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Adult Student Experiences at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my children, Henry and Olivia Stillwell. They have made countless sacrifices over the many years that I have been an adult student and have been unwavering in their support of my educational and career goals. Their seemingly endless supply of encouragement and love both motivated and sustained me throughout my time as an adult student, and somehow, we have managed to keep laughing through it all!

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Abstract

This thesis, using qualitative data, a grounded theory approach, and symbolic interaction theory, explores the experiences adult students have had while attending the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point. This exploratory study uncovered both the positives and challenges experienced by adult students at UWSP, as well as the coping strategies students use to overcome any obstacles. Symbolic interaction theory provides a framework for understanding how role expansion and identity reconstruction serve to aid adult students in achieving success at UW-Stevens Point. The analysis highlights unique challenges faced by veterans.

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Adult Students: Obstacles Faced at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point

Introduction

Background

During two different time segments in my life, I entered college and then graduate school as an adult student. Each class period, I would hear some variation of dramatic accounts from 18- to 22-year-olds about being forced to take an 8 o'clock class, having frustrating roommate issues, enduring the pressure of coming up with car payments for their brand new cars, cell phones gone missing, the nerve of professors who assign group projects, the dilemma over where to go on spring break, the tearful break-ups of relationships, drastic cuts in financial aid, professors who do not respond within four hours to an email, and on and on. And on.

Adult students deal with stressors of their own, which differ vastly in scope. For example, during the time I spent as an adult student, I have faced the demands of parenting a toddler while trying to find general education courses I could fit into my schedule; a difficult second pregnancy requiring partial bed rest and subsequent withdrawal from a semester; my father's heart attack; my own hospitalization for reconstructive kidney and bladder surgery; mothering my four-year-old and nursing my youngest while typing up a final paper with an impending deadline; initiating my own divorce after 18 years of marriage; the challenge of raising two children on my own with a part-time, low-wage job, and no child support; and most recently, my own cancer diagnosis and surgery.

I do not mean to minimize the stress experienced by traditional college students, but there is, generally speaking, clearly a world of difference in their life circumstances and those of adult students. The problem is that many college administrators expect both groups to neatly fit into one system. And it is not working.

To begin with, the average age of a college student is not what it used to be. Increasing divorce rates, employment cuts, and career changes have all affected the demographics of the so-called 'typical' college student. The 18- to 22-year-olds are slowly being joined by many students in their late 20s and 30s and a significant number of students in their 40s, as well. Nationally, a full 60 percent of college students are over the age of 25 (Noel-Levitz, 2006). In 2007, 10.7% of undergraduate students at UWSP, including transfer students, were age 25 or older (D. Kellogg, personal communication, May 6, 2008). As high school graduation rates begin to drop sharply over the next four to five years, competition for those students will be quite fierce among college recruiters in the UW System (UW System Accountability Report, 2007-08).

At the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point (UWSP), Mark Nook, Provost and Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs, has recognized that the UW System has an explicitly stated goal to increase the number of adult students who are enrolled each year. In addition to increasing enrollment, UW System and UWSP are implementing what they have termed, "Inclusive Excellence." Inclusive excellence is essentially a philosophy and way of looking at university goals (and the associated necessary steps that must be taken to reach those goals) through integrating diversity into all areas of campus life.

Diversity across the life-span and through differing life experiences is a relatively simple way to increase diversity. Since the working definition of diversity, as it relates to inclusive excellence, mentions individual differences (including life experiences), increasing the enrollment of adult students would seem to be a timely and appropriate goal for UWSP (UWSP, 2010).

This communication study employs symbolic interaction theory to help aid in understanding the experiences adult students have had on the UWSP campus. Humans make

meaning through shared symbols. One of the important meanings we make is our own identity, which is structured through face-to-face and organizational communication. The challenge facing adult students is not only to negotiate obstacles, but also to expand their identities to include the role of student.

Purpose of the Study

Given the national, state, and UWSP demographic trends, and in light of the increasing difficulty in securing and maintaining funding for education at the state level, there are good reasons for UWSP to make a serious effort to recruit and support adult students while recognizing that our current ways of serving adult students at UWSP are both antiquated and ineffective. The purpose of this study, then, is to bring to light the obstacles that adult students face at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point. The research question is, “What obstacles do adult students face at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point?” Follow up questions include, “How have adult students overcome these obstacles?” and “What causes some adult students at UWSP to drop out?”

With the majority of college students now over the age of 24 and high school graduation rates dropping across the nation and in the state of Wisconsin, UWSP is currently considering alternative ways to ensure they will have the students they need to fulfill their enrollment targets over the next decade (Noel-Levitz, 2006; UW System Accountability Report, 2007-08). Planning is underway to increase the number of transfer students at UWSP and to strengthen retention rates across campus. Building theory through the grounded approach will assist in understanding and planning, therefore, ultimately supporting these recruitment goals.

At a time when so many adults may find themselves unemployed or underemployed, UWSP might look to expand recruitment, support, and retention of adult students. However,

recruiting adult students without programs, services, and schedules to meet their needs would be potentially counterproductive.

The results of this study will be of interest to many different audiences. First and foremost, this study will be of interest to administrators at UW-Stevens Point, specifically the Chancellor, the Provost/Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs, the Vice Chancellors for Business and Student Affairs, the Executive Director of University Relations and Communications, and the Policy and Planning Analyst. Staff in specific departments at UWSP, including Admissions, Continuing Education, the Nontraditional Student Office, Registration and Records, and Student Academic Advising, might also be interested in this study. Current adult students at UWSP may find this research of value as might other UWSP faculty and staff. Equally important are outside constituents, such as businesses in Central Wisconsin, who may be looking to partner with UWSP in adult student endeavors. Given the theoretical framework that will be used in this study, the findings may also make a small contribution to the existing larger body of literature on student retention.

Chapter One - Literature Review

Introduction

With the ever-changing demographics of college students, and most noticeably of late, the large numbers of veterans returning to school post-service, it is imperative that institutions that have not done much to embrace adult learners start to review and revise their policies. The related literature on adult students focuses on three main areas of importance: recruitment, student services, and persistence and retention. The following review begins by addressing recruitment through understanding adult students' needs and tailoring programs to meet those needs. The review then looks at student services and support and how critical those services and factors are in the lives of adult students. Finally, the issues that contribute and detract from adult student persistence and retention will be discussed.

Recruitment

The first main theme in adult student literature is adult student recruitment. Before initiating an effort to market to adult students, it is important to understand them and their needs. Why are students looking to return to or begin college? According to Eduventures' Assessment of Consumer Preferences (2007), demographics show 64% of students taking credit courses are women and 73% of all students taking credit courses are employed full-time. Many types of life changes and employment changes lead people to return to school. In fact, when recruiting students, it would benefit institutions to be mindful that adult students have a very broad and often extensive variety of reasons and motivations for their interest in education ranging from divorce or personal interest to being laid-off from a job or wanting a promotion. Each student comes to higher education with his or her own goals. To successfully recruit adult students,

effective ways of helping them reach those goals and serving their needs must be securely in place (Compton, 2006).

Currently, there is no adult recruitment program at UW-Stevens Point, and adult students stumble upon UWSP due to proximity or word of mouth. Anecdotally, the researcher turns away one to two adult students per week because UW-Stevens Point does not have an array of online degree programs or many evening courses available. According to administrators at UW-Oshkosh, they have seen a 38% increase in adult student enrollment in the last year and a 100% increase in the last three years (Wells, 2009). Their adult student office is also open until 6:00 p.m. four nights a week and other times, including Saturdays, by appointment. In contrast, the Admissions Office at UW-Stevens Point is open Monday through Friday from 7:45 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.

The seriousness with which adult students approach educational decision-making should be taken into consideration when developing a marketing plan geared toward adult students. The scarce literature available on recruitment specifically for adults shows there are many reasons for students wanting to return to school and that recruiting them is a matter of meeting their needs, both personally and in terms of available programs.

According to an Eduventures research brief on Assessing Consumer Preferences for Adult, Continuing, and Professional Education (2007), adult students take an average of 23 weeks and consider 3.1 institutions before making a selection about where to enroll. This same study indicates that 22% of adult students are likely to be enrolled in or considering a course or program offered in a 100% online format. Recruiting adults must include offering them courses online.

One such program striving to serve adult students is Northern Arizona University's Bachelor of Arts in Liberal Studies (BAiLS) program. They attribute their success not to recruitment, but to listening to what the students need and providing them with flexible options and programs (Magna Publications, 2006).

According to Carol Aslanian, President of Aslanian Group, Inc., adult students have a strong interest in weekend programs, certificate programs, and accelerated programs. She emphasizes that institutions need to focus on telling students how their programs will benefit the students and how they are directly related to their career goals. In looking at future trends, Aslanian says, ...“if your adult enrollments are decreasing, that doesn't mean that the market is decreasing. It means that adult students are finding what they need somewhere else” (Magna Publications, 2005).

The literature makes it clear that adult student recruitment cannot be effective without an array of course offerings scheduled for days and times that fit into the hectic and complicated lives of adult students. Unfortunately, flexible, alternative schedules are not the norm at UWSP. According to the UWSP Registration and Records Timetable, very few classes are offered during times other than the traditional Monday through Friday, 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. format. In addition, adult students need faculty involvement and faculty support for alternative delivery formats. Such programming and faculty support can yield more than additional tuition dollars for the campus. Chaves (2006) emphasizes the need for administration to believe in the positive impact that adult students will have on the educational experiences of everyone involved. For example, diversity in age may be as important to the university community as cultural diversity. Through online discussions, initial postings, and responses to those postings, students can still benefit from the diversity in age offered via online classes. The literature shows that in order to recruit

adult students, there must be something in place to recruit them for. Talking adult students into attending a campus with only traditional offerings will result in their frustration and lack of student retention.

Student Services

In order to encourage adult students to persist in obtaining a college education, institutions of higher learning must provide appropriate support and student services. The literature is vast and solid in support of the importance of personal contact (including initial contacts), continued advocate resources, academic advising, and follow-up (Bauman, 2004; Chaves, 2006; Miller Brown, 2002). As an institution, UWSP seems to acknowledge that something needs to be done to assist adult students. According to the UWSP 2007-08 accountability report,

UWSP is developing an Office of Adult Student Services to enhance and support the educational pursuits of adult students. The goals of the office are to provide a first point of contact, serve as an information resource, provide a supportive community, and advocate for the needs of adult students at UWSP.

In spite of its relatively remote location and minimal staffing, this office makes an important statement: adult students are welcome here. Adult student services are not only important for recruitment; they are also a critical factor in adult students' retention and success. A good first step would be to define what the needs of these students are. An institution can then put the appropriate contacts in place, develop a means for building community and cohesion among adult students, and find a way to very practically serve these students by expanding office

hours and implementing alternative course delivery formats (ACE Conference, 2001; Compton 2006; Miller Brown, 2002, 2008).

The 1999 Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) benchmark study findings also support the need for student services. CAEL focused its study on best practices for institutions, and their findings include the desire for many kinds of services and support, including adult-centered learning, meeting learners' needs, flexibility, and communication. And as evidenced by the quantity and depth of detail of the Adult-Friendly Institution inventory summary forms distributed at the ACE Conference (2001), there is no such thing as too much support for adult students. From initial entry through graduation, someone, somewhere, needs to be paying attention to the adult learners to make sure they are getting the answers they want and the support they need.

The main findings about student services show that adult students often start and stop college many times before either completing a degree or dropping out altogether. Some of the reasons they do so include negative academic experiences, feeling they did not have the academic student skills needed to succeed, lack of focus, family issues, insufficient support, and financial issues (Hensley, 2001). And once an adult student has attended off and on for a six-year period or longer, they are less likely to earn any degree (Long, 2007). So it follows that after adult students have been recruited, attention needs to turn to what the campus can do to ensure students have the appropriate support they need to stay in school and move toward graduation.

Persistence and Retention

There is a wealth of literature available with regard to adult student persistence and retention, and much of that literature touches on students' needs and ideas for meeting those

needs. Kerka and Hagedorn (1988, 2005) argue that there are a variety of reasons adult students drop out of higher education and that these reasons need to be studied and addressed in order to successfully retain these students. The literature also focuses on the importance of having systems in place that assure adult learners of advocacy and support (Hensley, 2001). Where the literature falls short is in proposing specific models for adult-friendly campuses and explaining how those institutions of higher education might implement such models.

Information and support are also critical factors in student persistence and retention. It is very common for adult students to start college only to drop out and return again (and sometimes again). With specific contact people serving as resources and advocates, this pattern can be reduced or eliminated (Hensley, 2001). It costs far less to retain a student than to have to recruit them all over again in the future.

It is clear that students need study skills, guidance in academic and career planning, family support, and access to financial aid. The Bauman study (2004) noted comments from students that indicated they would welcome support in the areas of career counseling, time and stress management, personal counseling, and getting together with other adult students. In addition, it has been well-documented that students who feel connected to a campus feel a loyalty and commitment to that campus, which impacts retention rates (Hensley, 2001; Warner, 1997).

Enlisting the support of families who have an adult member returning to school is also important to adult student success. Some institutions, such as UW-Whitewater, have a staff member who meets with the whole immediate family when an adult wants to return to school so that the family knows what to expect and how to be supportive (T. Moldenhauer, personal

communication, Nov. 6, 2008). The more people who can be of support to an adult learner, the more likely they will be to persist (Hensley, 2001).

To aid in retention efforts, campuses often employ the use of some type of First Year Experience. These programs typically utilize a cohort approach. Adult student peers are then more likely to get to know each other and provide each other with encouragement and support. Self-reports and evaluations have shown that participants in these groups find them helpful. As one student said, "I feel that the cohort really helped to ease me into college. It helps to adjust you to the pace of college life" (Miller Brown, 2008; Warner, 1997). Miller Brown also suggests that campuses gear an orientation program specifically toward adult students so they may better understand the culture of the college, learn about academic study skills, and build confidence (2002).

Faculty can promote student success, as well, by making use of adult students' experiences to serve as practical examples and acknowledge those life experiences. The more professors and administration can reinforce the value that adult students have on campus and how they contribute to making the learning environment better for everyone involved, the more connected adult students will feel (Chaves, 2006).

The main findings about retention surround the specific reasons students stop attending college and what can be done to combat those issues. Some of the reasons include difficulty with class scheduling, family responsibilities, financial difficulty related to school, inability to get along with other students, job responsibilities, lack of self-confidence and self esteem, lack of time, and lack of information about transfer opportunities (Kerka, 1988; Serra, 2005).

The responses of postsecondary institutions to the needs of adult learners can be categorized into three types: 1) those institutions that have been actively supporting adult

education for quite some time, 2) institutions that are not doing anything specific to attract or retain adult students, and 3) those that have made changes to better support adult students or sprang into existence for the sole purpose of catering to adult students' needs.

Actively Supportive Institutions

Private colleges and universities in Wisconsin saw the need for serving adult students long before most public institutions did. They have always been largely dependent on private funding for their success and have not been carried along by the state. Lakeland College sports an Adult Education tab right on their home page. They have a School of Adult Education that offers evening, weekend and online classes in seven locations, as well as BlendEd courses which allow students to choose how they complete their class(es) for each week: either onsite or online (<http://www.lakeland.edu/adult/>). Alverno College is home to both a Weekday College for Adult and Transfer Students, which offers courses mainly during the work week, and an Adult Weekend College for Women that is a full bachelor's degree program. The Weekend College courses meet two weekends a month on Friday nights and all day Saturday and Sunday (http://www.alverno.edu/prospective_students/adult_weekday.html).

Institutions Maintaining the Status Quo

Public universities have been slower to change and embrace adult learners than many private colleges have been. UW-Stout, for example, noted in its 2001-2002 University Priority report under Adult and Nontraditional Markets that their goal was to "Develop programs and partnerships to meet the needs of adult and nontraditional student markets." That seems like an appropriate goal given their total undergraduate enrollment was just over 7,200 students in 2001, yet their undergraduate adult student population dropped by 249 students from 1996 to 2001 (University Priority report, 2002). However, one of the adult students surveyed in 2007 as part

of the research for a Master's thesis had this to say about UW-Stout when asked which programs, policies, and/or services might be instituted to assist adult students: "Take your pick. There is nothing in place right now!" (Droege, 2007).

UW-Stevens Point has just in the last year issued office space for a "Nontraditional Student Services Center." Housed in a small space far away from the hub of activity in the Dreyfus University Center, the center hopes to attract adult students. Their Web page, also recently launched, contains very little useful information specifically geared toward adult students. There are simply links to UWSP Web pages, which are geared toward traditional college students. Why? Because the Center is overseen by a Director who has many other hats to wear and who has no support staff dedicated to adult students.

Institutions Catering to Adults

There are some public universities, however, that have taken action to develop their own programs for adult students in response to declining revenue. The University of Oregon has a strong mission statement for Nontraditional Student Programs, which uses warm words, such as 'advocate,' 'interpersonal,' 'nurturing,' and 'supportive.' They want to "engage nontraditional students as active partners in the planning, delivery and evaluation of their own learning." The University of Oregon has a Nontrad. Student Union (NSU), offers study tips, and has its own Nontraditional Student Resource Guide. Also of note is the description of the NSU: "The Nontraditional Student Union strives to provide a voice for adult students to be heard by the decision-making bodies of the UO Administration and Student Government"

(http://studentlife.uoregon.edu/programs/nontrad_student_prog/main.htm).

Pennsylvania State also welcomes adult students with open arms as they have acknowledged that Pennsylvania has five million plus adults who have yet to earn a bachelor's

degree. Their Adult Learner Programs and Services department in the Office of Student Affairs holds a monthly Conversation Café that gives adult students the opportunity to learn about and discuss issues that matter to them. The satellite campuses offer different types of programs to serve adult students. Penn State Fayette uses a local cable television station as the venue for a virtual open house program about academics, admissions, and career services. The Shenango campus is open evenings for enrollment services. Other campuses offer weekend, 7 a.m., lunch hour, and online courses (<http://www.live.psu.edu/story/36125>).

Closer to home, the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire (UWEC) has an advisor for adult students, who is available in the early evenings by appointment. UWEC has an extensive frequently asked questions section on their Web site that is just for adult students. They also have a Student Peer Mentoring Program that matches students of similar educational/career goals with a current UWEC adult student (<http://www.uwec.edu/advising/nss/>).

And the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay has a pick for ‘Adult Learners’ right on their home page and offers three different degree programs for them (<http://www.uwgb.edu/adultdegrees/>).

Quick to cash in on the opportunity to serve the ever-growing population of adult students, online universities, such as Capella University located in Minnesota and The University of Phoenix, have been springing up all over. The University of Phoenix is the largest online school in the United States (Romano, 2006). Their Web site acknowledges adult student dilemmas, saying, “...most University of Phoenix students have one thing in common: the desire to earn their degrees without giving up their lives” (http://www.phoenix.edu/admissions/student_services.aspx).

Most recently, Rasmussen College and Globe University have entered into this market and built facilities in the Central Wisconsin area. For their first semester of operation in January 2010, Rasmussen had 100 students enrolled in courses offered mostly online (*Wausau Daily Herald*, 2010). Carmen Price, Online Faculty Manager for Rasmussen, says the online courses and degree programs they offer are filling a need in the market for adult students (personal communication, November 25, 2009). Globe University is currently still under construction.

Change

Historically, UWSP has valued diversity and worked hard to steadily increase the number of racial minority students admitted to and enrolled on this campus. With the recent emphasis placed on inclusive excellence by UW System, we have a golden opportunity to renew, revitalize, and expand our commitment to diversity. By creating a working definition of diversity that includes age and life experiences, we are in a position to move forward and to serve a wide array of students, thereby enhancing the educational experiences of all those who attend and are employed by UWSP.

However, not all members of the UWSP community would support adopting programs and services to meet the needs of adult students. A change in priorities might mean faculty and staff would have to work at times other than they have been accustomed to working. Faculty would also have a different type of teaching responsibility, as adult students tend to demand more (perhaps because their costs are perceived as greater than those of a traditional-aged student). While responsibility is generally considered a ‘positive,’ it can also be seen in terms of negatives. As Homans (1958) says, ...“responsibility may be looked on, less clearly, as a cost. It means constraint and worry—or peace of mind foregone.”

Once a minimal population, adult students were definitely outside the norm of the traditional-aged college student and largely ignored. Now a more significant segment of the population, adult students are often faced with dated attitudes and beliefs about who they are, why they wish to further their education, what kind of power they hold in the university community and why administration should take a look at how to better serve them.

The decisions that UWSP administrators made 20 years ago with regard to which populations would be served and how that would best be accomplished do affect what types of obstacles adult students encounter today. For example, most courses are not taught at times convenient for adult students.

As a first step, UWSP administration has recognized and emphasized the need for the Admissions Office at UWSP to increase nonresident student recruitment. In the fiscal year (July 1, 2007-June 30, 2008), \$11,011 was spent on nonresident recruitment, and in turn, nonresident enrollment increased by 72 students from fall 2007 to fall 2008. Nonresident students pay \$8,184 more in tuition each year than resident students. Some of the additional 72 nonresident students received fee remissions and some paid less in tuition due to a tuition discount program serving students in North Dakota, Nebraska, Michigan, Kansas, and Missouri called the Midwest Student Exchange Program (MSEP). But all in all, UWSP still saw a substantial increase in nonresident tuition revenue (C. Glennon, personal communication, November 10, 2008).

When it comes to adult students, however, not much has been done to attract students or to serve the adult students currently enrolled (The Alliance for Adult Students, 2008). Wisconsin ranks 24th in the nation in the percentage of adults aged 25-64 who hold an Associate's degree or higher with 39.4% (CAEL, 2008). The possibilities for marketing to the remaining group of 62.3% are very real. On the UWSP campus, there is an existing model that makes assumptions about

when students are available to attend class. For example, the UWSP spring 2009 timetable of courses shows that no introductory English, math, or communication courses are offered after 4:00 p.m. (UWSP Registration and Records Timetable, 2008).

UWSP has taken some steps to provide classes with alternative delivery formats. However, the scope is not large enough or targeted enough (in terms of general degree requirements) to help students lessen their time to degree. While UWSP does offer some online and hybrid courses, again, offerings are slim and many are geared toward teachers who need to take three or six credits of coursework in order to fulfill requirements set forth by the state Department of Public Instruction. The timetable for fall 2009 lists 49 fully online courses, only three of which fulfill a general degree requirement. Forty-three of the 49 are offered through Continuing Education or the Collaborative Degree Program. The Collaborative Degree program is a joint venture between UWSP and the two-year UW campuses in Wausau, Marshfield, Fond du Lac, and Marinette. Bachelor's degrees are offered with majors in business administration, American studies, and Web and digital media development. However, the program is not fully available online. Only upper level courses are offered, and they are all hybrid (partially online, partially on campus). In addition, students have to have at least 30 college credits already in order to participate. UWSP also offers 10 other hybrid courses, but seven of them are 400-level courses or above and none of them fulfill a general degree requirement.

Given the UWSP university culture that shies away from alternative class days and times, how does a campus break away from the past and become adult-learner friendly or begin to head in that direction? This kind of culture change can be initiated if administration sets the tone and the agenda for attracting, retaining, and serving adult students. It takes time for faculty, staff, and other students to buy in to the change. The change starts with 1) a belief system that says

that the presence of adult students on the campus—their contributions and experience—is important to the success of the institution (Chaves, 2006) and 2) giving Admissions professionals something to recruit students for. Some faculty may be quite happy to offer one section of a class during an evening or weekend time slot. It might be possible to plan a schedule that would enable students to complete general degree requirements and even a major by taking evening classes over the course of several years. It would not be cost-prohibitive to lay the foundation for this kind of change.

UWSP places a strong emphasis on traditional-aged students and strives to provide quality services and resources to those students. The reality is that people who fall outside of UWSP's limited definition of a student will face obstacles of one kind or another as they try to navigate the campus. There was a student, for example, in the fall 2008 semester of Comm. 701, Introduction to Graduate Communication Studies, who worked full-time and could not check out library materials for her coursework because she did not have a student identification card. The PointCard office, which issues student ID cards, is only open weekdays until 4:30 p.m. This posed a significant problem for the student, since checking out a thesis from the library was a course requirement, and she was unable to leave her job in Iola to get to campus by 4:30 p.m.

A culture that values the diversity of age and experiences will sensitize decision-makers to the needs of adult students. Take the following situation, for example. Announcing on a Monday in late November, 2008, (three weeks before finals) that the entire university would be shut down that Saturday due to a scheduled power outage did not send a positive message to adult students, who often only have weekends to work on their research and homework. Acknowledging the schedules that adult students must contend with would have sent an entirely different message to the student body as a whole (Chaves, 2006). The sensitivity that will likely

be developed as a result of a culture shift toward supporting diversity of age and experiences has the potential to make situations like the one just described uncommon if not obsolete.

Complaints of adult learners, which were discovered during an Adult Student Questionnaire in 2007, can be a goldmine of useful information for advocates of the needed culture change. One student said,

Coming in to UWSP as a transfer/adult student has been difficult. There seem to be many questions that pertain directly to my education and experience here, and I always seem to have to talk with multiple people, and never do I get the same answer out of any of them...the one thing I always asked for and tried to find was a single person I could deal with, or at least talk to about my problems here on campus and I was always shuffled around to different people.

another explained,

I find it very difficult to attend UWSP as an adult student. I have a full-time job and three children to support on my own. Because of the lack of online classes and convenient campus class times, I am thinking about dropping out of UWSP and re-enrolling in a school that is more online focused.

The first student, who made the point about not having one contact to advocate for him/her, has a valid concern. Adult students often have many other obligations and time constraints and do not have the luxury of tracking down staff member after staff member. Aiding students by having one contact for many services or at least one contact for adult learners in each office would be a major step forward (ACE, 2001; Compton, 2006). The second student supports Aslanian's comment, referenced earlier, about adult students finding what they need elsewhere. Clearly, adult students have not typically found the mentoring they feel they need in

order to be successful students at UWSP, and they are willing to seek out the competition to ensure that their needs are fulfilled.

Symbolic Interaction Theory

Herbert Blumer (1969), coined the term symbolic interaction to describe the process that involves humans' assignation of meanings to things, their interpretation, and their responses. Blumer's approach to symbolic interaction involves three premises: 1) Human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that they have for them; 2) The meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one's fellows; and 3) These meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretative process used by the person in dealing with the things he encounters.

More specifically, the meanings we assign are not merely definitions of objects or events, nor are they necessarily personally psychologically significant. Instead, symbolic interaction theory posits that the process of social interaction itself allows us to take our past experiences, compare them with the new information gained through the social interaction arena, and then finally assign or refine meanings. Further, we then develop our identities over time based on face-to-face interaction with others. It is the process of social interaction itself that leads to determining meaning.

According to George Herbert Mead (1934), our development is a process of interaction, and since we all have different backgrounds and life experiences, so the meanings we make out of our interactions will differ. Mead distinguished between the "I" or the "response of the organism to the reaction of the other" and the "me" or "the other person's reaction, implanted within the organism." He believed that the interaction that occurred between language and responses are what allowed symbols to exist in the first place; that mind, body, and self were all

connected. The terms self, self-concept, and identity have been used interchangeably throughout this work based on Mead's views.

Charles Horton Cooley developed the concept of the "looking glass self:"

Each to each a looking-glass.

Reflects the other that doth pass (Cooley, 1922).

This thought sums up the idea that is central to Cooley's looking glass self theory. Simply put, Cooley's main ideas involve a person's appearance according to him or herself, the way they think others think and feel about their appearance, and how the individual feels (whether positively or negatively) as a result. We come to develop our self-concept, in many ways, through our perception of how others view us (Cooley, 1922). If an adult student feels patronized at orientation or unable to check out materials from the library because of conflicts with operating hours, they are likely to take in negative messages about what it means to be a student on this campus.

The significance of such experiences is made clear in the work of John Dewey (1920), who described human experience as the result of the connection between doing and undergoing a process or change. In this way, he felt that people must be taken as a whole, including having knowledge of the context of their environment, in order to be fully appreciated. When talking about adult students, we cannot ignore their backgrounds, their histories, and who they were as individuals before they set foot on this campus if we are to understand who they must become in order to succeed here. Dewey emphasized the importance of experience when he said:

In what I have said I have taken for granted the soundness of the principle that education in order to accomplish its ends both for the individual learner and for society must be

based upon experience—which is always the actual life-experience of some individual (113).

Dewey's assertion that life experience contributes to the learning of all of us points out the value of adult students on our campus.

Life experience springs forth from social interaction, which begins at birth. As infants, we learn to associate our early experiences with meanings, and, over periods, those associations become more broad and complex. Human growth and development leads to a connection with others through a highly involved system of symbols and shared meanings, i.e. communication. By interpreting and understanding these symbols and the meanings others wish to communicate, as noted above, individuals eventually create, refine, and maintain their self-concept and overall identity. Interpretation by the self of the other person's meaning is key to this process, so rather than the traditional human behavior process of stimulus, response, one is working with stimulus, definition/interpretation, and response (De Fleur, 1966, Manis, 1967, and Stone, 1970). Stone describes the process as being one in which the organism takes an action, observes the other's response, and change itself in response (Stone, 1970). This enables humans to learn from past experiences, alter behavior, and move toward a new future full of possibilities. This process "in which the individual notes things, assesses them, gives them a meaning, and decides to act on the basis of the meaning" is called self-indication (Manis, 1967).

Symbolic interaction, then, allows us to gradually form our self-concept and, ultimately, our identity. A person's identity is constituted within a certain role or roles and their proscribed characteristics. Socially, we all move through life in a certain way; setting forth a certain image. We tell the world who we are by our choice of hair style, makeup, jewelry, piercings, and clothing, along with the identification we carry in our wallets and purses. These symbols of

ourselves are referred to as identity documents (Stone, 1970). Identity and symbolic interaction are closely intertwined, for, as we will see, identity reconstitution is an important part of adult student success.

Conclusion

At a time when so many adults may find themselves unemployed or underemployed, UWSP might consider expanding the recruitment, support, and retention of adult students. Adult students make significant contributions to the overall diversity of the campus through the many experiences that have brought them to this point in their lives. Having programs and services in place for them is critical if we are to recruit adult students to our campus in the first place. Once they are here, helping them feel connected to UWSP will aid in retention efforts, since students who feel they belong here are more likely to persist.

This study of adult students at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point is important given the national, state, and UWSP demographic trends, and in light of the increasing difficulty in securing and maintaining funding for education at the state level. UWSP must, accordingly, make a serious effort to recruit and support adult students while recognizing that our current ways of serving adult students at UWSP are both antiquated and ineffective. The main research question for this study is, “What obstacles do adult students face at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point?” Follow up questions include, “How have adult students overcome these obstacles?” and “What causes some adult students at UWSP to drop out?” The following section details the methods that are proposed in order to find answers to these questions.

Chapter Two - Method

This study explored the experiences of adult students at UW-Stevens Point using a qualitative approach. This approach best illuminated these experiences and allowed for the particulars of these experiences to be fully described. Grounded theory was a good choice for analyzing the data in this study because it allowed the details shared by adult students to gradually build up to some general ideas about what is going on at UWSP when it comes to adult learners.

The following methodology plan provided the reasons for using a qualitative approach to this exploratory study and a brief review of grounded theory and theoretical sensitivity. This section provides a detailed description of the participants that were recruited and the rationale for these characteristics, as well as the instruments that were used, including the demographic and personal interview questions asked, and finally, the procedures, which describe the way the interviews were set up and conducted.

Qualitative Approach

This exploratory study employed a qualitative method to focus on the individual experiences of adult students at UW-Stevens Point. This study used a qualitative approach because the goal was to explore and elicit the participants' perceptions and feelings about their unique experiences rather than forcing the participants to select from a provided list of objective answers. A qualitative method gave the researcher the ability to use open-ended interview questions with time for substantial follow-up questions. This was a catalyst for the emergence of themes and ultimately, for a much more complete understanding of the experiences had by adult students at UWSP than a quantitative approach would provide (Strauss, 1998). Using a

quantitative approach to this study would have limited the responses and detail necessary to convey the individual experiences of adult students.

Grounded Theory

Grounded theory was used for the analysis of this study. Grounded theory employs an inductive, rather than deductive, approach to research (Chesebro, 2007). Rather than making a general hypothesis and working toward specifics, the researcher started with the large quantity of textual data provided by the personal interviews and used those specifics to work toward general composite stories of two adult students--one of a new freshman adult student and the other of a returning adult student. In other words, with grounded theory, it is possible to take large amounts of qualitative data, to sift through it, and to code the data patterns, eventually building up to form a theory or theories about what is happening. Because this is a modest, exploratory study, the end result was not a fully developed theory, but hopefully the composite experiences lead to a deeper understanding of what it means to be an adult student at UW-Stevens Point.

Three main types of coding were used to analyze the data: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. The first type of coding mentioned, open coding, allowed the researcher to take the transcribed interviews and begin to identify themes and to note similarities and differences. Sections were coded according to concepts, noting certain properties of those concepts along the way. The discovery of characteristics and common themes as they relate to the experiences of adult students at UWSP began to emerge through constant comparison, and defining the concepts allowed the researcher to develop categories and subcategories, as well (Strauss, 1998).

Axial coding explores how these themes and concepts are related, how they link together, and whether something causes, is parallel to, or is the opposite of something else. It is important to note that it occurs simultaneously with open coding rather than subsequently (Strauss, 1998).

Finally, as relationships among concepts and themes become more clear, a model or structure begins to emerge. Selective coding involves locating a main point or central theme in the research and connecting the other concepts to that central theme (Strauss, 1988). Concepts continued to be refined, honed, and integrated as further understanding was developed, ultimately resulting in a theory (Chesebro, 2007). Because this was an exploratory study, in-depth selective coding did not take place. Rather, student experiences were compiled and described in terms of what adult students were feeling, what they have experienced, and what they think about their time at UWSP. This is illustrated through two composite stories--one of a new freshman adult student and the other of a returning adult student.

Through microscopic coding, writing memos, constant comparison, development of categories and subcategories, constructing diagrams, continually asking "What is this all about," and linking abstract concepts together, the researcher finally arrived at the point of integration with a central theme and the creation of a theory (Strauss, 1998), or at least a basic theoretical model of what is happening.

Grounded theory assisted in providing a clear picture of what is happening with adult students on this campus. According to Strauss and Corbin, (1998) "Grounded theories, because they are drawn from data, are likely to offer insight, enhance understanding, and provide a meaningful guide to action." And as Chesebro elaborates (2007), "Data include the feelings and interpretations of what subjects reveal both explicitly as well as tacitly."

As the researcher became more sensitive and in tune to what was happening and how certain theoretical concepts could be directly applied to the experiences of adult students, some additional understanding of the interviews occurred. This developing theoretical sensitivity enhanced the depth and breadth of the project as the researcher could go back and review data

over time, noting connections that were missed in the first couple of analyses. As theoretical sensitivity developed, the researcher connected findings to concepts in the research literature in search of an answer to the question, “What is really happening here?”

A grounded theory approach was taken to conduct this study because the insight, understanding, and recommendations often resulting from the use of such an approach are precisely what are needed in order to attract, support, and retain adult learners at UWSP.

Participants

While many universities use “anyone over the age of 25” as their description of adult students, for the purposes of this study, adult students were defined as students who are 24 years of age or older; or have had delayed enrollment into postsecondary education; or have dependents; or are married, divorced, or separated; or have military veteran status. This definition corresponds with the UWSP definition of adult students, and it includes a broad spectrum of new freshmen, transfer, reentry, and graduate students. Since this is an exploratory study, these students were included in order to draw from a wide array of experiences.

There is a good reason for referring to these students as “adult students.” Although 18- to 23-year-olds are legally adults and the terms “nontraditional,” “older adult,” “reentry,” or “commuter student” help differentiate the group being studied, these terms also, unfortunately, further marginalize these individuals, who are already lacking in privilege and power (Sissel, 2001). Thus, students 24 and older will be referred to simply as adult students.

Participants consisted of 10 adult students currently attending UWSP, including both male and female participants so that the experiences of both genders were represented. A re-entry student and a student who dropped out of UWSP were also interviewed. It was important to select participants with varying characteristics, such as employment and marital status, age,

and race/ethnicity factors. Part-time and full-time students were represented, as were adults with and without children and those with military veteran status. This provided rich data that covered most variables found to exist with most adult students, resulting in the most complete picture possible of a “typical” UWSP adult student.

Recruitment and Selection Procedure

Participants were initially contacted via email from a paper listing of approximately 243 students obtained from the Nontraditional Student Office. The list was kept in a locked desk unit, and no one other than the researcher had access to the list. A demographic questionnaire, which follows, was emailed to all these students in order to then narrow down the list of final participants.

Demographic Questionnaire

Please circle one answer or type an ‘x’ under one answer for each question.

1. Did you ever attend college before attending UWSP? Yes No
2. Enrollment status? Full-time Part-time
3. Employment status? Full-time Part-time Not employed
4. Marital status? Single Married Domestic Partnership
 Separated/Divorced Widowed
5. Do you have children living at home? Yes No
6. If yes, tell us about them:
7. Are you a veteran? Yes No
8. Your sex? Female Male
9. Age? _____

10. Race/ethnicity?	African-American	Multi-racial
	Native-American	Caucasian
	Asian-American	Other
	Latina/Latino	

Of the 243 questionnaires originally emailed, 32 were returned. The researcher sent a follow-up reminder with another questionnaire attachment to the remaining 211 students in the random sample. Another 21 questionnaires were then received for a total of 53; a 21.81 percent response rate.

After reviewing the questionnaires, the researcher began to whittle down the number of prospective participants based on the desired characteristics mentioned previously, such as gender and employment status. Final selection took place using the non-probability sampling technique of purposive sampling using the responses from the demographic questionnaires until new freshmen, transfer students, re-entry students, and graduate students were chosen (Babbie, 2004). This type of selection gave the researcher the varied scope needed to successfully gather information from adult students at UWSP.

Procedure

Personal interviews were conducted so that in-depth conversations could be held to gather a large amount of data with great detail that is rich in substance. More people could have been chosen to participate in interviews, but a minimal number was chosen in order to obtain some in-depth information from an array of students for an exploratory study. In her 1991 study of African-American women on the UWSP campus, Boone used a similar approach to select a small number of interview participants. Time limitations were also a factor. Fewer people could have been chosen, but it was important to obtain a diverse range of opinions about experiences

had by adult students at UWSP rather than just a few, possibly limited, responses. This resulted in a more complete picture of adult student experiences at UWSP.

Through the use of personal interviews, the researcher was able to develop a rapport with individuals that encouraged them to share both their good and bad experiences of UWSP, as well as gave them an opportunity to provide specific examples illustrating what it is like to be an adult student at this university.

Surveys were not used because they would have limited the responses and not given voice to the full experiences of adult students. Surveys do not allow for the active listening techniques so critical to ensuring participants are heard and understood completely, nor do they permit participants to ask questions or further elaborate on important points, including those that may not be listed on the survey.

Focus groups were not used because it was important that each participant have her or his own opportunity to be heard. Based on the researcher's experience meeting with adult students in the Admissions Office and attending classes with other adult students, she has found that most adult students are not as forthcoming in groups as they are in one-on-one situations. In addition, as with other groups, there is always the danger of participants falling into groupthink.

Upon agreeing to participate in the study, time permitting, participants were e-mailed a packet of information, including an informed consent form approved by the Institutional Review Board at UWSP and the personal interview questions. Sending the participants the interview questions prior to the interviews gave them a chance to read them, review their own experiences (perhaps evoking memories), and consider their responses.

The personal interviews were conducted individually in late March and early April so adult students had nearly an entire academic year or at least several weeks behind them, but were

not yet facing final academic projects and exams. Interviews were scheduled at a time and place selected by participants. The researcher made her office, which is located in the Admissions Office complex at UWSP, available for interviews, but also conducted one telephone interview, and three interviews at varying locations. The Admissions Office was offered as a meeting place because it is easy to locate and navigate compared to some of the other academic buildings, and the researcher has master keys to the building. The office is comfortable with a soft visitor chair and pillow, pictures, plants, and several lamps rather than overhead fluorescent lighting. This environment made meeting with students more conducive to personal conversations and was less formal and cold than many of the conference rooms on campus.

Interviews were scheduled for one hour or longer, if feasible for the participant, with a break as needed. This time frame allowed for follow-up questions to be asked in addition to the pre-set questions. A child care provider was offered to be hired to watch participants' children, if needed, while the participants were involved in the interview process. The interviews were conducted by the researcher so other people did not need to be trained. All interviews were recorded via audiotape and transcribed by the researcher. The researcher secured funding from the Nontraditional Student Office and provided all participants with a \$15 in gift cards for the DUC bookstore in exchange for their participation in this study.

To ensure confidentiality, all research notes were kept in a locked desk drawer in the researcher's office with the researcher being the only person with access to the drawer. To further protect the confidentiality of participants, pseudonyms were used in all interview notes and study write-ups. A key was developed to link pseudonyms to real names. This key was accessible only to the researcher and was kept in a locked file cabinet. Audio tapes of the interviews were transcribed and saved onto the researcher's computer, and the researcher was the

only person with access to the computer and the password protected documents. In addition, participants received and signed an informed consent form as part of their initial packet of information sent by the researcher.

Instruments

Instruments included the demographic questionnaire and a set of personal interview questions.

Demographics. The demographic instrument outlined earlier was used prior to the personal interviews to gather important information about participants' sex, age, race/ethnicity, marital status, number of children, employment, and enrollment status.

Personal Interview Questions. Personal interview questions initially focused on nonthreatening questions, such as what made the students decide to attend UWSP, and then moved on to questions about how groups on campus have responded to their presence. Questions about positive and negative experiences were asked in order to gain a more complete understanding of what it is like for participants to be adult students at UWSP.

The number of questions was small enough to avoid participants becoming bored or tired, yet large enough to provide a wide view of the experiences had by adult students at UWSP. The interview questions were as follows:

Personal Interview Questions

1. What was your first contact with UWSP and how did that go?
 - What affected your decision to attend UWSP?
 - How did your family and friends feel about your decision?
 - As an adult student at UWSP, what types of communication do you receive and how do you feel about that communication?

2. What have been your experiences when looking for information from administrative departments on campus, such as financial aid, admissions, and registration?

3. What have been your personal experiences with regard to course availability and scheduling?
 - Are we offering the courses you need at times that you can take them?
 - What is it that is impacting the scheduling issue?
4. Tell me about your very first day of classes on this campus and how that felt.
5. Tell me about an experience you were involved in at UWSP that went really well. What was it that made it so?
6. Tell me about an experience that you had here that you were not satisfied with. What could have made it better? How did you overcome it?
7. What kinds of strategies did you employ to make this campus work for your situation?
 - Have you ever thought of dropping out of school, and if so, why?
8. If you had to describe your experiences as a UWSP adult student to another adult who was thinking about going back to school, what would you say?
 - How have members of other groups on campus, such traditional students, responded to you? What about faculty members? Administrators?
9. Thinking back to your own experience, what kind of information do you think would be helpful to you in thinking about coming to school here?
10. What are some things you think work very well for you on this campus?
 - What should we absolutely not change?
11. What changes would you suggest to make it easier for you to complete a degree here at UWSP?
12. Is there anything else you would like to tell me?
13. Would you be willing to be contacted again to verify that I have represented your experiences accurately?

Participants were initially contacted via email from a paper listing obtained from the Nontraditional Student Office and asked to complete a demographic questionnaire. The questionnaire responses were then used to narrow down the list of final participants. Final selection took place using purposive sampling until new freshmen, transfer students, re-entry students, and graduate students were represented. Individuals were also chosen based on desired characteristics, such as gender, employment status, and marital status. Participants were then

sent a packet of information, which included an informed consent form and personal interview questions. Personal interviews were then conducted, recorded, and transcribed.

Chapter Three – Results

The personal interviews that were conducted delved into the situations experienced by current adult students at UWSP: What has been working well for those students, how they are coping with and overcoming obstacles, and what causes some adult students to drop out. This chapter sets forth the results of the overall exploration of the experiences of eleven current UWSP students and one UWSP adult student who dropped out of school.

This chapter is divided into two main sections. The first section is a description of the participants. This description outlines the basic demographic differences among the students and provides essential background information that aims to aid in understanding the specific circumstances each student faces as they work(ed) toward degree completion at UWSP. The second section focuses on the results themselves, which are organized according to the main themes and subthemes that were prevalent throughout the adult student interviews.

The Participants

Adult students face a wide variety of life circumstances, situations, and challenges that are not typically faced by traditional students. While there are definite similarities among the experiences of adult students, these different life factors ultimately make each experience unique to the student.

The participants were initially sent a demographic questionnaire to complete. Participants were selected for interviews based on differing demographic characteristics in order to provide the most complete picture possible of an adult student at UWSP. Seven females and five males were chosen for interviews, and their ages ranged from 27 to 50. Two students who had entered UWSP as new freshmen were interviewed, along with four transfer students, three re-entry students, two graduate students, and one student who had dropped out of UWSP. Of

those interviewed, seven were attending UWSP full-time, while four were attending part-time and one was not currently attending. Three interviewees were employed full-time, four were employed part-time, and five were not employed at the time of the interviews.

Upon agreeing to be interviewed, each participant was assigned a pseudonym that corresponded to the alphabet in the order in which the interviews took place, e.g., Andrew for the first interview; Claire for the second, etc.. This was done to ensure the protection of the participants' real identities. The following table summarizes the characteristics of the interview participants:

Each adult student participant has a combination of unique demographics, personality characteristics, perceptions, and coping methods that came into play during the interview and throughout their experiences as students at UWSP. What follows is a brief introduction to each interviewee, including what it was that made them stand apart from the other adult students interviewed.

Andrew. – Andrew was a transfer student and the only male interviewed who had the challenge of both working full-time and attending school full-time. Throughout his interview, Andrew emphasized that he had a great deal of family support and understanding, as well as support from those at his place of employment. He displayed a sense of humor about his individual experiences, yet confronted what he perceived as difficulties for many adult students who do not have the same level of external support. He believes that for many adult students, the current methods of conducting business at UWSP, specifically with regard to course scheduling, could pose significant roadblocks to their academic success.

Claire. – The challenges of being a single parent with two teenagers to raise while going to school full-time and working part-time were evident during Claire's interview. Claire was a soft-spoken re-entry student, who expressed frustration over numerous subjects, including scheduling issues, transportation, and a negative faculty experience. What made her situation unique was that she did not have the outside support systems in place that most of the other interviewees had. Her coping methods involve accepting things as they are rather than confronting or attempting to change her situation.

Ellen. - A high-energy veteran with two small children and a husband who is currently in the military, Ellen spoke passionately about intergenerational communication issues, flexibility on the part of UWSP faculty members, and scheduling difficulties. With her husband

frequently gone, Ellen relies heavily on university child care so she can attend classes and study. She is a re-entry student, who has numerous challenges to face, and her willingness to advocate for herself seems to pull her through almost every situation she comes up against.

George. – During his interview, George was reflective, very open, and candid about his experiences as an adult transfer student at UWSP. George is a Desert Storm veteran, who chose to talk about some of his personal experiences and how they affected his role as a student, thereby shedding light on an increasingly common, yet little understood segment of our adult student population. George was the oldest person interviewed and also the most “laser-focused,” as he called it. His level of determination and self-direction were main themes in his interview responses.

Isabelle. - Isabelle could have easily passed as a traditional student and did not face the same degree of age-related issues that most of the other adult students experienced at one point or another. However, she still deals with feeling that she is not as “up-to-speed” as her younger counterparts. Isabelle entered UWSP as a new freshman and is single without children. She has talked several of her friends into attending UWSP as adult students, and she has become quite involved on campus and has made many friends. In that way, she has had starkly different experiences than the majority of other adult students interviewed.

Kevin. – Though he was not working at the time of the interview, Kevin has his share of scheduling issues with two very young children and a wife, who currently works full-time and had been working third shift. Kevin entered UWSP as a new freshman and expressed more thoughts of dropping out than the others who were interviewed. Much of that was due to lack of sleep attributed to a teething baby and other demands on his time. Even so, he went to great

lengths to schedule his classes around his wife's and mother's schedules so he could make everything work as smoothly as possible under his circumstances.

Madeline. – Madeline is a re-entry student, who has been working on her undergraduate degree for a number of years. She began her studies as a married woman with four children and an unsupportive husband at home. Her husband did not want her to return to school and would purposely blare the stereo while she was trying to study and laugh if she lost something on the computer. After her divorce, her obstacles shifted to finances and heightened scheduling concerns, though she currently has only her youngest child living at home. She is very family-oriented and has sought out people on campus to help connect her to various resources to make the campus work for her situation.

Odessa. – Odessa started as a special student at UWSP and then formally applied for admission a year later as a transfer student. She works full-time due to a chronic health condition that student insurance does not cover, and she attends school full-time, as well. Her partner would also like to take classes at UWSP, but between the two of them, class scheduling, work, and other demands do not permit that to happen at this time. In fact, due to course scheduling constraints, Odessa had to change her major. She is resigned to that, but is sad and disappointed that she could not choose her original major.

Quinn. – Currently, Quinn is taking graduate classes here, though she already has one graduate degree from UWSP. In hindsight, she feels she could have been better-advised and would not have selected the first graduate program that she did because it she feels strongly that it did not result in the opportunities she thought it would have. Once she determined what she really wanted to do in life, she felt was already too far into the program not to finish. Quinn has two teenagers living at home and attends school full-time while working part-time. She believes

that better communication in terms of advising and being welcoming to and flexible for adult students is a positive step that UWSP could take to make this campus work more efficiently for adult students.

Sam. – By first registering for and attending a Winterim session at UWSP, Sam slipped through the cracks in university protocol and was never provided with an orientation. Now a graduate student, this young, currently separated father of three young children is still learning things about UWSP he feels he should have learned early on in an orientation session. His self-directed style and confident nature have tempered the ill effects of the lack of a basic knowledge base about the university, but he has been disappointed and frustrated at numerous points in his academic career. Finances, child care, and the welcoming, supportive environment of the campus all were main themes that arose during Sam's interview.

Udele. – Completing a college degree is one of the goals Udele has set for herself, but she has found it challenging to reach that goal. A divorced, remarried woman with two children, Udele entered UWSP as a transfer student, dropped out once because she became burned out and dropped out again a few years ago when her mother was involved in a near-fatal car accident and required long-term hospitalization and after care. Udele's contagious enthusiasm for life and her dedication to reaching her goals has carried her through some difficult personal circumstances, but she has been unable to complete her degree at UWSP due to scheduling conflicts. With a toddler at home, a pre-teen to care for, and a husband who continually works different shifts, she cannot find the on-line or evening courses she needs within her major to see her through to graduation.

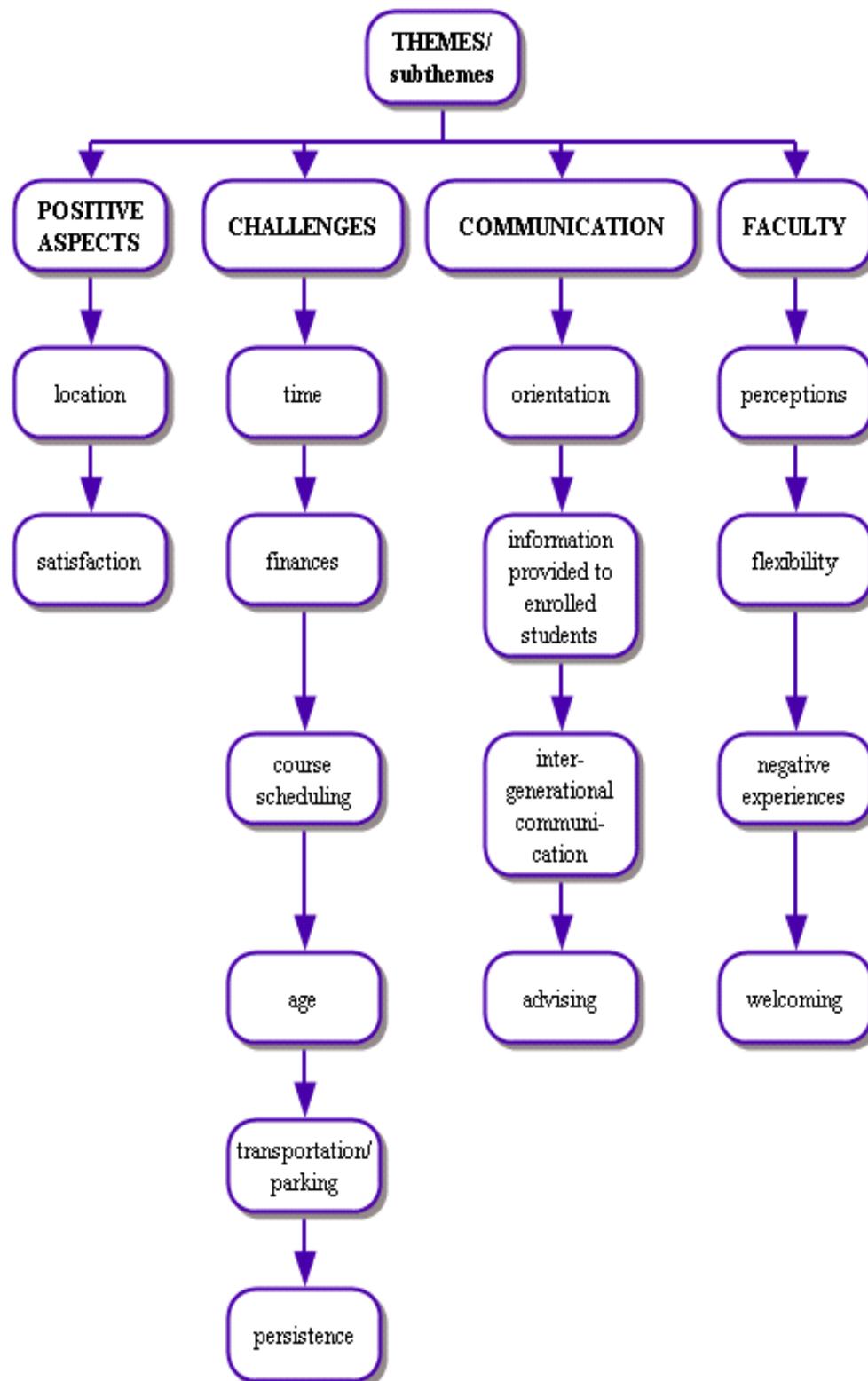
William. – William knew early on in high school that he wanted to enter the military. He performed adequately in high school, but he really did not put much focus on school, but rather

set his sights on joining the U.S. Army. Upon fulfilling his military commitment, he decided to pursue a college education. William is single, not employed, and currently attending UWSP full-time. Throughout his interview, issues of intergenerational communication frequently arose. William's military experiences have heightened his feelings of being somehow very different from traditional-age students. He also struggles with whether to stay in school or try to find solid employment that pays well.

Results

In open and subsequent axial coding, four distinct themes emerged from the group of twelve adult student interviews. The most dominant theme was clearly the challenges that adult students face. The other three themes were the positive aspects of attending UWSP; communication received, perceived, and desired by adult students; and interaction with UWSP faculty. This segment of the results chapter provides a discussion of the main themes and subthemes found in the interviews. These main themes and subthemes are illustrated in the following chart:

Figure 2. Interview Themes and Sub-themes



Positive Aspects

The first main theme involved the positive aspects of attending UWSP. Each student interviewed mentioned something positive in relation to attending UWSP, and there were some overlapping comments with regard to location of the university, overall satisfaction with attending college in general, and the university course requirements.

For example, 11 of the 12 interview participants mentioned location as the primary reason for choosing to attend the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point. Whether they wanted to be near their family, had a spouse stationed here in the military, did not want a long commute, or just wanted to stay close to home in general, location emerged as a primary factor in affecting most adult students when deciding to attend UWSP.

Participants' overall satisfaction with their decision to attend college was another topic that arose. Six out of the 12 students interviewed expressed solid satisfaction with their decision to attend UWSP, calling it 'enjoyable,' and 'a great experience' and saying "It's really cool to go back to school," "I was really proud to be back," "I was excited," "It was like I was feeding my brain," and "I felt really proud to be going back to school and being on campus."

In addition to all the positive comments about location and overall satisfaction with their college attendance, university course requirements were mentioned as positive by two of the students. Odessa expressed this when she described one of the requirements in her positive psychology course, which was to volunteer a minimum of 10 hours. She worked primarily at the Hope Center and felt it was a really rewarding, great experience that gave her increased energy. She said, "That was pretty much the purpose of it, and I'm very glad that I had that experience."

The previous positive comments made about location, decision to attend and the associated general satisfaction with UWSP, and course requirements were indicative of the

overall main theme of the positive aspects of UWSP. A pattern of challenges emerged from the interviews, as well, including time, finances, course scheduling, age, transportation and parking.

Challenges

Challenges noted by the adult students interviewed were often dictated by personal circumstances, but the sub-themes arose frequently during the interviews.

Time. Time and balancing multiple priorities are common challenges in any student's life, but for adult students, the time demands they face are often greater in scope than those a typical traditional student faces, and then have the potential to impact adult students in more significant ways.

Seven of the 12 students interviewed mentioned more than once during their interview that time was a commodity that was valuable to them. They were firm in stating they did not like to have their time wasted through what they perceive to be pointless processes or classes.

George highlighted this issue when he discussed his frustration with the mandatory orientation, which he did not enjoy very much at all:

Going to the advisors and class registration and so forth, I could have easily done that all online. After the day was over, I just thought I could've accomplished everything online. They didn't really tell me anything I didn't already know. Everything I already had or I looked up online. Overall, I thought it was a wasted trip.

Odessa felt the mandatory orientation was a waste of her time, as well:

I had to go back through the orientation, which I didn't like, since I had been here for a year, and I asked them if there really wasn't a way for me to get out of it, and I really didn't like that because obviously I was on campus for a year, and I wasted four hours of

my day, and I work full-time. That was definitely an accommodation that I felt should be made.

William echoed that statement when he said, “It was just a wasted day coming down here.”

Another example of wasted time was indicated in the interviews with the topic of advising. George mentioned this when he described meeting with his advisor:

Quite honestly, nicest guy as he is, my advisor was kind of a dud, and he wasn’t that helpful at all. Most times I had my courses selected already, and he didn’t suggest those courses, or gave me a worse selection. So there were a few times I left my advisor’s office thinking, well, that was a waste of time.

Quinn echoed George’s statements about wasted time when she described calling and calling around the university to finally get the appropriate person to speak with. “It’s a lot of wasted time. There’s not one area. There should be a place with a go-to person.”

And Andrew used similar wording when referring to courses:

There were a couple of classes that I’ve taken...100-level ones ‘cause I had to, and they were really a waste of my time because the format to teach the class was really kind of dumb or there was a lack of control or seriousness of the freshman students that were involved. And it’s almost to the point where it’s like wow, really, you know? And this behavior is tolerated...It would’ve been a waste of my time for some of these classes either because the material, there really wasn’t a lot to it, and then that combination of the distraction thing was more annoying.

Madeline mentioned time as it related to her huge disappointment in a psychology class in which she did not learn anything from the class and did not really even get anything out of it.

All of the students who talked about time as a challenge in their academic career were frustrated as a result of what they perceived to be wasting something they had little of in the first place.

Similarly, finances were brought up repeatedly during the interviews.

Finances. Adult students often have challenges when it comes to financing their college education. Sam, who has three young children, said the child care facility at UWSP is “awfully expensive” and “even more expensive than the YMCA.” He also talked about the expense of parking tickets for a commuter student and what he felt was “kind of bait and switch” with regard to text rental because he was told text rental was great and that a student would pay student fees and then get his or her books. “Inevitably, I’d spend two, three, four hundred dollars on books beyond text rental...and when you have a family and a strict budget to maintain, that’s a lot of money.”

Several students directly acknowledged how important it was that they got something out of their education because they were paying for it. Kevin explained this when he said:

In high school, I didn’t really care, but now that I’m here, I’m a lot different than I was in high school. Now that I’m actually paying for it, I think that’s why I decided, okay, it’s time to buckle down and pay attention.

Andrew concurred, saying, “As a non-trad., you can’t afford a semester to just go “oh well,” ‘cause odds are you’re working hard to pay for that.” Madeline, a divorced single parent, had more to say on the topic:

We (adult students) don’t spend our money to go to college because we’re just silly young people who like to go out all the time...I had to go down to one class a semester, for my own reasons. I couldn’t get financial aid, so I just paid for my own courses,

which is a struggle, but you know, it's what you do. You don't come this far and then not. So I just did that...If someone didn't investigate (a major), they might do what I was going to do—take another semester and pay another eight, nine hundred dollars.

As these adult students indicated, finances are often tight and pose barriers, either real or looming, to their academic careers. Investing their own time and money is significant to these students, and they want to receive something of value to them in return for their sacrifices.

Course Scheduling. Course scheduling was another unanimous topic throughout the 12 adult student interviews. Students overwhelmingly found this to be the most significant obstacle they faced and had a great deal to say about it. Madeline explained:

I think that that's probably the biggest challenge at UWSP. I know of other students that have, that's their greatest complaint, as well, is not enough classes offered, and it's really hard to get into the classes because they're always full and not all of them have wait lists. And then you have to wait a whole 'nother year for them. I know that's happened to a lot of students. I've been frustrated, too, with not being able to get into a class that I wanted and end up taking frivolous classes instead. And that's probably my biggest, biggest complaint.

Ellen felt it was difficult to get the courses she needs. Kevin got what he needed most of the time, but said there were certain classes only offered at a certain time, like in the fall.

Scheduling has been an issue for him more in the past than it is currently:

My wife works from 7 to 3, so I mean, she's working while I'm at school, and we just have a babysitter for the kids, so it works out really good right now. Last semester, it was a little different 'cause she was working third shift and then by the time she got off work

and got home, I was leaving to go to school, and the kids were just like nuts, and that was hard on her.

Adult students commented most about the need for alternative class scheduling in all its forms: evening courses, online courses, blended/hybrid courses, and weekend offerings.

Madeline explained that when she started at UWSP, she was married and working full-time:

I would not have been able to finish. If it was a daytime class, I couldn't do it. If I worked until 3, well, I couldn't get there until 3:30, and it'd be off just enough so that I couldn't take that particular course. To finish school, I would've had no support. None. I no longer work full-time during the days. I just work creative jobs part-time; different jobs that I can coordinate a schedule around.

Udele, who dropped out of UWSP as a first semester junior, attributed her reasons for being unable to complete her degree at this time to scheduling difficulties. She said:

Well, I have a 15-month-old son, and I'm not at a place to put him in daycare right now, so...I would be able to take night courses and possibly some online course if they offered them in the social work field. And I could chisel away at some classes right now until I'm ready to put him in daycare in a couple of years. But that's not possible because it is, I feel that UWSP is more so designed for the traditional student coming out of high school without kids.

When asked if UWSP is offering the courses she needs at times that she can take them, Odessa laughed:

No. Not for a non-trad. student...as far as offering classes primarily Mon., Wed., Fri. or Tues/Thurs.; I think that the university does a good job of that. But my schedule,

personally, they're usually in the middle of the day. I think it would be nicer to see more evening classes--instead of meeting three times a week, maybe one or two times a week.

She mentioned two problems with online classes:

One, they're extremely expensive, and the availability is a lot less because you have to go through Extension, and they're primarily offered for a specific major, so they're hard to get into. It's like an extra two or three hundred dollars.

When asked what she would say if she had to describe her experiences as a UWSP adult student to another adult who was thinking about going back to school, Odessa had this to say:

If they asked me specifically for alternative scheduling, I'd say that there isn't. I know that's important to other adult students, and my partner is actually thinking about going back to school. It's something that we've talked about, and it wouldn't really work for her to go back to school.

Madeline indicated that more online and nighttime classes in her core area of study would make it easier for her to complete a degree at UWSP. Ellen, too, said, "When you're talking about nontraditional students with children, more evening courses would be nice. There's not a lot of evening courses offered, which is kind of difficult for non-trad. students." When Claire was asked about her personal experiences with regard to course availability and scheduling, her frustration and sadness came through:

That's tough. I can't hold a job and come to school. Not if I want to complete in a certain amount of time. So I have to put basically the rest of my life on hold to attend here to get the classes I need at **their** (her emphasis) time slots. I only have one GDR to complete, so all of the other classes, they meet during the day, and it would help, not just myself, but the other nontrads., if there was those classes at least offered once a semester

in the evening. I've laid my time aside, but that's not always true for non-trads. I know that I have to devote the daytime hours to my schedule here, and that everything else comes in the evening, so I've gotten used to that. So you know, I've laid my life on hold so that I can attend and get this done. But some of those nontrad. students don't have that option, so you know, they're taking entire days off to get their schedule so they can attend certain classes, and then they can only attend part-time, which makes them, you know, long, it draws it out.

Odessa had this to say when asked what changes she would suggest to make it easier for her to complete a degree at UWSP: "The alternative scheduling." She went on to talk about course scheduling for biology and chemistry requirements as the reason she had to change majors. "As a non-trad., there's **no way** (her emphasis) I can take those classes with labs that last all day and then after working ten hours and then going back to work after sleeping like two hours." Isabelle provided a slightly different point of view because from her own perspective, scheduling has worked relatively well, since she only works part-time. But, she says, "I haven't had to work like most other people, even people younger than me who work full-time. I don't know how people do that." Andrew said he, too, had a pretty good experience with course availability and scheduling within his major. At the same time, he indicated:

If I was on hourly wage or something, I don't know how you'd do that. You really have to make a lot of choices with what you have to take. I don't think there's a lot of use of Friday classes as all. There's a lot of people that work part-time that could go to school, they could go the whole day Friday. GDR's—I think that's where you really start to run into some problems is getting the availability of those classes. So again, mine was a little unique because I transferred in and didn't have to do the GDRs, but I can see where

that'd really cause some issues; trying to balance all that out. And then the evening classes are totally under...I mean they really don't have them in Art and Design at all. There's not a lot of evening classes offered across campus. You could have a couple of GDRs at night a week that would really help out, I think, somebody coming in from scratch. Most GDR classes are two 50-minute blocks, so why that couldn't be taught on a Friday or Saturday, but I realize there's budgeting and I know there's a lot of other issues that drive that, but if it was just strictly a scheduling thing, that'd be very, very convenient. (The researcher asked him if he thought he'd take advantage of that if there were evening classes offered). Oh, absolutely if they fit in with what I needed to take. Oh, absolutely. I mean what happens is, I end up, I miss a lot of contact with my co-workers. I do miss that interface time with them, and for jobs that we have to coordinate a lot, it's a challenge to make sure that we're coordinating stuff, but we handle that through meetings, and they've all been very, very supportive. Yeah, absolutely, if I could've taken some of these at night or on the weekends, it would've been a great fit 'cause it would lessen the stress during the week.

Finally, William pointed out a course scheduling difficulty unique to veterans:

Uh, that's been a challenge, especially as a new freshman. I'm taking summer courses, too. I was trying to take a full load, which is six credits. That was pretty hard to do 'cause all the classes are pretty much during the same time, and six are required to get your GI bill...the first semester I got a full load and everything, but I took one art class I really didn't need to take. It counted as a GDR, but I would've rather taken a different class.

While students often exhibited frustration, sadness, and a strong desire for change with regard to course scheduling, they made observations and comments about their age that were frequently self-deprecating and humorous. In the course of their interviews, two-thirds of the students interviewed made some reference to their age being a challenge, even though it was never brought up in any of the questions that were asked.

Age. George said that according to the traditional students, he was “the weird, old guy, which is good sometimes, especially when I’m trying to study.” Madeline relayed a situation she found amusing:

This one girl, she brought me aside, and she’s like, “Don’t feel bad going to school at your age because you’re with all of us.” And I was like, “Oh, honey, I’ve been here so many years, and I don’t feel bad, but you’re so cute for caring, thank you.” They (the traditional-aged boys) all think I’m terribly old, you know, like, “Oh my gosh, by the time she’s done, she can retire, what’s the point?”

Andrew shared a light-hearted story, like Madeline. This happened on his first day of a class in his major:

I was sitting there waiting for the class to start, and the students are coming in there, and they start to fill in, and they came up to me, “Well, what time we startin’? I was like, “I’m not the Professor.” And it was more funny than anything. I’m like, “I’m a student, too.” And they were like, “Oh, okay.”

Isabelle was uncomfortable admitting she was older than the traditional students: “I lied and told people I was 20-years-old, which is still older than they were, but I did, I lied.” Isabelle, while one of the youngest students interviewed, was also one of three students who felt at a disadvantage because of her age:

I guess the hardest thing for me has always been that I feel like I'm not as up to speed as the other students. And I imagine that would only be harder for people who take a longer time off...to come back and then to jump into it. The problem is that I don't get these basic concepts. I don't know if there's a solution for that. I think it's just harder to get those basic concepts after that much time.

Kevin, another one of the youngest students interviewed, made some similar comments when talking about his first day of classes and trying to keep up:

I was really nervous. I remember that. I was thinking, I'm eight years older than everybody else coming in, and how much of this do I remember, did I forget, and that's what I was just worried about was what I'd forgotten; trying to keep up with everybody else who just came out of high school and everything's so fresh for them, and I had to relearn everything.

Udele talked about the difficulty of adjusting to college life as an older student:

...I was there in my mid- to late-20s, so as far as my appearance, I didn't feel like I was too much different than the other students, but you know, I also felt lost a lot...at a lot of times because, you know, being out of school, your brain, it feels like your brain is kind of rusty, you know, you've got to start those wheels again (laughed). It took me a while to get in the swing of things.

George, the oldest student interviewed, also felt at a disadvantage at times, which he poignantly described:

Even simple things like your attention, you know, retaining what one has just read, having to go over or re-read a chapter again because you can't quite hang onto it like you used to. Just the simple, basic things like that, or when I first started, the first day, the

teacher said that she wanted all homework submitted on Word. Well, I'd never opened a Word document before. I didn't even know how to type, so quickly you have to learn these things. Excel, all these things were done by administrative secretaries, so even just the basics are quite a chore. You know, and all the while, if you're the only non-trad. in your class, you dress differently, you look different, you speak different, so you're really by yourself.

On the flip side, though his age poses a challenge for him in his field, Andrew pointed out a positive experience he had with regard to his age when a faculty member was direct and honest with him about his future. A professor in his major approached him and said his work was good to go, and he did not even need to talk with Andrew about it. But what he wanted to do was talk with Andrew about his future employment:

And he was real frank with me, and it was like, "You know, you're older, you're going to have some different challenges coming into the job market, and how you approach that, you know, you really need to think about that." And I didn't think that was like rude or, "Old man, good luck," it wasn't like that, you know. I thought that was a mature way to approach that and some things that needed to be said.

Overall, the adult students had mostly positive and/or funny comments about the ways in which their age is a challenging factor in the UWSP setting.

Transportation/Parking. None of them, however, found transportation and parking issues quite so funny. Three of the students found the transportation and parking situation at UWSP to be a source of frustration and a significant obstacle for them.

While Claire takes advantage of the city bus to get to and from campus so she does not have to bring her car to campus, she felt that parking was one of the biggest issues adult students had to deal with:

They have to park in the back of the parking lot, and **we're just trying to get here** (her emphasis). Why can't they put us in the front of the parking lot? You know, save us some spots at the start so we have an easier chance to get to class on time. That would help a little. But the bus works great because it drops you off closer to where you have to be.

Sam was continually frustrated by parking issues, and he spent a large sum of money paying parking tickets as a result of having to commute and being in a rush to get to and from classes:

Well, I think from the perspective of commuting students, parking was a constant issue, and what was frustrating about parking wasn't that there wasn't enough parking or whatever, it was just that like, you know, if you had a night class, and you were coming from _____, which I was, and you couldn't park in the **empty** (his emphasis) lot because it was reserved for folks. They've since changed that policy, I think, so after five they're open or whatever to accommodate. That was a major frustration, constantly having to get parking tickets. I literally one semester paid almost \$500 in parking tickets....

Part of the issue with transportation and parking for adult students involved their busy schedules and the associated rushing from place to place to try to fit everything into their day. Another challenging topic faced by busy adult students was how to balance all their priorities and stay in school.

Persistence. For all of the challenges they feel they experience, the vast majority of adult students interviewed are committed to finishing their degree of choice at UWSP and are

persistent in their pursuit of their goals. Four students commented on this area when they were asked if they ever thought of dropping out of school, and if so, why. One student talked about persistence at the end of his interview. All student responses were short in comparison to other challenging topics. They were also direct, heartfelt, and honest.

In response to whether she had ever thought of dropping out, Ellen said, “All the time. I’m tired. I’m missing my kids. I’m frustrated with certain professors. That’s life, though. I’m going to do it.” Odessa laughed, “Yes. It’s challenging because I have little time to sleep sometimes, and it’s a challenge to attend classes, and sometimes I get behind because I miss classes. It’s overwhelming, so sometimes it’s hard to put the end in mind.” Isabelle displayed the resilience common to this group of adult students:

Yeah, this week! But I know I can’t do that ‘cause I only have one year left. Yeah, I guess I’ve gotten discouraged at times and thought that there’s no way I can compete with these people. I guess the biggest problem for me is when I have problems outside of school that’s distracted me, and then I feel overwhelmed. But I’ve never actually, like, really thought about it (dropping out). You know, it comes up and you’re like, “I can’t do this anymore,” but within a day I’m not like that.

Kevin indicated the same acknowledgement of the challenge of school as an adult student, yet he added a dose of humor:

A couple times. Yeah, it’s hard with, well, especially last semester. Well, when my son started teething, he was up like every hour and a half or two hours in the night, so I wasn’t getting much sleep, and then coming in trying to do all this, it’s like, “Oh, I should just quit. Take a break, let him get older, and then come back.” But I figured if I dropped out, who knows how long it’d be before I’d come back, so I might as well just

stick it out. I can make up the sleep sometime, so...that and my wife won't let me drop out. She already told me no.

When asked if there was anything else he'd like to tell me, George had this to say about the necessary persistence adult students must possess given their life circumstances, again, with a bit of humor tacked on:

With a certain amount of non-trads., you know, they've got a full plate, obviously. You know, it's great for a young person to come here, live in the dorm, take 18 credits, 16, whatever, that's all they have to do. And that's wonderful. I believe a non-trad. has a much larger row to hoe. Even the basics, like a home to take care of, families, and things like that. So, I, you know, I guess, I'll make the claim that a non-trad. really does have to work harder to get their degree...the only one to pat yourself on the back is yourself.

Those around you are oblivious. So, "Whaaaaaa, I'm sorry."

From time and money issues to parking and age-related challenges, adult students have their unique share of challenges to face and attempt to overcome at UWSP. However, they are committed to doing so and have shown determination and strength in persisting here.

Communication

Another theme that came up repeatedly in student interviews was communication as it is received, perceived, and desired by adult students. The sub-themes that emerged were communication via UWSP orientation, the current information that adult students receive and what that communications to them, and communication through advising.

The Admissions Office does not have a current recruitment program specifically for adult students because there are not enough classes scheduled at alternative times, i.e., there is not a system in place that would support recruitment of adult students. The adult students interviewed

were, therefore, not specifically recruited to attend UWSP. As noted earlier, they attended because the location was convenient, and UWSP had the programs they wanted. What they expected, though, was a certain level of communication about starting out as a student at UWSP while not having their already jam-packed schedules negatively impacted by a mandatory orientation session.

Orientation. The orientation program is conceptualized and implemented in such a way that it seems to convey the message that if you are not a recent high school graduate, then you are not a “real” college student. New freshmen at UWSP are required to attend a one-and-a-half-day mandatory orientation/registration session, during which they attend programs designed to introduce them to the campus and enhance their experiences while they are students here. They also meet with an academic advisor and register for their classes. These orientation programs are designed for traditional-aged students and are not always appropriate for adult students. Transfer students experience a mini-version of the freshman orientation and only spend one day on campus. Before delving into the topic of orientation as experienced by the adult students interviewed, it must be noted that since the time when the majority of students of the interviewed students first attended their mandatory, in-person orientation, an on-line non-traditional student orientation has been developed. It is not currently, however, offered as an option to students up front. Students must call to express difficulty with their scheduled mandatory orientation before alternatives are provided to them. Seventy-five percent of the students spoke about orientation at some point during their interview.

Ellen felt that the orientation portion of the session was good, but once she spoke with an advisor about registering for classes, she was lost. She explained, “It was kind of confusing; they’re kind of throwing classes at you right away.” Andrew, too, found orientation to be a

mostly positive experience: “The transfer orientation didn’t assume that you didn’t know anything about college, so I liked that. I thought that was pretty good. I thought it was pretty well set-up.”

As mentioned in the ‘challenges’ section under the subtheme of time, Odessa was one of several students who was not happy with having to go through an orientation session after having attended UWSP for a year. George echoed those feelings in the same subsection and said: “My first official contact was the mandatory orientation that I had to attend, which I didn’t really enjoy very much at all.” Isabelle was frustrated enough that she wrote a complaint during her orientation stating that there should be a separate session for adult students because she “spent a lot of time hearing about housing and food plans, and I was already planning on living off campus.” She said she was really unhappy that she had wasted two days to attend the session only to find out that most of the material did not apply to her. She elaborated:

I definitely tried to put forth reading through the whole guidebook and going through the whole Web site and trying to find out what was up here, but I still didn’t really take advantage of stuff ‘til, I don’t know, I guess you’re just overwhelmed at first. So I don’t know if there’s an easier way to do that...show people what there is available when it comes to that.

Udele left orientation upset and frustrated:

...I felt lost and alone...It was like another culture. And I left my orientation crying because I could not understand how to read the timetable and stuff like that. It was all really confusing to me...I was so overwhelmed.

Sam, on the other hand, was frustrated mainly with the fact that he did not receive an orientation at all:

I never got an orientation. I never got contacted because I came for Winterim and then I started in the spring semester. I came in as a special student, and I never was offered an orientation, ever. I didn't even know. I had no idea where I was going or what I was doing. I had no idea where the Collins Classroom Center was, I mean, I still to this day have not gotten a tour of the campus. It's interesting that I never had that experience, and I just kind of maybe slipped through the cracks a little bit...it was very difficult to navigate things, though, and I think maybe it could've been very simply solved with an orientation kind of experience that introduces you to the resources on campus, but I never had any of that. And then even just trying to get email to work. I was able to figure it out, and I had a few people I knew who kind of helped me. But it was awful, my first couple months here just because I had no idea where I was going or what I was doing. I had no idea how to register...I got a \$20 ticket on my first day of class. And I just remember all of those things, and it was just like, Oh, my God." I remember that being an awful sour experience, trying to figure out everything.

Quinn had a similar experience to Sam in that as a graduate student, she had no orientation session:

There was no orientation. I did not even know how to use the library. I had been out for 22 years. I was like, "Where's the little cards?" It's all computerized. And I'm like, "Oh, okay, how do you do this?" Um, I did not know how to register. Um, I had a lot of help.

Overall, the data revealed that students want information, but they do not want to spend time receiving information that does not pertain to them. They want direct communication about basic student services and academics.

Information Provided to Enrolled Students. All students interviewed commented about the information they receive, along with how they feel about what that communicates to them. Quinn stated that there is not a lot of communication for graduate students and that she is definitely dissatisfied with the amount and type of communication she has received. But most of the students commented that they receive quite a bit of information from the Non-traditional Student Office, which they appreciate, even though they cannot often participate in scheduled events due to their busy schedules. As one student commented, “I always try to read the emails just to see what’s going on; if anything’s changed, or if there’s something I can help out with.” And another said, “I get a lot of feedback from the Non-trad office, which I really support them. I like that office.”

Claire said she receives some communication about registering for classes, but she has had a difficult time finding people who will tell her what she needs next:

Even though they say they’re great at it, they’re not. And I’ve been pawned off saying, “Well, here, go to this person, and they can help you.” And they can’t. And I’m like, “Okay, how am I supposed to know what to take here?” I need to be done.

One issue that arose during the interviews was that communication is generally written for one audience: the traditional-aged student. Yet the recipients of that material also consist of re-entry students, transfer students, and even graduate students. The end result can be laughable, as in Andrew’s case:

I thought it was a bit humorous. I had to go to (Residential Living) to turn in a waiver to not have to live in the dorms. I went over there, and I was like, “Well, my wife may not like it if I live in the dorms, although it could be fun. I just think she’s not gonna like that.” So some of the things, I thought, were just an unintentional byproduct of not really

understanding some of the people they're bringing in. I got a lot of stuff like I was a true freshman, although I never really have been. That was a little odd. It was more humorous than annoying.

Another topic of conversation was communication via the UWSP Veteran's Coordinator. Ellen said the coordinator keeps in good contact with veterans on everything, including job opportunities. She recently applied for a position in Madison because the salary was good. She had heard about the position from the coordinator and just found out she was in the top five out of over one hundred candidates. She said she would not have known about the position if the coordinator had not contacted her. Sean, too, said the Veteran's Coordinator was "real helpful." George uses only one source for communication, and that is also the Veteran's Coordinator: "She's been excellent. I don't know what I'd do without her. She's been my go-to person for everything I've done."

Current communication was perceived differently by many of the students, but one area where students had similar experiences was within the realm of intergenerational communication.

Intergenerational Communication. 75 percent of the students interviewed had something important to say about the communication issues they faced with faculty members and students who were considered traditional. Most of the students interviewed felt disapproval of what they perceived as disrespectful behaviors of younger students.

Sam relayed a situation with a faculty member that he was really angry about because he felt it held him up as an example of an adult student and made it difficult for him to say what he really thought around traditional students:

I was in a business or marketing class...and the professor wrote all the grades on the board and the curve and the scores, and he said, "This is the worst class ever," and he

said, “The only person who did decently got an 87 percent, which is awful,” and he said “The test isn’t that difficult,” and he’s like, “That’s this guy right here in the front row, _____,” and he pointed at me, and everybody then hated me because the curve had been adjusted for that one score, and I was just like mortified, like, and I think that was the class, maybe my first business class, so I was instantly pegged as the overachiever or whatever.

George focused his comments that fed into this theme on traditional-aged students at UWSP and how he feels they are not welcoming to newcomers:

Here, they’re cold and impersonal. It’s kind of lonely, actually. I don’t know. It’s not as warm an environment, friendly environment as it was at a smaller school. That’s just my take. It’s a night and day difference between here and there (the two-year UW campus from which he transferred). It (his former institution) was the perfect environment for me to re-enter school after being gone for 30 years: small, warm and friendly, a lot of student-teacher interaction; it was perfect; the perfect way to ease back in. I don’t believe that here it would have been as easy. As I alluded to earlier, the younger students are cold and impersonal, I’ve found.

Claire, too, felt that in the beginning, traditional-aged students were not at all inclusive, but that changed for her over time:

Traditional-aged students are very unaccepting. There are very few and far between who will actually even talk to me. Um, it’s a very non-accepting environment until they get to know you. When they start to know you, know who you are in class, know that you’re serious about being here, they end up using you as a resource, and things change then. Their ideas change. I end up being a tutor all the time, which ends up being good. But it

ends up taking weeks, months, for them to realize that you're not just here because you're kind of skirting life.

The difficulty of intergenerational communication between traditional and adult students was also indicated by three students who described their negative experiences with group projects. During Isabelle's interview, she struggled to make sense of why her classroom experiences with traditional aged students have not necessarily been positives ones:

I don't know if younger people find it, I don't know, intimidating. I've just had some friends that are younger than me that are I would quote say "smarter" than me, and we haven't been able to, they don't necessarily understand where I'm coming from, why I can't pick up on the same things they are, or we've had conflicts in studying together. It just hasn't necessarily worked. Where, when I was studying with people that are closer to my age, we seemed to get along better. So, I don't know why that is. If it's a communicating thing, or maybe I'm intimidated by them, which I think I definitely am.

Madeline felt that as an adult student, she cared more than the traditional-aged students, and they made assumptions about who should lead group projects:

...I'm not an ageist, but I worked with younger people, who I get along with fabulously, but sometimes they really didn't care enough like I did. So, it was like, "We're gonna get an 'A' on this," and they're like, "Good, you're in charge then." It was just, you know, I just thought, I'm not in third grade, we're not all going to sit around and color a poster together, please, do we have to give a group presentation again? And it just happened over and over and over. When there has to be group work, I'm always invited to be in a group. People just assume that I'm like smart or something. I don't know why, but they just do. And I'm like, you guys, hey, whatever, but it's your funeral.

Sam had similar things to say about group projects:

...it was difficult with traditional-aged students when you had a lot of group work uh, to get them to be focused or meet at reasonable hours or just be accessible. But all in all, I think being a non-trad., a lot of students would look up to you and kind of see you as a leader because you're more organized. You have to be to accomplish things.

Another area where intergenerational communication surfaced was with adult students' perception of disrespectful behavior by traditional students. Andrew expressed his amazement at the younger students when he said:

You have people walk in during a lecture, get up and walk out during a lecture, and I just, you know, from my background especially, I really, I had a hard time not even saying something. I had to just keep quiet. In my background, and I'm a different generation removed from the folks that are in class, and you know, they're tweeting, and they're doing text messages, and it's tolerated...I think for a non-trad., it can be really, really annoying. I think your military non-trads. are going to feel that way. It really bothered me.

Sean, another veteran, made very similar comments about what he felt was impolite behavior by traditional-age students:

Going back with younger students is kind of a challenge. It's a lot different. Especially coming in and going in the middle of class. Teachers here are pretty tolerant of that...maybe some of the students think that they aren't getting anything out of the lecture, so they just leave, but it's still really rude.

But George summed up first the intergenerational communication challenges between

adult students and faculty and then between adult students and traditional-aged students by acknowledging the fact that circumstances made these differences a simple fact of life:

This isn't our world. This is their world. If I'd been smart, I would've been here 30 years ago, but I made some self-destructive choices. I should've been here when I was their age, and I would've been fine. So I'm in their environment. That's why a lot of people I know, a lot of my friends don't understand how I can do this. How do you get along with all those young punks? You have absolutely nothing in common with them. They're in a whole different world?...and, well, that's just how it is. I've entered their world. They're not in my world. It's the same thing with the instructors. We have nothing in common...as far as I'm concerned they've lived in the bubble and have experienced a different life.

While some of the adult students interviewed felt that age was an obstacle or challenge for them, most kept it in perspective, understood, or attempted to understand why that was, and even found some of their circumstances amusing and humorous.

Advising. For two-thirds of the students interviewed, advising was found to be a disappointment because they either did not get the information or connection they were looking for, or they felt it was a waste of their time. Sam simply stated, "Advising was a challenge, especially business, I remember." When asked about an experience she has had at UWSP that she was not satisfied with,

Isabelle added:

Well, I guess, my advising has probably been the biggest thing, and the fact that I feel like the advisor-student connection is, they just want to get you in and out of their office kind of quickly. And one advisor I loved, and when I came to her, she'd make extra time

for me and encourage me to come back, and I haven't gotten that feeling from my last two advisors, and one doesn't even recognize me when I see her, and that's when I asked for a new advisor. And so, I mean, I do understand that it takes your initiative to ask the right questions, but I want to feel like they're giving me options, and I haven't felt that.

Quinn felt that if she had had better advising, she would not have gone into the Master's program she did. She said, "I think from what I know about adult learners, they're all in the same boat. They just really are not clear or sure about where they really want to go, and they need people asking more in-depth questions." She went on to describe an experience at UWSP that she was not satisfied with: "Probably the advising with the school itself (the program). They told me I wasn't marketable. You know, really planting some seeds that were negative, and once they're planted, they're in there."

When George talked about his advisor, he expressed understanding of the situation and provided a different point of view about the process:

Well, poor guy, he has to do it, but he really doesn't know what he's doing, and he's got 'x' amount of minutes to do it in, and it's kind of a laugh, actually, with the line outside the door. He's just trying to get through the day. It's kind of sad in a way because these are important decisions. One mistake can cost a kid a semester. So it's kind of precarious. I've had to make a few corrections.

Adult students feel that communication is generally adequate. However, the exceptions of communication for graduate students, communication targeted at adult students that might give them information pertaining to their specific circumstances as members of that population, intergenerational communication (particularly between adult students and traditional-aged

students), and the ways in which advisors communicate with students were all areas where students felt communication could be improved.

Overall, adult students want to matter to UWSP, and they want that communicated to them in some manner. Oftentimes, they find that need met through faculty interaction.

Faculty

The final theme that was threaded throughout the interviews was the variety of interaction adult students have with faculty. Of primary note were perceptions of each other, instructor flexibility, negative experiences, and the welcoming, caring faculty and culture of UWSP.

Perceptions. Five out of 12 of the adult students interviewed talked about the different perceptions they held of faculty members or that they felt faculty members held about them. Quinn said she felt faculty members like non-traditional students because they work harder. Ellen, however, said she thought a professor of hers thinks she begs for grades and does not ever work for them. Yet, she said:

I've had good experience face-to-face with professors. I've never had them say, "Oh, you're just a nontraditional student questioning things." The most times, it's like, "Oh, my God, I didn't even realize I put that on the exam, oh yeah, I'm going to have to throw that out."

Sam enjoyed what he saw as faculty who really care in a nurturing climate in which:

...you can have a great conversation, you can have a great experience in the classroom with your professor. You can go to their office. You can go out and grab a beer with them at night after class, and what I remember most about college isn't necessarily the interactions in the classroom, but rather it's the conversations with _____ in his office

for hours on end or the, you know, going downtown to Guu's with some of my classmates and _____ or others and having a beer and having a little get together. The outreach beyond the classroom for faculty should not change.

George had empathy for his professors:

Most of my large groups, it just seems like the poor guy's in a race; racing the clock; rushing; he's just trying to get through the lecture. If you ask questions, he'd kind of stop, and you'd interrupted him, and then he'd know who you are.

He added:

I'm as old or older than some of them, most of them. Uh, sittin' there with grey hair, of course they remember you in the group. Many times as the course begins, I'll see them lock-on to me and make note. Uh, I'm a little more outspoken, and if they say something I disagree with, or I believe they're being disingenuous, I'll call them on that, and they don't like that, of course. They're used to the young sheep just laying there and taking it, and I'm not that way. Some of them I really enjoy. Probably in the two years I've been back in school, there's only two that have really impressed me as professional; someone that I would like to emulate. But again, I'm coming out of a harsh commission business model. I'm critical, and I admit it, and I find myself saying that, uh, looking at this young professor, and thinking that, well, this is all you've ever done. All you've ever known is an academic environment, so I understand why you think or say that. But that's not how it is in the world that I just came out of. So I find myself saying or muttering that to myself. Most of the time I bite my lip. It's just not worth it. Or I find myself saying you're right where you should be—just stay there. You're safe here. You'd be fired instantly for that.

When asked if he ever found himself in a position where he was used as a resource, he said:

...I've gone through a few courses where it just seems like every lecture when the instructor did want to know and ask a question, it'd be like, "George, what do you think of that?" "And then along with that, these kids don't care what I think. I'm 50 years old. I mean, ask them what they think. Why are you always coming back to me?" So, I guess I've been singled out that way. Or the other extreme, the other thing that happens is that they stay away from me. If I've called them on a few things, they don't ever call on me again.

George also pointed out the issue of adult students on campus and that they may not be understood by professors:

I don't think a lot of instructors, a lot of professors, and certainly the younger students take into account that the non-trads. that are here, some of them, are walking around with some real damage. And for them just to be here and to go through the lectures and things is taking all the resources mentally and physically that they have. Because they are in some way, most times, not physically handicapped. (With regard to veterans) they have gone through things, seen things that a person should never see or do. Um, they are, health is damaged, again, it's not outwardly visible, but just the simple fact of getting here and getting to the classes is difficult. And there doesn't seem to be any thought or compassion in regards to those lines. So that's, I'll throw that out there. It might not be so obvious, but some of us are here, and it's quite a struggle.

Flexibility. The willingness of faculty to be flexible with regard to adult students' needs was another topic of conversation. Five of the students discussed this during the interviews.

Kevin felt his experiences thus far were very positive in that regard:

...it just seems like, all the teachers I had, they actually like go out of their way to try and help you. They don't just act like you're another student, you know, you do your work or you don't, you know, they don't really care, but a lot of the teachers, well, actually all the teachers that I've had here, if I've had any questions, I can go talk to them for a half an hour, try and figure something out, and that's been a big help to me.

Ellen agreed: "My son was hospitalized for three days for rhinovirus, and that was scary. And I missed two exams and an in-class group assignment, and all of them let me make it up." Andrew, too, benefited from understanding professors:

With my job on occasion, I have to miss some days, and I can predict when those are going to happen, which is nice, but I've gone in and I've never had a problem with the instructor for like being excused or trying to get work in at a different time. My experience has been that instructors are very supportive of non-trads. I've never felt like I was a bother, but not over-accommodated either. It was a nice balance.

And Sam elaborated on that theme:

...the classes were full, but I just went to the professor, and I said, "Can I get in?"...I remember I needed to do that for most classes that I needed to fit in a timeframe, but the faculty were really flexible, and especially more so for me, given my circumstances, so I really appreciated that. The faculty here truly care, they really do. They bent over backwards to accommodate my unique circumstances, and I really appreciate that. I learned that you just need to ask. That was about the biggest lesson I took away from this place. There were a lot of times I was working nights and weekends pretty much most of my time in college (as an undergraduate), and there were some times when I'd work the entire weekend and then I'd be on call and then I'd have a major assignment that was due,

and there was just no way I was going to get to it, and I just asked for flexibility, and the faculty members were great.

And Udele brought up gender as related to faculty flexibility and said she felt some female professors with children were more understanding about her circumstances because they had children of their own and could directly relate to her situation. She had some professors that extended deadlines for her if she took the time to go talk with them.

The adult students interviewed strongly emphasized how important it was to them that faculty had been understanding of their circumstances and flexible in their requirements as a result.

Negative experiences. At the same time, three-quarters of the adult students interviewed had run into disappointing and negative experiences with faculty, including Sam, who, as mentioned earlier, was singled out in class as the overachiever in the group. George relayed his experience with a faculty member in the religious studies area: “I took a religious course that I ended up dropping pretty quick. Pretty outrageous. I was offended. That was a professor using her classroom as a platform to advance her own personal biases. Really derogatory.” When clarifying that the way he overcame the class was to drop it, he replied, “Yeah. You say “drop the class.” In the business world, I’d say I fired her.” Isabelle talked about the impact a negative experience with a faculty member had on her. “I had one teacher laugh at me when I made a mistake, and I never went back to her office again. I feel that one bad experience can throw you off course.” Claire, too, talked about how difficult a faculty member made her life when she first started at UWSP:

There was an instructor here in the College of Natural Resources who made it his point to attempt to make it miserable for me, and I actually took that into account when I changed

my major. I didn't want to have to feel that way for 2 ½ more years, so it was like, okay, I have to get away from that instructor...even where there were classes with 200 people in there, he would point me out and humiliate me, and I just...it was sad.

Yet, she pointed out, "The majority of the instructors are **not** (her emphasis) that way. Most of them are **wonderful** (her emphasis). Madeline also felt a professor made a point of making her life as an adult student more of a challenge and was insensitive to the needs of others. She explained:

I don't want to dig on a certain professor, but it was a really, I mean, I work hard, and I get 'A's,' and I'm not saying, oh, I just deserve to wheel in and get an 'A,' but I worked so hard....and she prided herself on making it as difficult as possible. And also, she talked about alcohol a lot to be cool with the kids, by my friend sitting next to me was in AA and was one of her advisees, and she (the professor) knew it. And so my friend was just like, it unmotivated my friend, I mean, she passed it because she's a whiz, but it made her feel pretty bad, like you don't even have, I was just in your office, and you don't have the sensitivity not to talk about how fun it was when we all went out Friday and you all went out and drank a beer, and it's like, no, we don't all do that and not everybody in this class is like an 18-year-old party animal. In fact, most of us weren't.

Welcoming. Even though many adult students talked about specific negative experience they had with faculty members, half of the adult students interviewed mentioned frequently that overall, they felt welcome and supported by faculty. Madeline mentioned several faculty and staff members and talked about their positive welcome to the campus and how they told her, "You can do this, and this is how you do it." Andrew directly stated, "Well, actually, I think the teachers' attitudes toward the non-trad. students is, is real positive. Kevin expressed his

gratefulness about the caring professors at UWSP. Sam talked about UWSP being a very supportive and nurturing environment, but one where the system in place does not support that culture. He often mentioned during his interview that at UWSP, there are amazing people who genuinely care, and if you ask them, and they do not have the answer, they will try to help or direct you to someone who can. He then did an excellent job of summing up what the researcher had heard during interviews many times in different forms:

I really think the one thing that sticks with me as I reflect on my experience here is that faculty really care. And that's something that you can't impose, you can't force upon folks, it's just part of the culture here...

Overall, the 12 UWSP current and past adult students who were interviewed spoke volumes about their individual experiences on campus. The positives and challenges they shared and face; the ways in which they receive and perceive communication; and their experiences with faculty, both negative and supportive, all intertwine and have resulted in their unique perceptions of life as an adult student on the campus of the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point.

Chapter Four – Analysis

This study was conducted in order to explore the experiences adult students have on the campus of the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point. The main research questions that were posed asked about the obstacles faced by these students, how the obstacles were overcome, and what might cause them to drop out of UWSP.

As described in the previous results section, a number of themes emerged during the interview coding process. The main themes have been incorporated into this chapter in order to provide a more thorough understanding of what is happening with these students; how they initially arrive at their decision to attend UWSP, how they function once they get here, and what is likely to happen to them during their time at our institution. Symbolic interaction theory has been used as a framework to help explain what is occurring during different key points in these students' journeys.

Adult students often start out at UWSP after a significant transitional period or crisis in their lives. This requires a shift on their parts--an openness to taking on a new role and a willingness to change. As Stryker explains, "Crises will always threaten identifications, for the latter depend on stable activities of others with reference to oneself; and crises are likely to be important in the process by which identities change" (119). For most adult students, the identity they held in high school is clearly not the identity they hold today.

Earlier Confident Identities

On average, today's adult students had a vision of where they were headed, but that vision did not include college. The adult students interviewed did not do particularly well in high school and did not have a goal of obtaining a college education once they graduated from high school. Their understanding of who they were determined the choices they made. Some

adult students had definite plans early on to enter the military upon high school graduation, some developed addictions in high school and dropped out, some became pregnant, and still others set their sights on working full-time.

Claire, the 41-year-old divorced mother of two teenagers, who attends school full-time and works part-time, was an average student in high school. She started college after high school, but ended up dropping out for reasons she did not discuss. When interviewed, she said she “was really proud to be back.”

Isabelle did not graduate from high school. This 29-year-old single woman without children attends UWSP full-time and works part-time. During her interview, she outlined her life after high school:

As soon as I turned 18, I went out West and lived with family and traveled, and I had had scholarships to both Hamline and Edgewood in Madison, so I had never wanted to go to Stevens Point. But then when I was older, I decided to move back, and I was living with my grandmother and helping her, and I decided to go to school in Point. It was the only school I had applied to at the time. And I had gotten my GED.

George, whose post-high school life led to his enlistment and service in Iraq, had a difficult high school experience and shared his story when he was asked about his decision to attend UWSP:

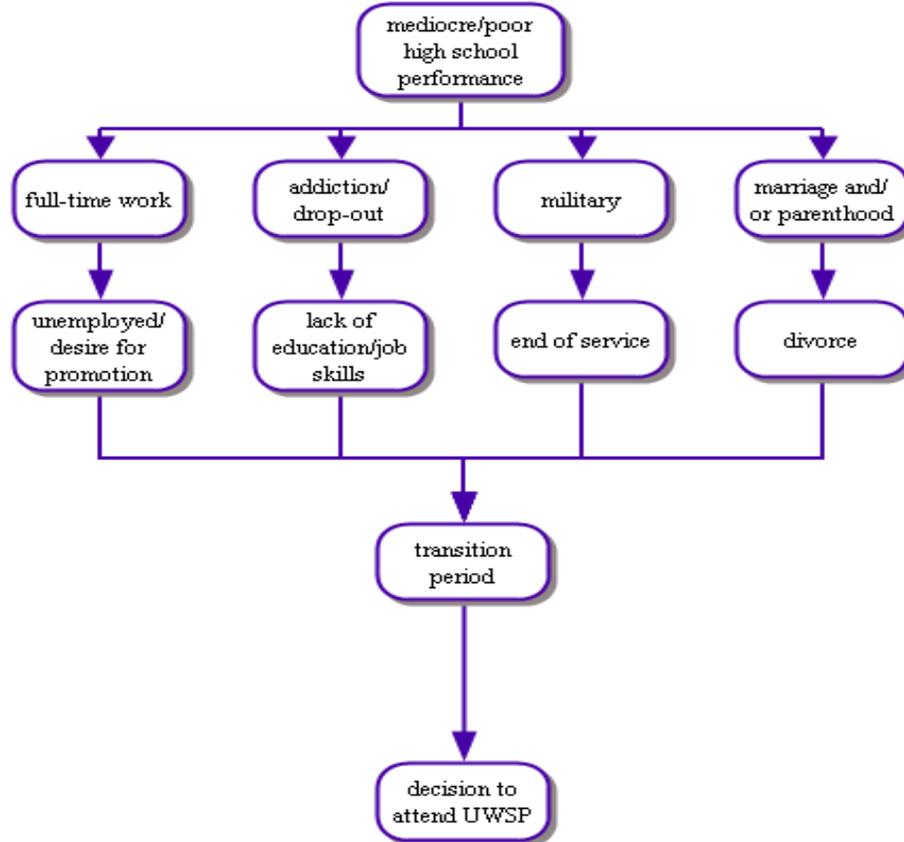
I’ve thought about doing this for a long time. It’s (going back to school) taking care of a regret. At the age of 14, I discovered alcohol, so I crawled into a bottle of Jack Daniels for the next 14 years. I didn’t even know I was graduating from high school until 3 days before the ceremony.

At that point in time, George could not have imagined himself as a college student.

These adult students each had a self-concept and identity that did not include the idea that they were going to become involved in higher education. At that point in time, they could not have entered higher education, and they did not need it. While they each had different specific life circumstances during and just after high school, their unifying element is that they did not typically take college preparatory classes in high school, and there was no initial intention to attend and/or complete a college education. Yet for each, something happened that caused them to take stock of their lives and to reassess possibilities.

Disruption/Taking Stock

The ways in which adult students arrive at their decision to attend UWSP vary, but are most often precipitated by some transitional (sometimes crisis-related) event(s) in their lives. The transitional event may be situational or logistical, such as the loss of employment; desire for a promotion; or the end of military service; or it can be financial/personal/psychological, such as divorce; wanting to set an example for one's children; seeking a new direction in life; or taking care of an old regret. In most cases, the decision to return to college involves a combination of factors:

Figure 3. Composite Adult Student Background

As Figure 3. illustrates, most adult students earned mediocre to poor grades in high school. Upon graduation, they tended to go to work full-time, develop addictions, enlist in the military, get married and/or become a parent, or they simply dropped out of high school before ever reaching graduation day. After living their post-high school experiences for a while, they became unemployed or desired a promotion, found they had a lack of education or job skills that prevented them from achieving their goals, came to the end of their military service, or found their marriage ending in divorce. From there, they entered a transition period, where they reevaluated their direction in life and made decisions about what to do next, including whether or not to attend UWSP.

Most often, adult students begin their college educational endeavor by seeking out information and questioning whether or not they are capable of undertaking such a significant commitment in terms of time, emotion, money, and other resources. This was, indeed, the case for Claire, who called the university and wanted to know what kind of programs they had available. She was contemplating finishing her college education and “was amazed at how accepting they were of transfer students coming in and how easy it was for me to integrate at that time.” Isabelle talked about how coming back and first attending classes posed challenges for her: “Yeah, I mean, I guess the hardest thing for me has always been that I feel like I’m not as up to speed as the other students.” And George looked up all the information he could online before he ever came to the campus. His initial introduction to the idea of college came not from UWSP, but from the VA office:

Within weeks of my decision to retire from sales, since I’m also a Desert Storm veteran, one day ...I went to the VA office, and the lady there said, ‘wow, you know you have one heck of an education benefit sitting here,’ and she says, ‘well, since you’re a Gulf War vet, you have access to the Wisconsin GI bill.’ Well, no, I never even knew that it existed. So I kind of walked out of there like a deer in the headlights. I went home and spoke with my wife about it, and we reached a pretty quick decision, you know, this is your opportunity to go back and take care of an old regret.

Once adults have decided they will consider giving the college experience a try, they begin their attempts at making connections. One of those connections is often times this researcher, Assistant Director of Admissions at UWSP. Anecdotally, this researcher has talked with countless adult students in her office, the majority of whom suffer from a considerable lack of self-confidence when discussing their ideas and educational goals. Most are even apologetic

when speaking about their high school grades, and when assured that their circumstances are quite typical in that regard, their relief is nearly palpable. It is at that point that their dreams find expression in words and they begin to allow themselves to acknowledge their strong self-direction and feel the excitement that is so rightfully theirs.

Symbols and Identity

Adult students are unique for a whole variety of reasons. One factor that further sets them apart from traditional-aged students is that they are embarking on a journey for which they feel unprepared at this particular point in their lives.

They are likely to lack the academic preparation of college preparatory classes, and they are most likely not in the habit of reading and studying. Moreover, becoming a college student puts them in a vulnerable position, dependent upon others who would, in better circumstances, have been dependent upon them. Typically, human beings move from the complete dependency of infancy toward the steadily increasing independence of adulthood only to gradually find themselves moving back toward the dependent role of the elderly. The following figure illustrates this pattern and indicates where on the path one is traditionally “expected” by society to participate in education:

Figure 4. Typical Sequence of Social Role in American Society (McCall, 1966)**Independence****Dependence**

infant

sibling

playmate

PUPIL

friend

enemy

athlete

religious role

worker

colleague

sex role

adult citizen

spouse

parent

in-law

grandparent

aged role (disengaged)

Independence**Dependence**

As shown in Figure 4., the role of student (or “pupil”) comes early on in one’s sequential social role, leaving many roles on the path ahead. The typical adult student is again assuming this role at some point beyond the “adult citizen” role and often somewhere between “in-law”

and “grandparent.” This makes for quite an adjustment for everyone involved: The student, their family, the faculty, the staff, the traditional-aged students, the institution, and, ultimately, for society as a whole.

Whether coming from a primary role as military serviceperson or as a stay-at-home mom, adult students will need to reformulate their ideas about themselves to include the role and identity of college student. How others perceive them and interact with them will initially, continually, and ultimately help to shape their identity and to determine whether they are able to successfully integrate this new role into their overall self-concept.

This identity shaping is important for all adult students, particularly those who are committed to finishing their education. Adults experience different roles and learn through trial and error what is expected of them in order to persist and achieve success. This “situational adjustment” is key for adult students, for they must figure out what the university expects a student to be and then assume that identity. In turn, this will allow them to feel comfortable and subsequently fulfill university requirements (Stone, 1970). But without role models and mentors to help guide adult students toward adjustment, UWSP is likely to lose those students to other institutions who have a support system solidly in place for them from the beginning.

Role models and mentors are so important because they offer up encouragement to prospective adult students and help them begin to see themselves as the college students they are capable of becoming. Mentors also provide critical support once the adult students are here. An alternative vision of Cooley’s concept of the “looking glass self” (1922) poignantly fits this important mentoring process whereby adult students are seen by staff as “real” college students and ultimately come to feel comfortable expanding their identity to include that role. Adult students look to mentors for support, and many times they see someone who is like them in an

important way or ways. They then tell themselves, “They did it, (maybe) I can, too.” This researcher often sees this shift occur from the start to the finish of her meetings with adult students. When the students initially sigh and lament the length of time it will take them to finish their degree, she shares with them that she has found that time passes whether one attends school or not, that there are worse things than taking seven years to finish an undergraduate degree as she did, and that the sense of accomplishment they will feel when they do earn their degree is enormous and will assist them in reaching their personal and career goals. And she tells them they can do it. A mentor may not necessarily share the characteristics of the adult student, but is an informed person who communicates to the student through language, gestures, and symbols, “You can do it!” This symbolic interaction is critical to the recruitment and retention of adult students.

Unfortunately, many of the symbols and gestures that come their way reinforce for adult students that they may not belong here. It is important to examine the symbols that come to adult students in order to find out how they are interpreting their experiences. Blumer (1969), talks about the elements of objects and gestures as part of symbolic interactionism. Objects begin to mean something to someone as a result of how those objects are explained to that person by another; their interaction creates meaning. And the same holds true for gestures. Gestures are packed with communication. They indicate what to expect and not to expect, and gestures arrive in the form of “requests, orders, commands, cues, and declarations,” (Blumer, 1969), as well as vocal sounds, such as sighs and grunts (Manis, 1967).

Adult students are continually bombarded with symbols, objects, and gestures that communicate to them that they are not “traditional,” but rather, “other.” For example, as noted in the literature review, recruitment materials do not exist for adult students. When they inquire

about the university or about admission in general, they are sent materials that contain language geared toward prospective new freshmen, such as:

- Applications are available from your high school counselor...
- “I’ve grown up a lot since high school. Just being able to talk to people was a problem because I was so shy. But living in the dorms at Stevens Point really helped.”
- ViewPoints are comprehensive visit programs....bring your parents...

Adult students do not have high school counselors, cannot leave families and jobs to study abroad, will not be living in the residence halls, and if they are lucky enough to still have parents who are living, they will not likely bring them along for a campus tour. While these gestures do not invalidate the potential usefulness of the information provided, they do, unfortunately, confirm the unstated message that “you do not really belong here.”

Once a student wades through the admission application, which asks for high school courses in progress, along with a large number of other questions which also pertain to high school students, let us assume they are admitted to the university. At that point, they will receive an admission letter, along with a new freshman enrollment checklist, which contains roommate and housing dates, food contract information, and more parental references. They will then receive housing, placement testing, and orientation information, all of which use language referring to new freshmen. Andrew thought it “a bit hilarious” that he had to go to Residential Living to turn in a waiver to not have to live in the dorms and thought his wife might not like him living on campus. But not all adult students necessarily see the humor in being addressed as if they were new freshmen.

The repetition of the message continues to suggest that they must not be “real” college students because they do not relate to “real” student needs, such as housing, meal plans, the numerous student organizations, etc., etc. These symbols that adult students receive from their first contact with the university through graduation day are all designed for a population other than their own; they are obviously not intended to obstruct the adaptation process of older students, but they are nevertheless constant reminders that adult students are outsiders.

Adult students need socialization by other adults to help them begin their assimilation and adjustment into what is, for most of them, an anxiety-producing new role (Stone, 1970). Adult students continually evaluate themselves and their behavior as they interpret the feedback they receive from faculty, staff, and traditional students (Manis, 1967). Traditional-aged, undergraduate students can receive this face-to-face interaction in the residence halls, where it is confirmed through various organized activities, such as workshops and planned outings, that they are, indeed, college students having a typical college student experience. But adult students lack that peer support to adapt to their circumstances, adjust to this new role of college student, and bolster their opinion of themselves as serious students. They must begin to reinvent themselves according to this new role and new information. Without acknowledgement by others that they are indeed, “legitimate” college students, adult students may feel unworthy of such a title and may not view themselves as “real” college students who have the same right to succeed as traditional students (Stone, 1970).

A reconstitution of identity as a college student must occur for adult students to be successful at UWSP. A single, underemployed parent must continue to put food on the table and parent the children, while also finding time and space for going to class and studying. She must also expand her identity to include a capable, determined student. Similarly, a veteran needs to

adapt to a schedule of classes and homework, and to expand his identity, as well. However, the veteran may also need to shut down parts of his identity that were well-adapted to battle, but that can be dysfunctional in civilian life.

For veterans, reconstituting their identity is a particularly complex process. Veterans are prepared for basic training by having their identity stripped away and then reconstructed to prepare them for the physical and mental rigors of battle. According to the Department of Veterans Affairs (2010), individuals who serve in the military are faced with a significant number of transitions upon returning to civilian life. Their experiences in the military often result in post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which includes episodes of reliving the event(s) causing the PTSD, avoiding situations reminding them of the event(s), feeling numb, and hyperarousal. Hyperarousal includes feeling startled, having difficulty concentrating, feeling on guard, difficulty sleeping, and feelings of anger and irritability. Veterans also often find they have a need for individual and/or family counseling, a wide range of health concerns, bereavement issues, suicidal thoughts, drug and alcohol concerns, and/or education and employment issues. Veterans are dealing with many different combinations of these challenges, as well as numerous other challenges, which makes reconstituting their identity difficult.

When serving in the military, veterans had defenses to use as a means to cope with their situation. They were able to pick and choose self-images that supported the positive aspects of being a soldier. When they left the military, they had to find ways in which they could integrate their pre-military lives, their military lives, and their post-military lives to best sustain the ideal of the person they wanted to be at that point in time (Stein, 1960). No longer having a need for the defenses they used while serving in the military, but having a current need to form a sense of identity as an adult college student, veterans and other adult students often struggle to find their

place on our campus. Symbols pepper them from all angles telling them they are not having a typical college experience. And they are not. They are having a typical **adult** student college experience, which, for veterans, may look something like this:

Figure 5. Proposed Composite Veterans' Experience at UWSP

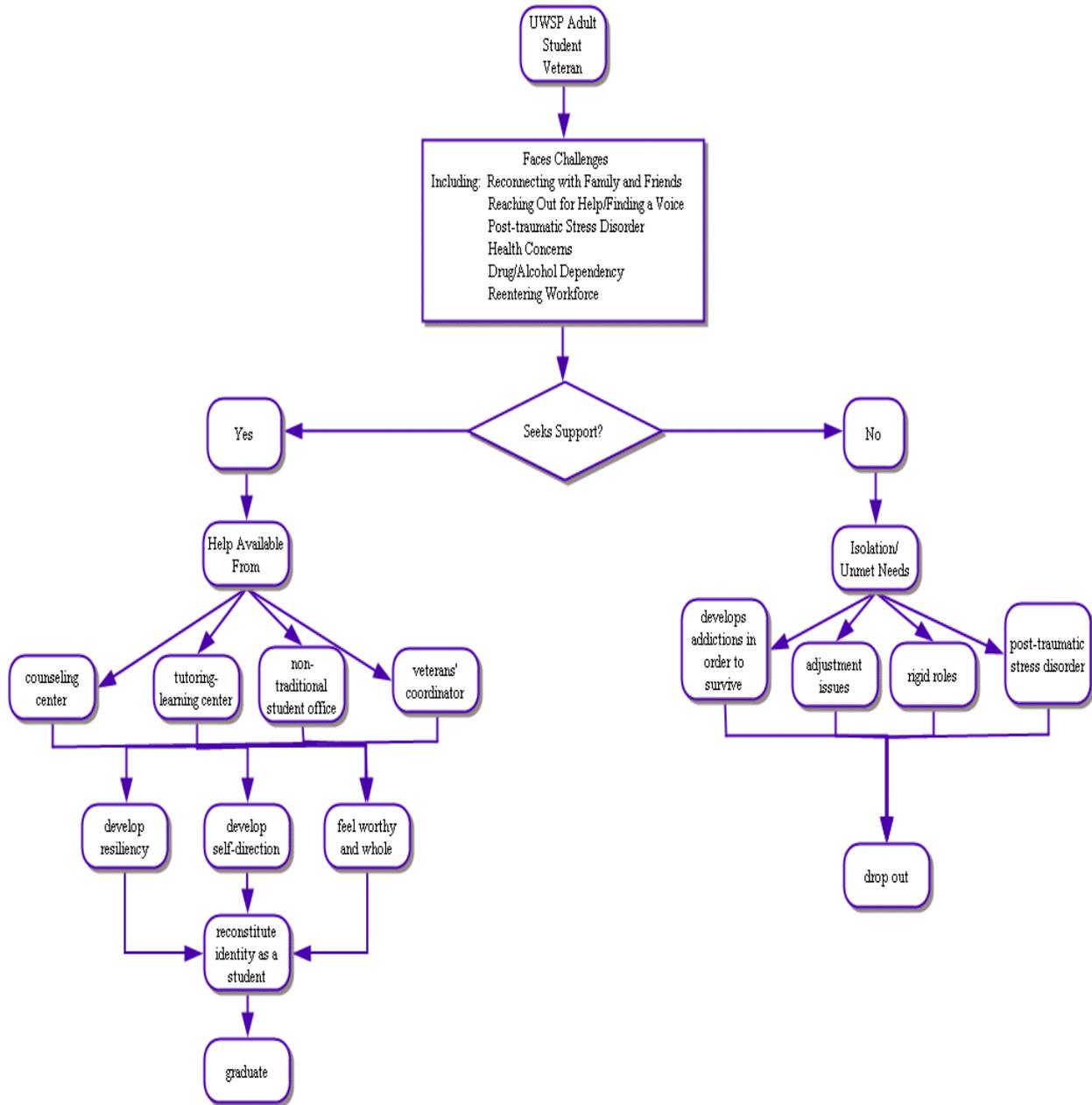


Figure 5. illustrates the challenges faced by veterans. These challenges include learning to reconnect with family and friends, many of whom are not familiar with the challenges they are

facing; difficulty reaching out and feeling comfortable speaking up to share their experiences with others; PTSD and its myriad of symptoms, other general health concerns, drug and/or alcohol issues, and re-entering the work force.

Some veterans, however, choose to seek support to help them with these challenges. A veteran who chooses this path might reach out to the Counseling Center, the Tutoring-Learning Center, the Non-traditional Student Office, or the Veterans' Coordinator. By connecting with a person or persons in one or more of these office, the veteran will feel supported and develop resiliency, self-direction, and begin to feel worthy and whole. This gradual process eventually leads to their reconstitution of identity as a student and, ultimately, to their college graduation.

Veterans who do not choose to seek support will likely begin to feel isolated, and their needs will not be getting met. This tends to develop into issues with adjustment, taking on rigid roles, PTSD (if it had not been present already), and possible addictions. Unfortunately, these are the students who end up dropping out of college.

It is important to note, however, that symbolic interaction is inherently fluid, and as such, the ways in which UWSP works for and against adult students is open to interpretation and change. As Blumer (1969) indicates:

Beneath the norms and rules that specify the type of action to be engaged in at any given point in the organizational complex there are two concurrent processes in which people are defining each other's perspectives and the individual, through self-interaction, is redefining his own perspective.

It is through face-to-face communication that adult students redefine how they perceive themselves and the world. Through symbolic interaction, there is constant opportunity for growth and redefinition of what it means to be an adult student on the UWSP campus.

Obstacles/Challenges and Critical Factors

All adult students will face challenges of one type or another as they move through UWSP, but some sub-segments of that population will face challenges unique to their group. Veterans, for example, will experience a huge psychological adjustment, and stay-at-home mothers will face the challenge of adjusting to newfound freedom. Others, including those who have lost their jobs, may be adjusting to new career possibilities and a large drop in income.

The obstacles and challenges faced by the majority of adult students include time pressures, finances, course scheduling, and age. There are issues of space management, as well. Many students want online courses, but have to balance the flexibility of those courses with the ability to pay for Internet services. Also reported was a sense of feeling lost and out of place. Some adult students feel a sense of shame because they are not (or do not perceive themselves to be) academically prepared, and they are often uncomfortable asking for help from others. This is particularly difficult for the majority of adult students who were not academically strong during high school and without higher education as an end goal, did not take college preparatory classes. As they move through the UWSP system, those who seek support, through tutoring, for example, will have an easier time in their classes and will feel more connected to the campus. Some adult students will have challenges that are more specific to their unique situations.

Single mothers, for example, are often fully responsible for their child(ren), paying the bills, taking care of a home and pets, making appointments, filling out forms for elementary school, etc. Whether due to the death of a spouse or partner, divorce, or by choice, these partner-less women bear the brunt of parenting on top of other usual adult responsibilities, and adding the role of student to an already overfull life can be overwhelming to them. Also present is the

guilt often felt when needing to choose between the student role and the parenting role, or trying to adequately perform both roles.

Clearly, roles and life circumstances dictate the kinds of challenges a person will face. For example, finances will be less of an issue for active military personnel facing the end of their service because many veterans, such as George, will benefit from some federal financial assistance. However, a huge psychological adjustment awaits them as they look toward reintegrating into the civilian world. They left that world, have been changed by their military experience, and are now being asked to get back to “business as usual.” Part of their readjustment will involve moving from a highly organized system of structure where they have been, to some degree, cut off from family and friends to a much more loosely organized social set-up, particularly as it relates to their entrance into higher education (Stein, et al, 1960). Unanimously, the veterans interviewed commented on their frustration with the ability of non-veterans’ and traditional-aged students to get away with certain behaviors, specifically what they felt was treating professors and classmates with disrespect. As George relayed, “Here they’re (traditional students) cold and impersonal.” Another veteran, Andrew, described an incident that occurred during his summer environmental literature course:

People would just get in and walk up and ask, ‘Do I need to know anything you’re talking about for a test?’ literally, and I’m like (throws his hands up in the air), and as a non-trad, I was just flabbergasted.

Because of their military training and feelings of loyalty, they are unlikely to speak out or speak to anyone where confidentiality may be breached, and so, suffer in silence (Stein, 1960).

Andrew illustrated this completely when he said:

...there was a lack of control or seriousness of the freshmen students that were involved. And it's almost to the point where it's like wow, really, you know? And this behavior is tolerated. You have people walk in during a lecture, get up and walk out during a lecture, and I just, you know, from my background especially, I really, I had a hard time not even saying something. I had to just keep quiet. In my background, and I'm a different generation removed from the folks that are in class, and you know they're tweeting and they're doing text messages, and it's tolerated.

This contributes, in part, to a sense of separation (and often, isolation) felt by veterans.

In addition to this exasperation with the behavior of Millennium students, veterans are faced with the challenge of setting aside parts of the military identities that were constructed through basic training. The initial transformation from civilian to serviceperson is significant and should not be underestimated. Civilians are taken away from the comfort and relative safety of their support systems and, through a rather methodical armed forces process, they are molded into soldiers who will predictably behave according to the established protocol. Essentially, their sense of self is diminished and then rebuilt to military standards (Stein, 1960). So, to expect the reverse transformation to be any less significant would be a mistake. Upon return to civilian life, this same transformation process is not a guided one, but rather, one that is experienced through trial and error, some outcomes being more "successful" than others.

The same can be said for the role expansion and reconstitution of identity for other adult students. Take Claire, for example, who is a mother with daily routines that have been formed around the schedules of her children: Nap times, meals, pre-school, grade school, activities, and now junior high school and high school. She has now entered a world where, beyond the syllabus, there is little structure and a lot of encouragement of free thought. Hence the adult

student who wants to know exactly how many pages the term paper should be and what size font to utilize. For Claire, this freedom made for a difficult transition:

Tell me where my goal is and what I got to do to get there...as non-trads., we have to know how much of our life to take out and how long is it going to take us. How much of our life is this going to take away from our kids?

This world of higher education with all of its choices and freedom can be frightening to those coming from the perceived “safe” world of hierarchy, set expectations, and definite consequences.

Coping Strategies

Adult students employ a number of coping strategies to help them thrive in their new environment and role. Whether they are aware of it or not, adult students occasionally rely on routines to help them cope with their newfound student role. Many adult students find that reaching out and seeking support through communicating with staff members, other adult students, the Tutoring-Learning Center, and the VA Coordinator helps them feel secure and connected to campus. Still other adult students find ways to get involved on campus through clubs and activities. Regardless of the particular coping strategies used, adult students all need to rely on their own internal motivation, and they all need to find ways to manage their time. And overall, adult students find themselves to be internally motivated and self-directed, yet struggling with issues of time management.

As a type of symbol, routines are gestures that serve to bring order to chaos and often give us the perception of control over a situation that can be otherwise anxiety-producing. We depend on routines in our daily lives, such as morning coffee routines, to offer us predictability and to provide us with a plan of action, such as checking our schedules for the day. Over time,

these routines provide us with a sense of comfort, and if our routines are altered, we may feel off balance (Geertz, 1983). Routines “give stability to our behaviors and serve as vehicles of communication (Driver, 1991).

Many of the students who were interviewed indicated that prior to their orientation session, they thoroughly and systematically reviewed the UWSP Web site and familiarized themselves with many of the facets of campus life and policies. As George bluntly stated, “I go online and figure it out myself.” A number of them had their course schedules already planned out and did not feel they needed formal advising. By becoming familiar with the campus, these students were essentially reducing their anxiety by gathering information; something most students do at any age, but in the case of adult students, this approach came with a heightened focus. They wanted to know exactly what was expected of them and what they needed to do to make sure their goals became reality, even though most of the information they found was covered in the orientation session they were subsequently required to attend.

Commuting time may also provide a routine transition and some processing time. Two adult students who carpool from Wausau to Stevens Point use their time in the car to and from classes to compare their experiences both inside and outside of the classroom. As such, they “bond” and socially interact, thus reinforcing their identities as college students and finding solutions to perceived problems. This travel time also serves as a buffer or boundary between two separate roles.

Still other adult students have homework routines, which involve finding a certain location on campus where one can sit quietly with coffee in hand, and finish all homework prior to leaving campus. In that way, they can then assume the identity of “mother” or “employee” the

moment they get into their car, thus compartmentalizing their role as “adult student.” Claire expressed this when she said,

I had to devote my time whenever I was on campus to doing whatever homework I’d have to do during those daytime hours. So say I had an hour between such and such class, I devoted that time to subject studies, and when I went off campus, I had to have the majority of my stuff done. That doesn’t always work. It never has, actually.

That ability to separate “school life” from “home life” can often mean the difference between success and dropping out and is a critical strategy for coping with their new role as student.

Once adults begin their studies at UWSP, they tend to implement a number of additional coping strategies to help them function as college students, including obtaining support by communicating with staff members, other adult students, the Tutoring-Learning Center, and the VA Coordinator. Isabelle felt her experience with a student group went really well:

I have gotten involved in Tri-Beta, which is a biological research group, like an honor society. I volunteered to be treasurer, and now I’m vice president. I’ve made a lot of really good friends. I’ve gotten some research jobs on campus, too, through the organization, and we’ve had a lot of speakers come in on different topics, and graduate talks on how to get into graduate school, so I guess that’s probably been one of my most valuable experiences here. And I’ve gotten to meet people, and I’m definitely the oldest person in that group. So I’ve gotten to meet people younger than me that have the same interests, and it has been helpful, I think.

These types of student involvement are crucial to the adult students’ feeling of connectedness to the campus. If contact was made with these and other Student Services Offices, the support was found to be generally helpful. Other coping strategies, such as time management and self-

direction (internally motivated)/persistence are also utilized by adult students. For example, when George was asked about the kinds of strategies he employed to make this campus work for his situation, he said,

Well, you call them strategies, but like I said earlier, I'm pretty focused on exactly what I need to do here. I come to my class, get done what I have to do, once in a while I use the library, but rarely. So, strategy? Just come here, and I don't waste time. Just lock-in on what I need to do and then I go back home and do my homework right away. I'm pretty focused, I guess.

Seeking out support was definitely a challenge for adult students, but full of rewards once they received the support. Adult students described feelings of frustration with certain faculty interactions, such as when one of Claire's professors made life "miserable" for her. As she said, "Even where there were classes with 200 people in there, he would point me out and humiliate me, and I just...it was sad." But at the same time, they tended to feel faculty really cared and were supportive of them. As Isabelle related, "The faculty members that have known I'm (an) adult (student) have responded positively and are encouraging, especially people I work with and my supervisors." The overall nurturing approach of faculty and their involvement beyond the classroom were definitely facets of interaction that encouraged adult students when the students were facing challenges at UWSP or in other areas of their lives.

Time management is absolutely critical for adult students, and as noted in the literature review, it is often one of the reasons students drop out of college. Students talked about "juggling" and "balancing." Claire lamented not being able to hold a full-time job and still attend classes. Andrew took "juggling" a step further and likened his situation to an emergency

when he talked about looking at his work schedule “to see if I could triage how much hours I could afford to miss and when I could make those up to make up the work.”

Over and over again, the adult students interviewed talked about being self-directed and persistent. Their internal motivation was strong. If they wanted to know something and were not getting answers, their tenacity pulled them through. This was illustrated by Isabelle when she said:

I’ve tried to learn about the different programs that I have access to, especially like, well like finding out about student services and making that effort. And every time I’ve ever done that, I’ve felt better about where I’m headed. Just knowing there are options or people that have some more information than I know of.

The literature review also mentioned access to and involvement with student support services as being key to preventing students from dropping out of college and to enhancing retention rates. It cannot be stressed enough that for adult students, having support and services in place seems to be critical to their feeling of importance to the campus, their connectedness to UWSP, and likely, their overall retention and success here.

Secrets to Success

Each student comes to higher education with his or her own goals. For adult students, these goals have often been articulated to themselves only after years of developing an identity as a student and resolving to finish their education. For many adults, this was a long, difficult, and often challenging path that resulted in their development of a tenacious and resilient character. Sharing the articulation of these goals with others outside of their trusted circle can be a daunting task for them. Just contacting UWSP employees for initial information can be a huge risk for them, and they deserved to be welcomed and affirmed for taking that first step.

Also deserving of acknowledgement is the fact that **all** students, including traditional-age students, need to expand their identities as students, to become internally motivated, and to manage their time. But several factors can make these challenges that much greater for adult students. Many may not have taken college preparatory classes in high school. And many are rebounding from some kind of life-changing crisis. They must not only overcome logistical obstacles, such as paying tuition, finding reliable, affordable child care, and locating parking spaces, they must also reinvent who they are—and have been—to adjust to a setting where there is no one to tell them what to do—and no freshman class of residence hall friends to assure them of who they are. In fact, they must learn to ignore and somehow counteract the continuous messages that seem to confirm that they do not belong at UWSP.

We know that to successfully recruit adult students, effective ways of helping them reach those goals and serving their needs must be securely in place (Compton, 2006). Adult students must come to some kind of conclusions about who they are and how they will define themselves as college students before they ever set foot on the UWSP campus. They have proven their resiliency thus far, and from an ethical standpoint, we have an obligation to make room for them at the table, meet their needs, and serve them, even if this means somewhat altering the menu of the comfortable status quo.

Chapter Five – Conclusion

By design, this exploratory study aimed to find out what obstacles are faced by adult students at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point, what strategies they use to overcome those obstacles, and what causes them to drop out. Through 12 student interviews, answers to those and other questions were obtained, and this researcher has analyzed those student experiences to provide a better understanding of exactly what is happening to adult students on our campus.

Certainly this researcher's knowledge, background, and experience working in the Admissions Office help shape her views of adult students' experiences, and this can be of value when trying to make sense of some of the comments adult students express and the experiences they relate. But staff can and do continually learn, which is one of the benefits of working on a college campus, and one which makes this job so infinitely rewarding. The most surprising facet of this research has been the willingness of veterans to candidly share the details of their experiences at UWSP with a complete stranger. Even though this researcher works with adult students daily as part of her profession in the Admissions Office, the depth and breadth of the challenges faced by this particular segment of the adult population (veterans) came as a bit of a shock and caused her to reevaluate the ways in which she communicates with these students. She was both moved by and grateful for this opportunity, which was the best type of professional development she could hope for.

Summary

The demographics are changing for the "typical" college student. A full 60 percent of college students are over the age of 25 (Noel-Levitz, 2006). As high school graduation rates begin to drop sharply over the next four to five years, competition for those students will be quite

fierce among college recruiters in the UW System (UW System Accountability Report, 2007-08). Due to the changing job market, the economy, and people staying the work force longer than they used to, we are seeing an increased need for lifelong learning.

Most of the adult students who came to us seeking a college education did not plan to attend college when they were high school students. They made life choices that took them in a variety of directions where college was not needed. But the eventual disruption of that initial life plan, whether the result of divorce, unemployment or underemployment, or leaving the military, led to a reassessment of the way these adult students viewed themselves and the opportunities available to them. This led to their decision to give college a try.

From there, these adult students were faced with numerous insecurities about finances, time management, whether or not they would be able to remember past and future academic information, and age-old insecurities about “fitting in.” They worked to prepare themselves by seeking out information online and reaching out to people on our campus. Yet, throughout this time period, they were addressed by UWSP as “typical” new freshmen and offered information about housing, meal plans, and directed to bring their parents with them to events, thus reinforcing their insecurities about their new student role.

As the data indicate, adult students face numerous challenges, including time pressures, finances, course scheduling, age, transportation and parking issues, the ability to persist, and the huge challenge of expanding their self-identity to include their new role of adult student. They were able to overcome the majority of these obstacles by using coping strategies, such as relying on routines; reaching out and seeking support through communicating with staff members, other adult students, the Tutoring-Learning Center, and the VA Coordinator to help them feel secure

and connected to campus; getting involved on campus through clubs and activities; and tapping into their own internal motivation and self-direction.

In addition to these challenges, adult students must also find a way to begin to see themselves as real college students. In terms of integrating their newfound role into their overall identity, role models and supportive faculty and staff played a large part in facilitating this complex process. In terms of symbolic interaction theory, they are using shared symbols to construct meanings; and one of the important meanings for these students is each person's own identity, which is structured through a combination of face-to-face and organizational communication. Adult students face the challenge of not only negotiating obstacles, but also to expand their identities to include the new role of students.

Veterans faced the additional unique challenges of reconnecting with family and friends, many of whom have no knowledge of military life; reaching out for help and finding a voice that was oftentimes subdued by military initiation and subsequent expectations; post-traumatic stress disorder and its associated symptoms of stress and anxiety; health concerns; possible drug and/or alcohol addiction; and re-entering the work force.

Adult students continue to reassess the costs, financial and otherwise, and weigh them against the perceived benefits and rewards they are receiving or will receive in the future. Sometimes, when the costs outweigh the rewards, some adult students drop out of UWSP.

Overall, adult students contribute to the diversity of the student body at UWSP in a variety of ways, including their ability to share their experiences with traditional-aged students, allowing learning to take place for all students in the classroom. The decision to actively recruit and support adult students is one that deserves to be given consideration.

Trailblazing

Pointers are trailblazers, and we as a university take calculated risks with the idea that our vision and associated goals will provide students with a global, multidimensional education that will solidly prepare them for their future...no matter where that future leads them. When it comes to adult students, there is clearly more work to be done if UWSP is going to effectively serve and prepare them. If nothing else, as the number of veterans increases, it will become necessary for campus administration to take a look at how to best serve this adult population. In studying the many ways to go about accomplishing this goal, the problem of the current model of attracting and serving adult students will become evident.

At a time when the UW System is emphasizing inclusive excellence, we have the opportunity before us to add diversity in age to our list of campus-specific diversity goals. Adult students bring varied backgrounds and experiences into the classroom that change the dynamics of discussions and impact traditional students in ways not possible without the presence of adult students. Adult students have often traveled extensively, sometimes internationally; they have an array of work experiences to share; they have parented and can help homesick or troubled traditional students by providing an empathetic ear; they have specific skills that come in handy during group projects; and, perhaps most importantly, having “lived a little,” they offer up a different point of view. And one of the most important components of a UWSP college education is the development of critical thinking skills and finding ways for our students to see the world outside of their own, oftentimes limited, experiences. Dewey (1939) felt strongly that life experience and education were closely linked. As he said, “...basing education upon personal experience may mean more multiplied and more intimate contacts between the mature and the immature than ever existed in the traditional school...” (8). Adult students are only one

ingredient in the overall mix of diversity, but they are a flavorful one. However, if we are to achieve broad diversity, including diversity in age, there is serious work to be done.

In order to improve our ability to attract, retain, and graduate adult students, UWSP needs a model from which to work that will support the institution's goals. As outlined earlier, there are some areas of adult student services at UWSP that bear review and revision. Adult students are not typically connected to UWSP in the ways that would support retention. For example, if adult students feel that their needs are not taken into consideration when course offerings and schedules are set or when hours for student services offices are determined, they will not feel loyalty and connection to UWSP. If we are all, including faculty, staff, and administration, to benefit from the many gifts adult students bring to this campus, we need to be in a position to welcome them to our campus community and fully support them once they are here.

Recommendations

Throughout the adult student interviews, suggestions and comments were made by students that took the form of "helpful hints" or ways in which they felt they could be better supported and/or more successful at UWSP.

Several students directly stated how important it was that they got something of value out of their education because they were paying for it out-of-pocket. This points to some of the elements of social exchange theory in terms of the cost versus benefits equation of determining whether something is worth the effort that is being expended into a given situation. And it is not only money that adult students are sacrificing for an education. Remember Madeline?

...I'm working full-time and going to school, and you know, have kids around. I guess I don't want to skip my dinner time every Wednesday night and drive a whole bunch of extra miles and yeah, whatever, not kiss my kids good night.

For adult students, there are often costs far beyond the dollars paid in tuition. Adult students mentally add up the missed dinners with family, the study time that takes away from exercise, and so forth, and weigh those costs against their perceived benefits. If the total of the costs surpasses the rewards, they will not continue the relationship. In other words, they will leave UWSP.

In order to ensure that adult students are receiving the overt and subtle messages that they are valued members of the UWSP campus community, that we recognize and care about what they are giving up in order to be students here, and that the quality of their education matters to us, their concerns bear addressing. Therefore, in response to the adult student interviews, a brief list of recommendations was developed as a starting point for discussion.

Those recommendations follow:

- Offer more courses in the summer that fulfill general degree requirements (GDRs).
The interview data show that adult students are used to working hard and want to complete their degrees quickly. They just need the course availability to do so.
- Offer more courses on Fridays or on weekends, especially for GDR classes.
Alternative scheduling is something adult students want. Their schedules are such that they need a variety of choices to support their goals of quickly obtaining a degree.
- Offer more evening courses. Again, this would offer adult students increased opportunities to fulfill degree requirements.
- Expand online and hybrid course availability. Offering alternative formatting would assist adult students who live a significant distance away from UWSP, as well as serving students who have demanding work schedules and other

commitments. This might also aid in solving some space planning issues as we seek to increase university enrollment.

- Bring back the Comm. 101 section for adult students. The data indicated that students might feel more comfortable completing this general degree requirement if they participated in the course with other adult students rather than with students who are of traditional age.
- Ask each Student Services Office to designate an adult student liaison so students are not shifted from office to office unnecessarily. The liaisons should be staff members who are knowledgeable about the university and how to work with adult students.
- Require that each Student Services Office stay open one evening a week, consistent among offices, to accommodate individuals who cannot make it to campus during usual business hours. Change the evening occasionally to accommodate the most people possible.
- Advise university staff to remain cognizant of their various audiences when developing materials and communicating with the public. Suggest they develop separate materials for adult students where feasible.
- Make orientation a mandatory component of the introductory process through Admissions for all admitted students rather than excluding graduate students and students who started at UWSP as special students through Registration and Records. Break this out according to student type, and take age into consideration so adult students receive more of a customized orientation. A research study

could then be designed to determine the impact a mandatory orientation session has on the retention of adult students.

- Implement a priority registration policy. Adult students are likely to have more limiting schedules than traditional students because of the many other demands on their time. Adult students indicated that priority registration is something that ought to be considered by either using overall student GPA or giving students priority within their major. Future studies could look into whether giving adult students priority registration would lead to greater overall satisfaction with their UWSP experience.

It is noteworthy that most of the recommendations offered would also support the ever-changing lifestyle of students of all ages. More than ever, students work off campus, often at times that make evening classes their best option, as well.

In reviewing the data for potential recommendations, it seemed that Quinn summed up what many adult students were articulating during their interviews:

This university needs to start moving forward. And you know, I understand the whole slow process, but small steps will show the adult population that you're trying to work with them. If you don't take any steps, they're gonna say, they're not gonna come here 'cause they know they're not important. Seeing the nontraditional student as important would be—and also veterans, there's a lot of veterans here, you know, show us that we matter.

Researcher's Reflection

I consider myself fortunate to have had the opportunity to attend UWSP as an adult student for my Associate's, Bachelor's, and Master's degrees. I was technically a transfer

student, and, at one point, a re-entry student. This background has allowed me to remain sensitive to those adult students with whom I meet as part of my responsibilities in the Admissions Office.

Many of the findings of this study were indicative of my own experiences, as well. The frustrations I felt with course scheduling, for instance, were certainly balanced out with the positive experiences I had with faculty members who genuinely cared. For example, though I placed out of the B.A. math requirement, I decided to first pursue an Associate's degree, for which I did need to take a trigonometry class. After the first week of classes, my 18-month-old toddling along next to me, I went to Professor Emeritus, Sonja Kung, to drop the class. I just could not get a handle on the material presented in class. She suggested I give it another week, since it had been quite a while since I had taken a math class, and she felt it would start to "click" for me before too long. Another week went by, and again, toddler in tow, I went to see Sonja with my drop form in hand. She remained steadfast, positive, and encouraging, and offered tutoring support if I would stay in the class. Taking her advice, I accepted the tutoring assistance, studied a great deal, and I ended up learning and doing well. Sonja was someone who told me, "You can **do** this." Without her support, I would not have earned that degree.

Validity

Throughout the study, the researcher remained concerned with issues of validity, both internal and external. Anticipated problems associated with validity included: 1) External validity – this was the greatest weakness in terms of validity. Since this was an exploratory study with a small sample population, the study findings cannot be assumed to be accurate for a larger population. 2) Face validity – it is debatable whether interviewing 12 adult students was an accurate measure of the obstacles adults students face at UWSP. However, on the surface, it

would seem this method would tell us something about adult students' experiences on this campus, and since this was an exploratory study, the intended purpose was achieved. To strengthen validity, though, all participants were asked if they were willing to be contacted for follow-up questions and, if necessary, were contacted and asked if they felt the experiences noted were indicative of what they were trying to convey. This participant feedback provided a cross verification to guard against personal bias. 3) Personal bias - this was reduced through the use of active listening techniques and follow-up contact. Since the researcher has spent ten years as an adult student, it was critical to separate those experiences from those of the adult students being interviewed. Reflecting the interviewee's responses back to them was one important way to ensure effective listening and accurate understanding of the participants' comments. Another way the researcher confirmed understanding was to ask for clarification whenever needed. Questioning the interviewees about responses containing "always" and "never" statements assisted in exploring and fleshing out exactly what the individuals were trying to convey (Strauss, 1998). The final interview question asked the interviewee if follow-up contact would be acceptable. Upon analysis, participants were again contacted, if necessary, to see if the experiences described were accurately reflected. These validation techniques, central to the grounded theory approach, served as safeguards against personal bias on the part of the researcher.

While the personal experience of the researcher can make it hard to hear and understand experiences different from her own, that experience can also serve as an asset in an exploratory study such as this. The researcher's background, experience in the Admissions Office and higher education, and the time she spent as an adult student at UWSP allowed her to ask appropriate follow-up questions and aid in understanding more about adult students' experiences at UWSP.

By acknowledging her personal experiences as an adult student, the researcher minimized possible biases while taking advantage of insights that may have resulted from those same experiences.

Importance of the Study

Given the national, state, and UWSP demographic trends, and in light of the increasing difficulty in securing and maintaining funding for education at the state level, it is important for UWSP to make a serious effort to recruit and support adult students while recognizing that our current ways of serving adult students at UWSP could use some improvement. Something must be done to ensure that UWSP will have the students it needs to fulfill its enrollment targets over the next decade (Noel-Levitz, 2006; UW System Accountability Report, 2007-08). The benefit of adult learner tuition is becoming increasingly important to us, perhaps even to the point that we as an institution may be willing to take stock of our current practices and make some significant shifts in philosophy, student services commitment, and strategy.

As noted, the benefits of diversity in age are also important to the UW System's goals of inclusive excellence and to UWSP's diversity agenda. It would be of great value to the university community to begin to include student age as a component of diversity discussions as a way to increase awareness and generate fruitful insight.

The importance of this study was to explore the experiences adult students have, the obstacles they face at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point, what adult students are doing to overcome those obstacles, and what makes them drop out. This will assist administrators in beginning to plan how to further enhance what is being done well, to make changes to better serve adult students, and to introduce new ideas to help support adult students' academic goals and achievements. Rather than essentially encouraging adult students to seek an education at a

more accommodating, adult-friendly university or for-profit institution, we could then truly meet the needs of the expanding adult learner population and ensure that UWSP will thrive in these times of decreasing high school populations and scarce funding.

Future Exploration

Since this was an exploratory study of adult learners as a general population, there are numerous follow-up studies that would be beneficial to UWSP. Future studies could focus on research into adult transfer and re-entry students, for example. The information gleaned from the interviews in this study could be used to develop and conduct an extensive non-traditional student Web survey. Another interesting study could address the specific ways in which adult students contribute to UWSP, for example, through adding to the overall diversity of the student body and serving as links to the Central Wisconsin community. The researcher also hopes that future studies will look more in-depth at differences in experiences between male and female adult students in different age categories. In addition, it would be helpful to look at the experiences of other specific, marginalized groups, such as adult minority students, adult LGBT students, adult veterans, and adult students with learning disabilities. The data from those studies could then be used to further hone services at UWSP, thereby continually improving the campus climate for the important group of adult learners.

Concluding Remarks

High school graduation rates are dropping, and at the same time, we are looking to broaden diversity on the UWSP campus. The adult students who attend here are faced with numerous challenges and are doing their best to navigate a system which is set up for traditional students, thereby presenting many obstacles for them. Other universities and for-profit institutions are doing everything they can to accommodate adult learners. As noted, there are a

variety of ways in which we can make UWSP a more inviting option for adult students. If changes are not made to welcome, encourage, and accommodate adult students, many are likely to flock to institutions that are more than willing to do so. They may add up all those costs, weigh the benefits, and decide UWSP is just not worth it. As an adult student who has persisted, I believe there is much to gain for both the adult students and for UWSP if we can make it work.

Since the time this thesis was begun, a number of UW System schools have initiated more adult-friendly policies, and positions are being dedicated solely to recruiting, advising, and supporting adult students at our sister institutions. This may be the time for UWSP to expand these options, as well.

In order for us to confront these issues and consider taking steps to remedy them, we must first fully understand the needs of adult students and then develop a strategy for meeting those needs. By creating a place at the table for adult students, UWSP will become poised to serve this population and to further experience the benefits of having students with extensive life experiences learning alongside our traditional students. Indeed, part of the learning is being with different kinds of people; what better way to accomplish this than to make room for those who want to be here, too?

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APPENDIX A

University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point
 Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects

Protocol for Original Submissions

A complete protocol must be submitted to the IRB for approval prior to the initiation of any investigations involving human subjects or human materials, including studies in the behavioral and social sciences.

For all research protocols, please submit the following:

- **1 printed copy with Faculty Mentor and Department Chair signatures** of (1) the completed protocol; (2) project abstract; and (3) samples of informed consent forms to the IRB chairperson. PROTOCOLS LACKING ANY ONE OF THESE THREE ELEMENTS WILL NOT BE APPROVED.
- **A second copy of this page, with signatures.** Printed materials should be submitted to: IRB/Grants Office, 204 Old Main.
- **Electronic copies of all submission materials (multiple files are acceptable)** emailed as attachments to Jason R. Davis, IRB chair: jdavis@uwsp.edu

PLEASE TYPE

Project Title: Adult Students: Obstacles Faced at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point

Principal Investigator: Sarah Stillwell

Department: Admissions Rank: Graduate Student/Asst. Director

Campus Mailing Address: 102 SSC

Telephone: 346-4019 E-mail address: sstillwe@uwsp.edu

Dr. Karlene Ferrante

Faculty Sponsor (if required): _____
 (Faculty sponsor required if investigator is below rank of instructor.)

Expected Starting Date: March 1, 2010 Expected Completion Date: April 9, 2010

X

Are you applying for funding of this research? Yes _____ No _____

If yes, what agency? Non-traditional Student Office/Multicultural Affairs

Please indicate the categories of subjects to be included in this project. Please check all that apply.

Normal adult volunteers _____ Minors (under 18 years of age)
 _____ Incarcerated individuals _____ Mentally Disabled
 _____ Pregnant women _____ Other _____ (specify)

(Faculty Member) I have completed the "Human Subjects Protection Training" (available at <http://www.uwsp.edu/special/irb/start.htm>) and agree to accept responsibility for conducting or directing this research in accordance with the guidelines.

 (Signature of Faculty Member responsible for research)

(Department Chair or equivalent) I have reviewed this research proposal and, to the best of my knowledge, believe that it meets the ethical standards of the discipline.

 (Signature of Department Chair or equivalent)

***** Do not write below this line – for IRB use only *****

IRB approval _____ Date _____

(Signature of IRB Chair)

Approval for this research expires one year from the above date.

If research is not completed by this date, a request for continuation must be filed and approved before continuing.

Revised form: January 2001

Proposal Abstract

Write a brief description of the purpose of the proposed research project. (100-200 words)

The goal of this qualitative study is to explore the experiences adult students have had with UWSP. The researcher will interview 8-12 adult students to explore the obstacles they have faced at UWSP and their strategies for overcoming those obstacles. This exploratory study will employ grounded theory to help explain what it is like to be an adult student at UW-Stevens Point.

Please complete the following questions for all research.

1. Describe the characteristics of the subjects, including gender, age ranges, ethnic background, health/treatment status and approximate number.

Participants will be male and female students currently attending UWSP, who are 24 years of age or older; or have had delayed enrollment into postsecondary education; or have dependents. These students will be from a variety of racial backgrounds and will have part-time or full-time enrollment and employment statuses. Inquiries into health status will not be made. A short demographic questionnaire will be sent to approximately 250 adult students. The researcher will use the returned surveys to identify the subjects to interview.

2. Indicate how and where your subjects will be obtained. Describe the method you will use to contact subjects.

Participants will be obtained from a random sample list created by the Director of Multicultural Affairs, who oversees the Non-Traditional Student Office. Because the definition of participants for this study creates a possible contact list of 1400 students, the Director will randomly select 250 people for possible inclusion in this study. The 250 students will be asked via email to complete a short demographic questionnaire as indicated in question #1, and based on the responses, the researcher will use purposive (snowball) sampling to select 8-12 participants for interviews, along with 3 alternates (in case a selected participant declines to be interviewed). The researcher wants to include different categories of people as connected with the questions on the demographic questionnaire. In other words, a combination of students who are just starting college, are returning, a veteran, a minority student, students of different ages and marital statuses, and those with different employment statuses. The selected participants will be contacted via email with an invitation to participate in the study and specifics about interview times and locations.

3. What are you going to ask your subjects to do (be explicit) and where will your interaction with the subjects take place?

Approximately 250 adult students will be asked to complete a short demographic questionnaire to gather important information about participants' sex, age, race/ethnicity, marital status, number of children, employment, and enrollment status.

Participants selected for personal interviews will first be asked to sign an informed consent form.

Personal interview questions will initially focus on nonthreatening questions, such as how they decided to attend UWSP, and then move to questions about how groups on campus have responded to their presence. Questions about positive and negative experiences will be asked to gain a more complete understanding of what it is like for participants to be adult students at UWSP. The participants will select the time and location of the interviews and will be asked if they are willing to be contacted with follow-up questions.

- X
4. Will deception be used in gathering data? Yes _____ No _____
If yes, describe and justify.
5. Are there any risks to subjects? Yes X No _____
If yes, describe the risks (consider physical, psychological, social, economic, and legal risks) and include this description on the informed consent form.

Participants could experience some discomfort if they have had an uncomfortable experience as an adult student at UWSP and their participation causes them to remember this.

6. What safeguards will be provided for subjects in case of harm or distress? (Examples of safeguards include having a counselor/therapist on call, an emergency plan in place for seeking medical assistance, assuring editorial rights to data prior to publication or release where appropriate.)

If a participant experiences discomfort during the interview, she/he will be directed to the counseling center.

7. What are the benefits of participation/involvement in this research to subjects? (Examples include obtaining knowledge of discipline, experiencing research in a discipline, obtaining course credit, getting paid, or contributing to general welfare/knowledge.) Be sure to include this description on the informed consent form.

Participants will have the benefit of experiencing research in communication and contributing to general knowledge about adult students at UWSP. They may also benefit from knowing their participation has the potential to affect the future experiences of other adult students, since research will be presented to administration. Personal interview participants will be provided with a \$15 gift certificate from the UWSP bookstore as a reward. If a participant needs child care services, this will be provided during the interview.

- X
8. Will this research involve conducting surveys or interviews? Yes _____ No _____
If yes, please attach copies of all instruments or include a list of interview questions.
9. If electronic equipment is used with subjects, it is the investigator's responsibility to determine that it is safe, either by virtue of his or her own experience or through consultation with qualified technical personnel. The investigator is further responsible for carrying out continuing safety checks, as appropriate, during the course of the research. If electronic equipment is used, have appropriate measures been taken to ensure safety?
Yes _____ No _____

Not applicable. Only a tape recorder will be used.

10. During this research, what precautions will be taken to protect the identity of subjects and the confidentiality of the data?

To ensure confidentiality, all personal interview participants will be assigned pseudonyms at the time of selection. The key linking the pseudonyms to the participants' real names will be available only to

the researcher, and it will be kept in a locked file cabinet. No real names will be used in reporting the results of the study. Any other potentially identifying information, such as the name of an employer, will be deleted or changed to disguise the identities of each participant.

11. Where will the data be kept throughout the course of the study? What provisions will be taken to keep it confidential or safe?

All research notes and audio tapes will be kept in a locked desk in the researcher's office located in the Admissions Office at UW-Stevens Point with the researcher being the only person with access to the desk. Audio tapes of the interviews will be transcribed and saved onto the researcher's computer, and the researcher will be the only person with access to the computer and the password protected documents.

12. Describe the intended use of the data by yourself and others.

The intended use of the data for this study is for the researcher to complete her Master's thesis in the Department of Communication and to gain a greater understanding of the experiences adult students have had with UWSP. Through understanding, the researcher and administrators can learn more about how to best attract and retain adult students, as well as how to support their academic success. The researcher and administrators will be able to use the data from this study to assess the experiences adult students are having on the UWSP campus. From there, informed decisions can be made as to what is working well for this population and what adjustments need to be made. The researcher and administrators should be able to see what services are supportive of adult students and what is not working according to those students' experiences, and then develop solid plans for facilitating adult student success.

13. Will the results of the study be published or presented in a public or professional setting?

X

Yes _____ No _____

If yes, what precautions will be taken to protect the identity of your participants? **State whether or not subjects will be identifiable directly or through identifying information linked to the subjects.**

This data will be used in a Master's thesis in the Division of Communication and possibly for a professional conference paper and publication.

14. State how and where you will store the data upon completion of your study as well as who will have access to it? What will be done with audio/video data upon completion of the study?

Upon completion of this study, all data, including any audio materials, will be kept in a locked desk in the researcher's office in the Admissions Office at UWSP. No one but this researcher will have access to the data. Audio tapes of the interviews will be transcribed and saved onto the researcher's computer, and the researcher will be the only person with access to the computer and the password protected documents. The original tapes will be labeled with pseudonyms and kept in a locked drawer in the researcher's desk.

Informed Consent to Participate in Human Subject Research

Sarah Stillwell, graduate student in the Department of Communication at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point (UWSP) is conducting a study to explore the experiences of adult students on the UWSP campus. You are being asked to participate in this study.

As part of the study, you will be interviewed about your experiences as an adult student at UWSP. The interview will take approximately one hour of your time.

It is helpful to be able to analyze the results from all of the interviews and then contact participants with follow-up questions. You can choose, however, not to be contacted in the future.

We anticipate no risk to you as a result of your participation in this study other than the inconvenience of the time to participate in the interview. You could, however, experience some discomfort if you have had an uncomfortable experience as an adult student at UWSP and your participation in the interview causes you to remember this. If this occurs, you will have an opportunity to visit a counselor at the UWSP counseling center.

You will have the benefit of experiencing research in communication and contributing to general knowledge about adult students at UWSP. You may also benefit from knowing your participation has the potential to affect the future experiences of other adult students, since research will be presented to the UWSP administration. As a reward for your participation in this study, you will be provided with a \$15 gift certificate from the UWSP bookstore. If you need child care during the interview, it will be provided at no cost to you.

For the purpose of the study, your interview results will be coded so that your name will not appear on any of the forms used for data analysis. No information about you will be released to anyone other than yourself, and publication or presentation of the study data would in no way identify you as a participant. Only Sarah Stillwell will have access to the names associated with the interviews and this information will be kept in a locked desk in her office, to which she is the only person with access. All transcribed notes will be kept on her computer hard drive, and she is the only person with password access to this computer.

If you want to withdraw from the study, at any time, you may do so without penalty. Any information collected on you up to that point would be destroyed.

Once the study is completed, you may receive the results of the study. If you would like these results, or if you have any questions in the meantime, please contact:

Sarah Stillwell
Admissions Office
University of Wisconsin – Stevens Point
Stevens Point, WI 54481
(715) 346-4019

If you have any complaints about your treatment as a participant in this study or believe that you have been harmed in some way by your participation, please contact:

Dr. Jason Davis, Chair
Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects
Department of Business & Economics
University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point
Stevens Point, WI 54481
(715) 346-4598

Although Dr. Davis will ask your name, all complaints are kept in confidence.

I have received a complete explanation of the study and I agree to participate.

Name _____ Date _____
(Signature of subject)