are less likely to be academically prepared for college, often attend schools with less rigorous courses, and are less likely to be placed in academically rigorous courses (Perna, 2003). Integrating students' culture plays a critical role for all aspects of college preparation. Swail and Perna (2002) found that most higher education outreach programs do not pay attention to the cultural identities of students.

Women's Ways of Knowing

Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule's (1986) study of 135 diverse women provides an ethos for the understanding of the way women specifically or more commonly acquire knowledge, what they value in life and learning, and factors that influence their world views. Belenky et al. present a fascinatingly complex study of the epistemological development of women, regularly contrasting it with patterns found in males at an elite university. They go far beyond the university in their examination, but university students and the teaching and learning they encounter are never far removed from the concerns of Belenky and associates. The ways of knowing they identified are: "Silence; Received knowledge: Listening to the voices of others; Subjective knowledge: The inner voice—the quest for self; Procedural knowledge: The voice of reason—separate and connected knowing; Constructed knowledge; and Integrating the voices" (p. vi).

> Belenky et al. (1986) espouse a strong constructivist position:
>
> > Constructivists seek to stretch the outer boundaries of their consciousness by making the unconscious conscious, by consulting and listening to the self, by voicing the unsaid, by listening to others and staying alert to all the currents and undercurrents of life about them, by imagining themselves inside the new poem or person or idea that they want to come to know and understand. Constructivists become passionate knowers, knowers who enter into a union with that which is to be known. (p. 141)

Using Belenky's five-stage scheme of Women's Ways of Knowing to analyze women's learning from diverse cultural backgrounds, one might ask if *ways of knowing* are comparable from culture to culture. Are women's ways of knowing universal? Does cultural context of females have an influence on ways of knowing? And what of the huge variations that exist within and across a group, such as Hispanics, according to

geographic location, national origin, length of residence in the U.S., gender and age? Suarez-McCrink (2002) posed the following questions:

> What factors may have contributed toward the desire to pursue an education and subsequent career advancement on the part of women? Do women, based on a specific ethnic group, share the same experiences? Or does the socialization process play a role? (p. 239)

Minority Women

By 2010, one in four new jobs will be technically oriented or involve computers; however, women still lag far behind in earning computer technology degrees and working in computer technology-related professions. High school girls represent only 16% of computer science AP test takers, and college-educated women earn only 29.1% of bachelor's degrees in mathematics and computer science (down from 39.3% in 1984) and 24.7% of doctorate degrees in mathematics and computer science (AAUW, 2007a, 2007b).

Minority women face daunting structural and cultural barriers that prevent them from achieving their true potential. In a national study of adult women attending 2-year colleges, 40% of minority women cited finding time to study and work schedules as barriers to taking a full college load (Seymour & Hewit, 1997). Hispanic women scored highest on mean measures of academic pressures. In addition, 33% of Asian women and 30% of Hispanic women indicated that inadequate finances kept them from pursuing their studies full-time. Asian women also had low participation rates in student services (AAUW, 2007a, 2007b).

Outside pressures have an especially negative impact on minority women's participation in professions that require a great deal of time and personal commitment, such as engineering and the physical sciences. Hispanic students in particular tend to

work while studying in college not only to financially support themselves but also to assist their families (Pusser et al., 2007; Seymour & Hewit, 1997).

Although the discussion about participation in higher education is frequently couched in terms of access, persistence to degree is also an important focus. Even among those who enroll in postsecondary institutions, degree completion is correlated with demographic characteristics. White and Asian American students are more likely to earn degrees than Black and Hispanic students, and higher-income students are more likely than others to graduate. The differences in enrollment rates and in degree completion rates are reflected in significant differences in educational attainment patterns among the adult population (Baum & Payea, 2004).

Even with numerous barriers, minority women have gained access to higher education at significantly higher rates than minority men have. Several trends, including divorce rates, the increasing number of single mothers and the disproportionate number of female teachers in elementary schools, contribute to a negative outlook for minority males in terms of college enrollment (Browstein, 2000).

Socioeconomic Status

PEW (2004a) described how Latinas/Latinos face a greater burden in meeting college expenses, with 57% of undergraduates having "unmet need after financial aid" in spite of attendance at lower-cost institutions (¶ 5). Orfield et al. (2006) called for additional research on Latinas/Latinos' financial aid needs. In a separate report, PEW showed that first-generation Latinas/Latinos tend to have lower incomes than second-generation Latinas/Latinos. Specifically, 24% of second-generation Latinas/Latinos are more likely to have incomes over $50,000 than first-generation Latinas/Latinos. In its

2007 report, the U.S. Census Bureau reported that on average, about 22% of Hispanics live below the poverty level, and that Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, and Hondurans had the highest poverty rates. The 2004 median household income for all Hispanics was $35,929, with individuals from South America having the highest household incomes at more than $41,000 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007). The U.S. Hispanic Chamber of Commerce (n.d.) notes that "the number of prosperous Hispanic households (those with incomes of at least $100,000) rose 137 percent between 1990 and 2000" (¶ 10), and that "U.S. Hispanic purchasing power . . . is projected to reach $1 trillion by 2010" (¶ 12).

Undoubtedly, education is directly linked to social and economic status regardless of the race/ethnic group. According to the U.S. Department of Commerce (as cited in the U.S. Department of Education, 2005), high school dropouts were more likely to be unemployed, and those who are employed are more likely to earn less money than those who have a high school diploma. It is not surprising that the link between higher education and earnings is even stronger. In 2003, Hispanics ages 25-34 who were employed full-time and held a bachelor's degree earned 56.7% more than the same group with only a high school diploma or the equivalent (U.S. Department of Education). On a more global scale, an unprepared workforce impacts upon the entire country, socially and economically. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2006), 19.4% of the Hispanic families living in the United States, or the equivalent of 21.4% of the total Hispanic population, are living below the poverty level.

Despite the progress women have made over years, ensuring equal opportunity for women in education and the paid workforce remains an elusive goal, in part because

women continue to face discrimination. The AAUW (2007b) believes that affirmative action programs have begun to break down the barriers that confront women and minorities in education and employment, and these programs remain essential to ensure equal access to all professions at all levels through recruitment, outreach, and training. President Lyndon Johnson, in 1965, signed Executive Order 11246 requiring federal contractors to take affirmative action to ensure that all applicants are employed and treated equally during employment, without regard to their race, creed, color, or national origin. He expanded this order to include women in 1967 (AAUW, 2007a, 2007b). Since affirmative actions have been implemented, the numbers of women and minorities in certain professions have increased. Between 1970 and 2002, for example, the proportion of women physicians tripled from 7.6% to 25.2%; between 1972 and 2004, the percentage of women awarded science and engineering degrees increased from 40% to 50.4% for bachelor's and 19% to 43.6% for master's degrees; the number of majority women-owned firms increased from 5.4 million to 7.7 million between 1997 and 2004. This figure represents an increase of 42%, which is almost double that of all firms: 23% (AAUW).

Latina Students in Higher Education

Overall in the United States, about 10% of Hispanics hold bachelor's degrees, with about 29% of those being Spaniard, another 25% South American, 21% Cuban, 11% other Hispanic and Dominicans, 10% Central American, and 7% Mexican descent (Ramirez, 2004). Ramirez analyzed data from the U.S. Census Bureau (2005a, 2005b) to ascertain the level of undergraduate enrollment for Hispanics, age 25 or older, as well as

age-related data on one of the characteristics of nontraditional students in higher education—employment. These numbers are reflected in Table 2.

Table 2

Nontraditional students in Education and Employment

471,000: Total undergraduates - Hispanics, age 25 or older					
2-year institution: 204,000			4-year institution: 257,000		
Full-time: 75,000			Full-time: 119,000		
Part-time: 129,000			Part-time: 138,000		
310,000: Total female undergraduates – Hispanics, age 25 or older					
2-year institution: 130,000			4-year institution: 180,000		
Full-time students: 47,000			Full-time students: 94,000		
Part-time students: 83,000			Part-time students: 86,000		
Employment status for undergraduate Hispanics, 25 or older					
		Full-time students: 172,000			
		Part-time students: 337,000			
F/T: 106,000	P/T: 66,000	NoE:132,000	F/T: 272,000	P/T: 65,000	NoE:54,000
Employment status for female undergraduate Hispanics, age 25 or older					
		Full–time students: 99,000			
		Part-time students: 213,000			
F/T: 24,000	P/T: 67,000	NoE:8,000	F/T:156,000	P/T:57,000	NoE:40,000

Note. F/T = Full-time, P/T = part-time, NoE= not employed Source: U.S. Census Bureau (2005, October).

Beliefs about the learning potential of Latina/Latino students vary among administrators, counselors, and teachers (Alson, 2003; Aschaffenburg & Maas, 1997). Many educators maintain the false assumption that Latina/Latino students are not interested in, or not capable of succeeding in an academic setting. Remarks such as “they are not interested in education,” “You have to lower the standards for those kids to pass

these examinations," or "They are not college material," are still heard in school settings (Minority Student Achievement Network, 2002, p. 13). These expectations can contribute to the students' achievement gap. Studies about self-fulfilling prophecy have demonstrated that negative beliefs significantly contribute to low academic performance (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968). Contrary to the aforementioned beliefs, research has shown that despite disparities in their mastery of skills and resources available to support their achievement, Latina/Latino youth in school districts have as much desire to succeed in schools as their Anglo and Asian counterparts (Minority Student Achievement Network).

The following are additional factors identified in the research literature as contributing to Latina/Latino students' displacement from education. Racism, poverty, lack of educational leadership, poorly prepared teachers, inadequate early childhood literacy development, impersonal education environments, failure to establish a cultural context, low teacher expectations, insufficient parental support, negative peer pressure, instruction not aligned with student needs, inadequate assessments, and lack of mentors and positive role models. Because of these barriers, many Latina/Latino students who are interested in education tend to abandon school and to have a narrow view of their possibilities for education (Alson, 2003; Chacon, 2002; D'Anglejan, Renaud, Arsenault & Lortie, 1984; Gregory, 2003; Harrell & Forney, 2003; Valverde & Scribner, 2001).

Despite the barriers, some Latina/Latino students succeed in gaining access to a college career. They select a college, present an effective admissions letter, and apply for appropriate financial aid. Often, the mediating factor making the difference for these

students seems to be a teacher, a family member, or a role model who helps them stay focused on their education (Immerwahr, 2003; Pusser et al., 2007).

The extent of Latinas participation in higher education does not reflect their ethnic and racial distribution in the population or the overall enrollment of their ethnic group in higher education and all subgroups are not necessarily represented proportionately, as the following demonstrates: For example, Flores (1992) commented that while Hispanics (Latinas/Latinos) comprised 10% of the U.S. population, they received only 3% of the bachelor's degrees. By the middle of the 1990s, however, Hispanics' registration had jumped, and their enrollments showed the largest increase overall. Asian women showed the next largest enrollments. The boom was reflected in the number of bachelor degrees conferred. In the 1993-1994 academic year, the number of Hispanic women receiving degrees increased 11.5%, and the number of Asian women graduates rose by 10.5%. Black women degree recipients rose by 8% and Native Americans by 7.6% (Carter & Wilson, 1997; Sargant, Field, Francis, Schuller, & Tuckett, 1997). However, Carter and Wilson observed that Hispanic women who received degrees remained underrepresented when compared with their level of college enrollment, earning only 4.3% of all bachelor's degrees. Latinas/Latinos are the least represented population in U.S. colleges and universities, whether as administrators, faculty or students; and as students, they have one of the highest levels of attrition (Market Segment Research, 2003; Minority Student Achievement Network, 2002; Pusser et al., 2007).

Changes in student enrollment patterns have challenged colleges and universities, once the domain of recent high school graduates, to meet the shifting needs of their student enrollment. New groups of nontraditional students, many of whom are juggling

study, family, and job, are encountering a variety of challenges as they work to meet the demands of academia, as well as the demands of family and job (Davis, 1994; Kasworm & Blowers, 1994; Pitts, 1992, 1993/1994; Rothstein, 2000; Yankelovich, 2006). Their lifestyles and, therefore, their needs are different from those of younger classmates (Parish & Sperling, 1991; Pusser et al., 2007; Sandler, 2000; Spanard, 1990).

According to the U.S. Census (2007), the Hispanic population will soon be the largest minority population in this country, but its participation in politics, education, and the economy is limited. And sadly, the poorest of the poor in this country are Latinas and their children (U.S. Census, 2007). A complex web of issues contributes to high levels of poverty among Latinas: limited knowledge of English, low levels of education, unfamiliarity with local social, educational and political systems, and traditional gender roles that encourage female passivity and limit women's access to educational and professional opportunities (Market Segment Research, 2003).

Self-Efficacy: An Overview

The construct of self-efficacy, introduced by Albert Bandura (1977, 1997), represents one core aspect of his social cognitive theory. While outcome expectancies refer to the perception of the possible consequences of one's action, self-efficacy expectancies refer to personal action control or agency. A person who believes in being able to cause an event can conduct a more active and self-determined life course. This "can do" cognition mirrors a sense of control over one's environment (Bandura, 1997, p. 39). It reflects the belief of being able to control challenging environmental demands by means of taking adaptive action. It can be regarded as a self-confident view of one's capability to deal with certain life stressors (Schwarzer, 1999).

According to theory and research, self-efficacy makes a difference in how people feel, think, and act (Bandura, 1995). In terms of feeling, a low sense of self-efficacy is associated with depression, anxiety, and helplessness. Such individuals also have low self-esteem and harbor pessimistic thoughts about their accomplishments and personal development. In terms of thinking, a strong sense of competence facilitates cognitive processes and performance in a variety of settings, including quality of decision-making and academic achievement. When it comes to preparing action, self-related cognitions are a major ingredient of the motivation process. Self-efficacy levels can enhance or impede motivation. People with high self-efficacy choose to perform more challenging tasks (Bandura). They set themselves higher goals and stick to them. Actions are pre-shaped in thought, and people anticipate either optimistic or pessimistic scenarios in line with their level of self-efficacy. Once an action has been taken, high self-efficacy persons invest more effort and persist longer than those who are low in self-efficacy. When setbacks occur, they recover more quickly and maintain the commitment to their goals. Self-efficacy also allows people to select challenging settings, explore their environments, or create new environments (Bandura).

Self-referent thought has become an issue that pervades psychological research in many domains. It has been found that a strong sense of personal efficacy is related to better health, higher achievement, and more social integration. This concept has been applied to such diverse areas as school achievement, emotional disorders, mental and physical health, career choice, and sociopolitical change. It has become a key variable in clinical, educational, social, developmental, health, and personality psychology (Bandura, 1997; Maddux, 1995; Schwarzer, 1993, 1999).

Whereas the literature suggests that gender differences in academic achievement are either diminishing or practically nonexistent, gender differences in the academic self-beliefs of American students may still be prevalent (Wigfield, Eccles, & Pintrich, 1996). For example, boys and girls report similar confidence in their math ability during the elementary years, but, by high school, boys are more confident and girls more likely to underestimate their capabilities. High school boys also report higher mathematics self-concepts than do girls (Bong & Clark, 1999; Marsh, 1988). Gifted girls are especially likely to be under-confident about their mathematics capabilities (Pajares, 1996). Sandra Graham's (1994) summary of the literature on the motivation of African American students revealed that they "maintain undaunted optimism and positive self-regard even in the face of achievement failure" (p. 103). Similar findings have been reported with Hispanic American students (Lay & Wakstein, 1985; Stevenson, Hanson, & Uttal, 1990). In studies in which task-specific self-efficacy perceptions are assessed, the self-efficacy of African American students and of Hispanic American students tends to be lower than that of their Anglo peers. Despite differences in self-efficacy, minority students report positive self-concepts (Pajares & Kranzler, 1995; Pajares & Johnson, 1996). Some have posited that beliefs at differing levels of specificity perform different functions for minority students (Edelin & Paris, 1995).

Self-efficacy is commonly understood as being domain-specific; that is, one can have more or less firm self-beliefs in different domains or particular situations of functioning. But some researchers also conceptualized a generalized sense of self-efficacy. It refers to a global confidence in one’s coping ability across a wide range of demanding or novel situations. General self-efficacy aims at a broad and stable sense of

personal competence to deal effectively with a variety of stressful situations (Schwarzer, 1993).

With the publication of *Social Foundations of Thought and Action: A Social Cognitive Theory*, Bandura (1986) advanced a view of human functioning that accords a central role to cognitive, vicarious, self-regulatory, and self-reflective processes in human adaptation and change. People are viewed as self-organizing, proactive, self-reflecting and self-regulating rather than as reactive organisms shaped and shepherded by environmental forces or driven by concealed inner impulses. From this theoretical perspective, human functioning is viewed as the product of a dynamic interplay of personal, behavioral, and environmental influences. For example, how people interpret the results of their own behavior informs and alters their environments and the personal factors they possess, which, in turn, inform and alter subsequent behavior. This is the foundation of Bandura's (1986) conception of *reciprocal determinism:* (a) personal factors in the form of cognition, affect, and biological events; (b) behavior, and (c) environmental influences create interactions that result in a *triadic reciprocality*. Bandura altered the label of his theory from social learning to social "cognitive" both to distance it from prevalent social learning theories of the day and to emphasize that cognition plays a critical role in people's capability to construct reality, self-regulate, encode information, and perform behaviors (Bandura, p. 3).

In his book *Self-Efficacy: The Exercise of Control*, Bandura (1997) set forth the tenets of his theory of self-efficacy and its applications to fields as diverse as life-course development, education, health, psychopathology, athletics, business, and international affairs. In this volume, Bandura also further situated self-efficacy within a social

cognitive theory of personal and collective agency that operates in concert with other socio-cognitive factors in regulating human well-being and attainment. He also addressed the major facets of agency: the nature and structure of self-efficacy beliefs, their origins and effects, the processes through which such self-beliefs operate, and the modes by which they can be created and strengthened. In addition, Bandura reviewed a vast body of research on each of these aspects of agency in diverse applications of the theory. A search for the term "self-efficacy" in most academic databases reveals that, by the year 2000, over 2,500 articles had been written on this important psychological construct (p. 2). Albert Bandura's (1997) key contentions with regard to the role of self-efficacy beliefs in human functioning are that *"people's level of motivation, affective states, and actions are based more on what they believe than on what is objectively true"* (p. 2).

According to Bandura's (1986) social-cognitive theory, students' beliefs about their academic capabilities, or self-efficacy beliefs, are good predictors of their academic achievement and of their subsequent career choices and decisions. Self-efficacy beliefs can enhance human accomplishment and well-being in countless ways. They influence the *choices* people make and the courses of action they pursue. Individuals tend to select tasks and activities in which they feel competent and confident and avoid those in which they do not. Unless people believe that their actions will have the desired consequences, they have little incentive to engage in those actions.

Bandura (1986) described self-efficacy as one’s belief in one’s abilities to accomplish specific tasks. Self-efficacy also includes, “Self-perception of one’s efficacy influences, and of one’s thought patterns, actions, and emotions. The stronger the ‘perceived self-efficacy,’ the higher the goals people set for themselves and the firmer

their commitment to them" (Bandura, 1982, p.175). Researchers have argued that self-efficacy also influences the career development of women. Hacket and Betz (1981) extended Bandura's (1977) self-efficacy theory to include vocational behavior. They posited that the formulation of women's career goals strongly relates to self-efficacy and may be especially useful in understanding women's career development. For example, they hypothesized that self-efficacy beliefs are related to people's range of perceived career options and persistence and success in their chosen fields.

Self-efficacy beliefs also help determine how much *effort* people will expend on an activity, how long they will *persevere* when confronting obstacles, and how *resilient* they will be in the face of adverse situations; the higher the sense of efficacy, the greater the effort, persistence, and resilience. People with a strong sense of personal competence approach difficult tasks as challenges to be mastered rather than as threats to be avoided. They have greater intrinsic interest and deep engrossment in activities, set themselves challenging goals and maintain strong commitment to them, and heighten and sustain their efforts in the face of failure (Bandura, 1986, 1997).

Self-Efficacy and Women

Historically, many women have lacked confidence in their ability to succeed academically and to pursue career-related tasks (Betz, 1994; Hackett & Betz, 1981). Women, the nontraditional students, who enter or reenter college at an older age may be particularly at risk for low levels of confidence, which, in turn, could affect their ability to achieve academically and advance in their vocation. In fact, nontraditional women students often underestimate their skills and ability to succeed in college (Chartrand, 1990). Low self-efficacy as a student and a lack of confidence in career decision making

may cause psychological distress (Quimby & O'Brien, 2002) and place non-traditional college women at risk for dropping out of school (Padula, 1994). The purpose of this study was to examine the lived experience of nontraditional Latina students, aged 25 or older enrolled in an undergraduate program for adult students at a private, 4-year Catholic university in Southern Florida. This researcher sought to understand the meaning behind these women's motivation and the social construction of the group's reality (Patton, 2002). The objective of this study was to gain new knowledge regarding student academic self-efficacy to assist university academic and administrative personnel working with nontraditional college women.

Nontraditional college women have been defined as those women enrolled in college who are over the age of 25 (Lewis, 1988). Recent enrollment statistics revealed that nontraditional college women constituted 35% of all female students at 4-year colleges and 46% of female students at 2-year colleges (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007). For those women, participation in higher education is often delayed because of homemaking responsibilities (Betz & Fitzgerald, 1987). Some of the most significant reasons that adults give for returning to school are related to career enhancement (Luzzo, 1993) and a desire to contribute to the family, both financially and experientially (Clayton & Smith, 1987).

As a group, nontraditional college women are characterized by diversity regarding number of children, age, marital status, work status, and income (Padula, 1994). Many of these women balance multiple roles such as mother, spouse/partner, student, employee, and community member (Padula). Consequently, researchers have reported that the lifestyles of nontraditional college women are broader and more complex than those of

traditional students (King & Bauer, 1988). A significant contributor to this complexity is responsibility for caring for children, which can pose challenges to academic and vocational achievement because it imposes considerable demands on time and energy, influencing a woman's ability to pursue and her confidence in seeking higher education (Fitzgerald & Weitzman, 1992). Thus, nontraditional college women with children may be at particular risk for low levels of confidence in their student and career roles (Fitzgerald & Weitzman).

Self-efficacy has been defined as the belief in one's ability to successfully perform a specific task and has been linked to initiation of behaviors, persistence despite obstacles, and successful performance (Bandura, 1986). Low levels of student self-efficacy (i.e., confidence in successfully negotiating academic pursuits) have been shown to relate to poor grades, attrition, and psychological struggles (Mau, 2003; Multon, Brown, & Lent, 1991). A lack of career decision-making self-efficacy (i.e., confidence in managing tasks associated with successful career choices) has correlated with career indecisiveness (Betz, Klein, & Taylor, 1996; Robins, 1985; Taylor & Betz, 1988), an external locus of control (Luzzo, 1995), and problems with career exploration (Blustein, 1989). Although the majority of studies were conducted with traditional-aged college students, one study included nontraditional students and indicated that older students were more likely than traditional-aged students to possess confidence in their career decision-making abilities (Luzzo, 1993). To date, no study has examined students' self-efficacy among nontraditional Latina college women.

Self-Efficacy and Ethnicity

Despite women's advances in higher education during the past 30 years, women still face psychosocial disadvantages in educational pursuits when compared with men. Women report lower educational self-efficacy, have lower self-esteem, experience higher academic stress, and often perceive less support for education (Bandura, 1997). For women of color (who remain underrepresented on campuses), these factors are barriers to educational success (Gloria, 1997).

Researchers (Gloria & Robinson Kurplas, 2001; Gloria, Robinson Kurplus, Hamilton, & Wilson, 1999; Gloria & Rodriguez, 2000) have shown that academic stress, self-esteem, and valuing of and commitment to education are predictive of academic self-efficacy, which, in turn, is a significant predictor of academic persistence decisions. Academic stress is most prevalent during the undergraduate years (Sher, Wood, & Gotham, 1996) when there is also the highest drop-out rate (Daugherty & Lane, 1999). In a study of students attending orientation and the first week of classes, women's stress levels were significantly higher than that of men (Reisberg, 2000). Factors contributing to these women's stress were time spent with student activities, child and home care responsibilities, and volunteering (Reisberg). For racial/ethnic minority students, there may be additional stressors of cultural incongruity (Gloria & Robinson Kurplus, 2001; Gloria et al, 1999), or the experience of one's personal culture not seemingly fitting with the university environment culture. For women of color, dual minority status further adds to levels of stress (Ancis & Sanchez-Hucles, 2000; Ross-Gordon, 2003a, 2003b).

Studying ethnic and racial minority undergraduates, Gloria et al. (1999) reported that students' self-beliefs (self-esteem and educational self-efficacy) were directly related

to academic stress and to persisting in school. Other researchers (Robinson Kurplus, Chee, Rayle, & Arredondo, 2003) have also found that both self-esteem and educational self-efficacy are positively related to persistence decisions, to grades and occupational aspirations (Lent, Brown, & Gore, 1997), and to academic achievement adjustment (Boulter, 2002).

Self-Efficacy and Latina Women

Individuals must have self-confidence or a sense of "efficacy" to implement the options they see for themselves in the future. Researchers identify the support and reactions of families, peers, teachers, and other important figures as central to this process of building confidence and efficacy in students. Latinas, on average, start school with higher self-esteem than their African American and Anglo peers (AAUW, 1991). A manifestation of this higher self-esteem may be seen in the anticipation that they would do very well in high school math and reading classes (Stevenson, Chen, & Uttal, 1990). However, decreases in self-esteem common to all girls as they progress to young adulthood are greater for Latinas than for other groups (AAUW). One probable source of this diminished self-confidence is the school environment itself. Although it requires further exploration, a qualitative study finds that Latinas wrote of being belittled intellectually more frequently than their African American and Anglo peers (Haag, 1999).

Self-confidence is negatively impacted by low grades because grades are used as an indicator of performance and potential. Receiving low grades may lead to early withdrawal from school (Valverde, 1987). However, intriguing anthropological data suggest that adult high-performing Latinas have not always done well in school and that

even high-performing youngsters may withdraw emotionally and end up doing quite poorly in high school (Gándara, 1995).

In 4-year colleges, as well, low grades among Latinas/Latinos are a strong indicator of the chances of dropping out (Rendón & Amaury, 1987). In addition, SAT scores are significantly predictive of first-year college grades, but not of retention among university Latinas/Latinos. A Latina's academic success (persistence through the degree) was correlated with a positive view of intellectual ability combined with a strong sense of responsibility for her academic future (Wycoff, 1996).

Compared with Anglos and American Indians, Hispanics have higher occupational aspirations but lower expectations for achieving them (Farmer, Wardrop, & Rotella, 1999). Socioeconomic status affected self-efficacy among Hispanics. In terms of educational goals, a study of Latinas in Catholic school found that they have slightly higher aspirations than their Anglo classmates (Lee, 1988), but national studies find lower educational goals than Anglos, perhaps reflecting the different opportunity structures offered to students in the public and private schooling systems (Smith, 1995).

As individuals face life, it is often assumed that at the moment of choice, the individual stands alone in making decisions about the present and about the future that he or she envisions, but qualitative research on high-achieving Latinas with doctoral degrees also note the particular importance of mentoring and of supportive personal relationships. Gómez and Fassinger (1995) found in a qualitative study that all but one of their participants spoke of a pivotal individual who had a positive influence in their lives and career, and all had spouses or partners who supported and encouraged them. As has been presented throughout this document, an individual's education is shaped by her or his

family, school, and communities. Individual Latina experiences are contextualized by Latina/Latino values that are more communally oriented than those of the Anglo culture and by their position as an ethnic minority in the United States (Ginorio & Huston, 2001; Gil & Vazquez, 1996; Market Segment Research, 2003). Even for individuals for whom Latina identity is merely attributed, this ethnic attribution also affects their educational outcomes (Ginorio & Huston; Gil & Vazquez; Gomez & Fassinger; Market Segment Research).

Chapter Summary

The purpose of the literature review which constitutes Chapter II was to share the findings from this researcher's substantive literature review. She described the current trends in higher education, what is known about adult nontraditional students in general, Latina/Latino lifeworld and values as represented in the literature, and the construct of self-efficacy. This should help the reader understand why there is a need to learn more about adult nontraditional Latina/Latino undergraduates. The theoretical and methodological phases of the literature review are articulated in Chapter III.

This review revealed that much of the current research continues to follow three trends of the past 60 years: adult student demographics; comparisons with younger students; and predictions and explanations of adults' patterns of enrollment, involvement and persistence. Encouraging was an emerging body of scholarship that (a) challenged historic, negative labels and definitions; (b) reframed traditional concepts of college outcomes and persistence; (c) identified institutional policies and classroom practices that were oppressive; and, (d) employed qualitative inquiry methods that allowed marginalized students' voices to be heard.

From recent studies on adult students from underrepresented groups, several consistent themes emerged including the following: otherness, determination, self-efficacy, culturally-insensitive curricula, and racialized institutional culture. These students' voices give evidence to the arguments of researchers like Huber and Cale (2002) and Brookfield (2003, 2005), who pointed out that White Eurocentric ideologies dominate the discourse of college classrooms and sustain control of elitist policies that permeate higher education institutions. By working toward an "expanded consciousness" (Giroux, as cited in Lincoln & Guba, 1994, p. 115), adult educators and researchers will learn to challenge the privileged, hegemonic structures that nurture oppression, thereby contributing to efforts to create a more socially just U.S. educational system for adults from various racial and ethnic groups that traditionally have been underrepresented in higher education.

Zambrana and Zoppi (2002) posited that Latina academic achievement is compromised by poverty, family responsibilities, low preschool participation, poor quality schools, limited neighborhood resources, low expectations, few role models, and gender role attitudes. To improve Latinas' academic success, economic and social change must precede educational change (Zambrana & Zoppi).

With changes in the workforce, higher education is becoming less of a luxury and more of a necessity. As the skill requirements of jobs continue to rise, so too should access to postsecondary training for all students. In this ever-increasing global society, an unprepared workforce would impact the United States, both socially and economically. Minority women, in particular, face daunting structural and cultural barriers that prevent them from achieving their true potential.

Review of the literature for this study resulted in a dearth of articles on adult students, especially about students from underrepresented groups, and not a single article about middle-age Latina undergraduates. This researcher was able to locate numerous refereed journal articles, conference proceedings, unpublished papers, books, chapters, and government reports on a variety of interrelated topics pertinent to this study. Positivist approaches to data collection and analysis will continue to lack the richness and depth that is needed to understand adult students' diverse undergraduate experiences more fully. There is a need to learn how familial, social, cultural, economic, and political factors influence adults' histories and current lifeworld. To date, however, no study has examined student's self-efficacy among nontraditional Latina college women. Thus, the purpose of this study was to examine the lived experience of these students with the objective of gaining new knowledge regarding student academic self-efficacy.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to examine the lived experience of nontraditional Latina students, aged 25 or older, enrolled in an undergraduate program for adult students at a private, 4-year Catholic university in Southern Florida. This researcher sought to understand the meaning behind these women's motivation and the social construction of the group's reality (Patton, 2002), as they pursued and completed an undergraduate degree. The objective of the study was to gain new knowledge regarding student academic self-efficacy to assist university academic and administrative personnel working with nontraditional college women. Chapter III includes a discussion of the study as it relates to the following: (a) philosophical perspective; (b) research design; (c) research questions; (d) methods (including role of the researcher, sample, data collection and processing procedures, data analysis procedures); (e) quality and verification; and (f) ethical considerations.

Philosophical Framework Paradigm

The justification of choice and particular use of methodology and methods is something that reaches into the assumptions about reality that are brought to the research question. To ask about these assumptions is to ask about theoretical perspectives (Crotty, 1998). According to Goetz and LeCompte (1984), theoretical perspectives, or conceptual frameworks, are those loosely interrelated sets of assumptions, concepts, and propositions that constitute a view of the world and guides researchers in framing their project determining what kinds of investigations are appropriate, and thus shaping their

analysis.Theoretical perspective is a way of looking at the world and making sense of it, understanding how we know what we know, and the theoretical framework of this study was designed according to the recommendations of Crotty (1998) regarding his four basic elements of the research process: The methods the researcher proposes to use, the methodology that will govern the choice and use of those methods, the theoretical perspective behind that methodology, and the epistemology that will inform that chosen theoretical perspective. Epistemology, or the way in which one views the world, embeds the theoretical perspective or philosophical approach by shaping the methodology of the study. Methodology adds specific markers to the map by detailing the approach and further defining the research process, especially the methods used to gather and collect data, and the means by which data are interpreted (Crotty).

The philosophical paradigms that guided this study were phenomenology as a philosophical research tradition, critical theory, postmodernism, as well as a blend of these last two theories, and critical postmodernism. Phenomenologists seek to understand the essence of what individuals experience and how they experience the phenomenon according to their lived experiences.

Phenomenology as a Philosophy

Phenomenology, as a new approach to philosophy, has its origins in the thinking of the German philosopher Edmund Husserl and the French phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty. Crotty (1998) calls it the classical phenomenologist approach. Husserl held that humans direct their consciousness toward objects and that reality is intentional (Moustakas, 1994). Until Husserl introduced this new approach, the writing of philosophers focused heavily on ontology (what is), epistemology (knowing), logic

(reasoning), and ethics (how to act) (Kockelmans, 1994; Schnell, 1997; Woodruff Smith, 2003). Even though Husserl is generally credited as being the "father" of *philosophical* phenomenology, some of the theoretical underpinnings had emerged much earlier in history (Kockelmans; Schnell; Woodruff Smith). Husserl's contribution, however, was to posit a new facet of professional understanding: individuals' subjectivity and meaning-making in their description of experience (Woodruff Smith).

Husserl's initial work (1894-1903), labeled as *static* or *descriptive* phenomenology, was based on psychology, mathematics, logical semantics, perception and *various types of re-presentation,* such as imagination and memory (Embree, 1997; Kockelmans, 1994). As a research tool, static phenomenology "defines and classifies various types of mental phenomena, including perception, judgment, emotion, etc." (Woodruff Smith, 2003, ¶ 30). Over several decades, Husserl's thinking evolved dramatically (Donohoe, 2004; Kockelmans; Moran, 2000). He extended his descriptive scientific methods to include more explanatory tools aimed at the etiology of mental phenomena, and he made allowances for individual development based on historical, cultural, and shared experiences (Donohoe; Woodruff Smith). Husserl's later writings were grounded in transcendental psychology (Kockelmans). Husserl eventually made a distinction between the phenomenological philosophy and phenomenological psychology in 1927, adding that phenomenological psychology was "closer to our natural way of thinking" (Kockelmans, 1994, p. 30). Despite his metamorphosis, Husserl "steadfastly protected the subjective view as a necessary part of any full understanding" (Moran, p. 21).

Husserl's followers also diverged from his original work . According to Moran (2000), Heidegger, radically transformed Husserl's work by (a) rejecting key concepts (e.g., reduction and epoché), (b) focusing on existentialism and questions of *Being*, and (c) adding more interpretive methods (as cited in Choy, 2002). In turn, successions of noteworthy scholars (e.g., Sartre, Merleu-Ponty, Beauvoir, Gadamer) similarly critiqued and reconceptualized phenomenology (Donohoe, 2004; Moran). Throughout Europe, elements of phenomenology were soon integrated into other philosophical movements, including neo-Kantianism, idealism, pragmatism, and Hermeneutics (Moran). By the 1980s, phenomenology had spread around the globe and was adopted or adapted by researchers in numerous disciplines, including psychiatry, sociology, theater, anthropology, religion, law, literature, ethnology, and nursing (Creswell, 1998; Embree, 1997). It is understandable then that Moran described phenomenology as both a "method and a movement" (p. 21). Alfred Schutz is generally credited for bringing phenomenology to the social sciences in the United States (Bernard, 2002; Creswell, 1998; Hitzler & Eberle, 2004; Patton, 2002).

The current literature revealed numerous ways to categorize phenomenology—from philosophical foundations to various research methodologies—Jung (1997): realistic, constitutive, existential, and hermeneutical; Creswell (1998): reflective/transcendental, dialogical, empirical, existential, hermeneutical, and social; Woodruff Smith (2003): transcendental, naturalistic, existential, generative, genetic, hermeneutical, and realistic. Hence, there does not appear to be a shared understanding of "phenomenology" today. This researcher found that the tenets of the phenomenological paradigm were elusive, both complex and contradictory within and across disciplines.

Yet it is the *essence* of phenomenological study—the described *lifeworld* experiences and subjective meanings individuals attach to those experiences—that remains an extremely useful tool for qualitative inquiry (Greene, 1997). Van Manen (1990) stated that experiences have meanings that are constructed by individuals through commonality of experiences, the understanding of others, and being understood by others, but those relationships and their meanings are found in the individual's interpretation of the phenomenon. This is an exploration of the essence of lived experience (Van Manen). Moran (2000) offered the following statement:

> It is indeed true that central to phenomenology and indeed part of its continuing appeal is its attempt to provide rigorous deference of the fundamental and inextricable role of subjectivity and consciousness in all knowledge and descriptions of the world. (p. 15)

Daniels (2000) posited the following explanation, which this researcher adopted as a simplified working definition for the study. He offered that phenomenology is a method for learning about others by listening to their description of what their subjective world is like for them, together with an attempt to understand their life's experiences in their own terms as fully as possible, "free of our preconceptions and interferences" (Daniels, ¶ 5).

Critical Postmodernism as a Philosophy

To ensure consistency throughout the study, this researcher wanted to understand the philosophical structures of phenomenology, critical theory, and postmodernism. She learned that the beliefs of those three paradigms were in some ways complementary and in others contradictory, so her interpretations and writing could well be inconsistent at times. For example, Schnell (1997) asserted that "phenomenology is not a critical theory . . . [but] a critical philosophy" (p. 102). Jung (1997) added, "phenomenology is

not of but in postmodernity" (p. 558). However, bolstered by Lincoln and Guba's (2000) work, the researcher developed a sense of comfort about blending paradigms. Additional readings, specific to the merger of critical theory and postmodernism (critical postmodernism), also helped her thinking and approach to data interpretation.

Several researchers have noted that the existing higher education journal literature on adults has generally omitted social critique, and that feminism, critical theories, and postmodernist perspectives are lacking (Donaldson et al., 2004; Sissel et al., 2001; Quinnan, 1997). To help fill this void, this researcher selected critical postmodernism as the theoretical principle for her secondary level of data interpretation. Kincheloe and McLaren (2000) described critical postmodernism as a "synergism of the conversation between postmodernism and critical theory" (p. 294). Lincoln and Guba (2000) acknowledged this type of "confluence" of paradigms for qualitative study: "Indeed, the various paradigms are beginning to 'interbreed' such that two theories previously thought to be in irreconcilable conflict may now appear, under a different theoretical rubric, to be informing one another's arguments" (p. 164). Tierney (1993) offers the same view. Alvesson and Sköldberg (2000) further suggested that the use of more than one theory facilitates "reflective interpretation" because the researcher does not become "locked into a particular philosophical position" (p. 248). However, Martin (2002) cited potential problems in that it is difficult to "reconcile the endless ambiguities of deconstruction with the clarity required for a commitment to action in organizations" (p. 76). Another concern from Kincheloe and McLaren (2000) was that precise definitions of the various critical theories are difficult to develop in part because "the critical tradition is always changing and evolving" (p. 281). They also added that a "set of fixed characteristics of the position

is contrary to the desire of such theorists to avoid the production of blueprints of socio-political and epistemological beliefs" (p. 281).

However, this researcher was not discouraged because even within this context of flux, notable scholars—including Henry Giroux (1992)—have "forged links" between these two theories for more than 20 years (Aggers, 1991). Like Alvesson and Deetz (1996), this researcher believes there is considerable value in "working with the tensions" (p. 212) of these two paradigms (e.g., Tierney, 1993).

For the purpose of the study, the confluence of the two theories worked in the following manner: The postmodern paradigm allowed the researcher allowances for multiple realities, consciousness-raising, and contextual meaning-making (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2000; Pulliam & Van Patten, 2003), while critical theory helped her "address issues of power and justice and the ways that economy, matters of race, class and gender, ideologies, discourse, education, religion and other social institutions and cultural dynamics interact to construct a social system" (Kincheloe & McLaren, as cited in Patton, 2002, p. 131).

This researcher's learning was ongoing, and her interpretations, she hopes, dynamic; the challenge to reflect, interpret, and describe in a nebulous space that sways in midair like a suspension bridge spanning both modern and postmodern thought. While each side of the bridge is anchored, she cannot run to the safety of one side (critical theory) or the other (postmodernism), but learn to be comfortable someplace in the middle, regardless of how deep the chasm may appear. In spite of the metaphor, this researcher believes that the addition of critical theory provided a bit of structure and purpose to her data interpretation that might otherwise have ended up incoherent due to

the ambiguities of postmodern thought. In fact, Kindcheloe and McLaren (2000) explained that without the grounding of critical theory, "postmodern critique is incapable of providing an ethically challenging and politically transforming program of action" (p. 295). Kaufmann (2000) and Tierney (1993) draw the same conclusion. For this researcher, the appeal of a blended theory was that it offered her the opportunity to critique and serve as a catalyst of change (Patton, 2002) and social action (Grathoff, 1978).

Precedence for applying a critical postmodern framework to studies about higher education institutions was established by Tierney (1993). According to Giroux (1993), Tierney's work with critical postmodernism analyzes,

> How differences are constituted in and mediated across sexual orientation, ethnicity, race, class, and gender. . . . Difference . . . is always treated historically and relationally as a struggle over power, signs and identities. . . . For Tierney, theory s a practice that is constantly informing one's beliefs, actions, and practices; at the same time, it is more than a matter of epistemology and aesthetics, it is also a borderland where conversations begin, differences confront each other, hopes are initiated, and social struggles are waged. (p. x)

Quinnan (1997) later employed critical postmodernism perspective to the study of adult students. Locke, Spirduso, and Silverman (2000) noted that the nature of one's questions is a key indicator of how one should approach a research problem. Because this researcher sought to understand the deeper meanings individuals attach to their educational experiences, qualitative methods were best served for the intention of her study.

Rationale for a Qualitative Study

Quantitative research is empirical research in which the researcher explores relationships using numerical data. Quantitative research uses deductive method;

behavior is “law like,” focus is narrow, observation is conducted under controlled conditions, data is based on measurements, analysis is based on statistical relationships, and, the final report is statistical. The purpose of quantitative methods is to test a theory, to measure a variable, to asses the impact of a variable on outcomes, and to apply research to a large number of people (Creswell, 2003; Fraenkel & Wallen, 2003; Johnson & Christensen, 2004; Patton, 2002; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003).

Qualitative inquiry has an interpretive character, and the data derived from the participants’ and researcher’s perspectives attempt to understand the world from the participants’ frame of reference and the meaning people have constructed of their experiences. Qualitative inquiry occurs in natural settings, typically examining a small number of sites, situations, or people or an extended period of time. The reporting is rich with quotation, narration, and detail. The researchers are themselves the instrument for data collection and analysis through observing, participating, and interviewing. They acknowledge and monitor their own biases and subjectivities and how these color interpretation of data. The qualitative process is inductive, and data are collected to build concepts, hypotheses, or theories from observation and intuitive understandings. The process is flexible, and research designs can be changed to match the dynamic needs of the situation. The qualitative research problem typically is related to lack of theory or previous research; may be derived from the notion that existing theory may be inaccurate, inappropriate, or biased; and, may be based on the need to describe phenomena that are not suited to the use of quantitative measures (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Christensen, 2004; Creswell, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 2002).

An inductive methodological stance calls for the use of qualitative research methods wherein the researcher explores a social or human problem as it unfolds naturally. The whole phenomenon under study is understood as a complex and holistic system that is more than the sum of its parts and the focus is on complex interdependence rather than cause-and-effect relationships (Creswell, 1998). Qualitative study would be a preferred approach to research that attempts to increase one's understanding of why things are the way they are in the social world and why people act the ways they do (Patton, 2002).

Qualitative analysis uses unstructured data (text, visual images, and interviews) to examine relationships that cannot be easily explained through quantitative analysis. The purpose of qualitative analysis is two-fold: First, qualitative analysis allows the researcher to become familiar with the phenomena being studied; second, it allows the researcher to formulate a new explanation/theory by examining the phenomena's interrelationships. This process is conducted by data collection, coding according to given words or symbols, and then running analyses to make inferences (Berg, 2004; Creswell, 1998, 2003). The rationale for a qualitative study is taking the participants' perspectives, describing the detail of mundane settings, understanding actions and meanings, favoring open unstructured designs and avoiding concepts/theories at an early stage. Different people create different realities and people's perceptions/experiences have value (Creswell). Therefore, a qualitative study allows the researcher to offer a unique context of an individual's experiences (Berg, 2004). Research that attempts to increase understanding of why things are the way they are in the social world and why

people act the ways they do is “qualitative” research (Eisner, 1991; Lee, Mitchell, & Sablynksi, 1999; Merriam & Brockett, 1997; Merriam & Caffarella, 1998).

This researcher sought to understand the meanings and essences behind nontraditional Latina undergraduate students’ motivations and challenges, and the social construction of the group’s reality of this shared phenomenon. As such, a qualitative method of research was the most appropriate for this particular study. Qualitative research is a naturalistic inquiry process where the researcher builds a complex, holistic picture, analyzes words, reports detailed views of informants, and conducts the study in a natural setting (Creswell, 1998). Careful, systematic, patient investigation was undertaken to discover or establish facts and relationships using a holistic, inductive approach intended to explore the topic (people, group) in a natural setting. Data was collected and presented in a narrative report. In qualitative research, the assumption is that all research is value-laden; therefore, the researcher admits and discusses these beliefs (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Johnson & Christensen, 2004; Patton, 2002).

Qualitative strategies are intricately intertwined with both the substance of the issues they explore and theories grounded in these substantive issues (Berg, 2004). Unlike quantitative research that ends with the analysis of the specific data collected, qualitative research continues to grow and develop, sometimes exponentially. Qualitative research provides the opportunity to study people in their natural settings, use more flexible techniques for collecting, analyzing and interpreting data, and allows the researcher to creatively report findings that bring individual voices into examination. This lived world is a world of interpretation, a world in which meaning and the objects that are meaningful cannot be separated (Slife & Williams, 1995).

Qualitative research is completed within a naturalistic inquiry. It includes an inductive analysis with open-ended questions to discover important factors related to the topic, a holistic perspective, personal contact and insight, unique case orientation, emphatic neutrality, context sensitivity, and design flexibility (Patton, 2002). The goal in qualitative research is to achieve in-depth, thick descriptive responses to research questions. It deals with words, emotions, and feelings and, therefore, provides data that is rich and descriptive. The goal of this researcher's study was to give voice to these nontraditional Latina undergraduate students' reality; therefore, a qualitative research design was the most appropriate choice.

Rationale for a Phenomenological Study

In the body of literature on methods, descriptions of phenomenology appear less contentious, more harmonious, and are (frankly) more comprehensible to this researcher. For example, Creswell (1998) explained that "a phenomenological study describes the meaning of the lived experiences for several individuals about a concept or the phenomenon" (p. 51). Other authors similarly use the terms *meaning-making* and *lived experiences* as key concepts of the research tradition (Bodgan & Biklen, 1998; Patton, 2002; Schwandt, 2001). Moustakas (1994) explained that,

> Empirical phenomenological approach involves a return to the experience to obtain comprehensive descriptions that provide the basis for a reflective structural analysis that portrays the essences of the experience . . . to determine what an experience means for the persons who have had the experience and are able to provide a comprehensive description of it. (p. 13)

Bogdan and Biklen (1998) emphasized that phenomenology allows for multiple perspectives—that people experiencing the same event can attach unique meanings to that event, based upon their respective perceptions. Bernard (2002) and Creswell (1998)

drew a parallel between ethnography and phenomenology in that the goal is to create an accurate description of how people "think and feel about their lives" (Bernard, p. 23). Whereas Creswell preferred to focus on the essence of individual experiences, other researchers included shared experiences and social construction of meanings as part of the phenomenological approach (Bogdan & Biklen; Htizler & Eberle, 2004; Patton). This researcher did not seek a "transcendent truth" but rather an "interpretation of reality grounded in the empirical world . . . that is useful in understanding the human condition" (Bodgan & Biklen, p. 25). In this case, this researcher was prepared to be captivated by learning more about the phenomenon of nontraditional Latina undergraduates, as articulated and interpreted by the students.

Locke, Spirduso, and Silverman (2000) noted that the nature of one's questions is a key indicator of how one should approach a research problem. Because this researcher sought to understand the deeper meanings individuals attach to their educational experiences, qualitative methods were best served for the intention of her study. Following Creswell's (1998) recommendation that qualitative researchers should work from a specific tradition of inquiry, she selected phenomenology as her guiding methodological approach. Daniels (2000) defined phenomenology as "a method for learning about another person by listening to their descriptions in their own terms as fully as possible, free of our preconceptions and interferences" (¶ 5). In this case, she was interested in the phenomenon of nontraditional Latina undergraduates, as defined, communicated, and interpreted by the students themselves. Beyond *describing*, phenomenological research can also be *interpretive* (Hitzler & Eberle, 2004). In her case,

she intentionally waited before re-interpreting the participants' constructions—first attempting to allow the students' voices to be heard.

Determining her approach was further complicated because this researcher tried to identify a specific set of methods that were consistent with the many ideologies of postmodernism. This is where Gubrim and Holstein's (2003) terminology, postmodern *inspired* methods, became helpful to her. To summarize, the methodological literature review included theoretical foundations, broad study on qualitative approaches, and specific interviewing, journaling, and data interpretation techniques inspired by postmodern thinking. Ultimately, she designed a study that felt comfortable to her and one that allowed her to avoid filtering the participants' stories to the best of her ability.

Creswell (2003) stated that phenomenological research is that in which the researcher identifies the essence of human experiences concerning a phenomenon, as described by participants in a study. Understanding the lived experiences marks phenomenology as a philosophy as well as a method, and the procedure involves studying a small number of subjects through extensive and prolonged engagement to develop patterns and relationships of meaning (Moustakas, 1994). In this process, the researcher brackets his or her experiences in order to understand those of the participants in the study (Marshall & Rossman, 1995; Patton, 2002). In phenomenology, the primary data are derived from conversations, text analysis or interviews, and these data are then reflected from the phenomenological literature and other experiential accounts, including the researcher's own experience (van Manen, 1990).

Phenomenological research is concerned with the process and how one finds out what it is that one believes one knows or can come to know. In the phenomenological

paradigm, rather than testing theoretically derived or deductive, hypotheses, the researcher first details the individual statements of the participants about their experiences with the phenomenon, exploring their answers to open-ended questions before moving to meanings and clusters of meanings (Moustakas). Using inductive analysis with immersion in the details and specifics of the data, the researcher's aim is to discover important categories, dimensions, and interrelationships within the data (Creswell, 1998).

The phenomenological inquiry, as part of uncovering meaning, articulated essences of meaning in these nontraditional Latina students' lived experiences as they pursued their undergraduate education. For a phenomenologist, a decision is made to examine the meaning of experiences for individuals (Creswell, 1998). This emerging, lived experience was the central phenomenon of this study, and the focus was on the participant's individual and collective challenges and "lived through" experiences. Methods of inquiry included phenomenological reflection on the data obtained during the study (Creswell, 2003).

The researcher sought to understand the barriers nontraditional Latina students faced while pursuing their educational goals and their responses to those barriers. The objective of the study was to gain new knowledge regarding student academic self-efficacy to assist university academic and administrative personnel working with nontraditional college women and to learn more about coping strategies devised to address the challenges Latinas face as they add *student* to their existing roles as homemaker, spouse, parent, caretaker and employee. Moustakas (1994) posited that "the understanding of meaningful concrete relations implicit in the original description of the

experience *in the context of a particular situation* is the primary target of phenomenological knowledge" (p. 14).

Research Questions

The following research question and sub-questions guided this study:

1. What is the unique experience of nontraditional Latina students completing an undergraduate degree in an Adult Education Program?
    a. What factors have surfaced as challenges to nontraditional Latina students?
    b. What strategies have nontraditional Latina students employed to overcome these challenges?
    c. What factors have contributed to nontraditional Latina students' success in undertaking and completing their undergraduate education?

Methods

Role of the Researcher

Qualitative research is a naturalistic inquiry process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions of inquiry that explore a social or human problem. The qualitative researcher studies real-world situations as they unfold naturally, without manipulation, and builds a complex holistic picture, analyzes words, reports detailed views of informants and conducts the study in a natural setting (Creswell, 1998; Patton, 2002).

Guarding against subjectivity is a crucial element for the researcher to contend with in qualitative research. The researcher is viewed as the instrument for data collection and analysis through observing, participating, and interviewing and as such

acknowledges and monitors his or her own biases and subjectivities and how these might color the interpretation of the research data (Berg, 2004; Creswell, 1998, 2003; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Hatch, 2002; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Modhaddam, Walker, & Harre, 2003; Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2002; Schwandt, 2001; van Manen, 1990).

Sample

The sample population for this research study was comprised of 10 nontraditional Latina undergraduate students, aged 25 or older, enrolled in their third year (or having completed at least 60 credits toward 90 semester hours) at an Adult Education Program at a private 4-year Catholic university in Southern Florida. (Semester hour is defined as a unit of academic credit representing an hour of class, as lecture class, or three hours of laboratory work each week for an academic semester.) This researcher anticipated that the students' stories, shared in Chapter IV, would yield life lessons and reflections that illustrate what Patton (2002) meant by "richness" (p. 438). Participants were selected using a purposeful sampling (Patton). Participants were selected based on their availability and willingness to participate, as with any study, and they must have satisfied the criteria sample rules. Criterion samples are marked by specific criteria for invitations to be extended (Creswell, 2001; Patton, 2002; Polkinghorne, 1989). The criteria for inclusion in this study were as follows: participants must have been females, aged 25 and older, and Latinas, either by birth or by self-identifying with the Latina culture. Selecting participants based solely on their names could have eliminated many possible candidates. Additionally, participants must have completed at least 60 credits toward 90 semester hours in this program. This was not a convenience sample, but instead followed the tenets of phenomenological qualitative studies that require that the participants have all

experienced the same phenomena (Creswell, 2003). As noted, the sample for this study included *10 nontraditional Latina undergraduates,* which is within the range of the recommended sample size for phenomenology qualitative methodology.

Phenomenological studies are marked by a group of people who have experienced a similar phenomenon, but the experiences do not necessarily have to be bound by space and time (Creswell, 2003). Participants of this study, however, were students of the same program, and had undertaken the phenomena together.

The following procedure was used to secure 10 participants: (a) the Participant Recruitment Flyer (Appendix A) was sent electronically to all students enrolled in the subject institution's Adult Education Program by their Executive Director of Operations, and posted in visible locations on campus (flyers were removed after two weeks). (b) The Participant Recruitment Flyer was also sent electronically to all directors of the various off-site locations for this program throughout the State of Florida. Directors were asked to post this flyer at their locations, with copies available for students who visited/attended classes at those sites (flyers were removed after two weeks). Students who wished to participate and met the criteria for this study were asked to visit the secure Website. The Website was designed with an opening page that included the Informed Consent Form (Appendix B), which detailed the parameters of this study, and allowed for acceptance or refusal of voluntary consent. The first 10 who consented to voluntarily participate and who met the criteria were given access to the questionnaire and constituted the sample of this study.

Instrument

This study was conducted using *Survey Monkey*™. Once participants were identified, selected and agreed to participate in the study, they were directed to the researcher's Website and electronically guided through the participant protocol. While several authors proposed various techniques used to collect data (Creswell, 1998, 2005; Patton, 2002), emerging qualitative trends in the data collection process include technology such as email and computer software (Creswell, 2005). Creswell acknowledged Web-based data collection processes as popular methods of data collection. An Online Open-ended Questionnaire (Appendix E) was appropriate for the study because it allowed distance between the researcher and participants, and increased the integrity of the study by using a Website design that would protect the confidentiality of the participants by preventing the researcher from identifying individual participant responses.

Questionnaires provide a dexterous data collection process and are often more effective than telephone and face-to-face interviews because they can be administered with a high level of confidentiality for matters of a sensitive nature (Patton, 2002). Confidentiality was important to the study; therefore, participants were assigned acronyms, and results and findings have been reported without assigning them to a particular location or individual, thereby providing an added degree of confidentiality (Berg, 2004; Creswell, 2001; Salkind, 2003). For example, Latina undergraduate respondent number 1 became LU-1; Latina undergraduate respondent number 2 became LU-2, and so forth. The questionnaire encouraged candor and truthfulness in the

participant's uncoerced responses as the researcher was unable to discern and identify individual responses.

The questionnaire allowed participants to provide lengthy, in-depth responses. The instrument was accessible from any computer with Internet access, thus allowing participants to complete the questionnaire at a time and place that was convenient for them.

Data Collection and Processing Procedures

Creswell (1998) and Weiss (1994), also Day (1979) and Meriwether (2001) recommend that researchers conduct pilot studies before the study begins in order to test their research questions. Different approaches may exist depending upon the methodology used; however, a consistent approach should be used for both the pilot and the actual study (Creswell; Weiss). Two nontraditional Latina students aged 25 or older, enrolled in the Adult Education Program this researcher proposed to study were randomly selected from a Theology class to pilot the research questions. These questions were disseminated and responses collected electronically in order to mirror as closely as possible the data collection methods of the proposed study. Each participant was asked to evaluate the appropriateness and thoroughness of each of the protocol questions, and their responses were used to carefully modify the protocol that was used in the study. According to Creswell (1998), the most important point of a phenomenological study is to describe the meaning of a small number of individuals who have experienced the phenomenon. In order to accomplish this task, the protocol must be carefully designed.

The research Website included the Informed Consent Form (Appendix B) that provided (a) the name of the researcher and the dissertation topic and title, (b) the

purpose of the survey, (c) the estimated duration of time required to complete the questionnaire, (d) the confidentiality safety measures, and (e) the specification that only voluntary participants would be considered, as specified by the subject University's Institutional Review Board.

Participants confirmed their interest in participating in the research project by selecting the *YES* option on the Informed Consent Form (Appendix B). By indicating *YES* participants were granted access to the online Inclusion Criteria Form (Appendix C), which served as the criterion for inclusion in the study. Embedded logic on this page granted access only to those participants who indicated *YES* to each qualifying question. If an individual met the criteria for inclusion, she was granted access to the online Demographic Data Form (Appendix D), and the Online Questionnaire (Appendix E). If any individual indicated *NO* to voluntarily participate in the study or indicated *NO* to any of the criteria for inclusion in the study, she was not granted access to the demographic data form nor the questionnaire. Instead, the individual was taken to a page that thanked her for participating in the study.

The Website, on *Survey Monkey*™, was set up to allow access to up to 20 participants in order to allow for log in of individuals who did not voluntarily agree to participate and/or meet the criteria for inclusion in this study. The first 10 individuals, who voluntarily consented to participate, who met the criteria for inclusion in the study, and who completed the questionnaire comprised the sample for this study.

The online, open-ended questionnaire was designed to generate participants' meaningful thoughts and feelings regarding their unique experience as nontraditional Latina undergraduate students completing an undergraduate degree in an Adult Education

Program. The process should have taken no more than two hours to complete, and participants were able to log out of the survey site and then return to complete the survey at a later date/time, if necessary. Rubin and Rubin (2005) highlighted the value of the researcher asking follow-up questions regarding unexpected responses. Therefore, the Website asked the participants to voluntarily provide a contact email address in order for the researcher to ask follow-up questions, and/or provide participants with a copy of the study once completed.

The study exploring the lived experience of these nontraditional Latina participants' meaningful thoughts and feelings regarding their unique experience as nontraditional Latina undergraduate students completing an undergraduate degree in an Adult Education Program was conducted at a private, 4-year Catholic university in Southern Florida. To gain permission to conduct this study, the researcher met with the dean of that university's School of Adult Education and explained the significance of the study and the procedures for maintaining confidentiality of the findings. The researcher's Website was also presented. The dean was assured that findings would be kept confidential to the extent permitted by law. The researcher obtained verbal approval from the dean of the program, who was provided with periodic updates on the researcher proposal process, and a completed copy of the research proposal was submitted to the dean for review. Once the researcher was ready to defend the proposal, the dean was asked for final approval. The dean responded, in the affirmative, via email (Appendix F). The researcher submitted the information to the Barry University Institutional Review Board for approval prior to beginning the data collection process.

Data Analysis Procedures

Data analysis is a systematic search for meaning. It is a way to process qualitative data so that what has been learned can be communicated to others. Analysis means organizing and interrogating data in ways that allow researchers to see patterns, identify themes, discover relationships, develop explanations, make interpretations, mount critiques, or generate theories. It often involves synthesis, evaluation, interpretation, categorization, hypothesizing, comparison and pattern finding (Berg, 2004; Creswell, 1998; Huberman & Miles, 2002; Patton, 2002; Rubin & Rubin, 2005). It always involves what Wolcott (2001) referred to as "mindwork" (p. 233). Researchers always engage their own intellectual capacities to make sense of qualitative data. Even when computer programs are used to assist in the mechanics of sorting data, only the intelligence, creativity, and reflexivity of the human mind can bring meaning to those data (Berg; Creswell; Huberman & Miles; Patton; Rubin & Rubin). Hatch (2002) conceptualized the general data analysis process as asking questions of data. What kinds of questions are asked is related to what kind of research is being done within what set of paradigmatic assumptions. Different approaches and paradigms lead to different analysis strategies, but the general idea Hatch proposes is built on the assumption that important information is in the data, and by systematically asking the right questions of the data, that information can be revealed (Hatch).

All qualitative research is characterized by an emphasis on inductive rather than deductive information processing (Hatch, 2002). Inductive thinking proceeds from the specific to the general, and understandings are generated by starting with specific elements and finding connections among them. To argue inductively is to begin with

particular pieces of evidence, then pull them together into a meaningful whole. Inductive data analysis is a search for patterns of meaning in data so that general statements about phenomena under investigation can be made (Hatch; Potter, 1996).

Guba (1981) outlined several paradigms for discovering "truth." These included a judicial paradigm that has well-established rules for procedure, rules of evidence and criteria for judging the adequacy of the rationale for a proceeding. This judicial paradigm offered guidelines for behavior. Another paradigm is that of expert judgment. The third is what he referred to as the rationalistic paradigm and is connected to deductive thinking and a logical positivist point of view. The paradigm Guba preferred is the naturalistic. The naturalistic is characterized by inductive thinking, and phenomenological views of knowing and understanding social and organizational phenomena. He noted that there are shades of gray in viewing these paradigms and that often they are seen as competing, but in the task of knowledge production, they are all-important. Guba stressed that the naturalistic ecological hypothesis is embedded in a context that is often more powerful in shaping behavior than differences among individuals. Guba stated that understanding the reality of the world requires acceptance of the notion that the parts cannot be separated. He further concluded that because of the assumptions, underlying naturalistic inquiry and the traditional concerns for objectivity, validity, and reliability have little relevance for the design of the research. The validity of the findings is related to the careful recording and continual verification of the data that the researcher undertakes during the investigative practice which is consistent with Wolcott (2001).

According to Salkind (2003), researchers should create and organize files for the data (computer files are inferred), read through the text, make margin notes, form initial

codes, describe the meaning of the experience for the researcher, find and list statements of meaning for individuals, cluster group statements into meaning units, develop a structural description of how the phenomenon was experienced, develop an overall description of the experience, the "essence," and present narration of the "essence" of the experience, using tables or figures of statements and meaning units. The researcher must code raw data in meaningful, explicit, and discrete elements (Salkind).

During the initial phase of the data analysis process, the researcher read each of the participant's responses and bracketed personal experiences and biases regarding the phenomenon by describing biases and being reflexive of feelings immediately after the first reading of each participant's responses to the on-line open-ended questionnaire. After bracketing biases and noting reflexive thoughts, the researcher continued to engage in numerous readings of participant responses, as numerous readings allowed the researcher to become familiar with the entire collection of responses (Creswell, 2003). After several readings of the participants' responses by means of constant comparative analysis, the researcher searched for concepts that corresponded to the research project by jotting down common words in the margins of the narrative (Creswell, 1998; Miles & Huberman, 1994). The researcher looked for events and topical markers that depicted major activities that took place or significant individuals in order to clarify and integrate information necessary to generate new concepts and themes.

Constant comparison of participants' responses was ongoing throughout the data analysis process, as recommended by Moustakas (1994). This researcher proceeded to sort data within categories and re-sort through each of these categories looking for emergent patterns by clustering similar data, counting the number of times data and

themes occurred, looking for supporting and contradictory evidence of patterns, seeing what data were left out and deciding what to do with them. She further enhanced her analysis of the data by refining and clarifying themes, looking for verification or contradiction of patterns, noting relationships between the variables, identifying significant themes, drawing conclusions, and making metaphors or analogies. These were the steps suggested by experts in the field, including this researcher's committee members. Data was reviewed to extract particular comments and/or quotes from the respondents that would indicate evidence of these themes. A textural description of what happened was developed, as well as a structural description of how the phenomenon was experienced. The foregoing led to developing an overall description of the experience—the essence. This researcher has presented a narration of the essence of the experience using thick descriptions, tables and/or figures of statements and meaning units, selecting supporting quotes to describe the phenomenon of the participants (Creswell, 1998, 2003; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 2002).

The original responses to the on-line open-ended questionnaire were hand-coded creating notes in the margins about topics, repeated themes, contradictions, and interpretations (Charmaz, 2000). Once data was refined and concepts and themes were integrated, a preliminary color-coded system was developed to label concepts and themes. The goal was to capture multiple perceptions and shared meanings by defining as many themes as needed to summarize the constructs within the texts without diluting the content (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). According to Miles and Huberman (1994), specific methods for analyzing qualitative data are not well-defined. The researcher began with Moustakas' (1994) four steps to phenomenological data analysis as a means to group,

reduce, and eliminate data. The four steps included: (a) horizonalizing data, (b) listing meanings, (c) creating clusters, and (d) writing textural and structural descriptions (Creswell, 1998; Janesick, 2000). According to Moustakas, during the first phase, horizonalizing, the researcher divided the data into statements relevant to inquiry topics and viewed them as having "equal value" (p. 118). Next she listed the meanings and meaning units of the statements (Moustakas). In this step, the researcher gained a deeper understanding through reflection (Janesick, 2000). Third, she clustered the statements into themes and phenomenological concepts, or what Janesick calls a phase of "illumination"— deeper understanding (p. 391). Finally, the researcher linked the clusters together to provide a rich description of the participants' experiences, as she understood them (Creswell, 1998). As Moustakas (1994) described this process: "From the textural descriptions, structural descriptions and an integration of textures and structures into the meanings and essences of the phenomenon are constructed" (p. 119). Specific procedures that were used for data analysis are listed in Table 3.

With reference to data analysis, LeCompte and Preissle (1993) stated simply that one cannot predict what will happen; that trying to develop and use a template to direct the data analysis is impossible. They felt that "qualitative analysis is interpretive, idiosyncratic and so context dependent as to be infinitely variable. A creative analyst can never be sure that the ending will match the point of view adopted in the beginning" (p. 330). LeCompte and Preissle posited that a single definition of validity is inappropriate for qualitative research. In a qualitative confirmation process, all authors agree that concerns about validity touch every part of the inquiry.

Table 3

Data Analysis Procedures

Steps	Procedures	Actions
1.	Review original research questions	a. Review original research questions
2.	Review all data and generate general coding categories	a. Read and reread questionnaires. b. Consider emerging themes, concepts, and form broad categories or classifications that represent them. c. Sub-divide broad categories or classifications that represent them. d. Use convergent and divergent thinking. e. Collapse overlapping categories.
3.	Code all data within categories	a. Assign code, number, or abbreviation to each category. b. Develop clear, operational definitions for codes. c. Develop master list of coding system. d. Refine coding system, collapsing or expanding categories. e. Tag important quotes.
4.	Sort data within categories.	a. Sort data within categories.
5.	Resort through categories, looking for emergent patterns and themes	a. Cluster similar data. b. Count the number of times data occur. c. Look for supporting or contradictory evidence of patterns. d. See what data are left out and what to do with them.
6.	Refine analysis	a. Refine and clarify themes. b. Look for verification or contradiction of patterns. c. Note relationships between variables. d. Identify significant themes. e. Draw conclusions. f. Make metaphors and analogies.
7.	Extract respondents	a. Extract respondents' comments as "evidence of themes."
8.	Present themes as narratives	a. Cull thick, rich descriptions (quality not quantity). b. Select supporting quotes

Note. Adapted with permission from the author, T. D. Melton (2002).

The final stages of the data analysis procedures were to tie together emerging themes to make a general description of the experience, the textural descriptions of what was experienced, and the structural descriptions of how it was experienced (Creswell, 1998, 2003). Findings for this tradition are reported as understandings, essence, and meaning of a phenomenon as viewed through the eyes of the informants (Creswell). Qualitative findings are typically presented as narrative dialogue including rich, thick descriptions of written summaries of detailed findings and direct quotes from participants found in the data analysis (Creswell, 2005; Patton, 2002; Rubin & Rubin, 2005). "The phenomenological report ends with the reader having a better understanding of the essential, invariant structure (or essence) of the experience, recognizing that a single unifying meaning of the experience exists" (Creswell, p. 55). Research findings serve as the foundation for shaping new information about the phenomenon and validating support or challenges of the literature review (Creswell, 1998; Patton).

The phenomenological report, for this proposed study, ended with this researcher providing a description that "allows the reader to understand better the essential, invariant structure (or essence) of the experience, recognizing that a single unifying meaning of the experience exists" (Polkinghorne, 1989, p. 46). All responses were combined to address the overarching research questions and sub-questions and the researcher sought to extrapolate a description of the phenomenon of the lived experience of being a nontraditional Latina undergraduate student, experienced by the group as a whole (Moustakas, 1994). As a result, the reader should have a sense of understanding this phenomenon as if the experience is universal to all (Moustakas).

Presentation of the findings was guided by the research questions and the study's theoretical framework. The participants' lived experiences was examined, described, and interpreted. By allowing the participants' voices to resonate throughout the text, the depth, richness, meaning and essence of their lived experience was captured.

Hatch (2002) posited that qualitative researchers will not be able to describe their anticipated findings as they are designing studies. They do not begin with a null hypothesis to retain or reject. But they can anticipate the form that their findings will take; they can describe the nature of anticipated findings. Again, this is an important conceptual step for the researcher and those evaluating his or her research proposal. Having a basic idea of what findings will look like gives researchers a frame of reference for thinking about what they are doing at each step of the research process. Being able to describe the nature of anticipated findings to committee members gives them confidence that the product of a great deal of effort will be worth the trouble. For some studies, the form will flow directly from the kind of research approach that is applied. Most kinds of qualitative research, however, will produce insights that can be presented in a number of ways.

Wolcott (2001) provided a useful tool for thinking about the form that findings will take. He described three options for organizing and presenting qualitative data: description, analysis, and interpretation. Wolcott argued that all three are present to some degree in all qualitative studies; however, deciding what gets emphasized in the balance determines the nature of the findings. In descriptive findings, the data are said to speak for themselves. The goal is to provide accounts that represent as far as possible what is going on in particular contexts. Wolcott recognized that pure description is impossible

because researchers are observing through their own interpretive lenses and making choices about what to describe, but on balance, description emphasizes data presentation as the source for understanding the contexts under examination. Analysis, for Wolcott, means transforming data by way of searching for relationships and key factors that can be supported by evidence in the data. The products of analysis are generalizations that represent essential features or relationships, and the case for the accuracy of these generalizations is made using excerpts from the data. Interpretation involves mental processes through which the researcher goes beyond the data and analysis and begins to probe what is to be made of them (Wolcott). Understanding and explanation are the goals of interpretation, and it is here that the researcher inserts his or her own thinking into the data transformation process. Interpretive work is not undertaken without regard for the data; indeed, the plausibility of interpretation comes from the researcher's ability to use the data to make his or her interpretations (Hatch, 2002).

According to Van Manen (1990), the research process itself is practically inseparable from the writing process. This researcher sought to interpret the data and presented the findings using rich descriptions that explored the meanings and structures beyond what was immediately experienced. Sufficient examples were included to give readers confidence that this researcher's assertions about the topic at hand were supported by her data. Whenever generalizations are presented, patterns described, impressions painted, or critiques generated, this researcher has provided excerpts from her data to give the reader a real sense of how what will be learned will be played out in the actual setting that was examined. The researcher has selected the right data excerpts, in the right

places, and helps the reader see why they are the right examples to strengthen their unclear standings.

Being true to those who have trusted the researcher enough to participate in her study goes beyond safeguarding confidentiality. An ever-present vision of the informants' looking over her shoulder as the findings were written, guided this researcher in her quest for accuracy, along with the rich descriptions she has presented describing the essence of the experienced phenomenon.

Quality and Verification

A qualitative researcher must provide evidence of rigor throughout the development of the research study. Rigor requires the researcher to display integrity, competence, and ethics (Creswell, 1998; Huberman & Miles, 2002; Patton, 2002) while pursuing excellence, discipline, detail, and accuracy in the research project (Creswell; Huberman & Miles; Patton). Certain criteria must be met to confirm that a research study is valid and reliable to demonstrate trustworthiness (Creswell; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton). Trustworthiness is a term coined by Lincoln and Guba (1985) to describe an alternative set of criteria that should be used to judge quality or goodness of qualitative research (Patton; Schwandt, 2001). Strategies to secure trustworthiness in a qualitative study are credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba).

For trustworthy qualitative research, valid studies must be credible and transferable. Credibility is an internal validity criterion that addresses the research question and represents the effort of the researcher to ensure that the study evaluates what it is intended to evaluate (Creswell, 2003; Patton, 2002). For this research project, the

researcher used the following methods to promote credibility: participant relevancy or sampling, respondent validation or member checking, audit trail, and reflexivity.

According to Schwandt (2002), participant relevancy or sampling is significant to research credibility because it is important to select participants according to their significance to the research project and methodological structure. Another method of considering participant relevancy within a research project is when the researcher has prior knowledge about the community or individual that is distinctive or critical for the targeted research. For this research project, the sampling method was purposeful and all participants had experienced the phenomenon of study, which greatly contributed to the research project. In addition, this researcher had prior knowledge of the phenomenon, which greatly enhanced credibility of the research project.

Respondent validation (member checking) takes place when participants review data collected and analyzed, and agree or disagree with the findings (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The participant responses to data analysis confirm or disconfirm the researcher's conclusions and become part of the research findings (Miles & Huberman). For the study, using an online, open-ended questionnaire, respondent validation occurred using a secure Website on the Internet.

The audit trail helps establish the credibility of qualitative studies in regard to details of data collection and the data analysis procedure. Researchers depend on the utilization of data to produce findings. The audit trail provides evidence of the path taken by the investigator, and data must be clearly described for the reader verifying evidence of the path the investigator followed from the raw textural data. The utilization of direct quotes from participants and rich, thick descriptions (Geertz, 1973) to accurately portray

the experiences of participants as they interact within their world and construct meaning lends itself to credible research (Creswell, 1998; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 2002).

Reflexivity as a methodology to validate trustworthiness is the notion of the researcher seriously acknowledging biases, speculative outlook, preferences, and other idiosyncrasies about the study. Reflexivity can make clear the activity of the audit trail, and the credibility of the researcher and findings are reinforced when the researcher acknowledges his or her potential bias towards the study (Creswell, 2003; Patton, 2002). In the study, the researcher bracketed biases and noted reflexive thoughts immediately after the first reading of each participant's response.

In addition to credibility, a research project must also be transferable for it to be judged a valid study (Schwandt, 2001). Transferability is external validity in qualitative research, and relates to the ability of the results to be generalized and used beyond the specific framework in which the study is conducted (Patton, 2002; Huberman & Miles, 2002; Lincoln & Guba, 2005; Schwandt). While qualitative findings are not considered generalizable, by providing rich, thick (Geertz, 1973) descriptions, participants' direct quotes, and full demographics, the reader can determine transferability of the study (Creswell, 1998). Detailed descriptions about the study will allow the reader to engage in the project and consider if the research findings apply to other cases with comparable characteristics and conditions (Creswell).

It is the coherence and rigor of the data collection principles and procedures, together with strategies for ensuring what Herschell (1997) referred to as "process believability" that provide the qualitative researcher with confidence in the data

collection process and trustworthiness of interpretations (p. 102). In order to establish processes for confirming the authenticity, reliability, and dependability of their data and analytical approaches, Herschell proposed that the term of process *believability* be used and defined for these purposes. His notion of process believability is understood to be the design and implementation of principles and procedures to ensure that the qualitative data, analytical tactics, and outcomes are authentic, believable, trustworthy and reliable. Process believability means to investigate, check, question, embed one's self in the study data, mine the data, categorize, generalize, articulate and communicate the research presuppositions and assumptions, data collection processes, analytical processes and strategies as well as the study outcomes.

Trustworthy qualitative studies must also be reliable. Reliability is the notion of the study being duplicated by another researcher (Schwandt, 2001). Reliable qualitative studies must be dependable and confirmable. Dependability is a process that is accomplished through auditing. Readers are judging whether the process of the research is reasonable, traceable, and well documented (Schwandt). Dependability for this research was realized by the researcher's efforts of corroborating data and challenging interpretive theory. Dependability in qualitative research requires the researcher to provide descriptive and colorful examples or extensive data so the reader can develop his or her own opinions, measure the suitability of coding, comprehend the data analysis, and support research conclusions (Creswell, 1998; Patton, 2002). This researcher has provided details of the process of the research in the final report as well as demographics and rich descriptions of the participants' lived experiences.

For a qualitative study to be reliable, it must also be confirmable. Confirmability ensures that participant responses and the researcher's interpretations of data are authentic and not fabricated (Schawandt, 2001). Confirmability criteria require data to correlate with research affirmations, conclusions, and explanations, and guarantees that the data support the results and recommendations of the study and the agreement with the inquirer and the facts (Schwandt). The use of an external auditor is an excellent technique for establishing that the research study is confirmable (Schwandt). Therefore, the researcher used an expert external auditor who has no connection to the study, but is proficient in the field of study. An external auditor reviews the study in detail and asks the researcher questions regarding all aspects of the study (Creswell, 2005; Schwandt) to verify that the study was performed correctly and is consistent with the philosophy and purpose of the study. For the study exploring the lived experience of these nontraditional Latina participants' meaningful thoughts and feelings regarding their unique experience as nontraditional Latina undergraduate students completing an undergraduate degree in an Adult Education Program, confirmability was achieved using the chair of the dissertation committee and the committee members. The dissertation committee was considered the external auditor because committee members are regarded as experts in the field and can verify confirmability.

According to Herschell (1999), researchers undertaking a qualitative study must employ a range of quality control measures to ensure that data collection, organization, and analyses, as well as the processes and outcomes of such studies, are trustworthy and believable. The nature of the data collection process relates directly to the type of qualitative investigations being investigated and the desire to maintain openness rather

than closure in the data collection, analysis and conclusion-drawing phases of qualitative research. Because phenomenology uses interpretative approaches, a degree of uncertainty might exist in the mind of the researcher about the meanings being generated through the data collection and analysis process. Unique combinations of individual and collective lived world experiences are dependent on the researcher, the participants, and the study topic. The research data used to form a conclusion are usually derived from various participants who have experienced a different aspect of their lived world. It is the participants' perceptions and resulting understanding rather than the experiences themselves that are the object of study.

Researchers are in a privileged position of power that carries the danger of silencing the participants' voices and controlling representation (Fontana, 2003; Gubrim & Holstein, 2003). In an effort to minimize these problems, this researcher applied a theoretical perspective—critical postmodernism—to the meanings and clusters that emerge from the participants' stories and constructions. After clustering the meanings from the participants' stories, she again reflected on the responses of the individual participants, and on her understanding of what they were describing (her interpretations). Next, she explored their stories for deeper meanings relating to power, injustice, discrimination, ideologies, and cultural dynamics.

Rigor was reinforced by *epoche*, wherein this researcher refrained from judging what was real or not real from the data until all the evidence was in. Phenomenological reduction by bracketing presuppositions to identify the data in its purest of forms was also employed (Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2002).

This study met the standards for quality and verification recommended by experts in the field of qualitative research. Guba and Lincoln (1985) are notable qualitative researchers who suggest an alternative for qualitative studies to authenticate rigor: trustworthiness. Trustworthiness provides clear and concise strategies to identify and enhance validity and reliability for the qualitative researcher. This study used trustworthiness to achieve quality and verification of the research project through the aforementioned four criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

By identifying, discussing, and debating the quality control procedures being addressed, clarity was developed in relation to the appropriate measures that should be considered in qualitative studies. Regardless of which of the five traditions of inquiry is chosen for a qualitative study, the researcher faces many ethical issues that surface during data collection in the field and analysis and dissemination of qualitative reports (Armino, & Hultgren, 2002; Creswell, 1998; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Ethical Considerations

Ethics issues in qualitative research are often more subtle than issues in survey or experimental research. These issues are related to the characteristics of qualitative or field methodology which usually include long-term and close personal involvement, interviewing and participant observation. Field research is an approach based on human interaction, rather than one viewed as outside human interactions, as field investigators themselves are the measuring instruments (Christians, 2000; Lipson, 1994).

Ethical research practices begin when the researcher identifies the topic of study and continues through publication of study findings (Creswell, 2003). All ethical research

must include the effort to protect the rights of human participants, balance benefits and risks of participants in the study, obtain an agreed upon consent form from each participant, and meet the guidelines of the Institutional Review Board at the researcher's institution of higher learning (Berg, 2004).

Ethical researchers should develop a relationship of trust with participants (Patton, 2002). As an ethical researcher, participant trust was achieved by protecting their rights through the acknowledgement of respect of persons and the right to privacy and confidentiality (Schwandt, 2001).

To show respect of persons, this researcher treated each individual separately by informing them of the study and allowing them to voluntarily decide if they would like to participate. Respect of persons as an ethical issue also requires the researcher to allow participants to leave the study without consequences (Creswell, 2003; Rubin & Rubin, 2005); participants were notified of their right to withdraw from the study at any time.

The right to privacy and confidentiality requires the ethical researcher to consider what, how, and when participant information can be shared (Creswell, 2003). As an ethical researcher, the researcher for this study followed the Privacy Act of 1974 by clearly illuminating in the Informed Consent Form (Appendix B) that private responses from participants and data collected would be kept confidential and not made public without the participant's written approval. The researcher protected participants' confidentiality by inhibiting the researcher's ability to link responses to individual participants.

Researchers are to inspect and balance the possible benefits and risks for participants while involved in a study by considering the possible outcomes of the study

(Creswell, 2003; Rubin & Rubin, 2005). The benefits of this study was the notion of generating knowledge to increase the understanding of the lived experience of nontraditional Latinas regarding their unique experience as nontraditional Latina undergraduate students completing an undergraduate degree in an Adult Education Program, as stated on the Informed Consent Form (Appendix B). Assessing risks that participants could experience is significant for an ethical researcher (Burns & Grove, 2005). Burns and Grove proposed that risks associated with research are wide-ranging, from no risks at all to severe risks. Participants were recruited using the Participant Recruitment Flyer (Appendix A). For this study, there were no known or anticipated risks for participants involved because the study was specifically designed with minimal risk of any response(s) being attributable to any one person. This study was conducted using a secure Website designed exclusively for this particular research project. With the exception of identifying the characteristics of the participants (e.g., gender, approximate age, years of professional employment, and county where they are enrolled) results and findings were reported without assigning them to a particular location or individual, thereby providing an added degree of confidentiality.

The National Research Act of 1974 requires all research involving human participants to be examined by an Institutional Review Board (IRB). Institutional Review Boards examine and approve research and protect participants' rights, ensure participant safety, and protect individuals from harm (Berg, 2004; Creswell, 2005; Denzin & Lincoln, 2003; Patton, 2002). As a doctoral student at Barry University, this researcher sought to meet all requirements of the IRB, by having completed the online Human Participants Protection Education for Research course. The researcher followed the

protocol of the IRB as outlined on the Barry University Website. In accordance with the requirements of the Barry University IRB, data has been stored in a locked file cabinet in the home of the researcher for five years. Participant Informed Consent Forms and responses will be kept separately. All data will be destroyed after 5 years.

Chapter Summary

As stated, the purpose of this qualitative research study was to examine the lived experiences of nontraditional Latina students, aged 25 or older, pursuing an undergraduate degree. This researcher sought to understand the meaning behind these women's motivation and the social construction of the group's reality (Patton, 2002), as they pursued and completed an undergraduate degree. The objective of this study was to gain new knowledge regarding student academic self-efficacy to assist university academic and administrative personnel working with nontraditional college women.

This chapter described the method and methodology employed in the study, specifically the assumptions and rational for the use of a phenomenology qualitative research design. The philosophical paradigms that guided the study were phenomenology as a philosophical research tradition, critical theory, postmodernism, as well as a blend of these last two theories: critical postmodernism. Phenomenologists seek to understand the essence of what individuals experience and how they experience the phenomenon according to their lived experiences.

Phenomenology was the best qualitative tradition of inquiry for this study since it sought to understand and portray how people experience a phenomenon according to their understanding and views. Participants for this study involved 10, purposively selected, nontraditional Latina students enrolled in, and completing, an undergraduate

degree in an Adult Education Program at a private 4-year, Catholic university in Southern Florida.

Data was collected through *Survey Monkey*™. Employing purposeful criterion sampling, participants were recruited using a Participant Recruitment Flyer, which was distributed electronically via email to all students enrolled in the Adult Education Program, as well as posted at the various sites offering this program throughout the State of Florida. Prospective participants were directed to the secure researcher-developed Website to read and agree to the electronic Informed Consent Form by selecting *YES* at the bottom of the form. Once the participant agreed to the conditions listed on the Informed Consent Form, she was instructed to complete the demographic data/inclusion criteria.

Data analysis included bracketing the researcher's description of experiences with the phenomenon. The researcher engaged in numerous readings of the text to discover concepts and themes, events, and topical markers. After examining all responses from the open-ended questionnaire, the researcher sought to reveal the meaning of concepts and themes. The researcher then synthesized the data to develop an all-inclusive description of the participants' responses.

As a phenomenological qualitative researcher, the researcher employed methods of rigor that yielded valid and reliable data. To ensure rigor, rich, thick narratives to describe participants' lived experiences have been used. After the first reading of each participant response, the researcher recorded her biases. The researcher also used member checking to validate findings with participants to ensure the exactness of interpretations. The researcher also utilized an auditor to review the research and validate integrity.

Safety measures were exercised throughout the research process to protect participants' identity and privacy. Using the Informed Consent Form, the researcher thoroughly explained the ramifications of the study and the potential risks and benefits of participant involvement in the study. The disk containing participant responses and demographic information has been kept separately from transcripts in a locked file cabinet at the researcher's home. All research data will be destroyed after a period of 5 years, as required by the IRB at Barry University. This study fits the phenomenological qualitative traditions and methodology, and should lead to an understanding of the *lived experience* by *giving voice* to those who experienced the phenomenon.

CHAPTER IV

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

Introduction

This phenomenological study was designed to explore the lived experience of nontraditional Latinas, aged 25 and older enrolled in an undergraduate program for adult students at a private 4-year Catholic university in Southern Florida. The purpose of this study was to understand the meaning behind these women's motivation and the social construction of the group's reality (Patton, 2003) as they pursued and completed an undergraduate degree. The researcher envisioned a dissertation study that would help her understand the classroom experiences of nontraditional Latina undergraduates, and it was for this purpose that she chose this particular age group of Latinas. She wanted research from students who had rich life stories and lessons learned across several decades. Her assumption was that younger students, between the ages of 18-24, had limited experience in multiple life roles and, therefore, would attach meaning to their collegiate experiences somewhat differently than older adult students. Further, she was also interested in learning about the motivation, persistence, and goals of older Latina students who did not have the opportunity to complete college at a younger age and were now managing many life roles concurrent to persisting in college. This chapter focuses on their educational journeys, with an attempt to allow their voices to be heard. Even though she applied critical postmodernism as a lens to interpret their stories, the researcher also emphasized the centrality of ethnicity, gender, family, lifeworld, culture, and values.

Based on responses provided by a sample of 10 participants who completed an open-ended questionnaire, data were analyzed using a process of scrutinizing the data to

find emergent patterns and themes through the use of coding. The procedures the researcher used for this analysis are listed in Table 3. In order to better "hear" what participants were saying in regard to their lived experiences, the researcher scrutinized the data in several different ways. First, participants' answers to individual questions were examined as a separate category, and then compared to other participants' responses to those same questions. Next, participants' responses to each part of the questionnaire were grouped, examined, and compared to other participants' responses. Finally, participants' responses to all questions were grouped, examined, and compared to the responses of others. This allowed the researcher to explore not only participants' lived experience as a whole, but also what challenges they had encountered, strategies they employed to overcome those challenges and factors that have contributed to their success in undertaking and completing their undergraduate education.

Each of these 10 nontraditional Latina undergraduate students was referenced by a moniker, as opposed to her name, in order to protect the participant's identity. To uphold confidentiality, the researcher did not reveal the students' names, create personal profiles, or attach specific background information to pseudonyms. Instead, the researcher generally described participants' background histories and then discussed clusters of meanings from their stories (Moustakas, 1994). This structure is in contradiction to the spirit of postmodernism; however, this was the best option in order to maintain confidentiality. A brief description of the participants follows.

Findings

Based on the overarching research question for the study, the open-ended questionnaire was designed to ascertain these students' perspectives on *their* unique

experiences of this academic journey, both individually and collectively. Hence, the researcher's focus was to quote participants as often as possible and, thus, ensure that their voices be heard. The sample of 10 nontraditional Latina undergraduate students who contributed to the study emerged as knowledgeable, insightful, determined, and motivated women who, despite multiple challenges and obstacles, have managed to persevere toward completing their undergraduate degrees.

Description of Participants

Ethnicity and Cultural Identity

As this study focused on the experience of Latinas, it is essential to report on the participants' specific country of origin. This will provide a frame of reference that will serve as a mantra toward understanding the phenomenon as it relates to the issue of cultural identity.

The countries from which the participants' families originated include Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Cuba, Colombia, Mexico, and Puerto Rico. All the participants are presently U.S. citizens. Throughout their narratives, they interchangeably used the term Hispanic and Latina when referring to themselves. One person also used the term *Cuban American* when describing her family. The term *minority* was used by most of the participants, but none of them used the phrase *person of color*. When quoting or paraphrasing a participant's story, this researcher used their definitions and terminology. For example, if a participant used the term Hispanic or minority, then those terms were used (verbatim) to report participants' responses. The following response reflects the use of interchangeable terminology by one participant.

> I am a Latina…Hispanic, Latina. It's all the same thing. Hispanic is the word that we need to use in the language for the government. And that's fine. But I feel I'm

> a Latina from Latin America, and I became a U.S. citizen. But essentially, I am a Latina. I'm a Latina, kind of White-ish, not part of the indigenous population. My family came from Europe. So, I can make it up: Look, I'm a European Latina (LU-2).

Common Themes

After this researcher analyzed and coded the data, she determined that there were three common themes shared by all 10 participants. They are as follows:

Common Theme 1: Returning to College: Motivation and Life Goals

The first common theme was the shared belief that education is "the key" (their words) to better jobs, lives, and futures for their children. Several of them described degree attainment as a life-long goal that was never lost, only deferred for a while. Without exception, all of these students explained how a bachelor's degree is an essential step in establishing new careers or workplace advancement. The following statements most poignantly illustrates this desire:

> I am an elementary teacher in my country. When I came to the United States they told me, you want to be a teacher, you have to start all over. And I didn't understand English so it was worse. I started working in hotels and factories because I needed money. To tell the truth: I hated it. I thought, this is not the truth. This is not happening to me. In the United States, you think you can find a lot of good things. That's our mentality over there – it's a paradise. But it's different. Reality is different. I got tired. I can't be working so many hours and going home and cooking and taking care of everything. I came to this country because I wanted to succeed, get better. But I don't feel like I'm there. I can do something better here, and I can give my kids a better life and more opportunities. And I can be a role model for them (LU-1).

> If you are a middle-class or upper-class White family, I believe there's a push to get a college degree. I'd say my family is like a minority, because they have all gotten degrees. If you don't have a degree in this country you are an outsider with limited opportunities to be successful. But like in a Mexican family, I think it's the opposite. Emphasis is on work, and not school. If you decide to go to school, you are like an outsider (LU-5).

> Hispanics need to do something about getting an education. People or companies or schools are using this as an excuse that we are not educated enough to hold

> management positions. If we are given opportunities like grants and services, we can take courses to better ourselves and step by step succeed in getting a college degree (LU-2).
>
> I'm the one who is interested in a bachelor's now. It's competitive in the workplace and without an education you are very limited. I like the eight-week courses at this university. I like working under pressure. I've taken 16 week courses at another college and I didn't do very well in them. With the eight-week courses you get everything out of the way. You get your syllabus, and you know what you need to do. There's a test every other week and I just seem to work a lot better even thought it's a four-hour class and I've been working all day (LU-6).
>
> I've learned through the years that if you want something, you have to go for it. If I'm not confident and don't trust myself, then nobody else is going to trust in me either. I know that a college degree is an important thing. It opens doors for you and you can help yourself and your kids have a better life (LU-3).
>
> The competition in the workplace. There are more, younger people with degrees. And you feel the competition. Also because of my children. I told them I was persistent and I always told them, you have to get your education. Well, I told them, you don't want to end up like me. When they go to college, it will be to get their Ph.D. or something higher than just completing a bachelor's degree. They see me as a role model (LU-5).

Common Theme 2: Determination and Persistence: Participants' College Attendance Patterns

The second common theme was that of determination and persistence. Of the 10 students in this study, only three were able to enroll in college right after high school—two in this country, and the third in a different country. The remaining students enrolled later in life. Five of the students initiated studies in community college settings. All five obtained associate degrees and one person acquired a second associate's degree. Along the pathway to degree completion, three of the students attended multiple 4-year institutions. One person attended six institutions (a combination of 2-year and 4-year settings).

Collectively, the students' stories show how adult Latinas can persist toward degree completion a period of several years. These women cited family needs as the

reason they had to leave college at different points in their lives: marriage, children, relocation due to husband's employment, and parents. Despite barriers and deferred goals, their stories are positive. They did not give up.

> We moved away and about a year later, we got married and had a baby. So I put it off. It was always on my mind: I want to go back to school. I have to go to school and get my degree. Years and years later I finished the other half of my community college degree. Got that done and now I'm working on completing my bachelor's (LU-7).

> I planned that I was going to be done by the end of December. Well, it's not going to happen. Like we say, sometimes there are other priorities; ups and downs. I had to go through my dad's sickness and death. I had to be by his side, so I had to leave classes. Class, I can always take over again. My dad would be gone. He's gone. I'm so proud that I decided to leave school to be with him. Now, I will continue, in tribute to him (LU-4).

> Like my mother said…don't let people hold you down, don't let them tell you what you can't do. She always reinforced that. If you fail, it's your own fault because you didn't try hard enough. You're smarter than that. So, even though I'd tried several times to get a degree I knew that I was not too old to start over. I knew it was going to be hard, but I knew that I could do it. As my mother said, if you want to do it, you can do it (LU-3).

> Once I started going to school and started getting A's, I thought, Wow, I can do this, I really can do this. I think I've only had a couple of B's the whole time. So I know I can do it. It's been tough. The way I see myself is like a turtle. I'm going waaaaay too slow, but I'm getting there. I'm getting there. I'm making myself happy, and okay, I can do this! I never thought I could (LU-5).

> My mother-in-law said that I should just hang in there, that I was going to pass. You just show up, you've got to be there. I realize that a lot of the other students in the classroom have the same mentality for whatever reason. Some of them may work harder than I do. I'm sticking it out, but I still want an A (LU-9).

> It's been hard but it's been worth it. Every single little bit. Every day I go to school, even though I'm so tired after work, and I wonder what I'm going to learn that day (LU-2).

> Just be determined. Don't listen to negative things because those can bring us down. Just know what you want. Set your goals, and just do it. Because people are always going to tell you like, you can't do that. You cannot listen to them. You just have to know what you want and that's it. Look for the positive. There are already a million negatives. We have to trust ourselves. We have to trust

> ourselves and believe in ourselves regardless. Sometimes the price is very, very high, but it's worth it (LU-8).
>
> It seems almost impossible. First of all it's a different language. No high school. I mean if we work at this little by little it can be done. Nobody can say "Oh no, piece of cake. Just go to college, have a seat there and all the knowledge will come in to your brain. No. You have to work hard at it, but it's worth it (LU-6).
>
> In the classroom you have peer pressure. You don't want to be the one asking the stupid questions. Or, the teacher says something that makes you look stupid and everyone laughs and makes you feel like whatever. I just don't care anymore. If I need to know something I raise my hand (LU-1).
>
> When I first started college at [state school], I felt like I didn't fit in. Some of my classes had five or six in my age group, and the rest were kind of young. And I was like, am I really here in the right place, or am I just too old to take these courses? So, I dropped out. And years went by. Then, two years ago, I was told about this program by someone who had graduated. This was a program for people like me, of my age, working adults! And, the classes were structured so that you were able to attend school at nights and/or on week-ends. My advisor has been wonderful and has guided me through this journey. Now, I'm prepared to graduate in May, and I can't wait to start Graduate School (LU-10).

Common Theme 3: The Influence of Work and Financial Support

The third common theme shared by all 10 participants, who like many adults, work full-time and attend college part-time, was the influence of their work experiences and achieving a worklife balance. When this researcher chose to select this population of Latina undergraduates of nontraditional ages, it was because she wanted to explore the experiences of older women who had multiple life roles and responsibilities. Beyond learning about their classroom experiences, she wanted to better understand how they dealt with the pressing demands of family, work, and college studies. In this section, her aim is to provide an overview of the many issues that the students posited relative to work. As she started to list meanings and create clusters from their stories (Moustakas, 1994), the essence of their work experiences seemed to relate to (a) pressures from

younger workers, (b) income and/or tuition reimbursement, and (c) encouraging other Hispanic women to seek educational opportunities.

> At work, there's some that are older than me, and a lot that are younger than me, and some kind of in the middle. And the younger people ridicule me and say, "Why are you going to school? You're not going to go anywhere. You're too old. What are you going to do?" And I told them, "For one, I have a goal to teach my children that you're never too old to learn" (LU-8).
>
> It's not like the earlier days when you could still get a job without a degree. It's just not that way anymore. The ones who are going to college, they know how competitive it is. You know you have to get a higher degree. Too bad you can't get more Hispanics to see it that way. Maybe it's their upbringing (LU-5).
>
> It's competitive. I've been here a while and I know how competitive it is. In order to get a promotion it looks better to have at least a bachelor's, but of course in some positions, they want more. I don't know if I'll go on to get my Master's right now (LU-7).
>
> I'm very close to being poor. I don't want that. I really don't want that. And, when we see human service videos in class, I see that I am very close. I don't want to live like that. I don't want my kids to have that experience. Even in the United States, there's a lot of poverty. So I go to school part-time and work full-time to support my family. I know that it will be worth whatever sacrifice I'm making, because without an education, I'll never get ahead, never be anybody (LU-1).
>
> Who can stand in the way of your dreams? It was always my dream to earn a degree. In my country I just couldn't do that. We were too many kids, and there was never enough money. I was going to rush to be done, but then I thought, why should I do that? I've already waited so many years I can wait a few more months. I'm getting so into my job and my education. I love to be dedicated, focus on what I'm doing, because if I try to do too much in both places, I'm not going to do anything. I tried that before and it doesn't work (LU-9).
>
> One of the senators came to our company and said, "The only way you're going to get Hispanics to move up into management positions is that you have to take a step to move up." I was in a position where I could move up, but I didn't want to because the pay wasn't there. But I was holding everybody else below me from moving up. So last year, I took a position and moved up, and that opened doors for two more Hispanic women to move up. You can't be selfish about work. My goal is to be a manager someday. There are other people who want to achieve goals and if I block everybody, then I'm not helping my own people to advance (LU-2).

> I've put in for a job change which was a little bit harder for me to get into because it involved technology. I had the scores for it, and it worked out. I got the position. Schooling got me to where I knew I could do it if I applied myself and just put forth the effort (LU-3).

> My first job was housekeeping in a hotel. It was really frustrating, you'll have to excuse me, but it was true. I felt very discriminated against at work. I worked in a factory after the hotel - two factories. Work also helped me with my English skills, because I was talking to Vietnamese and minorities there. At one factory I felt like I was not improving my English, so I quit. I said, I need a job where I can improve my English. Because they were from the Caribbean, talking in their language, the radio, music and all of that. So I moved to another factory where I could talk in English to other Hispanics and Blacks. My life has been a journey (LU-1).

Several of the students pointed out how financial support helped them gain access to college. All of the 10 women used government educational benefits while others received partial tuition reimbursement based on successful course completion.

> Another big issue is financial. My mom really liked nursing but she couldn't afford to go. Then my dad and she separated, and finances were even tougher. At my current job, we pay for our tuition up front, but we get reimbursed if we get passing grades. I decided that instead of going to school full-time, I would go to work full-time and go to school part-time. That way I could have money to pay for my school. I'm very lucky to be working at a company that has tuition reimbursement. So many of my classmates do not (LU-9).

> Then I got a job and they told me that if I wanted to go back to school, they would give me money for tuition. So I told my husband that I was not going to lose this opportunity. I'd been waiting for this opportunity for a long time. And I'm not too old, so I can start all over. I want to. I know it's going to be hard, but I can do it. My mother always told me, "If you want to do it, you can do it." So I keep that thought in mind (LU-1).

Emergent Shared Themes

After analyzing the data, the researcher determined that there were several shared themes among the participants. They are as follows:

Shared Theme 1: Participants' Family Histories

Many of the participants shared that their parents had come to the United States decades ago to find employment and attain better living conditions for their families. Several of the families arrived in New York, Texas, California or the mid-west, and later came to South Florida following other relatives to various communities.

> Both of my parents were born in another country. My mom came over when she was 15, to live with her older sister, who had already made way for everybody. So did a lot of younger siblings, as they were 15 or 16 years old. By…high school, you learned enough. You didn't need any more education. You come and you start working and start sending money back home. (LU-6)

Many of the students described how their parents refused to abandon "old ways," and that the culture of their respective countries remained important. Although most of their parents had learned to speak English, some of them spoke only in Spanish to their adult children. For others, it was different.

> You see, my parents were kind of stuck on the old ways…when we came here, for some reason, we would communicate with my dad and ma in Spanish. And that's how I learned Spanish…I remember my dad making a comment that he just flat out did not like to speak English. I mean, it was honest for him to say that…My mom, to this day, she can speak in English…she just likes Spanish so much…With my brothers and sisters, we'd speak only English to each other. Sometimes we would play around…and say things in Spanish. To us, it was humorous. (LU-8)

> I am fluent in English. My mom speaks to me in Spanish the whole time on the phone. My family is all here and a lot of them speak Spanish, especially the older group, the older people…it seemed like my dad was of the mindset not to encourage the Spanish-speaking or whatever. Because they wanted to fit in, like they didn't fit in. (LU-6)

Despite differences in thinking, family ties remain important, and the participants described regular contact with extended family members. Several of the students have also returned to their family's country of origin with their children, to visit grandparents

and relatives. Most stressed the importance of keeping their children engaged in the Latino culture, but LU-6 maintained a different view:

> People say my husband is more Latino than I am. With our children, he tries to teach them about being Latino. He is basically more proud of the Latino heritage than I am. I can't help that. I'm not going to be fake about something. My parents raised me to be an American. It's the American flag that rings true to me. Yes, I am happy and proud of my heritage but it never really ingrained in me. My husband gets mad at me and we have arguments. (LU-6)

Several of the students stated their grief of losing a parent, and of the important influences that a parent had in their life. This seemed especially true when referring to their fathers. Six of the ten students fondly recalled life's lessons learned from their father, even though they all described their fathers as being somewhat strict. Four of these Latinas voiced marrying at an early age because of the traditional decision of their fathers for a daughter to marry in order to leave home.

> We had such a strict upbringing. In order to get out of the house, we had to get married! If I had to do it over, I would have moved out. Yeah, I was either going to get married or join the military. This is the only way out of your house (LU-5).

> I was working full-time, paying my way through school. I bought myself a new car. Then I thought, I'm going to get myself an apartment. I told my dad and he said, "No daughter of mine is leaving this house unless she gets married." I said, "OK, fine, it's no big deal" (LU-10).

Another similarity in these students' stories was that most of their parents did not encourage them to attend college. Four of these participants are first-generation college students, and the remaining six are second generation college students. These Latinas indicated that their fathers and other male family members discouraged their goals to attend college:

> Back then my father, when he was alive, and my brother, he was still here, we would drive past this university so many times. Every single time we would pass, I would always say, "One day I'm going to this college." They would laugh at me.

> They were like, “Just get a job. Just start working.” But instead of getting down, it made me feel a little angry and I wanted to do it more (LU-4).

> I have a brother-in-law for some reason I don’t know he’s just not into the school thing. And he didn’t understand why I would go back to school and would say I was wasting my time and my money? He never pushed school with his kids. I think it’s because he doesn’t want to end up paying for it. I think that’s the main thing. I think he’s just the kind of person that thinks about what he wants and what makes him happy (LU-9).

Although the women have from three to six siblings, all but one of the students is the first person in the family to receive a college degree. Two women noted, with a great sense of pride, siblings, and a parent, who have “followed in their footsteps” and started college later in life.

> Like my sister, who just earned her GED, she is now trying to get into college, and I think I have a little bit to do with that. Because she didn’t want to. She was like, “I already have a job and wages, so why should I?” So now she is willing to go for something that is related to what she is doing. She wants to become a nutritionist, and I’m so proud of her (LU-4).

Even though their parents and most of their siblings had no college experience, the participants reported with pride about family member accomplishments in the workplace. At no time, did these students pass judgment on their parents or family members for not taking the opportunity to attend college.

Shared Theme 2: Participants and Their Children

The second emergent shared theme was the participants’ children. As mentioned in an earlier section, several of the participants identified themselves as being a role model for their children. In fact, LU-1, LU-3, and LU-5 all mentioned that their motivation for returning to college was in part driven by their desire to have their children see them succeed. During their narratives, several of the participants mentioned

their relationships with their children, struggles their children were having, and advice they had passed along to them.

> I came to this country because I want to succeed. I can do something better here. I can give my kids a better life and more opportunities. Also, my kids are old enough to see what's going on. When I get my bachelor's, I want to make sure to walk on stage not so much for myself, but I want my kids to understand where Mom was going and how they can do it as well (LU-1).

> I think my influences are my children, and I'm not a quitter. And also I notice that we have another thing in common. We talk about school, work, and different issues, and me keeping up with them, and they keeping up with me. They see me as a role model (LU-3).

> At first my kids were like, "Mom, are you even going to be able to finish school?" Now they know. When I come home, I look at their grades. I say, "Look at me. I'm 50 years old. I'm involved in activities at church, with your school, and I cook and clean - and I still managed to get an A. If I can get an A, you can get an A." So now they're like, "Mom, what are you taking next?" Many times we even do our homework together. My son was taking vocational courses. So I said, "You're going to have to take certain classes to get into college." I think he's going to follow along in my footsteps. So, I think they're looking at me differently than they were in the beginning (LU-5).

Undeterred by their busy schedules, these parents found time for activities with their children, to help them with their homework, and offer them advice for negotiating life. This researcher was impressed with how tenacious these students were, and admired how they made time for their children.

Shared Theme 3: Culture, Racism, Latino Representation, and Immigration Issues

At some point in each of their narratives, each one of the participants touched upon culture, racism, discrimination, representation and/or current immigration issues resulting in the second emergent shared theme. This researcher shared some of their comments in earlier sections, but there is much more of their stories to tell—about work, family, schools, and others in the community. Again, her preference is not to filter their voices by summarizing, but to quote passages directly from their diverse stories:

If you are in a group setting and you have two people speaking in a different language, most of the time you'd assume they are saying something they don't want you to hear about. So it's a negative thing, and I try to keep people from doing that. When you're at work, we need to speak a common language and be a team. Some people say, "That's not right, why can't we show our culture?" (LU-6).

For us Latina women, we have to have the support of our husbands or it cannot be done. We women can do more than just cooking, doing the dishes, taking care of babies. We are *smart*! We just need a chance and we just need support. Go from there. (LU-9).

Another thing I want to add is about influences—it's whatever is going on right now with Latino stereotyping. And like I tell my children, the only way you can fight back is by getting an education. You have to prove them wrong. So all of my children are going to college, which is turning a negative into a positive (LU-4).

In this last class, the teacher was very open. I have one classmate who is very racist, especially toward Hispanic women. And my teacher told him, if you are going to work in this community, then you have to accept everyone. The teacher told him that he was going to have to accept diversity even if he didn't want it. And I liked that. I like that thinking. I thought it was good that the teacher told everyone that, because that's the reality (LU-10).

I have classmates who won't even look at me. It's something you don't understand. It's the young, Black, White, anyone. They are reacting to my ethnicity. I had one classmate who was very racist. And now with the immigration problem, they think it has something to do with me. But it has nothing to do with me. I'm here. I'm working—a lot. I'm paying my taxes, so I'm legal. I'm doing what I'm supposed to do. Maybe in the bigger cities it's going to be different, but in the town where I live if they see somebody, or if they sound like they're speaking Spanish, they automatically think Mexico (LU-1).

It's easier to live through prejudice if you ignore it. Acceptance, if you want to be accepted, I'll ignore it. Some of it's not just being Hispanic or being White, it's being female. You have to keep fighting (LU-5).

Yesterday I was interpreting for someone in the hospital. And there was a little table with plastic bones on it. I said, "This is how we look after a while. All the bones are White. Regardless of what kind of flesh you have" (LU-2).

There's a lot of Hispanics that are born in this country, I'll just mention Mexican Americans, and they've been here for a couple of generations. They're not represented, some of it due to outside things, some of it within ourselves. But there's not one big force who can stand up and say, we're Mexican American but maybe we're more proud of being American (LU-8).

> When I told my husband about college he said OK, but he never supported me. Because, I think if I would have had more support, I would have started back then. So, I didn't feel that support, he was busy all the time. Working, working, working. So I took care of everything even though I was working too. He is Latino and Latino men are that way. They do the work, they bring in the money. The woman has to do the rest, even if she is working outside the home (LU-3).

Unique Theme

Unique Theme: Volunteering and Altruism

Despite their busy schedules, many of the participants also found time to do volunteer work for community groups and schools. Others have plans to volunteer or are working in informal ways to help other Latinas/Latinos.

> It's scary because the dropout rate is very high. The children—they are the ones who will keep this country running. I talk to other parents and teenagers. Hopefully, to influence them, to keep them in school. Because in the old-times, Latinos did not have to go to college to make good money. You have your house, your car, eat meat every day. Nowadays they can't…There's no more blue-collar, well-paid jobs in this country…all of those jobs are going out of the country. So even with college, a lot of kids can't find jobs. The only way to communicate this is to bring it out to the surface. The only way to get it out is by educating and by participating in something (LU-5).

> Yesterday I got information about volunteering in my community. Just some information. I think that's what's missing to connect to. I'm studying, I do this reading, and I know I'm not exactly physically putting in any of that into motion. Not getting into the community or doing things like that. I'm basically looking at the Mexican American community. I think that becoming involved with my community will help my daughter understand her culture better, and be proud of her roots, in addition to being proud of being an American (LU-8).

> I organized the Hispanic club for this area. We've been trying to put the word out trying to get other Latina students that are getting ready to go to college—or at a point in their careers—to see if we can plant the seed in them about this University and how we can help them (LU-7).

LU-7 and LU-2 both reflected a deep spirit of altruism throughout their narratives. They demonstrate their commitment to help other Latinas not only through their work and volunteerism, but also in their post-graduate goals:

> I would like to be somebody in my community, like somebody that when people have a problem, they can come to me. But if you don't have a degree, you can't get those opportunities, or they won't look at you, because they don't think you're smart enough to make decisions or hold an office (LU-7).

> One of my goals is to secure property for a Latina nonprofit group. It would help the community feel that they have achieved something. Through the actions of that center, people would identify themselves, like a church. You go because you identify with that group of people. Pray together, you feel you are closer to God. That center would be something like that. If we do something good, then people would come to that center and will feel good also (LU-2).

Summary of the Findings

The purpose of this final section is to summarize the findings, including the application of critical postmodernism as a theoretical perspective. In Chapter III, the researcher acknowledged the criticisms of blending critical theory and postmodernism, but also showed support and precedence for working amidst the tensions. The core assumptions of critical theory are that "Western democracies are actually highly unequal societies" and that through the "dissemination of the dominant ideology" those inequities are sustained (Brookfield, 2005, p. viii). In contrast, postmodernism generally argues against theory building; it allows for multiple realities and assumes that individual constructions can be contextual and fluid (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2000). A commonality is that critical theory and postmodernism assist consciousness raising and hold the potential to inspire change (Alvesson & Sköldberg; Brookfield). The researcher's summary discussion lies in this middle ground—using critical theory as a tool to pose possibilities, but not assuming one "Truth" or grand narrative about the experience of nontraditional Latina undergraduates.

In an attempt to understand these 10 educational journeys in a different light, the researcher followed Brookfield's (2005) suggestion to employ "traditions of criticality"

(p. 12) in her data interpretation process; these include ideology critique, analysis of inhibitions, logic, and constructivism. Included in this summary discussion is the role of each of the following elements: ideology, hegemony, power, gender, alienation, liberation, and democracy, and how these may have influenced the participants' journeys. As stated previously, the researcher began to create clusters of meaning to arrive at common as well as shared emergent themes (Moustakas, 1994). This specific process, within the context of data analysis, served to identify those tenets of critical theory and how these applied directly to the participants' stories: their lived experience. Thus, the following sections, that is, participants' ethnic origins, their motivation for returning to college, determination and persistence, participants and their children, the influence of work and financial issues, and culture, racism, Latino representation, and immigration issues, are reflective of the researcher's interpretation through the lens of critical theory.

Ethnicity and Cultural Identity

All 10 participants, but most especially LU-2, LU-5, LU-6, and LU-8, taught this researcher how gender, ethnicity, race, culture, class, and regional differences are fluid, and a part of one's identity. As an ideology that categorizes people by color, race (or ethnicity), the researcher must challenge the assumed beliefs to individuals and society. For under a guise of being "politically correct," the widespread adoption of any new term may also be an insidious means of upholding the dominant ideologies of a racist society. In the researcher's view, when categories and the label of color are reproduced or extended, discourse is promoted that remains centered on the White Eurocentric experience, while persons from underrepresented groups remain depicted as the other experience, in contrast to that norm. Critical reflection (Merriam & Caffrella, 1999),

ideology critique about the cultural systems (Brookfield, 2005), and racialized discourse (Brookfield, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 2000) about labels and terminology would be most insightful.

Concurrently, there is a need to respect individual preferences for terms like Hispanic, Latino, and American, and understand that these and other labels may not be meaningful to all individuals (Suro, 2006a). In the PEW study (Suro, 2002), neither the term Hispanic or Latino were popular with a majority of individuals, but preferences varied by country of origin, generation in the U.S., and immigration status. From a White Eurocentric perspective, researchers must challenge the casual use of labels and groups.

It is also required to try to understand the diverse ways in which people conceptualize assimilation and acculturation, and related terms like diffusion, automation conformity, biculturalism, and syncretism. From the participants' narratives, as well as the literature, it is clear that shared meanings are not held about how people, groups, or societies change when individuals live, work, play, or worship together—or even if they change or merge at all. Some possible inquiry questions arise: Are individuals losing their identity or becoming bicultural (Korzenney, 2005)? What are the influences of hegemony, hyperreality (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000), and representations in the media (Olivarez, 1998). Similar to Suro (2006a, 2006b), the researcher believes unprecedented changes are emerging, and people will continue to learn more as they move forward in life together.

In reviewing these participants' narratives, it struck the researcher how the participants' identities are closely intertwined with their respective family histories. From the literature, the researcher knows that importance of family—*familismo*—is integral to

understanding Latino culture (Greenhouse Gardella et al., 2005; Mareno & Guido, 2005). Eight of the 10 participants are parents, and their respective stories reflect the courage to take risks that are driven by a desire to make a better life for their children. As voiced by LU-1, imagine moving to a new country—to "paradise," as she described—only to find numerous societal inequities brought about by one's ethnicity, class, and language differences. This researcher has deep admiration for these women who faced the challenges of immigration and learned a new language in order to acquire a job and provide a family with its basic needs.

In addition to LU-1's feelings of isolation due to her ethnicity and language, it also struck this researcher how she and the other Latinas faced patriarchal oppression and gendered role inequities. For example, marriage or the military were identified as the only alternatives for Latinas to leave home. These Latinas' stories showed how the patriarchal oppression and gendered-role inequities persisted. Instead of enrolling or remaining in college, all participants discussed having to raise babies and complete household tasks. All noted the cultural differences of being Latina, and stated that *machismo* (participants' terminology) was a way of life for them. Even now, as a middle-aged adult, LU-5 hid her college enrollment from male family members. Latino scholars have noted similar gender roles and values across Latino cultures, described in the literature as the interwoven concepts of *marianismo*, *hembrismo*, and *machismo* (e.g., Moore Hines et al, 2005; Moreno & Guido, 2005).

Inequitable college access has persisted for decades, so it is necessary to look beyond Latina/Latino gender roles to examine historic government and family economic trends, as well as the influence of hegemony. In the 1970s, adults enrolled or returned to

college in unprecedented numbers (Horn & Carroll, 1996; Horn et al., 2002). As the existing workforce was transformed for a more knowledge-based economy, agriculture lost its laborers (Kasworm, 2003b; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Osgood-Treston, 2001; Pulliam & Van Patten, 1995). The void was filled by an influx of migrant and undocumented workers, many from Latin American countries (Gouthro, 2002). From a critical viewpoint, education was a potential threat to the labor system. As long as immigrants could not speak English, they could not access education. Without education, workers could not advance to higher-paying positions. Hence, the labor interest of the government (and corporate agriculture) is protected. Gouthro (2002) also points out that unskilled workers enable the production of cheap, plentiful food, even during periods of steep inflation. Looking at it from their side, Latinos came to the U.S. to earn better wages and send money back home. Jobs in agriculture were plentiful. It had the appearance of a win-win situation. So much so, that by the late 1980s rather than travel with the changing seasons, more migrant families settled into U.S. communities. The families did not seem to resist the exploitation, but instead acquiesced to a form of oppression: hegemony. Brookfield (2005) describes hegemony as "the process by which we learn to embrace enthusiastically a system of beliefs and practices that end up harming us and working to support the interests of others who have power over us" (p. 93). As a result of hegemony, young Latinas like LU-1, LU-4, LU-5, and LU-6 received little encouragement from either the government or their parents to pursue postsecondary education, and the ideologies of capitalism prevailed.

Another cluster of meanings from the participants' stories pertained to Mexican immigration, identity, and Latino diversity. Several of the participants wanted to distance

themselves from their culture; one participant, specifically, wanted to be distinguished from illegal immigrants and the resulting discrimination she felt. Several of the participants mentioned assimilation and not knowing where they "fit in." According to PEW (2004), assimilation is a process in which people "change as they come into contact with their host society . . . but does imply superiority in the host society's views" (p. 1). Using assimilation as an additional lens, this researcher was better able to understand LU-6's statement that her parents "wanted to fit in, like they didn't fit in" and how her actions drifted among the currents of her husband's expectations and societal rewards. This notion of flux is also consistent with postmodern view—that an individual can "think and behave in entirely different ways, depending on the situation" (Brookfield, 2005, p. 149).

Learning about these students' rich familial histories underscored another important point for this researcher. A postmodern perspective accepts multiple realities. On the surface, it was easy to make connections and create "themes" within the context of "family." Yet, as the researcher moved closer to the essence of the participants' experiences, a profound sense of uniqueness emerged. In conclusion, the researcher realized that the participants' respective family histories provided a foundation from which their individual identities would emerge. Their backgrounds could never predict their journeys, or the achievement and dreams that would occur decades later.

Returning to College: Motivation and Life Goals

For far too long, older Latina/Latino undergraduates have been marginalized in the literature. When these participants narrated their experiences about entering college, this researcher realized that they had much to teach her. Their stories, particularly

poignant at a time in U.S. history when tensions over Latino immigrants are at an all-time high (American Association of State Colleges and Universities, n.d.; American Council on Education, 2005; National Immigration Law Center, July, 2005) and also underscore the importance of how a qualitative study can help to illuminate the multiple realities of life. Even in the 21st century, not everyone in the U.S. has the opportunity to attend college (Fry, 2002; National Center for Education Statistics, 2002). Despite changes, this remains an inequitable educational system in terms of academic preparation, fair access, and reasonable costs. These persistent barriers deny participation in postsecondary education to many people, especially those from underrepresented populations and those from low-income families (Gil & Vazquez, 1996; Ginorio & Huston, 2001; Market Segment Research, 2003).

Determination and Persistence: Participation and College Attendance Patterns

It is remarkable that these individuals persisted over decades, past numerous barriers toward degree completion; their stories reflect those characteristics of nontraditional students such as age and part-time enrollment as well as sociological issues such as the effects of a "hidden curriculum" and institutional culture (Hayes, 2000); thus, often at odds with the concept of persistence is the institutional perspective of retention. This researcher believes that the participants' voices not only help scholars to understand multiple life realities but, indeed, their stories reveal a richness of detail that cannot be categorized by retention statistics. The irony, of course, is that, as outlined in this study's literature review, adults are invisible in higher education studies and are not typically captured in detailed demographic data. In fact, these students would be considered *outliers,* because too much time has lapsed between enrollment periods; their time to

degree completion does not fall within the four-to six-year window normally tracked and reported by institutions. This marginalization of older students makes little sense because, as a group, they still represent nearly half of the U.S. undergraduate population aged 25 or older—a trend that has held steady for nearly four decades (NCES, 2002). It appears, however, that this age bias will continue. Within the last ten years, scholars have placed increasing attention on traditional characteristics, perpetuating the historic research focus on 18-to-25-year old undergraduates, and further marginalizing older adult students ((Donaldson et al., 2003; Donaldson, Townsend, & Thompson, 2004; Pacarella & Terenzini, 1998, 2005; Ross-Gordon, 2003a; Sissel et al., 2001).

This researcher can only hope that, through sharing stories such as these, institutional leaders, policymakers, and statisticians in education will eventually validate middle-aged students and look for new ways to describe their experiences and achievement. It is important to emphasize that, after they graduate, most of these individuals will have between 20-30 years left in the workforce. So again, the marginalization based on age makes little sense, as they are conforming to expectations of a dominant White Eurocentric culture, supporting the ideologies of capitalism, and continuing to perform as "cogs in the bureaucratic machine" (Brookfield, 2005, p. 168). Based upon the narratives of these participants' goals, their contributions to society will be impressive, and certainly worthy of scholarly study.

The Influence of Work and Financial Support

Despite being harassed at work, LU-7 did not dwell on the negative. Instead, she remained highly motivated and altruistic. This was not merely a verbal commitment.

LU-7 had taken a job change that she did not necessarily want, but one that was for the greater good.

The emotional and psychological aspect of worrying about money takes a toll. In working with older students in a variety of postsecondary settings, educators need to keep in mind that the family's economic stability is a top priority, often above completing a college degree in as timely a fashion as an institution would like to report. The financial issues underscore both upper class privilege and societal inequities; college access for all has not been a priority for the elite (Baum & Payea, 2004; Pusser et al., 2007). Rising tuition costs and increasing student debt add credence to the argument that it is indeed a capitalist world (Fry, 2002; NCES, 2002; Yankelovich, 2005).

Participants and Their Children

Several of the participants said that their motivation for returning to college was in part driven by their desire to serve as a role model for their children. This manifested in two ways. First, they closely monitored their children's academic performance. On an ongoing basis, they reminded their children of the importance of getting good grades in order to access college. Second, there was a concerted effort to make certain that their children knew how hard they were working and how well they were performing in college. They hold high aspirations for their children and truly believe that their children's lives will be better with a college education.

Culture, Racism, Latino Representation, and Immigration Issues

Even though this researcher did not ask participants a specific question about voice, racism, or discrimination, during secondary data analysis, a cluster indeed emerged relative to these and other interrelated issues. Some of the participants' vignettes and

interpretations were context specific, so she included those in other sections such as background, children, or work.

Probably more so than the other students, LU-5 discussed hate, discrimination, stereotyping, and prejudice. She is the only student to identify prejudice at the intersection of race, ethnicity, and gender. Grounded in her life experiences, LU-5 advised her children to "stay on the good side" of people who treat them unjustly. At another point, she advised them that the only way they can "fight back" against stereotypes is by obtaining a college degree. She further indicated that she "ignores" prejudice because it is "easier to live through" and "be accepted."

LU-6 and LU-8 held differing realities about the Latina/Latino culture than the other eight participants. To paraphrase their stories, both indicated that they see themselves as American first. As mentioned earlier, LU-8 feels she is different from other Latinas, whereas LU-6 feels Latinas/Latinos should do more to integrate with non-Spanish speakers. LU-6 also said she does not believe that people living in the U.S. should participate in ethnic-related celebrations. While these are somewhat fluid, contextual constructions, their diverse stories represent assimilation, plurality, and other critical issues.

From a critical theory perspective, however, this researcher might argue that by striving to assimilate, LU-5, LU-6, and LU-8 are being conditioned to conform to the ideologies of a dominant society. At another level, some of the study participants are aware of how the system works. LU-5 tells her children to placate others. She also stated that "to be accepted" she ignores discrimination. After analyzing these comments as a cluster of meanings, the researcher's inference was that LU-5 has learned to survive by

playing the game. In an effort to help her children find success in an unequal and unjust educational system, LU-5 is inculcating the rules and expectations of the dominant White Eurocentric population.

Two participants, LU-7 and LU-8, discussed how Latinos are underrepresented in government. Further, LU-8 pondered why Mexican Americans do not vote and would like to see this change. After living in the U.S. for more than three decades, she became an American citizen last year, and one of her first steps toward seeking this change was to register to vote. She has also requested the ability to work the polls in the next election, recently voted in the primary election, and encourages others to participate in the process. She credits the pre-law classes in her undergraduate program for inspiring her to be an instrument of change. These challenges to the prevailing "democratic" ideologies are an early indication that they are thinking critically, "learning liberation" and possibly "overcoming alienation" (Brookfield, 2005). In fact, the lack of representation has motivated LU-7 to become highly engaged in Hispanic causes in the university and in her community. LU-8 also described herself as contemplating about how to work with Mexican Americans in a volunteer capacity. Like LU-5, they are moving toward social action, which, from a critical theory perspective, is highly desirable.

LU-4, LU-1, LU-8, and LU-2 articulated immigration issues from distinct perspectives. LU-4 was forced to quit her job and leave school so she could travel to another country to help her fiancé enter the U.S. She described a demeaning process with unrealistic time constraints and incredible bureaucratic paperwork. LU-1's story illustrated the reality of leaving one's home country with a dream of a better life in "paradise." LU-1, however, experienced isolation because she spoke Spanish; she was

discriminated due to her Mexican origin as stated earlier. Discrimination by race, ethnicity, gender, class, and religion is widespread; the ugly dominant ideologies of the society permeate numerous aspects of their lives. As Brookfield (2005) suggested, the society needs to "challenge ideology, contest hegemony , , , [and] overcome alienation" (p. xii) through reflexive learning, critical discourse, and "communicative action" (p. 272). Critical theories help us to identify social injustice and moral grounding. It is through this praxis (Freire, 2002) that society will be able to raise consciousness and hopefully, mitigate the social inequities; not only for citizens, but also for individuals who enter this country for work and, thus, support capitalist ideologies.

Volunteering and Altruism

More than half of the participants wrote about helping others. In LU-8's case, volunteerism is an espoused value, but she had not yet taken action. Others, such as LU-7, LU-4, and LU-2, actively volunteer for Latino organizations. LU-5 used a less formal approach by working one-on-one with high school students and parents. The altruistic spirit was especially strong in LU-2 and LU-7, who worked tirelessly to help other Latinos. Both women emphasized how their college degree would enable them to help other Latinos in the future. For this researcher, part of the appeal of critical postmodernism is the usefulness in raising others' consciousness. However, identifying social inequities is only a first step. These women are taking action and each is challenging dominant ideologies. They show that "achieving liberation" can occur in diverse and subtle ways.

Chapter Summary

In Chapter IV, the researcher provided an introduction to the 10 Latina undergraduates who participated in the study. All were 25 and older, enrolled in their third year (or having completed at least 60 credits toward 90 semester hours) at an Adult Education Program at a private 4-year Catholic university in Southern Florida. Their ethnic origins include Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Cuba, Colombia, Mexico, and Puerto Rico. Pseudonyms were used in an effort to protect confidentiality. The study was conducted using *Survey Monkey*™. Individuals who were interested in the study were invited, by the researcher, to log on to her Website and electronically guided through the participant Protocol. The participant Protocol consisted of an Informed Consent Form, participant criteria, participant demographics, and open-ended questions. The questionnaire allowed participants to provide lengthy, in-depth responses. The instrument was accessible from any computer with Internet access, thus, allowing participants to complete the questionnaire at a time and place that was convenient to them.

Initially, this researcher organized Chapter IV around topics listed on the open-ended questionnaire (Appendix E). Topics pertained to the importance of earning the degree they were pursuing and factors which caused them to return to college, their classroom experiences, and self-efficacy beliefs on their abilities to complete the current program. However, their stories also revealed anecdotes about parents, children, and work. During data interpretation, two additional clusters of meanings emerged from their stories. The first revolved around the intertwined topics of race, ethnicity, discrimination, representation, and immigration, while the second cluster pertained to their volunteerism, engagement, and altruism. The early histories and background experiences of the

10 study participants helped this researcher to better understand who these individuals are, what drives them to achieve in college, and the influences of their environment. Their stories revealed themes of isolation due to language, discrimination, determination, and achievement. They also presented insight into their motivation, work ethic, values, perceptions, self-efficacy, and life roles. The participants, overwhelmingly, expressed that the highlight of this experience was the realization that they had challenged themselves, persevered despite many obstacles, and were nearing completion of a bachelor's degree; their ticket to a successful life for themselves and their families.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

Introduction

According to the research in the field of higher education, adult learners are highly represented on college campuses and in continuing education programs; however, what is known about them, particularly about students from historically underrepresented groups, is limited. This persistent knowledge gap has been fueled by three barriers. First, the higher education journal literature has historically focused on the experiences and outcomes of young, White, non-Hispanic undergraduates (Aiken et al., 2001; Donaldson et al., 2003; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Ross-Gordon, 2005; Sissel et al., 2001). Second, adult students' voices are often misinterpreted by the assumptions and interpretations of the scholars who study them (Donaldson et al., 2003). Third, is a lack of critical analysis of the dominant ideologies about adult learners (Merriam, 2001; Quinnan, 1997).

Despite women's advances in higher education during the past 35 years, women still face psychosocial disadvantages in educational pursuits when compared with men. For instance, women report lower educational self-efficacy, that is, the belief that one can complete specific educational tasks (Bandura, 1997), have lower self-esteem, experience higher academic stress, and often perceive less support for education. Minority women face daunting structural and cultural barriers that prevent them from achieving their true potential (Gloria, 1997). Factors contributing to these women's stress were time spent with student activities, child and home care responsibilities, as well as additional stressors of cultural incongruity (Gloria & Robinson Kurpius, 2001; Gloria, Robinson Kurplus,

Hamilton, & Wilson, 1999), or the experience of one's personal culture not seemingly fitting with the institutional culture. For women of color, dual minority status further adds to levels of stress (Ancis & Sanchez-Hucles, 2000).

Although Latinas/Latinos represent the largest ethnic minority group in the United States, 32.8 million or approximately 12% of the population in the United States (Pew Hispanic Center Fact Sheet, 2002; Therrien & Ramirez, 2000), they continue to be underrepresented in institutions of higher education (NCES, 2002). Of the bachelor's degrees conferred from 1996 to 1997, Latinas/Latinos accounted for only 5.5%; Latinas earned 5.7%, and their male counterparts, 5.2% (NCES, 2000a). Latinas also have substantially lower college completion rates than African American and White females (Rodriguez et al., 2000). Earning a higher education is important for socioeconomic mobility and independence for Latinas (Cardoza, 1991). Those with a bachelor's degree earn 82% more than those Latinas who hold only a high school diploma (NCES, 2000a).

With changes in the workforce, higher education is becoming less of a luxury and more of a necessity. As the skill requirements of jobs continue to rise, so should access to postsecondary training for all students. In this ever-increasing global society, an unprepared workforce would have negative impact on this country, both socially and economically (Pusser et al., 2007).

Summary of the Study

The venue for this exploratory study was a private 4-year Catholic university based in Southern Florida whose School of Adult Education offers undergraduate degree programs at sites throughout the State of Florida. These programs, catering to working professionals, are delivered via two 10-week formats during both spring and fall terms,

along with a 5-week summer term; classes convene once a week for four hours. According to this University's Office of Institutional Research, during the 2006 Fall term, 2,393 students were enrolled in this program.

Participants of this study were 10 nontraditional Latina students, aged 25 or older enrolled in this university's School of Adult Education. The following overarching research question guided this study: What is the unique experience of nontraditional Latina students completing an undergraduate degree in an Adult Education program? This qualitative study utilized an open-ended questionnaire which was accessed, completed, and returned on-line by a criterion sample of 10 nontraditional Latina undergraduates enrolled in the Adult Education program at this specific university.

The research questions were designed to understand the meanings and essences behind these students' shared experience, including challenges they had encountered, strategies they had employed to overcome those challenges, and factors contributing to their success in completing their undergraduate education. Data was aggregated, analyzed, and interpreted using the phenomenological approach of coding, listing statements of meaning, structuring descriptions, clustering, presenting narratives, horizonalization, and describing the essence of the phenomena. Results are presented, in a narrative report, as findings and organized to the research questions.

Purpose

To date no study has examined students' self-efficacy among nontraditional Latina college women. Albert Bandura's (1977, 1997) construct of self-efficacy guided this study. Self-efficacy expectancies refer to personal action control or agency. A person who believes in being able to cause an event can conduct a more active and self-

determined life course. This *can do* cognition mirrors a sense of control over one's environment. This researcher chose to focus specifically on nontraditional Latina students pursuing an undergraduate degree because, as a group, there is limited research on this segment of the population. The dearth of research has led to a lack of knowledge and understanding of these students' needs and concerns. Given that Latinas tend to have more stressful education experiences than Latinos and report unique educational experiences, this study heeded Rodriguez et al.'s (2000) call for intentional and focused research on Latinas in higher education. The research study examined these students' undergraduate experience to determine what factors might have impacted their access, persistence, and success. The purpose of the study was to give these Latina students a voice to address their undergraduate experiences, including how identity, history, family, culture, values, and lived experiences had influenced their learning and constructions. The objective of this study was to gain new knowledge regarding student academic self-efficacy to assist university academic and administrative personnel working with nontraditional Latina college students.

Significance of the Study

Since there is currently no evidence of a study which focuses on the self-efficacy of nontraditional Latina students pursuing an undergraduate degree, this study has theoretical and practical value. The Latino culture is a patriarchy with a long-established social system. Women are often relegated to the roles of wife and mother. Latinas usually look toward the family as the center of culture. Being a woman in Latino culture implies responsibility to husbands or other significant males such as fathers and brothers. Family

relationships are dictated by a defined authority structure of age, gender, and role (Gil & Vazquez, 1996).

The conclusions this researcher obtained, by examining the lived experience of these Latina students, may offer a springboard for further studies of this particular segment. According to the U.S. Census (2007), the Hispanic population will soon be the largest minority population in this country, but its participation in politics, education, and the economy is limited. And sadly, the poorest of the poor in this country are Latinas and their children (U.S. Census, 2007). A complex web of issues contributes to high levels of poverty among Latinas: limited knowledge of English, low levels of education, unfamiliarity with local social, educational and political systems, and traditional gender roles that encourage female passivity and limit women's access to educational and professional opportunities (Market Segment Research, 2003).

In the 1990s, researchers defined the nontraditional label from an age distinction to an expanded term that included student characteristics such as delayed enrollment, full-time employment, having dependants, and part-time college enrollment (Choy, 2002). While the expanded definition blurred some of the distinctions between younger and older students, it also made the marginalized adult population all the more invisible to the academy. Under the new definition, the nontraditional label became synonymous with *at risk.* The literature aptly demonstrated that the more nontraditional characteristics a student acquired (regardless of age), the more *at risk* a student became for attrition (Berkner et al., 1996; Bradburn, 2002; Horn et al., 2002). In the positivistic realm, there is utility to the *at risk* variables as they help statisticians describe and predict the progress of undergraduate students. Under their classification system, statisticians would label all

of the participants in this study as highly *at risk.* From a postmodern perspective, however, the concept of *at risk* is a grand narrative. This label has little to do with multiple realities of these Latinas' stories. These participants' narratives convey that, despite being at risk, they have persisted across decades toward a college degree. Their stories do not depict them as problematic non-persisters (Cleveland-Innes, 1994); instead, they followed different paths in higher education. The complexity and richness of their personal biographies illustrate that aspirations, persistence, and degree completion are not easily predicted or explained by positivist inquiry. These students are indeed tenacious persisters, as identified by Hensley and Kinser (2001).

Method

The sample population for this qualitative study was comprised of 10 nontraditional Latina undergraduate students enrolled in an Adult Education Program at a private 4-year Catholic university in Southern Florida. Participants were selected using a purposeful sample (Patton, 2002), based on specific criteria, and their availability and willingness to participate. Specific criteria for inclusion in this study were as follows: only female participants, aged 25 and older, and Latinas, either by birth or by self-identifying with the Latina culture. Additionally, participants must have completed at least 60 credits toward 90 semester hours in this program. This was not a convenience sample, but instead followed the tenets of phenomenological qualitative studies that require that the participants have all experienced the same phenomena (Creswell, 2003).

This study was conducted using *Survey Monkey*™. Individuals interested in the study were directed to the researcher's Website and electronically guided through the participant Protocol, which consisted of participant criteria, participant demographics,

and open-ended questions. An Online Open-ended Questionnaire (Appendix E) was appropriate for the study because it allowed distance between the researcher and participants, and increased the integrity of the study by using a Website design that would protect the confidentiality of the participants by preventing the researcher from identifying individual participant responses. Confidentiality was important to this study; therefore, participants were assigned monikers. Results and findings have been reported in a generic format, without assigning them to a particular location or individual, thereby, providing an added degree of confidentiality. For example: Latina undergraduate respondent number 1 became LU-1; Latina undergraduate respondent number 2 became LU-2, and so forth. The questionnaire encouraged candor and truthfulness in the participants' un-coerced responses as the researcher was unable to discern and identify individual responses.

The questionnaire allowed participants' to provide lengthy, in-depth responses. The Protocol questions were designed to prompt these women for illustrative examples of their experiences (Creswell, 1998), and their interpretations and feelings about those experiences (Charmaz, 2000). Questions with a direct bearing on academic success, such as family support, level of motivation, past experience, and success in academics, were included. The instrument was accessible from any computer with Internet access, thus allowing participants to complete the questionnaire at a time and place that was convenient for them. Data were collected and are presented in a narrative report. In qualitative research, the assumption is that all research is value-laden; therefore, the researcher admits and discusses these beliefs (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Johnson & Christensen, 2004; Patton, 1990).

Limitations of the Study

Study limitations are often compounded by the research approach. In keeping with the qualitative phenomenological research tenets, this researcher sought answers to her research questions via an open-ended questionnaire. By collecting and analyzing the research data, she made interpretations regarding the phenomena. Guarding against subjectivity is a crucial element for the researchers to address within qualitative research, as the researcher is viewed as an instrument of data collection (Creswell, 2001; Denzin & Lincoln, 1998; Patton, 2002). Striving to be completely objective by depicting the context accurately and identifying the possibility of biases, the researcher attempted to ensure that personal biases did not improperly influence perceptions and interpretations. Bracketing through open-ended questionnaires was used to limit any undue influence that could have arisen through personal interviews. In addition, any instrument that relies on self-report, such as a questionnaire, is subject to limitations, as people's perceptions of what they did and how it was received may have been slanted and inconsistent with reality (Patton). The participants of this study were limited to nontraditional Latina students enrolled in an Adult Education Program at one 4-year Catholic university in Southern Florida. Therefore, the results of the study may not be generalized to other populations.

This researcher made every effort to complete a study that was rich in detail. The experiences and constructions of the participants remained essential to her overarching aim, which is to help reverse the invisibility of Latina adult students in the higher education journal literature. For the researcher, it was not important to measure how much of the knowledge gap she narrowed. She was most concerned with learning from

the participants and to the best of her ability allowing their voices and interpretations to be heard, so that others could learn from them as well.

Finally, common to the tenets of interpretive phenomenology, qualitative inquiry, and postmodernism, is that individual perceptions are context specific; these "findings" are not generalizable. Further, the participants in this study did not attempt to speak for, or represent, other adult Latina students (Briggs, 2003). At best, these stories begin to reflect what little one knows and how much society needs to learn.

Discussion of the Findings

Following the title of this dissertation, the open-ended questionnaire was designed to ascertain these students' perspectives on *their* unique experiences of this academic journey, both individually and collectively. The sample of 10 nontraditional Latina undergraduate students who contributed to the study emerged as knowledgeable, insightful, determined, and motivated women who, despite multiple challenges and obstacles, have managed to persevere toward completing their undergraduate degrees.

The study data revealed that their ethnic origins included Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Cuba, Colombia, Mexico and Puerto Rico, and that their parents had come to the United States to find employment and better living conditions for their families. Many of the students described how their parents refused to abandon "old ways," and that the culture of their respective countries remained important. Despite differences in thinking, family ties remain important, and many stressed the importance of keeping their children engaged in the Latino culture. Another similarity in these students' stories was that most of their parents, especially their fathers and other male family members, did not encourage them to attend college. All but one of these students will be the first in their

family to receive a college degree. Even though their parents and most of their siblings had no college experience, the participants reported with pride about family member accomplishments in the workplace, and did not pass judgment on them for not taking the opportunity to attend college.

Returning to College: Motivation and Life Goals

The participants' stories revealed a shared belief: That education is "the key" (their words) to better jobs, lives, and futures for their children. Without exception, all of these students explained how a bachelor's degree will be an essential step in establishing new careers, or workplace advancement. Higher education has become increasingly more important for people so that they can become economically self-sufficient in this global and technological economy. Many jobs require at least some postsecondary education. Increased emphasis in the workplace is being placed on an individual earning a baccalaureate degree. The population is changing (Yankelovich, 2006), and more nontraditional students are entering the milieu of higher education, many of them ill-prepared to address the challenges for successfully completing a degree (Pusser et al., 2007). Increasingly, adult women are returning to college campuses to complete a degree for academic work they began 10, 20, or 30 years earlier (Anderman & Young, 1994; Kopka & Korb, 1996; Pitts, 1992; Rothstein, 1996; Yankelovich).

Determination and Persistence: Participants' College Attendance Patterns

Collectively, the students' narratives show how adult Latinas can persist toward degree completion across decades. These women cited family needs as the reason they decided to leave college at different points in their lives: marriage, children, relocation due to husband's employment, and parents. Despite multiple barriers and deferred goals,

their stories are positive; *they did not give up.* These women personify Bandura's (1977, 1997) concept of self-efficacy, the theoretical framework guiding this study. Self-efficacy has been defined as the belief in one's ability to successfully perform a specific task and has been linked to initiation of behaviors, persistence despite obstacles, and successful performance (Bandura, 1986). Self-efficacy is commonly understood as being domain-specific; that is, one can have more or less firm self-beliefs in different domains or particular situations of functioning. However, some researchers also conceptualized a generalized sense of self-efficacy. It refers to a global confidence in one's coping ability across a wide range of demanding or novel situations. General self-efficacy aims at a broad and stable sense of personal competence to deal effectively with a variety of stressful situations (Schwarzer, 1993).

According to theory and research (Bandura, 1995), self-efficacy makes a difference in how people feel, think, and act. Self-efficacy levels can enhance or impede motivation. People with high self-efficacy choose to perform more challenging tasks (Bandura). They set themselves higher goals and stick to them. Actions are pre-shaped in thought, and people anticipate either optimistic or pessimistic scenarios in line with their level of self-efficacy. Once an action has been taken, high self-efficacy persons invest more effort and persist longer than those who are low in self-efficacy. When setbacks occur, they recover more quickly and maintain the commitment to their goals. Self-efficacy also allows people to select challenging settings, explore their environments, or create new environments (Bandura).

Albert Bandura's (1977) key contentions with regard to the role of self-efficacy beliefs in human functioning are that "people's level of motivation, affective states, and

actions are based more on what they believe than on what is objectively true" (p. 2). Self-efficacy beliefs also help determine how much *effort* people will expend on an activity, how long they will *persevere* when confronting obstacles, and how *resilient* they will be in the face of adverse situations; the higher the sense of efficacy, the greater the effort, persistence and resilience (Bandura, 1986, 1997).

Historically, many women have lacked confidence in their ability to succeed academically and to pursue career-related tasks (Betz, 1994; Hackett & Betz, 1981). Women who enter or reenter college at an older age, nontraditional students, may be particularly at risk for low levels of confidence which, in turn, could affect their ability to achieve academically and advance in their vocation. In fact, nontraditional women students often underestimate their skills and ability to succeed in college (Chartarand, 1990). Low self-efficacy as a student and a lack of confidence in career decision-making may cause psychological distress (Quimby & O'Brien, 2002) and place nontraditional college women at risk for dropping out of school (Padula, 1994).

Despite women's advances in higher education during the past 30 years, women still face psychological disadvantages in educational pursuits when compared with men. Women report lower educational self-efficacy, have lower self-esteem, experience higher academic stress, and often perceive less support for education (Bandura, 1997). For women of color (who remain underrepresented on campuses), these factors are barriers to educational success (Gloria, 1997).

The literature also reflects the particular importance of mentoring and of supportive personal relationships. Gomez and Fassinger (1995) found in a qualitative study that all but one of their participants spoke of a pivotal individual who had a positive

influence in their lives and careers, and all had spouses or partners who supported and encouraged them. The 10 nontraditional Latinas in this researcher's study made note of receiving support from some family members, instructors, academic advisors, and mentors. As has been presented throughout this study, an individual's education is shaped by her or his family, school, and communities. Individual Latina experiences are contextualized by Latina/Latino values that are more communally oriented than those of the Anglo culture and by their position as an ethnic minority in the United States (Ginorio & Huston, 2001; Gil & Vazquez, 1996; Market Segment Research, 2003). Even for individuals for whom Latina identity is merely attributed, this ethnic attribution also affects their educational outcomes (Ginorio & Huston; Gil & Vazquez; Gomez & Fassinger; Market Segment Research).

The Influence of Work and Financial Support

When this researcher chose to select this population of Latina undergraduates of nontraditional ages, it was because she wanted to explore the experiences of older women who had multiple life roles and responsibilities and understand how they dealt with the pressing demands of family, work, and college studies. From their life stories, the essence of their work experiences seemed related to (a) pressures from younger workers, (b) income and/or finances, and (c) encouraging other Hispanic women to seek educational opportunities.

Nontraditional adult students often represent a diversity of backgrounds, socioeconomic as well as racial and ethnic. Unlike traditional students who have few responsibilities other than being a student, nontraditional adult students frequently fill multiple roles that compete with their roles as students and are encountering a variety of

challenges as they work to meet the rigors of academia (Kasworm & Blowers, 1994; Pitts, 1992, 1993, 1994; Pusser et al., 2007). Several of the students in this study pointed out how financial support had helped them gain access to college, and all of the women had used government educational benefits.

Participants and Their Children

In addition to their desire to obtain a degree as an essential step toward a better life for themselves and their families, quite a few of the participants identified themselves as being a role model for their children, and that their motivation for returning to college was in part driven by their desire to have their children see them succeed. During their narratives, they mentioned the challenges of juggling multiple responsibilities and demands on their time, with the importance of spending time with their children. Of particular joy was the opportunity to study, do homework together, and learn from each other's academic experiences.

Researchers have reported that the lifestyles of nontraditional college women are broader and more complex than those of traditional students (King & Bauer, 1988), as many balance multiple roles such as mother, spouse/partner, student, employee, and community member (Padula, 1994). The responsibility for caring for children, can pose challenges to academic and vocational achievement because it imposes considerable demands on time and energy, influencing a woman's ability to pursue, and her confidence in seeking, an education (Fitzgerald & Weitzman, 1992). Thus, nontraditional college women with children may be at particular risk for low levels of confidence in their student and career roles (Fitzgerald & Weitzman). The Latinas in this study proved to be tenacious students, persevering toward degree completion, even with the demands

placed on them as primary family caregivers, demonstrating a high sense of Bandura's (1986, 1997) concept of self-efficacy.

Culture, Racism, Latino Representation, and Immigration Issues

At some point in each of their narratives, each one of the participants touched upon culture, racism, discrimination, representation and/or current immigration issues. This researcher explored their stories for deeper meanings relating to power, injustice, discrimination, ideologies, and cultural dynamics. One qualitative study in the literature found that Latinas discussed being belittled intellectually more frequently than their African American and Anglo peers (Haag, 1999). According to the literature, about 25% of native-born Latinos who identified themselves as being White "complain that discrimination is a major problem" (Tafoya, 2004, p. 2) for Latinos in this country, as did about 33% of those who identified themselves as being from some other race (Cano-Garcia & Hughes, 2000; Morin, 2005; Tafoya).

As reflected in the literature, Wircenski et al. (1999) stated that "few generalizations can be made about older students, due to the differences in adult lives" (p. 493). This statement rings true for Latina adult students (Moreno & Guido, 2005) and can be illustrated by the participant who emphasized that *Latino* did not mean *Mexican*. Paraphrasing for a moment, this participant raised three points. First, that many Latinos come to this country legally, to work, attend college, and make a better life for their families. This participant emphasized that not all Latinos are illegal immigrants from Mexico. Second, that many people who live between North America and the tip of South America identify themselves as being Latina/Latino. Third, that people in the U.S. do not understand that Latino cultures are diverse, including uniqueness by country of origin. It

is easy to agree with all three points. The U.S. perpetuates a White Eurocentric discourse and ideologies that keep underrepresented individuals invisible (Brookfield; 2003). Collective ignorance continues to fuel the racism and discrimination that polarizes this country. The findings of this study suggest that the U.S. has much to learn about diversity, but may refuse to do so. This researcher hopes that these stories might increase adult educators' understandings. Furthermore, the researcher believes that to raise consciousness and combat generalizations, she now has a professional and moral obligation to (a) share these students' stories beyond the academy and (b) confront racism and bigotry regardless of who is making assumptions or sharing a derogatory joke. These voices convinced her that she must, at the very least, use "praxis" in Freire's (2002) context and work to eliminate oppression.

Volunteerism and Altruism

Despite their busy schedules, many of the participants also find time to do volunteer work for community groups and schools. Several reflected a deep sense of altruism throughout their narratives and demonstrated their commitment to help other Latinas, not only through work and volunteerism, but with encouragement toward achieving a post-secondary education.

Conclusion

Overall, the findings represent an interesting pattern. For example, findings related to the first common theme, which addressed the participants' motivation for returning to college and their life goals, revealed a shared belief that a bachelor's degree is an essential step in establishing new careers, or workplace advancement. Additionally, several participants discussed that their motivation for returning to college was in part

driven by their desire to serve as a role model to their children. They hold high aspirations for their children and truly believe that their lives could be better with a college education. Their respective stories reflect the courage to take risks that are driven by a desire to make a better life for their children.

The review of the literature noted that mothers' education, fathers' education, and family income were positively related to educational self-efficacy. These relationships are not surprising. Parents often encourage their children to achieve more than they, themselves, have achieved, and this encouragement may foster self-confidence among their children. The relationships found among the study constructs parallel those reported in the literature (Gloria & Robinson Kurpius, 2001; Gloria et al., 1999). As expected, the more these women and their families valued education, the more determined they were to persist in spite of barriers. In addition, the higher their self-esteem, the more these women personally valued an education and the less they experienced academic stress. These findings point to the importance of students' beliefs, not only about themselves and their ability, but also about the importance of education. When each of these beliefs is strong, the academic stressors were not perceived as that stressful. These findings reinforce research which has suggested that a personal commitment to education and a more positive view of one's self are related to higher educational self-efficacy (Gloria et al., 1999).

The literature also notes that women who enter or reenter college at an older age, nontraditional students, may be particularly at risk for low levels of confidence which, in turn, could affect their ability to achieve academically (Betz, 1994; Hackett & Betz,

1981). In fact, nontraditional women students often underestimate their skills and ability to succeed in college (Chartrand, 1990).

The second common theme related to the findings, the role of determination and persistence toward attaining a bachelor's degree, revealed that the educational journey of these nontraditional Latina undergraduates reflects the challenges, struggles, and strategies that they have employed in order to pursue and complete their degrees given the multiple demands of balancing work life with personal and professional development. During their narratives, the participants mentioned the challenges of juggling multiple responsibilities, and the findings suggest that while it is nearly impossible in today's society to pursue parenthood with school, work, etc., these 10 women are succeeding. These students became stakeholders of their journeys through their academic programs, as well as role models for those who will follow in their footsteps. They persisted toward degree completion and they will not give up the pursuit.

Researchers (Gloria & Robinson Kurplas, 2001; Gloria, Robinson Kurplus, Hamilton, & Wilson, 1999; Gloria & Rodriguez, 2000) have shown that academic stress, self-esteem, and valuing of and commitment to education are predictive of academic self-efficacy which, in turn, is a significant predictor of academic persistence decisions. Academic stress is most prevalent during the undergraduate years (Sher, Wood, & Gotham, 1996) when there is also the highest drop-out rate (Daugherty & Lane, 1999). In a study of students attending orientation and the first week of classes, women's stress levels were significantly higher than were men's (Reisberg, 2000). Factors contributing to these women's stress were time spent with student activities, child and home care responsibilities, and volunteering (Reisberg). For racial/ethnic minority students, there

may be additional stressors of cultural incongruity (Gloria & Robinson Kurplus; Gloria et al.), or the experience of one's personal culture not seemingly fitting with the university environment culture. For women of color, dual minority status further adds to levels of stress (Ancis & Sanchez-Hucles, 2000; Ross-Gordon, 2003a, 2003b).

The third common theme was related to their work experiences, financial issues, and achieving a worklife balance. Like may adults, the participants in this study work full-time and attend college part-time. The emotional and psychological aspect of worrying about money has taken a toll on the participants and their families. Their family's economic stability is a top priority for them and, without the benefits of financial support and loans, these participants would, undoubtedly, been unable to pursue their education. The financial issues underscore both upper class privileges and societal inequities; college access for all has not been a priority for the elite (Baum & Payea, 2004; Pusser et al., 2007). Rising tuition costs and increasing student debt add credence to the argument that it is indeed a capitalist world (Fry, 2002; NCES, 2002; Yankelovich, 2005).

Studying ethnic and racial minority undergraduates, Gloria et al. (1999) reported that students' self-beliefs (self-esteem and educational self-efficacy) were directly related to academic stress and to persisting in school. Other researchers (Robinson Kurplus, Chee, Rayle, & Arredondo, 2003) have also found that both self-esteem and educational self-efficacy are positively related to persistence decisions, to grades and occupational aspirations (Lent, Brown, & Gore, 1997), and to academic achievement adjustment (Boulter, 2002).

Cleveland-Innes (1994) made the rash generalization that students who leave college are a “loss of human potential” (p. 432). This researcher, however, learned that when not attending college, these women led complex and meaningful lives, caring for extended family members, managing multiple life roles, working in their communities, and advancing in the job force. From these participants’ perspective, they never abandoned college goals and remained motivated to return to school despite family relocations, raising children, medical conditions, and financial difficulties. This observation is especially poignant for these Latinas, who faced patriarchal oppression and cultural expectations about their roles as women, yet held fast to their dreams of college. Unfortunately, some generalizations and negativity toward older undergraduates persisted in the review of the literature or scholars seemed to ignore adults altogether (e.g., Kasworm, 2003a). These students teach society about potential, motivation, persistence, and goals. Hopefully, Cleveland-Innes and others are beginning to understand that the changing context of adult students’ lives will continue and, that multiple realities should be valued equally. The voices of these 10 Latinas should contribute much to a deeper understanding.

This researcher is also concerned that the dominant discourse in this country reinforces generalizations on another level. These Latinas described their identity in numerous ways, which included race, gender, country of origin, length of time in the United States, familial history, community ties, assimilation, life roles, and learning styles. Two of them described trying to assimilate or acculturate with a White, non-Hispanic culture. Some described trying to meet the expectations of others in power positions, including their college instructors. This researcher does not know if the

hyperreality of U.S. culture (Kinchole & McLaren, 2000) or media representations (Morin, 2005; Olivarez, 1998) pressured them to assimilate, but it merits further thought.

Although scholars use concepts such as assimilation and acculturation to explain and theorize, this researcher found that she could not ignore the importance of multiple perspectives. Two of the participants' descriptions of assimilation as a construct, for example, were analyzed through a lens of dominant ideologies, and then hegemony. Later, the researcher incorporated Latinas/Latinos cultural norms, beliefs, and values into her critical analysis.

A decade ago, Quinnan (1997) prompted the academy to think critically and abandon the pattern of "repackaging hypotheses" (p. 1). At the time of his article, there was a dearth of theory applied to the study of adults. Thus, assumptions were seldom challenged, voices were filtered, and understanding somewhat constrained. Following Quinnan's cue, this researcher has attempted to move her research in that direction. In Chapter II, she cites examples of repressive tolerance (Brookfield, 2005), and these participants voices send a clear message that many of them have experienced discrimination and other disconcerting classroom events. A review of the literature reflects that some adult African American students encountered instances of overt and covert racism (Johnson-Bailey, 2001). These participants, also from a marginalized group, provide additional insight about classroom experiences from their unique perspective. Many of the participants' classroom experiences were indicative of repressive tolerance. Hopefully, the participants' voices in this study will generate insight and begin to fill a void in the higher education journal literature that has long been neglected.

The final area for discussion is that these Latinas, with several strikes against them, including language, discrimination, racism, lack of access to education, finances, family, single parenthood and lifeworld obligations, appear to embody the concept of self-efficacy, and have managed to pursue, persevere and succeed along their journey toward completing their undergraduate degree. Clearly, a post-secondary degree is "key" (participants' terminology) to their success, and quitting or failing, is not an option.

The participants in this study have provided rich descriptions toward a deeper understanding of who they are, what drives them to achieve in college, and the influences of their environment. Their responses presented insight into their motivation, work ethic, values, perceptions, self-efficacy, and life roles, as well as illuminated how the participants' prior experience and personal biographies have influenced their personal philosophy, cognition, values, and perceptions about themselves and others. As stated earlier, the researcher focused on critical postmodernism as the window through which to raise consciousness and offer hope for change.

Recommendations

As previously discussed, several noteworthy themes emerged from an analysis of the composite responses from the 10 nontraditional Latina undergraduates as they pursue their degree in an Adult Education Program, at a private 4-year Catholic University in Southern Florida. Based on those findings, several recommendations are offered.

For example, Brookefield (2005), Howard and Henley (1998), Huber and Cale (2002), and Ross-Gordon (2003a, 2003b) have discussed how instructors' methods in proclaimed democratic classrooms can (unwittingly) create repressive tolerance. Even if one rejects the notion of repressive tolerance, these Latinas' voices suggest that

discrimination festers in many classrooms, student-instructor expectations are not always clear, and teaching methods do not always meet nontraditional students' needs. Although this researcher's implications for adult educators are not necessarily new to the literature (e.g., Donaldon, 2003; Greenhouse Gardella et al.; 2005; Kasworm, 2003a; Ross-Gordon, 2003b, 2003c), these must be underscored. Undoubtedly, Latina students have the following needs: (a) explicit directions to resolve discrepancies in expectations about assignments, grading, assessment criteria, and classroom learning versus self study; (b) thorough explanations of rationale behind syllabi, work load, and content delivery pace, especially in accelerated classrooms; (c) immediate linkages to tutoring and other resources to enhance their study and test-taking skills; (d) recognition of cultural differences, especially by country of origin; (e) extra time to read and study because many are learning the English language simultaneously; (f) reassurance about their accents, verbal skills, and being understood by others; and, (g) validation that they are intelligent and capable of comprehending new concepts, even though they may not be proficient speakers of English. Indeed, while many institutions espouse values of diversity and globalization, it seems that mission statements rarely include learning liberation or overcoming alienation (Brookfield, 2005; Kumashiro, 2000) as student outcomes.

This researcher believes that these participants may identify inequities and injustices in U.S. society; however, not all of them connect learning with social action. Regardless of individual's perceptions toward the dominant culture, the researcher suggests that adult education programs aspire toward social transformation based on the present student demographics and the role of higher education within the global

community. Indeed, adult education programs must protect students' rights and the academic freedom of faculty while (a) encouraging critical thinking, reflection, and reflexivity; (b) introducing students to critical theories; (c) providing Latina students with an opportunity to discuss issues and current events relevant to them; (d) integrating service learning into course content (allowing the students to define if this includes social action); and, (e) facilitating respectful, civil discourse about values, diversity, racial and ethnic identity, ideologies, privilege, power, and discrimination with *all* students.

Implications for Practice

The results of this study also reflect implications for researchers, administrators, and policy makers. The issues include, but are not limited to the following: (a) conducting additional qualitative studies to identify factors such as motivation, goals, and persistence from the nontraditional students' point of view; (b) employing new variables in quantitative studies about departure, based on the multiple realities of underrepresented students (e.g., discrimination, repressive tolerance, lack of institutional resources, culturally-insensitive curricula); (c) including multiple voices and critical perspectives in adult education research; (d) honing in on departure of nontraditional students; (e) offering financial support, tuition reimbursement, and other options for middle-aged students with dependents; (f) conducting comprehensive evaluations of teachers, including "safe" environments for underrepresented students, to share views without fear of negative consequences; and, (g) challenging the dominant discourse that is centered on White, Eurocentric ideologies: this includes educational philosophy, terminology, unintentional negative messages, assumptions, and generalizations about adult students.

Institutions must begin by identifying adult learners' needs in order to focus on those who are most at risk of failure. They must also identify the unique challenges and obligations that shape access and success in the postsecondary arena. Colleges and universities can develop strategies to increase student confidence in managing short-term needs and longer-term aspirations (Pusser et al., 2007).

The participants' voices in this study also hold implications for the broader community. In spite of "odds" and "barriers," four of these undergraduate students are first-generation (PEW, 2006) immigrants to the United States who initially came here for work-related reasons. The other six participants are second generation Latinas (PEW) whose parents initially came to the U.S. for work-related reasons. Although it has taken several decades, all ten of these participants are nearing college completion and eight hold professional positions. Life journeys such as theirs are not prevalent in the media, or the higher education literature. Their marginalization reinforces stereotypes and representations (Olivarez, 1998) and constrains thinking about the future of recent Latina/Latino immigration.

It is this researcher's hope that these stories will help achieve visibility for older Latina undergraduates, raising the collective awareness of the broader community. One participant's statement about Latino stereotyping as a self-fulfilling prophecy is a powerful lesson. It is a disservice to immigrants when the focus is solely on polarizing issues and short-term solutions such as English as a Second Language (ESL) and the General Equivalency Diploma (GED).

In the 21st Century, the U.S. needs to maximize the potential of adult learners to face global challenges. Adult learners can support the nation's efforts to increase global

competitiveness; however, adult learners need their institutions to support them in the pursuit of their personal aspirations for credentials and degrees (Pusser et al., 2007).

Recommendations for Further Research

As previously stated, this study explored an area where there is a dearth of research as it relates to Latina undergraduates and self-efficacy. Despite the limitations, this study makes a significant contribution to the literature on the educational self-efficacy of nontraditional Latina undergraduates and highlights factors such as motivation, persistence, the influence of work and, financial support.

The results of the study have implications for further research. The findings suggest that self-beliefs are more influential in determining college women's levels of educational self-efficacy than the value family attaches to education. Findings also suggest that self-beliefs play a positive role toward diminishing academic stress. According to Bandura (1997), working with a student's self-beliefs may be an important starting point in academic and personal counseling; this is the core to social learning theory. University personnel also need to be sensitive to the specific needs of women of minority groups. Their under-representation on the college campus and the possibility of being first-generation college students may serve as barriers to academic success. One recommendation for future research is to further explore what other variables may be associated with self-efficacy in college populations.

Future research, both quantitative and qualitative, should reexamine and extend the issues raised in this study. Although educational self-efficacy has been linked to academic success, stress, and self-beliefs among college students (Gloria et al., 1999; Lent et al., 1997; Robinson Kurplus et al., 2003), continued research is needed to address

potential racial/ethnic minority differences and the influence of other demographic and psychosocial variables, in addition to those addressed in this study. For instance, future research could more thoroughly identify Latinas' experiences as nontraditional undergraduates as well as those of other racial minority groups, including biracial and multiracial individuals.

Additionally, this study could be replicated within other institutions of higher education in South Florida, or in the United States. These studies might offer opportunities to educate colleges and universities about this frequently marginalized population. Nontraditional students bring special insights and diversity in life experiences with them to class, enriching the knowledge base for themselves and their colleagues. As they represent increasing proportions of college enrollment, their special needs must be recognized and addressed by academic institutions (Bash, 2003).

This researcher's last recommendations for further research include the following: (a) conducting research on the effects of institutional policy and marginalization on students' persistence, as well as attendance at multiple institutions; (b) changing the practice of treating adult undergraduates—specifically students from underrepresented groups—as one homogeneous group, paying close attention to different age groups, vis-à-vis developmental stages and life roles; (c) revising the variables used in government surveys, on student departure, to include terminology which is familiar to underrepresented groups; and, (d) promoting the inclusion of multiple voices and diverse perspectives toward expansion of the critical theory mantra in higher education literature.

Chapter Summary

This chapter addressed all the salient findings, implications for practice and recommendations for further research. The researcher sought to understand the meaning behind these Latinas' motivation and the social construction of the group's reality (Patton, 2003) as they pursued and completed an undergraduate degree. The objective of the study was to expand the knowledge base regarding academic self-efficacy as it relates to nontraditional Latina college women, and inform university faculty, staff and administrators as they develop retention strategies toward degree completion.

Indeed, during the past ten years, adult education researchers have increasingly acknowledged the centrality of race, ethnicity, gender, culture, and identity to one's learning process and lifeworld. Still, there have been few opportunities to learn directly from underrepresented students, especially middle-aged Latina undergraduates. These voices help the academy move toward a better understanding of *how* they experience college and the meaning *they* attach to those experiences.

The narratives of the 10 Latina nontraditional undergraduates in this study added a new detail to the profile of the nontraditional student. The ability to view Latinas as a separate research group, apart from the category of women and Latinos, widens and sharpens the research lens by allowing the researcher to address issues of race and gender simultaneously. Qualitative data for the study served to provide a detailed appraisal of Latina nontraditional students and reaffirm the need to create awareness in the higher education terrain, evaluate adult education practice, and support the call for action to rectify social injustices and inequities in the American educational system. This study underscored the need to accept multiple realities, and thus, celebrate differences in the

quest to make higher education accessible to all groups and, indeed, praise their resilience along what, too often times, can be a very rocky road.

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APPENDIX A

PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT FLYER

The Lived Experience of Latina Undergraduates

Enrolled in an Adult Education Program

I am seeking 10 undergraduate students, who meet the criteria listed below to participate in this exciting study.

Criteria for participation:

- Self-identify as a Latina, and
- Fluent in English, and
- Age 25 years or older, and
- Have completed at least 90 hours toward a bachelor's degree, in an Adult Education Program, and
- Will be able to complete an online questionnaire in *Survey Monkey* ™.

If you are interested in participating in the study please log in to [website address] and respond to the questionnaire.

Note: The anticipated time for the entire process should take no more than two (2) hours to complete the questionnaire.
All information will be kept confidential.

If you have any questions, please contact me at:
Sandra (Sandee) L. Roberts
Phone: 305-899-3303
Email: sroberts@mail.barry.edu

APPENDIX B

ONLINE INFORMED CONSENT FORM

The Lived Experience of Latina Undergraduates

Enrolled in an Adult Education Program

Dear Research Participant,

Your participation in a research project is requested. The title of the study is *The lived experience of Latina undergraduates enrolled in an adult education program*. I am seeking 10 undergraduate students, who meet the criteria listed below to participate in this exciting study. The proposed study will be conducted with undergraduate students, who are female, age 25 years or older, identifying themselves as Latina and who have completed at least 90 credit hours toward a bachelor's degree, in an Adult Education Program. Participants must be fluent in English in order to complete the questionnaire. Through exploring and describing the experiences/perceptions of these students' as they near completion of their degrees, I will seek to identify challenges, and barriers Latinas face while navigating through the undergraduate experience.

Your participation will involve answering questions in a confidential online questionnaire to describe your unique experience, as a non-traditional Latina student, completing an undergraduate degree in an Adult Education program. The anticipated time to complete the questionnaire is two hours; however if you agree in responding to questions and member checking, this will take an additional hour, maximum. You will be granted five days to complete and submit the responses to the online 19 open-ended questions. The first 10 individuals, who meet the criteria and complete the questionnaire, will constitute the sample for this study.

While this is not an anonymous study, the risks of involvement in this study are minimal. The study has been designed to ensure participant confidentiality. Your participation in this study is voluntary. If you elect not to participate, to discontinue your participation in the study, or decline to answer any part of the questions on the questionnaire, you may do so at any time without consequences. The results of the research study may be published, but your name will not be used. Although there are no direct benefits to you, your participation in this study may help our understanding of the unique challenges and barriers non-traditional Latinas face while navigating through the undergraduate experience.

Findings will be presented in my dissertation project for completion of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Leadership and Education from Barry University. The study is confidential. Please be assured that strict confidentiality will be maintained throughout this study. My handling of your data will be consistent with the standards of the Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects (Federal Register, 1991) and the Ethical Principles in the Conduct of Research with Human Participants (APA, 1982). Data will be kept in a locked file in the researcher's office. Your signed consent form will be kept separate from the data. All data will be destroyed after five years.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding the study or your participation in the study, you may contact me, via email at sandees@bellsouth.net or sroberts@mail.barry.edu, or telephone me at (305) 903-3023. You may also contact my faculty advisor, Dr. Carmen McCrink, at cmccrink@mail.barry.edu, or (305) 899-3702 or Barry University's Institutional Review Board point of contact, Ms. Nildy Polanco, at (305) 899-3020.

Voluntary Consent

I acknowledge that I have been informed of the nature and purposes of this study by Sandra (Sandee) L. Roberts; have read and understand the information presented above, and that I have received a copy of this form for my records. I give my voluntary consent to participate in this study.

Yes, I voluntarily consent to participate in this study. [Embedded logic will allow participant access to the questionnaire].

No, I do not consent to participate in this study. [Embedded logic will deny access to the questionnaire].

APPENDIX C

ONLINE INCLUSION CRITERIA

The Lived Experience of Latina Undergraduates

Enrolled in an Adult Education Program

Please complete the following confidential inclusion criteria data:

- Self-identify as a Latina Yes _____ No _____
- Fluent in English Yes _____ No _____
- Age 25 years or older Yes _____ No _____
- Have completed at least 90 hours toward a bachelor's degree in an Adult Education Program Yes _____ No _____
- Hispanic or Latina Yes _____ No _____
- Will be able to complete an online questionnaire in *Survey Monkey*™ Yes _____ No _____

[If the participant's response to any of the above criteria questions is NO, embedded logic will not allow access to the questionnaire].

APPENDIX D

ONLINE DEMOGRAPHIC DATA FORM

The Lived Experience of Latina Undergraduates

Enrolled in an Adult Education Program

Please complete the following confidential demographic data:

- In this country, people come from a lot of different cultures and there are many different words to describe the different backgrounds or ethnic groups that people come from. Every person is born into an ethnic group, or sometimes two groups, but people differ on how important their ethnicity is to them, how they feel about it, and how much their behavior is affected by it. As the purpose of this study is to examine the experiences of Latinas (Hispanic women), *please select the ethnic group with which you most closely relate*:
  - Birthplace/Country of Origin _____
  - Hispanic or Latina _____
  - White, Caucasian, European, non Hispanic _____
  - Mixed; parents are from two different groups _____
  - Other – Please specify: _____
- I began my undergraduate studies several years ago but had to drop out at least one time for a semester or more. Yes __No___
- In addition to being a student, I am employed. Yes __No___
- In addition to being a student, I take care of a family. Yes __No___
- Mother's highest level of schooling _____
- Father's highest level of schooling _____

APPENDIX E

PROTOCOL FOR ONLINE OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONNAIRE

The Lived Experience of Latina Undergraduates

Enrolled in an Adult Education Program

PLEASE DO NOT MENTION ANYONE BY NAME

1. Why is it important to you to earn the higher education degree you are pursuing?
2. What factor(s) caused you to decide to return to school?
3. When you enrolled in your current program, what were your beliefs about your ability to be successful (complete the program)?
4. Was there any time/s that you believed you could not be successful in completing your program? If, please describe and discuss how you worked through this problem.
5. Was there any person or any programs you have found especially helpful? How/why?
6. Did you have a mentor during this time?
7. Who was your support or confidant during this process?
8. Have you had problems with transportation, childcare, parent-care, work scheduling, etc. that may have adversely affected your academic performance? If so, would you please describe the problem, and how you worked through it?
9. What role has education played in the lives of your family of origin?
10. How has this educational endeavor affected your personal relationships?
11. How does your family feel about your return to school? How have they adapted to the added demands of your academic work?

12. Has any family member provided additional support for your goals?
13. Has any family member expressed resentment toward your goals?
14. Are you currently employed? If so, does your employer support your academic activities? In what way?
15. Has your decision to return to school led you to develop any new personal and/or professional goals?
16. Have you had one significant experience or accomplishment that made you decide to complete your education?
17. Would you, or do you, encourage other women, aged 25 or older, to return to school? Why or why not?
18. Please provide a summary of your thoughts as they relate to your participation in this academic effort. Please include any highlights, low points, changes for you personally and/or professionally as a result of this experience. Do not limit your comments. Please feel free to express as much as you wish. Do not worry about the length of your response. Write as much as you wish. (Please do not identify anyone by name).
19. If you are willing to be available for follow-up questions or clarification, or you would like a copy of this study, please provide me with your email address.