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Nontraditional aged undergraduates in higher education: A qualitative study of decisions and satisfaction

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NONTRADITIONAL AGED UNDERGRADUATES IN HIGHER EDUCATION:

A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF DECISIONS AND SATISFACTION

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ABSTRACT

Nontraditional Aged Undergraduates in Higher Education: A Qualitative Study of Decisions and Satisfaction

by

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Nontraditional aged undergraduates, those aged 25 or older, now comprise nearly 40% of the higher education population, and are more heavily represented on some campuses, according to the National Center for Education Statistics (2002). This demographic shift has not been reflected in current research, with most higher education studies focused on the traditional aged 18 to 24 college cohort. The older undergraduate population is included in some studies for comparative purposes, or they are subject of limited, outcome centered, studies. This study takes an in-depth approach to this population, focusing on the educational decision-making process and several aspects of satisfaction.

Using qualitative methodology, this exploratory study utilized focus groups as the primary means of data collection method to investigate three key higher education decision points, and decision, as well as, outcome satisfaction. Twenty-seven volunteer subjects, recruited from two areas of study at a large community college in the western United States, participated in the study. Five research questions, centered on decision-

making and satisfaction, were formatted into 10 discussion questions and tested using a preliminary study of four individual interviews. The finalized questions were then utilized in conducting four focus group sessions, two each with participants from Business and Health Sciences areas of study. Sessions were audio taped and transcribed to permit coding and analysis.

Detailed analysis resulted in identification of data categories in each of the areas of investigation and development of 15 themes. Emergent themes were identified for each of the decision points and both outcome and decision satisfaction areas. An interview with a senior student services administrator at the host institution provided feedback on the identified categories and themes. Additionally, this interview provided insight into institution specific policies and services directed to nontraditional students, valuable in framing and interpreting the study results. The preliminary study, focus groups and administrator interview comprised the triangulation of data sources suggested for qualitative research (Gay, 1996). The developed themes, and a further consideration of results data, enabled the reaching of some conclusions regarding the decision-making and satisfaction of this particular study population, and recommendations for both practice and further research.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Higher education student demographics have changed much over the past twenty years, yet many institutions continue to provide programs and services developed and tailored over time to best serve the traditional college cohort. The traditional undergraduate, defined by the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) (2002) as being a student eighteen to twenty four years of age who graduates from high school and immediately enrolls full-time in a college or university, is no longer the dominant campus group. Students beyond the age of the traditional college cohort represent a significant and growing segment of the undergraduate population on campuses across the United States and the NCES (2002) reports that 39 percent of all post-secondary students were 25 years of age, or older, in 1999, compared with 28 percent in 1970. This changed campus reality remains largely unrecognized in many institutions, with program, facility, and student support decisions directed primarily to serving traditional undergraduates. Much research also remains firmly focused on the traditional college cohort and the sizable nontraditional student population is little studied in terms of the decisions leading them to pursue higher education, or their satisfaction with these decisions and outcomes. Decisions on how to best serve nontraditional student groups are routinely made in the absence of a clear, research based, understanding of their needs.

The necessity of better serving this changed college population was subject of a speech by Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton in 2004. In her keynote speech for the Teaching in the Community College On-line Conference, 2004, Senator Clinton highlighted the need for enhanced services and new ways of thinking regarding non-traditional undergraduates, and the necessity of reducing barriers and revising policies to benefit this population (Troumpoucis, 2004). The types of wide-ranging improvements outlined in her remarks can only be effective if based on an enhanced understanding of this population, and grounded by sound research and clearly identified and validated student needs.

Two primary factors clearly indicated a need for additional research regarding the non-traditional undergraduate population and provided the impetus for this study. First, these students now represent nearly forty percent of the college population nation-wide and are in the majority on some campuses, and the sheer size of this student group dictates equitable treatment and programs and services specifically designed to best support their success. Secondly, the programs, schedules, and support systems that have been developed over time and served the traditional college cohort so well, may not be appropriate in all cases to best serve this population. These two factors highlighted a need for a study of decisions and satisfaction issues as perceived by this population. Results of this study provide indicators of how to best support nontraditional students in developing and achieving their educational goals, and in using scarce resources to provide the educational services identified as most critical to this population.

The study addressed the key areas of decision-making and satisfaction with a sample of nontraditional undergraduates in several academic program areas. Students were

queried to better understand the decisions they have made regarding higher education, their level of satisfaction with their choices of current program and institution, and how their decision-making might have been improved. The findings of this research assist in identifying key areas for enhanced services to this population throughout the process, from recruitment through matriculation.

Identification of the Study Population

The term nontraditional student in higher education is variously defined, but for purposes of this study age was the primary identifying factor and permitted immediate identification of the target population by a single characteristic; undergraduates aged 25 or older enrolled in a post-secondary institution (NCES, 2002). Other characteristics associated with adult students are not exclusive to this group. Nevertheless, nontraditional students are more likely than those of traditional college age to be married, work full or part-time, live off-campus, be enrolled less than full-time, and have other significant responsibilities (NCES, 2002). Other differences are also likely to set adult students apart, but are more difficult to identify as exemplified by the varying population definitions used in current studies. Determining what, if any, impact these additional characteristics have on college choices and experiences is also difficult to assess, but greater life experiences, achievement orientation, and the likelihood that these students are financing their own studies would all seem logically to have some impact (Donohue & Wong, 1997). Several authors have even gone so far as to suggest that adult students are more likely to exhibit a consumer mentality, with an expectation of value for value and a willingness to "shop" for higher education. Hadfield (2003) proposes that

nontraditional students are more likely to hold institutions accountable for results, and expect educational experiences to make a difference in their lives. Educational interest and decision-making may be driven primarily by calculations of return on investment of time, money and effort, rather than less rational factors according to Tharp (1988). The above characteristics are those most used in identifying non-traditional students as a distinct undergraduate population and the research subjects of this study may reflect these factors.

Adult undergraduates are certainly not a homogeneous group and differ in numerous ways as indicated above, but are identifiable as a group by age, generally recognized by most researchers, to include the NCES (2002), as being age twenty five or older. As a major focus of this study was decision-making regarding school continuation, or discontinuation, an additional criterion was applied to the study population; that they have had a break of at least one year since high school completion. This discriminator eliminated potential research subjects who may attend alternate terms for financial or other reasons, or those who might take one class each for two semesters yearly. It was felt that the decisions made by these long-term part-time students were not as germane to the purpose of this study as those who had at least a one year break in attendance at some point following high school completion.

Much current research is not specifically directed to the nontraditional student population, but rather they are addressed as a comparison group. Traditional and non-traditional students are compared in such areas as motivation (Fujita-Stark, 1996), academic and intellectual development (Graham & Donaldson, 1999), and outcomes of the college experience (Donaldson, 1999). Additionally, Pascarella and Terenzini (1991)

reviewed several studies and research projects where adult students were the subject, or formed an identifiable population for comparative purposes. These studies addressed a range of research areas including cognitive skills, learning styles, theories of change, and educational attainment. In all cases the findings support the position that adult or non-traditional aged students differ in significant ways from the traditional campus population.

Study Focus Areas

Two primary areas of study were identified from the search of literature and a critical analysis of what new information might be most useful to both adult undergraduates and the institutions that serve them. The areas of nontraditional student decision-making and satisfaction represent sources of potentially useful data to better understand, advise, recruit, and serve this large student population.

Decision-making

Decision-making models and college choice investigations provided some direction for further inquiry. Bateman and Spruill (1996) offer an excellent review of commonly used theoretical models to explain the college choice process. Although their study did not specifically address older students, they do suggest that policies designed to influence decision-making may need to reflect differences within the student population. Kasworm (2003) takes a broader view of the increasing adult undergraduate population and the decisions leading to enrollment. The author notes that the importance of a college credential, economic restructuring and job change, and societal commitments to open access and equal educational opportunity all play a part in the higher education decision

process. The choice of a college by nontraditional aged students was the subject of a focus group study reported by Bers and Smith (1987), which identified factors important in the decision-making process. The authors noted the value of this new information for program development and marketing. Research conducted at nine private colleges and universities with older students provides some indication of the most important factors in enrollment decisions (Tumblin, 2002). This work also provides insight into students' personal and professional objectives, and levels of concern over college costs and financing.

Satisfaction

Student satisfaction with institution and program choices is a concern for both institutions, in developing and marketing programs to best serve their populations, and rather more obviously to students. Elliott and Shin (2002) describe several methods of assessing student satisfaction and propose an alternative method using a multiple-item weighted gap score analysis approach. The authors propose that this method may be more likely to produce data enabling institutions to accurately identify and deliver what is important to students. Achievement motivation and college satisfaction were addressed by Donohue and Wong (1997) and their findings suggest that differences exist in these areas between traditional and nontraditional students. They highlight the fact that more attention should be devoted to satisfaction issues of older students as they consider this an area generally neglected in research. Institutional efforts to improve student satisfaction and support student achievement are subjects of work by Allen (1993). The author relates these factors to retention and improved completion rates for older students.

Focusing on another aspect of the present study are several articles specifically addressing satisfaction with chosen courses of action and the decision-making process. Tsiros and Mittal (2000) report on four studies of consumers and their purchase decisions and subsequent levels of satisfaction or regret. Although conducted from a business, rather than higher education, perspective, their methods and findings are useful in developing a systematic means of study. Investigation of decision-making in a group context is reported by Ariely and Levav (2000). Nontraditional aged students are subject to group influence, (as are most individuals), and this may impact on decisions and perceived satisfaction with their choices.

That research is certainly useful and provides some direction for efforts to better understand and serve the nontraditional student population. However, most studies focused on a single factor, such as college choice, achievement motivation or satisfaction with the educational experience, and on adult students during or shortly after completing their college experience (Allen, 1993; Donahue & Wong, 1997; Donaldson, 1999). Gaining a more detailed and useful understanding of this population required a broader view, starting with pre-enrollment decision-making and following through to ascertain satisfaction not only with their institution and program choices, but with the quality of decisions and how they were made. Consideration of satisfaction with the educational experience and decision satisfaction completes the decision-making cycle and permits evaluation of the effectiveness of chosen courses of action and can aid in identifying flaws in the decision process and weaknesses in institutional support systems. This comprehensive approach to study of the nontraditional student higher education

experience was chosen as it seemed more likely to produce actionable data than the commonly used single factor approach.

Research Problem

Nontraditional aged students in higher education, defined as those twenty-five or older, now represent over thirty-nine percent of the undergraduate population nation-wide, (NCES, 2002), yet are usually studied as part of the larger student population, or in research narrowly focused on retention, completion, or satisfaction with their particular educational experience. Scant research focuses on the earlier decision factors, and choices, leading students to be members of this demographic, and their later satisfaction with the higher education decisions made. It is this lack of empirical data that makes it difficult for students to plan effectively, and for institutions to best serve this population, or to evaluate the effectiveness of programs and services specifically implemented for older students. Lack of insight into this decision process negatively impacts institutions and students at all phases of the higher education cycle. An enhanced understanding of this decision process will enable students to more systematically consider educational choices, and for careful consideration of all salient factors. Institutions benefit in being able to direct scarce resources into services established as being most valued and potentially beneficial to this population.

Research questions:

1. What factors led to the decision to delay, or to fail to complete, a higher education course of study following high school?
2. What subsequently transpired that led to current enrollment?

3. How was the current institution and course of study selected from the available options?
4. How would you characterize your level of satisfaction, or dissatisfaction, with the current educational experience? (timing, institution, and program)
5. How would you characterize level of satisfaction, or dissatisfaction, with the decisions made regarding higher education? (If you were to start over, what might you do differently?)

Approach to Investigation

Adult or non-traditional aged students represent an identifiable college population and may differ significantly from other student groups. The limited available research on decision-making and satisfaction issues, with regard to this population, strongly indicated that a study in this area would be useful in several ways. Results serve to increase the general body of knowledge available concerning this population and provide specific practical indicators of best practice in serving this demographically significant group. Further, results provide direction and additional data, with the specificity needed, to serve as the basis for subsequent qualitative or quantitative inquiry.

Methodology

Due to the lack of a sufficient body of knowledge addressing higher education decision-making and satisfaction with these choices within this particular population, an exploratory study using qualitative methods, was indicated (Babbie, 2001). Previous studies either had limited relationship to the research problem areas or failed to focus on the specific study population and, therefore, provided an insufficient basis for

quantitative research at this time. A qualitative case study approach provided the widest possible insights into students' experience and was consistent with the identified research problem and purpose of this study. Categories of collected data were emergent and coded using the constant comparison method with concepts identified (Babbie, 2001). Memos and marginal notes aided in data analysis, provided additional detail, and served as the basis for particularly insightful student statements included in the study results.

A single institution study was designed to permit in-depth analysis and selection of a suitable research site was driven by the need for a large and diverse nontraditional student population and a research supportive institutional environment. The Community College of Southern Nevada (CCSN) provided an ideal venue, with over fifty percent nontraditional students of 35,000 enrolled, a broadly diverse population, a wide range of programs appealing to these students, and an enthusiastic and supportive administration (CCSN Profile, 2005). The size of the institution, and institutional support which included administration and faculty involvement, access to students, and providing facilities, enabled the necessary numbers of students, meeting the desired criteria, to be recruited as research subjects on a voluntary basis (constituting a convenience sample of adequate size) (Kreuger & Casey, 2000).

Data Collection

An initial preliminary study of four individual interviews provided significant data and useful insights. Ten discussion questions were finalized as a result, focused on three key higher education decision points, and both outcome and decision satisfaction. Focus groups were then conducted and these group sessions were structured around the discussion questions. Sessions lasted approximately 90 minutes and were audio taped

(with permission) and, additionally, the researcher took notes and recorded process observations during the sessions. Four focus group sessions with 4 -7 participants were conducted over a period of two months. Two groups from each of two fields of study (Business and Health Sciences) provided an additional means of comparative analysis and furnished additional insights regarding specific programs and the research areas of decision-making and satisfaction. A simple collection instrument was used to gather demographic information useful in identifying nontraditional student characteristics, in addition to age, that may have impacted on the results.

Analysis

Utilizing the grounded theory method as a framework, collected data were analyzed using the constant comparison method as described by Glaser and Strauss (1967). Data elements were coded and categorized, facilitating identification of patterns and relative strengths of responses, and permitting comparison between focus groups. Memos and marginal notes recorded additional insights, assisted in interpretation, and served as memory aids. Categorizing permitted tabulating of results by response area and assisted in trend identification. Due to the limited scope of this study, data analysis was conducted manually. Although lacking the precision of quantitative analysis, this methodology was highly effective in this study due to systematic application.

An individual interview was arranged with a senior Student Services administrator at CCSN who is involved with developing and administering programs specifically targeted to the study population. This interview served to frame student responses into the context of their particular college environment, and facilitated proper interpretation of specific student responses that related to institution unique policies or programs. Additionally, the

interviewee provided valuable feedback regarding the response categories developed and emergent themes.

Limitations

Results of this research are limited in several ways. The Community College of Southern Nevada is a public college, and students attending private institutions may, or may not, differ significantly from study participants. Additionally, the students serving as research subjects were recruited as volunteers, constituting a convenience sample, and may not be representative of the broader nontraditional student population at CCSN. Focus on two educational program areas, Health Sciences and Business, provides comparative data, but results may differ from students in different programs and with other educational goals. The study design itself is also somewhat limited by the short time of data collection and the fact that participants were asked to respond to questions requiring recall of past events. As with most qualitative studies, results cannot be expected to generalize to other institutions or populations (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Definition of Terms

For purposes of this study the following definitions apply.

Decision point one: The decision, or series of choices, that led a student to delay, or to fail to complete, a higher education course of study prior to age 25. This applies to both students new to higher education, and those who stopped out at some point.

Decision point two: The choices and circumstances resulting in current enrollment. This decision point is limited in this study to the factors surrounding the choices made to pursue a higher education at this time.

Decision point three: The process of choosing the institution and specific program of current enrollment, as distinct from the decision to pursue a higher education, (decision point two).

Decision satisfaction: That level of expressed satisfaction with the decision-making process students used to make their educational choices. This area is limited to the process, rather than outcomes.

Emergent (data) categories: The product of reduction of research subject responses into related groupings based on similarities between responses. These categories are revised, combined, or in some cases eliminated during data analysis to accurately reflect strength and frequency of responses.

Emergent themes: Those themes developed from analysis of raw data, emergent categories, and collection notes. These themes emerge with the analysis of data, and represent the significant findings or general tendencies in a particular research area.

Grounded theory: Theory based on data collected in real world settings, which reflect what naturally occurred over a period of time. Researchers using grounded theory may develop a hypothesis, but not usually prior to conducting the study.

Likert scale: A composite measure developed by Rensis Likert to improve levels of measurement in social research through standardized response categories. Often used in survey research to determine relative intensity of responses using such categories as strongly agree, agree, disagree, and strongly disagree, with or without linkage to a numerical scale.

Nontraditional undergraduate: Students aged 25 or older who may have enrolled at some point prior to age 25 and stopped out, or delayed entry until age 25. Additionally,

for purposes of this study members of the research sample must have had at least a one year break in enrollment at some point following high school completion. Adult undergraduate is also used throughout to refer to this identified population.

Satisfaction with current educational experience: The level of satisfaction with the current institution and program. This area is limited to academic and institutional factors, and the meeting of student expectations.

Significance of the Study

Adult students represent an identifiable and growing population on most campuses and are the focus of numerous programs and services. The areas of nontraditional student decision-making and satisfaction identified above represented sources of useful data to better understand, assist, and serve this large student population. This qualitative study using focus groups and structured questions from the areas of research interest resulted in useable data of benefit to both schools and students. Institutional benefits include increased ability for CCSN to evaluate current or future programs based on greater knowledge of the target population, and as a basis for further inquiry. Students benefit by having critical information made more readily available to support key decisions, and by having programs and services designed based on research supported, rather than anecdotal, information.

A clearer understanding of the students' earlier decision-making, which placed students in this group, provided additional insight into this population and resulted in data useful in several ways. Identifying factors which led the student not to pursue higher education immediately following high school, (the path of the traditional college cohort),

will aid in developing strategies to address inhibitors to college enrollment. In Nevada, for instance, low college-going rate was an issue articulated by Governor Guinn in his 1999 State of the State address (Las Vegas Sun, 1999), and such information can prove useful in addressing this issue. The later choice to pursue higher education represented another decision point worthy of study. Enhanced understanding of the factors effecting enrollment or reenrollment, (for those who may have attended earlier, but not finished), will aid in developing information resources, recruiting strategies, and programs specifically targeted to this population. Decisions regarding institution or program selection represent another area of choice, and the insights provided into the needs and educational goals of adult students provide direction for advising and program design. Ascertaining the level of satisfaction with the current institution and program provided important indicators for improving retention and completion rates. Satisfaction with the decisions made regarding higher education provided indicators of how this population can be better supported throughout the decision-making process, and identified shortcomings of current institutional efforts to serve the nontraditional aged student. In summary, the findings constitute an important step in helping to provide a solid basis for nontraditional student support leading to academic success and goal achievement.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Older undergraduates are becoming increasingly common on campuses across the United States, and a number of recent studies are available that examine different aspects of the adult undergraduate experience. Additionally, many studies directed primarily to the traditional college cohort include older students for comparative purposes, which provide additional insight. Defining this nontraditional aged student population and developing an appreciation for the characteristics, other than age, that set them apart from their younger peers is essential for framing a study of this population. The National Center for Educational Statistics (2002) provides an excellent analysis of nontraditional students, which serves as a valuable starting point for an in-depth study of this group. Works from four research areas relative to the purpose of this study are included in the literature review: 1) Several studies that provide additional discussion of the common characteristics of adult students and assist in further defining this population, 2) literature, including both theoretical and empirical works, related to decision-making and college choice, 3) works addressing satisfaction with the current educational experience, and to a lesser degree achievement, and 4) studies investigating decision satisfaction and decision-making process factors. These four major areas of current literature provide the foundation for the study of this particular population, and focus on the specific research interest areas of critical decisions and subsequent satisfaction.

Population Characteristics

The National Center for Education Statistics Special Analysis of Nontraditional Undergraduates (NCES, 2002) provides invaluable baseline data which highlights the size and growth of this increasingly important demographic, and identifies and defines the characteristics common to this population. These nontraditional students are described in terms of their demographic characteristics, enrollment patterns, ways of combining school and work, participation in distance education, and persistence patterns. Using age only as an identifier the nontraditional student population in 1999 had risen to 39 percent of the 12.7 million enrolled students being 25 years of age or older, compared with 28 percent in 1970. The NCES identifies seven characteristics, in addition to age, as being common to nontraditional students; including students in nontraditional population who posses at least one of these characteristics results in 73 percent of college population being "nontraditional" in some way. The discussion of enrollment patterns and combining work and study provide data particularly useful in developing background for current research, and both areas are keys to understanding nontraditional student motivation and decision-making. Nontraditional students are identified as being more likely than traditional students to leave school prior to degree attainment, highlighting the need for additional research and improved support systems.

Focusing on community college students, Kim (2002) reviewed the defining characteristics of nontraditional students, with particular attention to the limitations of age as the sole criterion. Three common means of identifying and defining nontraditional students are discussed, including the age criterion, student background characteristics, and risk factors. Based on these population definitions, the author proposes a range of

strategies to better serve this group, from marketing and recruiting, through program completion and graduation. He points out that this population is not homogeneous and can differ significantly in attendance patterns, reasons for attending college, resources, and challenges; important considerations in studying this group. Use of the term "nontraditional" is even brought into question as perhaps reinforcing a negative stereotype; at the community college level a clear majority of students may be nontraditional in some way, and hence are the norm. The article includes a useful comparison of risk factors that might be common to the population and suggests this older student group be considered as both complex and diverse.

Geiger, Weinstein and Jones (2004) describe a study of traditional and nontraditional aged students which used the Purpose in Life inventory (PIL) to examine differences in purpose of life based on student status, (traditional or nontraditional) and major; and additionally compare results from two regions of the country. The research sample included 258 undergraduates, (approximately one-third nontraditional students), from the upper mid-west or southwest, with nine major fields of study represented. Results indicate choice of major showed no significant difference, but older students had higher scores on the PIL, as did those from the southwestern United States compared to the mid-west. Nontraditional students were more likely to choose human service majors based on life experience, with the traditional students' choices more varied and related to family suggestions or issues of financial reward and prestige occupations. This may indicate that the nontraditional students have a more clearly defined purpose in their educational endeavors than the traditional cohort. The findings support the position that traditional

students, aged 18 to 24, differ in more than age, and other factors must be considered in study of this population.

Levine and Cureton (1998) go beyond the usual statistical description of older undergraduates to identify characteristics of this population that can be keys to what may best be termed, customer satisfaction considerations. The authors point out that higher education might not be as central to the lives of older students, as it is to the traditional college cohort, and may be of lower priority than work or family. Nontraditional aged students likely have more of a consumer mentality and may be more demanding and confrontive than their younger peers. Greater life experience may contribute to a much different set of institutional expectations than those common to the traditional college cohort. Expectations of convenience, courteous customer relations, and responsive services may be more closely identified with banking, cable television systems, or other service providers than traditional institutions of higher education. Additionally, as many, if not most, nontraditional students reside off-campus they may resist being billed for health services, technology fees, or other student services that they will neither need nor use. As a significant portion of the undergraduates on many campuses, these students bring the same consumer expectations they have of other commercial enterprises. This mind-set is difficult to capture in traditional research, but is worthy of consideration and might well impact on any study of this population.

Among the characteristics of nontraditional students often mentioned in current literature is non-standard enrollment patterns, with this population often identified with part-time status and multiple institution attendance. The concept of student "swirl," or non-linear matriculation, is introduced by Borden (2004) who proposed as being common

to traditional aged students as well, and supports that proposition with survey data. Eight multiple institution enrollment patterns are defined, with some discussion of the impact on students and colleges. The author highlights the risks and potential negative outcomes for institutional planning, and providing student services, based on traditional enrollment patterns when nearly 50% of the student population at many institutions may exhibit these nontraditional enrollment patterns. A very useful table is included which presents collected methodologies to better serve students, (traditional or nontraditional), with non-standard enrollment patterns. Although older students are not specifically addressed, it seems that multiple institutional enrollments, skipped semesters, and other indicators of swirl common to the author's model need to be considered in studying the nontraditional aged population and the suggestions for reducing the negative impact of the swirl phenomenon may be applicable to older students.

Graham and Donaldson (1999) present a study of academic and intellectual development and contrast the outcomes for adult learners with those of younger students. The ACT College Outcomes Survey (COS) was the primary data collection tool and useable data were obtained from 27,311 subjects attending 154 colleges and universities in 35 states. The authors reviewed the generally accepted characteristics of nontraditional students, but in an effort to create clearly distinct groups, eliminated data collected from students aged 23-26. This effectively eliminated the oldest members of the 18 to 24 traditional college cohort. and the youngest of the nontraditional aged students. Students were asked to respond in two dimensions measuring the importance and progress in 26 outcome areas using a Likert-type scale. Data analysis utilized benchmarks established through empirical data, rather than statistical significance due to the large sample size.

Adult students rated 18 areas as having great importance and reported higher levels of progress in 17 of 18 areas than traditional students. Not surprisingly, findings show that adult students are less involved than traditional students in campus activities and more involved in meeting their off-campus responsibilities. Despite this lower level of involvement in the college environment, adult students reported slightly higher levels of growth than did the traditional undergraduate sample on most academic and intellectual items. The factor analysis of index scores resulted in five broad intellectual and academic themes including: broadening ones' intellectual interests, critical thinking skills, enhancing study skills, career development, and understanding and applying science and technology. This work supports the position that non-traditional students represent an identifiable population, and assumptions based on the traditional student population do not necessarily apply.

The Boshier's Educational Participation Scale (EPS) (Boshier, 1991) was used in a series of studies to better understand a diverse adult student population described by Fujita-Stark (1996). Specifically, the study investigated the factor stability and construct validity of the EPS to better understand and serve this student demographic. Responses were obtained from 1,142 students in programs at a large state university. The scale defines a seven-factor structure of motivation to participants, which allows for close examination of what motivates this particular student group, (and might differ from traditional-age undergraduates). The seven factors include: communication improvement (COM), social contact (SOC), educational preparation (EDUC), professional advancement (ADV), family togetherness (FAM), social stimulation (STIM), and cognitive interest in a particular subject. Students rated the importance of each factor on a

four-point Likert-type scale. The data analysis provided indicates that learner motivation can be more easily understood through grouping by curricula, since educational program choices might be in response to perceived needs and educational goals. The author suggests that given the diversity of adult students, future studies might focus on whether student needs and motivations are changing over time, and further that study is also needed on the relationship of motivation to other relevant variables, such as satisfaction and persistence. Although Fujita-Stark's study was conducted with subjects enrolled in non-credit courses, the motivational factors and choice issues may be characteristic of degree-seeking nontraditional students as well.

Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) acknowledge that their earlier work was strongly biased toward the traditional undergraduate, perhaps reflecting the institutions where most research was conducted. They note a shift in the literature of the 1990's to being much more representative of the changing and diverse student population. This change in focus results in consideration of a number of factors such as advanced age, work responsibilities, full or part-time (or even interrupted) attendance, and commuter versus resident status; characteristics thought to be more common in the nontraditional student population. The authors include reviews of a number of studies and research projects in which adult students are the subject or form an identifiable population for comparative purposes. These studies address a range of research areas including cognitive skills, learning styles, theories of change, and educational attainment. Particularly useful in developing a fuller appreciation of the multi-faceted nature of this adult student population are studies by Graham and Long (1998), addressing college involvement, and Ryder, Bowman, and Newman (1994), assessing barriers to degree completion. In most

cases the findings support the position that adult or non-traditional students differ in significant ways from the traditional campus population.

The above literature serves to establish that adult undergraduates represent a significant and distinct student group, which is identifiable and from which usable data can be obtained. Research has helped to identify a number of characteristics, other than age, that might frame the higher education experience for nontraditional students. An in-depth understanding of the defining characteristics is essential for the design and conduct of any meaningful study of this population. This enhanced understanding of the nontraditional aged undergraduate forms the foundation for further study of this group.

Decision-making and College Choice

The fact that adult students are a part of the undergraduate population indicates that they have made a number of choices regarding the pursuit of higher education. Several recent studies establish that these decision-points are researchable and can provide useful data for better understanding the critical educational decisions made by this student population. Decision-making models and consideration of college and program choice form a theoretical perspective, and provide some direction for further inquiry. Also of interest are articles addressing specific factors that impact educational decision-making, and several that provide findings from studies of college choice and student decisions.

Discussion of five components from college choice models, which might aid administrators in understanding and assisting students throughout the college experience, is presented in a paper by Bateman and Spruill (1996). A review of the characteristics of the most common college choice models is followed by explanation of selected

components and discussion regarding how they can assist in understanding student choices, both prior to and following enrollment. The authors propose that combined models of college choice have potential for assisting students with decisions throughout the higher education experience, and may positively affect retention and completion rates. Undergraduate decision-making is considered as a multi-stage process, from the initial desire to attend college to matriculation. The characterization of college attendance as resembling a funnel is particularly illuminating and illustrates that large numbers consider college, and progressively smaller numbers go through the entire process culminating in graduation. Although adult or nontraditional students are not an identified group in this study, the use of these choice models provides another dimension for understanding the complexities of undergraduate alternatives and the factors that affect their decisions.

Much current literature on college choice focuses almost exclusively on the traditional student, 18 to 24 years of age, and considers such factors as socio-economic status of parents, degree of parental encouragement, or level of aspiration before or during high school. These factors may not be germane to the discussion of older undergraduates, and the choice of a college by nontraditional aged students is the subject of a focus group study by Bers and Smith (1987), which identifies factors important in their decision-making process. Focus was on the critical life incidents which may have preceded the enrollment decision, information used in the college search, and factors influencing the choice of a particular institution. Participants were further asked to evaluate their colleges' programs and services in terms of meeting their needs, and that may affect their persistence at the institution. Somewhat surprising, considering existing

college choice models, the majority of focus group participants indicated they had not considered other colleges, and appeared to have collapsed the search and choice phases of college selection into a single step. Characteristics that appeared to influence choice were convenience and affordability, with little mention of being attracted by particular programs. Although this study was conducted in a public, and suburban, community college, institutions of this type serve large numbers of older students and the results may be somewhat reflective of the larger nontraditional student population, and can realistically serve as a starting point for further inquiry. The authors noted the potential value of this information to institutions for use in program development and marketing.

Research at a Florida campus comparing the types of professions selected by traditional and nontraditional (adult) undergraduates was reported by Kinsella (1998). A detailed discussion of adult student characteristics precedes the presentation of the study design and findings. In all respects the assumptions made about this student group were in keeping with those commonly encountered in current literature. Data collection was conducted through use of a twenty-three-item questionnaire with specific categorical answers plus two open-ended questions. A study sample of 84 students (N = 84) were drawn from seven fields of study, with 58% of the respondents being of nontraditional age. Collection and presentation of demographic data established that many of these adult students possessed other characteristics common to this population. The researcher sought through the open-ended items to elicit comments and life experiences that have influenced the decision to enter a specific profession. Additionally, students were asked to rate the services provided by the college and to identify needs not currently served. The data supported the position that choice of professional study for adult students is

heavily impacted by life experiences, with greater representation of human services, social work, or other so-called "helping" professions. The traditional age group sample reflected more heavily the influence of family and the potential for high earnings and prestige factors were rated more highly. A useful part of this work is the inclusion of ratings of campus services for both groups, which graphically illustrate that these student groups differ to a degree necessitating programs and services tailored to their needs.

Closely related to the objectives of the current research effort is a preliminary study described by Baumen, et al. (2004). A sample of 53 nontraditional undergraduates were surveyed to determine their reasons for reentering college, likelihood of using services for nontraditional students, and sources of social support. A purpose designed instrument was utilized to collect demographic data, rate the likelihood of using ten common student services, determine level of support through the use of the Scales Of Perceived Social Support (SOPSS), and to solicit up to three reasons for the respondent returning to college. Data collection was by mail-out survey to 115 nontraditional students at a Pacific northwest research university, with a return rate of 46%. Demographic information provided indicated that this sample had characteristics other than age common to nontraditional students and were generally representative of the larger population. Student services identified as likely to be utilized by this sample population included career counseling (76%), stress management workshops (57%), and student aid workshops (53%). The results from SOPSS indicated that more than 60% of respondents reported receiving strong support from family members and friends. Potentially most useful were responses to the question regarding return to school, which clustered in three general categories; career, self improvement, and family, in that order. The categories,

response strengths, and illustrative comments provided excellent insight and direction for research into nontraditional student enrollment decisions.

Davies and Williams (2001) provide an additional perspective on decision-making in an article that addresses fragility and risk as elements of the process. Using qualitative inquiry methods the authors explored the decision-making processes of both potential and new entrants into higher education. Two concepts, fragility and risk, are introduced as being useful in understanding the interaction between various elements of the decision-making process of nontraditional students. Fragility refers to hesitancy, the tendency to change decision paths, or lack of commitment, and are attributable to one of three sources or a combination: complexity of the investment, newness of learner identity, or accessibility of higher education information, programs and services. Five risk factors were identified by research subjects: future rewards, personal achievement, (or failure), finances, time, and resources and services. Each of these factors is addressed in some detail with illustrative examples provided from interviews and focus groups. These were not discreet categories and were interrelated in various ways, as related by the research subjects. Although the study took place in the United Kingdom, many of the underlying concerns about the cost of higher education, and the uncertainty of return on this investment, seem applicable to both cultures. Results were based on interview, focus group, and survey data and the results indicate that fragility and risk can be a significant considerations in reaching the decision to pursue a higher education by older students. They also reported that this sensing of risk is apparently heightened by confusion and lack of information regarding programs and financing.

Econometric models of college decision-making are based largely on the assumption that a decision regarding attending college is made by comparing potential benefits with the projected costs, with selection based on greatest net benefit. Models stress the importance of physical and human capital, but may undervalue social and cultural capital, particularly among some student groups. Perna (2000) designed and conducted a study utilizing an expanded model, including these additional factors, to explore variations among African-American, Hispanic, and White students. Two research questions framed this study:

1. Does including measures of social and cultural capital improve the explanatory power for the three study groups?
2. How do the variables related to the decision to enroll in a four year college vary between the identified groups?

Data from the third National Educational Longitudinal Study ((NELS, 1994)) were used to examine the research questions, and the author presents four findings that appear to support the value of the expanded model when applied to these groups. A detailed discussion of the identified decision variables for each research group is particularly useful in the study of diverse student populations. Although this research does not address older or nontraditional aged students as a separate group, it does provide another useful lens for viewing enrollment decision-making. The study of only three racial / ethnic groups, and considering only enrollments at four year institutions, constitute further limitations in generalizing findings.

Finances figure prominently for many students, traditional and nontraditional, when making decisions regarding higher education. Impact of costs on adult students is the

focus of a preliminary survey-based study by Merrill and Mckie (1998). Due to the increasing costs of higher education, the researchers were attempting to: 1) determine the extent of financial hardship among adult students, 2) identify specific education related expenses, and 3) explore possible changes in policy and practice to assist this population in meeting the high cost of college completion. Findings supported their predictions, in that a significant number of adult students surveyed did feel financial pressure from a variety of sources in the course of seeking an undergraduate degree. Sources of financial pressure identified extended beyond tuition and books, to include childcare costs, housing, and travel expenses. Quality of life issues were mentioned by a number of those surveyed and highlighted an inability to maintain an acceptable family standard of living in light of education expenses, and the necessity, and complexity, of paid employment while pursuing a fulltime education. Although conducted in the United Kingdom, the findings are similar in results from studies in U.S. institutions addressing financial concerns. The specific suggestions to address financial issues were primarily directed to U.K. policies, and the institution in which the study was conducted, and thus are not broadly applicable.

The above studies address student decision-making from both theoretical and practical perspectives, to include college choice and the factors which impact on these higher education decisions. Factors significant to this study include the decision points, elements of enrollment decisions, program choice issues, and consideration of fragility and risk as significant to the process. Data from these works are used in identifying specific adult undergraduate critical decisions and in formulating the questions to be used

in qualitative inquiry. The findings in these works also provide reference points for evaluating collected data and indicate directions for further investigation.

Achievement and Satisfaction

Consideration of the various outcomes of student decision-making, including levels of achievement and satisfaction with the educational experience, comprise the third section of this literature review. This higher education decision process can be viewed as a linked system, from initial consideration to enroll or re-enroll, to program completion and level of satisfaction with the educational experience and institution. This section focuses heavily on the post-enrollment experiences that impact on subsequent decisions, persistence, and ultimately program or degree completion.

Traditional and nontraditional students may differ significantly in life experience, achievement motivation, satisfaction with the college experience, and reasons for pursuing a higher education. Donohue and Wong (1997) provide a comparison of traditional and nontraditional students in these areas and their findings do suggest that differences exist between these groups of students. A research sample of 126 undergraduates was recruited for this project, 69 traditional and 57 nontraditional students. Using two existing instruments, the College Student Satisfaction Questionnaire (CSSQ) and the Work and Family Orientation Questionnaire (WFOQ), the authors were able to develop data indicating the relative strengths of each scaled item and to compare results across the two groups. One noteworthy finding was from the work orientation subscale, with nontraditional students exhibiting significantly higher scores for work orientation than traditional students. Although the authors' focus was on correlation

between satisfaction and motivation, the item data provides valuable insight for this study in terms of identification and the results of the older study group. They also highlight the fact that more attention should be devoted to satisfaction issues of older students as they consider this an area generally neglected in research.

A qualitative study of nontraditional college students' perspectives on their college experience, conducted by Chao and Good (2004), provides a useful model for considering student motivation and persistence. A sample of 43 adult undergraduates participated in structured interviews of approximately 60 minutes duration, focused on their higher education experiences. A detailed break-out of characteristics, other than age, of the study population established the sample as being generally reflective of adult undergraduates. Using grounded theory analysis methods, the authors systematically analyzed resultant data in sequential stages to yield interrelated constructs. The findings led to development of a theoretical and interactive model of nontraditional student perspectives regarding their educational experiences. Central to the model is a sense of hopefulness held toward decisions and the future; this core category was found to influence the other five identified themes: 1) motivation; 2) financial investment; 3) career development; 4) life transition; and 5) support systems. The interactive nature of the model allows for consideration of the authors' proposal that this central hopefulness provides motivation to manage the interaction of the five sub-system themes to successful outcomes. A detailed discussion of these themes provides insight into the decision-making processes of this particular sample, (and to a lesser or greater extent the larger adult undergraduate population). Several other findings are worthy of note and are common to studies of nontraditional students. The close connection between educational

and career goals is apparent, and seemingly more pronounced than evidenced by the traditional college cohort. Another finding is nontraditional students may pursue higher education based at least partly on social contexts and familial expectations. This study was undertaken to assist in establishing a research based context for more effective counseling of adult students, but provides valuable insights into student achievement and decision-making and indications for future inquiry.

Eppler and Warju (1997) applied Dweck's model of student motivation (Dweck, 1986; Dweck & Leppett, 1988) in a study of college students with a sample of 262 undergraduates, including both traditional and nontraditional students, with data separated for comparative purposes. Dweck's model proposes two behavioral patterns reflecting different achievement goal orientations and theories of intelligence. Learning goals are characterized by a desire to increase competence and mastery of new problems and skills. This orientation may include persistence, varied problem solving strategies, and positive views of challenges. Performance goals are less optimistic, and focus on outcomes rather than process. A desire to elicit positive responses and to avoid negative evaluations, characterize this orientation. The authors utilized two instruments for data collection; a Goals Inventory and the Ellis Irrational Beliefs Scale. The resultant data were analyzed using quantitative methods; to provide comparative results for traditional and nontraditional students. SAT scores and cumulative GPA were obtained to provide objective measures for comparison with analyzed data. Results indicate that higher scores in learning orientation, or high scores in both learning and performance orientation provide statistically significant gains in achievement reflected by GPA. This effect was higher for nontraditional versus traditional students in both orientation areas. Irrational

beliefs correlations were not significant for nontraditional students, perhaps because of greater life experience. Comparison of learning and performance goals provides a further means to better understand the motivation and achievement of nontraditional students.

Taniguchi and Kaufman (2003) address the overall low completion rates of nontraditional students through the use of data from the Natural Longitudinal Study of Youth. Their research focuses on factors, other than age, common to adult undergraduates, and correlates a selection of these characteristics to successful college completion. The authors acknowledge that previous research suggests that factors such as part-time enrollment and lack of financial aid contribute to relatively lower completion rates for nontraditional students. Three major themes frame the study: 1) enrollment status; 2) human capital factors; and 3) the enabling and constraining effects of family characteristics. The authors defined nontraditional students for purposes of this study as those entering a college or university at age 21 or older; a departure from the commonly used age parameter for nontraditional students, (over 25 years of age). The study systematically examines a range of characteristics common to adult undergraduates under these three themes. The findings are supportive of previous research mentioned above, but additionally establish that duration of enrollment and previous enrollments, (indicators of persistence), contribute to increased completion rates. Advancing age and pre-school family members appear to hinder completion, while older children in the home may have a positive impact. Due to the large data sample size and quantitative methods, the findings provide both enhanced understanding of the student population, and indications of how this group might be better supported. Additionally, the results

provide indicators for further inquiry in the areas of both nontraditional student characteristics and achievement.

Career development objectives are routinely identified in current research as being high value outcomes for nontraditional students. Foltz and Luzzo (1998) designed and conducted a study specifically targeted to this population, using the self-efficacy model developed by Bandura (1982) in investigating how college students' career decision-making self-efficacy might be improved. A career counseling workshop was specifically designed to include elements paralleling Bandura's concepts, and believed to enhance self-efficacy. A sample 66 nontraditional students ranging in age from 26 to 54, and ranging from freshmen to seniors, was recruited from the 1210 students comprising this population at a southeastern public university. Respondents were assigned to either an experimental treatment group or a delayed treatment group, and were administered the Career Decision Making Self-Efficacy Scale (CDMSES) as scheduled for each group. The workshop intervention was found to be of statistically significant benefit to both the experimental and delayed-treatment control group. The objective of this research was to establish the value of self-efficacy theory to nontraditional student career development, and college level counseling, but also contributes to the broader understanding of nontraditional students. Specifically the findings can provide indicators of how career development interests can be better supported and give indicators of which specific career issues require further study.

Lynch and Bishop-Clark (1998) observe that nontraditional students are most often studied in environments where they constitute a significant percentage of the student population, and note that most report few problems and mostly positive experiences. The

authors theorize that comparison between a traditional campus, with a small number of nontraditional students, and a commuter, or branch, campus with a more diverse student population, might provide a different perspective on nontraditional student satisfaction. Research was conducted at Miami University, in the Midwestern United States, where nontraditional students comprise approximately 5% of the main campus student population and 40% on the branch campuses. Focus groups of older undergraduates were held to investigate their educational experiences and serve as a basis for survey development. The finalized survey instrument consisted of questions from these areas: 1) students' perceptions of the mixed age college experience; 2) students' perceptions of the student /professor relationship; and 3) attitudes toward each age group. The finalized survey instrument included 73 questions scored on a Likert-type scale, four open-ended questions, and 20 demographic questions. The wording of several questions was changed to reflect the location of population surveyed; main or a branch campus. Results indicated differences in the experiences of nontraditional students based on the age diversity of the campus, and on the main campus the minority status might be perceived as problematic. It appears that nontraditional students may require additional support where their percentage of the student population is low, but in general, faculty and students of all ages appreciate the mixed age classroom. This study considers a number of environmental, and institutional, factors which may impact on the nontraditional student experience, and need be considered in subsequent research design.

Satisfaction with educational experiences is routinely assessed by means of survey instruments designed to use yes or no questions, or with each of several educational dimensions rated independently on a Likert-type scale. Student responses may be driven

by recollection of particularly positive (or negative) experiences, or key on a single dimension, such as scheduling or availability of student services. Elliott & Shin (2002) highlight the need for improved student satisfaction assessment, provide a detailed discussion of existing techniques, and propose an alternative method using a multiple-item weighted gap score analysis approach. Using this methodology students or graduates are asked to provide two ratings for each of a number of attributes; a rating for expectations (or ideal rating) and a second rating based on actual experience. Satisfaction, or dissatisfaction, is indicated by the gap between ideal and actual rating, with resultant data appropriate for statistical analysis. The application of this methodology is detailed and the results of a study (N = 1,805) at an upper Midwest university is provided for illustrative purposes. Their results seem to indicate that this approach can more accurately reflect levels of satisfaction than the traditional single item rating scale. Older students comprised nearly 25% of the sample, but were not tested as a separate group. The methodology could, however, be used with virtually any identified student population and might prove particularly useful with the nontraditional student population. The improved method proposed by the authors does appear to produce more accurate data useful for institutions to better identify and deliver what is important to students.

College outcomes often focus on the traditional college cohort, but Donaldson (1999) describes development of a model of college outcomes specifically addressing adult undergraduate students. Six key elements are identified and explained in some detail that effect learning, and the relationships and interactions are illustrated through the use of a comprehensive model. The six major elements related to adults' undergraduate experiences are: 1) prior experiences; 2) orienting frameworks such as motivation, self-

confidence, and value systems; 3) adult's cognition or the declarative, procedural, and self-regulating knowledge structures and processes; 4) the "connecting classroom" as the central avenue for social engagement and for negotiating meaning for learning; 5) the life-world environment and the concurrent work, family, and community settings; and 6) the different types and levels of learning outcomes experienced by adults. Unlike other studies, which compare traditional undergraduates with adult students, this work starts from the known characteristics of this population and the model is offered as a means to further discussion and research into how adult students succeed despite lower levels of campus involvement, rusty academic skills, and busy lifestyles. Explanation of the model suggests that adult college students may engage the new knowledge obtained in college in different and perhaps more immediately useful ways then do traditional age students. The interactive nature of the model highlights the complexity of the adult undergraduate experience and raises questions that confirm a need for alternative strategies to evaluate outcomes that move beyond traditional measures. The author suggests areas for further study, which would further our understanding of this student group and better meet their educational needs.

The preceding articles, in the general areas of satisfaction and achievement, provide background for examination in this study of the program choices and educational outcomes of adult undergraduates. Current literature, of both theoretical and practical focus, indicates that a wide range of factors impact on adult learners at all stages of the higher education process, in both positive and negative ways. The higher education decision-making of nontraditional aged students can only be studied and understood in terms of the effectiveness and outcomes of this highly interactive process and the results

of the numerous choices, at various decision-points, made from a variety of available options.

Decision Satisfaction

This section focuses on one specific area of inquiry for the study, with several articles specifically addressing satisfaction with decisions made and with the decision-making process. This might differ from the consideration of satisfaction in the previous section, as outcome satisfaction might well differ, particularly after educational goals have been met, from satisfaction with the decision process. Most studies of educational satisfaction consider only outcomes and educational attainment, with little attention to the choices and processes, and for this reason these articles are from marketing and business journals. Consideration of alternatives, the decision-making process, and post-decision reflection are discussed in some detail, and provide needed background for a study focused partially on decision satisfaction.

A detailed consideration of decision-making and resultant outcomes is provided by Tsiros and Mittal (2000) who report on the design and conduct of four studies of consumers and their purchase decisions and subsequent levels of satisfaction or regret. The detailed discussion of antecedents, moderators, and consequences in the decision process provide a framework for further study, and aid in understanding the internal conflicts inherent in decision-making. The four studies described were designed to test a series of hypothesis through manipulation of pre-decision information availability, and a series of possible known or unknown outcomes. Undergraduate students constituted the research samples for each study, and were provided with specific scenarios and data

elements to test selected hypothesis. Results provided are useful in better understanding information availability as an essential element in decision-making, and the relationships to subsequent satisfaction levels. Consideration of regret, based on other than desired outcomes, appears applicable to higher education, as well as other types of life decisions. Repurchase decisions, (an important consideration in marketing decision research), appear to be seldom applicable, but may be an important element in the study of student retention or decisions relative to program or institutional change. Although these studies were conducted from a business, rather than higher education perspective, their methods and findings are useful in developing a systematic approach to the study of decision-making.

Nontraditional undergraduates are diverse in a number of ways, as indicated in current literature, and Handley and Heacox (2004) provide a model of decision-making that incorporates both a cultural-based component, as well as the impact of previous experience, into the decision process. The Integrative Decision Space Model (IDSM) was developed to enhance understanding of decision-making in a multi-national business environment, but the non-organizational elements of the model appear applicable to any diverse population and a range of choice situations. Using the family unit, or other individual support system, as synonymous with the organizational component of the model renders it even more applicable in considering individual life decisions. The four components of the model are: 1) the organizational component, including relationships to other key players; 2) process component comprising activities and steps in reaching a decision; 3) cultural component which may include shared values, cultural patterns, and ways of behaving; and 4) decision-maker component that recognizes effects of specific

training or life experiences on the decision process. Key to the IDSM is the decision space where the four components of the model intersect and the decision-maker executes a decision task and influences outcomes. A very useful piece in conceptualizing nontraditional undergraduate decision-making as an integrated act, as culture and past experience may figure prominently in educational choices.

Chi (2001) proposes a trait model of decision-making with goal orientation being the variable of individual differences. This model depicts how individual differences influence the decision makers' cognitive processes, how selection is made from available alternatives, and how decision makers solicit and utilize feedback. Drawing on the work of Dweck and Leggettt (1988) two goal orientations are considered; performance goal orientation and learning goal orientation. A performance goal orientation stresses demonstrating competence and validation seeking, whereas a learning goal orientation focuses on gaining competence through acquiring additional skills and mastery of new situations. Solicitation and use of feedback are important in differentiating the orientations; those with a learning orientation perceive less risk, or negative reflection on their abilities, in seeking and acting on feedback. The two methods described to examine trait effects on decision-making are potentially useful in studying particular decisions and the underlying cognitive processes. The first method, the verbal protocol approach, employs experimental tasks with the use of verbalization and coding to develop comparative data between individuals and identify critical points in the decision process. The second method, task analysis, is perhaps more useful in the study of higher education decision-making, as actual decisions may be investigated. Research subjects provide details on actual decision events, other individuals involved and their input, and specifics

of their consideration of alternatives; these inputs are then coded and a decision map developed. This method recognizes that significant decisions are seldom reached in isolation and may be reached over a period of time, and allows for further questioning and exploration at any point in the decision process. Although decision satisfaction was not a focus of this piece, the latter investigative method would permit inclusion of post-decision outcome investigation.

Students considering higher education alternatives are subject to "expert" advice from a variety of institutional and non-institutional sources. Fitzsimons and Lehmann (2004) conducted a series of four experiments at the University of Pennsylvania to investigate the effects of perceived expert advice on alternative selection and subsequent satisfaction with decisions made. Results in all cases indicate that advice which conflicts with previous preferences, or independent research, can result in both increased decision difficulty and lessened decision satisfaction. Although three of the experimental situations dealt with low value decisions, experiment four utilized a new vehicle purchase scenario, which for most would be considered a high value decision with some long-term ramifications. Obviously decisions regarding higher education require far greater commitment and resource expenditure, and have greater long-term consequences, but the findings of this study may be useful in better understanding possible effects of perhaps conflicting advice. The authors identified the concept of reactance, where expert advice conflicts with choice tendencies, and decision difficulty and selection of previously "rejected" alternatives increase. Expert advice which is consistent with choice tendencies tends to move the decision maker in the recommended direction, decrease decision difficulty, and increase both confidence and satisfaction. Most potential higher education

students rely on some type of advice or guidance in reaching enrollment decisions, and consideration of how these external inputs might affect both choices and subsequent satisfaction is potentially useful in researching student decision-making.

Investigation of individual decision-making in a group context is reported by Ariely and Levav (2000). Nontraditional aged students are subject to group influence, (as are most individuals), and this may impact on decisions and perceived satisfaction with their choices. The researchers' focus is on decision-making in social groups, but family or work groups common to the educational decision-making environment may introduce the same, (if not more complex), dynamics into the decision process. They propose that four types of goals are common to individual decision-making in a group situations: 1) satisfying one's tastes (individual alone goal); 2) minimizing regret and avoiding losses (individual / group goal); 3) information gathering (individual / group goal); and 4) self-preservation (individual / group goal). The three studies described, although based on low-value decisions, indicate that choices may result from balancing individual goals with those triggered by membership in a group, and thus introduce additional dynamics into the decision-making process.

The above studies represent several perspectives, and decision elements, not commonly encountered in educational research addressing decision-making and satisfaction. Several studies cited earlier noted that nontraditional students might be more likely to exhibit a stronger consumer orientation than the traditional college cohort, and these latter studies address consumer considerations in decision-making. Additionally, they illustrate systematic study of the decision process and satisfaction issues, without linkage to specific higher education outcomes. A number of elements introduced provide

clarification of decision process issues or give direction for further investigation of information flow and alternatives, decision points, outcomes, and satisfaction.

Summary

While the above research is certainly useful, and provides direction for efforts to better understand and serve the nontraditional student population, it is almost entirely focused on a single factor, such as college choice, achievement motivation, or satisfaction with the educational experience. Many works consider adult students during or shortly after completing their college experience, with little consideration of the decisions and choices which placed them in the student population. This study gains a more detailed and useful understanding of this population by taking a broader view, starting with pre-enrollment choices and following through to ascertain satisfaction not only with the chosen program, but with the effectiveness of decisions made. Identifying critical decision points and the key factors in nontraditional student decision-making facilitates development of effective interventions to better assist this population. Consideration of satisfaction with the educational experience and decision satisfaction completes the decision-making cycle and permits evaluation of the effectiveness of chosen courses of action and can aid in identifying flaws in the decision process.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The lack of a sufficient body of knowledge addressing educational decision-making and satisfaction, focused specifically on this population, indicated that an exploratory study using qualitative methods would be most appropriate and potentially useful (Babbie, 2001). Previous studies have either limited relationship to the research problem areas or fail to focus on the specific study population and, therefore, provide insufficient basis for meaningful quantitative research at this time. A qualitative case study approach provided the widest possible insights into students' experience and was consistent with the identified research problem and purpose of this study.

Research Design

Due to the complexity of educational decision-making, the differing levels of satisfaction with several aspects of the educational experience, and lack of previous research in these areas the grounded theory approach was selected to examine student experiences and perceptions. The grounded theory approach is based on development of theory by inductive means, begins with observation rather than hypothesis, and was first applied in sociological research (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Through the systematic gathering and analysis of data, the commonalities of responses generate categories and

linkages. Theory emerges as these data elements are linked into themes and theoretical propositions (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Grounded theory provides a building block approach to development of new theory by providing a systematic approach to attaching meanings to raw data and explaining complex behaviors. This approach is appropriate in an exploratory study such as this, with intentions to discover patterns and develop theory from the study results. Known factors of the research population were considered in this study, however, rather than starting with no preconceptions as is common to grounded theory (Babbie, 2001).

Sample

Research subjects for this study were nontraditional students, (adult undergraduates age 25 or older), with at least a one year break in education following high school. Soliciting participants from two fields of study (Health Sciences and Business) was intended to provide data more comparable than if greater randomness were allowed in the study population. Focus groups were the primary means of data collection and this methodology required recruiting sufficient numbers of voluntary participants, constituting a convenience sample (Gay, 1996), rather than a more random selection. This limitation was recognized, but the collection of demographic data from each participant assisted in establishing this group as representative of the larger nontraditional student population. Demographic data also made possible the identification of participants whose background, experiences, or other unique characteristics placed them outside the norm for the target population and might impact on findings. Pre-screening of volunteers was employed to achieve some group leveling in terms of non-traditional

student characteristics other than age and to reflect the diversity of the student population. There was no pre-determined number of participants, in keeping with the grounded theory approach, and recruitment and data collection continued until no new data emerged.

In addition to focus group sessions, four volunteers participated in a preliminary study using individual interviews for data collection, and one student services administrator was interviewed regarding institutional policies and programs for nontraditional students. These additional activities served to accomplish the data triangulation appropriate to qualitative research (Gay, 1996), and served several other purposes. The individual interviews were conducted prior to the focus group sessions, and were used to generate data, finalize the questions derived from the research questions to be used in the groups, and to develop prompts to generate additional discussion. The student services administrator interview provided background to frame student responses into the context of the particular college environment and enabled proper interpretation of specific student responses that were related to institution unique policies or programs. Additionally, response categories and emergent themes were presented and the administrator provided impressions and interpretations based on her experience.

Topical Focus

Three broad topics of inquiry based on the identified research problems guided the conduct of this study.

1. Decision-making: Determine what factors led to the decision to defer, or to fail to complete, a higher education course of study following high school,

what subsequently transpired that led to current enrollment, and how the current institution and course of study were selected from the available options.

2. Satisfaction: Assess the level of satisfaction with the current higher education experience, with the higher education decision-making process overall, and how this process might be better supported based on improved information, a wider array of available options, or by other means.
3. Decision process satisfaction: Determine if the consideration of Higher Education were to start over, if the same or other decisions would be made, and if different, in what ways.

Discussion in each of these areas was initiated in the focus groups by asking a short series of questions. The draft questions were developed from the research problem, and literature review, and finalized during the individual interviews. In keeping with the characteristics of focus groups, these questions were sufficient to stimulate discussion and interaction, and resulted in more usable data than might have been obtained in a lengthier individual interview process (Babbie, 2001).

Examination of decision-making, which placed these undergraduates into the non-traditional aged student population, provided insight into the factors effecting their choices and provided data useful in planning to serve this student group. The initial choice whether or not to pursue higher education immediately following high school, (the path of the traditional college cohort), was addressed in the first two questions:

1. What were your reasons for not entering college immediately following high school?

OR

If you did enroll and attend college after high school, but failed to finish, what were your reasons for discontinuing your studies?

2. What factors would have made you more likely to begin higher education immediately following high school? (or to continue, if enrolled, but failing to complete your degree or program?).

A second decision point was that which placed the student in the undergraduate population at an age beyond the traditional. Questions were again tailored to fit both initial enrollees and returning students.

3. What factors or circumstances led you to enroll (or re-enroll) at this point in your life?
4. Can you identify any single factor that may have been most important in reaching this decision?

Selection of institution and program was the third identified area of choice for the nontraditional student, which placed them in this population and was investigated by the final questions of this section.

5. What factors caused you to select the particular institution and program in which you are enrolled?
6. What other higher education options did you consider and why?

The focus of the first set of questions, directed at decision point one, was intended to identify inhibitors to the pursuit of higher education. Insight into this area of decision-making provided indicators of how members of this group might have been encouraged to continue studies without interruption following high school. As indicated earlier, this is

an area of particular interest in Nevada. Decision point two was investigated by questions three and four, regarding the decision to enroll or re-enroll and were intended to determine the critical factors which encouraged members of this group to join or re-join the undergraduate population. The final two decision-making questions, focused on decision point three, related to choices with regards to specific institutions and programs, and were intended to identify factors, such as scheduling, format, and cost that may be key issues to the adult student population.

Satisfaction was addressed in the final four focus group discussion questions, which examined the issue from several perspectives.

7. What is your level of satisfaction with your current educational experience, including the institution and specific program?
8. How satisfied are you with the process of decision-making that led you to delay entry or to re-enroll in an institution of higher education and what might you have done differently?
9. How satisfied are you with the process of decision-making that led you to your current institution and program, and what might you have done differently?
10. What might have helped you better plan and prepare for a higher education and improved your decision-making?

This final question set addressing satisfaction issues was key to understanding the entire higher education decision-making process for members of this population. Other studies focused on a much narrower definition of satisfaction that was primarily concerned with results or outcomes, or required reflective responses following

completion. These questions were intentionally keyed to the quality of decisions and the process, and how it might have been improved, in addition to considering general satisfaction with the educational experience.

Data Collection Protocol

Planning for collection required consideration of a number of factors, each with potential to impact on outcomes and success of the study. Site selection and subject recruiting strategies were key to successful implementation of the qualitative methodology selected. Both were driven by access and availability issues, and required significant coordination and pre-work. Constant attention to the requirements of ethical conduct not only safe-guarded the participants of the study, but insured the integrity of the research process. The role of the researcher, and the potential for bias, can impact on data and outcomes (Babbie, 2001), and, therefore, the roles and procedures were carefully planned. Strategies for data collection were sufficiently detailed to limit researcher bias, allow for some degree of standardization, and insure objectivity. Reducing the negative impact of extraneous influences and the limitations of the study were also considered as a part of planning for the data collection effort. The consideration and pre-work for each of these factors is addressed in some detail in the following sections.

Site Selection

Requirements of a suitable host institution for the conduct of this study included the presence of a diverse nontraditional student population in sufficient numbers to enable voluntary recruiting of subjects, and institutional support to facilitate the research process. The Community College of Southern Nevada (CCSN) proved ideal for conduct

of this study, with a highly diverse student population of over 35,000 and a wide range of programs and services appealing to nontraditional students (CCSN Profile, 2005). Additionally, the Office of Institutional Research and Planning and the Academic Departments from which subjects were recruited were highly supportive of the research effort. Students at CCSN, due to the two year nature of programs, represent both vocationally oriented students and those intending to later transfer to a four-year institution. Each of those populations, with differing educational goals and aspirations were represented in the research sample, and provided unique perspectives relating to both educational choices and satisfaction issues.

Ethical considerations

Prior to initiating the study, the Social / Behavioral Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Nevada Las Vegas approved the research proposal on October 14, 2005. Approval included a review of specific procedures, informed consent forms, and recruiting materials. At the Community College of Southern Nevada, the Office of Institutional Research and Planning approved the proposal on November 4, 2005.

Major ethical concerns in this study included obtaining informed consent and confidentiality concerns of participants. The completion of the approved informed consent form, following explanation, and voluntary appearance at the focus group session were deemed sufficient to establish informed consent. Students were further advised that they could withdraw from the study at any time. Absolute confidentiality cannot be assured in a focus group format, and this was explained to potential subjects during the recruiting process and addressed in the focus group in-briefings. Records were not kept which reflect participant names or other identifying data, and this was made known to

focus group participants. Additionally, each participant signed a permission form for audio-taping of the session. The nature of this type of research minimizes ethical concerns and the measures described are deemed adequate both in terms of informed consent and confidentiality.

Researcher role

Common to qualitative studies, the researcher was the primary instrument of data collection (Merriam, 1998) and performed all functions associated with gaining research approval, subject recruiting, and the data collection and analysis process. A source of continuing debate regarding qualitative research is the belief that researcher bias often influences both processes and findings (Patton, 2002). Several steps were taken to limit the impact of any predispositions which could have influenced the conduct of this study. A critical review of my prior interactions with nontraditional students, and my own experiences as a member of this group, allowed for examination of preconceived notions and beliefs which might result in researcher bias. Closely adhering to established data collection and analysis procedures provided an additional means of insuring data-driven outcomes. Additionally, maintaining objectivity was an essential skill in my previous role as a management consultant, and in my training as a school counselor.

Collection strategies

Following submission of the research proposal to the Institutional Review Board at UNLV, contact was made with the Office of Institutional Research and Planning at CCSN. A meeting with the Director of this office allowed me to explain the purpose and plan for the proposed research, and request institutional approval and support. Following formal approvals at both UNLV and CCSN, contacts were made with administrators and

faculty in the two targeted program areas, Business and Health Sciences, at CCSN. Using previous faculty contacts, and through a research overview presentation at a Health Sciences Department meeting, in-class recruiting of study participants was permitted. Several site visits were required over a period of several weeks for coordination and participant recruiting and screening. Potential volunteers were given a short in-class briefing, provided a copy of the recruiting flyer and informed consent, and asked to contact the researcher by email to volunteer or seek additional information.

Four initial volunteers were asked to participate in the preliminary study individual interviews which served as a source of triangulation data (Gay, 1996). Discussion questions derived from the research questions, for use with the focus groups, were refined and tested with this population and prompts developed to encourage elaboration and generate discussion. Results of these sessions resulted in the revision of several questions and clarification of instructions to prevent overlap in the final research area (satisfaction).

As volunteers became available based on their schedules, focus group sessions were held, with four sessions (two each with Health Sciences and Business students) over a period of two months. Sessions commenced with an explanation of process and goals, the collection of demographic data by means of a six item instrument, and signing of informed consent and permission to audio-tape forms. Following these administrative matters the actual sessions commenced with sequential consideration of the ten discussion questions developed in the two primary areas of research interest. The researcher served as facilitator, but avoided involvement in content, and focused on process and the movement of the group in addressing the focus questions. The focus groups were presented with each of the ten questions on large chart paper. Abbreviated

participant responses were recorded on color-coded sheets keyed to the particular question, to aid in later transcription and coding. This recording in front of the group may also have stimulated additional responses and discussion. Sessions ranged from 60-90 minutes in duration depending on size of the group, level of interest, and participation. Groups ranged from four to seven participants and can be characterized as high energy with excellent interest and interaction. Later transcribing of audiotapes allowed for integration of additional data and checking of hand recorded responses for accuracy.

The student services administrator interview followed completion of focus group data collection and analysis and focused on what services and programs at CCSN were specifically developed for the nontraditional student population and solicited feedback on response categories and emergent themes. Any particular recruiting strategies employed, special programs, or additional insights into this campus group were also of interest. Notes from this interview were also transcribed and maintained as an aid to further data interpretation as it provided an institution specific frame of reference for student responses.

Extraneous factors

Two areas were of concern in this regard, external distracters and dysfunctional participants (Krueger & Casey, 2000). Efforts were made to provide a private setting for the focus group sessions, free from extraneous noise and non-group activity. This proved to be a non-issue as the office of Institutional Research and Planning provided excellent facilities as needed. Focus groups test the facilitation skills of the group leader and disruptive participants can negatively impact on the process and productivity. Pre-

screening identified several volunteers with obvious issues or behaviors, which could have hindered group work, and they were diplomatically dis-invited from the study.

Limitations

The results of this research are limited in several ways. CCSN is a public college, and students attending private institutions may, or may not, differ significantly from study participants. Focus on two educational program areas, health sciences and business, provided comparative data, but this may differ from students with other educational goals. The study design itself is also somewhat limited by the short time of data collection and the fact that participants were asked to respond to questions requiring recall of past events. Additionally, qualitative research is generally not accepted as generalizing beyond the study sample (Miles & Huberman,1994).

Data Analysis

Utilizing the grounded theory method as a framework, collected data were analyzed using the constant comparison method first described by Glaser and Strauss (1967). Categories of collected data emerged and were coded using this constant comparison method, with concepts identified (Babbie, 2001). Data elements were coded and categorized, which facilitated identification of patterns and relative strengths of responses, and permitted comparison between focus groups and programs. Marginal notes recorded additional insights, assisted in interpretation, and served as memory aids. Use of spreadsheets, as an aid to categorizing and tabulating, assisted in identification of trends and emergent themes from the findings. Due to the limited scope of this study,

data analysis was conducted manually. Although lacking the precision of quantitative analysis, this methodology was highly effective in this study.

Procedures

Recording focus group responses on color-coded chart paper for each of the ten questions at the group sessions aided in initial organizing of data for analysis. Following each session, responses were coded (classifying or categorizing individual pieces of data) (Babbie, 2001). Responses for each of these ten general focus questions were grouped by emerging categories as they were transcribed. This step took place immediately following the group sessions, and permitted some recall of specifics of responses beyond the brief record, and aided in writing memos or marginal notes. Memos are the brief notes attached to pieces of data that clarify or place the information in a specific context, and enable further analysis of the collected data (Babbie, 2001). Strauss and Corbin (1990) further define these notes as serving specific functions. Code notes identify the code labels and their meanings, and provide clear parameters for a particular label. Theoretical notes can refer to noted relationships, meaning of concepts, or theoretical propositions. Methodological issues are recorded using operational notes and may include considerations in the data collection process or circumstances that may aid in understanding the data. The code notes were the primary means of initially categorizing the response data.

Following the initial coding from the sessions written records, audio tapes of the session were transcribed and used to check for any missed or partial responses, and as a quality control check on initial categorizing and memos. Using the initial data sort, code notes, memos, and transcribed audio record, the response categories were refined, and

responses in some cases moved to more appropriate categories, and in several instances new categories emerged. Categorizing formed the basis of concept maps, or graphic representation, of the partially analyzed data. This more clearly and forcefully indicated trends, relationships, and relative strength of responses than was apparent in the rather lengthy, though categorized, transcriptions (Babbie, 2001). Spreadsheets were employed at this point to tally numbers of responses within categories, represented strength of responses, and assisted in later identification of themes. The response categories identified were then re-checked and matched with supporting data for identification of linkages and relationships. Write-ups from the individual interviews and focus group sessions provided usable comparative data and the basis for theme development.

Analysis considerations

Scheduling of focus groups to allow for analysis of collected data prior to the next session was key to maintaining integrity of the data and prevented inadvertent distortion. Issues such as category compatibility were addressed following collection and analysis and, as open coding was employed throughout, later adjustments were anticipated and accomplished to aid in comparison and interpretation.

Records of collection and analysis from each session were maintained as separate files and not co-mingled. The design of the study, with findings from each group session initially reported separately, depended on this level of data separation to insure accuracy in describing findings. Following preparation of these individual session interpretations, a further step in data analysis was required to meaningfully compare program of choice findings. This required some broadening of categories, and adjustments, to allow for clear

comparisons and understanding. It is this second phase of data analysis that was the basis of theme identification and preparation of the final results section.

Summary

The research methodology and design described was appropriate to the level of available research regarding the identified population, (Babbie, 2001), and suitable to collect data sufficient to accomplish the goals of the study. Most major considerations of coordination and actual collection were addressed in the collection protocol section and are based on recognized best practices (Kreuger & Casey, 2000). The data analysis procedures were based on the proven techniques of Glaser and Strauss (1967). Following the methodology outlined, the study objectives were met with meaningful and useful outcomes.

CHAPTER 4

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Use of the research methodology detailed in the previous chapter provided significant usable data in the research areas of nontraditional student decision-making and satisfaction. This chapter begins with an explanation of the inquiry format, and relates the research questions to the discussion questions utilized in the individual interviews and focus groups. A description of the research participants follows, and highlights those particular characteristics of the study sample that may have impacted on individual perceptions of their higher education experience. A subsequent section provides an explanation of the manner in which results appear in the text. Results are then presented from two of the three data sources, preliminary study individual interviews and focus groups. Illustrative remarks and emergent response categories are provided for each of the areas of questioning, the three identified decision points and both experiential and decision satisfaction, in each of the interview and focus group sections. Emergent category comparisons are provided by data source, and the finalized response categories and emergent themes from data analysis are then considered in some detail. Information on institution specific programs and services for nontraditional students, and feedback regarding the emergent data categories and themes as provided by a senior student services professional are then presented in the third and last data source section. A final section summarizes and reviews the findings of the collection and analysis effort.

Inquiry Format

The following five research questions provided the focus of inquiry:

1. What factors led to the decision to delay, or fail to complete, a higher education course of study following high school?
2. What subsequently transpired that led to current enrollment?
3. How was the current institution and course of study selected from the available options?
4. How would you characterize your level of satisfaction, or dissatisfaction, with the current educational experience? (institution and program)
5. How would you characterize level of satisfaction, or dissatisfaction, with the decisions made regarding higher education? (If you were to start over, what might you do differently?)

These five research questions were formatted into a total of ten discussion questions, utilized in data collection. Discussion questions one and two investigated research question one and were worded to be applicable to both students with no previous higher education experience, and those who had been previously enrolled, but stopped out at some point. This area of questioning constitutes decision point one in subsequent discussion.

1. What were your reasons for not entering college immediately following high school, or if you did enroll, but failed to complete, what were your reasons for stopping-out?

2. What factors would have made you more likely to begin college immediately after high school or to continue, if you did enroll and stopped out?

Questions three and four related to research question two above and are considered in discussion as the second higher education decision point.

3. What factors or circumstances led to your current enrollment?

4. What single factor may have been most important in reaching this decision?

Research question three regarding choice of current institution and program, considered decision point three, was addressed by discussion questions five and six.

5. What factors caused you to select the current institution and program?

6. What other higher education options did you consider and why?

The remaining discussion questions, seven through ten, addressed several aspects of satisfaction. Discussion question seven investigated research question four, focused on satisfaction with the current institution and program and an area common in current student satisfaction research.

7. What is your level of satisfaction with your current educational experience, and why? (including institution and program)

Discussion questions eight through ten related to decision satisfaction, research question five. This is an area of little previous research, and the questions were worded to elicit reflection and discussion, and to provide indicators of how decision-making might have been better supported.

8. How satisfied are you with the decision process that led you to delay enrollment, or re-enroll, and what might you have done differently?

9. How satisfied are you with the decision process that led to your current institution and program and what might you have done differently?

10. What might have helped you to better plan and prepare for higher education and improved your decision-making?

The above discussion questions were keyed to the research questions as indicated, and designed to generate meaningful responses and stimulate discussion when used in individual interviews and focus groups. Results are presented in later sections for the three discrete decision points identified and for both experiential and decision satisfaction.

Research Subjects

Primary research subjects for the individual interviews and focus groups were recruited from the Business and Health Sciences programs at the Community College of Southern Nevada (CCSN). All participants matched the established research subject criteria; undergraduate, age 25 or older, with at least a one year break in education following high school completion. A total of 27 volunteers participated in the study, ranging in ages from 25 to 54, a mean age of 29, and 16 females and 11 males participating. Thirteen were in Business programs and 14 in Health Sciences, with 63% in their second year of study. Over half of the subjects had previous higher education experiences and several had earned associate degrees or technical certificates. Due to the small sample size other demographic data were not collected, but the study population appeared reflective of the diversity found at CCSN. The student services interviewee had more than three years experience and was well versed in issues routinely encountered in

serving nontraditional students. This familiarity with institutional policies and programs proved valuable in framing and attaching appropriate meaning to subject responses. Additionally, the interviewee provided insightful impressions of the response categories and themes developed from the interview and focus group data.

Presentation of Results

Results from each of the research subject groups is presented in both narrative and tabular format. The particular subject group is introduced, beginning with the preliminary study, and each investigated area is then considered sequentially. Explanatory material, illustrative subject comments, and a table of emergent categories are provided for each of the areas investigated; three higher education decision points and several aspects of student satisfaction. A summary follows the presentation of each group's results and emergent categories. This presentation procedure is then repeated for each data source, (Health Sciences and Business focus groups). Following consideration of results by data source, a subsequent section provides a comparative analysis of emergent categories by data source, again utilizing narrative and illustrative tables. Emergent themes follow, organized by relationship to area of investigation, followed by the results of the student services interview. A chapter summary provides several highlights and suggestions for use of the research results.

Preliminary Study

Four early research volunteers were recruited to participate in individual interviews, rather than focus groups, to serve as a small preliminary study. Questions developed to

investigate the research questions, comprising three higher education decision points and both experience and decision satisfaction provided the format for questioning. The ten previously prepared discussion questions, as explained in the Inquiry Format section of this chapter, and derived from the research questions and literature review, were utilized and finalized as a result of these interviews. Additionally, prompts were developed to generate additional comments and discussion. Analysis of the collected data resulted in tentative response categories, and provided important indicators of issues important to this population. The individual interview format permitted in-depth questioning and the use of detailed follow-on questions, which elicited a great deal of raw data from the limited research sample.

Decision-making

The first six discussion questions used in the interviews focused on nontraditional student decision-making at three identified decision points, and relate to research questions one through three. The first two questions addressed reasons for delaying college or stopping out, and what might have encouraged earlier enrollment and completion. This is the point at which students were effectively removed from the traditional college cohort, and of particular interest to those concerned with recruiting and retention. Several student comments from question one were particularly insightful in this area and indicate subjects' earlier level of exposure to, and perceptions of, higher education, as well as the type and level of support and encouragement they received.

"I had no connection with college in high school, I was afraid."

"Attending college was not normal in my hometown and no one in my family has a college education."

"Tired of school, no desire."

"It was never mentioned at home, and my high school counselor never talked to me about college."

"I hated high school and I thought college was more of the same".

Those who had attended, but failed to complete, mentioned financial issues and lack of clear educational goals, or focus, as major factors.

"I couldn't afford to continue without working fulltime, and it was simply too hard for me."

"Didn't know what I wanted to do or why I was there."

When asked what would have made them more likely to enroll or to continue, question two, comments highlighted the need for academic and family support to successfully make the transition to higher education.

"Had I understood how college worked, and the value of a higher education, I would have been much more likely to enroll."

"If my family and my high school teachers and counselor had been more supportive, I would have probably started after high school."

"I didn't have the information I needed to make good decisions."

Those who stopped out indicated finances were a primary factor in the decision not to continue.

"I had other responsibilities and work came first, as I had to pay the bills."

"The money I had for college ran out and I didn't understand student aid at that time, I do now."

Note that the above responses highlight family support, academic preparation, and making a connection to higher education as being important at this decision point. It is apparent that schools and families both play significant roles in this transition process from high school to college. Student responses from the first decision point questioning in the preliminary study, and the subsequent analysis of this collected data, resulted in development of the tentative response categories in Table 1.

The second decision point investigated, from research question two, was that which led to current enrollment as nontraditional students. Interviewees were asked specifically to describe what factors or life experiences led them to their current status as adult students. Further, in question four subjects were asked to identify a single factor that was most important to them in reaching this decision. The following comments are generally reflective of the responses, with economic and financial benefits mentioned most frequently. Personal issues, including self-actualization, challenge, and self-esteem also surfaced from this area of questioning.

"I want a profession, not another job."

"Finally recognized the value of education."

"My children are in school now and I want to set an example for them, I don't want them to make the mistakes I did."

"Had to do something different, I needed a new start."

"Money!"

When asked to identify a single factor as most important, comments reflected both career and personal issues.

Table 1

Preliminary Study Response Categories for Nontraditional Students: Decision Point 1 – Delayed or Failed to Complete Higher Education (Research Question One)

Discussion Question	Identified Categories
1. What were your reasons for not entering college immediately following high school?	Readiness Family support No exposure / information
OR	
If you did enroll, but failed to complete, what were your reasons for stopping-out?	Lack of interest / focus Financial
2. What factors would have made you more likely to begin college immediately after high school?	Family Support Exposure to Higher Education Academic support
OR	
To continue, if you did enroll and stopped out?	Financial resources

"Had a new job with promotion possibilities and found out I could get a grant to help pay for school."

"I wanted a promotion and more money."

"Wanted to prove to myself that I could succeed in school and in life."

"Probably the challenge of going back to school and being successful this time, and proving it by graduating."

This area of questioning generated a great deal of reflection and discussion and a wide range of responses. When asked to identify a factor as most important in the higher education decision, several interviewee responses had not been previously mentioned in the general discussion. Tentative categories developed from responses in this area are depicted in Table 2.

Table 2

Preliminary Study Response Categories for Nontraditional Students: Decision Point 2 – Current Enrollment (Research Question Two)

Discussion Question	Identified Categories
3. What factors or circumstances led to your current enrollment?	Career Financial / economic Personal issues
4. What single factor may have been most important in reaching this decision?	Career advancement Education benefits Challenge / self-actualization

The final decision point and the last two decision-making questions were directed to the selection of specific institution and program. Students were asked why they made their particular selections and what other options were considered. Several comments provide early indications of what factors were significant to members of this study population in choosing their current college and course of study.

"Talked to several friends for recommendations."

"Scheduling here is convenient and I get good value for the money."

"I already knew what I wanted to take."

Comments regarding other options considered were limited, but several were of interest.

"Heard UNLV was not friendly to adults."

"Options were limited when I started, better now."

Responses from this line of questioning would indicate that few other educational options were considered once the decision had been reached to pursue a higher education. This was surprising, based on the range of available local, or on-line, educational options and the apparent sophistication of the interviewees. The emergent response categories are depicted in Table 3.

Satisfaction

Questions seven through ten addressed differing aspects of student satisfaction and alternative courses of action. Differing from much current research, satisfaction was investigated from several perspectives, to ascertain not only students' satisfaction with their educational experience, as is common, but with the decision-making process which led them to this point.

Table 3

Preliminary Study Response Categories for Nontraditional Students: Decision Point 3 – Current Institution and Program (Research Question Three)

Discussion Question	Identified Categories
5. What factors caused you to select the current institution and program?	Recommendations Convenience Value / cost
6. What other higher education options you consider and why?	UNLV Private technical schools

Level of satisfaction with current program and institution, from research question four, was the focus of question seven and elicited the following representative comments.

"Poor counseling led me to take courses I didn't need."

"Institution is great, with good instructors who will help you."

"On-line courses are good, but tough"

The final three discussion questions were keyed to research question five. Questions eight and nine focused on an area of little previous research, satisfaction with the higher education decision-making process and what different courses of action might have been taken. Several comments were particularly representative in this area of questioning.

"Wish I had gone back sooner."

"Knew what I wanted, just took a long time."

"Didn't want to go after high school, went back when I was ready."

"I should have gone back to school sooner, it took a long time."

The final question asked students to share what might have been done differently to help them plan and prepare for higher education. Four comments are reflective of the general consensus.

"Wish I'd had more information and help in high school."

"More support from my family."

"In high school maybe a counselor could have helped, because I just didn't understand how college worked."

"Don't know if anything would have changed my actions, I just wasn't ready."

The initial categories derived from the analysis of the four satisfaction area questions, (experience and decision-making), are provided in Table 4. Question seven related to satisfaction with the current educational experience, while eight through ten focused on the less studied area of decision satisfaction.

Interview results from the preliminary study provided valuable comparative and exploratory data used throughout the remainder of the collection and analysis process. These individual interviews provided not only a great deal of usable data and poignant comments, but allowed for finalizing the questions to be used to generate focus group discussion. In several cases this required re-wording to clearly focus on the specific areas of research interest. These revised questions, as used in the focus group sessions, are at appendix A.

Table 4

Preliminary Study Response Categories for Nontraditional Students: Student Satisfaction Experience and Decision-making (Research Questions 4 & 5)

Discussion Question	Identified Categories
Program Satisfaction (Expressed as a range, emergent categories follow)	
7. What is your level of satisfaction with your current educational experience, and why? (including institution and program)	Satisfied to Undecided Career impact Institutional issues
Decision satisfaction (Expressed as a range, emergent categories follow)	
8. How satisfied are you with the decision process that led you to delay enrollment or re-enroll and what might you have done differently?	Satisfied Dissatisfied - timing
9. How satisfied are you with the decision process that led to your current institution and program and what might you have done differently?	Satisfied – information & program Dissatisfied - timing

10. What might have helped you to better plan and prepare for higher education and improved your decision-making?	Information Family support Academic support

Focus Groups Overview

The primary method of data collection was a series of focus group sessions with volunteer research subjects from the Health Sciences and Business Departments of the Community College of Southern Nevada (CCSN). A total of four sessions were held over a two-month period in on-campus facilities provided by CCSN. The collection methodology proved sound in that the synergistic effect, which characterizes the focus group method, resulted in detailed answers and illuminating group discussion. Student responses were rich with recollection and reflection, a recognized strength of qualitative research (Babbie, 2001). Investigation into each of the identified decision points and satisfaction areas, with pertinent comments and emergent data categories, is addressed in detail in the following sections. Results are initially provided by programs from which the volunteers were recruited for clarity and later comparison.

Health Sciences Focus Groups

The two Health Sciences focus groups were attended by a total of 12 subjects, (one group of eight and one of four), with each session lasting approximately 90 minutes. In addition to the response data, several additional, and unsolicited, and particularly

insightful comments are provided following review of illustrative comments and the tentative response categories.

Decision-making.

Using the same sequencing as had been used in the preliminary study individual interviews; three critical decision-making points, (research questions one through three), were investigated using the first six discussion questions previously introduced. This was followed by discussion of questions seven through ten directed to satisfaction with both the educational experience and the decision process, (research questions four and five). The first two questions addressed the initial decision to delay higher education following high school, (or reasons for stopping-out if enrolled), and factors which might have contributed to a decision to enroll sooner, or to complete if enrolled. Sample responses provide some indications of what factors were important to this particular research sample when they first considered higher education.

"Wasn't focused on education, I just wasn't ready."

I didn't know much about college, or understand what I needed to do, or how to get started."

"I knew where I was going, but I took breaks."

"Lasted one week, I wasn't ready."

"Had a scholarship, but worked full-time, simply too hard."

"If I'd known then what I wanted to do."

"I had children, moved, always delays."

Questioning regarding what factors would have made enrollment, (and / or completion), more likely, question two, elicited the following comments.

"I needed encouragement, no one ever mentioned college; my family really didn't understand college or push me to go."

"Better academic counselor, more information and support."

"I didn't really have an educational goal to work toward."

Analysis of students' responses to the first two questions posed to the Health Sciences groups resulted in the emergent data categories for decision point one displayed in Table 5.

Discussion questions three and four considered the second decision point; those choices that led to current enrollment. Question three asked specifically what transpired that led them to be currently pursuing a higher education and the follow-on, question. four, asked subjects to identify a single factor as most important in this decision. Responses tended to be of two general types, that either an event, such as job loss or divorce, precipitated the educational decision or a long-term situation, such as chronic under-employment, was acted upon. Sampling of the subject comments provided detail and reflected both pre-conditions.

"Needed to do something to bring in more money."

"I wanted to be a "professional.""

"I always wanted a career, but it was unspoken in my world."

"Needed something more to better provide for my family."

"My child is in school and now I have time."

"Got divorced and this was another life change."

Table 5

Health Sciences Response Categories for Nontraditional Students: Decision Point 1- Delayed or Failed to Complete Higher Education (Research Question 1)

Discussion Question	Identified Categories
1. What were your reasons for not entering college immediately following high school?	Readiness Family responsibilities No information/support
OR	
If you did enroll, but failed to complete, what were your reasons for stopping-out?	Lost interest Conflicting responsibilities Relocation
2. What factors would have made you more likely to begin college immediately after high school?	Family support Academic support
OR	
To continue, if you did enroll and stopped-out?	Focus/direction

When asked to identify the single most important factor in this decision, subject comments were predominately focused on career and economic benefit, although personal issues were mentioned.

"I want to take pride in what I do."

"Decided what I wanted to do." (nursing)

"Better life for me and my family."

"I've always had a job at the bottom, want to move up."

Responses from the health sciences subjects were dominated by economic, financial, and career reasons, as might be expected of those in programs with clear career outcomes, but other less tangible motivations were mentioned as well. Particularly in the responses to question 4, asking subjects to identify one reason as most important in their decision to enroll or re-enroll, factors such as self-esteem, higher social standing, and prestige were mentioned in sufficient strength to justify a category of such personal or intrinsic issues. Analysis of the second decision point, (from research question two), responses resulted in the data categories in Table 6.

Selection of current institution and program was the focus of the third identified decision point, (research question three), and addressed by discussion questions five and six. Question five asked students to provide details of their decision-making, and these responses provided valuable indicators of what issues were important in making these educational choices. Asking about other options considered, in question six, provided insight into the detail of the decision-making process and to some degree the awareness of the availability of local higher education options. Comments revealed that these subjects considered a range of factors in reaching their decisions.

"Someone told me CCSN had the best program for what I wanted."

"The limited entry program, I like to challenge myself."

"Tuition here is reasonable and I really like the convenience."

"CCSN is the only institution with this program.

Table 6

Health Sciences Response Categories for Nontraditional Students: Decision Point 2 - Current Enrollment (Research Question 2)

Discussion Question	Identified Categories
5. What factors or circumstances led to your current enrollment?	Career Financial/ economic Time availability Family example
6. What single factors may have been most important in reaching this decision?	Career advancement Education benefits Licensing/ credential Validation / self-actualization

"Heard the program is very good and it was what I was looking for."

"Another person in the same program encouraged me."

Comments regarding other options were generally not positive and did not indicate that a wide range of other courses of action had been seriously considered.

"Thought of going into the RN program at Nevada State."

"Technical schools, but their reputation is not good."

"I thought about going out of state, but relocation and the expense was a limitation."

It appeared in several responses that students had decided to return to school and selected the institution and program simultaneously. This contrasts with the generally accepted process of discrete decision-making steps and has been previously noted with adult students by Bers and Smith (1987). This area of questioning generated much comment and discussion, and analysis revealed a range of emergent data categories as reflected in Table 7.

Table 7

Health Sciences Response Categories for Nontraditional Students: Decision Point 3 - Institution and Program (Research Question 3)

Discussion Question	Identified Categories
5. What factors caused you to select the current institution and program?	Recommendations Convenience/ services Limited options Quality / value
6. What other higher education options did you consider and why?	Private technical schools Nevada State College Out of state programs

Satisfaction

Satisfaction with the current educational experience and the process of decision-making which led to this point were investigated through use of the final four focus group discussion questions. The questions focused attention not only on the well researched area of satisfaction with the educational program, but with subjects' levels of satisfaction with their decision-making, and consideration of what they might have done differently.

Comments regarding satisfaction with institution and program, (question 7), were generally positive, but highlight several specific areas of possible concern. These sample student responses range from the general to the very specific.

"I have a high level of satisfaction, the program is what I wanted and I'm doing well."

"Depends on where you are in the program."

"I've been really satisfied up to this point, but I'm only in my first year of the program."

"I've bonded with other students and learned from them."

"The longer I'm in the program the more I like it."

"No one to teach you, and no feedback, with on-line classes."

"Why do we need this class? I asked this a couple of times."

The following two questions focused on satisfaction with the decision-making process, (research question five), first with the decision that led them to delay enrollment or re-enroll, and what they might have done differently. Comments indicated a general level of satisfaction, with some expressed regret over not acting sooner.

"Wish I would have started sooner."

"Didn't have good information, not a good recruiter."

"My mistake was in not starting after high school, I simply wasted a lot of time and could have a career now."

"Should have started three years ago"

"Satisfied because it took me time to make the right decision."

"I should have a career by now instead of a series of jobs."

When asked about satisfaction with the decisions leading to their current institution and program, subjects were generally more positive regarding assistance received and information, but again mentioned timing as a source of dissatisfaction.

"I've researched other programs by state."

"Could have used more information, but overall I am satisfied."

"I knew what I needed to do and I just kept putting it off" (returning to college, initial registration).

"All the information I needed was available, and when I needed help CCSN was there for me."

The final decision satisfaction area question solicited student reflections on what might have enabled them to improve their decisions and to better plan and prepare for higher education. These comments indicate what, in retrospect, students believe was lacking in their decision-making.

"More research."

"Should have taken more initiative and realized sooner that I'm responsible for my own education and future."

"If I had gotten more support from family or at school it would have made a difference."

"I should have taken education seriously, much sooner."

The satisfaction area questions, derived from research questions four and five, provided strong indications of the degree of subjects' satisfaction with their current educational experience, of interest to their institution, but also with their own decision-making, and how they perceive this could have been improved. Subjects expressed general satisfaction with their particular institution and program, but were less satisfied with their decision-making, (research question five), based primarily on issues of timing, support, and research. Table eight provides the emergent response categories developed in each of these areas.

Health Sciences Summary

The two focus groups composed of Health Sciences program students provided valuable insights into the research areas of higher education decision-making and satisfaction. Several of the emergent response categories were in common with those identified by the preliminary study individual interviews, but others represented new perspectives. Questioning in each area of investigation provided data sufficient to develop categories based on frequency or strength of responses.

Analysis of data from the first decision point questioning, to delay or fail to complete higher education, revealed three response categories in sufficient strength to be considered common to the group. Readiness issues were mentioned by over half of the focus group participants, and several related this back to negative high school experiences. Mentioned also were immaturity, lack of direction, and needing a break

Table 8

Health Sciences Response Categories for Nontraditional Students: Student Satisfaction Experience and Decision-making (Research Questions 4 & 5)

Discussion Question	Identified Categories
Program Satisfaction (Expressed as a range, emergent categories follow)	
7. What is your level of satisfaction with your current educational experience? (including institution and program)	Satisfied Institution and experience Dissatisfied - program issues
Decision satisfaction (Expressed as a range, emergent categories follow)	
8. How satisfied are you with the decision process that led you to delay enrollment or re-enroll and what might you have done differently?	Dissatisfied Timing Academic support
9. How satisfied are you with the decision process that led to your current institution and program and what might you have done differently?	Satisfied - information Dissatisfied - timing

10. What might have helped you to better plan and prepare for higher education and improved your decision-making?	Research Personal initiative

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following high school. Family issues mentioned included not only a lack of support for higher education, but also expressed family expectations of students' seeking immediate employment following high school, or encouraging early marriage. The third emergent category focused on lack of information about higher education opportunities and limited, or no, exposure to a college campus or college life. Responses from those who had enrolled following high school, but failed to complete, provided data resulting in the identification of two categories. A surprising number (five) subjects reported that weak interest, no clear educational objectives, and lack of focus were primary reasons for stopping-out. Financial reasons comprised the second category with issues of insufficient funds, lost scholarships, and lack of student aid all being mentioned.

The second question asked subjects what would have made them more likely to enroll immediately following high school, or to have continued to completion if enrolled. Not surprisingly, considering the data categories from the previous question, family support and increased exposure to higher education dominated the discussion. Academic support, both at high school level and through college outreach and counseling were deemed important in this regard as well. These who had stopped-out had a variety of reasons and comments, but the only strong commonality was in the financial area.

The second decision point, regarding the factors which led to current enrollment, also yielded emergent data categories based on strength and commonalities of student responses. The career category comments focused on moving from job to career, status and prestige issues, and self-actualization needs. Monetary issues and long-term economic benefits constituted the financial category. Life changes, or significant events, were also identified as a category and included divorce, forced unemployment, and death of spouse.

When subjects were asked to reduce the various reasons above to a single, most important factor, the categories shifted. Career was still a primary factor, but two new categories emerged. Availability of educational funding (grants, loans, scholarships, employer paid, etc.) appeared as very significant in this discussion. Challenge and self-actualization appeared to be much more important than originally expressed in the previous area of questioning.

Choice of current institution and program was the third decision point and considered both reasons for selection, and what other options were considered. Recommendations from friends, family, and co-workers were the most frequently mentioned selection factors, followed by convenience considerations. Cost and value was the third identified category in this area of questioning. Interestingly, not mentioned as significant in this decision area was college outreach or recruiting activities. Other higher education options considered fell in two categories, Nevada State College (NSC) or the various local private career and technical schools. Choices considered were rather more limited than expected, and do not reflect the range of viable local and on-line options.

Significantly, the University of Nevada Las Vegas (UNLV) was not mentioned by members of either group as having been considered as a higher education option.

The final four questions provided insight into both subjects' satisfaction with the educational experience, and with the higher education decision-making process; derived from research questions four and five. Program satisfaction discussions resulted in assessment of level of satisfaction, with most subjects either satisfied or undecided, and emergent categories, which reflect factors impacting on this assessment. Institutional issues and career impact were identified as response categories in this area, with the latter being largely outside the control of the institution. Decision satisfaction was for the most part positive with responses indicating dissatisfaction centered on timing of decisions, and in some cases regret over not having started, and completed, earlier. Decisions regarding choice of institution and program were rather more varied, with general satisfaction related to program and institutional information availability, and timing issues being the source of much dissatisfaction. Responses to the final question, which asked subjects what information, or support, might have improved their higher educational decision-making, resulted in three emergent categories, all mentioned previously in other areas of questioning. Availability of information, family support, and academic support seemed to these groups, at least, to be keys to improved educational decision-making.

The Health Sciences focus groups provided significant response data and emergent data categories in all areas of questioning. Additionally, several areas of possible institutional concern were identified which could be acted upon, or be subject of further research.

Several additional subject comments are provided from members of this group as being particularly insightful and, although being outside the area of research questioning, are important in better understanding adult students and the higher education process.

"My daughter goes to CCSN and although we are both students, our views on higher education are much different."

"As a mother, I know the value of modeling behavior, and it applies to education."

"Your high school experience is of paramount importance, it dictates how you feel about education (including higher education)."

Business Focus Groups

Business programs were the recruiting source for eleven subjects who attended one of two focus groups (one group of six, one of five) during spring semester 2006. Sessions lasted approximately 90 minutes and utilized the same format and discussion questions as used for the Health Sciences focus groups.

Decision-making

The three critical decision points from research questions one through three, identified from the research problem and the literature review, were each subject of two discussion questions. The first two questions investigated reasons for not entering (or not completing) college immediately following high school, and asked what factors might have made subjects more likely to enter and/or complete their higher education at this time. Some representative and illuminating comments provide insight into this area of earlier higher education decision-making.

"I had an awful high school experience"

"I didn't think I could do it, I had no confidence and no one tried to convince me I could do it"

"Nobody I know went to college"

"Saw the value, but I already had a family and job, no time"

"I wanted to be a Marine and I thought college could wait until later."

"No interest and no goals."

"Didn't have any idea what I wanted to do and had no idea where to turn for help in deciding."

"I went one semester and quit"

"Working and going to school was too hard."

"I had no money. Didn't know about loans and scholarships"

The following comments were generated by the second question, indicating what might have encouraged earlier attendance and completion.

"Needed help with focus, maybe vocational counseling."

"I needed more information, not just how, but why of higher ed."

"If I'd known how not having college would affect me later on."

"More family support, but not just money."

Response frequency was significant in several areas of questioning and the emergent data categories are depicted in Table 9. Several categories were similar, or the same, as those developed from the Health Sciences data, but others were unique to this subject group.

The second set of two discussion questions were directed to reasons for current enrollment and further, asked students to identify one reason, or factor, as being most

important in this decision. This area constituted the second identified higher education decision point from research question two, and provided comments indicating a wide range of factors impacted on the choice to return to school.

Table 9

Business Response Categories for Nontraditional Students: Decision Point 1 - Delayed or Failed to Complete Higher Education (Research Question 1)

Discussion Question	Identified Categories
1. What were your reasons for not entering college immediately following high school?	Readiness No information Financial
OR	
If you did enroll, but failed to complete, what were your reasons for stopping-out?	Interest/ focus Time
2. What factors would have made you more likely to begin college immediately after high school?	Information Academic support
OR	
To continue, if you did enroll and stopped-out?	Financial issues

"Could not advance without more education, I had gone as far as I could without returning to school."

"Wanted to be proud of myself, and for my family to be proud of me."

"I want a better future and to improve my life."

"I got divorced, had no job, and needed a new start."

"Reached a point in my life where I wanted to change my life with and a real career, and a better future."

When asked to identify a single "most important" factor, question four, subjects' comments reflected both external focus (careers) and internal motivation (self-esteem) and included the following.

"I wanted to accomplish something and prove myself."

"To advance my career."

"I want a better job with more pay and a little higher status."

"To prove I could do it."

"Needed a new start and to build my confidence."

The emergent data categories from this area are reflected in Table 10. A number of responses were in the area of personal issues which figured more prominently than in the previous Health Sciences groups.

The two questions addressing research question three and the third decision point, selection of current institution and program, provided some detail of what factors were important to this sample and what resources were utilized in their decision-making. Question five asked what factors were considered in selecting the current institution and program, and produced significant discussion and comments, including the following.

Table 10

Business Response Categories for Nontraditional Students: Decision Point 2 - Current Enrollment (Research Question 2)

Discussion Question	Identified Categories
3. What factors or circumstances led to your current enrollment?	Career Personal issues
4. What single factors may have been most important in reaching this decision?	Intrinsic Career

"I asked my friends who go here."

"My brother recommended CCSN."

"Right program and good schedule for me."

"Cheaper than UNLV, or private schools, and money is a serious concern for me."

"Got good information on what I wanted and it all seemed to match my college goals and what I wanted to accomplish."

"The counselor was helpful and was able to match my needs with a program and schedule."

"Great facility, convenient for me, and affordable."

When asked what other institutions, and programs were considered, discussion was more limited and comments indicated that relatively few other options had been considered. Several subjects expressed that they had considered no other options.

"I checked on some private schools, but they were too expensive."

"I checked primarily on-line programs and some local business schools."

"None!"

Data analysis resulted in the emergent categories in Table 11. Note the apparently limited consideration of other educational options.

Table 11

Business Response Categories for Nontraditional Students: Decision Point 3 - Institution and Program (Research Question 3)

Discussion Question	Identified Categories
5. What factors caused you to select the current institution and program?	Academic Support Recommendations Cost and benefits
6. What other higher education options did you consider and why?	Private schools None

The final four group discussion questions focused on several aspects of satisfaction. Question number seven, derived from research question four, requested information regarding the level of satisfaction with subjects' current institution and program. Responses were generally positive and indicated overall satisfaction, but with some references to specific problem areas or system failures.

"Took classes I didn't need, due to poor advising."

"Overall, I'm satisfied with my program."

"Scheduling is hard, every semester."

"They don't offer what I need every semester, it makes it very hard to plan if you have other things going on in your life."

"CCSN is student friendly."

"Good instruction and I think I get good value for my tuition."

"I'm satisfied, and I am very proud of my progress."

The final three discussion questions, from research question five, focused on the little studied area of decision satisfaction. Questions eight and nine focused on satisfaction with decision-making rather than outcomes, and additionally investigated what other courses of action subjects might have considered. As with previous individual interviews and focus groups, responses included numerous references to the timing of decisions as being an area of dissatisfaction. Comments from question eight, which investigated the decision to delay enrollment or to re-enroll, reflect a general feeling that timing of their decisions were poor in that they had not started sooner, and to a lesser degree that incorrect or insufficient information played a role in their decision dissatisfaction.

"I made sound decisions, but should have started sooner."

"Now I know I should have started after high school."

"I don't think I was ready, and so starting sooner might not have worked out well for me."

"The information I had wasn't good and so my decisions were not good."

"I wish I had known what I want to do sooner."

"Didn't have much help from family or school and it turned-out ok, but I do wish I'd started much sooner."

Question nine asked about satisfaction with the decisions leading to current institution and program, and results were more positive than for question eight. Several comments are indicative of this apparent student satisfaction, but indicated a need for greater information and academic support.

"It is fine now, but I didn't know how to get started."

"I could be further along if I had understood course flow and pre-requisites a little better; I wasted time (and money)."

I'm very satisfied that I picked the right college and program."

A final focus group satisfaction discussion question asked subjects to reflect on what might have enabled them to better plan and prepare for higher education, or improved their decision-making. The resultant comments expressed a of range views focusing on both internal and external factors.

"I should have been much more proactive."

"Talked to the counselors and college recruiters in high school."

"Taken education more seriously in high school."

"Gotten more information and started sooner"

The satisfaction area findings indicated a general level of satisfaction with the current educational experience, but less with the decision making process, research question five. Timing and availability of information were again mentioned as major factors in decision satisfaction. Analysis of program and decision satisfaction data resulted in the emergent categories reflected in table 12.

Business Summary

Two focus groups were conducted with 11 subjects from Business programs at CCSN, using the procedures previously described, with each lasting approximately 90 minutes. Emergent response categories were, overall, very similar to those developed from the preliminary study individual interviews and previous groups, in most areas of questioning. Some unique perspectives were expressed, however, and several new data categories emerged from the collected data during analysis based on strength and frequency of responses. Results were most similar in the decision-making responses and dissimilar in the satisfaction areas, possibly related to differing program selection and educational objectives.

The first two discussion questions, developed from the research question one, addressed the decision to delay or fail to complete college, decision point one. Those not going immediately on to college following high school expressed readiness issues as important in this decision, as had previous groups and individuals. Lack of information and exposure to higher education also figured prominently, as did financial issues. Strength and frequency of responses was sufficient to identify three emergent categories in this area of questioning for those not going on to college immediately following high

Table 12

Business Response Categories for Nontraditional Students: Student Satisfaction Experience and Decision-making (Research Questions 4 & 5)

Discussion Question	Identified Categories
Program Satisfaction (Expressed as a range, emergent categories follow)	
7. What is your level of satisfaction with your current educational experience? (including institution and program)	Satisfied Dissatisfied - Program issues
Decision satisfaction (Expressed as a range, emergent categories follow)	
8. How satisfied are you with the decision process that led you to delay enrollment or re-enroll and what might you have done differently?	Satisfied to undecided Timing Support
9. How satisfied are you with the decision process that led to your current institution and program and what might you have done differently?	Satisfied Information Support

10. What might have helped you to better plan and improved your decision-making?	Focus / interest Information

school; 1) readiness, 2) information support, and 3) financial. Those who had started, but failed to complete, indicated loss of interest or focus and time pressures as being significant factors at a level sufficient to be considered as data categories. Several subjects expressed, upon reflection, that the underlying issue for them had been lack of a clear educational goal, which might have enabled them to remain motivated and focused on completion.

When subjects were asked what factors would have made them more likely to enroll, (or to continue if enrolled), following high school, question 2, the responses clustered around more and better information regarding higher education options, and greater academic support including both college preparatory courses and high school level counseling and assistance. Significantly not mentioned were college outreach efforts, which might have partially compensated for the perceived service deficiencies at high school level. Most responses from those who enrolled, but failed to complete a degree were finance related, such as difficulties with student aid, or time issues involving the inherent conflicts of simultaneous employment and college study.

The second higher education decision point investigated, research question two, focused on the processes and choices, which resulted in subjects' current enrollment. Question three asked what specific circumstances led to current enrollment and resulted

in a wide-ranging discussion, but only two data categories based on strength and frequency. Career issues were related by a majority of subjects, but personal issues, such as pride in accomplishment, proving themselves, and setting an example for other family members were also important to this group as gauged by their responses.

When asked, in question four, to identify the single most important factor in this decision, many of the responses again were again career centered and keyed to potential economic benefits. Intrinsic or internalized personal issues were nearly as important to this subject group in terms of "most important."

Decision point three, identified in research question three, investigated factors important to subjects in the selection of current institution and program and other options considered. Recommendations were an important identified element in these decisions for this population, and constituted one of three emergent categories. Academic support and cost and benefits were also identified in sufficient strength and frequency to be considered categories in this area of questioning.

The area of other options continued to produce limited discussion, and it appeared that the majority of these subjects had engaged in limited research and consideration of other higher education options. Private schools were considered at a level to constitute a response category, as was "none."

Satisfaction areas considered, from research questions four and five, encompassed not only satisfaction with the current educational experience, but with the higher education decision process. A final question asked students to reflect on what might have better supported and facilitated their educational decision-making, how it could have been improved.

The first satisfaction question referred to the current educational experience, the most common focus of educational satisfaction investigations. Subjects expressed overall satisfaction, with sources of dissatisfaction related to specific events or experiences, (scheduling, course pre-requisites, etc.).

Moving to the less studied area of decision satisfaction, subjects were asked how satisfied they were with the decision process that led them to delay enrollment, or to re-enroll, and what they might have done differently. Expressed level of satisfaction ranged from satisfied to undecided, with timing, again, being a primary issue, with support for decision-making constituting the second emergent category.

The second question investigating decision satisfaction, question 9, focused on choice of current institution and program, with subjects asked to rate their satisfaction and share what they might have done differently. This area generated significant discussion with students generally satisfied with their decision-making, and the emergent categories of information and support being related to how greater research might have improved decision quality.

In the final area of investigation, what might have helped subjects better plan and prepare for higher education; two areas were identified and discussed at length. Subjects focused on both external support mechanisms, such as greater information availability, but also on the less tangible areas, of focus, interest and readiness. The latter areas appear ambiguous, and seemingly difficult to compensate for with meaningful interventions.

Overall, the Business focus groups provided both reinforcement for a number of emergent categories developed from other data sources, and identified important new categories in several areas of investigation. A number of subject comments included in

the write-up highlight the complexity of higher education issues with the nontraditional student population in general, and this subject group in particular.

Emergent Category Comparisons

Following completion of interview and focus group data collection, and the analysis effort, category comparison tables were developed in each of the investigated areas. These tables highlight the similarities of responses in many cases, but also indicate the divergence of views for some areas of questioning, which may relate to the make-up of the particular group, educational goals, or other unique factors.

Table 13 displays emergent category comparisons in the first area of investigation, the decision to delay higher education following high school, or to fail to complete if enrolled. Note the dominance of readiness and support issues in these responses.

Response category comparisons for the second identified decision point, current enrollment, are depicted in table 14. In this area career and economic issues were dominant, but personal and intrinsic issues also appeared in strength.

Table 15 compares response categories resulting from the discussion of choice of current institution and program. Recommendations were seen to be particularly important to a range of subjects, as well as cost and benefits, and convenience. Note the rather limited categories developed for other options considered.

Category comparisons for satisfaction, table 16, begins with results for the current educational experience, research question four, and decision satisfaction at two points, and identification of actions and mechanisms that might have enabled subjects to improve their educational decision-making, related to research question five. Subjects expressed

Table 13

Response Category Comparisons for Nontraditional Students: Decision Point 1 - Delayed or Failed to Complete Higher Education (Research Question 1)

1. What were your reasons for not entering college immediately after high school?

Preliminary Study	**Health Sciences Groups**	**Business Groups**
Readiness	Readiness	Readiness
Family support	Family responsibilities	Information
No exposure / information	No information / support	Financial issues

OR

If you did enroll, but failed to complete, what were your reasons for stopping-out?

Preliminary Study	**Health Sciences Groups**	**Business Groups**
Lack of interest / focus	Lost interest	Interest / focus
Financial	Conflicting responsibilities	Time
	Relocation	

2. What factors would have made you more likely to begin college immediately after high school?

Preliminary Study	**Health Sciences Groups**	**Business Groups**
Family Support	Family support	Information
Exposure to college	Academic support	Academic support
Academic support		

OR

To continue, if you did enroll and stopped-out?

Preliminary Study	**Health Sciences Groups**	**Business Groups**
Financial resources	Focus / direction	Financial issues

Table 14

Response Category Comparisons for Nontraditional Students: Decision Point 2 – Current Enrollment (Research Question 2)

3. What factors or circumstances led to your current enrollment?

Preliminary Study	**Health Sciences Groups**	**Business Groups**
Career	Career	Career
Financial / economic	Financial / economic	Personal issues
Personal issues	Time availability	
	Family example	

4. What single factor may have been most important in reaching this decision?

Preliminary Study	**Health Sciences Groups**	**Business Groups**
Career advancement	Career advancement	Intrinsic
Education benefits	Education benefits	Career
Challenge	Licensing /credential	
Self-actualization	Validation / self-actualization	

Table 15

Response Category Comparisons for Nontraditional Students: Decision Point 3 – Current Institution and Program (Research Question 3)

5. What factors caused you to select the current institution and program?

Preliminary Study	**Health Sciences Groups**	**Business Groups**
Recommendations	Recommendations	Academic support
Convenience	Convenience / services	Recommendations
Value / cost	Limited options	Cost and benefits
	Quality / value	

6. What other higher education options did you consider and why?

Preliminary Study	**Health Sciences Groups**	**Business Groups**
UNLV	Private technical schools	Private schools
Private technical schools	Nevada State College	None
	Out of state programs	

general satisfaction across groups with the current experience, but were less satisfied with their decision-making. Timing of decisions was a common source of dissatisfaction, but subjects were generally satisfied with the information support for their decisions. When queried about what might have better supported their educational decisions, subjects focused on external factors, family and school support, and information, and internal issues such as focus and interest.

Table 16

Response Category Comparisons for Nontraditional Students:

Student Satisfaction (Research Questions 4 & 5)

Program Satisfaction (Expressed as a range, emergent categories follow)

7. What is your level of satisfaction with your current educational experience (including institution and program)

Preliminary Study	**Health Sciences Groups**	**Business Groups**
Satisfied to undecided	Satisfied	Satisfied
Career impact	Learning environment	Dissatisfied –
Institutional issues	Institution - general	Program issues
	Dissatisfied –	
	Program issues	

Decision Satisfaction (Expressed as a range, emergent categories follow)

8. How satisfied are you with the decision process that led you to delay enrollment or re-enroll and what might you have done differently?

Preliminary Study	**Health Sciences Groups**	**Business Groups**
Satisfied	Dissatisfied	Satisfied to undecided
Dissatisfied - timing	Timing	Timing
	Academic support	Support

9. How satisfied are you with the decision process that led you to your current institution and program and what might you have done differently?

Preliminary Study	**Health Sciences Groups**	**Business Groups**
Satisfied – info & program	Satisfied - information	Satisfied
Dissatisfied - timing	Dissatisfied - timing	Information
		Support

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10. What might have helped you better plan and prepare for higher education and improved your decision-making?

Preliminary Study	**Health Sciences Groups**	**Business Groups**
Information	Research	Focus / interest
Family support	Personal initiative	Information
Academic support		

The emergent data category comparisons above provided significant insight into both nontraditional student decision-making and satisfaction with both their educational experience, and the quality and process of educational decision-making. In a number of areas, commonalities existed across subject groups, and in some cases findings supported anecdotal information pertaining to this student group. Other area findings and categories represented new data and other than expected perspectives. Critical consideration in each investigated area provided a solid foundation for the following steps in sequential data analysis.

Emergent Themes

Further analysis of raw data, emergent data categories, and collection notes facilitated the development of emergent themes. A total of 15 themes were developed from the three decision points and experience and decision satisfaction issues reflected in the five research questions. Themes are presented following the areas to which they relate.

Decision point 1 (Research Question 1) – Delayed or failed to complete higher education

Reasons for not entering college immediately following high school or to fail to complete if enrolled.

1. Readiness issues related to maturity, educational experiences, and willingness to continue educational activities beyond high school were common to nontraditional students sampled.
2. Family support for higher education was lacking and other mechanisms, such as high school guidance counselors and college outreach programs, were insufficient to compensate.
3. For those who had started college, but failed to complete, a lack, or loss of interest and failure to maintain focus appeared common, and related to an absence of clear educational objectives.

Factors which would have made subjects more likely to enroll following high school, or to continue if enrolled.

4. Family and academic support are keys to moving from high school to college, particularly for students from families where higher education is not the norm.
5. Students who stopped out indicated finances played a major part in their decisions and improved financial aid mechanisms could improve retention.

Decision point 2 (Research Question 2) - Current Enrollment

Factors and circumstances that led to current enrollment.

6. Career and financial issues dominated the educational decision-making for this sample of nontraditional students, with personal issues such as challenge, setting an example for children, or self-actualization also being important considerations.

Single factor most important in reaching this decision.

7. Career issues including career change, advancement, licensing and credentialing were identified as most important, but facilitated by employer education benefits and other student aid, or other helpful mechanisms

Decision point 3 (Research Question 3) - Current institution and program

Factors that caused selection of the current institution and program.

8. This sample of adult undergraduates placed great importance on the recommendations of friends, family, co-workers, and other acquaintances in reaching educational decisions.
9. Subjects mentioned convenience and / or services as important considerations, with cost and value being less often mentioned.

Other options considered.

10. Private colleges and technical school were considered by a majority of these students, but other public institutions received less serious consideration.

Satisfaction with educational experience (Research Question 4) -

Level of satisfaction with current institution and program.

11. Subjects expressed general satisfaction with their current educational experience, with negatives centered on program issues, such as scheduling and course pre-requisites.

Decision satisfaction (Research Question 5) -

Satisfaction with the decision process that led to current enrollment or re-enrollment.

12. Timing of the decisions leading to a higher education was a major source of dissatisfaction, with many indicating that they should have started and / or completed sooner. Most, however, expressed satisfaction with the process and quality of their decisions.

Satisfaction with the decision process that led to the current institution and program.

13. Timing, or the delay, of educational decision-making was the primary source of expressed dissatisfaction.

Might have helped to better plan and prepare for higher education and improved decision-making.

14. Support mechanisms were felt to be keys to improved decision-making and included family support, academic preparation and counseling at high school level, and higher education institutional outreach and recruiting programs.

15. Several areas were mentioned which might be best considered individual factors, and meaningful support mechanisms have yet to be fully developed. Included in this area were comments regarding personal initiative, internal motivation, and maturity or readiness.

The themes above represent the significant findings of the study. In several cases they represent reinforcement of previous research findings. In other areas themes represent new information, with directions for further inquiry strongly indicated. One theme identified was sufficiently specific and detailed to be currently actionable by the institution, (theme 14).

Decision-making themes paralleled what might have been expected based on available previous research, with the exception of readiness issues. This area is little mentioned in current literature, yet appears in such strength across the study samples to merit further inquiry. The generally accepted importance of family support and financial issues in making the successful transition to college, and following through to completion, were supported by the study data. Further, career and economic issues were found, as in previous research, to figure prominently in nontraditional students' educational decisions. An unexpected finding was the level of importance accorded to recommendations of family, friends, and others in reaching educational decisions. Another unexpected result in this area of questioning was the apparent tendency to simultaneously decide to return to school and select institution and course of study, thus reducing the decision process to a single step.

Satisfaction area themes addressed both subjects' educational experiences and decision-making. Subjects expressed general satisfaction with their current institution and

program as expressed in the emergent themes, with dissatisfaction resulting from seemingly minor problems, (scheduling, pre-requisites, etc.). Dissatisfaction with decision-making primarily related to timing and having delayed the start, or completion, of a higher education. Subjects were generally satisfied with their research and decision process and with information available. Responses strongly indicated in several themes a need for improved and more widely available institutional outreach activities, and this is an area where action is indicated. The final theme presents an area of challenge, as designing effective interventions to affect individual motivation, focus, and interest seems a daunting task with a limited body of knowledge to form a foundation.

Student Services Interview

The interview with a senior student services professional was conducted as the third data collection element, with the intention of soliciting feedback on the categories and themes previously identified. This interview was held at the West Charleston campus of CCSN, and over the course of approximately one hour the developed data categories, emergent themes, and services and support for nontraditional students were discussed.

In discussion of the initial data categories the interviewee expressed general agreement with the findings from the three identified decision points and experience and decision satisfaction areas. The only area that appeared unexpected was the limited reference to financial issues as major factors in educational decision-making in the study findings. Although financial issues appeared in the categories developed in several investigated areas, CCSN internal research had shown finances to be more important across a broader spectrum of educational decision areas.

Interviewee reaction to the 15 emergent themes was again generally positive and findings appeared to be supported both by internal institutional research and interviewee personal experiences. The tendency of adult students to make the decision to return to school, and simultaneously select institution and program, had been previously noted and was discussed in consideration of educational options (theme 10). Student dissatisfaction due to the timing, or delay, of educational decisions was acknowledged as common by the interviewee (theme 12 & 13). Discussion of support mechanisms identified in theme 14 led to the discussion of specific services and programs for adult students at CCSN.

Due to busy life-styles, adult students value convenience, and CCSN has adapted well to serving this demographic. On-campus childcare, free parking, as well as the more academically centered areas of scheduling, on-line courses, and intense shortened courses and specialized programs are examples of these efforts. Results can be seen in the general level of satisfaction with institution and program expressed by students in the research data. Additionally, the institution is attempting to intervene earlier in the student decision process through such high school outreach efforts as STEP, (an accelerated teacher training system), the 2 plus 2 program, (a high school to college transition effort), and increased general course offerings on high school campuses.

Summary

The study results described in the preceding sections serve to both reinforce previous research findings, and in several areas present new information which can provide direction for further inquiry. Findings are of particular interest to the institution hosting the research effort, the Community College of Southern Nevada, in their continuing

efforts to better serve the significant nontraditional student population. The wider audience will find the results of value for the insights into the educational decision-making of this population and their satisfaction with both the educational experience and their particular decision processes. Sections addressing decision satisfaction, research question 5, highlight an area of little previous research and new information. Recognizing the limitations in attempting to generalize from the findings of small population qualitative studies, the results do provide direction and foundations for further qualitative or quantitative research. These results provided the basis for the conclusions and recommendations, as they relate to the guiding research questions, presented in the following conclude

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Adult or nontraditional aged undergraduate students represent a significant and identifiable college population that differs significantly from other student groups. The limited available research on educational decision-making and satisfaction issues, with regard to this population, strongly indicated that a study in this area would be useful in several ways. Results serve to increase the general body of knowledge available concerning this population, provide specific practical indicators of best practice in serving this demographically significant group, and provide direction and additional data, with the specificity needed, to serve as the basis for subsequent qualitative or quantitative inquiry. Insights, levels of satisfaction, and specific comments expressed by the research subjects, nontraditional students at CCSN, may be of particular value to this institution and the completed study will be provided to the Office of Institutional Research and Planning.

This chapter first presents a brief summary of the study, by means of a review of the background, relevant literature, research questions, and the methodology employed. Following is the presentation and discussion of conclusions based on the research questions and emergent themes from data analysis. Subsequent sections provide recommendations for both practice in serving nontraditional students, and further

research. A concluding section provides some final thoughts on the planning and conduct of this study, with attention to outcomes.

Study Summary

The population of adult higher education students, aged 25 or older, has risen from 28 percent in 1970 to 39 percent in 1999 (NCES, 2002). This significant representation of older students is even greater in many community and technical colleges, due to their open access and traditional role in serving this population. Not withstanding this demographic shift, current research continues to focus primarily on the traditional college cohort, with adult or nontraditional students seldom studied as a separate and distinct population. Institutions in many cases continue to make academic program and student services decisions based on best serving the declining population comprising the traditional 18 to 24 year old college cohort. Additional research can provide the foundation for needs based improvements in services to this important adult undergraduate demographic. Much current research that does include this older nontraditional student population does so for comparative purposes with the traditional student group, or limits investigation primarily to student outcomes. Departing from this common focus, planning for this study keyed on the process of nontraditional student decision-making and several aspects of student satisfaction.

The literature review, which served as the supporting foundation for this study, utilized recent research conducted in several areas. Characteristics of the nontraditional student population were subject of a selection of articles that assisted in more clearly defining the target study population and enhanced understanding of this group. Both

theoretical and empirical works investigating decision-making and college choice were reviewed and provided the underpinning of one of the major study areas. Works addressing satisfaction issues and student achievement, and a separate section concerning decision satisfaction provided background for the second major area of investigation, satisfaction.

Research questions developed following study of the target population and review of pertinent current literature centered on three key higher education decision points and several aspects of student satisfaction, including decision process support and subsequent satisfaction with both process and outcomes. The following five research questions guided the planning and conduct of the study.

1. What factors led to the decision to delay, or to fail to complete, a higher education course of study following high school?
2. What subsequently transpired that led to current enrollment?
3. How was the current institution and course of study selected from the available options?
4. How would you characterize your level of satisfaction, or dissatisfaction, with the current educational experience? (timing, institution, and program)
5. How would you characterize level of satisfaction, or dissatisfaction, with the decisions made regarding higher education? (If you were to start over, what might you do differently?)

The limitations of available research identified during the literature review indicated that an exploratory study using qualitative methods would be potentially most effective in developing a better understanding of nontraditional student decision-making and

satisfaction issues. The Community College of Southern Nevada (CCSN) was selected as the study site due to student demographics and the institution's willingness to support this particular research. Twenty seven volunteer research subjects meeting the study criteria, undergraduate aged 25 or older with at least a one year break in education following high school completion, were recruited from the Business and Health Sciences departments. The five research questions were re-formatted into 10 discussion questions and tested in a preliminary study of four volunteers using individual interviews. Four focus group sessions were then conducted; two sessions each with subjects from the Business and Health Sciences areas of study. Interviews and focus group sessions were audio taped and later transcribed and coded. Analysis of these subject responses, supplemented with facilitator notes, provided data categories from the responses for each of the three decision points and satisfaction areas identified in the research questions. Emergent themes were then identified for the areas investigated. A subsequent interview was conducted with a senior student services administrator at CCSN. This interview provided feedback on the categories and emergent themes, as well as institution specific information useful in framing the study findings. The preliminary study, focus groups, and the administrator interview each played an important part in the effectiveness of the study, and provided the triangulation important in qualitative research (Gay, 1996).

Conclusions

Several conclusions were reached based on detailed consideration of the research questions, and emergent themes from the study presented in the results chapter. Both major areas of investigation, decision-making and student satisfaction, are reflected in

these conclusions as indicated. It should be noted that these conclusions cannot be generalized beyond this particular study sample.

Conclusion 1 – Decision-making

Decisions to delay or discontinue higher education were more complex than expected based on the literature review. Current research suggests that lack of family and academic support, and / or financial issues are primary factors hindering the transition to higher education, and successful completion. This subject group also identified as maturity and readiness issues, as well as the quality of their previous educational experiences, (not necessarily academic), as key factors in their educational decision-making. For these students at least, improving high school to college transition rates would require additional or adapted interventions to address these readiness issues.

Conclusion 2 – Decision-making

Career, financial, and economic issues were key factors which led to current enrollment. This was not surprising based on the occupational nature of the programs from which subjects were recruited, and most expressed clear educational goals and expectations based on their higher education. The number and strength of responses relating to personal issues, such as setting the example for their children, personal challenge, and self-actualization did indicate, however, that for this group of subjects higher education decisions were multi-dimensional.

Conclusion 3 – Decision-making

Research subjects considered a limited range of options when selecting their current institution and program. This is particularly significant, considering the educational choices available beyond the three public institutions. A wide range of private and

primarily on-line education providers serve the local population, particularly in the study fields from which the research sample is drawn. A significant number of subjects made the decision to pursue a higher education and simultaneously selected their current institution and program. This compression and abbreviation of the usually multi-step decision-making process had been previously noted by Bers and Smith (1987) and was supported in the student services administrator interview. Members of this group also placed great importance on the recommendations of family members, friends, acquaintances, and other students.

Conclusion 4 – Satisfaction

Sources of dissatisfaction with current program and institution were primarily related to seemingly minor issues, with most expressing overall satisfaction with their educational experience. Scheduling problems, pre-requisites, and lack of interactive support for on-line courses were all cited as sources of dissatisfaction by many subjects. However, most subjects also took a broader view and expressed a high degree of overall satisfaction with the program, institution, and their own academic progress.

Conclusion 5 – Satisfaction

Dissatisfaction with educational decision-making for most study participants was related to the timing of decisions, and regret over having waited to begin, or interrupted their higher education. Responses citing issues such as lack of information or an absence of family and academic support were minor in comparison to this timing issue in terms of both frequency and strength. If this were established through further research to be common to a wider population it could be of concern, due to the apparent difficulty of developing meaningful interventions.

Conclusion 6 – Satisfaction (Preparation)

Several actions were identified by subjects which might have helped them better prepare for higher education and to have made better decisions. Identified were increased parental education regarding higher education opportunities and procedures, improved high school preparation through more rigorous course work and academic counseling, and expanded college outreach and recruiting efforts. Subjects expressed strongly that such actions might have helped to compensate for lack of family support and lack of exposure to higher education. The helpful mechanisms identified involve actions at both secondary, (or earlier), and post-secondary levels.

Recommendations for Practice

Based on consideration of the emergent themes from this study several recommendations for practice are indicated. Principally of value to the host college, CCSN, others may find them useful following additional institutional research.

Recommendation 1 – Support for Decision-making

Improving high school to college transition rates will require greater efforts to educate students, (and families), on the procedural aspects and long-term benefits of higher education. Decisions resulting in delay or discontinuance of their education were strongly related in the study to lack of family support for, or exposure to, higher education. Actions at both the secondary and post-secondary levels are required to compensate in these areas. At high school level these may include additional activities such as student aid workshops or educational options briefings, which would encourage family as well as student attendance, increased emphasis on college prep courses, and

improved communication of requirements, such as the Scholastic Aptitude Test sign-up and college application deadlines. Colleges should broaden opportunities for potential students to visit their institutions, and actually observe campus life and college instruction, and increase their level of presence on high school campuses. Some of these interventions at the high school level are being currently employed, but seldom system-wide, and college outreach and recruiting efforts could be greatly improved. Initiatives undertaken by CCSN, such as the STEP program, (an accelerated teacher training program in partnership with Nevada State College), and expanding college course offerings on high school campuses are successful and should be expanded.

Recommendation 2 – Support for Decision-making

The limited range of higher education options considered by subjects in this study may indicate a lack of awareness of, and information about, available institutions, programs, and services. Additionally, several subjects indicated an inability to intelligently evaluate the projected costs and potential benefits of the options they had considered. Issues of this type can be best addressed at high school level, at the pre-decision point by high school staff, whose objectivity would be less likely to be questioned than that of a college recruiter. Publicizing available higher education options more widely on high school campuses including information on actual costs and projected benefits may partially address this issue. Financial aid issues could be integrated into these efforts with potentially good effect.

Recommendation 3 – Satisfaction

Several of the expressed sources of dissatisfaction with institution and program related directly to what could be termed internal institutional policy issues. Availability

of pre-requisite courses, schedule conflicts and, in one instance, poor counseling and unsound advice were cited by subjects as frustrating and cause of dissatisfaction. These impediments might be viewed as more important to this group, as they have failed to achieve academic success up to this point in their lives and may be prone to discouragement. Also mentioned were the lack of interaction with on-line courses and poor faculty support for these classes. Students new to the on-line format, (and perhaps not as technologically competent as the traditional college cohort), may require additional training and support in this area. These sources of dissatisfaction can possibly lead to retention issues with these subjects if not addressed by the institution.

Recommendation 4 – Satisfaction

Due to the potentially conflicting family, work, and student roles of nontraditional undergraduates, their needs, unique life experiences, and expertise should be considered in course and curriculum development. Adult students in this sample had both greater life experiences and specific expectations of higher education that appear to differ from the traditional college cohort. Previous training and experience should be acknowledged and course waivers granted when appropriate. Nontraditional students may expect instruction to key on the application of knowledge and skills, rather than the abstract, and those with unique or subject related experience can utilized as course resources to enhance instruction. A consumer mentality appears more likely in older students with an expectation of economic, (or personal), value for the costs incurred in obtaining a higher education. Consideration of these factors in planning to serve this population may prove beneficial to both students and institutions.

Recommendations for Further Research

One of the objectives of this qualitative study of nontraditional undergraduates was to increase the body of knowledge regarding this population. In accomplishing this goal several areas have been identified as being excellent opportunities to expand this knowledge base further through additional research.

Recommendation 1 – Readiness Issues

The issues of maturity, readiness, and the effects of previous educational experiences may be negatively impacting on high school to college transition rates. Further research in this area would require initial investigation to determine the degree to which these issues affect educational decision-making in the larger nontraditional student population. If found to be significant, research could then be designed to fully assess the problem, leading to development of effective intervention strategies.

Recommendation 2 – Retention

Retention of enrolled students is an area of concern, and subject of significant current research, with finances, conflicting responsibilities, or relocation being commonly cited reasons for failing to complete college following initial enrollment. The significant number of subjects in this study expressing loss of focus, or lack of interest, or no clear educational goal as a reason for stopping-out appears to represent new information. Further research of these results would require a study sample, unlike the mixed group utilized in this study, in which all subjects would have stopped-out at some point following initial college enrollment. An in-depth investigation of previous educational plans and goals would precede examination of the decisions that led them to stop-out.

Students who did not return would be valuable subjects in this study area, but would be difficult to recruit.

Recommendation 3 – Decision Timing

The number of subjects expressing dissatisfaction with the timing of their educational decisions indicates this as an area where further inquiry could prove useful. Linking of timing with specific decision points presents a research challenge, but a qualitative study employing in-depth interviews could provide additional new information. Identifying the point at which critical educational decisions are made, and the surrounding circumstances, could serve as the basis for developing timely and effective interventions, assuming this issue is found to be significant in the wider nontraditional student population.

Recommendation 4 – Support Mechanisms

Findings from this study sample, and current literature, serve to identify support mechanisms which have proven helpful to this population in their pursuit of a higher education. Available information should be sufficient at this point to support the development of a quantitative study investigating the relative importance of these previously identified support mechanisms to the nontraditional student population. Survey-based data collection would enable subjects to rate the importance of each of these factors, and solicit identification of additional helpful mechanisms not previously identified. This effort could lead to a fuller understanding of what actions and activities are important to adult undergraduates, and to what degree. Further, findings would enable allocation of scarce resources to those areas established by research as most value to the student population.

Recommendation 5 – Educational Options

Members of this sample considered a limited range higher education options prior to selection of their program at CCSN. Further research in this educational options area has the potential to provide findings of benefit to both institutional outreach and marketing efforts, and for information providers, such as secondary school guidance counselors. Subjects, prospective or current students, could be queried through survey or other means to assess their awareness of available higher education options in our area, (and on-line offerings), and the accuracy of information they do possess. This could serve to not only identify areas of insufficient information to support higher education decision-making, but the prevalence of misinformation and student misconceptions as well.

Final Thoughts

The purpose of this exploratory study was to increase the body of knowledge regarding nontraditional student decision-making and subsequent satisfaction through investigation focused on five research questions. The qualitative methodology employed resulted in findings with depth and insight not common in available research with this population. Investigation of the students' decision processes and subsequent satisfaction with these decisions represents an area of inquiry resulting in new information and unique perspectives. Emergent themes from the research data both reinforce the findings of previous research and indicate directions for further inquiry, with the potential to provide the foundation for improved services to this population. Themes also provided several indicators for improved practice, primarily of value to CCSN. In sum, the

objectives of the study were met, providing new knowledge and value to the higher education community and an incredible learning experience for the researcher.

APPENDIX

Finalized Focus Group Questions

Decision Point One – Delayed or Failed to Complete Higher Education

1. What were your reasons for not entering college immediately following high school?

OR

If you did enroll, but failed to complete, what were your reasons for stopping-out?

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2. What factors would have made you more likely to begin college immediately after high school?

OR

To continue, if you did enroll and stopped out?

Decision Point two – Current Enrollment

3. What factors or circumstances led to your current enrollment?

4. What single factor may have been most important in reaching this decision?

Decision Point Three – Current Institution and Program

5. What factors caused you to select the current institution and program?

6. What other higher education options you consider and why?

Student Satisfaction

7. What is your level of satisfaction with your current educational experience, and why? (including institution and program)

8. How satisfied are you with the decision process that led you to delay enrollment, or re-enroll, and what might you have done differently?

9. How satisfied are you with the decision process that led to your current institution and program and what might you have done differently?

10. What might have helped you to better plan and prepare for higher education and improved your decision-making?

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