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THE TIES THAT BIND: IDENTIFYING CONNECTIONS THAT FACILITATE
STUDENTS' SUCCESSFUL RE-ENTRY TO HIGHER EDUCATION

by

Toni J. Asay

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree

of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

Education

Approved:

Sylvia Read, Ph.D.
Major Professor

Scott Bates, Ph.D.
Committee Member

Scott Hunsaker, Ph.D.
Committee Member

Courtney Stewart, Ph.D.
Committee Member

Susan Turner, Ph.D.
Committee Member

Richard S. Inouye, Ph.D.
Vice-Provost for Graduate Studies

UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY
Logan, Utah

2019

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ABSTRACT

The Ties that Bind: Identifying Connections that Facilitate Students' Successful
Re-Entry to Higher Education

by

Toni J. Asay, Doctor of Philosophy

Utah State University, 2019

Major Professor: Sylvia Read, Ph.D.

Department: School of Teacher Education and Leadership

The ubiquitous roadblocks to university graduation have been investigated, identified, and interrogated for 7 decades, yet the mystery of retaining students to graduation continues to elude even the most prestigious universities. This researcher's approach to increasing graduation began with the concession that increasingly, students may leave school at some point due to one or more of the retention issues that we may recognize all too well—finances, illness, family problems, pregnancies, and other educational obstacles. However, leaving school does not mean that there is no going back. Student's dropout status changes when they re-enroll in school; they take on new identities as stop-out students who forge their own nontraditional path to graduation.

This work explored the lived experiences of this often-overlooked subset of university students—students who begin courses in higher education but then forgo their studies for a time before returning. These students are known in the literature as stop-out

students, a cohort seldom acknowledged, studied, or desegregated from dropout statistics. An online survey was used to determine the demographics of the stop-out participants, and face-to-face, semi-structured interviews were then conducted to allow students to relate their experiences, in and out of school, in their own voices. Of particular interest was the effect of students' perceived connections to faculty, staff, and/or administration as an influence in their decisions to return to school.

The study was analyzed through the lens of care theory as a way to investigate how students' persistence was affected by feelings of connection or caring. Only one of twelve interviewees had formed a relationship with a professor before he left school, and this relationship was maintained during his absence and renewed when he returned. The other interviewees acknowledged that they felt no specific connections to any person, office, or administration when they left.

The stop-out population is one that higher education needs to acknowledge and support with targeted services. In many cases, they are only a few semesters from graduation. Rather than blocking their way when they run for the hills, we should be lighting their path back to success.

PUBLIC ABSTRACT

The Ties that Bind: Identifying Connections that Facilitate Students' Successful
Re-Entry to Higher Education

Toni J. Asay

The ubiquitous roadblocks to university graduation have been investigated, identified, and interrogated for 7 decades, yet the mystery of retaining students to graduation continues to elude even the most prestigious universities. This researcher's approach to increasing graduation began with the concession that increasingly, students may leave school at some point due to one or more of the retention issues that we recognize all too well—finances, illness, family problems, pregnancies, and other educational obstacles. However, leaving school does not mean that there is no going back. Student's dropout status changes when they re-enroll in school; they take on new identities as stop-out students who forge their own nontraditional path to graduation. This work explored the lived experiences of this often-overlooked subset of university students—students who begin courses in higher education but then forgo their studies for a time before returning. These students are known in the literature as stop-out students, a cohort seldom acknowledged, studied, or desegregated from dropout statistics. An online survey was used to determine the demographics of the stop-out participants, and face-to-face, semi-structured interviews were then conducted to allow students to relate their experiences, in and out of school, in their own voices. Of particular interest was the effect of students' perceived connections to faculty, staff, and/or administration as an influence

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The stop-out population is one that higher education needs to acknowledge and support with targeted services. In many cases, they are only a few semesters from graduation. Rather than blocking their way when they run for the hills, we should be lighting their path back to success.

DEDICATION

Dedicated to my late sister, Karen,
who left us too soon
and
my brother, Michael, who is one of
the best dads I know

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

*What do we live for, if not to make life less
difficult for each other?*

George Eliot

Of every word I have written, the ones on these two pages mean the most to me. How wonderful it is to recognize with heartfelt gratitude those who have made this dream possible.

Without the immense patience, unfailing encouragement, constant cheerleading, and empathetic care of Dr. Sylvia Read, I would not have finished what I set out to do in writing this dissertation. I owe her a debt that I cannot repay. I also wish to thank the other outstanding members of my committee, Dr. Scott Bates, Dr. Scott Hunsaker, Dr. Courtney Stewart, and Dr. Susan Turner who gave much needed guidance and encouragement from the start. I also wish to thank Dr. Kit Mohr who gave me her support and a much-needed pep talk, and who also helped Sylvia move heaven and earth (and hearts and minds) to get me through!

My colleagues have been generous in their belief in me, for which I am deeply grateful. I would like to especially thank Brooke Staples, Becky Marchant, Debi Sheridan, Sarah Vause, Michael Wutz, Emily January Petersen, and Susan McKay.

Without the support of Dr. Russell Burrows, I would not have begun, persisted, or finished this journey. I do not have the words to thank him for his kindness, loyalty, encouragement, generosity, care, and belief in me.

I have been blessed with brilliant, lovely, audacious, ebullient friends who I have

not deserved, who have reminded me by their presence in my life of the debt I owe to others because of the examples they have shown me. Thank you, Terri, Colleen, Rachel, Luana, Caralee, Jill, Debra, Jean, Jessica, Mindy, Martha, and Danelle.

I would like to thank my parents, who read to me when I was small, loved me when I was difficult, and taught me that family is everything, and to my children and grandchildren, without whom none of this would have meaning. Thank you Charlotte, Katie, Matt, Aly, Jake, and Emmeline for the privilege of being your mother. Thank you Randy, Nate, Michael, and Wade for loving my girls. I love you all more than I can express. To you, Grace, Halle, Sadie, Jane, Jack, Max, Zoe, Millie, Ella, Jon, and any other grandchildren-in-waiting, thank you for the joy you bring me every day. You are all my favorite.

Toni J. Asay

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

“Never again will a single story be told as though it’s the only one.”
(Gilligan, 2014, p. 89)

Juan walked through my office door then stopped abruptly. It was 2 weeks into the new semester and I had asked him to come and talk to me prior to allowing him late entry into my class. I had remembered him from two previous failed attempts to complete my course. He was a profoundly silent young man, usually late for class, slipping noiselessly into a seat on the back row. He had contributed to discussions only when I singled him out for a response. Then, just as quietly, he had disappeared midway through those semesters. A thoughtful, articulate young man gone without a word.

However, on this day, after obtaining a commitment that he would catch up and complete the class *this time*, I asked him the question that had puzzled me—not why he had left, but why he had come back.

He looked surprised and fell into his habitual silence. Then he took another step into the office and began talking. His story came out in pieces—a nonlinear narrative of doubt, of travel, of personal heartbreak, and of his current desperate attempt to seize what he saw as his last chance for a “good life.”

After he left, I began to think about other students who had drifted away from my remedial English classes in the past. Some had found their way back but most did not. That realization suddenly made the returning students even more interesting. What was it that brought them back? What did they overcome to get back here? What made the

difference between stopping out and dropping out? It suddenly became important for me to know the answers.

The resulting study revealed surprising connections that were completely unanticipated. It was weeks after the above encounter before I realized that the university would view my oldest son in the same light as Juan. Matthew had stopped out of school for 3 years to live with and care for his father after early onset Alzheimer's had made it impossible for him to live alone. However, Matthew's school record simply showed that he had withdrawn early one spring and that five semesters had passed before he had re-enrolled.

My next realization was even more startling. I had also been a stop-out student, following the most common pattern of taking a year off between my freshman and sophomore years. In my case, I told friends that I needed to work to make money for my second year of college, and that story became autobiography. Now I wondered for perhaps the first time why I had chosen that course. It was true that I needed money, but were there not other options? Could I not have taken out a loan or applied for scholarships or worked part-time?

Of course, the truth was more complicated. Despite getting good grades and enjoying a golden freshman year, looking around that spring, I had no strong desire to continue. My best friend, who braved the 1,000 mile trip to college with me, found her "one and only" and left school after one semester in order to work and save for her spring wedding. I had no real connection to my other roommates, and no young man had stepped up to claim *my* heart. As a first-generation college student, I had no models or

mentors. I was adrift. Therefore, after my freshman year, I stayed home and got a job.

Three stories—three different reasons for leaving and coming back. Juan told me that he had returned because he hoped for a better life. Matthew reflexively returned because he was no longer able to provide the level of care his father needed. I returned because someone pulled me back across those 1,000 miles and pushed me into school. Could it be that the reasons for returning to school are as individual and complex as the people who make those choices?

Oliver Sacks (1985) has written:

Each of us is a singular narrative, which is constructed, continually, unconsciously, by, through, and in us—through our perceptions, our feelings, our thoughts, our actions; and, not least, our discourse, our spoken narrations. Biologically, physiologically, we are not so different from each other; historically, as narratives—we are each of us unique. (p. 12)

My interest in individual narratives has developed over the past 14 years of teaching at an open-enrollment university in the western U.S. I primarily teach in the Developmental English program, working with students who are classified by the university as “underprepared” for college-level studies. Students in these classes are diverse. They differ from each other by such disparate measures as gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, religion, marital status, cultural traditions, and family background. They are also classified as a high-risk cohort for attrition because of their status in my class. It is rare for my students not to work either part- or full-time. Many are the first in their family to go to college. For some, their graduation from the university is driven by their parents’ dreams. Even though some speak English as a second language, they are reluctant to take ESL classes because of the lingering stigma, so their challenges are

multiplied before they even walk into my classroom.

I know these things because my students share (and perhaps overshare) their stories through their writing. In one paper, they will reveal heart-rending histories of unwed pregnancies, battles with addictions, cycles of violence and abuse, the effects of divorce or long-term unemployment, unhealed war experiences, suicide attempts, struggles with reading and math, and on and on. Yet, in another paper they will change perspectives, revealing their love for family, their strong faith, their loyal friends, and their hopes for a brighter future because they honestly believe that a degree will make it so.

Many of my students have returned to school after an absence of years, not semesters, and their classroom comments sound equal parts a voice of warning and a gospel of redemption through graduation. Their remarks are aimed at the skeptical 18 year olds, to whom a promised \$15 an hour (without the hassle of a degree) sounds like all one would need to be happy.

I have congratulated some at graduation—but all too few. I have smiled when they have walked back into my class for another try. I have run into them on campus years after they have taken my class, and they have shared with me their stories of absences and returns. Because I know their stories, I recognize my bias. I am a divorced, white woman with 6 children, 10 grandchildren, advanced degrees, and a modest income. I live in my own house, in a safe neighborhood, in an affluent community. I have never had to deal with most of the struggles my students have. I have almost nothing in common with them except the material I teach and my belief in them—because the belief

that impels them to stay the course to graduation, or to return for another try after an absence is what I believe too. I believe that they can prove to their families, their friends, their neighborhoods, the university, and to themselves that they can persist and graduate. I believe that a degree will help them be successful in life, and I believe in their success. I believe that their parents' hopeful dreams are true. I believe that even if they leave, they can come back—as many times as it takes. Juan did. Matt did. I did. I want to do all that I can to make sure that they can say, “I did.”

Definition of Terms

It may be helpful at this point to clarify some of the terms used in this dissertation.

Attrition is defined as “departure of all forms of higher education prior to completion of a degree or other credential” (J/ Johnson, 2012, p. 3).

Persistence generally refers to students' efforts to continue in school until graduation, regardless of how many institutions they attend (Powell, 2013).

Retention can be defined simply as the “rate at which institutions keep students until they graduate” (Powell, 2013, p. iii), although it also embodies the focused and strenuous attention of institutions of higher learning to prevent students from leaving before obtaining a degree, as well as the continuous research and scholarship that surrounds the problem.

Dropouts are considered to be students who enroll in higher education but do not persist to graduation and who have no plans to re-enroll or transfer to another institution

(Bonham & Luckie, 1993; Hoyt & Winn, 2004).

Stop-outs, on the other hand, are students who begin their studies at a college or university, leave for a period, and then re-enroll (Ahson, Gentemann, & Phelps, 1998; Carnegie Commission on Higher Education, 1973; Hoyt & Winn, 2004).

Re-enrollment and *re-entry* will be used interchangeably and are considered to be self-evident.

Background

America's institutions of higher education have a chronic problem—the highest student attrition rates in the industrialized world (Harvard Graduate School of Education, 2011). “One-third of students who enter postsecondary education expecting to earn a degree leave without one” (N. Johnson, 2012, p. 1). We have long recognized the critical need to help more students in higher education persist to graduation, yet this awareness has failed to significantly impact decreasing graduation numbers. This trend continues despite the fact that retention may be the most studied topic in American higher education (Spradlin, Burroughs, Rutkowski, & Lang, 2010). Still, the results of decades of research have failed to stop the flow of students out of higher education before graduation.

To understand this problem in real numbers, consider the findings of the U.S. Census Bureau, “In 2007, the U.S. Census Bureau estimated that 21% of 25 to 34 year olds in the U.S., or about eight million adults, attended some college but left without completing a degree” (Schatzel, Callahan, & Davis, 2013, p. 348). One result of this, as Schatzel et al. point out, is that our country no longer has the “highest percentage of

young adults with college attainment. It has fallen from first to twelfth” (p. 360).

Numerous studies have documented the importance of a college degree in the framework of economic and social outcomes. This research suggests that graduates enjoy higher lifetime earnings, lower unemployment rates, greater civic and volunteer engagement, and reduced criminal involvement (DesJardins, Ahlburg, & McCall, 1999; Light, 1995; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Graduates of higher education acquire a breadth of impressive benefits conferred along with their degree. Cabrera, Burkum, and LaNasa (2005) argue,

A bachelor’s degree is no longer considered a potential stepping stone to a better life. It is the gatekeeper to myriad social and individual benefits, ranging from income, employment stability, and occupational prestige to engagement in civic and political activities. (p. 155)

However, the negative effects of failing to retain students to graduation reach beyond individuals. They impact broad economic aspects of society, according N. Johnson (2012). Consider, for example, the cost of student attrition to universities’ reputations, as well as lost revenue and lost investment (Woosley, 2004). Between 2003 and 2008, \$6.18 billion was paid to colleges and universities to fund the education of students who exited the university after only one year. In 2010 alone, “\$2.9 billion in State and Federal grants were paid to students who did not pursue a college education beyond their first year” (AIR, 2010, p. 16).

In light of such findings, many state legislatures have moved to tie university funding to graduation rates (DesJardins, Ahlburg, & McCall, 2002), a decision that could be catastrophic for open enrollment universities that are under the same pressure to reduce attrition as their more elite state university counterparts. If universities that are

allowed to tie admission to high GPAs and ACT/SAT scores can not retain students to graduation, what are the odds that universities that must accept every applicant will be able to as well, considering the inherent difficulties that low academic and underprepared students face?

After decades of study, researchers have identified and categorized myriad factors that contribute to students' decisions to leave higher education. It is safe to say that because of this narrow focus on why students fail to persist that we know roughly what factors are involved in their leave-taking. I believe that the focus needs to expand to include an examination of what brings students back. More information about stop-out students will give colleges and universities a more complete understanding of how to more successfully address the needs of students and facilitate their persistence to graduation. Using the lens of care theory, I hope to discover if stop-out students feel that a sense of connection to an individual, a department, or an institution acts as a significant factor in their successful re-enrollment. I also hope to discover any institutional obstacles that student's face that could be remedied to facilitate a smoother re-entry to the university under study.

Because an examination of the literature yielded fewer than 25 studies that focus on stop-out students specifically, this research will add to a small body of important knowledge about this subset of students. Acknowledging that some students will, of necessity, leave school at some point in their academic careers, it is imperative to recognize what the university can do to entice them back and ensure that re-entry is manageable. In other words, if we cannot block their exit when they run for the hills, we

ought to at least light the path back for them.

As stated in the introduction, I was one of those students who followed the most common path of leaving school after my freshman year. However, that was not the only time I left. During my senior year of college, I married and quit school in order to work while my husband returned to school. The arrangement was that he would get a degree, and then I would return to finish my last credits. Unfortunately, his choice of major was beyond his interest and ability, and he eventually dropped out of school to work full time.

Subsequently, I did not return to finish my bachelor's degree for more than twenty years. During that time, I was raising children and involving myself in my community; however, I always carried a nagging, secret shame for not finishing my degree. I was embarrassed that I had not had the maturity to stick it out for one more semester. I envied others who had their degrees and felt inferior to them. I knew that I was intelligent, but I did not have a degree or a career to show for it.

As my husband's salary as a book buyer for a church chain store was meager, necessity dictated that I find work for most of our married life. I tried to work from home as much as possible, but no matter what job I found, I couldn't help but feel a deep shame for not preparing myself with a degree that would have supported our family in a more lucrative and stable manner.

Coming from this background, therefore, I felt that I had a good insight into the students I interviewed when they expressed their fears of returning to school as mature adults, their embarrassment and shame that they had hadn't taken advantage of their educational opportunities when they were younger, and their determination to stay in

school *this time* and finish.

Order of Presentation

In Chapter II, I explore the individual and societal impacts of college attrition and suggest re-attracting dropout students as one corrective to the problem. I then move on to an exploration of care theory, the theoretical lens through which I investigated the project, before presenting the purpose, objectives, and research questions for the project.

In Chapter III, I present a short review of the methods of evaluating stop-out students before discussing my Review of Literature, methodological design, data analysis, ethical issues, implications of the study, and my own limitations and role as a researcher. Finally, I present my findings and analysis overview of the data using thematic analysis.

In Chapter IV, I evaluate the findings of the survey and interview profiles seen through the care lens. I then discuss coding procedures of categories and themes that arose from analysis of the students' interviews.

In Chapter V, I analyze my findings, using the research questions and making recommendations for further research. Finally, I conclude my research with a summary of what was learned in the process of my study.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

What are we, after all, we human beings?
(Marilynne Robinson, 2012, p. 185)

Background

America's institutions of higher education have a chronic problem—the highest student attrition rates in the industrialized world (Harvard Graduate School of Education, 2011). “One-third of students who enter postsecondary education expecting to earn a degree leave without one” (Johnson, N., 2010, p. 1). We have long recognized the critical need to help more students in higher education persist to graduation, yet this awareness has failed to significantly impact decreasing graduation numbers. This trend continues despite the fact that retention may be the most studied topic in American higher education (Spradlin et al., 2010). Still, the results of decades of research have failed to stop the flow of students out of higher education before graduation.

To understand this problem in real numbers, consider the findings of the U.S. Census Bureau, “In 2007, the US Census Bureau estimated that 21% of 25 to 34 year olds in the U.S., or about eight million adults, attended some college but left without completing a degree” (Schatzel et al., 2013, p. 348). One result of this, as Schatzel et al. point out, is that our country no longer has the “highest percentage of young adults with college attainment. It has fallen from first to twelfth” (p. 360). This is a finding that precipitated a call to action by our federal government.

Numerous studies have documented the importance of a college degree in the framework of economic and social outcomes. This research suggests that graduates enjoy higher lifetime earnings, lower unemployment rates, greater civic and volunteer engagement, and reduced criminal involvement (DesJardins et al., 1999; Light, 1995; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Graduates of higher education acquire a breadth of impressive benefits conferred along with their degree. Cabrera et al. (2005) argue that

A bachelor's degree is no longer considered a potential stepping stone to a better life. It is the gatekeeper to myriad social and individual benefits, ranging from income, employment stability, and occupational prestige to engagement in civic and political activities. (p. 155)

However, the negative effects of failing to retain students to graduation reaches beyond individuals. The negative effects of student attrition impact broad economic aspects of society, according to the AIR (2010). Consider, for example, the cost of student attrition to universities' reputations, as well as lost revenue and lost investment (Woosley, 2004). Between 2003 and 2008, \$6.18 billion was paid to colleges and universities to fund the education of students who exited the university after only one year. In 2010 alone, "\$2.9 billion in State and Federal grants were paid to students who did not pursue a college education beyond their first year" (AIR, 2010, p. 16).

In light of such findings, many state legislatures have moved to tie university funding to graduation rates (DesJardins et al., 2002, p. 556), a decision that could be catastrophic for open enrollment universities that are under the same pressure to reduce attrition as their more elite state university counterparts. If universities that can tie admission to high GPAs and ACT/SAT scores can't retain students to graduation, what

are the chances that universities that must accept every applicant will be able to do better, considering the inherent difficulties low-scoring or underprepared students face?

After decades of study, researchers have identified and categorized myriad factors that contribute to students' decisions to leave higher education. It is safe to say that because of this narrow focus on why students fail to persist that we know roughly what factors are involved in their leave-taking. This researcher believes that the focus needs to expand to include an examination of what brings students back. More information about stop-out students will give colleges and universities a more complete understanding of how to more successfully address the needs of students and facilitate their persistence to graduation.

It should be obvious that not everyone who stops out of college becomes a dropout. Conversely, not everyone who returns to college after an absence persists to graduation. However, dropouts are guaranteed a 0% graduation rate, while stop-outs are still in the running.

Research tells us that first year students are especially at risk for leaving school early; attrition for this cohort ranges from 30% to 50 % (AIR, 2010), the "highest of all four years" (Powell, 2013, p. 7). "Colleges and universities around the nation are suffering with poor retention, [and] degree completion...particularly during the first year of college" (Kolenovic, Linderman, & Karp, 2013, p. 271). These statistics take on added importance when we acknowledge that they act as a reliable indicator of the institution's overall graduation rate. Thus, improving retention between the first and second year should have a positive effect on graduation rates in subsequent years.

The time it takes to finish a degree negatively impacts most students' persistence, as the longer the road to graduation, the fewer the students who complete the journey. Keeping in mind that an associate degree is designed to take two years to finish, it is discouraging that fewer than 3 out of 10 community college students who attend college on a full-time basis graduate with an associate degree in three years (Spradlin et al., 2010). Adding to that gloomy statistic, just over one half of students who start 4-year bachelor's degree programs full-time finish in 6 years (National Center for Higher Education Management Systems [NCHEMS], 2009).

Ethnicity also plays a role in time-to-completion statistics. "Sixty percent of White students who attend 4-year colleges full-time complete a bachelor's degree within six years, compared to 49% of Hispanic students and 42% of African-American students" (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System [IPEDS], 2007).

However, it is not just the amount of time that students take to graduate that is worrisome. Retaining students to graduation has been at the core of research in higher education research for the past seven decades. However, "[u]niversity retention has become an increasingly important issue in the last decade" (Alarcon & Edwards, 2013, p. 129), and the decline in graduation rates are under careful scrutiny at the highest levels of government. "US President Barack Obama referred to the fall of the US in terms of the proportion of young people with college degrees, stating that this 'represents a threat to our position as the world's leading economy'" (Powell, 2013, p. 1).

Shortly after being elected, President Obama addressed a joint session of

Congress, identifying college retention as one of the “major initiatives” (Powell, 2013, p. 1) of his administration. He told the lawmakers that

[I]n a global economy where the most valuable skill you can sell is your knowledge, a good education is no longer just a pathway to opportunity—it is a pre-requisite” (Powell, 2013, p. 1). The president subsequently unveiled his goal that by 2020, America would once again have “the highest proportion of college graduates in the world. (pp. 1-2)

As mentioned previously, many state legislatures have moved to tie university funding to graduation rates (DesJardins et al., 2002; Dougherty, Jones, Lahr, Natow, Pheatt, Vikash 2014). State legislators appear to have developed impatience with institutions of higher education’s retention rates. Virginia has tied institutional funding to graduation rates, and at the University of Minnesota “graduation rates are on of the institutional effectiveness measures that have had funding explicitly tied to them for the past several years” (DesJardins et al., 2002, p. 556).

Retention scholars like Seidman (2005) echo the belief that our country needs an “educated citizenry [to] keep the U.S. strong and vibrant. This, in essence, is what makes us a great nation and an example for others to follow” (p. 315).

The powerful College Board also thinks along the same lines. It established the Commission on Access, Admission and Success in Higher Education, which in turn created the College Completion Agenda. One of the Commission’s goals is to ensure that 55% of all 25- to 34-year-old Americans will hold an associate degree or higher by 2025 (Powell, 2013, p. 2).

The Gates Foundation, a powerful force in education, identified degree completion as one of its top priorities almost a decade ago. In 2009, it created the non-

profit alliance Complete College America with a single mission: “Leveraging our Alliance to eliminate achievement gaps by providing equity of opportunity for all students to complete college degrees and credentials of purpose and value” (<https://completecollege.org/about/>). Currently, there are 43 members of the Alliance, representing 37 states and a few regional consortiums. Members have committed to strategies that are focused on raising graduation rates such as math pathways to ensure students begin their math the first year, aligned with their field of study and “15 to Finish,” designed to encourage students to enroll in 15 credits each semester in order to graduate in four years.

The above goals support research indicating that approximately 60% of the fastest growing occupations in our country require at least an associate’s degree, and 46% require a bachelor’s degree or higher (Grummon, 2009; Rosser-Mims, Palmer, & Harroff, 2014). The Lumina Foundation for Education predicted ten years ago that our changing workforce requires that jobs leading to mid-level careers are now likely to require postsecondary education (Grummon, 2009, p. 7). Many educators strongly believe that the challenge for postsecondary education is to keep up with society’s demands to meet the educational attainment needs of the 21st century adult learner (Gast, 2013; Southern Region Education Board [SREB], 2010).

If the U.S. is not prepared to do whatever it takes to increase higher education attainment levels, our comparatively low attainment rate will be an increasing burden on the economy and will deny opportunity to growing millions of people. (Lumina Foundation for Education, 2009, p. 7)

Although there are many ways to weigh the value of a college degree, by all measures, it is arguably more advantageous to complete a college degree. Graduates of

higher education can reasonably look forward to a brighter economic future. The research of Murphy and Welch (1993) reveals a shocking disparity of potential earnings between college and high school graduates: In 1993, college graduates typically earned twice that of high-school graduates and six times that of high-school dropouts. Four years later those numbers remained relatively stable. At that time, graduates of higher education enjoyed wealth that was two and a half times that of their high-school graduate counterparts and five times that of high-school dropouts (Diaz-Jiminez, Quadrini, & Rios-Rull, 1997). By 2000, the average earnings for those with a graduate degree was \$65,000 while those with just a high school diploma earned on average merely \$33,000 (Weinberg, 2004).

As a side note, some researchers have found that spouses of college graduates were also better educated. A few studies have suggested that this benefit generally carried over to their children, who did better in school and were less likely to get into trouble with the police (Jencks & Edlin, 1995; Murphy & Welch, 1993).

The high cost of attrition can be considered from yet another perspective. Students and families invest in educational costs through tuition, student fees, housing, costs that may not be recouped without a degree and subsequent income advantage. Heileman, Babbitt, and Abdallah (2015) suggest that

[A]ttempting but not completing a bachelor's degree may lead to worse outcomes, in terms of opportunity costs and debt, than avoiding college altogether. The last of these creates a moral imperative for colleges and universities to graduate the students they admit (Red Bird, Rodriguez, Wimer, & Grusky, 2013, as quoted in Heileman et al., 2015, p. 30.)

Consider also lost time and income and tax losses from “low educational attainment in

the workforce” (N. Johnson, N., 2012, p. 1). Additionally, most students rely on some form of financial aid to attend college. Repaying student loans may be difficult without the increased earnings that a degree brings. Figures from the National Center for Education Statistics (2015) demonstrate the extent to which students increasingly rely on financial aid:

The percentage of first-time, full-time undergraduate students at 4-year degree-granting postsecondary institutions receiving financial aid was higher in 2013-2014 (85 percent) than in 2008-09 (82 percent).... For 2-year degree-granting postsecondary institutions, the percentage of first-time, full-time degree/certificate-seeking undergraduate students receiving any financial aid increased from 71 percent in 2008-09 to 78 percent in 2013-14. During this time, the percentage of students receiving aid at 2-year public institutions increased from 66 to 77 percent.

For many students, financial aid may help alleviate the cost of tuition and books, but the cost of living is still a considerable obstacle, especially for nontraditional students.

Taking into account that the average cost of a 4-year public institution for tuition, fees, room and board was estimated to be \$16,757, in the 10-year span from 2005-06 to 2015-16, prices for undergraduates at those 4-year public institutions rose 37% (Snyder, de Bray, & Dillow, 2016).

Review of Studies

A review of relevant literature revealed, as expected, that many approaches have been employed to study attrition, retention, and re-enrollment without discriminating among them (Araque, Roldán, & Salguero, 2009). Quantitative methods reviewed included (1) multiple group discriminant analysis (Pascarella, Duby, Miller & Rasher, 1981), (2) two stage sequential decision model (Stratton, O’Toole & Wetzel, 2007), (3)

statistical analysis using *t* tests, Omnibus *F* tests, and ANOVAS (Hoyt & Winn, 2004), (4) event history analysis (Chen & DesJardins, 2010; DesJardins et al., 2002; Ishitani, 2003, 2008; Ortiz & Dehon, 2011), (5) comparative/statistical analysis (Ahson, et al., 1998; Iwai & Churchill, 1982; Mallette & Cabrera, 1991; Sibulkin & Butler, 2005; Woosley, 2004), (6) logistic regression (Herzog, 2005; I. Johnson, 2006; Liu, 2010; Schatzel et al., 2013; Singell & Waddell, 2010), and (7) hierarchical generalized linear models (Oseguera & Rhee, 2009) among others. However, these studies did not discriminate among dropouts, stop-outs, transfer-outs, and opt-outs, treating them all as one category for purposes of their studies. The methodologies of the few studies that focus exclusively on stop-outs are discussed below.

Pardee's (1992) mixed-methods descriptive research study used surveys mailed to 396 stop-outs, asking them to rate the significance of various factors in their decision to return to college, in order to identify the most important events that triggered their decision to return at that specific time, and to provide information on their personal decisions. Differences between demographic categories were determined through the use of Chi Square and lambda statistical tests. Results showed that factors that influence returning to higher education are intrinsic in nature. They also asserted that the most important body from which to attract returning students is the institution's own former students.

Students in the Ahson et al. (1998) study were assessed through the use of (1) institutional data (GPA, class level); (2) survey responses (intentions to complete a degree, reasons for not returning sooner, number of hours worked weekly while

enrolled); and (3) personal characteristics (age, gender, socioeconomic status [SES]) to formulate predictors of re-entry, attrition, and academic persistence to graduation (p. 5). Students were divided into two groups (graduators/persisters as group 1 and nonreturners as group 2). A stepwise multiple regression was conducted using 76 independent variables and the dichotomous dependent variable defined as group 1 or group 2 above. Of the 1,262 students who enrolled in fall semester 1992 and did not return for spring 1993, only 504 students responded to a university survey on attrition and retention. Predictions were then made on freshmen persistence/graduation and attrition as well as sophomore, junior, and senior persistence/graduation or attrition predictions. The authors concluded that the survey given to students who did not return for spring semester 1993 best predicted persistence/graduation for freshmen and sophomores; furthermore, the study confirmed previous findings that “traditional” freshmen persistence is affected by such external factors as “[p]re-entry attributes, academic integration, social integration, [and] academic goals” (p. 13).

Schatzel et al. (2013) employed a commercial survey company to administer telephone interviews. The respondents, between the ages of 25 and 34, had been identified from current census data, voter registration lists, and warranty card registrations. They were selected if they had some previous college experience but no degree. Two versions of the survey were administered, one for respondents who indicated an intention to return to college and the other for those who did not intend to return. Binary logistic regression was used to test each of the twelve hypotheses. Their results suggested that minorities were more likely than majority group members to express their

intention to re-enroll. Counter to one of their hypotheses, full-time workers were also more likely to intend to re-enroll than those who did not intend to return. Other hypotheses, developed from earlier research, were not supported, “including those predicting negative effects from time constraints, financial constraints, lower incomes, number of children, and previous success in college” (p. 359).

Woosley (2004) used institutional data to examine demographic characteristics of withdrawing students, regardless of whether they re-enrolled or not (defined as students who registered for classes and paid tuition in either of the two semesters following her/his withdrawal). Data were collected and analyzed for 613 undergraduates. As part of the official withdrawal process, students were required to complete a survey that contained questions about the decision to withdraw, opinions about the university, and reasons for withdrawal. Out of 613 students, 559 completed the survey. Independent-samples *t*-tests were conducted to determine if re-enrolling students had higher SAT math or verbal scores or higher high school percentile ranks than those who did not re-enroll. Chi-square was used to determine if a relationship existed between re-enrollment and such factors as sex, ethnicity, time of withdrawal, enrollment status, and class level. Chi-square tests were also used to evaluate whether the survey responses were related to re-enrollment. The results of the study indicated that students’ intentions to return to school were related to re-enrollment behaviors, but students did not always accurately predict their successful return. Education goals, work commitments, participation levels at school, and health issues were some of the differences found between those who re-enrolled and those who did not. Woosley suggested that understanding the difference between dropouts and stop-

outs would enhance our understanding of retention issues.

Although quantitative studies have assembled a fulsome view of information that may be used to identify and predict student behavior in hopes of encouraging retention, the qualitative approach has its own advantages in excavating the histories and experiences of students in their own words and from their own point of view (Schwandt, 2007). The following studies used a qualitative approach to study re-enrollment behaviors.

Students in Genco's (2007) qualitative study were chosen through purposeful sampling and assigned pseudonyms to protect their identity. Twenty-four participants completed face-to-face interviews with open-ended questions. The interviews were transcribed, and the final transcription was verbatim. The phenomenological approach was used to analyze the findings, both interpretively and inductively. Creswell's (2003) coding process was used to organize and describe the data. The interviews produced several conclusions as follows: re-enrolling was commonly the result of a life transition; returning students use family, faith, positivity, and the belief that a better life is ahead through education to persevere; and returning students want more programs and services to address their concerns (anxiety, apprehension, childcare issues).

J. Johnson, Rochkind, Ott, and DuPont (2009) designed their qualitative study using a nationally representative sample of 22- to 30-year-olds who had attended a college or university but left before completing a certificate or degree. The 614 respondents first participated in one of five focus groups conducted in locations across the country. Telephone interviews were then conducted over a seven-week period in

2009, using both landline and cellular phones. The respondents were given the choice of participating in the interview in English or Spanish. Their results suggested that contrary to popular thought, many young people who drop out of college are paying their own way; they may not fully realize the implications of leaving school without a degree; and 97% of those who dropped out college intend to encourage their own children to go to college.

Using critical race theory as a framework, Rosser-Mims et al. (2014) looked specifically at the re-entry experience of black males using an “interpretive qualitative approach” (p. 61; see also Denzin, 1989; Merriam, 1998). The sample population was 15 black males, ranging in age from 25 to 45, who had some college experience and then returned to complete their education. One-hour, semistructured interviews were conducted face-to-face. Identities of participants were protected by the use of pseudonyms. The interviews were tape recorded and transcribed. The data were then analyzed using the constant comparative method. The authors describe two themes as emerging: barriers to re-entry (a lack of understanding of available financial resources, a lack of role models, and uncertainty about how to create work/life balance) and sources of support (faith/spirituality, familial support, personal desire to be seen as a role model, and intrinsic motivation for self-improvement).

Lehmann (2007) identified and then contacted 2,400 stop-outs, which yielded only 42 responses. Eventually, 25 qualitative, semi-structured interviews (one-on-one) were conducted. The interviews, averaging 80 minutes each, were transcribed and coded with data analysis following the method prescribed by Strauss and Corbin (1990). The

author also kept extensive field notes that were analyzed with the interviews using QSR NVivo Version 2.0 software. Lehmann (2007) concluded that even though there was “little evidence for a statistical relationship between social class background and dropping out of university” we need to recognize the important role that social background plays in “how students experience university and ultimately how they form dispositions to either persist or drop out” (p. 105).

Johnson et al.’s (2009) study under the umbrella of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation surveyed more than 600 dropout students in 2009. More than half stated that the need to work and make money was the major reason they left. They also reported that work was the top reason given for not returning to school once they left. Of those who failed to graduate, more than 6 in 10 reported that the statement “I had to work as well, and it was too stressful trying to do both” described their first year of school. In contrast, 48% of those who graduated said that the previous statement did not describe their first year in school at all.

Because retention has long been a focus for research in higher education, the literature around retention identifies diverse and copious individual and institutional factors that attempt to identify causal factors, predict at-risk populations, and explain why students leave college or university before graduation. Some of the categories studied in retention research of the last 75 years include but are not limited to: (1) the role of finances, (2) less governmental assistance, (3) lower paying jobs, (4) level of student commitment, (5) students’ previous educational experiences, (6) their relationships with peers and faculty, (7) grade performance, (8) the availability and use of school services

and facilities, (9) self-motivation, (10) off-campus demands, (11) health, (13) uncertainties about academic and career goals, (14) on-campus vs. off-campus residence, (15) full vs. part-time enrollment, (16) participation in campus activities, (17) race, (18) gender, (19) age, (20) socioeconomic status, (21) first-generation college status, (21) psychological issues, (23) maternity/marriage status, (24) pre-college GPA & SAT scores, (25) feelings of isolation, (26) integration with college life, (27) timing of enrollment, (28) local economy's employment rate, (29) transfer plans, (30) boredom, lack of "fit" to the institution, and/or (30) lack of academic challenge (Abel & Dietz, 2014; Aldridge & Rowley, 2001; Curran, Dallam, & Puller, 1981; Daubman, Williams, Johnson, & Crump, 1985; Gilmore, 1995; Krebs & Liberty, 1971; Lucas & Meltesen, 1993; McClain & Sartwell, 1983; Miller, 1997).

One strategy to address the attrition problem, seldom mentioned in retention literature, is to acknowledge the significant numbers of Americans who have already earned some college credit but left before earning a degree. By encouraging re-entry strategies for that population, we could begin to more quickly increase the number of college graduates. This pathway deserves much greater attention than it has been given to date. Compared to the decades of retention studies, relatively little research has been done to determine what factors motivate students to return after stopping out for a semester, a year, or longer. We also know relatively little about what institutional measures could be taken to ease the challenges of re-enrollment. However, as long ago as 1976, Kesselman was admonishing universities to take more seriously the stop-out students: "Once the stopout decision is taken, schools need to make the way back easier.

The trouble is that too many still consider the stopout as a permanent dropout” (p. 14).

As helpful as the stop-out studies are in describing some demographic characteristics of these students, there is much that is still unknown. For example, in 1998, Horn reported that 64% of students who left a 4-year institution before the beginning of their second year returned within 5 years. I. Johnson (2006) found that among this number, 42% returned to the same institutions. However, studies such as this 10-year-old research have not been replicated on any consistent basis. There are many such voids in the research on stop-outs.

There are several advantages to focusing on re-enrolling former students, and higher education would do well to give serious consideration to the institutional advantages that are met by “re-attracting former students” (Pardee, 1992, p. 21). This is an approach endorsed by Powell (2013) in *Retention & Resistance: Writing Instruction and Students Who Leave*:

Imagine if our institutions were places students could “go back to.” Not places where we do everything we can to prevent them from leaving, but places we invite them back to when they’re ready.... For these students, the context of their engagement with higher education shifts over time and space. As students seek “the opportune” –those times in their lives when college is again a possibility, and those places where they might pursue it—what if institutions could respond in kind? (pp. 131-132)

While this question is worth exploring, there is another, more compelling aspect of investigation that needs to be addressed. Turner (2016) wrote that even after 75 years of what he termed ineffective college retention research, there is still no concrete explanation for the low retention of college students. “Tinto’s model of student retention has been the basis for several decades of retention examination” (Turner, as quoted in

Barker, 2017, p. 2) Yet, as far back as the 70s, Turner realized that colleges and universities were missing crucial information about student attrition: the perspective of the student, e.g. their individual experiences, cultural differences or personal explanations concerning college retention” (as quoted in Barker, 2017, p. 2.) Therell and Dunneback (2015) have agreed that “[r]esearchers have typically ignored...the voice of the undergraduate student” and “have reached conclusions that exclude the student voice” (p. 49).

This study attempts to add those voices to the collection of literature about stop-out students in order to promote an easier, more welcome transition back into higher education.

Care Theory

The desire to be cared for is almost certainly a universal human characteristic.
(Noddings, 1992, p. 17)

When I began examining the literature on care, I was surprised to find that there is “no agreement among those writing on care on what exactly we should take the meaning of this term to be” (Held, 2006, p. 29). However, in employing care theory as a framework for this study, I acknowledged from the start that the theory is understood from many perspectives. Scholars from various disciplines such as philosophy, developmental psychology, and education have contributed knowledge about and definitions of care theory, also known in literature as the ethics of care, care-based theory and care ethics (e.g., see Agne, 1999; Gilligan, 1982; Kohlberg, 1984; Noddings, 1984,

1992, 2002, 2006; Oakes & Lipton, 1999; Owen & Ennis, 2005; Rabin, 2014; Roberts, 2010; Shevalier & McKenzie, 2012; Siddle Walker, 1993; Tarlow, 1996). However, current research continues to add to the body of literature seeking to understand and facilitate relationships between caring educators and students (Owen & Ennis, 2005).

Predating Gilligan and Noddings, two of care theory's most prominent researchers, is Milton Mayeroff (1971), whose extensive works on the phenomenon of care attempted to create a more universal definition in order to help others understand it. His writings on care were not intended to be read solely by any single discipline. They were general, describing care as a virtue and suggesting that individuals have certain traits and attitudes that make them a caring person. It would be fair to wonder what traits and attitudes Mayeroff is describing, but he lacks specificity here. Those who have studied his work extensively claim that these traits and attitudes include, but are not limited to trust, empathy, and devotion (L. Beck, 1992; Hult, 1979). Taken together, these would be categorized as caring, and demonstrating these characteristics would make one a caring person.

Noddings (1992, 2002) felt that Mayerhoff's definition was incomplete, arguing that showing trust, empathy, and devotion to others does not mean that the other will see it as caring. Although caring may include Mayerhoff's characteristics, critics contend that a definition of care must include the interpersonal or reciprocal relationship that exists between the caregiver and the cared-for (Noddings, 1984; Rogers, 1961).

The theories of psychologist Carl Rogers (1961, 1980) are most relevant in the fields of psychotherapy and counseling psychology. His theories center on the importance

of relationships and emphasize that a caring relationship is essential to the process of positive self-change (Rogers, 1961). His theory stresses care as being relational. Beck and Cassidy (2009) recognized how one teacher in an alternate education program used some of Rogers' ideas to help a group of marginalized students feel more cared for.

Carol Gilligan (1982) and Nel Noddings (1984, 1992, 1995, 2002, 2005), are two of the most prolific writers on care. Both have had a profound impact on the phenomenon of care, and both emphasize the role of relationships in defining care. Noddings (1992) sees care as "a way of being in relation, not a set of specific behaviours" (p. 17). Current writers on care in an educational context agree with her (Cassidy & Beck, 2009; Noblit, 1993; Noblit et al., 1995; Rauner, 2000). While Noddings does not deny that caring can be considered a virtue, she and Gilligan are credited for shifting the view of care as primarily relational rather than virtuous.

Historically, Carol Gilligan's 1982 writing on care connected its "parallel, feminised scheme of development to Kohlberg's (1984) theory of moral development" (Roberts, 2010, p. 451) which places the consideration of care above the ethic of justice and creates a paradigm where "people, including women, are seen and heard within the context of their own histories" (Jorgensen, 2006, p. 186). However, Gilligan differed from Noddings in her psychological approach to caring while Noddings' approach was philosophical in nature.

Nel Noddings (1984) adapted and expanded Gilligan's work to include both male and female caregivers, prompting Roberts (2010) to note that "[a]lthough it is often mistaken as such, Noddings' care is not simply a self-effacing type of behaviour" (p. 451)

but refers instead to reciprocal relationships. Noddings has had a more powerful impact on the educational field than any other care theorist (Bates, 2005; Beck & Cassidy, 2009; Cassidy & Bates, 2005). Owen and Ennis (2005) argued that Noddings felt that “caring should be at the heart of the educational system”—in fact, it should be the “moral orientation to teaching” (p. 393). This type of “ethical caring” occurs when we are beckoned to care but may not feel naturally inclined to care for the cared-for. This type of care is found in such public domains as education (Beck & Cassidy, 2009).

Noddings’s theory of caring, as mentioned, makes explicit that it is a reciprocal relationship. McBee’s (2007) perception of this is that “the relationships between the ones who give care and those who are cared for are characterized by thoughtful reciprocal encounters in which the caregiver is constantly considering the needs of the ones being cared for who in turn return the care in varied forms of responsive engagement” (p. 34). To expand this to the classroom, the caregiver (teacher) considers the needs of the cared for (students) who return the care by responding to and staying engaged with the classroom environment. A further expansion sees the caregiver (the university as faculty, staff, and/or administration) considering the needs of the cared for (the students), who respond by staying at or returning to the university. Indeed, extensive research literature links care in traditional instructional models and school organization to better outcomes and healthy development (Cassidy & Bates, 2005; Goldstein & Lake, 2000; Noddings, 2013; Rauner, 2000).

Noddings goes further, however, in arguing that “caring should be a foundation for ethical decision making” (Smith, 2004, p. 2). In a 1999 essay, Noddings questions

whether care should “assume a place of respectability in the accepted category of virtue ethics” (p. 37). When Noddings began her work on caring (1979-1980), she was shocked to discover that she did not realize that there were two aspects of caring. One referred to a virtue, and the other emphasized a special attribute of relations. While admitting that there is an overlap, Noddings maintained that the relational meaning of care should not “be abandoned” (p. 37). Goldstein (1999) supported Noddings’s meaning of the word *caring* by pointing out that it is a moral relation—not something that you are, but something that you do (p. 656).

Haidt and Joseph (2004) take up a closely related argument in asserting that morality is both innate and learned. They propose that

human beings come equipped with an intuitive *ethics*, an innate preparedness to feel flashes of approval or disapproval toward certain patterns of events involving other human beings.... These intuitions under-gird the moral systems that cultures develop, including their understandings of virtues and character. By recognizing that cultures build incommensurable moralities on top of a foundation of shared intuitions, we can develop new approaches to moral education and to the moral conflicts that divide our diverse society. (p. 55)

Interestingly, Haidt and Joseph (2004) agree with Goldstein’s assessment of Noddings’ definition of *caring* above. While their verbiage differs, the consensus is undeniable. They write, “Part of the appeal of virtue theory has always been that it sees morality as embodied in the very structure of the self, not merely as one of the activities of the self” (p. 55).

Nora Alder’s (2002) study of care theory used a qualitative approach that incorporated interviews, focus groups, and classroom observations to discover how middle school students and their teachers created and maintained caring relationships.

The study found that students believed that teachers's caring is established when students

...know their students well, provide personalized leadership for their students, teach to understanding and are academically helpful, and hold high expectations for behavior and achievement. Clearly, these urban students felt it was important for teachers to care. (p. 241)

L. Johnson (2009) used a mixed methods framework to examine using the ethics of care to analyze the relationship between belongingness, teacher support, and school context. The study was carried out to measure belongingness. Students were asked to evaluate teacher support by filling out questionnaires evaluating levels of support that they felt from the teachers. The second process used the Psychological Sense of School Membership Scale (PSSM) as an indication of belongingness. Semi-structured interviews were then carried out to expand the results. Ten teachers and five students participated in the interviews. The result of the study sheds light on the "the possibility and significance of supplying adolescent students with a sense of belongingness" (p. 99). The author asserts that schools that place emphasis on the needs of adolescent students are more likely to feel a sense of belongingness, influencing future outcomes for students and teachers both.

Noblit, Rogers, and McCadden's (1995) qualitative study began with the premise that caring is essential to build relationships between students and teachers. Using vignettes to report on personal observations of caring, Noblit, et al. conducted interviews with students and teachers. Using information from the interviews and their field notes, they concluded that we in the educational arena are unfettered in our efforts to promote caring in classrooms. They assert that caring is a value, and it's one that we can culturally construct with and for our students.

Hawk and Lyons (2008) initiated a qualitative study on the ethics of care and pedagogical caring after Hawk received a message from a student pleading not to “give up” on her (p. 316). Over the course of the next six semesters, students in the target class were asked to complete an open-ended survey that asked four questions—whether they had ever felt their instructor had given up on them, what the instructor did/did not do that made them feel that way, what they did as a result of that feeling/perception, and how faculty could reassure a student that the faculty member is still committed to and cares about the student’s learning. Their recommendations for greater caring relationships from teachers to students included:

(a) preparation and enthusiasm from the teacher, (b) encouragement and providing a safe environment, (c) recognition of diversity of student learning approaches, (d) checking on comprehension, and (e) constructive feedback . . . congruent with the characteristics of an ethic of care, pedagogical caring, and respect and with artful teaching. (p. 334)

A sample of preservice and experienced teachers were asked to describe what makes teachers effective. Caring was the most mentioned characteristic. Teven’s (2001) study focused on characteristics and behaviors that identified teachers’ caring to students and characteristics and misbehaviors that invalidated students’ feelings of receiving caring. They responded by answering anonymous questionnaires. Teven concluded that teacher immediacy, responsiveness, and perceived caring led students to increase their attendance and listen more attentively to teacher to whom they feel a close relationship.

Using a Care Theory Pedagogy

During my 14-year career as an instructor at an open enrollment university, I have

seen professors struggle with where to draw the line between professional and personal caring relationships with students. It seems to some that the lines are not clearly drawn. Ten years ago, Hawk and Lyons published an article examining the need for pedagogical caring in the framework of an MBA course. Quoting Noddings, they provided examples of her theory of pedagogical caring:

I do not need to establish a deep, lasting, time-consuming, personal relation with every student. What I must do is to be totally and non-selectively present to the student—to each student—as he addresses me. The time interval may be brief but the encounter is total. (Noddings, 1984, p. 180)

Hawk and Lyons (2008) specify that “To do this, Noddings tells us that the teacher can encourage and enhance the ethical ideal through dialogue, listening, modeling, providing practice, and attributing the best motives to the student” (p. 322).

When we discuss teaching and teaching-learner relationships in depth, we will see that teachers not only have to create caring relations in which they are carers, but that they also have a responsibility to help students develop the capacity to care. (Noddings, 1992, p. 18).

To be clear about caring relations, “caring for” others is not unidirectional. The cared-for must reciprocate and complete the cycle of caring by showing that it has been received (Noddings, 1984, 1992).

Goldstein (1999) synthesized Noddings’ ethic of care with Vygotsky’s zone of proximal development—“the range of effective learning tasks in which an individual can learn successfully both with and without the guidance of a more skilled learner” (Hawk & Lyons, 2008, p. 322). From this, Goldstein developed the proposition that in the context of a caring teacher-student relationship, both emotional and cognitive development takes place.

By advocating an ethic of care pedagogy, I am aware of the stories that have surfaced regarding inappropriate intimacy and disappointing relationships resulting from a misunderstanding of the core assumptions of “caring” between teachers and students. The question of relational boundaries was examined by Chory and Offstein (2017) as a direct pushback against Hawk and Lyons’ earlier work. They questioned “the core assumption that closer is better” (p. 9).

Most of us, of course, want meaningful connections with those we are charged to teach. However, meaningful connections or faculty-student out-of-class engagement is different than becoming friends with our students, acting as their confidants, or picking up where their parents left off.... Our essay, then, is intended to shed light on some of the risks of pursuing more personal bonds with our students. While most may assume only beneficial outcomes can occur, we offer some reasoning and evidence that risk is, indeed, present when “you know your student as a person.” More important, this risk must be managed appropriately so as not to damage the professor, the educational institution, and, ultimately, the student. (p. 33)

Chory and Offstein (2017) are temperate in their evaluations of professors who do not want to know their students “as a person.” I am acquainted with professors who believe that students are too pampered, too immature, and that student support services are a drain of valuable institutional resources. I have heard professors laugh about “freshman bashing” as one of their favorite beginning-of-semester rituals. I have also listened to colleagues diagnose the attrition problem as the fault of students who “just need to grow up.”

However, Hawk’s (2017) response to Chory and Offstein (2017) makes a distinction that is valuable in understanding the ethic of care. There is a difference between “caring for” and “caring about.” “[C]aring for’ necessarily involves some specific, concrete action by the one caring, intended for the developmental well-being of

the relationship and the parties to the relationship” (p. 672); whereas, “caring about” does not necessarily involve action.

Additionally, Hawk (2017) asserts that faculty who care for the well-being of students “must exercise reason and judgment in assessing the unique characteristics of the students, the context, and the situation” (Nelson, 2013, p. 673). Thus, all parties in the relationship work to create reciprocity of well-being (Atkinson, 2013; Engster, 2007; Sointu, 2005; White, 2015). An ethic of care, then, “assumes a significantly well-developed capacity to understand boundaries, individual needs, and deeply personal aspects of self” (Hawk, 2017, p. 673).

Finally, Hawk (2017) concludes, “All faculty should have at least some, if not a significant amount of, concern for helping their students to learn. That may seem obvious, but it is worth repeating” (p. 677). He agrees with Stark (2017), whose perspective proposes that faculty, staff, and administration have an “obligation to put into place caring policies that not only demonstrate and enhance an ethic of care, but that also encourage and reward faculty efforts to model an ethic of care” (p. 678).

Noddings (2002) identified four essential elements of care-based education: modeling, dialog and attention, practice, and confirmation. Acknowledging that caring for others is not an innate behavior, Noddings suggests that it must be learned through reflexive modeling. The way to teach modeling is to show by our own actions what it means to care for others by monitoring the effect our behavior has on others by deep and honest self-reflection. “Was my response adequate?” “Have my actions helped or hindered?” Modeling “caring-for” behaviors can be achieved at the faculty, staff, or

administrative level by “demonstrating respect and appreciation for cultural diversity ... and through...deep interpersonal empathy and understanding (Shevalier & McKenzie, 2012, p. 1092).

Dialogue and attention is the second component of Noddings’ (2002) care-based education: “Dialog [sic] is the means through which we learn what the other wants and needs, and it is also the means by which we monitor the effects of our acts. We ask, ‘What are you going through?’ before we act, as we act, and after we act” (p. 19). Attention, for Noddings, is when the carer attends to or is engrossed by the cared-for, and the cared-for receives the carer’s attempts at caring.

The dean of our college of Arts and Humanities demonstrated one way that administration could fulfill their responsibility to dialog with students recently. He shared with us the results of a survey sent to all of the students in our college prior to an anticipated recruitment realignment. When the students were asked, “What is the number one reason you came to Weber?” their top two answers echoed the sentiments of the interviewees of this study: Weber State was close to their homes, and it was affordable. By dialoguing with the students, the dean and his staff were able to uncover important information about our students’ motives and needs. They can now use that information to capitalize on recruitment.

As with any learning experience, we must practice how to “care for” others, Noddings’ third component of care theory. This is especially applicable in the classroom environment where students can engage in caregiving experiences through activities such as whole-group discussion, allowing students to talk about issues that they care about,

peer-review sessions to practice trust, or group work requiring cooperation. McBee (2007) suggests that teachers should “intentionally and explicitly” model respectful reciprocity with their students: “Attentive listening, maintaining good eye contact, learning names, smiling, courteous interactions, positive greetings and send-offs and respecting privacy are all qualities that we should strive to incorporate into our relationships with our undergraduates and graduate learners” (p. 41).

Confirmation, Noddings’s (2002) fourth component of educational caring, is best understood in her own words:

When someone commits an uncaring or unethical act...we respond—if we are engaging in confirmation –by attributing the best possible motive consonant with reality. By starting this way, we draw the cared-for’s attention to his or her better self. We confirm the other by showing that we believe the act in question is not a full reflection of the one who committed it.... It is wonderfully reassuring to realize that another sees the better self that often struggle for recognition beneath our lesser acts and poorer selves. (pp. 20-21)

Consider the force for positive change if every faculty member, every staff person, and every university administrator lived by this powerful tenet.

Addressing connectedness. Heisserer and Parette (2002) highlight the vulnerability of university students, writing that students may experience “feelings that they don’t belong, feel rejected, and may not adjust to normal academic challenges associated with college life” (as quoted in O’Keeffe, 2013, p. 606). O’Keeffe contends that whether students feel “a sense of connectedness” (p. 607) is a decisive factor in student’s withdrawal from courses. She continues, “A sense of connection can emerge if the student has a relationship with just one key person within the tertiary institution and this relationship can significantly impact upon a students’ decision to remain in college”

(Heisserer & Parette, 2002, as quoted in O’Keeffe, 2013, pp. 607-608). This study hopes to identify if that relationship extends to bringing students *back* to college.

Addressing disconnectedness. Because connection to others is a key factor in retaining students, O’Keeffe (2013) emphasizes that

Developing a ‘sense of belonging’ is critical to the success of college students, particularly for the retention of students who are considered to be at risk of non-completion. However, a sense of belonging within the tertiary education environment can be elusive for students. (p. 607).

According to O’Brien (2002), financial pressures faced by universities, which have led to larger class sizes, higher teacher-student ratios and the extensive use of online learning materials have exacerbated this disconnection. Critically, O’Keeffe (2013) cites the disconnection of students as arising from a

...lack of personal feedback from academic staff as a contributory factor towards the risk of withdrawal and lack of integration between students and lecturers outside of the classroom, for example inaccessibility or unfriendliness of lecturers and administrative staff. (p. 607)

Creating a caring environment. Feeling cared for in the tertiary education environment is critical for two reasons. First, care is essential to ensure that students perform to their best abilities. Second, care is essential to prevent student attrition (Pearson 2012; Heisserer & Parette 2002). Heisserer and Parette further assert that “the single most important factor in advising students who are at-risk is helping them to feel that they are cared for by the institution” (p. 6). Graham-Smith and Lafayette (2004, as quoted in O’Keeffe, 2013, p. 608) found that students at Texas’s Baylor University indicated that caring staff members and a safe environment were cited by respondents as being the most desirable factors at the university.

Tinto and a number of other retention scholars have become increasingly convinced that “the actions of the faculty, especially in the classroom, are key to institutional efforts to enhance student retention” (2006-2007, p. 5). If faculty’s actions are “key” to students’ decisions to *remain* in school, do they also influence their decisions to *return* to school?

Ishler and Upcraft (2005) identified a study which found that specific actions on the part of faculty such as “being supportive of student needs, being approachable, and returning telephone calls and e-mails in a timely fashion” contributed to student persistence (as quoted in Lundquist, Spalding, & Landrum, 2002/2003, p 127).

Again, if these actions contribute to student persistence, could they also positively affect students’ decisions to re-enroll?

So far this section has focused on explaining and theorizing about the concept of care. It is interesting that I have only been able to find authors who either used care theory as their theoretical framework or wrote *about* Noddings’s theory. I was able to find a solitary study which argued strongly against the theory of Noddings’s work. In their article, Krek and Zabel (2017) conceptualize the ethic of care as

...flawed...due to the rejection through principles in general, it fails to provide the educator with a conceptual apparatus through which he/she could analyze and reflect upon—could understand—what he/she is doing with regard to the norms of his/her culture. Society and educators cannot tacitly allow or be benevolent toward such fundamental mistakes in moral education. (p. 284).

The authors are unrelenting in their attack on both Noddings and care theory, referring to care theory as “so-called” and misquoting Noddings while erroneously accusing the proponents of the ethic of care as recommending that education should be based solely on

emotions and spontaneity.

Krek and Zabel (2017) then engage in a psychoanalytical analysis of care theory, aided by the writings of Freud and Lacan. They posit that there are no actions and no ethics outside discourse, therefore a child cannot understand a reason to care. They point out that care theory is in opposition to Kant's conception of ethical reflections through principles, a useless complaint, as Noddings pointed this out in an essay in 1999.

The authors's next objection to care theory is that Noddings has created an ethical theory based on feeling as opposed to rationality. They characterize her concept of caring being "based on an open non-intellectual, non-cognitive empathy toward and feeling for the other, on the perceiving of his/her feelings" (Krek & Zabel, 2017, p. 287). The authors conclude their article by accusing care theory of promoting education that is the result of care, without reflection on specific unnamed values. From this criticism, they hypothesize that educators will inevitably lead children to education that supports a racist education. By performing a psychoanalytical analysis of another theoretical framework, their argument boils down to a conflict between theories. Instead of writing a critique of care theory, the authors sounded more and more like bullies in the school yard. The tone of the article was unnecessarily hostile, and nothing constructive was added to the conversation about care theory.

Who are These Students?

Dropouts and stop-outs are two different cohorts, but historically they have been lumped together (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Hoyt and Winn (2004) suggest that

much of the literature on nonreturning students has treated them as a single cohort (Grosset, 1993; Witherspoon, Long, & Chubick, 1999), failing to differentiate between distinct populations of dropouts, stop-outs, transfer-outs, and opt-outs (Bonham & Luckie, 1993; Grosset, 1993; Herzog, 2004; Horn, 1998; Stratton, O'Toole, & Wetzel, 2008; Witherspoon et al., 1999). Recent research to disaggregate the stop-out population has generated an estimate that stop-outs comprise one-third of the student population (Stratton et al., 2007). It is important to keep in mind that because of this failure to distinguish between the groups, it may appear that there is more information about stop-out students than is accurate.

Some stop-out students leave higher education with an avowed intention to return. Although “intending” to re-enroll may not always result in re-enrollment, Stokes and Zusman (1992) and Woosley (2004) have provided empirical evidence for a strong relationship between intent and re-enrollment. Woosley’s research included 613 undergraduates who withdrew in fall 1999 or spring 2000. Institutional data was examined for demographic characteristics of withdrawing students who re-enrolled and those who did not. Students were then given a two-page survey as part of their mandatory withdrawal process. Of the 613 withdrawing undergraduates, 559 responded to the survey, a 91% response rate. Independent-samples *t* tests were performed to see if returning students had higher high school percentile ranks and grade point averages. The tests were not significant. Survey responses revealed that nearly 60% of first time stop-outs did not return in the 19-term window. Of the 40% who did return, over 70% had a second stop-out period. Only 37% of second stop-out students returned in the 19-term

period.

There is a racial component we need to address beyond the previous comments.

DesJardin, et al. (2002) report that

Many studies find that minority students have higher probabilities of dropout and stopout and lower probabilities of graduation than their majority counterparts. The lower average school quality and socioeconomic background of minority students is thought to be less favorable to academic attainment. (p. 557)

Black high school graduates also face poor employment prospects, which encourages academically underprepared students to continue their education past high school.

Unfortunately, being poorly academically prepared increases the chances of failure in higher education (DesJardin, et al., 2002, p. 557).

In addition to the racial component, gender also appears to be a significant factor in students' decisions to re-enroll. In the 1980s, the rate of return to college and the rate of return to completion of college, rather than just attending for a year or more, were greater for women than for men (DesJardins et al., 1999; Gerhart, 1990; Ley & Murnane, 1992). However, by the late 1990s, DesJardins et al. found that stop-outs in their study were more likely to be male, "from underrepresented minority groups,...be enrolled in General College, have lower first-term GPAs and higher loan amounts in year one, have lower ACT scores and high-school rank percentiles, and indicate a need for assistance on all the 'help' variables in [their] study" (DesJardins et al., 1999, p. 564). This information came from a study conducted at the University of Minnesota – Twin Cities campus. The original sample for the study comprised 3,070 freshman students in fall 1991. The sample used institutional data and information from the ACT over a 19-term period. The authors used an event history model to determine if patterns of behavior could be discovered that

would prevent stop-out students from becoming dropouts.

Family income seems to correlate strongly with whether students stop out. Not surprisingly, students from families with higher incomes are less likely to drop-out or stop-out due to financial need. There is also a strong correlation between income and other family background measurements on educational attainment: enrollment, persistence, and graduation (DesJardins et al., 2002; Kane, 1994; Manski & Wise, 1983).

Another important predictor for persistence to graduation is how well students feel they fit into the social structure of the college or university (DesJardins et al., 2002, Oseguera & Rhee, 2009). Numerous studies have found that students who lack a sense-of-belonging or feel isolated during their first years of college are more likely to leave. As mentioned in the Review of Studies section, Lehmann (2007) conducted “25 qualitative, semi-structured, one-on-one interviews” (p. 93) with students who left a research-intensive university with an affluent population without graduating. Lehmann mailed 1,400 invitations to these targeted student to ask them to participate in interviews with a disappointing 42 responses. Eventually, 25 students were interviewed followed by coding and the use of field notes. Lehmann concluded that there is a “class-cultural discontinuity” around feelings of “not fitting in, not ‘feeling university,’ and not being able to relate to other students” (2007, p. 89).

Walton, Cohen, Cwir, and Spencer (2012) conducted research on college students’ social connectedness through observations of two experiments. The first experiment intentionally manipulated the participants through a “getting-to-know-you” exercise. The social-connection manipulation was grounded in previous research that

suggested that similarity is an important foundation for feelings of social connectedness. The goal of the second experiment was to test whether a sense of social connectedness was formed by “matching a stranger’s preferences to participants’s valued, idiosyncratic preferences” (p. 664). Although not specifically related to stop-out students, the findings suggested the following:

[T]he present research suggests that people acquire interests and goals from others, especially others to whom they feel socially connected. The conclusion that motivation is highly sensitive to social relationships is consistent with research on social identity threat, which finds that subtle cues that convey to students that they do not belong or that their group does not belong in a field of study can undermine motivation. (p. 529)

The study further suggests “a mere sense of social linkage leads people to adopt the goals and motivation of others for themselves” (Walton et al., 2012, p. 529). This research aligns with the current study’s interest in exploring if and how returning students are affected by a sense of social connection with an individual, a department, or an institution.

A review of decades of retention literature has uncovered relatively few studies that have focused on stop-out students. Pardee’s (1992) study attempted to identify the characteristics of community college students who dropped out and then re-enrolled. His findings revealed that “desire to learn” was the most important influence reported by both men and women of all ethnic groups, excluding black students (p. 1). Other significant factors from the study were listed as “Improved Earning Potential, Increased Value on Education, Improved Emotional Outlook, Occupation Requires, and Dissatisfaction with Job” (p. 3). The study could not find a distinction between long-range influences to re-enroll in college and an immediate “trigger” event that influenced re-enrollment. Of

special relevance to this study is Pardee's conclusion that the "primary influencing factors to return to college [four of the top six ranking influences in this study] could be considered intrinsic in nature" (p. 3), a finding which "supports Fredrick Herzberg's theory that intrinsic factors provide the greatest motivation" (p. 11).

Genco (2007) conducted qualitative research using the phenomenological approach to extract knowledge about the "life transition and experiences" (p. 48) of re-enrolled or recently graduated students at a community college. The study focused on re-entry students, 25 years or older, who entered the community college after having been separated from an institution of learning for at least 5 years. Participants were enrolled during the study in either an associate's degree or certification program. Twenty-four interviews were conducted and tape-recorded. After transcription of the interviews, they were analyzed for emergent themes. The students also provided demographic information sheet at the time of their phenomenological interviews. The findings addressed affective, individual, and institutional factors. The takeaway for institutions was that programs and services must better address the needs of this population in order to facilitate higher re-enrollment.

Ahson et al. (1998) tracked undergraduates who were enrolled in the fall semester of 1992 but did not return for spring semester 1993 ($n = 1,262$). Two survey mailings and a follow-up postcard were used to recruit participants, resulting in a 43% response rate ($n = 504$). The study concentrated on which factors were significant in students' decisions to return and persist until graduation. Reasons for not returning were further studied by age, sex, credit hour enrollment, hours worked, socioeconomic status, dependent

children, and first generation college students. According to the authors, “The answer to the question, ‘Do stop-outs return?’ is yes, they do, but they are far more likely to do so as they progress through class levels and if they are able to reconcile or compensate for external forces that conflict with their enrollment” (Ahson et al, p. 18).

Schatzel et al. (2013) identified “those most likely to reenroll [sic] in higher education in the near future” (p. 347) through the use of demographic and psychographic factors. A commercial survey company interviewed participants by telephone. Interviews stopped if respondents answered that they were not the target cohort (e.g., they were not between 25 and 34 years old, had never attended college, were currently enrolled in college, or had already earned a degree). Schatzel et al. (2013) were influenced by Hossler’s 1990 work in which he extrapolated employee turnover models into a model of student attrition that emphasized intentions and attitudes. Tinto’s (1975, 1993) models of student retention continue to guide noteworthy research on stop-outs. The authors concluded that student intentions “directly affect retention behaviors” (Schatzel et al., 2013, p. 349). The results of their study indicated that those who intend to re-enroll are more likely to be “members of minority groups, younger, single, and recently laid off, have earned more credits, and hold strong beliefs about the value of education” (Schatzel et al., 2013 p. 347). Additionally, the authors believed that stop-out students did not have an infrastructure that supported their unique needs, such as “one-stop centers that provide support for administrative tasks to expedite the return to college” or help reintegrating into the college mindset in areas such as technology, time management, goal setting, and study habits (Schatzel et al., 2013, p. 360). Although many studies confirm that minority

students have a higher probability of dropout or stop-out behavior (and, therefore, a lower probability of graduation), Rivkin (1995) notes that re-enrollment for black students is higher than for whites.

Woosley (2004) focused on the differences between students who withdraw and re-enroll and those who do not. As mentioned before, Woosley used institutional data to determine demographic characteristics of withdrawing students. She next administered a survey to withdrawing students as part of their official withdrawal interviews. While conceding, as Schatzel et al. (2013) did a decade later, that intentions to return were related to re-enrollment behaviors, she noted that student predictions were not always accurate. Of specific importance to this discussion is their conclusion that “dropouts and stop-outs appear to be different groups of students with different issues” (p. 301). The author noted that Tinto’s model of student departure (1993) theorized a relationship between pre-entry attributes that may be related to departure. However, Woosley did not find any pre-entry attributes that were significantly related to re-enrollment.

With underwriting from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the group Public Agenda conducted a survey of 614 young people between the ages 22 and 30 who had started college but left before completing a degree. The report addressed both myths and realities about why so many students leave before obtaining a diploma or certificate. Their findings revealed weaknesses in the higher education system that created obstacles for students who need to work while trying to finish their education. The authors questioned policies that are unsuited to students who cannot attend school full-time for several years. Further, the report suggested that more young Americans could be helped

to continue their education if programs were better organized and more cost-effective. Of special relevance to this discussion is their finding that nearly two thirds of the respondents in their study reported that they had given a lot of thought to returning (J. Johnson et al., 2009).

Purpose and Objectives for Research

Despite decades of retention research, the accumulation of data concerning why students leave college before graduation has failed to translate into reduced attrition rates, which remain unsatisfactorily high. However, the inclusion of stop-out students into attrition rates must certainly skew those figures. The non-linear educational path of stop-out students cannot be disaggregated from dropouts until *after* they return, resulting in fuzzy retention numbers. This needs to be acknowledged in attrition studies along with the fact that many returning students are re-enrolling after 5, 10, or even 20 years out of school, which naturally creates challenges for faculty, staff, and administration to meet the specific needs and challenges that these nontraditional students present.

Those students who leave higher education and then successfully re-enroll have much to teach us about how to help them persist until graduation. To borrow from Jorgensen (2006), these students need to be “seen and heard within the context of their own histories” (p. 186). Will those histories include a caring connection as a factor in their decisions to become stop-outs instead of dropouts? When does a dropout become a stop-out? Why are some able to return? Is it really, as suggested earlier, as simple as solving the problems that took them away? Are institutions of higher education

unintentionally creating obstacles that make re-entry difficult or overwhelming, preventing their return? What problems, attitudes or behaviors within education need to be addressed to facilitate student re-entry? How would using a care theory approach change students' return rate? Is the absence of a caring connection perceived as an obstacle to re-entry to higher education?

Through the use of a survey and individual interviews, this study attempts to discover if students' perception of a caring connection with an individual, a department, or an institution influenced or motivated them to return to higher education. The potential benefit of an increased rate of graduation to both individuals and institutions should be self-evident.

Research Questions

The research project was conceptualized and designed to collect and analyze authentic student voices regarding stop-out experiences as seen through the lens of care theory.

1. What can returning students tell faculty, staff, and administration about how to encourage re-enrollment?
2. What can returning students tell faculty, staff, and administration about barriers or obstacles that discourage re-enrollment?
3. What can returning students tell faculty, staff, and administration about support services that are needed to facilitate re-enrollment?
4. What can returning students tell faculty, staff, and administration about how their perceptions of being connected to or being cared for by an individual or institution influenced their decision to re-enroll in higher education?

CHAPTER III

PROCEDURES AND METHODS

The universe is made of stories, not of atoms.

(Rukeyser, 1968, p. 465)

Background

My own experience of stopping out of university between my freshman and sophomore years and then returning to finish a bachelor's degree over 20 years later, opened a strong connection to students with similar backgrounds. I remembered attending the university without ever feeling like I fit in with other students who all seemed to share a rich connection to the state and culture, while I was an exotic, a transplant to the area. Coming from a low socioeconomic background, I was in awe of the affluence and sophistication of my peers. These were people my age who were affluent enough to have cars at school—cars newer and nicer than any my parents had ever been able to afford. They talked of vacations abroad with their families, they complained about being “forced” to take instruction in art, music, voice, or dance (something I had always dreamed of), and their closets burst with new and expensive wardrobes. They unconsciously and unaffectedly revealed their lives of privilege and wealth, lives that humbled and overwhelmed me. I knew that I was accountable to no one at the university and, consequently, no one would notice if I did not come back the next year, and, as far as I could tell, no one did.

I had experienced the difficulty of balancing school and part-time work when I

returned to school after a year absence spent working and then the challenges of balancing school, family, full-time work and motherhood when I returned to school twenty years later. I had found myself again in a position where I did not really fit in with the majority of much younger students. Nevertheless, I soon found that we shared some of the same struggles—to find enough money to finance yet another semester, to create a balance between school and family, and to keep alive the hope that the degree would bring us careers that would lead us to better lives.

Because my educational journey progressed along a nontraditional path, I am sensitive to administrative attitudes that fail to comprehend or acknowledge that our current efforts to solve the problem of attrition ignores the fact that, for many students, education is no longer a linear process. Some students leave, never to return—it is true. However, some students *do* return, and these students need to feel that the university cares about their success by doing all they can to help them persist.

This study was conducted at Weber State University, a third-tier state school in the Western U.S. The university has an enrollment of 27,949 students (Fall semester, 2017) and provides associate, baccalaureate, and master degree programs in liberal arts, sciences, professional, and technical fields. The student body is 54% female and 46% male with 75.1% identifying as Caucasian, 10.2% Hispanic, 2.3% Asian or Pacific Islander, 1.5% African American and 1.5% International. Residents of the state make up 92% of the population. Full-time students account for 42% of the population and 58% are part-time.

Weber State is commonly called a “commuter school.” In 2014, only 4% of

students lived in college-owned, -operated, or –affiliated housing; 96% lived off campus. The average age of all students was 26 years, and 42% of the student body was 25 or older. In 2014, 58% of full-time undergraduate students received financial aid, and 40% of part-time undergraduate students received financial aid. The university funds a “Dream Weber” plan, providing free tuition and general student fees to households with annual incomes of less than \$40,000. As is evident, this is not an affluent or traditional student body.

Graduation rates for female first-time, full-time freshmen who began their studies in 2008 broke down as follows: 15% graduated within four years; 24% graduated within six years; and 10% are expected to graduate within eight years. The graduation rates for male first-time, full-time freshmen who began their studies in 2008 were as follows: 14% graduated within four years; 30% graduated within six years; and 4% were expected to graduate within eight years. Average age at graduation for all students was 29 years, and average semesters to graduation were 11.8.

Retention rates for the 2011 first-time, full-time freshmen cohort for the first year was 61%, dropping to 40% for the second year and 38% for the third year. Fall 2012 retention for first-time, full-time freshmen for the first year was 53%, again dropping to 41% for the second and third year.

The characteristics of this university—open enrollment, retention rates as a focus for administration, older and nontraditional student body, delayed graduation, diversity of student body, commuter campus—are shared by other community colleges and universities across the country. It seems reasonable that whatever is discovered in this

study could be generalized to the small body of knowledge already gathered concerning stop-out students nationwide.

The cohort for this study was comprised of students who attended the university during the eight-year period between 2007 and 2016. The time period was based on the availability of student data in the university's reporting system. In order to qualify for inclusion in the study, students must have had a history of leaving school for at least one semester and then returning. No time limitation was specified for how long students stayed out before re-enrolling. According to initial data supplied by Weber's Office of Institutional Effectiveness in September of 2016, 7,572 students began classes during that time period, stopped out for at least a semester, and subsequently re-enrolled. This was the target group for the study from which the participants were selected.

It is necessary to note that this university traditionally enrolled male students who attended college for one year and then left at age 19 to serve a church mission for two years. Many re-entered school when they returned. There was a natural concern that this group would skew the number of stop-outs identified. The director of the Office of Institutional Effectiveness, who compiled the cohort information for the study, communicated that she had controlled for that abnormality by excluding males who stopped out at age 19 and returned at age 21 from 2007 to 2012. In 2013, the age for missionary service was lowered to 18. As most missionaries now leave to serve missions directly after high school, the potential difficulty was resolved. The director felt that the two controls above were sufficient to produce trustworthy figures.

Methodological Design

The above provides ample precedent for the mixed-methods design I chose, which employs both a survey and one-on-one interviews with semi-structured, open-ended questions. Although surveys alone are the easiest and most common method used to gather quantitative data, they can be intrusive and rely solely on the cooperation of students. I found the reliance on students' cooperation to be especially frustrating in this study, as my response rate for the survey was lower than my expectation. This is discussed in detail later in the paper.

Using personal information provided by students when registering for school is another option for gathering background demographics; however, this method is less specific and therefore less powerful. It was also beyond the range of this investigator to access. However, I considered the survey worthwhile in that it provided background information about the study cohort. Additionally, the survey was important as a mean to recruit potential participants for the interviews.

After receiving permission to conduct the study from Institutional Research Boards of both Weber State University (see Appendix C) and Utah State University (see Appendix D), I was provided a random sample of 2,000 names by Weber State's Office of Institutional Effectiveness. I sent the students an email (see Appendix E) through Weber's tool, Campus Labs Baseline, inviting them to participate in an anonymous online survey about their experience leaving and subsequently returning to school (see Appendix B for survey questions). A Letter of Information for Survey Participants was included on the first page of the survey to inform participants of the purpose and

procedures of the study, risks, benefits, confidentiality, and voluntary participation/withdrawal, proof is IRB approval, and informed consent (see Appendix G). As an incentive for participation, I provided survey respondents the opportunity to win one of five \$25 gift cards. Incentives such as this have been used with both mail and web surveys with documented increases in response rates (Fan & Yan, 2010; Hamilton, 2003).

Additionally, the students were told that they were a small, select group and a deadline was set for participating in the survey. Porter and Whitcomb (2003) believe that this approach, termed “mentioning the scarcity,” can increase response rates significantly.

I took care to structure the survey invitation according to recent best practices in technical design including a clear description of the survey task, informing students how their contact information was obtained, providing a realistic estimate of how long the survey would take to finish, and providing contact information should they need help or have questions. Per the work of Crawford, Couper, and Lamias (2001), no attachments or html documents were included.

Hamilton (2003) suggests that 7-10 days is sufficient time for respondents to complete the survey. Therefore, after 7 days, the email was resent, including a link to the survey (Futrell & Lamb, 1981), with thanks to those who completed the survey and a reminder to others of the potential cash incentive as well as the deadline (see Appendix F). Researchers Sheehan and Hoy (1997) found that an email reminder increased survey responses by 25%, so a final reminder email was sent the day before the survey closed.

The drawing for the gift cards took place a week after the survey closed. I used a random number generator to obtain the five winners, who were notified within 24 hours

of their selection. Emails were sent to the winners and they picked up their gift cards from me at my office on campus.

Adding the second step of interviewing survey participants allowed me to gather detailed information about the students' university experiences in their own words. Interviews were deemed an appropriate addition as they are considered primary source material that can provide rich, informative data to researchers (Owen, 2014).

In designing the interview questions, I was cognizant of the value of open ended questions that would allow me to focus on the study's central goal: what faculty, staff, and the institution could learn about student's perceptions of care in their own words. Because my questions were prepared ahead of time, I could ensure a level of consistency throughout the interviews. Therefore, I tried to carefully tailor the questions to best provide opportunities for insight into the individual student's knowing and experience. As I. E. Seidman (1991) has noted, "At the root of...interviewing is an interest in understanding the experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience" (p. 3). This was exactly the goal of my interviews—to understand the experience of stop-out students and the meaning they constructed from those experiences, seen through the lens of care theory.

Cresswell and Clark (2011) encourage researchers to become familiar with what they call "common methods of collecting qualitative data, such as semi-structured interviews using open-ended questions and qualitative observation" (p. 14). I felt myself to be familiar with such methods both theoretically through my reading and practically through my years of meeting with and counseling students during formal office hours and

after class meetings.

The semistructured interview was further applicable in this situation on a practical basis, as there was only one chance to interview the students and the interviews took place in only one instance (Bernard, 1988). DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree (2006) allow that single interviews are the most prevalent approach in situations where the topic can be effectively examined in one interaction or when access to participants is difficult. I felt that both of these conditions were present in the execution of this project.

Face-to-face interviews have the advantage of allowing nonverbal data such as facial expressions, gestures, and other kinds of communication that may enhance the meaning of spoken words (Carr & Worth, 2001; Hiller & DiLuzio, 2004). In-person interviews may also yield deep descriptions from interviewees depending on the interviewers' ability to elicit trust and openness from the interviewee (Knox & Burkard, 2009). In addition to these advantages, my purpose in face-to-face interviewing was not only to gather respondents' data for later theoretical analysis but also to model Noddings's components of caring for students in their interviews.

Further, interviews allowed me to use a more holistic approach, revealing the complexities of the students' viewpoints, attitudes, opinions, and experiences, providing a richer collection of data (Nassaji, 2015). Kozleski's (2017) assertion that qualitative interviews are important sources of discovering what works, and what does not work, in retention studies. I extrapolated from Kozleski that qualitative interviews would also be helpful to determine what works, and what does not work, in re-enrollment studies, as stop-out students could be seen in the light of successful retention.

I also considered that student voices are often unheard in higher education, as was the case during my experience in Student Affairs. The administration uses their power to make decisions *for* instead of *with* students, who have no power of their own. Because of this, some even suggest that true dialogue in education, as advocated by Noddings, is quite rare (Kozol, 1991). Because their needs are often unheard, students cannot or do not feel cared for. The interview process is an appropriate venue to give their voices a forum. As Noddings (1992) has written:

Dialogue is a common search for understanding, empathy, of appreciation. It can be playful or serious, logical or imaginative, goal or process oriented, but it is always a genuine quest for something undetermined at the beginning.... We respond most effectively as carers when we understand what the other needs and the history of this need. (p. 23)

Analyzing the applicability of this quote, I assert that the interviews were a genuine search for information, undetermined at the beginning of the interview process. In attempting to address the needs of stop-out students, I felt that it was important to listen for their needs and for the histories of their needs and to make them the object of my care as I interviewed them.

As I mentioned before, in order to obtain possible interviewees, the survey asked students to indicate if they would be willing to participate in face-to-face interviews with me. Each would be given a \$25 gift card for their time.

Although I would have preferred to choose students whose responses on the survey most closely matched the study objectives (demonstrated presence or absence of caring/connection or pronounced institutional obstacles), students' identification information was not linked to their responses, in order to maintain student anonymity.

However, the twelve students who were ultimately interviewed represented an authentic, random sample from which I was able to hear their expressions about feelings of connectedness and disconnectedness.

In selecting the first potential interviewees, I used a random number generator to select twenty students for inclusion in the study. I communicated with the prospective interviewees by email and invited them to meet on campus for one-on-one, semistructured interviews (see Appendix A for interview questions). The anticipated time for each interview was to be 45 to 60 minutes, although the final interviews varied in length, depending, ultimately, on how comfortable the participant felt in sharing their experiences and how those experiences affected their academic decisions. This first response produced only one volunteer, so a second round of invitations was issued using the same method as described above. Ultimately, 12 students responded and were interviewed.

I met eight of the students in one of three places on campus: my office, a small conference room, and a classroom. I gave the students a choice of where they would like to meet, and each chose according to her/his own convenience. Two of my interviews were conducted by phone due to the schedules of the participants. Although this varied from my original plan, I do not believe that it negatively affected the validity of the results. Many interviews are carried out over the phone, especially large, national surveys (see Johnson et al., 2009; Schatzel et al., 2013). Both of the students interviewed by phone proved to be as communicative as some of the face-to-face students in terms of the sheer volume of their responses.

To begin each interview, I introduced myself, thanked the students for their participation, and had them sit wherever they felt comfortable in the room. I then briefly described my research project and asked them if they were still willing to participate. Luckily, each answered affirmatively, so I next supplied the Informed Consent forms, which we reviewed together before the participants signed them. (In the two cases of phone interviews, I emailed the forms to the students before the interviews, and they printed them and returned them signed to my office, receiving their gift card at the same time. Before I began the phone interviews, I checked to make sure that the participants had read and agreed to the Informed Consent for Interview Participants (see Appendix H) before we began our interviews.

I next gave the interviewees the gift cards and then began to chat informally with them to create a comfortable setting before starting the formal interview. It was important to me to establish a reciprocal relationship of trust, as much as possible, from the beginning of the interview, so I centered my attention on each participant and asked them general questions about themselves before I began (e.g., Are you from this area? Where did you grow up? How is school going for you this semester? What classes are you enjoying?). I informed the students when I was going to turn my phone on to record so that they would know the interview was formally beginning.

When the interviews had run their course, I told the students that I was turning off the recorder, and we chatted a few minutes longer before they left. I began the process of transcribing the interviews as soon as each was completed, in order to evaluate how I could improve my interviewing skills. Once the interviews were transcribed verbatim, I

contacted the interviewees and offered them the opportunity to cross-check the interviews for accuracy. The file transcripts of the interviews were saved in a locked file on my computer and deleted from my phone. The locked file will be erased in January of 2020, approximately a year after the publication of this dissertation.

Data Analysis Procedures

When conceptualizing his project, I assumed that I would analyze my interviews by first using coding to develop emergent themes and categories (Yin, 2016). Although it is preferable to establish reliability of analysis through the execution of two independent codings of material, it is acceptable to use a test-retest method. Using this process, the researcher codes the material and then puts the results aside without studying them and later re-codes the same material. The first and second codings are then compared to see if they agree (Gorden, 1992). Because I was the sole investigator on this study, this is the coding procedure that I anticipated that I would follow, as it is an acceptable, common procedure.

However, as I was deep in the work of reading, re-reading, cross-checking interviews, and discovering themes, I stumbled onto articles that referenced Jackson and Mazzei's 2012 book, *Thinking with Theory in Qualitative Research: Viewing Data Across Multiple Perspectives*. These authors posit, "traditional forms of qualitative data analysis (e.g., coding, thematic analysis) may no longer be, and perhaps never were, able to adequately assess modern social life" (Marn, 2015, p. 762). They describe their preferred language and way of thinking as *thinking with theory* (e.g., directly "plugging-

in” theory with data, p. vii). The authors argue that interpretation and analysis of qualitative data “does not happen via mechanistic coding, reducing data to themes, and writing up transparent narratives that do little to critique the complexities of social life” (pp. vii-viii). They push against methods that they feel reduce complicated and conflicting voices and data to thematic chunks that can be interpreted out of context and circumstance.

In their book, Jackson and Mazzei (2012) interviewed two first-generation academic women and used the transcripts as the data for the following theorists and theories: (1) Derrida’s Deconstruction, (2) Spivak’s Marginality, (3) Foucault’s Power Knowledge, (4) Butler’s Performativity, (5) Deleuze’s Desire, and (6) Barad’s Intra-action. “Depending on the theory that a researcher chooses to think with, different questions get generated: these questions drive the process of analyzing the data” (Yacoub, 2017, pp. 1777-1778).

In the same vein, St. Pierre and Jackson (2014) subsequently addressed methods of qualitative data analysis *after* coding, arguing that thinking with theory is so difficult to describe and explain to the nonpositivist thinker that qualitative researchers have equated qualitative data analysis with coding data. While acknowledging that the predominant method of data collection in qualitative research is interviewing, they criticize how participants’ “authentic voices” are “hallowed, treated reverently by researchers, as if their words—supposedly uncontaminated by theoretical interpretation—can serve as a foundation of knowledge” (St. Pierre & Jackson, 2014, p. 1777). They recommend, instead, using theory to ascertain what is considered data and what is

considered appropriate (or good) data.

Yacoub (2017) notes, however, that Jackson and Mazzei's book is not a "holistic, radical change in qualitative studies" (p. 1779); one still needs to collect data and code transcripts. The difference comes at the analysis stage—looking at data through a theoretical lens rather than grouping themes.

The questions raised by these dissenting voices gave me pause for a few weeks while I wrestled with the implications of "thinking with theory, also known as "post-qualitative analysis" (Douglas, 2017, p. 1). By following traditional methods of coding and developing themes, "thematic analysis" (Douglas, 2017, p. 1), would I be guilty of Young's (1969) description of coding as "an elaborate presentation of data whose purposes are unclear and whose utility is undermined by the absence of an adequate conceptual foundation" (p. 489)? Would I be missing out on richer interpretation that a deconstructive analysis promises, as Douglas argues? Would my tone really be more distant, my results nothing more than "superficial descriptions of phenomena that do not provide meaningful insight" (Douglas, 2017, p. 2.) using a thematic analysis?

It was time to go back to my epistemological commitment. Crotty (2003) tells us that constructivism is defined as knowledge that is created through individuals' actions with the world. Douglas (2017) explains:

There is no meaning outside of a person's perception. We construct our understanding of the world through our own realities.... Thus knowledge is contextual, contingent, and subject to interpretation. Constructivism informs the thematic analysis of [a] study by considering the statements of the research participant to be their own construction.... (p. 2)

Douglas (2017) continues by explaining that in interpretive thematic research, the voices

of the participants are privileged. However, the voice of the researcher is silent, appearing only in the choices made in coding the data (Charmaz, 2016). Therefore, two different researchers may identify two different sets of themes, but the constant comparison process in coding helps maintain internal consistency. Therefore, a tension arises in interpretive research between retaining the voice of the participant and interpreting what they are saying. In the end, the focus of interpretive thematic analysis is on describing what the participant believes.

This approach seems most logically near the focus of my study—listening to students share what they have learned from their university experiences with faculty, staff, and administration about connection or disconnection. The voice of the students *can* serve as a foundation of knowledge, despite St. Pierre and Jackson's (2014) caustic disavowal. In the end, I rejected the authors' vision of post-coding analysis, as it did not seem practical or useful for my study, as is illustrated here:

Post-coding analysis, then, can be thought of as non-technique and non-method that is always in a process of becoming as theories interlink, intensify, and increase territory.... [It] cannot be neat, tidy, and contained...cannot be easily explained either during or after analysis...cannot be replicated because it is emergent and experimental without a beginning or end, without origin or destination. In this way, analysis occurs *everywhere and all the time*. (Emphasis in original, p. 717)

My one caveat is that I agree that analysis *can* occur everywhere and all the time. I consciously structured my project with the vision of both investigating students' perceptions of care while personally modeling the elements of Noddings's care theory.

To begin the analysis process, therefore, I first looked at the data derived from the survey's small sample and compared its results to previous research mentioned earlier. I

compared the study's demographic information (age, ethnicity, gender) to university demographics to see how well the study cohort resembled the general student population. I then analyzed the students' responses to reasons for leaving and re-enrolling, how long they stayed out of school, and support systems. Their responses also closely matched previous studies. This process gave me an overall impression of Weber's stop-out students and their resemblance to the general population of stop-outs.

The coding process is meant to take data from its original state to higher conceptual levels. Using Yin's (2016) coding process, I grouped the similar words or phrases of the interviewees into the same codes. From this overview, I created Level 1, or open codes whose language adhered closely to the original statements of the interviewees. From these words or expressions that appeared repetitively, I was able to create specific categories that established connections between the students' experiences, both positive and negative (Yin, 2016). Moving to a higher conceptual level, I synthesized Level 2, or category codes from students' experiences in order to organize the histories, expectations, struggles, and hopes of the participants' lived experiences. Moving from the simplest categories to a higher conceptual level allowed me to identify abstract themes from the students' stories and provided the process I needed for qualitatively analyzing their interviews through my lens of care.

Ethical Issues

As must be the case with qualitative research, the subjective nature of the study could threaten the validity of the results. However, it was a theme in this study that all

voices should and will be heard—without bias or distortion. Member checking was offered to each interviewee to prevent potential misperceptions or misunderstandings between interviewer and participant. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and used verbatim as much as possible. The exceptions were when the verbiage omitted by students would have necessitated I inject additional information to put the comment into context.

My method of interviewing was deliberately aligned with Noddings's theory of caring. Entering into dialogue with each of the interviewees was more than just exchanging words. In accordance with Noddings's requirement that in order for dialogue to be perceived as caring, it must be done in a non-coercive manner, I asked students to volunteer for both the survey and the interviews. No coercion was used to force students to participate. I accommodated their schedules of where we would meet and when the meetings would take place and thanked students for being "willing participants" in the interviews (Noddings, 1992, p. 23). Beyond that, I was aware of my responsibility to foster a thoughtful, reciprocal relationship with each student during the interviews in which I (the caregiver), was constantly considering the needs of the interviewees (the ones being cared for), as they returned their care through forms of responsive engagement in our dialogue.

Implications

Because the retention lens has been firmly focused on keeping students in school without regard to encouraging and facilitating their re-entry, my hope is that the

knowledge collected from this study will motivate the university personnel to widen its focus from its present emphasis on retention-only programs. The experiences of the students in this study could prove valuable in making future decisions based on caring theory about how best to anticipate and meet students' needs, not only by persuading them to persist, but also by encouraging and facilitating their return should they stop-out.

This study may also influence administration to consider recruiting students who are close to graduation, who are not currently attending school, to return and graduate. Focusing on this cohort would be one way to demonstrate the effectiveness of Noddings's care theory. The school (the carer) reaches out to junior or senior level students not currently in school (the cared-for), who respond by returning to school (demonstrating engagement with the carer) and graduate. The students gain by finishing their degree and accruing the benefits, and the university gains by increasing graduation rates and decreasing attrition.

Limitations of the Research and the Role of the Researcher

Pursuant to receiving approval to conduct research from both Weber State University and Utah State University's Institutional Review Boards (see Appendices C and D), the Office of Institutional Effectiveness at Weber State furnished me with the information that between 2007 and 2016, 7,572 students had enrolled at Weber State, failed to re-enroll for at least one subsequent semester, and then returned to the university and were presently enrolled as of Fall semester 2017. From that number, the office provided me with a randomized list of 2,000 ($n = 2,000$) students to use as the cohort for

my student surveys. The office limited the number of students provided due to the demands of their workload. As this study was not one requested by higher levels of administration, providing the list of 2,000 names was as much as their schedule allowed.

As I began my interviews, I realized that because of the open-ended format of the interview questions, the sessions would sometimes transgress the permeable boundaries of the research questions into the hinterlands of the interviewee's experiences. I sometimes had to draw the focus back to the study questions rather than be enticed to continue along lines that, while interesting, were not adding to the study's purposes. However, because I needed to establish trust and a level of empathy with the participants, I acknowledge that I frequently allowed students to continue to tell their stories without interruption. As Nodding's (1984) ethic of care is relational, one of its focuses is "engrossment by the one caring with the one(s) cared for" (Hawk, 2017, p. 672). In order to demonstrate that level of caring, I concentrated on making each of the interviewees feel the empathy and concern I had for them as they communicated their experiences.

Methods of Findings and Analysis Overview

Data

Survey protocol. Weber State's Campus Labs Baseline tool was used to email the surveys to the sample group (see Appendix E). After the initial email, reminder emails were sent ten days later (Hamilton, 2003, Nulty, 2008; (see Appendix F). The final number of students who received emails was 1,972. The reduction in number was due to duplicates, faculty inclusion, and incorrect email addresses. One hundred forty-seven

students agreed to take the survey and responded to the first three questions. Twelve students then opted out of the survey, leaving 135 who finished. The response rate for the first three questions was 7.5%. The response rate for the next six questions was 6.8%. This response rate is definitely not robust, especially when compared to some of the survey response rates in my Review of Literature; however, it is only possible to conjecture why so few students were interested in completing the survey.

Nulty (2008) states that in general, “online surveys are much less likely to achieve response rates as high as surveys administered on paper” (p. 302). My cultural conditioning led me to administer my survey online, as all of the surveys we are asked to complete by the university and department are carried out online. It would be interesting to see the difference if I had been able to conduct the surveys on paper to see if Nulty’s research has been affected by the advancements of technology, especially on younger people

Dommeyer, Baum, Hanna, and Chapman (2004) reported that a typical online survey involves “giving students assurances that their responses will be de-identified... providing students with the URL to access the survey...and providing at least two weeks in which the students can respond” (p. 615). My survey was in alignment with these recommendations yet did not yield a high response rate. It could have been that the timing of the survey was not convenient at the point in the semester when I conducted my research. However, Dommeyer et al. assert that toward the end of the semester is a premium time to send out surveys. This time frame fit closely to when my survey was administered. Low response rates could result from students deciding to participate in a

chance for a \$25 gift card did not entice them to spend time on the survey, especially if they were close to the end of the semester and feeling overwhelmed. Another relevant observation from Nulty's (2008) research was that the "most prevalent methods for boosting online survey response rates" (p. 303) require repeat reminder emails and incentives such as prizes awarded through a lottery. I included both of these in the design of my survey.

I was surprised at the low response rate to my survey that I had taken such care to design and administer based on previous research. As mentioned previously, 147 students began the short survey, yet only 135 students completed it. The implications of a low response rate need to be considered here.

The conventional wisdom presumes that higher response rates assure more accurate results...and response rates are often used to evaluate survey data quality.... Generalizing the results of a survey to the population of interest is based on the assumption that the respondents who provided data are a representative sample of the population. (Holbrook, Krosnick, & Pfent, 2008, p. 500)

From so few numbers, it is difficult to trust that all responders to the survey "are a representative sample of the population" (Holbrook et al., 2008, p. 500).

This leads to a strong reason for caution when relying on interpretation of the survey data. If respondents and nonrespondents differ on variables that researchers are interested in, nonresponse bias will occur. This bias is the result of respondents differing in meaningful ways from nonrespondents, which may skew or invalidate the survey completely. Based on the preceding, the results of the survey must be approached with some caution, keeping in mind that the low response rate may have not have included a representative sample cohort.

Interview protocol. A guiding principle for the use of interviewing in this study is found in Seidman's (1991) pronouncement: "[A]t the root of...interviewing is an interest in understanding the experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience" (p. 3).

The responses to the survey were not associated with participants' identities and therefore their answers remained anonymous. In order to procure participants for the interviews and to randomly select students for the \$25 card drawing, survey respondents were asked three additional questions, which were designed as a separate survey and triaged onto the first to make it appear seamless to the participants. To Question 1, (Would you be willing to participate in an interview to further discuss your experience re-enrolling at the university?), 67 students (59.82% of 112 respondents) answered "Yes." Students who declined numbered 45 (40.18%). The response to the next question asking students to supply their contact information resulted in a 100% participation percentage. Of the 147 respondents to the survey, 101 supplied their contact information in response to the Question 3 (If you wish to be entered into a drawing for a \$25 gift card, please provide your contact information below. Your information will be kept confidential and will not be associated with the answers you've given in this survey).

From the list of 67 students who indicated that they would be willing to be interviewed about their re-enrollment experience, a random number generator was used to choose 20 students. Emails were sent to each (see Appendix G) with instructions to use the SignUp tool to schedule their interviews. I designed a schedule for appointments from 8 am to 8 pm, excepting Tuesday and Thursday mornings when I taught classes. I

checked the list several times a day for two weeks for responses. I was disappointed to find that only one person signed up and, when contacted, she changed her mind about participating.

Returning to the list of remaining names, I again used a random number generator to identify 20 additional students, but this time interested students were asked to contact me directly by return email. This resulted in an immediate positive response by eight students, and, over the course of the next week and a half, four more students indicated their interest. The final number of students interviewed was 12.

The SignUp tool used is a relatively new app, and therefore there is no data on its effectiveness in recruitment situations. I cannot conjecture whether the students were reticent to use SignUp or why they would be. I also cannot speculate that the reason students did not sign up was related to the use of the app. There are many reasons that respondents would indicate an interest in being interviewed and then decline. Perhaps they decided that their time was worth more than a \$25.00 gift card. Perhaps the time of the semester, family or employment obligations factored into their decisions not to participate.

However, when asking students to respond to my email directly in my second attempt to procure interviewees, 12 of 20 students (60%) responded affirmatively and were successfully interviewed. The interview questions were open-ended (see Appendix A) and were designed to address the following four research questions:

1. What can returning students tell faculty, staff, and administration about how to encourage re-enrollment?
2. What can returning students tell faculty, staff, and administration about barriers or obstacles that discourage re-enrollment?

3. What can returning students tell faculty, staff, and administration about support services that are needed to facilitate re-enrollment?
4. What can returning students tell faculty, staff, and administration about how their perceptions of being connected to or being cared for by an individual or institution influenced their decision to re-enroll in higher education?

Following accepted practices of qualitative interview procedures, all questions were asked of each participant; however, some flexibility was maintained so that individual stories could be told more thoroughly, and the sequence in which the questions were asked sometimes varied (Hill et al., 2005; Hill, Thompson, & Williams, 1997). The central focus of the interviews was to obtain specific information in order to compare stories across individual experiences (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). “The protocol in such semi-structured interviews serves as a guide (Flick, 2002), a foundation on which the interview is built but one that allows creativity and flexibility to ensure that each participant’s story is fully uncovered” (Knox & Burkard, 2009, p. 567). Giving a voice to each student in the study was a priority, so this protocol seemed a logical method of uncovering each participant’s experience with re-entry to school. According to Rossetto (2014), the qualitative research interview is “a space for sharing stories, which can provide rich information for researchers” (p. 483).

It was the intention to carry out all interviews face-to-face, which allows for the interviewer to observe both verbal response and non-verbal clues to attitudes, emotions, facial expressions, and gestures, which enriches the communication between interviewer and participant (Carr & Worth, 2001). Supporting the idea of in-person interviews is the idea that

...because both researcher and participant are in the same space, and thus have access to more than just verbal data, they can build the rapport that may enable

participants to freely disclose their experiences more effectively than might occur in phone interviews.... (Knox & Burkard, p. 568)

Polkinghorne (1994, as quoted in Knox & Burkard, p. 568) wrote:

[I]n-person interviews yield authentic and deep descriptions of phenomena via the interviewer's ability to facilitate trust and openness in the interviewee, which then lessens the interviewee's need for impression management and enables the examination of her or his private experiences.

However, due to the demands of two of the participants' schedules, phone interviews were carried out. Very little research has been carried out comparing face-to-face interviews and phone interviews, but two studies that did so determined that face-to-face interviews elicited slightly better quality data (de Leeuw & van der Zouwen, 1988; Jordan, Marcus, & Reeder, 1980). However, phone interviews remain quite common as they enable researchers to include participants from any geographic location, as was the case in this study. Shuy (2003) argues that phone interviews do have some advantages, writing that they reduce interviewer effects, allow more precise uniformity in delivery and standardization of questions, enhance cost-efficiency and interviewer safety, and facilitate faster results. Based on this analysis, it was deemed acceptable to use phone interviews for the two participants who could not meet face-to-face.

Consistent with the framework of an ethics of care epistemology, Seidman's (2013) comment was uppermost in my mind during the interviews:

The purpose of in-depth interviewing is not to get answers to questions.... At the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the lived experiences of other people and the meaning they make of that experience.... At the heart of interviewing research is an interest in other individual's stories because they are of worth. (p. 9)

After the interviews were transcribed, I began my thematic analysis with

intentional reading. First, I read the interviews to discover similar words or sets of words that recurred frequently in order to find categories of experiences or themes. Then, I employed the lens of care theory, reading to discover traces of students' feelings of caring through their experiences of connections or disconnections. After that, I read for information that specifically related to the research questions, keeping in mind that the answers I sought would be framed in terms of what these students could teach me about re-entry to the university. Using a constructivist approach, I kept the focus of my interpretive thematic analysis on describing what the participant believes and how s/he constructs meaning from their life experiences.

In order to establish trustworthiness while carrying out this project, I used three strategies to combat threats to validity: respondent validation (feedback from the group studied to reduce misinterpretation of their self-reported views also known as member checking), triangulation (collecting evidence from different sources; in this case, a survey, a questionnaire, and face-to-face interviews), and "rich data" (using detailed and varied data to fully cover interviews and field observations by the researcher; Maxwell, 2013).

Respondent validation occurred after I had transcribed the interviews. I sent the interviewees transcripts of our meetings and asked them to review the texts for accuracy. I told them that I would be happy to correct or change the transcripts if they felt they needed to correct, edit, or expand on their answers to the interview questions. I asked them to contact me via email even if they did not want to make changes so that I would know that they were aware of my offer. None of the interviewees asked for a changed to

make changes to interviews.

Triangulation was accomplished by designing the research to collect evidence in three different ways. First, I employed a survey to gather data about the demographics of the cohort and their experience with stopping-out for a period. The survey was administered to the students online and included a short questionnaire that was triaged onto the survey. Finally, I conducted face-to-face interviews with students who volunteered to discuss their experience with re-entry into Weber after an absence of at least one semester.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

My objective is to show what I found, not what I was looking for.

(Picasso, 1923, p. 1)

Data

The following are the survey questions. In addition to these nine, students were asked the three triaged questions mentioned before to determine if they would consent to be interviewed.

As shown in Table 1, most definitions of nontraditional students (Rabourne, BrckaLorenz, & Shoup, 2018; Simi & Matusitz, 2016), the majority of our returning students (67.35%) in the survey were 24 or older.

Table 2 demonstrates that institution wide, White students make up 74.8% of the student population, and 11.2% identify as Hispanic, the second largest ethnic population served. Our highest percentage of survey participants was 85.71% White and the second

Table 1

Participants' Age (n = 147)

Age	Q1. What is your age?	
	Frequency	Percentage
18 to 20	3	2.04
20 to 22	23	15.65
22 to 24	22	14.57
24 to 26	24	16.33
26 to 30	33	22.45
30 and older	42	28.57

Table 2

Participants' Ethnicity (n = 147)

Ethnicity	Q2. What is your ethnicity?		
	Count	Percent	University (%)
Hispanic or Latino	8	5.44	11.0
Not Hispanic or Latino	4	2.72	
American Indian/Alaska Native	1	.68	0.5
Asian	2	1.36	2.3
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	3	2.04	2.3
White	126	85.71	74.8
African American/Black	1	.68	1.5
Other	2	1.36	5.5
Prefer not to say	0	0	

highest ethnic percentage was Hispanic, at 5.44%. White stop-outs are over-represented by 11% and Hispanic stop-outs are under-represented by almost 6%. Weber State is intentionally making strides to recruit students who will help our campus more closely match our community. More studies need to be performed to discover if these numbers are truly representative.

Table 3 relates to participants' gender. Although respondents were given choices not listed in the table to self-identify with a myriad of genders, they did not wander from traditional female/male identification.

Table 3

Participants' Gender (n = 147)

Identity	Q3. What is your gender identity?	
	Count	Percent
Female	82	55.78
Male	65	44.22

Previous research regarding gender as a factor in re-entry to higher education has been mixed. As mentioned before, the rate of return to college in the 1980s was greater for women than for men (DesJardins et al., 1999; Gerhart, 1990; Ley & Murnane, 1992). By the late 1990s, DesJardins et al. found that stop-outs in their study were more likely to be male. As this is a very small sample size, it is not particularly relevant whether the genders in the survey match the national percentages. Of more interest is the fact that the gender identity in the survey closely follow the university's overall demographics with 54% of students identifying as female (compared to 55.78% female stop-outs surveyed) and 46% students identifying as male (compared to 44.22% male stop-outs surveyed).

Table 4 illustrates the layers of flow of students who follow a nontraditional path in their education. Retention scholars tend to agree that most students fail to return after the freshman year, with attrition figures ranging from 30 to 50 percent (AIR, 2010), the “highest of all four years” (Powell, 2013, p. 7). However, retention in this group after the first two semesters was only 12.59%. More students in this stop-out group attended for five semesters or more before they stopped out, a figure that deserves more attention.

Table 4

Semesters Before Leaving (n =135)

Q4. How many semesters did you attend the university before you stopped out?		
Semesters	Count	Percent
One	29	21.48
Two	17	12.59
Three	12	8.89
Four	20	14.81
More than four	57	42.22

This would be a subset of students who could be targeted for accelerated graduation, given that they were potentially juniors or seniors and how close they now are to graduation.

Another consideration comes from the work of Heileman, Babbitt, and Abdallah (2015). In their study, the largest proportion of stop-outs occurred before the fourth term, as is reflected the survey cohort at 57.78%. This was before the students were enrolled in a degree program and were able to get advising from the program advisors. Weber's survey students who attended more than four semesters before stopping out may not have successfully entered a degree program, due to part-time enrollment. It is possible that they were never in contact with an academic advisor in their semesters before stopping out, which could be telling, as advisement is one tool acknowledged to increase student retention.

As revealed in Table 5, the largest stop-out population in the survey spent the most time out of school (more than four semesters). The next largest cohort, however, spent only one semester out of school. These could be students like Antonio or Katie, in

Table 5

Semesters Stopped Out (n = 135)

Q5. How many semesters did you stop out before you returned to the university?		
Semesters	Count	Percent
One	29	21.48
Two	17	12.59
Three	12	8.89
Four	20	14.81
More than four	57	42.22

the interviews who decided after one semester that school just was not for them. Again, survey results fail to match the national statistics of losing 30% to 50% after the first two semesters, but due to the small number of students surveyed, this should not be considered significant.

As an attempt at clarity regarding Table 6, the first column labeled “Count” refers to how many total students responded positively to each item. For example, 61 students chose the first item as a factor that contributed to her/his re-enrollment. The middle column labeled “Respondent %” represents what percentage of the students chose each factor. The far right column labeled “Response %” refers to the percentage of each factor students identified as a reason to reenroll.

Table 6

Re-Enrollment Factors

Issue	Q6. Which factors contributed to your re-enrollment? (Please check all that apply.)		
	Count	Respondent %	Response %
Resolved issue(s) that led to stopping out (examples: stopped out to earn money for school and I was able to save enough to return; stopped out because I didn't know what I wanted to do, and now I know what I want to major in)	61	41.19	18.05
Family and/or friend(s) encouraged me to return	44	32.59	13.02
Family and/or friend(s) cared about my success	39	28.89	11.54
Faculty or administration/staff member(s) encouraged me to return	7	5.19	2.07
I had always intended to return	92	68.15	27.22
I believed that I could successfully return	53	39.26	15.68
I had contact with someone at the university who encouraged me to re-enroll	3	2.22	0.89
I believed that someone at the university could help me re-enroll	12	8.89	3.55
Other	20	14.81	5.92

Students responded overwhelmingly in the affirmative to the statement: “I had always intended to return.” This is in line with Woosley et al.’s (2005) findings that intention to return was significant in predicting reenrollment and that students’ previous experience at the institution was a more significant predictor of both reenrollment intentions and reenrollment than previous academic success.

Table 7 discusses factors that held students back from re-enrolling. In Table 6, 61 students responded that what led them to re-enroll was that they had resolved the issues that caused them to stop-out. In this question, 62 students said that what kept them from returning to the university sooner was that they had not resolved the issues that kept them from re-enrolling. One way to consider this is to acknowledge that despite all that faculty, staff, and administration can do for students, some things are beyond their control in

Table 7

Restraining Factors

Issue	Q7. Which of the following kept you from returning to the university sooner? (Please check all that apply.)		
	Count	Respondent %	Response %
I hadn’t resolved the issue(s) that prevented me from returning	62	45.93	27.19
I had new issues that prevented me from returning	38	28.15	16.67
Family and/or friend(s) discouraged me from returning to school.	4	2.96	2.96
I had no contact with anyone at the university.	12	8.89	5.26
I didn’t know how to re-enroll.	1	0.74	0.44
I didn’t think that the university would let me re-enroll.	4	2.96	1.75
I just didn’t feel it was possible.	23	17.04	10.09
I was too scared to try to return.	16	11.85	7.02
Other	52	38.52	22.81

retaining and re-enrolling students until, as Powell (2013) notes, “those times in their lives when college is again a possibility...” (p. 7).

Looking at the issue long-term, however, is helpful here. Borden (2004) reviewed previous studies and found support for the realization that some university students no longer follow a traditional path to graduation (e.g., a high school graduate enters higher education and, after 4 years of continuous enrollment, graduates). As long ago as 1993, Tinto acknowledged that “the odysseys many individuals take to degree completion are long drawn out affairs with many intermediate stops” (p. 27). Stokes and Zusman (1992) studied stop-outs and discovered that some of these students returned to higher education and graduated at rates which matched those who never withdrew, making them “more similar to persisters than to withdrawals” (p. 284).

Table 8 breaks out the number of times that survey respondents left and returned to the university. I was not able to find any research that broke out the number of times that students stopped-out and then returned. These figures suggest that it is more common for Weber students to return after stopping out once or twice. However, it is difficult to read too much into these figures as it is unknown at the present whether students in this

Table 8

Times Left and Returned (n = 135)

Semesters	Q8. How many times have you left the university for more than one semester and then re-enrolled?	
	Count	Percent
Once	83	61.48
Twice	37	27.41
Three times	8	5.93
More than three times	7	5.19

cohort will stop-out again or even dropout prior to graduation. This is the picture as it stands today.

Table 9 addresses how respondents felt about the process of re-enrolling, a process that is sometimes seen as an overwhelming barrier to re-entry to school. Colvin (2013) referred to such institutional barriers as “the less obvious but more subtle barrier of exclusion that often awaits the student....” (p. 25). Fortunately, the figures suggest that Weber State’s re-admission process does not seem to be a deterrent to stop-out students.

Table 9

Re-Enrollment (n = 135)

Process	Q9. How would you characterize the process of re-enrolling?	
	Count	Percent
Extremely easy	51	37.78
Easy	42	31.11
Somewhat easy	38	28.15
Not easy at all	0	0.00
Somewhat difficult	4	2.96
Extremely difficult	0	0.00

Interview Profiles

I created a framework from which to organize interview profiles based on three categories: (1) background, family, attitude toward education; (2) first experience at the university; and (3) reenrollment and subsequent university experiences. All students have been assigned first-name pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality. A brief profile of each follows.

Miguel

Background, family, attitude toward education. Miguel is a Hispanic male, 30 years-old, and married with three children. He is well groomed, with hair just past his shoulders, parted in the middle, and tucked behind his ears. He smiles frequently. He speaks softly and thoughtfully but sometimes struggles to express his exact meanings. Miguel moved to Utah from Los Angeles, California, when he was in elementary school. His grandfather immigrated to the U.S. from Mexico and left Miguel's mother in charge of her younger siblings when she was "about 13." She subsequently completed the equivalent of a junior high education. Miguel's father attended university in Mexico, but when he immigrated to the U.S., his struggles with learning English and the obstacles of transferring his credits prevented his return to higher education. However, he stressed the value of education to his children—up to a point. It was not expected that Miguel or his siblings would attend a college or university. Instead, Miguel's father preached the gospel of work to his children. When Miguel informed his parents that he would be returning to school, their concern was for the financial stability of Miguel's family.

First experience at the university. The first time Miguel attended school, he was 19, married with one child, and attempted to go to school full time while working a full-time job.

It was just too much to handle at the time. I was working a full-time job, 40 to 50, sometimes 56 hours a week. I decided to go to school full time. That was, I believe, a big mistake. It was just too much to handle at the time, and my wife at the time was also going to school full time.

Miguel did not do well that semester, and he decided against returning to school the next semester. He and his wife then came to an understanding that she would take her turn in

school while he supported the family financially, but he would return after she graduated and got a job. Therefore, he withdrew after his first semester, with the intention to re-enroll in the future.

Re-enrollment and subsequent university experiences. Miguel lists several reasons for his re-entry to the university. First, his wife has graduated and is now working full time, which allows him to work part-time and attend school. According to their previous plan, it is now his turn to go to school. Second, he had progressed as far as he could in his trade career. He was the supervisor of a team of tradesmen and had maxed out his opportunities for advancement. Lastly, seeing his wife graduate had a profound effect on him.

[O]ne of the best, coolest experiences that I had was going to my wife's graduation once she got her bachelor's and seeing my daughter, especially, but both my kids, seeing her graduate. I think that was a big moment and I realized that, for my daughter especially, that hopefully in the future, it would mean a lot to her and help her keep going with education. And I feel like I kind of want to do the same for my son. To see me graduate, I think, would mean a lot to him, to our family.

Although he is glad that he returned to the university and he feels supported by his family and friends, he did experience some resistance from co-workers who told him school was going to be too "stressful" for him and it was "not a good idea." Those people, however, did not actively try to discourage him. He admits that there are times when he wonders if he should have stayed at his job, as they would be better off financially.

But I know, I know that there was only so far where I could go where I was at. And the only way where I could have done something that had any value or any meaning was to make this decision and take this risk. I feel like it's a risk because I don't, internally, I kind of think, "What if I'm not good at this? What if I fail?"

He has taken one class in his major so far, and he reports that he was surprised that he did as well as he did. He admitted that the grade helped alleviate some of his fears and boost his confidence.

Miguel considered going to the Ogden Applied Technology College to get his degree but decided instead that he wanted to attend the university again to get “everything else along with it.”

I kind of wanted the critical thinking part of it. I didn’t just want to just be good at programming or something like that. I wanted to be good at taking something like a project and making it my own, things like that. I wanted to not only get a job in the field but excel in the field as well. When I came my first semester, it was kind of just like, “Oh, I just want to get this over with and get my degree and go get a job.” But now, it’s more of “I want to learn and I want to try different things. I want to have that college experience.”

Career Services hosts an event called “The Purple Carpet,” designed to orient nontraditional students to the university. Miguel attended the event and considers it to be the best help he’s received from the university. He connected with others closer to his age who were also married with children:

...other people that were kind of in the same situation that I was in. That helped me as well because it kind of took my own, that stigma of coming back to school older, away from me.

Miguel wants a “better life” and hopes to be an example to his children. He is a computer science major.

Laura

Background, family, attitude toward education. Laura is White, 50 years-old, married, with two teenage children at home. She is tall, energetic, pragmatic, and outspoken. She works full-time and seasonal overtime. She enrolled in Weber State right

after high school, but soon left school to marry and start her family. In 2001, she returned and got her associate degree because she “just wanted to do it.” She returned again in 2014 with the goal of obtaining her bachelor’s degree.

She reports that her teenage daughter is a 4.0 student and her teenage son could not care less about his homework. Her older son is attending college and working three part-time jobs to support his education. He is not eligible for a Pell Grant because he is still listed as her dependent. Laura’s niece is attending the University of Utah this fall as a ballet major. Her stepdaughter is beginning a PhD program, and her sister graduated from Weber in chemistry and manages a lab that produces filters for dialysis. Her brother went into the Air Force and works with security services in the private sector.

Laura is extremely proud of her husband and appears to deprecate her own educational abilities when she discusses his educational career. Although he was in the Navy, he obtained his four-year degree “without ever setting foot inside a classroom.”

He would go get the book and because he was in the Navy, they would let him take the book. He’d be on a submarine or an aircraft carrier and whenever they docked in the port, they would let him go take the exam because he was in the Navy. And he got his MBA in 13 months while working full time with a family.

When Laura was 27, she was diagnosed with cancer. Within the span of about 18 months, she was involved in a major automobile accident at the same time that she was finishing her cancer treatments, left a seven-year relationship, moved 2,500 miles from home, started a new job, met her husband, and had a baby.

She works a full-time job, and, as an employee of a consumer-driven company, her workload fluctuates. This means that she is not always able to depend on much-needed study time as she is sometimes overly busy with her much-needed employment.

It's just difficult. I've gotten to the point that sometimes when I know that my work is backing up, I'll just take it home with me. I get up at 4:30 every morning and I do homework until I have to get the kids up at 6:30 and I work at 7:00. And then I do homework at night. I average four to six hours of sleep at night.

Although Laura is working against many odds, after talking with her for an hour, I am confident that she will receive her degree. I hope I am on the stage with her the day she graduates.

First experience at the university. As mentioned, Laura began her education in 1986 when she was 18. She did not know what she wanted to do with her life, and subsequently showed little interest in her classes. Her freshman year was a “total failure”, which would become a serious obstacle to her attempts to obtain financial aid thirty years later. She did not re-enroll until 2001 when she returned to successfully finish an associate degree. She began work on her bachelor's degree in 2014.

Re-enrollment and subsequent university experiences. Laura's biggest struggle returning to school has been the financial pressures of working full time, raising children, and trying to find money for tuition and books. Although she has been on the dean's list and never had less than a B- grade since returning in 2014, her low GPA from her freshman year haunts her. Scholarships that she has applied for all require a 3.0 GPA, and hers sits at 2.95. When she spoke to the Registrar about what she could do to raise her GPA, he told her that she could go through academic renewal, which meant that she would have to give up her associate's degree.

I would have to go back and retake classes that I got poor grades in, in order to get scholarships. If I'm going to pay to retake classes, I'm not going to take ones I took twenty years ago. Let's be smart about it. I'll just pay for the classes I need. That was offered to me when I was looking for funding. It's amazing how there's just nothing for that middle-of-the-road person. My situation cannot be that

abnormal that there shouldn't be something there for it.

It really does frustrate me. I understand that you're accountable for your grades. I get that. So go back ten years, not thirty. So my GPA is 2.95. "Sorry, it's not a 3.0." I've been on the Dean's list, but I can not get a scholarship that requires a 3.0 grade average. I know people who have lied about their situation so that they can get funding. It is honest? No. Is it fair? No. But is the system designed to be fair?

Laura's family income disqualified her for a Pell Grant, even though they're living "paycheck to paycheck." Without the option of scholarships and Pell Grants, her loans for school recently topped out at \$6,000. However, she now expects that she will begin taking out loans again to pay for school. She has looked into paid internships, but they require daytime hours, which she cannot provide with her work schedule.

However, Laura had not exhausted all of her options yet. Determined to find a way back into school, she applied for jobs at Weber State, figuring (correctly) that she could get a break on tuition if she worked at the university. Although she had 25 years of customer service experience, she was willing to take an entry-level position to fund her education. As she expected, she was told that she was overqualified.

I understand from an employer's view. If you hire someone who is overqualified, they tend to get bored and then they leave and you're in the same position again. I understand how it works.

Laura's attitude toward the frustration of financial aid is captured in the following quote:

I mean, teachers can be encouraging all they want, but if you can't find the funding to go to school, you can't find the funding. And we're a nation of people in debt. But I know I can't pay later any more than I can pay today.

Laura spent a lot of time talking about the problems of nontraditional students.

She complained that support services—including the Psychiatric and Counseling Center, the Nontraditional Student Center, the Student Health Center, the Women's Center and

the Stress Relief Center—were not available to students who have to take online or night classes.

I tried to make an appointment with the Stress Relief Center, and they said, “Oh, we leave at 3:30 on this day and 4:00 on that day and we don’t do Saturdays.” And I said, “Okay.” No Stress Relief Center, no Counseling Center because they’re not open. None of that is available to the nontraditional student. They need to be available to students who can’t make it here in the daytime.

When I’m having an existential meltdown, where am I supposed to go? You know, my poor husband has to listen to me, and I don’t drink, so that’s not going to help. So, you know, I think that those kinds of things need to be available.

Michael

Background, family, and attitude toward education. Michael is a White 25-year-old single male who lives at home, works part time and attends school full time. He has one sibling, a sister, who is three years younger. He lives in an affluent section of Salt Lake City. He has an open, friendly manner, is well spoken, and very mature. He will be eligible for graduation after the fall semester, but he has considered taking a class in spring so that he can audition for the spring musical.

If I was to get [the role], it’s a title role in a Sondheim piece, and...if there was ever a show to wait an extra semester for, this is probably it for me.

Although Michael has left the university twice, he will only be one semester over four years for his graduation date.

First experience at the university. As a high school senior, Michael was awarded a Presidential Scholarship to Weber and a full tuition waiver to BYU. He chose to attend Weber because his high school theater teacher had a close friendship with a musical theater professor at Weber, and so encouraged him to enroll at Weber.

He came into his freshman year with high ACT and Advanced Placement scores, so he had only a few of his general education classes to complete. However, his freshman year wasn't the success that one would have predicted from a student with such high promise. Michael lost his scholarship because, as he characterized the situation, "I was stupid and didn't go to class."

He left after his freshman year and worked in a professional theater company that summer. Unfortunately, the show ended after the fall semester started, which created some logistical problems for him when he tried to return to school.

It was just so crazy, trying to get all the finances in place and think about moving up here, having a car, having to commute because my family lives in Kearns, so it just didn't work out that semester, so I ended up working at a call center with my father and sister and then came back in the spring.

Preparing to return, he was in contact with the same musical theater professor, who arranged for Michael to receive a tuition waiver through the theater department. After attending Weber for another semester and a half, he left for another semester to work. He returned again and plans to stay at Weber through graduation.

Re-enrollment and subsequent university experiences. Michael could be considered an outlier in this study. Unlike the other students in this study, he had the advantage of having close relationships with both his high school theater teacher and his university theater professor. Although he had no previous connection to Weber State when he chose to enroll, it was his high school teacher who "kind of pushed" him toward Weber State. In effect, she handed him over to her friend, who then mentored him, arranged tuition waivers for him, and cast him in professional productions outside of the university setting.

Michael describes himself as “pretty self-sufficient”, meaning that he has taken the initiative to reach out to the department and professors proactively to make sure that he received tuition waivers so he could continue to attend school. He admitted that if he had met with advisors that he would have been done a semester earlier but also says “if I was a slightly different person or the situation had been slightly different, it would have been a lot harder to come back, especially now that the department is in so much flux.”

When asked why he returned to Weber each time he left, Michael cited his relationship with his professor as the “biggest reason.”

I’m so glad that I had that connection, had that friendship because he’s an amazing man... he’s a good human, and it’s nice to have him in your corner. That was probably the biggest reason that I came back because he, it was just like the environment that he fostered in his classrooms and in the department. When he was here, the faculty was more professional.

Because I wondered, like every kid, “Is theater what I really want to be doing? Do I want to transfer?” And I was thinking all these things, and [he] was probably the biggest reason that I still came back. So that was my reason for coming back that first year. And I was in contact with him because I had been offered a tuition waiver and so the fact that schooling was going to be mostly if not completely paid for through the department and having that relationship...was what brought me back.

Going back to the point of the interview, that is the biggest reason that I came back—that I had somebody. I had a mentor that I trusted, that was invested in my progression and in my career, and in finishing school.

As mentioned, Michael is the outlier in this study. No other interviewees had a personal connection to a faculty member that brought them back to the school.

Rachel

Background, family, and attitude toward education. Rachel is a 24-year-old White female, married with two young children, 5 and 3. She looks much younger than

her age, is diminutive and smiles frequently. She talks openly of the pressure that her choice to return to school has placed on her marriage due to her husband's disapproving attitude toward her pursuing her education.

It's been a struggle, for sure. I always wonder if he thinks that I think I'm too good for him now because sometimes he asks me questions and then, I'm like, "Oh, I actually know the answer to this," so I tell him because I've been in anatomy and physiology and I say, "This is how this works," and he'll say, "You just think you're a know-it-all, don't you?"

She is, however, also quite optimistic about her future career. She states that her husband makes really good money, so she is able to attend school full time. She currently works part time, but she recently applied for a part-time job closer to her home because she wants to contribute to the family's support. However, she does receive financial aid.

A month before her 18th birthday, Rachel withdrew from high school due to some personal circumstances. As a result, instead of a high school diploma, Rachel has a GED, which she said was one of the things that has always held her back. "And for me, applying to go back to college was this big deal because I have a GED but for me that's not really a degree. I know it's the same, but it doesn't feel the same for me."

First experience at the university. Rachel says that she always wanted to go to Weber State. She attended one semester of college, but to add to her stress that semester, her best friend died. She describes her life at that time as "crazy.... My head just wasn't in it." As a result, she did not pass her classes and did not re-enroll.

However, despite this initial experience, Rachel says that she always intended to return to Weber State.

I grew up in Roy until I was 11, and then we moved to Tremonton, and I always planned on coming back here because the medical field has always been

something that I've wanted to get into. I've never had the urge to go to Utah State because Utah State is really big up there but it's never appealed to me. I don't know why, but it's always been here. I've just always wanted to be here.

Re-enrollment and subsequent university experiences. Rachel's experiences with readmission and financial aid were positive.

I was really stressed about it because my sister was like, "Financial Aid" is so hard. And I just, it took me like 20 minutes, and I got it done and submitted it. But I did have a few things I had to fax them, but generally it was really easy, so that was good.

She went through orientation online but regretted that she chose that option rather than coming to campus.

I think it would have been more helpful if I had come here and done it instead of online because when I got here, I was so anxious the first day of school. I have anxiety, so when I got here, I was lost. I didn't know where to park. I didn't know what to do. I didn't know the campus.

I found out at the end of this last semester, but I didn't know that they did online tutoring and stuff like that because I live a 45-minute drive so the online sessions in anatomy and physiology or any of those classes would have been really beneficial for me, but I didn't know that until the end of the semester.

Rachel's self-described "stubborn" personality worked to her advantage when dealing with unreliable advisors. Although she found it difficult to make appointments when she was on campus and even showed up for scheduled appointments to find the advisor out of the office, she was lucky to guide herself successfully through her associate's degree.

I think that was one of the things I really struggled with was that I didn't know what I was doing, so I just kind of winged it, and, you know, by spring I'll have my associate's so it's worked okay.

One thing that Rachel said helped her a lot was her connection to others in study groups.

The one thing that I've found really helps me when I'm here is that I've met

people, and I'm, "Oh, I'm like you," and we talk about it. My first semester study group was awesome. And then my second semester, anatomy and physiology is a two semester course, and so the first one I had study group and the second one all our schedules conflicted so that was hard. But one of the girls who was in it, she and I became really good friends, so she helped me and I helped her, and it worked out really well.

Despite her self-confidence, Rachel reported that making those connections with the people in her study group who were "like" her was helpful. She found others she could relate to who were going through the same experiences she was.

Jessica

Background, family, attitude toward education. Jessica is a 21-year-old Hispanic unmarried female who works about 20 hours a week, is currently enrolled in school part time, and lives at home with her family. In high school, she took concurrent enrollment classes, graduated, attended a technical school in dental assisting in Ogden on a scholarship, attended Weber for one semester, and then stopped out to work full time and save money for future semesters. She said that she had always intended to return to school, but at the time, she felt like she had been going to school "forever" and was not getting anywhere. Although Jessica's parents do not have any college experience, they have supported her in her decision to further her education.

First experience at the university. Before her first semester at the university, Jessica attended orientation and thought that it was "really fun." She began school with five friends, but she is currently the only one still attending.

One of my friends, she kind of wanted to see what school was like and then she didn't like school. She kind of prefers to work. And then my other friend, she had to drop out due to personal circumstances. And the other ones just didn't like school.

Jessica relies very heavily on the school's support system for guidance. Before she left school, she talked to two counselors from Student Support Services who assured her that if for any reason she needed to take a break that they would help her when she came back.

I connected with them my first year of school and it was through the Student to Student mentor program. I think they encourage minorities to go to college, so Joe (not real name) was actually a work study student, because they hire work study students to work in Student Support Services. He would come down to my high school and he would talk to us and be like, "Oh, are you guys interested in going to Weber?" And he would try to get minorities to enroll. I also have connections with the Multicultural Center. So I met a few people from there, too.

I attended a meeting for.... I think it's like a little club. Because I used to be a part of it in high school. In high school, it's actually an elective class. At the university level, it's just a club.

Re-enrollment and subsequent university experiences. Jessica spent a year out of school, working, as her parents are unable to help her financially. She reports that her father is only able to make enough for their family's needs. However, they were emotionally supportive of her returning to school.

Jessica stated that being connected to people was very important to her. Because of the support system that she put into place before leaving school, it was relatively easy for her to return. She had no problems with registration, but when it came to Financial Aid, she felt that she had to make new connections with their office so that they could walk her through the process.

Because a lot of people, their FAFSA doesn't go through because they click the wrong button, and it happened to my friend last year. So that's why I always ask for help. It's better to be safe than sorry. Usually I'll be bothering them. I'll be stopping by a lot. Like last semester I think I stopped by, like eight or nine times. I'm like, "I'm sorry again you guys, like, I'm bothering you, but I want to make sure. I've got all these questions." And then once I knew everything, I was,

“Okay, I feel much better.” I’m not going to go bothering them anymore. I asked and I asked and I asked.

I’m not intimidated to ask for help. My dad always taught me, “No one’s gonna know if you need help if you don’t speak up. You’ve gotta tell people. They’re not gonna read your mind. No one’s gonna read your mind. You gotta say stuff.”

What is most surprising about Jessica is that she is a very quiet, soft-spoken young woman. She appears to be very shy, very much unlike the person who so doggedly seeks out resources to help her navigate the academic maze that overwhelms many other students.

Despite her praise of staff members who have helped her, Jessica admits that her connection to them was not the reason she came back to school. However, she does feel like she has been mentored by several staff personnel and is grateful for those experiences. She is happy to be back in school and has decided on her career.

Colleen

Background, family, attitude toward education. Colleen is a 34-year-old White woman, married with four children, who works part time. She is lively, animated, and speaks copiously in response to my questions. She appears very relaxed and confident. The first time she left school was to have a baby.. She finished the semester and then planned to take a semester or two off before returning. However, when her son was seven months old, she discovered that she was pregnant again. She and her husband then decided that she would not to return to school until they had established their family.

She came from a background where education is important. She hopes to enroll in an MFA program after graduation. Her younger brother recently completed an MFA from

Columbia University School of the Arts in Theater Management and Producing. Her husband was in a master's program before complications in his medication for severe anxiety and depression forced him to leave the program. He was in an athletic training program so that he could become a physical therapist, but now he has had too long of a gap to go back to school, even if his psychological state would allow him to. He is unable to work a regular job but supplements their income by weaving paracord bracelets and "get back" whips for motorcycles. Colleen's family currently lives with her father and stepmother but hopes to find low-income housing soon to alleviate some family tension between her husband and stepmother. Weber does not have family housing, but if she decides to get an MFA at Utah State, she is hoping to get family housing there.

They are \$190,000 in debt from her husband's unfinished schooling, but Colleen does not indulge in self-pity: "We'll most likely live in apartments our whole lives because we're not going to be able to afford a house. That's just life."

First experience at the university. Colleen's first years at the university were typical of many students at Weber State. Her parents made too much money for her to qualify for a Pell Grant, but they made just barely too much. Consequently, she had to pay her own way, which meant working part-time while taking 18 credits each semester so that she could get as many classes as she could for her money. She was working full-time when she married, and one of her benefits was a tuition reimbursement program. Unfortunately, she kept getting pregnant, so with her decision to stay out of school until their family was finished, she could not use the reimbursement program. However, Colleen managed to get her associate degree before she left school. She did not return for

10 years.

Re-enrollment and subsequent university experiences. Several factors combined to encourage Colleen to return to school. Her husband had left graduate school with a large debt but no degree. Due to his mental state, he could not work but did not want to be declared permanently disabled, which would absolve them from their debt. They were forced to move back to Utah and live with Colleen's dad and stepmother. She found a job as a lunch lady and eventually had to make a choice between moving into a management position that was on the horizon for her or going back to school and doing something with her art.

Although her husband was "terrified" for her, once she decided to return to school, she was determined to do it. She wanted her children and extended family to have her example of graduating, even against tough odds. She especially wanted her daughters to know that education is a "big deal and the sooner they do it, the easier."

Colleen felt that the hardest thing about coming back to school wasn't the re-enrollment process (*All I had to do was just say, "Okay, I'm signing back up."*) or financial aid (*So I signed up for financial aid, I took the most that I can, and I don't care that we have to pay it back because we still have living experiences.*) but rather her department's erratic class scheduling. For example, in the spring, the classes she wants to take are scheduled at the same time. One class that she has always been interested in has not been offered for the past 2 years. Two classes that are required were often scheduled at the same time with a limited class size. Her chair told her that he wanted her to take a specific class before she graduates to round out her portfolio, but it is not being offered in

the fall, when she would need to take it.

The other difficulty she ran into was with the general education advisors.

Advising was difficult. I have to say. I will say honestly, trying to get people to help me was hard. I would have one conversation with somebody, and then that person would leave, and this was when I was first coming back. I was just like, “I need this information.” And then trying to get people to respond back. This was when I was still trying to figure out everything, what I needed to do, when I was worried about my math class still counting.

Colleen will graduate with a specialization in printmaking and art education in three semesters, after which she plans to enroll in an MFA program.

Jonathan

Background, family, attitude toward education. Jonathan is a 22-year-old, recently married White male who works full time and attends school full time. He is short, thin, and has come straight from work, dressed in a rumpled tee shirt, jeans, and boots. He looks tired, but is extremely polite and accommodating in his answers. Jonathan took some concurrent enrollment classes in high school, so he had some university credits before he enrolled. He is currently a sophomore and plans to complete his associate degree in Fall 2018. He will then finish his degree at Weber State. Both of his parents attended Utah State and ran collegiately for them, and he, when growing up, “always wanted to go run at Utah State.” He hoped to train under the same coaches his parents had. However, by the time Jonathan was ready to enroll, Utah State lacked a solid coaching program and was late in recruiting athletes. Jonathan describes his experience as both a “missed opportunity” and a “heartbreak.” The experience made him “bitter toward Utah State.” He decided to attend Weber State instead because he felt that Weber

had a good reputation and offered good preparation for a medical career. He describes his parents as being “very supportive” of his opportunities and possibilities at Weber.

Jonathan’s wife is currently a student at Weber, but she is uncertain about continuing her formal education. She sometimes feels that she would like to follow a field of training to become a Master Esthetician. Other times, she considers motherhood as a valid choice. This is a conversation that she and Jonathan have often, but so far they have not come to a decision.

Jonathan had high school friends who also attended Weber, but he did not know that they were there until he ran into them on campus, so he didn’t really feel connected to them.

First experience at the university. Because Jonathan was on an athletic scholarship when he entered Weber as a freshman, he had athletic advisors who helped him schedule his classes, provided tutoring, monitored his progress in classes, and made sure he had all of the same information he would have gleaned in the general orientation meeting. However, Jonathan’s athletic career at Weber was a disappointment for him, and he decided to take some time off to decide what his next step would be. He began working full time and then delayed re-enrollment when he became engaged. He felt that he could maybe balance a full semester load and a full time job, but he could not handle working full time, going to school full time, and adjusting to being a new husband. He gave himself another year to get adjusted to his new life.

Re-enrollment and subsequent university experiences. When Jonathan left, he “put in” for a leave of absence, letting the university know of his intention to return.

When he returned, he simply signed up for classes. He reports that he did not have any real obstacles with re-admission or financial aid since he proactively sought out help. When he needed help filling out a form, Jonathan would “go find somebody” and ask “What does this mean? What do you need from me? What do I have to do to get this done?” He reports that most of the time he would get his questions answered and forms handed in while he was talking to the staff.

Although Jonathan had intended to return to school, he was not certain that he would re-enroll at Weber. His attitude was “Well, when I go back, I’ll figure it out.” He did not really feel any connection to Weber in terms of being a “proud Wildcat.” However, the availability of Weber with multiple campuses and online classes was appealing. While acknowledging that other schools equal Weber in those areas, when Jonathan started meeting with academic advisors, he was convinced that he wanted to return to Weber.

I sat down with them, and I said, “These are my goals. This is what I want to do.” And they’re like, “Okay, well, here’s some different ways that you can do it.” And then they just started breaking it down and showing me that if I come, I can work hard to make my education work for me, but I can also make it doable. I can make it. I don’t have to make it harder than it has to be, if that makes sense. And I don’t know if you’d call that the university being personable and really able to help its students, but that’s what really sold me. That’s why I thought, “I’m going to finish my bachelor’s here because they’ve worked for me in the past. The university really helped me in the past, and so I see them helping me in the future.”

Jonathan plans to get his bachelor’s and apply to schools to become a physician’s assistant. He is working 40 hours a week and taking a full semester load of classes this semester. “I don’t know how I’m balancing everything, but I am balancing everything. So I’m just going to hold on to the railing and make it to the end of the semester.”

Charlotte

Background, family attitude toward education. Charlotte is a White female, 29-years-old, with one child. Her marital status is unknown. She displays a bubbly personality, has a dark red stripe of hair framing her face, and she laughs often. She is an only child and the only grandchild in her family, so she feels a lot of pressure to succeed. She works part time and attends school full time. Her mother is currently attending Weber to obtain a master's degree in nursing. Both her maternal and paternal grandparents graduated from college, so she feels that formal education has always been very important in her family. There has always been an expectation that she, too, would obtain a degree. "It was never even like a question. I knew I was going to school. It was kind of like *how* (emphasis added) I was going to go to school." Her father does not have a degree; he owns his own business.

As for Charlotte's son, she feels the same pressure is on him to receive an education beyond high school.

I want him to grow up and go do it [attend college]. And he probably doesn't want to go to school because he's just so mechanically inclined that he might want to do a trade, but I want him to have that example that you don't just graduate from high school. I'm hoping he'll do something with mechanical engineering or architecture. (Note: Charlotte's son is four years old at the time of this interview.)

First experience at the university. Charlotte came to Weber straight out of high school and attended for about two-and-a-half years. Despite the high expectations of her parents and grandparents, she did not take college seriously.

I was young and just having the fun college experience and just kind of drove my GPA into the ground.

When Charlotte discovered that she was pregnant, she decided to stay home with her baby. When he was old enough for pre-school, she knew that it was time to return to school. Although her GPA was low, she had accumulated approximately 80 credit hours before she left school.

Charlotte did not talk to anyone at the school or in her personal life about her decision to leave school. She “just didn’t re-enroll for the next semester.”

I didn’t tell my parents until after the next semester had already started. And then my mom was like “How is school” and I was like, “I’m not in school.” So it was kind of a bombshell for my parents, but they were supportive and then I had my son so they understood that I wanted to be home for him.

Re-enrollment and subsequent university experiences. As mentioned, Charlotte stayed out of school for a little over four years, until her son was old enough to go to pre-school. Then, she felt that there was no excuse not to return. Her parents were supportive of her going back to school.

They were not supportive of me leaving school, for sure. They just wanted me to push through, and I should have pushed through. Your parents know best, usually.

Although she had no problem re-enrolling, her first experience left her with a dismal GPA, which meant that she could not receive financial aid. The first two semesters back, she paid out-of-pocket.

It was kind of overwhelming to come back and think, “I’ll just take these classes again,” and work through the whole thing. I just kind of took the consequences of my actions when I was 18, and kind of retook—it was almost a whole year of just retaking classes and then I was able to go forward. So that first year back was kind of frustrating because I was just in between.

However, Charlotte immediately became involved in an internship and, as a result, she’s had most of her tuition covered since her return to school.

When she re-enrolled at Weber, she did not really feel it was because of a strong connection to the school.

When I first came back, I just came because this is where my mom went and I'm from here and it's local. That was my original reason. But now, I'm applying to grad school here because I'm completely emotionally invested in Weber State.

I really love Weber. I think everybody should go to school. I know people say that school's not for everyone but I think the vast majority of people could benefit from going to school, and I always recommend Weber. I think it's a really good place, especially for nontraditional students who have kids and you're balancing things. There's a good work/school/life balance.

Although she is busy with her son and her internship and classes, she feels that it's important for nontraditional students to be involved.

I think it's a really good campus for nontraditional students just because we have so much flexibility. Between all of the departments, like the Nontraditional Students' Center, and the Diversity Center, and CCEL [Center for Community Engaged Learning], and the Women's Center—I think the more you're involved, especially as a nontraditional student, the more support you have.

Charlotte will graduate Fall semester 2018. She hopes to be accepted into Weber's Master of Communication program.

Antonio

Background, family, attitude toward education. Antonio is a single, Hispanic, 28-year-old male. He is tall, thin, handsome, and has shoulder length, wavy hair, which he continually shakes off of his face. He works part time and attends school full time. He gave himself a year off after high school before he enrolled at Weber. In his first semester he worked a part time job, about 10 hours a week, and felt like it affected his schooling a bit.

I think at the time it was a little difficult to learn. It's a learning curve, learning

how to balance work and school independently like without your parents on your back about, “Oh, are you doing your homework?”

Antonio is the middle child, with an older sister and a younger brother. He calls his older sister “the golden child.” She has been very successful in college. She has a master’s degree and is considering starting a Ph.D. program in child development. His younger brother is not going to school. Antonio feels that he is “still trying to figure himself out as a person.” He does not mention his father but says that his mother only has a third grade education.

First Experience at the University. Antonio attended only one semester at Weber State. He feels strongly that he was not prepared for higher education. He felt overwhelmed by the “whole experience.” He was intimidated by older students, and felt that the diversity of services available was confusing instead of helpful. He was taking his general education classes and wanted to major in art, but he did not feel appreciated or inspired in his art classes and began to think that maybe college just wasn’t for him.

Re-enrollment and Subsequent University Experience. After leaving school, Antonio traveled to California and worked for a couple of years at “soul-sucking” jobs, feeling that he did not really fit anywhere. He returned to Ogden and tried going to a trade school, which he immediately regretted and rejected. Then he met a girl, fell in love, and they moved to China where she taught English. However, Antonio was getting older and he still did not have a career, so when they moved back to Utah, he decided to go back to school while she decided what she wanted to do with her life. He promised that after he graduated, he would support her while she went to school. That was the plan, and then they broke up, and he came back to school because he was hoping the break-up

was not final, and he would be able to offer her financial stability when he had his degree. However, the relationship ended badly, and Antonio decided to do for himself what he was willing to do for her—get his degree. He also credits his sister's influence as well as his mother's for his return.

I think a lot of it is her [his sister] and my mom, too, now that I'm kind of saying this out loud, to come back to school and make something of myself because I was just kind of spinning my wheels for long time.

As with all the other interviewees, he had no problems with re-admission, but financial aid was an unpleasant surprise. Because his completion rate from his only semester was unsatisfactory, he had to pay out-of-pocket for two semesters before he was eligible for a Pell Grant. He also had to retake the classes from that semester because he had failed all of them. However, he said that he actually enjoyed them the second time.

Life is pretty good now, according to Antonio. He feels a strong connection to and good support from his professors in the theater department. He is doing work with a theater company in downtown Ogden.

So, my sister's degrees are up on the wall and my plan is to also put mine up on the wall and they belong to my mom. That's mostly the reason I'm back in school and keeping at it is to give my mom that degree.

Jacob

Background, family, attitude toward education. Jacob is a White 24-year-old male. He is single, works 40 to 60 hours a week, and attends school full time. He is forthright, pragmatic, and expresses his desire to do all he can to help others. His mother has worked at Weber State for over 20 years. He is acquainted with many people in the highest levels of administration due to his mother's employment

Jacob is extremely hard working and ambitious. His greatest desire is to find employment that will allow him to serve others in meaningful ways. Besides carrying a full load in school, he is currently working full-time at a Wounded Warrior camp that provides vacations and ranch activities for military veterans and their families.

First experience at the university. Jacob went to Weber State to play football but during his first semester, he decided not to play in order to avoid head injuries. He was then able to work with the football staff, “breaking down film, going to practices and staff meetings, and so on” with the understanding that they would train him to coach. However, because he needed more money for school, in addition to his football responsibilities and a full class load, he took a job working about 35 hours a week. Sometime in the last weeks of the semester, he was involved in a car accident that left him with a severe concussion, which became post-concussive syndrome. He suffered from a continuous concussion for 6 months. Shortly after the accident, he attempted to finish the semester, but his doctor strongly advised him that he should not be attending school.

And it was pretty obvious to me because in between classes I’d have to go to the meditation center in the dark and try to regain myself. I’d have a massive headache and I’d be fried after each class, so I’d go to the meditation center and sit in the dark and maybe sleep for an hour or two. And then I’d try to go to my next class. It was pretty obvious that I needed to be done.

The timing of his accident was difficult because he had gone into the last two weeks of classes with “A” grades and ended up with an Incomplete in one class and low grades on his finals in his other classes. Because he was unable to return to school for two years, his Incomplete turned into a failing grade, which further impacted his GPA. He spent the

next two years working and recovering.

Re-enrolling and subsequent university experiences. Jacob very candidly shared his anxiety about returning to school after his accident.

I didn't come back for a time because I didn't feel confident enough in my brain to go and have it be worth it. You know what I mean? It's like tearing an ACL and going to cut for the first time and worrying that your leg's just going to give out on you. It's the same concept.

Part of me didn't want to go back because I was nervous about going and not being able to do very well. And I worried about professors not really understanding once I got into more difficult classes. And just starting out, it might take me a little bit longer. I was just nervous about the whole experience going back after a brain injury.

In retrospect, Jacob felt that having connections at the university helped him when he decided it was time to go back to school. It helped give him the confidence he needed.

Yeah, before I even came back to school, I was elected a state delegate. And I was at one of the state legislative sessions and I ran into [WSU's president], and he offered me an internship to Weber State for a state legislator before I'd even come back to school. So that gave me more motivation because he put that out there and he was going to work to get me an internship and some other things, and that ended up giving me more motivation to want to come back and to want to do good as well.

Although registration was not a problem, Jacob was very opinionated about the financial aid process.

Yeah, financial aid is a huge pain at Weber State, and my mom will actually always mention it about financial aid people as well. They're about as helpful as a fly—it seems like they just fly around you and hardly do anything. Yeah, when I went to go and try to get some information about FAFSA and maybe be able to sit down with someone and talk to somebody about it, they just handed me a pamphlet and told me basically to just go and figure it out. They told me, "It's online." So, I thought, "Well, that's a lot of help." You know, financial aid can be kind of difficult. You know, somebody should be helping you with your application.

Perhaps because of his personal connections to the university, Jacob is very loyal to

Weber. He feels that not only is Weber his comfort zone, but he thinks Weber is a really good school that does not get the credit it deserves. He says that if he had to leave again, he would come back to Weber.

Although Jacob is happy to be back, he has found he struggles with prioritizing his time.

It's been a struggle adjusting back to making sure that my priorities, making sure my work is done, putting in ample time, you know what I mean? Doing really well with that. That's been a struggle, really, I'll be honest. But I feel like I'm doing okay.

I get all these things going and keep wanting to do stuff and think, "Oh yeah, I can do that." But I have to take a step back and realize that I have school now and I have other priorities that kind of trump what other people need me to do, so it has been kind of hard.

Despite all of his initial concerns, he reports that he has done well this semester, even with his heavy workload.

Alyson

Background, family, attitude toward education. Alyson is a White, 23-year-old, single female who works part time, and was only taking one class during the semester she was interviewed, as it was her first semester back in school. She speaks quickly, with a smile always present. She is forthright, funny, and self-effacing. Alyson attended Weber fresh out of high school, although she did not really feel ready to go. She reports that she went because it was expected of her. She quickly decided that school was "dumb" and that if the "guy from Wendy's" did not need college, she did not either.

Both her father and mother attended Weber, and her mother and sister were attending Weber when Alyson began her schooling, so she relied on them as her

academic advisors and did not attend orientation or meet with campus advisors. She and her friend were going to join the bowling club, but since neither of them had ever bowled, they decided it was not really a practical choice.

Alyson reported that she never thought about the necessity of higher education when she was growing up.

To be honest, I always just imagined that it would happen magically, that I'd own these Ferraris and I'd be rich, and it would just happen for me, so I didn't really see college as something that was necessary for me until obviously recently.

First experience at the university. When she was 18, Alyson got her first job. She describes working for the first time and going to school for the first time as a balancing act. She was able to maintain her balance for a couple of semesters, but when Alyson finally decided that she did not need college, she left the university in the wrong way. She registered for classes, forgot that she had registered, and did not go, not knowing what difficulties this would create for her.

In her delightfully outspoken way, she admits that she talked to “basically everyone” about her decision to leave school.

Well, yeah, I'm kind of one of those people who says whatever they think, no matter what. So I told basically everyone. I was like, “I don't think this is for me. I really just don't...I basically need to make my own decisions.” And they were like, “Well, okay, if that's what you feel, you know, we'll support you, I guess, but it's a bad idea.” And they were telling me, but I didn't listen. So, yes, I did talk to a lot of people about it.

Re-enrolling and subsequent university experiences. After leaving school, Alyson did not plan to return to the university. She felt she would just make her fortune, so why would she need college? After a year of working at call centers, she began to rethink her feelings about higher education.

I decided I wasn't as smart as I thought I was, and um, I've been working in call centers ever since. And the last call center job that I had was with a law firm and I just realized, you know, I'm getting paid for this stuff that I could learn in college, and it was the worst job I've ever had. I was having anxiety attacks every day. It was awful. So I was like, "Why am I doing this to myself? I could go to college and get an education and then I don't have to work in these stupid jobs anymore." So yeah, that's why I decided to come back.

However, coming back was not without its difficulties, or as Alyson notes, "tons of problems."

When I make up my mind that I'm going to do something, I'm gonna do it—it has to be done right then. I had just barely decided in about January that I was going to pay off my loan and pay off the classes they had charged me. And I went to collections with Weber State, which is something I don't recommend for anybody. So I was paying, like, half of my paycheck to collections to Weber to get back as soon as possible and then I had met with an academic advisor in January, so basically the biggest hindrance was that—just the collections that I had with Weber.

Added to that was the problem of getting future financial aid because of the semester she registered for but did not attend.

They had a hold on my academics because when I left school, my GPA dropped down to like 1.5 because I had all those UWs for those classes, so I couldn't get financial aid or loans because of my GPA, so I had a GPA block, which was a big hindrance and like,... I had to go meet with the academic advisor because I had to do the form they had, and that's when I learned that I had a hold about the collections.

Thankfully, Alyson's financial problems are in the past, and she will register for a full spectrum of classes in the fall. Now instead of dreaming of owning Ferraris, she has her sights more realistically set on a mechanical engineering major, hoping that if she cannot own one, maybe she can work on supercars.

Matt

Background, family, attitude toward education. Matt is a 22-year-old single,

White male who attends school full time and works 40 to 60 hours a week. He is soft-spoken and does not waste words when answering questions. Matt is the oldest of four children. He lives with his family and is extremely close to them. He is an outdoorsman who enjoys hunting, fishing, hiking, canoeing, and camping with his family. He is proud of his family's strong work ethic.

When growing up, Matt did not really think about going to college, but he attended the Northern Utah Academy for Math, Engineering, and Science (NUAMES) early college charter school and participated in concurrent enrollment classes. NUAMES partners with Weber State, and Matt was able to finish his general education classes in high school. He feels that this was a motivating factor in deciding to pursue higher education at Weber State. His mother has an advanced degree and his father just received his bachelor's degree—both from Weber State.

First Experience at the University. Because of his experience with concurrent enrollment, Matt was in contact with advisors before he came to Weber State. He also attended orientation. He had friends who came to school with him, but says that college was still a “very new experience” for him. His first semester, he participated in the robotics program, which he describes as quite time-consuming and a lot of work. At the time, he was working about 20 hours a week.

Matt left school to work, but before he left, he let the University know that he was leaving and intended to return. He hoped that would smooth his path when he was able to come back. He was out of school for almost 2 years, working full-time. At the time of the interview, Matt was in his first semester back.

Re-enrolling and subsequent university experiences. After staying out of school to work, Matt began to feel the necessity of returning to work.

With the push of my parents, I just, you know, I knew that I needed to get a career and everything, and looking at my options, staying at Weber State had what I needed, and I just, it reaffirmed that I would struggle less here. My parents were very straightforward. They were saying, “Get back there.

Matt reports that he had no problems with re-admission or financial aid. He praises the advisors for the Engineering Department for helping him declare his major. Having the option of online classes and night classes makes it possible for Matt to continue working while attending school.

Although both of his parents attended Weber, Matt is very practical-minded and not sentimental about keeping up a family tradition. He does not feel any special connection to the school.

I looked at my options, and Weber was close to my home. It was affordable, and it’s a good school. I don’t think people give it the credit it deserves. It was just convenient. And given the state of the world, you have to have a degree in order to have a career.

When asked if he believed his younger siblings would be inclined to go to Weber, Matt answered, “They’ll probably just choose for themselves where they want to go.” He feels that he is setting the example for his younger siblings to follow, but stresses that everyone in his family is independent as well as hard workers.

As a final thought, Matt expressed what was most important to him as a student.

To me, it’s people who are really thoughtful, who are good at their jobs, who are flexible, who take the time to help you figure things out, so you feel a little connection.

Emergent Themes for Leaving School

Analyses of the interviews revealed the following themes as presented through the participants' shared experiences and histories. The following themes were identified as significant due to the frequency of mention by the interviewees. As such, they deserve our attention and thoughtful consideration.

Uncertainty

Students admitted feeling anxious and uncertain that school was really the right place for them.

Honestly, I just did not know what I was getting into. I've actually met some freshman students here who are around the age when I came and they speak to me and they're like, "I just don't know what I'm doing. I feel so lost around here. I just don't know where to go to for help." And I would help them. I would tell them things I wish I knew then. And it's very intimidating to be here and to be out of high school. Because in high school you're kind of like taken by the hand a little bit and here, you're here on your own. (Antonio)

But there's no place for people like me. And it makes you really feel like, "I'm here to get my education, but do I belong?" (Laura)

I went to orientation, and that was, I feel like, the orientation was more, it was more intimidating because of the amount of like, student, like the younger students. To me, the younger students made me feel like, "Gosh, I don't know." (Miguel)

Clearly, these experiences spoke to the fact that the students did not feel like they "fit in" or were college material.

Students also expressed uncertainty over what they wanted to major in, and anxiety because they did not have a career path. Some even wondered if they really needed college.

Well, I was just fresh out of high school and I don't feel like I was ready to go to college, but because it was, like, expected of me, that was why I really went in the first place. And you know, I'd gone for a couple of semesters and I was kind of dumb. (Alyson)

One student expressed her doubts about the readiness of 18-year-olds for college.

I think coming right out of high school can be a good thing, but I think a lot of people are just way too young. I think at 18 you just don't take it as seriously as you need to. You don't absorb as much as you would if you were, like 25, because you don't have the life experience. (Charlotte)

Feeling Overwhelmed

Some students felt overwhelmed by their first experiences at the university. They expressed confusion about how the university functioned and how to find the information they needed; they did not feel that they had a clear overview of university life and how to navigate it. Their lack of connection to any person or department exacerbated their feelings of being in over their heads.

I felt very overwhelmed by the whole experience. I mean, people here of all ages. It wasn't like high school where you see people who are all our own age, and some people's presence were kind of intimidating I guess. But also, I guess the sheer amount, this will sound weird, but the amount of resources that are at your disposal kind of overwhelming. I mean, "I don't know if I should use this or that or this information" and so on and so forth and so I felt very overwhelmed. I didn't know what to do." (Antonio)

I think a lot of people have a problem with communication where they get overwhelmed and talking to their professors is so scary. (Charlotte)

Financial Difficulties

Most of the students interviewed came from low socioeconomic backgrounds, making it necessary for them to leave school for a time to earn money to return. Some students found it difficult to concentrate on studies while working full time jobs.

The first time I attended school, I was working a full time job, 40 to 50, sometimes 56 hours a week. I decided to go to school full time. That was, I believe, a big mistake. It was just too much to handle at the time, and my wife at the time was also going to school full time. We also had our daughter then. It became too much. I failed a lot of my classes that semester just because I couldn't keep up and my wife and I kind of came into an agreement after that. I decided to let her take her turn, take her chance to go to school, and have that experience while I kind of supported us financially. And so, that's why I left that first semester. (Miguel)

After leaving school, Jonathan had decided to return a year earlier than he was able to due to financial strain.

I was going to start school in the Fall of 2017, and then what happened that semester was I was working full time, well, I still am, but I was working, I was trying to get married, I was...just a whole bunch of things, and I decided that I cannot, I could maybe balance, you know, work and school full time, but I don't think I can balance being a brand new husband, being a full time worker, and going to school full time. I wanted to give myself a little bit of time first to get these life events through and then I'll go back to school when I can actually give more of my attention to it. (Jonathan)

Because Laura did not put her attention on her classes during her freshman year in 1986, her GPA continues to suffer, affecting her ability to pay for school through scholarships.

I've made my choices, and I'm where I want to be, and I regret not making different choices earlier in my life, but that's on me. So now that I'm a serious student, and I don't know how you people do this, if you look at grades or whatever, B- is the lowest grade I've gotten in ten years. Compare that to 1986, but they're still holding 1986 over me because it impacts my overall grade point average. (Laura)

Family Struggles

Students frequently had temporary struggles in their families—pregnancies, illness, and unemployment—that made it difficult to return.

I intended to go back at some point, but then my husband went for a medicine change when he was in grad school when we lived down in Arizona and it was the wrong medicine and so his anxiety and depression spiraled out to the point that

we almost had to put him in a facility and so he couldn't finish grad school and he missed the test by two questions and stuff. But he just wasn't in the right frame of mind to be able to do it and so we still have all the debt but no degree. And so having \$190,000 that we have to worry about because he doesn't want to be declared disabled, permanently disabled and stuff that would absolve that because then he can't work. And so it was coming up and so when we moved, we had to move back here. I knew I had to go to work. (Colleen)

Pregnancy

Three of the four married women left school at some point due to pregnancy. All opted to wait until their families were established before they returned.

Well, I was having a baby, so I stayed out and then, when he was seven months old, I was feeding him and I got heartburn, and I thought, "No," and I took a pregnancy test and I called my husband and I just burst into tears.... So I guess it was supposed to happen that way because I told him, "Every time I go back to school, I'm getting pregnant, so I'm not going back until we're done and stuff." (Colleen)

So, I came to Weber right out of high school, so I was 18. And I did probably two years, maybe two-and-a-half, about 80 credits' worth however long that is. And then I had my son and so I wanted to stay home with him.... The more time that went by, I was "No." And then three years went by and the gap started to get kind of big. But as soon as he went to school, I started to think that there was no excuse. I just have one, so now I need to go back and finish. (Charlotte)

I always wanted to come back here. Plus, I wanted to do nursing and Weber's got a really good nursing program, so it's where I always wanted to be. I needed a change in my life. I was just, I was stuck in a routine, and I love my kids and I love being a mom, but I just felt like I wasn't accomplishing anything in my life, so I came back. I would say "It's time to do the nursing thing for years and years after I graduated, but it just never seemed to work out. And then this last spring, I just randomly decided to go back and I didn't even tell my husband about it. I just did it. (Rachel)

The themes discussed above have also been researched in retention studies of stop-outs. I interpret that connection as a way to use the themes to study Weber's stop-outs, comparing and contrasting our students against the national patterns of stop-out students.

Students' Motivation to Return

Students' clearly articulated motivations to return to school were unfailingly optimistic and demonstrated a degree of commitment not experienced in their first attempts at school. Withey, Fox, and Hartley (2014) identified six themes in their study of stop-out students. The one pertinent to motivation to return was phrased as "I finally decided what I wanted to do...only after all that" (p. 83). Withey et al. report that students who withdraw before attaining a degree feel a sense of having wasted their opportunities. Nevertheless, these researchers believe that some of these students are more focused for their second attempts in higher education.

Economic Stability

As may logically be expected, the older students more frequently expressed their hope for greater economic stability through their return to school. Their experiences in the "real world" had convinced them of the need for a degree in order to provide a better living for themselves and their families.

I'm 50 years old. I'm not going to go out and change the world, right? But can I get a job that I'm more comfortable in? I certainly hope so. (Laura)

My husband's like, "Why are you doing this?" "Well, to help us get a better place." We have a house but I want a nicer house. I want to move somewhere nicer, and I just want to be in a better situation, and he's not, and I feel like he's hard to please.... I just want to get into a better situation and the way I have it set up I should have my associate's by spring of next year." (Rachel)

Intention to Return Realized

Consistent with many studies, students had strong feelings in their interviews

about realizing their intention to return to higher education. Those who believed that their absence would be a temporary state and intended to return expressed happiness to be back in school. They were proud to have accomplished their goal to return. They also spoke with conviction about another intention: *this time* they would *stay* in school until they graduated (emphasis mine).

Eight of the students affirmed their belief that their absence from school was not going to be permanent.

I intended to go back at some point,...so having that big long break made it so that when I came back after ten years, I knew exactly what I wanted to do... (Amanda)

I had gone a couple of semesters, and I was kind of dumb. The reason I said I didn't want to go any more was because I was bored. And I was like, "I already know all this stuff that I'm learning. It's so dumb." I was stupid so I was like, "You know, I'm just going to go out and make my life. The guy from Wendy's didn't go to college, so I don't have to." (Alyson)

As mentioned above, some were leaving to work in order to return; some were waiting until their families were established before their return; one had to heal from a serious car accident before he was physical and psychologically ready to return. Only two students mentioned that when they left school the first time, they had a clear intention never to return, believing that school was either unnecessary or not for them. They both expressed their honest regret of that decision in our interviews. The last two students did not comment about their intentions or beliefs about returning.

To Be a Role Model

For some students, their desire to be a role model stemmed from their children.

The biggest thing for me is to inspire my kids. I think the goal for every parent is to have your kids be proud of you. I think if you don't set the example, well, what

example will they follow? (Miguel)

My little girl, she's got the biggest heart I've ever met, she's the sweetest, and she's like, "When I grow up, mom, I want to be a nurse just like you. And I want to work with you. Is that okay?" (Miranda)

Others were anxious to graduate for their siblings or extended families, one specifically for her/his mother.

So [my sister's] degrees are up on the wall and my plan is to also put mine up on the wall and they belong to my mom. That's mostly the reason I'm back in school and keeping at it is to give my mom that degree. (Antonio)

To Realize a Career

Students who were interviewed are now solidly in major programs, pursuing not just a degree, but also a career. Some are planning on attending graduate school. The return to school signaled a commitment to make their education count for something more than a job.

My dad has tried to get me to change schools, but I told him "They have nothing for art." There's graphic design but that's not the direction I want to go. I don't want to get a degree just to get a degree. That's not an option. (Amanda)

Self-Confidence

The students indicated their beliefs that they were making progress toward their goal of graduation and affirmed that they were confident in their abilities now to persist to graduation. Most indicated that they felt much more confident in the choice of their majors and expressed gratitude for the time they spent out of school. Their stop-out time had regenerated the desire to succeed in school. They no longer felt overwhelmed, fearful, alone, or uncertain.

[My parents] were very supportive. They were not supportive of me leaving school for sure.... But yeah, I'm kind of glad I waited [to come back] because I take it more seriously now. (Chloe)

More Certain of Life Goals

Students were able to articulate goals beyond academic performance. This may be tied to increased confidence in their abilities to construct their own paths toward graduation and career success.

I know that graduating from a university will be the best thing long term for me and my family and generations to come. (Jacob)

I am happy to be back. It's been a struggle adjusting back to making sure that my priorities, making sure my work is done, putting in ample time, you what I mean? Doing really well with that. That's been a struggle, really, I'll be honest. But I feel like I'm doing okay. (Jacob)

Students' Anxiety about Returning

I found the interviewees to be unabashedly open in expressing their anxieties and fears about returning to school. It was at this point in the interviews where I felt the most empathy for them, having experienced many of these same emotions as a stop-out student.

Age/Regret/Self-Consciousness

Students frequently expressed great concern over their "advanced" age in regard to returning to school. Although the average student age at WSU is 26, one 28-year-old interviewee told me that he felt like an "old man" in his classes. This is an issue with many factors. Because they may have spent five to ten years out of school, many

expressed regret at staying out so long, accompanied by feelings of shame and failure.

Their acknowledgement that if they had only persevered, they would be further along in life is a painful admission.

You get that feeling [that you've failed] though, especially when you come back and you're like one of the older people in your classes and you're sitting there and you're like 28 and there's like ten 18-year-olds in this 1010 class that you have to retake. And I think that's the hardest part about re-enrollment because it's like a slap in your face. It's like, "You should have just taken this class and you wouldn't be in here with all of these younger kids." (Charlotte, age 29)

It's very intimidating when you're coming back, because you're older, you're unsure what you're walking into because college now is not what college was in 1986. I can guarantee you that.... It's funny because people my age, we all kind of gravitate towards each other. And I don't know if that's because, "Hey, this is the old fart's section." I don't know. (Laura, age 50, who received her associate's degree in 2004, then returned in 2014 to finish a bachelor's degree)

I don't think age should be a hindrance in hiring somebody, and that's where I get a little bit nervous because by the time I finish grad school, I'll be like 37. (Charlotte, age 29)

I don't know; it was hard. That whole time when I came back it was very difficult for me because it was just, I don't know. I felt so lost. Because you see, you see these things, like you go ahead and then you fall into a pit that you did not see in front of you, and then you find another way around or something, you know? And when I decided to do it for myself, after a while of doing it for myself, I felt like I should have been doing this the whole time.... (Antonio, age 28)

I mean, I work with people that were somewhat younger than me even, and even they would say, "Oh, I'm too old for that. I'm past that now." I feel like people maybe think that after they hit 20 or so, I don't know, that's how I feel. You go past that, the school portion of your life, and that's kind of behind you now. (Miguel, age 30)

I mean, sometimes I still get pretty down on myself, you know, because I feel so behind. That's the thing, you know. I have to tell myself to stop it. It's like, I tell myself, "You didn't know what you wanted when you were 18." Some of the 18-year-olds are lucky to know what they want. (Antonio, age 28)

Financial Pressures

Although returning students may reasonably look forward to a stable and comfortable economic future, they are still struggling with the financial pressures of earning a living, providing for a family, and paying back student loans.

So when I came back, I told my husband, and he said, “I don’t want to go into more debt.” Money, money, money. I’m like, “We’re going to have money problems regardless. The world is going to explode or the Second Coming is going to happen, depending on your beliefs, before we have this paid off. We’ll most likely live in apartments our whole lives because we’re not going to be able to afford a house. That’s just life.” (Amanda)

Family Pressures

Half of the twelve students interviewed were married and five of the students had children. They felt acutely the responsibility to provide for their families as well as being present in their children’s lives while they are attending the university.

[My four-year-old son] comes [to school] with me sometimes and I think about that, as much as he has to come with me, he probably won’t even remember how much work it is to go to school and have a child.... I came back and immediately went full time, so I’ve never gone part., and I’ve always had 15 to 18 credits. I’ve always done more than 12, so just juggling that with my external internships and work and having a kid. (Chloe)

Students’ Perceptions of Support

Each of the interviewees named sources of caring supporters. However, very few had people they identified who cared for them who were affiliated with the university.

Spouse/Family

All students mentioned family during their interviews, whether spouses, children,

parents, or siblings, as their cheerleaders. Only one student, Colleen, spoke about her lack of support for her return to the university from a family member (her husband), who has not attended college and works with his father on their family farm. She feels that he is intimidated by her desire to improve her education. However, she believes that once she has her degree, he will secretly be proud of her and will brag about her academic accomplishments to their friends. She feels supported by the rest of her family, though, including her mother-in-law.

Institution

Interviewees were unfailingly positive about the university as a whole, while elucidating their negative experiences with different departments in the institution. Although not all students were thrilled to be identified as a “Wildcat,” the general feeling was that the university was on their side and wanted them to succeed, although not one student could give an example of why they felt that way.

Registration

None of the interviewees expressed problems with re-enrollment, which is not surprising since Weber State’s Admissions’ page has links for freshmen, transfer students, returning students, transfer returning students, early college, concurrent enrollment students, international students, and graduate students. The link for Returning Students advises them to log into the student portal and register for classes. Depending on how long the students have been out of school, they may be notified that they have to re-activate their record. They are then taken through the steps necessary. The Admissions

office's email is included for questions. My initial belief that re-enrollment would be a hurdle was unfounded.

Advisors

Although Weber State is moving toward mandatory advising, very few of the interviewees met with an advisor either before or after returning to school. Some were waiting until they were accepted into their program before they scheduled an appointment. Only Jonathan talked to an advisor after he returned to school before continuing his education. This may indicate that students do not regard advising as a necessary or helpful connection to the university.

The university has embraced the research that has identified the importance of the connection between advising and student retention. In the past two years, more advisors have been hired across campus to relieve the increased burden of requiring more advising. The provost has allocated a healthy budget to try to drive more students into taking advantage of Weber's advising resources. It appears that the university is moving toward mandatory advising; it has been discussed with mixed reactions from the faculty and staff.

Orientation

Three students attended orientation after returning to school—Miguel, Rachel, and Jonathan. Miguel had been away from school many years and felt that he wanted to learn as much as he could about the school and its services. He attended a live orientation while Jonathan and Rachel opted for an online orientation. Jonathan felt that he gained

the same information he would have in the live orientation, but he liked that he was able to do it at a time more convenient for him. Rachel regrets not coming onto campus for the orientation. She felt she would have had less anxiety the first day of school if she had been familiar with the campus layout.

Financial Aid

The interviewees' experiences with the Financial Aid office were varied. Those with negative encounters did not feel that the university cared about helping them. Those with positive experiences had good feelings toward the university as a whole.

One student, Antonio, had not officially withdrawn from school when he left, so once he came back, he had to pay back his aid as well as pay out-of-pocket for two semesters to improve his GPA. He was then eligible for financial aid again. However, he did not understand the problems he would have in obtaining financial aid when he re-enrolled and registered for school. This delayed his re-enrollment further.

Alyson had a similar experience. She talked to an advisor when she decided to return to school, who counseled her on enrollment procedures. She then applied for financial aid, only to discover that she had been sent to collections by the university for the semester she remained enrolled but did not attend. She wished that she had known when she came back that she had the judgment against her, as paying it off postponed her re-enrollment.

Jacob had a negative experience with the Financial Aid office. He had hoped to sit down with a counselor and receive instruction on how to apply for financial aid, but they merely handed him a bookmark and, according to Jacob, told him to just go and figure it

out. Their brief comment to him was “It’s online.” He was extremely frustrated with his experience and said their office was “about as helpful as a fly. It seems like they just fly around you and hardly do anything” (Jacob).

Conversely, Jessica stated that she did not have problems with obtaining financial aid because she proactively “pestered” the office. She visited them several times a week, asking questions and checking on the process until she was sure that everything was in place and she knew her financial aid was certain.

Jonathan said that when he began the re-enrollment process, he went to the Financial Aid office and sat down with them, asking them what they needed from him and what he could expect from them. He said in most instances, he was able to get any issues resolved immediately.

Current Faculty Connections

Antonio expressed his gratitude for an English teacher he had before he left school and for three professors he is currently working with. He feels that the professors in general at Weber State are very caring about their students. When asked if he had to leave again if he would return to Weber State, he stated that he would emphatically because of the connections he had with his current professors. Michael also made strong connections with his major professors after he returned to school. He expressed his doubt that he would return to school if he could not have come back to Weber. Colleen also had close ties with one of her professors and became her T.A. Charlotte mentioned two professors in her department who were important in mentoring her. In general, interviewees were consistent in praising the professors at the university for their concern

for students, now that they had returned.

Administration

Very few interviewees have had any experience with the administration with the exception of Jacob, who has a friendship with the current President of Weber State. During a conversation, Jacob was encouraged by then Vice President Mortensen to return to school and offered him an internship upon his return.

Friends

When asked how their friends viewed their return to school, interviewees stated that they were largely supportive and many of their friends voiced regret that they had either quit or had not ever enrolled in school. Miguel had friends who tried to talk him out of returning to school, telling him that it was not a good idea and would be too stressful. He reported that he was glad he did not listen to his friends.

Students' Certainty of Successful Future

Again, optimism was the ruler of students' attitudes toward the future.

Maybe we'll get low income housing and can move out and a lot of that anxiety will go away because we'll have our own space again—the kids will eat healthy again. (Colleen)

From Concern to Confidence

When students spoke of their first experience with the university, they tended to speak of how overwhelmed and uncertain they were about what they wanted to do and why they were even there. The general feeling that pervaded almost every conversation

was that they just were not college material during their first experience at school.

Antonio mentioned that he felt like everyone else knew exactly what he or she was doing and how to do it, and he felt like he was lost.

I only came for one semester. I felt very overwhelmed by the whole experience... I didn't know what to do. I didn't know how to navigate my website, so then all that just kind of like scared me, to be quite honest.

Colleen said she did not really know why she was going to school and so when she quit, it did not seem like a major life event until later. As a freshman student, Alyson felt that higher education had nothing to teach her, thinking she could start her own business without four years of "boring classes." As a returning student, she candidly admits that she was "stupid" to think that she was smarter than everyone else was. She now feels that her degree will give her the knowledge she needs to succeed. Without exception, students who were interviewed expressed confidence in their academic abilities. They now view graduation as a probability, not an impossibility.

Certainty of Major/Career Path

Before the students left the university, they had no certainty of a major or career path. Most did not know what they wanted to major in. Jonathan believed he wanted to be a physical therapist, but since returning he has changed his major to a path toward becoming a Physician's Assistant. With the experience of being away from school, interviewees came back with a clearer realization that the classes they were taking would lead to a major and a career, which was a belief they failed to perceive prior to leaving.

I can reflect back and say that when I graduated back in 2003, there were a lot of People who were saying "There's not a lot of careers in the arts. So having the big long break made it so that when I came back after ten years, I knew exactly

what I wanted to do, and that I could do it, and that I wasn't going to let people say, "You can't do this." (Colleen)

Gratitude for Experience out of School

Each of the students expressed their gratitude for what they learned because of leaving school. While the lessons they shared differed in scope and magnitude, each felt that they now were going to be successful in their studies because of the experience of leaving and coming back.

Appreciation of Family's Support

Along with gratitude for their experiences out of school, each expressed gratitude for their family's support during their absence from school. They felt that their families did not measure their value by an academic degree, which, in some respects, freed them to return to school without feeling obliged to return for the sake of others. They were doing it for themselves.

Gratitude to the School

Surprisingly, each student also expressed their gratitude to the university for the second (or third, or fourth) chances they received to succeed. They praised the easy admission process, the people who facilitated their financial aid processes, the faculty for caring about them, and the "simplicity" of the school. When asked if they had to stop out again if they would return to Weber, their answers were more considered. Most felt that they were so deeply invested in Weber that they would not think of starting again at another school. They also mentioned that Weber is convenient to their residences, offers

day, evening, and online classes, has multiple campuses, and offers a good education for an affordable price. A couple of students strongly declared that Weber does not get the credit it deserves. Although none mentioned specific institutional behaviors that made them feel welcome or cared for, their expressions of approval could be considered an implicit confirmation that they believed that the school supported them.

CHAPTER V

ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

A human being is nothing but a story with skin around it.

Fred Allen

The analysis of data from the survey was done first. I analyzed and interpreted the raw data by making connections between the responses from the survey, university statistics, and research studies. The information from the survey formed the basis for my understanding of basic characteristics of stop-out students from Weber State. This gave me insight into how much our students resembled or differed from “traditional” students at the university and in research studies. This gave me a necessary perspective on the generalizability of the survey’s findings.

Before analyzing the interviews, I reflected on my own epistemological foundations. Central to the overall research design, research process, and analysis of findings was the influence of my own lived experiences and my long experience approaching students with an ethic of care. Pondering on “the relationship between what we know and what we see [and] the truths we seek and believe as researchers” (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011, p. 103) provided the framework and boundaries for both the interviews and the analysis process.

Educational reform activist Freire (1970) advocated the belief that communication cannot exist without humility and compassion. He described caring as “an act of courage and commitment to others” (Garcia, 2011, p. 52) and felt that genuine dialogue and communication between parties could not occur without these elements. Therefore, it was

important to me that I listened deeply to each interviewee to attempt to understand the person's perceptions and authentic experiences.

The students' experiences of leaving and returning to school appear to have validated many of the findings of the previous literature on stop-out students, including Icek Ajzen's (1985, 1987, 1991) theory of planned behavior (TPB).

The key component to this model is behavioral intent; behavioral intentions are influenced by the attitude about the likelihood that the behavior will have the expected outcome and the subjective evaluation of the risks and benefits of that outcome.... The TPB states that behavioral achievement depends on both motivation (intention) and ability (behavioral control). (LaMorte, 2018)

As Woosley, Slabaugh, Sadler, and Mason (2005) wrote, "Students' self-reports of intentions to reenroll were a significant predictor of their actual reenrollment...students who indicated in their surveys that they intended to return to the university were nearly five times more likely to do so" (p. 197).

The good news is that the more we learn about stop-out students and their intentions, the more attentive to their needs we can be. However, we must not lose sight that these findings are valuable only as tools to help students increase persistence to graduation. That is the ultimate goal. However, the voices of those I interviewed have added new information that must be considered by faculty, staff, and administration to ensure that all students have an equal opportunity to be successful in their academic career.

Nontraditional Students

One of the most enlightening aspects of this study was the discovery that most of

the stop-out students had characteristics that overlapped with the definition of nontraditional students. Sometimes referred to as adult students or adult learners as well as nontraditional students, they are a rapidly growing population in higher education (Compton, Cox, & Laanan, 2006; Fairchild, 2003; Lundberg, 2003; Wyatt, 2011). Hussar and Bailey (2011) projected that when compared to enrollment figures for traditional-aged students, undergraduate enrollment of students between the ages of 24 and 29 will increase at a faster rate through 2020.

According to the NCES, nontraditional students display one or more of the following characteristics: “delayed enrollment after high school, part-time enrollment in education, full-time employment, financial independence from parents, caring for dependents, or did not complete high school” (Choy, 2002, as quoted in Rabourn et al., 2018, p. 23). Weber State specifically defines nontraditional students as fulfilling one or more of the following categories: over 25 years of age, with a spouse or committed partner, divorced or widowed, and/or single parent/have children. Taking both descriptions into account, every student interviewed met at least one of these criteria, and many students checked several of the boxes, as illustrated in Table 10.

Need for Targeted Support Services

Consistent with Genco’s (2007) study, students expressed the need for more support services targeted to their special needs as returning students or returning/nontraditional students. Table 10 illustrates the overlap of returning students with the category of nontraditional students. Colleges and universities may use new technology

Table 10

Returning Students Overlap as Nontraditional Students

Name	Over 25	Spouse or committed partner	Single parent, or have children, caring for dependents	Delayed enrollment after high school	Part-time enrollment in higher education	Full-time employment	Financial independence from parents	Did not complete high school
Miguel	X	X	X	X	X		X	
Laura	X	X	X			X	X	
Michael	X				X			
Rachel		X	X	X	X		X	X
Jessica					X			
Colleen	X	X	X		X		X	
Jonathan		X					X	
Charlotte	X	X	X		X	X	X	
Antonio	X			X	X			
Jacob	X					X		
Alyson					X			
Matt		X				X	X	

formerly unknown or unavailable to students even 5 years ago yet assume that all students are familiar with it—not considering that this may be a student’s first semester back after a long absence. Additionally, the university may change learning management system platforms between the time a student leaves and returns. One interviewee disclosed that her professor told the students at the beginning of the semester that their assignments were on Canvas. This student had been out of school for over 10 years. Because she was already intimidated by her status as a “much older” student, she was both embarrassed and intimidated by the professor’s assumption that everyone in the class knew what Canvas was and how to use it. Instead of waiting to speak with the professor after class, she addressed the student sitting next to her—“What’s Canvas?” Her sympathetic neighbor then gave her a short tutorial.

At Weber State, many of the student support services are not available to students who cannot attend school during the day. These include the Counseling Center, Stress Relief Center, the Women’s Center, New Student Orientation (on campus), Center for Multicultural Excellence, Hourly Child Care, Career Services, and the Health Center. Even though students may be taking online, night classes, or classes at satellite campuses, they are paying for services that they do not have access to. It becomes a matter of social justice when services available to others are unavailable to them, especially when many denied access would like to make use of some of those services.

Two of the interviewees who overlapped into the nontraditional category also expressed the desire for pre-semester orientation limited to nontraditional students only. Both felt that it would be helpful to allay the concerns that Genco (2007) mentioned such

as childcare, anxiety, and apprehension. This specialized orientation would also help address some of the barriers to re-entry mentioned by Rosser-Mims, Ralmer, and Harroff (2014): a lack of understanding of available financial resources and uncertainty about how to create work/life balance. One of the interviewees, Miguel, summarized his experience with the nontraditional student orientation

“I think another thing that helped me at the Purple Carpet event was seeing other people that were kind of in the same situation that I was in. That helped me as well because it kind of took my own, that stigma of coming back to school older, away from me.

Addressing Question One

What can returning students tell faculty, staff, and administration about how to encourage re-enrollment?

No Contact after Leaving

The interviewees told me that the university had ever contacted none of them after they stopped out, except to solicit donations for fundraising. The lack of outreach on the part of staff and administration was disappointing to me, but sadly, it aligns with a short discussion I had with one of our former university presidents in 2017, who asked me what my research had revealed so far on the prevalence of students claiming stop-out status through reenrollment. I mentioned that some of the students I had interviewed did not feel that the university cared if they returned or not, since they had not had contact from the school after they left. His surprising response was, “Yeah, once they leave, we’ve lost them.” I was shocked at first, but I later realized that if the university president did not regard encouraging reenrollment worthy of consideration as a means of retention,

I might be naïve about the changes that the administration was willing to make to encourage re-entry.

Two students reported having contact with someone at the university who encouraged them to return—one was a faculty member and one was a vice president. Both of these students credited their connections to these university representatives as the sole reason they re-entered the university. Without the mentorship of the faculty member or the encouragement from the administrator, the students reported that they would not have re-enrolled in school, and they definitely would not have re-entered Weber State.

Interestingly, although the interviewees felt that the university supported them, this was strictly a subjective opinion, as, with the exception of the previous two students, they could not point to any one thing that faculty, staff or university did to help facilitate their re-enrollment. It could be that because they are in a better position now in terms of commitment to career and graduation, increased confidence, and renewed hope for success, that this feeling of support generously embraces faculty, staff, and the university.

Many colleges and universities track their leaving students by means of exit interviews. If students are formally withdrawing, the interview takes place at the same time or can be scheduled later (if the student is willing) in order to gather information about why the student was leaving and if she/he intended to return. If students leave school unofficially, the administration attempts to contact them (phone, text, email, letter) to ask the students to provide the same information online. Currently, Weber State does not have an exit interview process for students who leave.

Low Grade Point Averages

Half of the student interviewed “ran their GPAs into the ground” before leaving school. The reasons for this varied from not attending classes in order to have the “fun college experience,” to not thinking that the grades would be that important, to enrolling but not attending class, to being overwhelmed and unofficially withdrawing before the end of the semester. When the students returned, they did not understand how their low GPAs would affect their eligibility to choose classes they wanted to enroll in, to affect their ability to receive financial aid or scholarships, or to affect time-to-completion, as some had to retake one or more semesters of classes. More than one student mentioned that they were so excited to return to school, only to become discouraged with the obstacles they needed to negotiate in order to atone for their freshman folly years. One interviewee wished that she had known how long it was going to take her to make up her lost semester, just so she could have been mentally prepared for the delay. Students were also unsure where to turn to for help with recovering their GPAs. They were not aware of the options they had for academic renewal, forgiveness, or semester waivers. It did not appear to them that anyone at the university cared enough to help them resolve their problems with their GPAs.

As a student who has always worried about her GPA, I would have been mortified to try to return to school with a low GPA. I would not have been able to sit across the desk from anyone who knew how bad my grades were. However, maturity puts things into perspective, and the fact that students with extremely low GPAs re-enrolled aligns with Woosely et al.’s (2005) findings that students’ GPA is not a predictor of re-

enrollment. “It was the experience, rather than previous academic success, that contributed to a student’s behavior [to return]” (p. 197).

Access to Classes

Returning students expressed gratitude for online classes, night classes, Saturday classes, and multiple campuses, which they said enabled them to re-enroll. Nontraditional students especially were grateful for online and night classes, which they felt allowed them to return to school and still maintain their employment and family life. They felt that the university was being responsive to their needs by offering a diversity of class offerings.

Although a former provost of Weber State put a cap on the percentage of online classes offered compared to face-to-face, that mandate has changed. Campus-wide, colleges and departments are being encouraged to offer greater numbers of online classes in order to accommodate the growing demand. As our nontraditional student body continues to grow, it appears that the university will attempt to satisfy the increased demand for online classes. In the sense that it enables students who may not otherwise re-enroll to attend college again, this is good news.

Intention to Return

Woosely et al. (2005) concluded, “Intention to return was a significant predictor of reenrollment” (p. 188). Consistent with this finding, interviewees revealed that when they left the university, it was always their intention to return. Only one student was surprised to find herself back in school. Of the students surveyed, 68% recognized that “I

had always intended to return” was a factor in their re-entry to school. These expressions of educational goal commitment and institutional commitment signal a greater likelihood to persist (Tinto, 1993).

Students’ self-reports of intentions to reenroll were a significant predictor of their actual reenrollment.... [S]tudents who indicated in their surveys that they intended to return to the university were nearly five times more likely to do so. Therefore, even though theories and research may differentiate between intentions and behaviors, practitioners may be able to rely on what students predict and plan for themselves. (Woosley et al., 2004, p. 197)

One way to capture the data of what “students predict and plan for themselves” is to use the exit interviews mentioned above. Reaching out to encourage those students who indicated an intention to return may hasten their re-entry as it shows a level of caring from the university.

Addressing Question Two

What can returning students tell faculty, staff, and administration about barriers or obstacles that discourage re-enrollment?

Work

One of the most prevalent obstacles students at Weber State face is money—or rather, the lack of it. Only one of the students interviewed was from a high socioeconomic background, although he too worked a part-time job. Work was a necessity for most of the students, and, in some cases, was the reason that students did not re-enroll sooner. All of the interviewees were working at least part-time *and* financing their education through student loans, Pell grants, and scholarships.

J. Johnson et al.’s (2009) study found that work was the top reason students gave

for not returning to college once they left. Associated with that is the stress of going to school and working at the same time. This is what all of the students I interviewed were doing. The above-referenced study found that most students leave college because they are working to support themselves while going to school. After a time, the stress of work and study becomes overwhelming. More than half of those who left higher education before completion said that the requirement to work and make money while attending classes was the reason they left.

Some interviewees expressed their frustration that the university did not offer more scholarships or provide Pell Grants for part-time students. Underlying this was an unspoken but perhaps unfair resentment that the university has the ability to provide increased financial help to students but do not care to find ways to accomplish it.

University Services

Financial aid and advising were the polarizing issues in the interviews. Some of the students complained bitterly about the offices, while others reported not having any problems obtaining either. However, as mentioned before, many of the support services are unavailable to nontraditional students or those who work full time, who can only take night or online classes and cannot come to campus during the day.

Ageism

Adult learners begin entering college with the mindset that they are marginal, meaning they do not feel a part of the mainstream culture. They contemplate on what their position is, how they can meet selective entry standards, and how they can prove themselves worthy to this critical environment” (Simi & Matusitz, 2016, p. 397)

Two words in this quote aptly describe the nontraditional student interviewees: marginal and worthy. As noted before, while all of the re-entry students interviewed met the criteria for nontraditional students, a few of the students were much older than the 24/25 threshold—Miguel (30), Colleen (34), and Laura (50). They all expressed anxiety about their age, their technological skills, and their sense of not “fitting in” or “belonging at the university.”

There may be a good reason for this anxiety. Simi and Matusitz (2016) report that:

Adult students are not only hidden *vis-à-vis* traditional students; they are also treated as though they are less important. This is revealed in college mission statements, procedures, curricula, and outreach services. Whether it is policy, curriculum, attitudes, teaching environment, or financial aid, adult undergraduates report being abandoned, receiving prejudice, and rejected from opportunities. These institutional factors informally make adults appear as a “class” rather than individuals who want to actually learn in academia. Defined as a class, they are subjected to several overlying social, educational, informational, and political features that retain them in a marginal position with little say—which means they have less control over rank, authority, or freedom. (p. 397)

Addressing Question Three

What can returning students tell faculty, staff, and administration about support services that are needed to facilitate re-enrollment?

Targeted Support

The Nontraditional Student Center hosts a “Purple Carpet” event as a way for entering nontraditional students to get to know one another and feel more connected to others and the university. Two of the older students interviewed lobbied for more events like this, where older students can get to know others who are “in their own situation”, as

Miguel said. This would help with the anxiety and marginalization that returning students feel as they resume their academic career. Nontraditional students reported that more outreach programs that target them would make them feel that the university cares about them and is providing support to help them succeed.

Although the university has several support services, the interviews discovered that few students are aware of them. One female student found out that there was a Women's Center on campus when she walked into the Testing Center next door. Before that, she was not aware of any on-campus services that accommodated women. This suggests that information about support services is not widely disseminated. One easy way to accomplish this would be to have all general education classes educate the students about what is offered on campus.

The exception was the student who felt a connection to many support services because she was recruited to come to Weber because of her ethnicity. Because of the recruitment mentor, she was personally introduced to the suite of services and consequently took advantage of what they offered.

Because campus services are not available evenings or weekends, students who cannot come to campus during the daytime are denied those services. Many interviewees commented on the lack of knowledge about on-campus support services or the availability of services they would like access to.

Addressing Question Four

What can returning students tell faculty, staff, and administration about how their perceptions of being connected to or being cared for by an individual or

institution influenced their decision to re-enroll in higher education?

Caring Connections

As previously mentioned, only two of the 12 students had a caring connection to either a professor or administrator. Both expressed that being cared for was a deciding factor in returning to school at Weber.

With the above exceptions, interviewees expressed connections *now* to faculty, but they did not return to Weber because of any prior connections to an individual. Some students were connected to Weber because their parents and/or grandparents were alumni, but their decisions to re-enter Weber were based unsentimentally on its closeness to home and its affordability.

Students who now feel a connection to an individual for the university as a whole expressed that Weber was a better school than it is given credit for. They mentioned pre-medical training, health professions, and educational programs that they felt elevated Weber's status to more than "just Weber" (a failed, controversial slogan unrecognized in its attempt to be ironic). Students' decisions to return to Weber are not based on feeling a connection to it, but a few mentioned that they wished they did.

Discussion

It is the theory that decides what we can observe.

Dr. Albert Einstein

In her TEDxHouston talk in 2010, Dr. Brené Brown stated:

[W]hen you ask people about love, they tell you about heartbreak. When you ask

people about belonging, they'll tell you their most excruciating experiences of being excluded. And when you ask people about connection, the stories they [tell you are] about disconnection.

In similar fashion, when looking at what brings students back to the university through the lens of connection and caring, the stories they often tell are about disconnection and neglect. This was certainly true in this study. Many of the findings about caring came from students' examples of faculty, staff, or administration that demonstrated neglect or indifference toward them. When they reported feeling cared for by individuals or the institution, much of the evidence they provided for support were vague feelings, not demonstrable actions that they could point to.

This study validated former studies and added new information to the research about students who take leave of their postsecondary education for a time and then return to reclaim their future. Care theory was used because care is an important element of students' experiences. It fosters trusting relationships and encourages student perseverance, especially in students at risk of dropping out (Cassidy and Bates, 2005).

As the students gave voice to their personal histories and perceptions of their academic careers, they told stories that uncovered their belief that the best days of their lives were yet to come. They spoke freely of past, dark times and what they have overcome to get to where they are today. Although they had left the university having failed to persist to graduation, they felt a sense that *this time* they would succeed, and that success would lead to a better life. The interviewees exhibited a strong sense of commitment and optimism. When asked if they had to leave again for some reason, if they would return, and if so, if they would return to Weber, all responded positively to

both questions.

Going back to Question 1 (*What can returning students tell faculty, staff, and administration about how to encourage re-enrollment?*), survey participants' responses made it clear that attrition and retention are sometimes the result of situations that the university has no control over, such as illness, pregnancies, or finances. Some students added that after leaving school, they encountered new obstacles that kept them out longer. These are possibly also situations over which the university has no control.

However, the discovery that 68% of students *intended* to return to school when they left the university is important. Stokes and Zusman (1992) studied dropouts and found these students returned and eventually graduated at rates similar to those who never withdrew, making them “more similar to persisters than to withdrawals” (p. 284). This highlights the necessity to shift the administration's perspective from viewing students who withdraw as dropouts and to conceptualize these withdrawals more as a opportunity to retain them rather than an attrition issue.

Question Two asks, “*What can returning students tell faculty, staff, and administration about barriers or obstacles that discourage re-enrollment?*” Every year at convocation ceremonies, the president of Weber State asks all of the graduates who have worked full- or part-time while going to school to stand. I've yet to spot a seated graduate. Given the socioeconomic status of our student body, working while attending school has been and will continue to be the number one obstacle that students will deal with when trying to persist to graduation.

National trends tell us that more and more nontraditional, or adult students (as

previously defined) will enroll or re-enroll in higher education at a faster rate than traditional-aged students through 2020 (Hussar & Bailey, 2011). Knowles' (1984) research on adult learners is the predominant reference and theoretical framework for nontraditional undergraduate students and the foundation upon which Compton et al. (2006) developed characteristics of this subpopulation as a discrete population with unique needs.

They are more likely to have focused educational goals, as was displayed by the interviewees who seem to be confident of their pathway to graduation now. They may not see themselves as students and consider themselves workers (Rabourn et al., 2018), and are more likely to attend school part time (Kasworm, 2003). They most likely live off campus and have established social communities outside of the campus community (Bradley & Graham, 2000). It is likely that they are managing full-time employment and caring for dependents, making them the student subpopulation with the greatest time constraints (Lundberg, 2003).

Beyond all that has been described, it is especially important for nontraditional, adult learners returning to higher education to feel that the university is a caring environment as they face insecurity about their age, their knowledge of technology, their sense of belonging and fitting in, and their ability to succeed in academics.

Question 3 addresses re-entry students need for support services: "*What can returning students tell faculty, staff, and administration about support services that are needed to facilitate re-enrollment?*" Returning students depend on the university to supply them with the information needed for their success. What returning students have

told me is that they have little knowledge of support services that are available to them such as the Women's Center, Tutoring, Supplemental Instruction, Health Center, Stress Relief Center, Writing Center, Psychological and Counseling Services. The second thing they told me is that many times their work schedules necessitate their enrollment in online or night classes and they are then denied access to these services as they are not open after 4:00 or 5:00 pm.

It becomes a matter of social justice when a subpopulation of students is denied the services they support with student fees. This oversight supports the claims of Kazis et al. (2007) who "asserted that higher education continues to create and adhere to policies that privilege or favor traditional students, defined as 18 to 24 and financially dependent" (Rabourn et al., 2018, p. 23).

The last question asks "*What can returning students tell faculty, staff, and administration about how their perceptions of being connected to or being cared for by an individual or institution influenced their decision to re-enroll in higher education?*" Only two of twelve students interviewed felt a caring connection to Weber State prior to leaving and returned because of that connection. Several interviewees expressed feeling connected to faculty, staff or the university as a whole *after* they returned. While fostering current connections will improve the students' chances to persist, it is hard to point to any one reason why the majority of the interviewees felt no connection to individuals or the institutions the first time they attended. This could lead us to the dangerous logical fallacy of circular reasoning: They had not built any connections so they left because they had not built any connections.

Of more value may be the responses of the survey participants. When asked “Which factors contributed to your re-enrollment?” only 12 students (8.89%) believed that someone at the university would help them re-enroll. Seven (5.19%) believed that someone at the university cared whether they returned or not, and three (2.22%) had contact with someone at the university who encouraged them to re-enroll.

When asked what kept them from returning to the university sooner, 12 students (8.89%) listed “no contact with anyone at the university” as a reason that kept them from returning. Four students (2.96%) said that they did not think the university would let them re-enroll. Given such a low response rate for this study, I am very interested in repeating this research, hoping for more participation from the students.

While these figures do not represent a majority of the survey participants, it is discouraging to think that there are students who delay their re-entry because of perceptions that the university does not care about them. While the administration is engaging in various strategies to retain students, they have so far failed to realize that the “low-hanging fruit” of stop-outs is a feasible opportunity. Focusing on those students who have already earned some credit college credit could be a more effective and quicker way to boost graduation rates. As the Lumina Foundation points out, “we’re not starting from scratch” (p. 6) with stop-outs.

Recommendations, Further Research, and Conclusion

Recommendations

The following recommendations were suggested by the students in the survey,

directly or indirectly, and reflect needs that, if anticipated and addressed, could cultivate a caring environment that may help them persist to graduation. These are the voices that need to be heard by the policymakers and stakeholders of the university.

Access to support services. As mentioned before, students who work full time and enroll in online or night classes have no access to student support services such as the Nontraditional Student Center, the Health Center, Psychological and Counseling Services, the Stress Relief Center, Financial Aid Office, and Advising, among others. Using flexible scheduling of personnel in these offices or videoconferencing in some cases could help meet the needs of these students. As mentioned above, the university, perhaps unwittingly, continues to privilege “traditional” students by limiting access to services for nontraditional students.

Online training for caring connections. As enrollment increases (including re-entry and nontraditional students) the demand for greater flexibility in scheduling increases. Instruction for faculty to facilitate online class design to foster caring connections with students in their online classes is imperative. Students perceive care in online environments as (1) feedback that is both timely and personal, (2) availability for contact opportunities multiple times during the semester, (3) a personal connection with the instructor, and (4) a sense of community with their peers (Deacon, 2012; Marx, 2011; Sitzman & Leners, 2006). While there are many online training classes available to Weber State faculty to help them understand best practices in online teaching and designing, emphasizing retention through the use of care theory could greatly enhance students’ feelings of connection to their instructors.

Targeted orientation. Currently, the university provides an orientation event for nontraditional students once a year. This was mentioned by an interviewee as an important event for him, as he was able to make connections to other nontraditional students. He left feeling that he was not so different and was happy to meet other people who were “like” him. Lehman (2007) found that “not ‘fitting in,’ not ‘feeling university,’ and not being able to ‘relate to these people’ were key reasons for eventually withdrawing from university” (p. 105).

In addition to the annual nontraditional student orientation, the university could reach out to returning students with a similar event to re-orient them to the university, equipping them with much-needed information about changes in policies, academic requirements, campus landscape, technology, and other relevant resources. Anticipating the needs of this cohort is one way to demonstrate that the university cares about returning students.

Faculty training in care theory. Although care theory may be relatively unknown to professors outside of the social sciences or education colleges, the pedagogy and practice of care theory could be made available to all faculty through such programs as the Teaching and Learning Forum on campus. Its value has been affirmed through research and practice, and, as Owens and Ennis (2005) have written, “[t]he ability to enact an ethic of care in teaching should be an expectation of effective teachers” (p. 392).

One result of Walker’s (1989) study will stand in for many, many others here. The results of her study indicate several key points. First, students felt that they could relate to teachers when teachers and administrators created a caring educational community.

Second, students wanted to emulate the strong role models of their teachers. Third, because students acknowledged that teachers and others cared, they were more likely to believe teachers' comments about their potential. Further, students reported that they were motivated to excel to avoid disappointing those teachers working hard to insure their success. Overall, Walker's research suggested that the presence of caring interpersonal relationships found in a caring educational community enhances students' feelings about school and serves as a mechanism to enhance student learning (Owens & Ennis, 2005, p. 392)

Center for returning students. Generally speaking, stop-outs do not have an infrastructure in place to assist them with their unique needs. One option to support the returning subpopulation would be to develop "one-stop centers that provide support for administrative tasks to expedite the return to college" (Schatzel et al., 2013, p. 360). This could be as easy as designating one person in existing centers like the Multicultural Center or Career Center, to mentor returning students. Targeting seminars or orientation programs that provide assistance with reintegration into college life could be developed, addressing such issues as technology skills, time management practices, goal setting, and study habits.

Institutional practices. This study echoes Woosley et al.'s (2005) call for more collection of data about stop-out students. My study began with questions about what we can learn from stop-out students. The institution could learn valuable information about withdrawing students' campus experiences, personal expectations, and future plans by expanding on the use of surveys and interviews.

Future studies could focus on relevant information about withdrawing students' educational goals and satisfaction with the institution, collected through longitudinal studies. Survey data from withdrawing students could teach us about their reasons for withdrawal, their intentions to return based on reasons for leaving or length of time away from school, their immediate plans, characteristics of their participation in academics and campus life, and a pattern of frequent withdrawal and re-entry among a particular subset of students (Woosley et al., 2005).

Coming from a position of genuine concern for individual student well-being and from the perspective of the known link between higher education and future earning potential, student affairs practitioners should extend a gesture of interest toward withdrawing student regardless of their intention to return to the institution they are leaving. (p. 199)

Finally, this study has shown that there is a need for collaboration between student services and other university offices. Working together, staff in offices such as admissions, advising, and financial aid who helped to facilitate students' enrollment could work with student services offices such as the Diversity Center or Advisement to reach out and develop positive relationships that can be sustained even during a student's stop-out period.

Further Research

This study revealed that 10 of the 12 students interviewed who had stopped-out had not formed caring connections with individuals, departments, or the university itself *prior* to leaving. Although none of the students expressed that a lack of feeling cared for motivated their decisions to leave school, most indicated that after returning, they had found sources of care that they feel will help them persist to graduation. More research

needs to be done with re-entry students to discover if perceptions of feeling cared for could influence their decisions to persist to graduation.

In accordance with the result of research by Schaltzel et al. (2013), future research needs to be framed around re-enrollment as “separate and distinct” from withdrawal and persistence behaviors (p. 361), validating the uniqueness of the subset of students known as stop-outs.

Additionally, the administration may need to reframe the language they use when describing students. The terms dropouts, withdrawers, and leavers may unintentionally overlook the stop-out population as a category of students the university no longer has an interest in serving. “When it is known that about 40% of withdrawing students can be counted on to reenroll and that 55% of withdrawing students indicated their intent to return, student affairs and enrollment management practitioners may need to refocus their attention on the retention possibilities these students create” (Woosley et al., 2005, p. 198).

I could not find research on how many times students stop out and re-enroll and how or if that affects their graduation rates. More study should be done on this to determine how likely it is that students are continuing a linear path in their educational journeys. Considering that more than 67% of those I surveyed were over 24, these nontraditional students may be having a very different college experience than “the stereotypical “Joe College” so often seen in the movies and television. For these students, the balancing act is not between going to class and attending football games and frat parties; it’s more likely between going to class and punching a clock in order to pay the

rent” (J. Johnson et al., 2009).

Conclusion

This study suggests, as other research has pointed out, that students who dropout *do* return to higher education. A serious problem is that they are not recognized as a subset of the student population who may need more attention and mentoring than students who follow a more traditional path of persistence to graduation.

The prevalence of additional challenges for the students in the overlap of “returning student” and “nontraditional student” categories need to be acknowledged by the institution. The university currently does not track how many students fall into this overlapping category, making it unlikely that they will anticipate or meet the unique challenges of this special cohort. More studies need to be done on this cohort to understand what additional challenges they face by being members of both subsets.

By ignoring the opportunities of basing our pedagogies, policies, and programs on care theory, we are missing out on creating an academic environment where students feel cared for and reciprocate their caring by persisting or returning to school. We, the academic community, should honor our responsibility to bring students back to school simply because we care about their success. That effort can be greatly enhanced by implementing care theory at every level of the university.

The questions we face in creating future ties that bind us to our students may include:

1. What will care theory look like in the future as technology advances, online classes become more numerous, and as yet unknown course delivery becomes more common?

2. What demands will educators face in trying to represent caring to our students?
3. What will care look like to students?

We know what caring looks like today in online environments—teachers answering emails and texts within 24 hours, knowing the students’ names, providing quick turnaround on grading, having an online presence, using discussion boards for peer reviews, and providing video instruction using screencasting. As the tools of technology advance, perhaps it will become easier to connect with students online, to demonstrate effective strategies of caring and establish trust. This is my hope.

Regardless, I believe the most important bonds that will tie us to our students are the bonds of caring and connection. We owe it to all of our students to make these ties our priority.

CHAPTER VI

EPILOGUE

We are the authors of our lives. We write our own daring endings.
(Brown, 2016, p. 267)

Antonio returned to the university because he found someone that he wanted to take care of for the rest of his life. When that dream withered, he stayed because he found caring teachers who taught him to care for himself.

Matt's return came at the end of caring for his father and the beginning of his family's caring for him, urging him to begin living his own life again.

I returned to school because someone cared enough about me to talk me into returning. I stayed because I found caring faculty who looked after me and championed my successes.

To paraphrase President Teddy Roosevelt, I regard the participants in this study as the men and women who are brave enough to enter the arena time after time, whose faces are figuratively marred by dust and sweat and blood, but who do not stoop to criticize others because they know that there is no effort without error and shortcoming. They have acknowledged that they have come up short again and again, but they are now actually doing the deeds, acquainting themselves with great enthusiasms, dedicating themselves to the great devotions, and spending themselves in a worthy cause. Their place will never be with the cold and timid souls. They are daring greatly. We will be fortunate if we find that through our ties that bind us, we may have helped them succeed. They deserve our admiration and care.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Interview Questions

Interview Questions

- Tell me about leaving school. Why did you leave?
- Guiding Questions:
 - Did you attend orientation before attending school?
 - Did you have friends who were attending school?
 - Did you participate in any extra-curricular activities?
 - Were you working at the time you were attending school?
 - If so, how many hours per week?
 - Were course offerings and times a problem? Did you have a major when you left school?
 - How old were you when you left school?
 - How many semesters did you complete?
 - What factors would you say influenced your decision to leave?
 - Can you talk more about those?
 - What institutional obstacles did you face trying to remain in school?
 - When you left, did you intend to return?
 - When you were growing up, did you intend to go to college?
 - Did you discuss your decision to leave school with anyone at the university?
 - Did you discuss your decision to leave school with people in your personal circle? Friends? Family?
- Tell me about coming back to school. Why are you here?
- Guiding Questions
 - How old were you when you came back?
 - Did you have a major when you came back?
 - Were you working when you came back to school?
 - If so, how many hours a week?
 - Are you currently working?
 - If so, how many hours a week?
 - How many semesters did you stop-out?
 - Can you describe your feeling of connection to specific people at the university?
 - Why did you come back?
 - What factors would you say influenced your decision to return?
 - Can you talk more about those?
 - What institutional obstacles did you face in re-enrolling?

Appendix B
Survey Questions

Survey Questions

1. What is your age?
 - a. 18 to 20
 - b. 20 to 22
 - c. 22 to 24
 - d. 24 to 26
 - e. 26 to 30
 - f. 30 and older
2. What is your ethnicity?
 - a. Hispanic or Latino
 - b. Not Hispanic or Latino
 - c. American Indian or Alaska Native
 - d. Asian
 - e. Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
 - f. White
 - g. African American/Black
 - h. Other (Please specify): _____
 - i. Prefer not to say
3. What is your gender identity?
 - a. Female
 - b. Female to male transgender
 - c. Male
 - d. Male to female transgender
 - e. Not sure
 - f. Other (Please specify): _____
 - g. No answer
4. How many semesters did you attend the university before you stopped out?
 - a. One
 - b. Two
 - c. Three
 - d. Four
 - e. More than four
5. How many semesters did you stop out before you returned to the university?
 - a. One
 - b. Two
 - c. Three
 - d. Four
 - e. More than four

6. Which factors contributed to your re-enrollment? (Please check all that apply.)
- a. Resolved issue(s) that led to stopping out (examples: stopped out to earn money for school, and I was able to save enough to return; stopped out because I didn't know what I wanted to do, and now I know what I want to major in)
 - b. Family and/or friend(s) encouraged me to return.
 - c. Family and/or friend(s) cared about my success.
 - d. Faculty or administration/staff member(s) encouraged me to return.
 - e. I had always intended to return.
 - f. I believed that I could successfully return.
 - g. I had contact with someone at the university who encouraged me to re-enroll.
 - h. I believed that someone at the university cared whether I returned or not.
 - i. I believed that someone at the university would help me re-enroll.
 - j. Other
7. Which of the following kept you from returning to the university sooner?
- a. I hadn't resolved the issue(s) that led to stopping out yet.
 - b. I had new issues that prevented me from returning.
 - c. Family and/or friend(s) discouraged me from returning to school.
 - d. Family and/or friend(s) didn't care if I returned to school.
 - e. I had no contact with anyone at the university.
 - f. I didn't feel that the university or anyone at the university cared if I attended or not.
 - g. I didn't know how to re-enroll.
 - h. I didn't think that the university would let me re-enroll.
 - i. I just didn't feel it was possible.
 - j. I was too scared to try to return.
 - k. Other
 - l.
 - m.
8. How many times have you left the university for more than one semester and then re-enrolled?
- a. Once.
 - b. Twice.
 - c. Three times.
 - d. More than three times.

9. How would you characterize the process of re-enrolling?
- a. Extremely easy. I understood just what to do, had little trouble finding answers to my questions, or easily found someone who cared enough to help me.
 - b. Easy. I understood the process and/or found someone who did.
 - c. Somewhat easy. I had a few confusing moments, but was able to negotiate the process without a lot of difficulty or outside help.
 - d. Not easy at all. I didn't know where to start and couldn't find answers to my questions without difficulty. I couldn't find anyone who cared enough to help when I asked for it.
 - e. Somewhat difficult. There were many challenges. I didn't know who to ask.
 - f. Extremely difficult. I felt like the university didn't want me to return. I didn't feel that anyone cared if I returned.
10. Would you be willing to participate in an interview to further discuss your experience re-enrolling at the university?
- a. Yes
 - b. No

Appendix C

IRB Approval from Weber State University



April 12, 2017
Toni Asay
Communications Department
2801 University Circle
Ogden, UT 84408

IRB Applicant,

Your project entitled "The Ties that Bind: Identifying Connections that Facilitate Students' Successful Re-entry to Higher Education" has been reviewed and is approved as written. The project was reviewed as "exempt" and low risk.

Subjects in this study are considered adults and consent is required. They may choose not to participate. You have one year to complete the study. Anonymity and confidentiality are addressed appropriately, and the type of information gathered could not "reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, or reputation" (Code of Federal Regulations 45 CFR 46, Subpart D).

You may proceed at this time. Please remember that any anticipated changes to the project and approved procedures must be submitted to the IRB prior to implementation. Any unanticipated problems that arise during any stage of the project require a written report to the IRB and possible suspension of the project.

A final copy of your application will remain on file with the IRB records. If you need further assistance or have any questions, you can e-mail me at kacypeckenpaugh@weber.edu

Sincerely,

Kacy M. Peckenpaugh, Ph.D.
Arts & Humanities Representative, Institutional Review Board

Assistant Professor of German and French
Weber State University
Department of Foreign Languages
1395 Edvalson Dr. Dept 1403
Ogden, UT 84408-1403

Title of Project: "The Ties that Bind: Identifying Connections that Facilitate Students' Successful Re-entry to Higher Education"

Primary Investigator(s): Toni Asay

Approval Number: 17-AH-07

Reviewer: Dr. Kacy M. Peckenpaugh

Date: 12. April 2017

COMMITTEE ACTION

Your proposal (project) and consent documents have been received and classified by the Human Subjects in Research Committee

AS:

☐ High Risk ☐ Moderate Risk ☒ Low Risk

BY THE FOLLOWING PROCESS:

☐ Full board review ☐ Expedited review ☒ Exemption

The project has been:

☒ Approved ☐ Not Approved

COMMENTS: See Attached Approval Letter

____ Kacy M. Peckenpaugh, Ph.D. _____
HUMAN SUBJECTS IN RESEARCH REVIEWER

____ 04.12.2017 _____
REVIEW DATE

INVESTIGATOR'S RESPONSIBILITY AFTER COMMITTEE ACTION

The federal regulations provide that after the committee has approved your study, you **may not** make any changes without **prior** committee approval except where necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to the subjects. Further, you must report to the committee any changes that you make and any unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects or others that arise.

Appendix D

IRB Approval from Utah State University



Institutional Review Board

USU Assurance: FWA#00003308



Expedite #6 & #7

Letter of Approval

FROM:

Melanie Domenech Rodriguez, IRB Chair

Nicole Vouvalis, IRB Administrator

To: Sylvia Read, Toni Asay
 Date: January 29, 2018
 Protocol #: 8977
 Title: The Ties That Bind: Identifying Connections That Facilitate Students' Successful Re-Entry To Higher Education
 Risk: Minimal risk

Your proposal has been reviewed by the Institutional Review Board and is approved under expedite procedure #6 & #7 (based on the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) regulations for the protection of human research subjects, 45 CFR Part 46, as amended to include provisions of the Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects, November 9, 1998):

- #6: Collection of data from voice, video, digital, or image recordings made for research purposes.
- #7: Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

This approval applies only to the proposal currently on file for the period of one year. If your study extends beyond this approval period, you must contact this office to request an annual review of this research. Any change affecting human subjects must be approved by the Board prior to implementation. Injuries or any unanticipated problems involving risk to subjects or to others must be reported immediately to the Chair of the Institutional Review Board.

Prior to involving human subjects, properly executed informed consent must be obtained from each subject or from an authorized representative, and documentation of informed consent must be kept on file for at least three years after the project ends. Each subject must be furnished with a copy of the informed consent document for their personal records.

4460 Old Main Logan, UT 84322- PH: (435) Fax: (435) WEB: irb.usu.edu EMAIL: irb@usu.edu

Appendix E

Survey Email

Dear Student,

My name is Toni Asay, and I am a graduate student in Teacher Education and Leadership at Utah State University. I am writing to request your participation in a brief survey. I am conducting research on students who enroll in higher education, stop-out for at least one semester, and then re-enroll. Specifically, I am studying how forming connections with an individual, a department, or the university as a whole may affect students' decisions to return to school. I am also hoping to discover areas where the institution can improve the process of re-enrollment. You are receiving this email because you are part of the cohort mentioned above.

Your participation in the survey is completely voluntary and all of your responses will be kept confidential. No personally identifiable information will be associated with your responses to this survey. The Weber State University Institutional Review Board has approved all aspects of this study.

The survey will be open for only ten days from the date of this email, and you will be sent one reminder email. If you choose to participate, you will be eligible to receive one of five \$25.00 gift cards as a thank you. A drawing will be held within a week of the survey's close to determine the winners.

The survey is brief and will take no more than 10 minutes to complete. It will also ask if you would like to participate in a face-to-face interview on campus where you could share your experience about the process of re-entering the university. The interviews will last 45 to 60 minutes, and all interviewees will receive a \$25.00 gift card for their participation. If you agree to an interview, you will receive a follow-up email to make those arrangements. Your experiences are extremely valuable in suggesting ways that the university can improve and assist students in re-entering school and persisting to graduation. I hope that you will consider completing both the survey and the interview process.

Please click the link below to go to the survey (or copy and paste the link into your Internet browser).

Survey link: <http://baseline.campuslabs.com/wsu/reenrollmentsurvey2017>

Should you have any comments or questions, please feel free to email me at t.asay@aggiemail.usu.edu or text me at 801-682-0906.

I appreciate your time and cooperation.

Best~

Toni J. Asay
Graduate Student, TEAL
Utah State University

Appendix F

Reminder Email

Dear Student,

My name is Toni Asay, and I am a graduate student at Utah State University. This email is a second request for your participation in a brief survey. I am conducting research on students who enroll in higher education, stop-out for at least one semester, and then re-enroll. Specifically, I am studying how forming connections with an individual, a department, or the university as a whole may affect students' decisions to return to school. I am also hoping to discover areas where the institution can improve the process of re-enrollment. You are receiving this email because you are part of the cohort mentioned above. If you have already completed the survey, please disregard this email and thank you for your participation.

As I indicated before, your participation in the survey is completely voluntary and all of your responses will be kept confidential. No personally identifiable information will be associated with your responses to this survey. The Weber State University Institutional Review Board has approved all aspects of this study.

If you choose to participate, you will be eligible to receive one of five \$25.00 gift cards as a thank you. A drawing will be held within a week of the survey's close to determine the winners.

The survey is brief and will take no more than 10 minutes to complete. It will also ask if you would like to participate in a face-to-face interview on campus where you could share your experience about the process of re-entering the university. The interviews will last 45 to 60 minutes, and all interviewees will receive a \$25.00 gift card for their participation. If you agree to an interview, you will receive a follow-up email to make those arrangements. Your experiences are extremely valuable in suggesting ways that the university can improve and assist students in re-entering school and persisting to graduation. I hope that you will consider completing both the survey and the interview process.

Please click the link below to go to the survey (or copy and paste the link into your Internet browser).

Survey link: <http://baseline.campuslabs.com/wsu/reenrollmentsurvey2017>

Should you have any comments or questions, please feel free to email me at t.asay@aggiemail.usu.edu or text me at 801-682-0906.

I appreciate your time and cooperation.

Best~

Toni J. Asay
Graduate Student, TEAL
Utah State University

Appendix G

Letter of Information for Survey Participants



Page 1 of 2
 Protocol #
 IRB Approval Date:
 Consent Document Expires:
 IRB Password Protected per IRB X

v.10 9.1.2016

Letter of Information

THE TIES THAT BIND: IDENTIFYING CONNECTIONS THAT FACILITATE STUDENTS' SUCCESSFUL RE-ENTRY TO HIGHER EDUCATION

Purpose

You are invited to participate in a research study of 2,000 WSU students conducted by Dr. Sylvia Read, Associate Professor and Toni J. Asay, Graduate Student, both in the School of Teacher Education and Leadership at Utah State University. The purpose of this research is (1) to identify what brings university students back to school after they've stopped out for a semester or more; (2) to discover if a sense of connection to an individual, a department, or an institution was a significant factor in their successful return to school; and (3) to address institutional obstacles that could be remedied to facilitate a smoother re-entry for future students.

This form includes detailed information on the research to help you decide whether to participate in this research. Please read it carefully and ask any questions you have before you agree to participate.

Procedures

Your participation will involve completing an anonymous online survey, which should take between ten (10) and fifteen (15) minutes. Questions will include age, ethnicity, gender, number of semesters attended before stopping out, length of time away from school, and factors that contributed to stopping out and re-enrolling. Participants in the survey will be given the opportunity to participate in face-to-face interviews with the researcher. These will involve between 45 and 60 minutes of your time and will require travel to Weber State University.

Risks

This is a minimal risk research study. That means that the risks of participating are no more likely or serious than those you encounter in everyday activities. The foreseeable risks or discomforts include answering questions that you may find uncomfortable. In order to minimize those risks and discomforts, the researchers will not force you to talk about anything you do not want to willingly discuss. Although every measure will be taken to ensure your privacy, there is a risk of loss of confidentiality due to unforeseen circumstances.

Benefits

There is no direct benefit to you for participating in this research study. More broadly, this study will help the researchers learn more about what motivates students to re-enroll in higher education after they have been away for at least one semester and may help future populations with similar issues.

Confidentiality

The researchers will make every effort to ensure that the information you provide as part of this study remains confidential. Your identity will not be revealed in any publications, presentations, or reports resulting from this research study. However, it may be possible for someone to recognize a participant's particular stories or responses, even if quotes are present without identifiable information.

We will collect your information through an online survey; face-to-face interviews will be held with those who volunteer. The interviews will be collected as audio recordings. This data will be securely stored in files in



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 Protocol #
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v.10 9.1.2016

Box.com, an encrypted, cloud-based storage system, as recommended by USU for all digital content. One year after the study is complete, the records will be destroyed.

It is unlikely, but possible, that Utah State University, state or federal officials may require us to share the information you give us from the study to ensure that the research was conducted safely and appropriately. We will only share your information if law or policy requires us to do so.

The research team works to ensure confidentiality to the degree permitted by technology. It is possible, although unlikely, that unauthorized individuals could gain access to your responses because you are responding online. However, your participation in this online survey involves risks similar to a person's everyday use of the Internet.

Voluntary Participation, Withdrawal

Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. If you agree to participate now and change your mind later, you may withdraw at any time by either failing to complete the online survey or asking to withdraw from the interview process. If you have chosen to participate in the interview and change your mind after the interview is complete, your audio file and transcribed tapes will be destroyed and your information will not be used in the study.

Compensation

For your participation in this research study, you will receive a chance for a \$25.00 gift card for completing the survey. You have a 1 in 500 chance of being selected for a gift card. Each participant in the interview process, whether chosen for the \$25.00 gift card for completing the survey, will receive a \$25.00 gift card.

IRB Review

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the protection of human research participants at Utah State University has reviewed and approved this study. If you have questions about the research study itself, please contact the Principal Investigator at 435-797-0382 or sylvia.read@usu.edu. If you have questions about your rights or would simply like to speak with someone other than the research team about questions or concerns, please contact the IRB Director at (435) 797-0567 or irb@usu.edu.

Please affix an electronic signature

Sylvia Read, Ph.D.
 Principal Investigator
 (435) 512-4929; sylvia.read@usu.edu

Please affix an electronic signature

Toni J. Asay
 Co-Investigator
 (801) 682-0906; t.asay@aggiemail.usu.edu

Informed Consent

By continuing on to the survey, you agree to participate in this study. You indicate that you understand the risks and benefits of participation, and that you know what you will be asked to do. You also agree that you have asked any questions you might have, and are clear on how to stop your participation in the study if you choose to do so. Please be sure to retain a copy of this form for your records.

Appendix H

Informed Consent for Interview Participants



Page 1 of 3
 Protocol #
 IRB Approval Date:
 Consent Document Expires:
 IRB Password Protected per IRB X

v.10 9.1.2016

Informed Consent

THE TIES THAT BIND: IDENTIFYING CONNECTIONS THAT FACILITATE STUDENTS' SUCCESSFUL RE-ENTRY TO HIGHER EDUCATION

Purpose

You are invited to participate in a research study of 2,000 WSU students conducted by Dr. Sylvia Read, Associate Professor and Toni J. Asay, Graduate Student, both in the School of Teacher Education and Leadership at Utah State University. The purpose of this research is (1) to identify what brings university students back to school after they've stopped out for a semester or more; (2) to discover if a sense of connection to an individual, a department, or an institution was a significant factor in their successful return to school; and (3) to address institutional obstacles that could be remedied to facilitate a smoother re-entry for future students.

This form includes detailed information on the research to help you decide whether to participate in this research. Please read it carefully and ask any questions you have before you agree to participate.

Procedures

Participants in survey will be given the opportunity to participate in face-to-face interviews with the researcher. Questions will focus on what returning students can tell faculty, staff, and administration about how to encourage re-enrollment and identify barriers that discourage re-enrollment, what support service are needed for re-enrollment, and how students' perception of being connected to or being cared for by an individual or institution influenced their decision to re-enroll in higher education. The interview is anticipated to take between 45 and 60 minutes of your time and will require travel to Weber State University. Each interviewee will receive a \$25.00 gift card.

Risks

This is a minimal risk research study. That means that the risks of participating are no more likely or serious than those you encounter in everyday activities. The foreseeable risks or discomforts include answering questions that you may find uncomfortable. In order to minimize those risks and discomforts, the researchers will not force you to talk about anything you do not want to willingly discuss. As a "mandatory reporter" under Title IX, there are cases that the researcher may have to report to appropriate authorities if you reveal your involvement in illegal activities such as drug trafficking on campus or child/elder abuse.

Benefits

There is no direct benefit to you for participating in this research study. More broadly, this study will help the researchers learn more about what motivates students to re-enroll in higher education after they have been away for at least one semester and may help future populations with similar issues.

Confidentiality

The researchers will make every effort to ensure that the information you provide as part of this study remains confidential. Your identity will not be revealed in any publications, presentations, or reports resulting from this research study. However, it may be possible for someone to recognize participants' particular stories or responses even without identifiable information.



Page 2 of 3
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 IRB Approval Date:
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v.10 9.1.2016

We will collect your information through an online survey; face-to-face interviews will be held with those who volunteer. The interviews will be collected as audio recordings. This data will be securely stored in files in Box.com, an encrypted, cloud-based storage system, as recommended by USU for all digital content. One year after the study is complete, the records will be destroyed.

It is unlikely, but possible, that Utah State University, state or federal officials may require us to share the information you give us from the study to ensure that the research was conducted safely and appropriately. We will only share your information if law or policy requires us to do so. If the researchers learn that you are abusing/neglecting/going to engage in self harm/intend to harm another, state law requires that the researchers report this behavior/intention to the authorities.

We would like you to know that the study investigators are Title IX mandatory reporters. This means we must carry out our responsibility to report all Title IX violations of sex-based discrimination and sexual harassment, including sexual violence and child sexual abuse to the University. If you report sex-based discrimination or sexual harassment, we are required to report this to the WSU Title IX coordinator. If you do not wish for this to happen, you may choose not to share this information during the interview. If you do wish to talk to someone confidentially about sex-based discrimination and/or sexual harassment, you can contact Barry Gomberg, Executive Director Affirmative Action/Equal Opportunity (bgomberg@weber.edu), Weber State University Counseling and Psychological Services Center (801-626-6406), Your Community Connection (YCC) of Ogden (801-392-7273 24 hour crisis line), Safe Harbor of Davis County (801-444-9161 24 hour crisis line), or Utah Coalition Against Sexual Assault (1-888-421-1100 24 hour crisis line). You may skip any questions during the interview that include this information if you do not wish to answer them.

The research team works to ensure confidentiality to the degree permitted by technology. It is possible, although unlikely, that unauthorized individuals could gain access to your responses because you are responding online. However, your participation in this online survey involves risks similar to a person's everyday use of the Internet.

Voluntary Participation, Withdrawal [and Costs]

Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. If you agree to participate now and change your mind later, you may withdraw at any time by either failing to complete the online survey or asking to withdraw from the interview process. If you have chosen to participate in the interview and change your mind after the interview is complete, your audio file and transcribed tapes will be destroyed and your information will not be used in the study.

Compensation

For your participation in this research study, you will receive a chance for a \$25.00 gift card for completing the survey. You have a 1 in 500 chance of being selected for a gift card. Each participant in the interview process, whether chosen for the \$25.00 gift card for completing the survey, will receive a \$25.00 gift card.

IRB Review

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the protection of human research participants at Utah State University has reviewed and approved this study. If you have questions about the research study itself, please contact the Principal Investigator at 435-797-0382 or sylvia.read@usu.edu. If you have questions about your rights or would simply like to speak with someone other than the research team about questions or concerns, please contact the IRB Director at (435) 797-0567 or irb@usu.edu.

Please affix an electronic signature

Sylvia Read, Ph.D.
 Principal Investigator



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 Protocol #
 IRB Approval Date:
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v.10 9.1.2016

(435) 512-4929; sylvia.read@usu.edu

Toni J. Asay

Co-Investigator

(801) 682-0906; t.asay@aggiemail.usu.edu

Please affix an electronic signature

Informed Consent

By signing below, you agree to participate in this study. You indicate that you understand the risks and benefits of participation, and that you know what you will be asked to do. You also agree that you have asked any questions you might have, and are clear on how to stop your participation in the study if you choose to do so. Please be sure to retain a copy of this form for your records.

 Participant's Signature

 Participant's Name, Printed

 Date

CURRICULUM VITAE

TONI J. ASAY

Education

- 2019 PhD. Utah State University, Logan, UT
Curriculum and Instruction. Dissertation: *The Tie that Binds: Identifying Connections that Facilitate Students' Successful Re-entry to Higher Education*
- 2008 MA. Weber State University, Ogden, UT
Master of English Literature.
- 2004 BA. Weber State University, Ogden, UT
Bachelor of English.

Work Experience*Weber State University*

- Instructor, Developmental English, 2004 to present
Instructor, Fundamentals of College Writing, Intermediate College Writing, Introduction to Fiction, Honors Intermediate Writing 2006, 2004 to present
Member – University Teaching and Learning Forum, 2013 – 2016
Member – Task Force for Revising Textbook Section of PPM, 2015 - 2017
Member – University Digital Literacy Committee, 2017 to present
Member – Arts and Humanities College Committee, 2016 - 2018
Member – Department Committees: Recruitment and Retention, Faculty Development, National Undergraduate Literature Conference, Developmental English, Composition, Curriculum, Faculty Online Education
Participated in seven-year study of Developmental English Program, made revisions to the curriculum, and authored the submission for National Association for Developmental Education certification, 2006 to 2014
Adjunct Instructor, Weber State, 2004 – 2008
Coordinator, Developmental English Tutoring, 2004 – 2008
Instructor, Summer Bridge Program, Developmental College Reading/Writing Review, 2006, 2008, 2010, 2013

Memberships

National Association for Developmental Education, 2006 to present
 Network for Public Education, 2013 to present
 South West Association for Developmental Education, 2017 to present

Publications

Interview with Susan Monk Kidd, *Weber West*, Spring, 2019
 Paper in process for submission in 2019 on stop-out students as a
 marginalized student population

Papers, Presentations

College Reading and Learning Association, April 2005
 Joint presentation with Claire Hughes, Writing Center Director
 CRLA conference in Logan, UT

National Association of Developmental Education (NADE)
 Paper presentation, “Warp and Weft: Weaving a ‘Centered’ Tapestry
 of Success”, NADE Conference, Boston, MA, February 2008
 Paper presentation, “Increasing Reading Comprehension and Self-
 Efficacy through Summarization Skills”, NADE Conference,
 Dallas, TX, March 2014
 Paper presentation, NADE Conference, “Increasing Reading
 Comprehension in Online Learning”, Oklahoma City, OK, March
 2016
 Paper presentation, SWADE Conference, Orem, UT, October 2017
 Paper presentation, NADE Conference 2019, “Not All
 Takeoffs are on Time: Failure to Launch is Never Final”,
 Atlanta, GA, March 2019

University Awards

Crystal Crest Award, Friend of Students, 2010
 Woman of Warmth Award, 2014