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ACADEMIC AND SOCIAL INTEGRATION
OF NONTRADITIONAL STUDENTS: THE
ROLE OF ACTIVE LEARNING STRATEGIES
AND SENSE OF BELONGING IN
INTEGRATION AND PERSISTENCE

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ACADEMIC AND SOCIAL INTEGRATION OF NONTRADITIONAL STUDENTS:
THE ROLE OF ACTIVE LEARNING STRATEGIES AND SENSE OF BELONGING
IN INTEGRATION AND PERSISTENCE

by

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B.S., Business Administration, Mid-Continent University, 2008
M.S.Ed, Workforce Education and Development, Southern Illinois University, 2010

A Dissertation
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
Doctor of Philosophy in Education

Department of Workforce Education and Development
in the Graduate School
Southern Illinois University Carbondale
December 2014

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DISSERTATION APPROVAL

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in the field of Workforce Education and Development

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October 27, 2014

AN ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION OF

Deborah R. Barnett, for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in Workforce Education and Development, presented on October 27, 2014, at Southern Illinois University Carbondale.

TITLE: ACADEMIC AND SOCIAL INTEGRATION OF NONTRADITIONAL STUDENTS: THE ROLE OF ACTIVE LEARNING STRATEGIES AND SENSE OF BELONGING IN INTEGRATION AND PERSISTENCE

MAJOR PROFESSOR: Dr. C. Keith Waugh

This mixed methods study, a concurrent triangulation design, explored Tinto's integration theory as it relates to nontraditional students. The study explored the relationship of academic and social integration, defined by classroom active learning strategies and sense of belonging, with persistence. The study also expanded upon the idea of socio-academic integrative moments which might occur when social and academic integration converge or overlap. Consistent with Tinto's model, factors including initial institutional commitment, initial goal commitment, and subsequent institutional commitment were also analyzed. Multiple regression analysis of data obtained from a 38-question survey ($n=299$) revealed one common predictor of persistence among the three research questions: initial commitment to the educational goal. Qualitative data, interpreted from a diverse group of 10 nontraditional students, confirmed the quantitative findings and revealed that, in relation to persistence, initial commitment to the educational goal seemed to transcend all other theoretical factors including institutional commitment, social integration, academic integration, and student entry characteristics such as race, gender, parents' educational attainment, first-generation status, and high school GPA. In addition, focus group findings indicated the presence of socio-academic integrative described as academically-focused social integration. Recommendations for further exploration into the integrational convergence

or non-linearity of Tinto's model are included. Recommendations for practice and future research prompt additional exploration into nontraditional student persistence including suggestions to identify factors related to meaningful integration for nontraditional students and how those factors might influence persistence.

DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this work to my family and friends who supported and believed in me along the way. When I set out to go back to school as a nontraditional student to earn my bachelor's degree and "to finish what I started a few decades ago" I had no idea that the journey would take me seven years and would conclude with a doctoral degree. The encouraging words and ongoing support of my husband Mike, my son Travis, my mom, sister, brother, and dear friends (including my two musketeers), and colleagues were the wind beneath my wings. I also dedicate this to my dad who always hoped I would go back to finish my degree but, unfortunately, passed away unexpectedly before I achieved that goal. Although he did not live to see me graduate, he gave me a lifetime of encouragement and wisdom that has carried me through. He was my biggest cheerleader and, in his eyes, I could do anything. Thank you Dad!

This dedication would be lacking, however, if I did not give credit where credit is due. My husband, Mike, is the one person who saw each and every step along the way and NEVER wavered in his support. He has always supported my dreams and passions and, for that, I am forever grateful. He celebrated my accomplishments and encouraged me through the challenging times. Many do not know that the night before the first class of my master's degree program, I doubted my decision, wondered if I could really do it, and almost did not go. It was Mike who believed in me in those moments of hesitation and fear. He was with me every step of the way through my master's degree and now my Ph.D. There are no words to adequately express my gratitude. So, my love, this one's for you!

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I believe that a doctoral degree, although authored by one, is a culmination of the work of many. As I think back over the nearly four years of coursework, preliminary exam preparation, and dissertation, there are many professors, classmates, and colleagues who each offered support and provided a piece to the puzzle. For each person along the way, I acknowledge your unique contribution no matter how large or small.

I would like to sincerely thank Dr. Keith Waugh for his guidance, instruction, wisdom, and support. You helped me navigate each step of the dissertation process in a way that helped me grow academically, professionally, and personally. I have the utmost respect for you and your expertise and appreciate the opportunity to have you as a mentor.

I would like to thank my other committee members, Dr. Cynthia Sims, Dr. Barbara Hagler, Dr. Saran Donahoo, and Dr. John Nicklow. I intentionally selected each of you for the expertise and insight that I felt you could bring to the committee. You did not let me down. Each of you offered a unique perspective that helped this research evolve into more than I could have imagined. You challenged and stretched me along the way and I thank you! I am a better person, a stronger researcher, and a more confident professional as a result.

I would also like to thank Dr. Jennifer Calvin. The time you took to offer comments, suggestions, and feedback helped me to dig deeper into my research and to ask questions that I might not have otherwise thought of. Thank you for taking the time to invest in me and in this work.

Finally, I acknowledge each of the 309 nontraditional students who took the time to complete a survey or participate in a focus group. Without you, this research would not exist. I especially want to thank my focus group participants who, in this study, are named Bob, Lauren, Grammy, Faith, George, Jane, Lana, Arthmis, Monica, and Steve (you all know who you are). Hearing your stories became one of the most rewarding pieces of this research. The honesty and transparency you offered were incredible. A part of you will forever be with me as I continue my work with nontraditional students. Thank you for lending your voice and sharing your own unique experiences.

RESEARCHER'S POSITIONALITY

Like the students in this study, I am also a nontraditional student who set out to finish a bachelor's degree abandoned years prior. I previously enrolled in college as a 17-year-old, first-generation student just out of high school and, in my junior year of college, abandoned my degree to go on into the workforce. In my late-30s, after having been out of school for nearly two decades, I made the decision to go back to school to earn my degree. My decision was not necessarily for career advancement but, rather, to finish what I started. I enrolled in a cohort-based bachelor's degree program that would fit into my multiple life roles including wife, mother, and business owner.

When I returned to finish my degree, I realized that I was a very different and more committed student than I was at age 17. As an adult, I loved learning. After completing my bachelor's degree, I made the decision to enroll in graduate school: a decision largely due to instructors who believed in me and encouraged me to further my education. It was at that point that I experienced the navigational challenges of a large institution and did not have the luxury of a student cohort for support like I had while earning my bachelor's degree. Early in one of my master's courses, I read an article entitled *The Politics of Neglect: Adult Learners in Higher Education* (Sissel, Hansman, & Kasworm, 2001). That single article sparked in me a passion for not only helping other adult learners to achieve their educational goal but to advocate for their needs.

Within two years, I finished my master's degree, enrolled in a doctoral degree program, and became employed full-time serving nontraditional students at that same institution. I knew early on that my dissertation topic would not only include learning more about nontraditional

students but would help me and others understand how this marginalized population seems to succeed despite the multiple barriers they sometimes face and the multiple roles they balance. I knew about my own experiences and I knew about research like the *Politics of Neglect* article. What I did not know was whether my experiences were similar to or different than that of other nontraditional students. How did I manage to go from a first-generation student who had dropped out of college to earning a master's degree and now a Ph.D.?

One might conclude that, due to my own experiences and because of my role serving nontraditional students at a higher education institution, I would be biased. However, I learned early on that nontraditional students are a diverse group, each having a different story and each arriving to pursue their degree through a different route and for varied reasons. There are more unknowns about this population than knowns and much is yet to be explored and understood. Therefore, my positionality is not one of agenda or bias but of inquiry and exploration. I have my own lived experiences as a nontraditional student who managed to persist through a bachelor's degree, master's degree, and now a doctoral degree. How do others persist? How do they integrate into a youth-centered culture without the luxury of an adult learner cohort? How do we, as higher education professionals, better assist them to degree completion? These are questions I had and these are questions that are yet to be fully explained by this current study or other research.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

A report sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education (Hussar & Bailey, 2013) projected the population of students age 25-34 to increase by 20% between 2010 and 2021 and students age 35 and older to increase by 25%. The report also projected an increase in the traditional student population, age 18-24, but at a lower rate of 10%. A separate report sponsored by the Public Agenda (Hagelskamp, Schleifer, & DiStasi, 2013) estimated that “23 percent of non-degree-holding Americans between 18 and 55 years are considering enrolling at a vocational school, college or university within two years to complete a certificate or degree” (p. 8). However, enrollment is just the beginning. “Once enrolled in college, understanding factors associated with student persistence is critical to strengthening the educational pipeline and achieving the broad economic and social goals fundamental to American society” (Wolniak, Mayhew, & Engberg, 2012, p. 795). As a result, expectations of higher education institutions are to not just enroll students but to demonstrate student success, namely the completion of degrees and other credentials. All students, including those with nontraditional characteristics such as delayed enrollment, work responsibilities, and family commitments (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2002a), and successfully increasing the educational attainment of those students should be a major focus of higher education.

Despite an ongoing trend in enrollment, some studies cite nontraditional students among the highest group to not graduate (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Guidos & Dooris, 2007; Wlodkowski, Mauldin, & Gahn, 2001). Even though nontraditional students appear to be at risk for non-completion, few empirical studies address the issue of nontraditional student persistence. A

comparison of those studies find data that are contradictory with some citing above normal graduation rates and others citing the population to be at a high risk for dropout (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Flint, 2005; NCES, 1996; Wlodkowski, Mauldin, & Gahn, 2001).

Although research related to nontraditional student characteristics and how those characteristics present barriers to persistence is abundant, few studies apply a theoretical framework to predict or inform nontraditional student persistence. The lack of research is significant as missing elements of a theoretical framework affect the ability to make informed decisions regarding policy and practice. Researchers primarily apply persistence theories, most notably Tinto's integration theory (1975), to traditional student populations (Berger & Braxton, 1998; Braxton, Jones, Hirschy, & Hartley, 2008; Braxton, Milem, & Sullivan, 2000; Cabrera, Castaneda, Nora, & Hengstler, 1992; Chapman & Pascarella, 1983; Jones, 2010; Pascarella, 1982; Pascarella, Duby, & Iverson, 1983) leaving predictors of persistence among other student populations largely unresolved. Applying the theory to traditional populations also limits measures of social and academic integration to out-of-class campus involvement such as student organizations or fraternity/sorority involvement, campus activities, and residence life common to younger students, but not applicable to nontraditional students balancing school with work and family.

For nontraditional students who juggle school with outside obligations, researchers cite the classroom as their only connection to campus and the primary integration site (Ashar & Skenes, 1993; Buglione, 2012; Deil-Amen, 2011; Donaldson & Graham, 1999; Samuels, Beach, & Palmer, 2011; Tinto, 1997, 2006, 2012; Townsend & Wilson, 2009). Tinto and Pusser (2006) cite the classroom as the most important place for involvement given that the classroom serves as

the common meeting place for all students to interact with faculty and peers. They further explained, “If involvement does not occur in these smaller places of engagement, it is unlikely it will easily occur elsewhere” (Tinto & Pusser, 2006, p. 8). In his latest work, Tinto (2012) emphasized, “The classroom is the building block upon which student retention is built and the pivot around which institutional action for student retention must be organized” (p. 124). Although cited as the primary site of integration and important to retention, empirical evidence linking classroom integration and persistence and testing the relevance of Tinto’s theory to nontraditional student groups is lacking.

Tinto’s theory combined with existing literature served as the guide for this current study, which utilized a mixed methods approach to quantitatively analyze and qualitatively explore nontraditional student integration and persistence as it relates to the classroom. Identified classroom integration constructs applied to the Tinto’s theoretical model are sense of belonging as related to social integration, and active learning strategies as related to academic integration. Since these constructs are new to the integration model, the decision to utilize a mixed methods approach, rather than a monomethod, stemmed from the need for a comprehensive analysis to triangulate current literature, statistical data, and student experiences to legitimize conclusions and to broaden understanding. Mixed methods research (MMR) provides the navigational tools to understand nontraditional student integration not only through a wider cast net of quantitative analysis, but also through individual student voices resulting in a deeper understanding of how the numbers might converge with or be contradictory to lived experiences. This triangulation not only provides opportunity for increased understanding of a phenomenon, but allows for the examination of any convergent or contradictory findings (Ary, Jacobs, & Sorensen, 2010).

Findings from this current study add to the body of knowledge related to theories of integration and persistence and begin to address the gap pertaining to persistence among the growing population of nontraditional students through classroom measures deemed appropriate to the population.

Background of the Study

To provide background for this current study, initial exploration of nontraditional student characteristics that differ from the traditional student and discussion of how these characteristics might inhibit persistence was included. Second, a review of literature related to nontraditional student integration and persistence provided evidence that the classroom, rather than out of class activities, serves as the primary point of integration for nontraditional students due to their competing obligations (Deil-Amen, 2011; Graham & Donaldson, 1999; Kasworm, 2003, 2005; Tinto, 1997, 2012). As a result, researchers called for further inquiry into the classroom's role in student integration and how social and academic integration might converge in the classroom environment to produce *socio-academic integrative moments* (Deil-Amen, 2011; Tinto, 1997, 2012; Tovar, 2013). This call for research identified the gap in literature and established the need for this dissertation study and for future research. Third, since nontraditional student involvement might be limited to the classroom, exploration included a review of successful classroom strategies to determine patterns and behaviors consistent with classroom involvement.

Student persistence theories, most notably Tinto's Integration Theory (Tinto, 1975; Tinto & Cullen, 1973), cited social and academic integration as precursors to persistence and generally link integration to campus involvement. Not only are out-of-class activities rarely possible for nontraditional students, literature concludes that "adult students have a unidimensional

experience as they engage in college: the classroom and the classroom only” (Buglione, 2012, p. 110). Research using traditional measures of integration for nontraditional students contributes to the misperception that engagement is not important to nontraditional students when the more accurate conclusion could be that they engage differently (Southerland, 2010; Tweedell, 2005). Tinto (1997) alluded to this fact in his article, “Classrooms as Communities: Exploring the Educational Character of Student Persistence”, in which he explored how the classroom might play a role in the integration of students academically and socially. Tinto (1997) suggested that for commuters and nontraditional students with outside responsibilities, “the classroom is the crossroads where the social and academic meet” (p. 599). Tinto continued by explaining that much of the research, including his own, had neglected the classroom as a vital component influencing student integration and persistence.

Tinto (1997) also recommended further inquiry into the idea that social and academic integration may not be two separate integration factors as previously thought. Instead, he suggested that they may “appear as two nested spheres, where the academic occurs within the broader social system that pervades the campus” (Tinto, 1997, p. 619). Townsend and Wilson (2009) came to a similar conclusion in their qualitative study of community college students who had transferred to a large public research university. They suggested, “Academic and social needs seem to blend together into a desire for socially-oriented academic integration” (Townsend & Wilson, 2009, p. 419). A separate qualitative study (Deil-Amen, 2011) exploring academic and social integration among two-year community college students also provided preliminary evidence consistent with Tinto’s suggestion of the non-linearity of social and academic integration. The study (Deil-Amen, 2011) concluded,

Not only did academic integration take a slightly more social form than one would expect based on previous measures, but also, social integration was often characterized by academic utility, and the tight interconnectedness of the two forms of integration often make them indistinguishable in these two-year settings. (p. 82)

Deil-Amen (2011) coined the term *socio-academic integrative moments* to describe the type of integration that students seemed to experience through classroom interactions as opposed to out-of-class, campus activities. Students in Deil-Amen's study described socio-academic integrative moments as precursors to persistence and cited the classroom as creating opportunity for academically-focused contact with faculty and students and a place in which a sense of connection or belonging was developed.

Although some have questioned the applicability of Tinto's theory to nontraditional student groups, Deil-Amen (2011) concluded that her research,

Supports the challenge to resist desires to dismiss more traditional frameworks for understanding persistence (i.e. Tinto) based on their weaknesses. Rather, integrating the strength of such frameworks with current research on the experiences of marginalized and minority students in different types of postsecondary institutions can be of great value. (p. 84)

Based on Tinto's (1997) recommendation of further inquiry into the classroom as an integration point and Deil-Amen's (2011) suggestion of the possibility of socio-academic integrative moments in the classroom through her qualitative study, this current study employed a comprehensive approach by utilizing both quantitative and qualitative methods to examine

Tinto's framework and its applicability to nontraditional students using in-class measures of integration.

Statement of the Problem

The nontraditional student population continues to increase yet research related to persistence among this population, considered at risk for non-completion, is limited. Few empirical studies address the issue of nontraditional student persistence and a comparison of those studies find contradictory data (Ashar & Skenes, 1993; Bean & Metzner, 1985; Flint, 2005; NCES, 1996; Wlodkowski, Mauldin, & Gahn, 2001). Although Tinto's theory linking integration to persistence has been widely studied, integration measures have focused primarily on out-of-class activities common to traditional students but inappropriate measures of integration for nontraditional students whose primary campus connection is the classroom. Findings from Townsend and Wilson's (2009) qualitative study support the claim that Tinto's construct of social integration, as measured by co-curricular activities, was irrelevant to nontraditional students. Deil-Amen's qualitative study (2011) provided initial insight into nontraditional student integration and persistence at community colleges through socio-academic integrative moments in the classroom, but research is still lacking, particularly as it relates to four-year institutions. Because of this lack of research, institutions are unable to make informed decisions related to policies and programs that might increase nontraditional student degree completion.

Purpose of the Study

Utilizing Tinto's integration theory as the framework, the purpose of this current study was to examine social and academic integration as it relates to nontraditional students and the

classroom. The study built upon the idea that social and academic integration, when occurring in the classroom, could present as combined spheres of influence or socio-academic integrative moments rather than the linear constructs typically cited in Tinto's theory (Deil-Amen, 2011; Tinto, 1997). Research questions served as a guide for the purpose of this current study, which is (1) to empirically test and explore the applicability of Tinto's theory as it relates to nontraditional student integration and persistence through classroom measures of sense of belonging and active learning strategies; and (2) to examine the possibility of socio-academic integrative moments within the classroom or learning environment by testing and exploring the convergent influence of the social and academic integration factors.

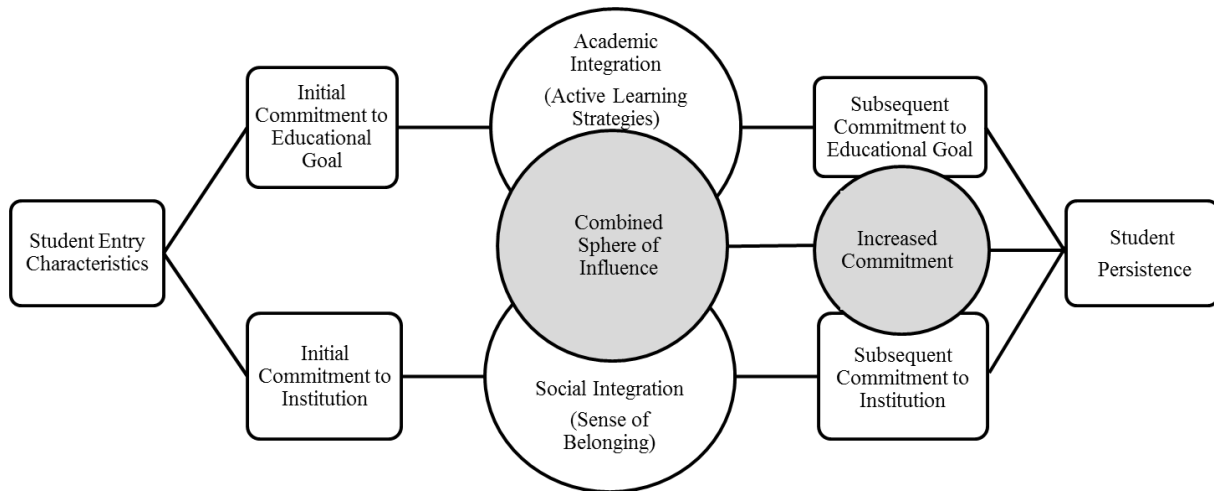
Research Questions

The study utilized both quantitative and qualitative analysis, or mixed method research, to examine the influence of social and academic integration of nontraditional students as it relates to persistence and the possibility of socio-academic integrative moments (see Figure 1). As determined by the literature review, which explored possible classroom-based integration factors, the study utilized perceived sense of belonging to measure social integration, and classroom active learning strategies to measure academic integration. The following research questions served as a guide for this study.

1. What is the relationship of academic integration through classroom active learning strategies with nontraditional student intent to persist? (see Figure 1, top row of model)
2. What is the relationship of social integration through a perceived sense of belonging with nontraditional student intent to persist? (see Figure 1, bottom row of model)

3. What is the relationship of the interaction of variables (perceived sense of belonging and classroom active learning strategies) with nontraditional student intent to persist? (see Figure 1, middle row of model)

Academic and Social Integration: Spheres of Influence on Student Persistence



SOURCE: Adapted from Tinto (© The Ohio State University Press) 1997.

Figure 1. Modification of Tinto's Integration Model including Spheres of Influence

Significance of the Study

Institutions have experienced an increase in nontraditional student enrollment due to economic decline and a change in societal norms (Compton, Cox, & Laanan, 2006). Although research related to traditional student persistence is abundant, data measuring nontraditional student outcomes and persistence is minimal leaving institutions uninformed about best practices to help them succeed (University Professional and Continuing Education Association [UPCEA] & Inside Track, 2012). This issue is increasingly significant and is receiving a heightened level of attention and urgency within higher education due to the following: (1) the continual rise in

the population of nontraditional students; (2) the escalating pressure by accreditation boards, higher education boards, and funding sources which hold institutions accountable for demonstrating student success and improving degree completion outcomes for broader population definitions; and (3) the extreme costs connected to federal and state funding for unfinished degrees. In fact, a report by the American Institutes of Research (Schneider, 2010) revealed an alarming number of taxpayer dollars invested in students who did not persist to degree completion. The report estimated that, during the five-year period studied (2003-2008), student attrition equated to over thirteen billion dollars in federal student grants, state appropriations, and state student grants at four-year universities and two-year colleges.

Understanding nontraditional student persistence is important as any student who enrolls in higher education and does not persist to completion exhausts already limited resources, both personal and institutional. In addition, non-completion reduces societal achievement goals, both economic and social (Wolniak, Mayhew, & Engberg, 2012). Therefore, the focus of this current study related to nontraditional student persistence is significant considering increased student enrollments, disproportionate gain given limited student resources, increased student success accountability measures, decreased state and federal resources, and increased awareness of failed return on taxpayer dollar investment.

Definitions

Academic Integration: “A measure of the general expansion of the individual’s intellectual breadth and scope, of the person’s ability to think systematically and critically, and of his stimulation in his academic coursework” (Tinto & Cullen, 1973, p. 56). A construct related to how well a student feels that he or she fits into the academic life of an institution (Brown, 2002).

Active learning: Involves students engaged in higher order thinking tasks as compared to just listening, an inactive or passive learning response (Bonwell & Eison, 1991).

Adult Learner/Adult Student: Students typically seeking work-related certificates, pursuing a vocational degree, enrolled in adult education at a community college, or enrolled in distance education (Compton, Cox, & Laanan, 2006).

Barrier: Anything that limits or deters adult learners from enrolling in higher education programs (DeVito, 2009).

Dropout: The failure of students to accomplish educational goals, given the ability and dedication needed to achieve the goal (Tinto & Cullen, 1973).

Engagement: The extent to which they [students] take part in educationally effective practices. (Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2006, p. 32)

Institutional Commitment: “The interaction between the individual’s commitment to the goal of college completion and his [her] commitment to the institution which, in turn, determines whether or not the individual decides to dropout from college” (Tinto & Cullen, 1973, p. 43).
“Feelings of attachment or belonging that students establish with the institution” (Brown, 2002, p. 71)

Integration: The reciprocal relationship or interaction between the student and the institution resulting in the merge of campus culture and student norms (Wolf-Wendel, Ward, & Kinzie, 2009).

Involvement: “The quantity and quality of the physical and psychological energy that students invest in the college experience” (Astin, 1999, p. 528).

Nontraditional student: Students who have one or more of the following characteristics: delayed enrollment, part-time enrollment, full-time employment, financially independent, and family commitments (NCES, 2002a). For the purpose of this current study, nontraditional is specifically defined as age 25 and over or age 18-24 (married and/or with dependents).

Persistence: Student's decision to remain enrolled in an educational institution to further their education. The longitudinal outcome of an interactive process between the individual and the institution in which registered (Tinto & Cullen, 1973).

Sense of Belonging: "A person's experience of being valued or important to an external referent and experiencing a fit between self and that referent. Connotes membership in groups or systems" (Haggerty, Lynch-Sauer, Patusky, Bouwsema, & Collier, 1992, p. 174).

Social Integration: "The development (through peer associations, activities, faculty/staff contact, etc.) of sufficient congruency with some part of the social system of the college" (Tinto & Cullen, 1973, p. 60). "A match between the individual student and the social system" (Ting, 2008, p. 6).

Limitations and Delimitations

The researcher conducted the study at a Midwestern, public, four-year, research institution and delimited specifically to nontraditional undergraduate students enrolled in the spring 2014 semester. Since the study focused on the classroom as the site of integration, the study delimited the participant pool to students attending class on-campus rather than online or at a distance. The study's limitations, or methodological restrictions, included non-random selection of participants as all students meeting the defined criteria were eligible to participate. Therefore, because the study consisted of a census rather than random selection and delimited to

the on-campus, nontraditional student population at a public, four-year, research institution, the study findings are not generalizable to all nontraditional student populations.

Overview of the Study

Five additional chapters comprise the remainder of this study, which includes a comprehensive literature review, research methodology, data analysis, and summary, conclusions, and recommendations. Chapter 2, Literature Review, provides an in-depth view of scholarly literature related to nontraditional students and integration theory. The chapter begins with background into what categorizes and defines nontraditional students and what barriers exist to their persistence. Next, the chapter presents Tinto's integration theory as it has evolved over time and how it relates to nontraditional students. The literature review concludes with discussion of social and academic integration, along with constructs used in research to explain the integration phenomena, as they relate to the classroom through students' perceived sense of belonging and through the presence of active learning strategies.

Chapter 3, Methodology, outlines the data collection plan for the study. This plan includes the research questions guiding the study; justification of mixed methods design; purpose, priority, and sequence of methods; definition of the study population and sampling procedures; concurrent data collection procedures; independent data analysis procedures; process for data integration and validation; and specific measures and instrumentation used for data collection.

Chapter 4, Quantitative Analysis: Survey Findings, states results from the study's 38-question survey distributed via email to the nontraditional student population enrolled during the spring 2014 semester at the participating institution. Chapter 5, Qualitative Analysis: Focus

Group Findings, describes the lived experiences of a diverse group of 10 nontraditional students who participated in focus group sessions. Tinto's integration theory guided focus group questions to remain in alignment with the study's theoretical framework and to allow for comparison and convergence with the study's quantitative survey findings. Chapter 6, Summary, Conclusions, and Recommendations, provides a summary of converged qualitative and quantitative data, an overview of the study's findings, implications for practice, and recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Issues related to nontraditional students in higher education are abundant with researchers drawing attention to the following: institutional neglect (Sissel, Hansman, & Kasworm, 2001); institutional type (McCormick, Pike, Kuh, & Chen, 2009); college experiences (Chao & Good, 2004; Kasworm, 2001, 2003, 2008); access (DeVito, 2009; Donaldson & Rentfro, 2006); positional identity (Kasworm, 2005, 2010); need for policy change (Klor de Alva, Schneider, & Klagge, 2010; Lumina Foundation & Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education [WICHE], 2010; Pusser et al., 2007; Soares, 2013), and campus climate (Hurtado & Carter, 1997) to name a few. Although researchers have cited a number of broader issues related to nontraditional students in higher education, the focus of this current study was to investigate the specific issue of nontraditional student persistence and how the classroom might serve as a point of integration (Deil-Amen, 2011; Tinto, 1997, 2012).

A number of studies address the issue of persistence among traditional students and provide institutions with the foundation to make informed decisions related to student orientation, campus involvement, first-year programs, and other strategies to engage traditional students. However, these strategies are not always effective or appropriate for nontraditional students who are unlikely to participate in out-of-class activities due to competing obligations. In other words, it is clear that nontraditional student integration is different from that of traditional students (Samuels, Beach, & Palmer, 2011; Southerland, 2010; Tweedell, 2005). What is not clear is how that integration occurs and what institutions can do to positively

influence nontraditional student integration which, according to Tinto's integration model, influences persistence (Tinto, 1975).

The student persistence issue has been a focus of research for decades. Vincent Tinto is a researcher cited often for his work in developing and expanding upon theory to help explain why some students do not finish college. Despite decades of research from Tinto and others as to why students leave college, the issue of student retention continues to be unresolved resulting in a continued drain on institutional, societal, and individual resources. The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (2004) commented, "For the past 100 years, the institutional graduation rate has stubbornly held at the 50 percent mark: half of all students entering higher education fail to realize their dreams and aspirations based on earning a certificate or degree" (p. 3). In other words, continued development of new programs and increased allocation of valuable resources with the goal of student success and degree completion result in minimal progress.

However, the college completion issue is not the only problem. Retention and completion rates, typically measured using data from first-time, first-year freshmen, present an incomplete picture as other student groups go largely unrecognized. When it comes to understanding persistence among today's fastest growing population, nontraditional students, not only is little known about what influences nontraditional student persistence but retention and completion rates of this population have rarely been measured. A report by the Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance (2012) noted, "The lack of recognition and data on the nontraditional student population presents a serious obstacle to understanding this group in the present day" (p. 2). A 2012 study by the University Professional and Continuing Education Association [UPCEA], in partnership with Inside Track, revealed that 43% of responding

institutions did not track retention for nontraditional students and 77% did not know current degree-completion rates for their nontraditional students. The study also revealed that only 16% of institutions understand the core issues of nontraditional student attrition. Of those institutions implementing programs to boost nontraditional student retention and completion rates, only 8% have data indicating that those programs have been successful.

Buglione (2012) noted, “The problem is clear: We have neither clear definitions of non-traditional students nor methods of effectively counting them” (p. 100). Understanding nontraditional student persistence requires starting with the very basics of describing the population and piecing together research with the goal of uncovering insights into the factors that might influence their decision to persist or depart. The following literature review provides background information to better understand nontraditional students and issues of persistence. To begin, an in-depth look at nontraditional student characteristics explains who they are and what makes them different from the traditional student population. Next, research related to nontraditional student persistence and Tinto’s integration theory provides the theoretical background for the study including a recent theoretical shift connecting persistence to the classroom, an important finding for nontraditional students. Finally, an analysis of Tinto’s theory placed in the context of the classroom reveals integration constructs considered more relevant to nontraditional students. Although limited, research indicates that means of integration for nontraditional students tends to originate through academic engagement in the classroom and the development of a sense of connection or belonging (Deil-Amen, 2011; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Tovar, 2013).

Who is the Nontraditional Student?

Literature related to nontraditional students reveals a number of broad issues beginning with disagreement as to the term used to describe them. In addition to *nontraditional*, other terms include the following: adult learner, adult student, re-entry student, returning student (Benshoff, 1993), and, most recently, post-traditional (Soares, 2013). There is much debate about utilizing the term *adult* as anyone above the age of 18 is an adult and, since most students enter college at the age of 18 or after, it would seem plausible to identify all students as adults (Kasworm, 2003). However, when researchers use the term *adult student*, they typically equate the term *adult* to adult responsibilities rather than the age at which one legally becomes an adult. Compton, Cox, and Laanan (2006) further distinguished the term by suggesting, “Adult students are often referred to as nontraditional students, yet not all nontraditional students are adult students” (p. 73). They went on to clarify that adult students are typically seeking work-related certificates, pursuing a vocational degree, enrolled in community college, or enrolled in distance education.

Although not common, other criterion identified in Donaldson and Rentfro’s (2006) content analysis of adult education literature included a gap in education (five years or more) or enrollment in adult-specific degree programs. Kasworm (2003) identified nontraditional students by age (25 and over); maturity as a result of life experience; and multiple life roles. Other studies identifying employment patterns indicated that nontraditional students view themselves as workers first, students second (NCES, 2003).

In contrast to the traditional student, generally viewed as having enrolled full-time in a residential college directly following high school (Tinto, 2012), literature defines the

nontraditional student very differently. Some of the most common characteristics of nontraditional students include these: delayed enrollment, part-time enrollment, full-time employment, financial independence, and family commitments (NCES, 2002b). For traditional students, college is part of preparing for adulthood whereas nontraditional students are typically already “self-supporting, mature, and responsible and lead lives as independent citizens with family and career responsibilities” (MacKinnon-Slaney, 1994, p. 268). Nontraditional students are more likely to work full-time, be married, or have dependents (Senter & Senter, 1998). Additional characteristics that distinguish traditional and nontraditional students are place of residency, care for dependents, military service, or an alternate route to high school completion (Southerland, 2010). Tinto (1993) added, “For them going to college is more frequently a matter of economic needs than it is a youthful rite of passage” (p. 76). Kasworm (2005) noted that nontraditional students view college attendance as a personal life choice resulting from personal transitions or proactive life planning.

The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) cited age, enrollment status, place of residence, hours worked off campus, and care for dependents as appropriate nontraditional student definitions (Southerland, 2010). Studies have also classified students by the number of nontraditional characteristics with levels ranging from minimally nontraditional to highly nontraditional (NCES, 2002b) or what Southerland (2010) referred to as degrees of adulthood. However, findings related to the level of adulthood are contradictory with some citing increased levels of nontraditional characteristics as a hindrance to completion (Wlodkowski, Mauldin, & Campbell, 2002) and others citing that a higher level of adulthood might actually enhance student engagement (Southerland, 2010).

Some authors caution that using the term ‘nontraditional’ to describe returning adult students further marginalizes the population. The term nontraditional “could be considered deficit-based and indicates that somehow these students are not the normal students that colleges and universities intend to serve” (Valencia, 1997 as cited in Southerland, 2010). Descriptive terminology denotes privilege or, in this case, the lack thereof as using a ‘non’ label to define students suggests a lack of acknowledgement and respect (Sissel, Hansman, & Kasworm, 2001) and contributes to outgroup status (Buglione, 2012). Terminology can also influence institutional responses as Sissel, Hansman, and Kasworm (2001) noted,

Some observers may dismiss such labels as mere descriptors, but in fact, such language is political, not only because of the lack of privilege it may signify but because labels on learners affect expectations and influence the actions of educators. (pp. 19-20).

A more appropriate realm for the terminology debate is in the development of public and institutional policy that shapes programs and services, directs funding allocations, and gives voice to traditionally marginalized populations. Although research informs policy and practice, and therefore warrants careful use of terminology, the reason for utilizing the term nontraditional in the context of this current study is solely to differentiate student populations (traditional versus not traditional) for the purposes of defining the data collection query.

A review of adult education literature (Donaldson & Rentfro, 2006) revealed that most authors use age as a distinguishing characteristic of nontraditional students with the primary reason being data availability (Senter & Senter, 1998) with age 25 and over commonly separating nontraditional students from traditional students (McGivney, 2004; Senter & Senter, 1998). Since student data commonly available through admissions and financial aid processes

include age, marital status, and dependent status, for the purposes of this current study nontraditional was specifically defined as age 25 and over or age 18-24 (married and/or with dependents). This expanded definition not only included the common age delineation but also took into account the growing population of younger students entering college with nontraditional characteristics including dependent care.

Nontraditional Student Barriers to Persistence

Characteristics that describe nontraditional students can also pose barriers affecting higher education participation decisions or can influence persistence once they have made the decision to enroll. DeVito (2009) suggested that barriers include anything that limits or deters adult learners from enrolling in higher education programs. Tinto (1997) stated, “For them, going to college is but one of a number of tasks to be completed during the course of a day” (p. 614). Samuels, Beach, and Palmer (2011) concurred that nontraditional students constantly juggle academics with other competing priorities, both professional and personal. Benschhoff (1993) added, “Adults who return to school are overwhelmingly commuters who live, work, and (usually) play away from the college campus” (p. 5). In other words, they enter with multiple obligations which could influence persistence and might prevent them from “becoming a real thread in the fabric of college life” (Buglione, 2013, p. 110). Although nontraditional students are committed to completing their goal, major concerns include affordability and school/life balance (Hagelskamp, Schleifer, & DiStasi, 2013).

In addition to barriers created by life demands, research identified the re-enrollment process as a significant barrier (Lumina Foundation & Western Interstate Commission on Higher Education [WICHE] 2010) as staff shuffled students from one office to another with many of

their questions going unanswered. Tovar (2013) noted that success of marginalized populations, such as nontraditional students, is dependent upon intentional, needs-based transition support through “systematic, purposeful, and informal agent-student interactions” (p. 266). This type of support at the onset of interactions with the institution enhances students’ perception of institutional commitment, mattering, and belonging.

Once nontraditional students decide to participate in higher education, the expectation exists for coursework to be relevant and applicable to their current or future career goals (Hagelskamp, Schleifer, & DiStasi, 2013; Kasworm, 2001; Sutherland, 1996). Educational institutions looking to attract this student population should realize the importance of creating a good fit between nontraditional student expectations and their actual experiences once they enroll. Research indicates that this *fit* increases the potential for student success and subsequent persistence (Noel-Levitz, 2010). A better understanding of who the nontraditional student is should assist institutions of higher education in structuring programs, services, and recruitment efforts to fit the needs of this growing population. For the nontraditional student, making the decision to participate in higher education might be the toughest part. However, entering the academic world can be an intimidating experience for some and may produce a great deal of anxiety for those who have not entered a classroom for several years. Finding strategies to integrate students into their new surroundings is vital to their success.

Studies indicate that integration is vital to becoming assimilated into an institution and persisting to degree completion (Ashar & Skenes, 1993; Tinto, 1975, 1987, 1988, 2006) and lack of integration is frequently cited as a reason for withdrawal (McGivney, 2004). For nontraditional students, integration can be a daunting task if they perceive that their institution

tailors programs and services only to the traditional college student who might live on campus, be involved in campus activities, receive financial support from a parent, and who has not experienced a gap in their educational experience. Despite their limited opportunity for campus involvement, researchers cite that nontraditional students report academic and intellectual development equal to or greater than that of traditional students (Graham & Donaldson, 1999; Graham & Gisi, 2000; Kuh, Gonyea, & Palmer, 2001). Compton, Cox, and Laanan (2006) commented, “Institutions should seek creative ways to make these students feel more involved and engaged in the institution” (p. 79). Since many nontraditional students only come to campus to attend class because of outside roles and responsibilities, researchers cited the classroom as a possible point of integration (Deil-Amen, 2010; Tinto, 1997).

It is clear that challenges can present barriers causing frustration and discouragement for nontraditional students who may already be facing significant barriers of time, money, work commitments, and family responsibilities (Barnett, 2010; Chao & Good, 2004; Guidos & Dooris, 2008; Kasworm, 2008; Mbilinyi, 2006; McGivney, 2004; Pusser et al., 2007; Tannehill, 2009; Wonacott, 2001). The initial barriers to higher education can be a strong influence on the nontraditional student’s decision to participate or not to participate. For those who do make the decision to further their education, persistence can be challenging. Factors that might integrate the traditional student into the educational environment can be lacking for the nontraditional student. Therefore, the question exists as to what steps educational institutions can take to not only welcome nontraditional students into an educational environment better designed to meet their needs, but to also create an atmosphere to help them persist to degree completion.

Tinto's Theory and Nontraditional Students

Despite the debate over the purpose of education, many nontraditional students enter higher education with commitment to one goal: to earn a college degree for purposes of career advancement or career change (Hagelskamp, Schleifer, & DiStasi, 2013). Many of these students have jobs and families that do not permit them to be involved in institutional activities outside of the classroom. However, some of the earliest student integration studies including Tinto's seminal work (Tinto & Cullen, 1973) suggested that "high commitment to the goal of college completion, even with minimal levels of social and/or academic integration and therefore institutional commitment might not lead to dropout from the institution" (p. 43). Nearly 30 years later, students in another study reiterated this point as nearly all described a strong internal commitment to completing their degree in order to open up opportunities for career advancement or to be a role model for their children (Samuels, Beach, & Palmer, 2011). Tinto and Cullen (1973) warned that these students with high commitment to earning their degree may, however, transfer to another college or university if institutional commitment is not strong.

Tinto and Pusser (2006) commented that student departure theory has been one of the most widely studied theories in recent decades and some have cited Tinto's theory as having reached paradigmatic status (Berger & Braxton, 1998). However, despite decades of research conducted on student departure or persistence, the question still remains as to how institutions can better retain students and, in this case, understand more about nontraditional students who have not always been included in the volumes of research. Tinto and Pusser (2006) stated that, although research exists on topics such as academic and social integration, these theories are difficult for institutions to operationalize and assess. They emphasized that, outside of the fixed

student entry characteristics, research cites student involvement as the most important factor to student success. Regarding nontraditional students, the issue is not whether involvement is important, the issue is what institutions can do to engage these students who might have multiple outside obligations.

For decades, researchers have been trying to better understand the factors that influence student decisions to persist through or depart from their educational goals. Among some of the most cited researchers in this field is Vincent Tinto who began looking at college student participation through the lens of accessibility in a 1971 unpublished doctoral dissertation entitled *Accessibility of Colleges as a Factor in the Rates and Selectivity of College Attendance*. Two years later, Tinto and Cullen (1973) published a report for the U.S. Office of Education to explore factors affecting college student dropout with findings illustrated through a theoretical model of dropout.

Tinto and Cullen's 1973 report, funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Planning, Budgeting, and Evaluation (OPBE), named three main goals: (1) to determine if dropout was related to social status and individual ability; (2) to determine if any change had occurred in dropout rates since a persistence model was developed in 1965 by the U.S. Office of Education; and (3) to pursue the development of a theoretical model to explain dropout. The third goal, development of a theoretical model, is one that researchers continue to analyze, expand upon, and debate. Tinto and Cullen's 80-page project was instrumental not only in identifying factors that might influence student departure or persistence but to understand dropout as a longitudinal process rather than an event or set of conditions.

As part of the OPBE report, Tinto and Cullen (1973) conducted a thorough review of dropout studies conducted prior to and after 1965, the year when the U.S. Office of Education developed a model of persistence.. They noted both social status and academic ability as predictors of student dropout or persistence but concluded that ability was the “single greatest predictor of returning to college for a second year” (Tinto & Cullen, 1973, p. 15). What Tinto and Cullen revealed near the end of the 1973 report was the development of a theoretical model to help explain the departure process. The basis for their theoretical model included concepts from Spady’s research related to Durkheim’s theory of suicide (as cited in Tinto & Cullen, 1973), which addressed the issue of isolation and dropping out from society. They suggested, “Given individual characteristics, prior experiences, and goal commitment, it is the individual’s integration into the college environment which most directly relates to continuance in college” (Tinto & Cullen, 1973, p. 41). Commitment to the goal (degree completion) and commitment to the institution became additional factors that Tinto and Cullen suggested had an inverse relationship to dropout: high commitment = low dropout, low commitment = high dropout.

Tinto and Cullen’s (1973) theoretical model indicated that the route to student dropout was not “one size fits all” but rather a process made up of multiple dimensions. The model, expanded upon by a number of researchers since 1973, began with various characteristics of the student, which could affect initial motivations and expectations. Along with those characteristics, a student’s commitment to their educational goal was a pre-entry factor that could have a direct impact on persistence or departure. Once the student entered the educational environment, Tinto and Cullen proposed that the level at which a student integrated into the educational setting, both academically and socially, correlated directly to subsequent goal

commitment and institutional commitment. The higher the degree of integration, the less likely a student would be to drop out of school.

Summary of Other Studies and Findings

Since 1973, Tinto (1975, 1987, 1988, 1993) has expanded upon the initial theory of student departure and numerous other studies have been conducted to further understand the complexities of the student departure phenomenon. Among those researchers are Bean and Metzner (1985); Pascarella (1982, 1985); and, more recently, Braxton (Berger & Braxton, 1998; Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon 2004; Braxton, Jones, Hirschy, & Hartley III, 2008; Braxton, Milem, & Sullivan, 2000). Following is a summary of those studies and major findings to identify the work still yet to be done related to the persistence issue, particularly among nontraditional students.

Pascarella (1982) argued that much of the research to validate Tinto's theory focused on individual institutions, primarily large four-year residential institutions. Pascarella sought to test the model's predictive ability through a multi-institutional study to determine what variations might exist. The study indicated that significant variability existed between institutional type as related to social and academic involvement. While this was not surprising given that students at a residential four-year institution would most likely have more opportunity for involvement than a student at a community college or commuter institution, Pascarella's study presented further evidence that the student persistence issue is multi-dimensional and complex.

Bean and Metzner (1985), recognizing that the conceptual model of student dropout was primarily focused on the traditional student, conducted an extensive review of literature to develop a model to study nontraditional student attrition. In addition to social and academic

factors previously researched as part of integration theory, they added a third set of factors: external or environmental. These factors included finances, hours of employment, outside encouragement, family responsibilities, and opportunity to transfer. Bean and Metzner argued that, while much of the previous research on student departure indicated a strong focus on socialization, social integration for the nontraditional student could be difficult due to competing roles and responsibilities. Therefore, the model sought to determine if utilitarian outcomes, education viewed as a 'means to an end' for career advancement, influenced nontraditional student persistence. The model was later tested (Metzner & Bean, 1987) and considered an inappropriate measure for nontraditional students with results indicating that social integration did not have significant effects on dropout. However, it is important to note that Metzner and Bean's measures for social integration focused on out-of-class activities such as student organization membership and out-of-class faculty contact, which would not typically apply to nontraditional students. As a result, although the study set out to study nontraditional student attrition, the question exists as to the applicability of the measures used.

Pascarella's (1982) research also indicated that social integration had little relevance to persistence of commuter students which, like many nontraditional students, do not typically become involved in campus activities as compared to traditional, on-campus students. However, like Metzner and Bean's research, Pascarella also utilized traditional measures of involvement so it would seem plausible that these measures would have little relevance to commuter students. Contrary to Bean and Metzner, the researcher of this current study contends that socialization of nontraditional students does matter to student success as everyone seeks to belong. However, the ways in which nontraditional students integrate socially and academically can be very different

than those of traditional students and, therefore, require measurements appropriate to nontraditional student behaviors.

In 1987, Tinto addressed the issue of student integration through the discussion of commonalities among retention efforts in higher education. He argued that retention should not be the goal of retention programs but, rather, institutions should focus on increasing the social and intellectual development of all students through effective educational communities (Tinto, 1987). He went on to refer to student dropout as a complex, longitudinal process of student departure. Tinto focused on seven reasons students might leave, or voluntarily withdraw, from an institution: academic difficulty; adjustment (academic or social); goals (college completion); uncertainty (future education/career goals); commitments (unwilling to put forth the effort); congruence (social or intellectual mismatch between student and institution); and isolation (undeveloped sense of belonging).

Tinto (1988) further developed the theory of student departure by adding a dimension that he related to tribal rites of passage/establishing membership, a phenomenon from the field of social anthropology. Van Gennep (as cited in Tinto, 1988) proposed three stages involved in moving from membership of one group or stage in life to another: separation, transition, and incorporation. Essentially, the stages involved leaving behind old patterns, learning new patterns, and establishing those new life patterns. Tinto emphasized that the stages of departure or persistence might not be the same for all students and can overlap or even be experienced in a different order; such is the complexity of the student departure issue. The implications for the institution are to take action to assist students during these transitory rites of passage. In reference to institutional strategies during student transition, Tinto (1988) stated that many

orientation programs are also geared toward incoming high school students and may not be appropriate for older nontraditionals whose needs “may be as great as, if not greater than those for more youthful entrants from high school” (p. 452). Tinto’s 1988 work continued to recognize that much of the research and conversation related to student persistence focused on first-time, first-year students entering college just out of high school. He commented that nontraditional students and transfer students, many times overlooked in these studies, would most likely experience the same rites of passage but in very different ways. Over 20 years later, the necessity exists to better understand student departure or persistence issues of those who are choosing to enter or re-enter college.

Although nontraditional students experience transition, they tend to add the educational experience to existing responsibilities and social networks. For these students, integration does not necessarily equate to separation from a previous group or stage in life. Hurtado and Carter (1997) also questioned the necessity to separate from or abandon previous communities for integration to occur among some student groups. Their work, related to Latino sense of belonging, emphasized the strong familial connections within Latino families that serve as a source of support that students do not have to sever to experience community and belonging in the educational environment. Research indicated that students might be “finding ways to become *interdependent* with their families during college, not completely independent” (Hurtado & Carter, 1997, p. 339). They suggested further exploration of this interdependence among other populations who might have strong cultural, familial connections or have multiple life roles and family responsibilities such as those of nontraditional students.

The lack of uniformity further complicates integration theory when researchers use multiple constructs to operationalize social and academic integration. In fact, Tinto (1993) revisited the concept of integration and believed it signified a deeper level of conformity, sharing of values within a group, and separation from previous groups. He concluded that the concept of membership might be more appropriate when referring to student participation in an institutional environment where conformity of values was not a prerequisite but, rather, adapting to norms and fitting in or achieving affiliation with the group was the more likely outcome. As Hurtado and Carter (1997) pointed out, the concept of membership avoids “the assumption of conformity and assimilation that critics have aptly pointed out are not inclusive of the diverse experiences of historically marginalized groups in higher education” (p. 338). As stated previously, nontraditional students also experience marginalization on college campuses and, therefore, membership might be a more appropriate term to describe their involvement as well.

In Tinto’s article, “Classrooms as Communities: Exploring the Educational Character of Student Persistence” Tinto (1997) explored how the classroom might play a role in the development of students academically and socially. Tinto (2006) explained that most theories of persistence, including his own, focused on why students leave rather than what influences them to stay and that “leaving is not the mirror image of staying” (p. 6). Since the site of integration for nontraditional students tends to be the classroom, understanding more about how classroom experiences influence integration should provide institutions with actionable practices that can be implemented rather than simply relying on the predictability of student entry characteristics that cannot be changed. Tinto recommended further inquiry into the idea that social and academic integration may not be two separate integration factors as previously suggested. Instead, he

suggested that they may “appear as two nested spheres, where the academic occurs within the broader social system that pervades the campus” (Tinto, 1997, p. 619). He proposed that social integration can emerge from activities in the classroom which would be particularly helpful for commuters and other nontraditional students whose only campus interaction may be in the classroom.

The Role of the Classroom in Nontraditional Student Integration

More recently, a shift began occurring in student persistence research. Tinto once viewed the phenomena through a psychological lens concluding in a theme of “students failed, not institutions” (Tinto, 2006, p. 2). Tinto’s view later expanded to include a relational lens focused on the interaction between the role of the environment (institution) and the role of the student. This new perspective on student retention prompted a flurry of new programs and add-ons to the traditional classroom experience. Institutions developed freshman seminars and other first-year programs to assist the student during their first-year transition. In addition, institutions began facing a new paradigm with the influx of nontraditional students with characteristics including these: delayed enrollment, part-time enrollment, full-time employment, financial independence, and family commitments (NCES, 2002a). These characteristics not only define the nontraditional student but also top the list of risk factors that most threaten student persistence and degree completion (Kuh et al., 2006).

Tinto (1993) discussed the role of the classroom in engaging students as compared to activities outside the classroom. Although nontraditional students might have multiple life roles and responsibilities, the one commonality they share when returning to school is the classroom or learning space. Deil-Amen (2011) noted, “For students with limited time, resources, and

inclination to seek assistance and support outside of class, a framework that truly centers on the academic experience as the central vehicle of integration is critical” (p. 65). Since many nontraditional students might only come to campus for class, their time spent in the classroom and what occurs in that classroom increase in importance.

Donaldson and Graham (1999) cited classroom learning and relationships with students and faculty through classroom interaction to be powerful campus influences. When applying Tinto’s theory to nontraditional students, Ashar and Skenes (1993) cited the classroom as the appropriate unit of analysis for measuring integration as opposed to the broader institutional integration commonly used when studying traditional student populations. Tinto (1993) referred to the classroom as “smaller communities of learning” (p. 132) where faculty and student communities intersect. Tinto continued to emphasize that classroom involvement paves the way for faculty-student interaction outside the classroom. Tinto (1993) stated, “In this fashion, colleges can be seen as consisting not merely of multiple communities, but of overlapping and sometimes nested academic and social communities, each influencing the other in important ways” (pp. 132-133). In other words, each class of students becomes an individual community of learning within the larger institution. The ability to create smaller communities within the larger institution is particularly important for doctorate-granting institutions and research institutions as students tend to report high cognitive gains, but low engagement (McCormick, Pike, Kuh, & Chen, 2009).

Regarding engagement through small communities, Tinto positioned the classroom as an entry point from which academic and social integration might emerge. At the time of his 1993 writing, Tinto presented the idea of classroom communities and how they might impact learning

and persistence as an “informed impression” (p. 133) and one that required additional support through empirical evidence. Tinto concluded, “It is quite clear that much remains to be known about the processes of involvement in the nested and overlapping communities of the college and their multiple impacts upon student effort, learning, and persistence” (p. 133). Researchers have yet to fully explore the topic of the classroom as smaller social and academic communities (Deil-Amen, 2011; Tinto, 1997, 2012).

Classrooms as Communities

Although research is mixed as to whether or not social integration plays a role in nontraditional student persistence (Ashar & Skenes, 1993; Metzner & Bean, 1987; Pascarella, 1982), some studies indicated that social integration for nontraditional students occurs inside the classroom through teacher-student and student-student interactions (Deil-Amen, 2011; Harris, 2006). Tinto (1997) suggested that for commuters and students with outside responsibilities, “the classroom is the crossroads where the social and academic meet” (p. 599). In other words, to meet social and academic needs of nontraditional students, the classroom would seem to be the most logical place in which to focus. A common theme among nontraditional students is a lack of connection to the university as many feel they are “just going to class” (Buglione, 2012, p. 116). Kasworm (2003) identified the classroom as the focal point in which nontraditional students defined their collegiate experience. Tinto (1997) continued by explaining that much of the research, including his own, had neglected the classroom as a vital component influencing student integration and persistence.

Studies also noted that, despite the lack of out-of-class involvement among nontraditional students, outcomes related to academic and intellectual development were as strong as or

stronger than that of traditional students (Donaldson & Graham, 1999; Graham & Gisi, 2000).

To further explain this occurrence, Donaldson and Graham (1999) developed a model of college outcomes for adults that presented the classroom as the connective interaction between the adults' cognition, psycho-social and value orientation, and life-world environment. The model demonstrated that, for nontraditional students, connections in the classroom might compensate for campus involvement as it relates to traditional college student outcomes of cognitive, intellectual, and emotional development. A study by Ashar and Skenes (1993) provided further support that the social environment or connections made within the classroom are significant to nontraditional student persistence in an educational program.

For decades, research related to social and academic integration has viewed the two constructs as independent and linear in nature. In the article "Classrooms as Communities", Tinto (1997) suggested that the classroom somehow provides a place in which social and academic integration interconnect rather than acting as separate phenomena. He concluded that this idea may be of most benefit to institutional interactions with commuter students and with nontraditional students whose only opportunity for social and academic integration might be the classroom. Tinto's study (1997), which focused on students in a cohort or learning community, indicated that the academic and social realms appeared to intersect as relationships developed. Furthermore, not only did they intersect but the opportunity for an enhanced learning experience occurred. Deil-Amen (2011) described this possibility as socio-academic integrative moments in which "the academic influence is coupled with elements of social integration to provide needed support and enhance feelings of college belonging, college identity, and college competence" (p. 73). To provide further support, a study of varied collaborative learning settings or learning

communities also discovered this phenomenon of bridging the “academic-social divide that typically confronts students. Learning communities enabled students to meet two needs, social and academic, without having to sacrifice one to address the other” (Tinto, Goodsell-Love, & Russo, 1993, p. 20). Although Tinto’s learning community study (1997) offered evidence that shared learning can play a role in academic and social integration, it is important to note that the study was limited to a community college in an urban setting. Therefore, the question still remains as to whether or not the findings are applicable to other settings or to classrooms that are not part of a structured cohort or learning community.

Institutions relying primarily on student affairs professionals to influence student involvement through activities outside of the classroom often exclude the growing sector of nontraditional students. Furthermore, studies revealed a stark contrast when comparing patterns of involvement among nontraditional students, who had work and family responsibilities, with that of traditional students (Graham & Donaldson, 1999; Graham & Gisi, 2000; Wyatt, 2011). Reynolds and Hebert (1998) concurred,

While some institutions have been creative in organizing activities and programs aimed at involving busy nontraditional students, the students themselves may have great difficulty finding time to participate. Many come to campus only to find a parking space, attend classes, and leave. It is difficult to envision how the positive impacts of involvement and integration can be extended to these students. (p. 34)

For nontraditional students, institutions should focus strategies for involvement and integration on what occurs in the classroom as opposed to out of class activities. Price and Baker (2012) noted, “Investigating student engagement within the academic curricular context rather than as a

separate and distinct phenomenon may provide additional insight into adult engagement” (p. 30). A study of nontraditional student engagement (Wyatt, 2011) revealed a noninterest in traditional campus life engagement. The classroom proved to be the only place on campus in which students engaged and that engagement was always academic-focused. Tinto (1997) suggested viewing classrooms as meeting places within the larger academic arena that could contribute to the feeling of membership within the college community. Deil-Amen (2011) added that, for students with multiple responsibilities or who do not engage with campus in traditional ways, the classroom and the academic experience are vital pieces to the integration framework.

Classroom Strategies Linked to Social and Academic Integration

Through an extensive qualitative study of commuter students, Deil-Amen (2011) sought to discover how integration might differ in nontraditional populations and to operationalize integration as it occurs in historically marginalized groups. The study revealed that, contrary to typical measures of integration that tend to emphasize out-of-class involvement, nontraditional student connection resulted from in-class faculty-student and student-student interaction that created a sense of belonging, both personal and intellectual. Other studies (Donaldson & Graham, 1999; Townsend & Wilson, 2009) provided additional support that the most influential campus experiences for nontraditional students are related to classroom learning and faculty/peer relationships. Deil-Amen (2011) commented, “Unfortunately, our lenses for viewing student persistence have not prioritized the classroom, perhaps because most research has focused on large residential universities populated by students with the privilege of living on campus” (p. 64). In other words, research related to persistence has largely neglected the one place in which all students meet at one time or another: the classroom. However, more recently, viewing the

classroom as a community in which every student can participate, has gained interest (Braxton et al., 2008; Deil-Amen, 2011; Harris, 2006; Price & Baker, 2012).

Deil-Amen (2011) also discovered that the social experiences of students tended to be academically focused and vice versa. She concluded,

Not only did academic integration take a slightly more social form than one would expect based on previous measures, but also, social integration was often characterized by academic utility, and the tight interconnectedness of the two forms of integration often make them indistinguishable. (p. 82)

To clarify, the study cited in-class interactions and faculty-student involvement as leading factors resulting in socio-academic integrative moments that influenced students' sense of belonging, self-efficacy, and social capital. As a result of her qualitative study, Deil-Amen challenged researchers to consider viewing social and academic integration in ways other than the traditional linear constructs. She noted, "Operationalizing the two forms of integration separately reinforces a false dichotomy and could be understating the true importance of socio-academic integrative experiences by recognizing only half of their socio-academic function" (p. 84). Deil-Amen cited a gap in quantitative exploration into the idea of socio-academic moments and recommended further research to identify measures where the traditionally linear social and academic integration constructs might intersect. The present study attempted to address that gap through quantitative data collection related to social and academic integration of nontraditional students and to further explore the lived experiences of these students through focus group interviews.

Given the context of Tinto's student integration theory and the idea of fostering socio-academic integrative moments (Deil-Amen, 2011), the next step in this current study consisted of

identifying, defining, and operationalizing the constructs congruent with social and academic integration, particularly as it relates to the classroom. As identified in the literature, common factors influencing social integration were peer support/peer-to-peer interaction, and sense of belonging/mattering; and common factors influencing academic integration included student-faculty interaction, active/collaborative learning, identity development (view of self as learner), and academic performance/GPA (Flynn, 2009; Hebert & Reynolds, 1998; Kraska, 2008; Reynolds & Hebert, 1998; Spaid & Duff, 2009; Tinto, Goodsell-Love, & Russo, 1993; Uyder, 2010).

Many of these characteristics are essential to student engagement, which researchers broadly defined as “the extent to which they [students] take part in educationally effective practices” (Kuh et al, 2006, p. 31). These educationally effective practices, developed by Chickering and Gamson (1987), served as the premise for the establishment of engagement indicators used by the National Survey of Student Engagement [NSSE] (2007) and include the following: academic challenge, active/collaborative learning (learning with peers), student-faculty interaction, and enriching educational experiences or high-impact practices. NSSE provides data related to educational practices and institutional effectiveness and the goal of the survey was to measure student engagement and the link to learning outcomes. Although data linked student engagement and learning outcomes to persistence, the NSSE does not provide data directly related to what student engagement indicators might influence a student’s intent to persist. Questions also exist as to the applicability of the NSSE to nontraditional populations as many questions appear biased to the traditional college experience. A review of the NSSE 2010 survey results provided preliminary support that nontraditional students, defined in the 2010

survey as first-time college students entering at age 23 or older, scored lower on 20 core items (Price & Baker, 2012). Although these lower scores, on the surface, might equate to low engagement, research suggests that nontraditional students simply engage differently (Southerland, 2010; Tweedell, 2005). For example, other NSSE surveys (2006) cited nontraditional students as less likely to participate in enriching educational experiences as defined by out-of-class activities such as community services, foreign language study, and co-curricular activities. Rather, non-traditional students engaged primarily through in-class activities such as asking questions in class and contributing to discussion (NSSE, 2006; Tweedell, 2005). Keeping in mind the idea of classrooms as communities (Tinto, 1997) and the opportunity for socio-academic integrative moments to occur in the classroom (Deil-Amen, 2011), a review of literature for this current study explored classroom strategies that might influence social and academic integration.

Social Integration

Hausmann, Ye, Schofield, and Woods (2009) noted that studies focusing solely on behavioral integration through campus activities neglects to explain how students who do not have the time or opportunity for campus activities become socially integrated. Bean and Metzner (1985) concluded that social integration does not play a role in nontraditional student persistence when using out-of-class activities as a measurement. Samuels, Beach, and Palmer (2011) also concluded that social integration was not important to nontraditional students and yet students used integrational language when citing the classroom as the “connection to the university and the center of activity” (p. 362). Perhaps the more appropriate conclusion is not

that social integration is irrelevant for nontraditional students but, rather, the definitions and measurements must be relevant to the population.

In Tinto and Cullen's (1973) original study of student integration and persistence, social integration was defined as "The development (through peer associations, activities, faculty/staff contact, etc.) of sufficient congruency with some part of the social system of the college" (p. 60) and, therefore, did not delimit social integration solely to traditional campus life. Years of integration research focused primarily on first-time, first-year freshmen led to the use of out-of-class campus activities as the standard measurement of social integration with little attention given to the applicability of these measures to nontraditional populations. Tinto (1975) emphasized that social integration did not necessarily imply wide-range institutional congruence but, rather, that social integration could occur when students find a place to fit within the smaller, subcultures of college. Twenty years after Tinto's seminal work, he cited a need for research viewing the classroom as one of those subcultures or sites of integration (Tinto, 1997).

Social Integration through the Classroom

Tinto (1975, 1993, 1997) theorized that social integration is a factor which leads to increased institutional commitment which, in turn, influences persistence. Research also indicates that, "institutional commitment is concerned with the feelings of attachment or belonging that students establish with the institutions" (Brown, 2002, p. 71). A study by Strauss and Volkwein (2004) concluded that "multiple student-level variables influence student satisfaction, sense of belonging, and willingness to attend 'all over again'" (p. 218). Classroom experiences and relationships developed within the classroom were strong predictors of institutional commitment and, as a result, persistence. Donaldson and Graham (1999) noted,

“The classroom connects adults with their instructors and student peers and provides a context to socially construct, for themselves and others, what it means to be a college student” (p. 31).

Sense of belonging, as observed in cohort learning groups, fulfilled the need for affiliation by creating strong connections and family-like bonds (Kasworm, 2001; Maher, 2004). For nontraditional students, socialization can and does occur in the classroom.

Hoffman, Richmond, Morrow, and Salomone (2003) noted that sense of belonging is not often included in attrition models and further commented, “This may offer one explanation as to why popular student departure models are able to account for only a small proportion of the explained variance in persistence/withdrawal decisions” (p. 228). They explained that sense of belonging, although not commonly used in higher education studies of departure, has been widely used in other fields such as psychology and psychiatry to explain congruency, or lack thereof, in a social system. Some studies provide preliminary evidence linking sense of relatedness or belonging to academic development and educational outcomes (Beachboard, Beachboard, Li, & Adkison, 2011).

It is interesting to note that Tinto and Cullen’s (1973) original definition of social integration centered on the idea of social congruency. In fact, Tinto’s (1975) seminal work cited his theoretical model as having roots in Durkheim’s theory of suicide or the process of withdrawal from of society. However, few studies have explored sense of belonging and how it might play a role in whether a student persists to degree completion or withdraws from the institution (Hoffman et al., 2003; Tovar and Simon, 2010). Those that have explored sense of belonging focused primarily on ethnic/racial minority student populations or first-year students but found evidence linking sense of belonging to persistence (Hausmann, Ye, Schofield, &

Woods, 2009; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Morrow & Ackermann, 2012). One study in particular (Hausmann, Ye, Schofield, & Woods, 2009) noted that sense of belonging had a direct effect on institutional commitment which, as demonstrated in Tinto's model, serves as the connecting point between social integration and persistence and should be included in student persistence research. Another study (Beachboard et al., 2011) found that sense of relatedness or belonging improved student motivation, positively influenced educational outcomes, and surfaced as the single most influential factor related to student perceived level of institutional contribution to educational development.

Although sense of belonging studies have primarily focused on minority populations (Hurtado & Carter, 1997), research suggests that nontraditional students are similar to minority populations in the marginalization they experience (Sissel, Hansman, & Kasworm, 2001). In his most recent work, Tinto (2012) emphasized the following:

When exploring student involvement, one must ask with whom, in what settings, and about what issues involvement occurs and how, in turn, the student interprets those involvements. Retention requires that a student see him or herself as belonging to at least one significant community and find meaning in the involvements that occur within that community. (p. 67)

Although some literature suggests that sense of belonging and retention are connected, Tovar (2013) noted the rarity of empirical research to provide evidence for those claims. Studies exploring sense of belonging and student persistence are rare (Hausmann, Ye, Schofield, & Woods, 2009) and those specific to sense of belonging and nontraditional student persistence, part of this current study, are practically nonexistent.

Sense of Belonging

Tovar (2013) noted, “While much has been written about the purported link between sense of belonging and student retention, there is little empirical evidence to substantiate this connection” (p. 40). In his study of the influence of sense of belonging on persistence, Tovar cited intercorrelation between mattering and belonging. Previous work by Schlossberg (1989) presented mattering as important to combating feelings of marginality particularly among students in transition. Bollen and Hoyle (1990) proposed belonging as also having strong ties to the construct of perceived cohesion. However, the instrument used by Bollen and Hoyle limited measurement to institutional belonging rather than individual belonging through sub-groups of the institutions such as the classroom. Hoffman et al. (2003) recognized the need to study the influence of sense of belonging on student persistence by defining, operationalizing, and developing an instrument to measure the construct. An in-depth literature review, combined with data from 24 student focus groups, resulted in an 85-item sense of belonging scale (SOBS) measuring two common themes: quality student/peer relationships and quality student/faculty relationships. Hoffman et al. tested the instrument with 448 first-year students and conducted exploratory factor analysis to revise the instrument. They used principal components factor analysis with the goal to,

Identify the main conceptual dimensions of a “sense of belonging” instrument, reduce the number of individual scales needed to effectively measure these independent dimensions, and to provide evidence that these dimensions reflect the conceptual definitions of “sense of belonging” found in research literature. (Hoffman et al., 2003, p. 239)

Principal components factor analysis, used to establish the best construct measures, resulted in five underlying dimensions: perceived peer support, perceived faculty support/comfort, perceived classroom comfort, perceived isolation, and empathetic faculty understanding. Researchers concluded that a perception of *valued involvement* with peers and faculty was a predecessor to belonging and provided evidence linking belonging to persistence but recommended additional research.

Tovar and Simon (2010) concurred, “The construct of SB [sense of belonging], although not foreign to higher education, has been studied minimally and only with select college student populations” (p. 200). To further build upon sense of belonging research, Tovar and Simon (2010) further refined the SOBS through confirmatory factor analysis resulting in 16 items representing three subscales: perceived faculty understanding, perceived peer support, and perceived classroom comfort (see Appendix C).

Faculty understanding. Studies conducted with students as early as elementary and middle school revealed that high levels of teacher support served as a resource to students which positively influenced student engagement (Klem & Connell, 2004). “Students who perceive teachers as creating a caring, well-structured learning environment in which expectations are high, clear, and fair are more likely to report engagement in school” (Klem & Connell, 2004, p. 270). The perception of high teacher support positively influenced student engagement resulting in higher attendance and academic achievement. On the contrary, low levels of teacher support became a liability resulting in low student engagement, decreased attendance, and low academic achievement.

Tinto (1975) commented that, although most think of student-to-student interaction when describing sources of campus socialization, faculty and staff are also an integral part of the social system. Studies cited student-faculty interaction as contributing positively to student belonging (Deil-Amen, 2011) and student motivation (Rugutt & Chemosit, 2009). A common theme revealed from Deil-Amen's study (2011) was the connection between faculty and student development in multiple areas. "During class, instructors allowed time for one-on-one communication and assistance and confirmed students' ability, which not only boosted students' academic performance, but also validated their self-worth, sense of competence and belonging, and belief in their ability to succeed" (p. 82). Deil-Amen noted that nearly three-quarters of the students in her study identified faculty support as instrumental to their feelings of comfort and belonging in college.

Hoffman et al. (2003) commented that perceived faculty understanding occurs when the student believes that faculty place value on them as individuals and that they are not just a number. A study by Samuels, Beach, and Palmer (2011) provided further support when students in their qualitative study, who were pursuing a four-year degree at a traditional university, cited faculty support as pertinent to persistence and belonging. Students in Kasworm's study (2003) cited faculty relationships as important to developing a "sense of place" (p. 89). Students in Deil-Amen's (2011) study cited faculty as critical to the development of social capital and agency within the organization that contributed to persistence through obstacles. Consistent with Tinto's original concept of integration (1975), a student's sense of alienation also decreased as they experienced faculty support in and out of the classroom.

Peer support. Studies have generally focused on social integration by quantitatively measuring the quantity and quality of social relationships with peers (Deil-Amen, 2011). However, nontraditional students tend to build peer relationships through purposeful academic experiences and “purely social relationships were devalued and even described as unwanted obstacles or distractions” (Deil-Amen, 2011, p. 74). Price and Baker’s study (2012) provided further evidence that nontraditional students are more likely than traditional students to develop peer relationships through classroom discussion and in-class activities. The study provided support that connection, created by informal communities within the classroom, allowed for peer relationships to develop even if the classroom is the only means of interaction. Deil-Amen (2011) noted, “Limited contact between students provided meaningful integrative moments valued not for the depth or length of contact, but for their contribution to a sense of connection from shared experiences and challenges” (p. 83). Researchers noticed that, even when students communicated outside of class, discussions tended to focus on academic matters and peer relationship expectation did not necessarily extend to social interaction outside the classroom (Deil-Amen, 2011; Kasworm, 2001, 2005). Tinto (1997) concluded with similar results in his study of learning communities as peer relationships built connections for students in transition. Studies also link student-to-student relations to increased student motivation and social support (Deil-Amen 2011; Kasworm, 2001; Rugutt & Chemosit, 2009; Swenson, Nordstrom, & Hiester 2008; Thomas, 2000).

Classroom comfort. Since the classroom serves as the primary meeting place for students, the level of comfort learners experience in that space can result in varying levels of assurance and confidence. Students in a study of sense of belonging (Hoffman et al., 2003)

revealed that classroom comfort equated to a place students can “always go back to” (p. 235). Other elements contributing to classroom comfort included feeling comfortable about contributing to class discussion, asking questions, making a class presentation, or knowing students within a larger lecture setting.

In relation to the role of the classroom in creating sense of belonging, Kasworm’s study (2005) indicated that nontraditional students “believed they had a voice, a place, and a valued presence in the classroom” (p. 17). Deil-Amen (2011) commented, “Feeling that they could ask questions and ask for assistance in class without being looked upon negatively by their instructor or classmates was enough to combat their fear of not belonging and inspire their drive to persist” (p. 65). Hoffman et al. (2003) noted that classroom comfort can ease anxiety that many students feel in classroom situations such as asking questions or presenting in front of the group. Classroom comfort influences sense of belonging when students feel safe when expressing themselves in the presence of faculty and peers. A qualitative study by Samuels, Beach, and Palmer (2011) noted, as students “became more comfortable with their roles as students and began experiencing some success, they began to interact in more positive ways with the classroom environment; they became leaders, were more verbal, and were more likely to be significantly engaged” (p. 366). The study found that nontraditional students and traditional students utilized the classroom differently as, for nontraditional students, “the classroom was definitely the focal point of their college experience” (Samuels, Beach, & Palmer, 2011, p. 367).

Academic Integration

Researchers defined academic integration as “A measure of the general expansion of the individual’s intellectual breadth and scope, of the person’s ability to think systematically and

critically, and of his stimulation in his academic coursework” (Tinto & Cullen, 1973, p. 56) and “how well a student feels that he or she fits into the academic life of an institution” (Brown, 2002, p. 71). For nontraditional students, Buglione (2011) noted that the classroom is the only opportunity to become part of the academic community because of their outside obligations. As for classroom instruction, programs that allow for real-world application and opportunities for active learning are preferred (Benshoff; 1993; Kasworm, 2001; Sutherland, 1996).

Kasworm (2010) noted nontraditional students constructed their student identity through gaining knowledge, being prepared, engaging in class, and proving they could compete academically. Studies have also cited quality teaching, defined by perceptions of clarity and organization, as a significant factor related to persistence (Wolniak, Mayhew, & Endberg, 2012) but have failed to further analyze pedagogical strategies that might also play a role. LeBeau (2012) concluded, “Institutions that offer opportunities for meaningful, engaged learning are more likely to be successful in recruiting, enrolling, and retaining adult students” (p. 5). In addition, researchers emphasized the role of instructors in creating a supportive, welcoming classroom environment and a place where students can connect (Astin, 1999; Axelson & Flick, 2011; Beachboard & Beachboard, 2010; Braxton, Milem, & Sullivan, 2000; Buglione, 2012; Collins, 2006; Deil-Amen, 2011; Kasworm, 2001; Tinto, 1993, 1997, 2012; Tovar, 2013).

Active Learning Strategies

A renewed interest in student-centered active approaches to learning or pedagogies of engagement (Tinto & Pusser, 2006; Tinto, 2012) as compared to a passive lecture model has prompted researchers to further analyze the effectiveness of classroom strategies (Drew & Mackie, 2011). A study using data from the National Survey on Student Engagement (NSSE)

noted, “College campuses where faculty employ active and collaborative learning techniques have students who were more engaged” (Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2005, p. 165). Bonwell and Sutherland (1996) commented, “Today’s effective college teachers must be prepared not only to share in-depth knowledge of their discipline but also to know something about college students and how they learn” (p. 3). Regarding nontraditional students, Kasworm (2003) noted that students valued faculty who used active learning strategies such as classroom discussion, case studies, real-world application, and connection to previous experiences. Buglione (2012) concurred that nontraditional students need “learning experiences that offer engagement, involvement, and reflective processes, and where classroom climate is representative of trust, support, and challenge” (p. 111). Rather than differentiate between traditional or nontraditional, strategies to create an equitable learning environment for *all* students include engaging students through active participation, facilitating classroom discussion, and promoting student contribution of new ideas and knowledge construction (Tanner, 2013).

Questions exist about the applicability of the NSSE to nontraditional students (Price & Baker, 2012) and an NSSE (2006) report specific to nontraditional students revealed that questions related to participation in campus activities outside the classroom such as volunteerism, research with a faculty member, or extracurricular activities were not as relevant to nontraditional students as compared to traditional students. However, nontraditional students reported more engagement in classroom activities and had better grades than traditional students. These data were consistent with a previous study of 28,000 undergraduate students which concluded that, despite the lack of campus involvement, nontraditional students reported higher levels of progress in areas of academic and intellectual growth than traditional students (Graham

& Donaldson, 1999). This study recommended further inquiry into how nontraditional students use classroom learning to make connections and to increase academic development. In a subsequent study, Donaldson and Graham (1999) developed a student development model for adults that focused on class-related learning as opposed to out-of-class activities. They noted, “Both the instructor and the instructional strategies employed create or fail to create the climate in which in-class and out-of-class learning and knowledge structures (both prior and concurrent) can become connected” (Donaldson & Graham, 1999, p. 31). Researchers agree that what occurs in the classroom is critical to student connection.

In a study of classroom cohort groups, Maher (2005) noticed that group members provided academic support to peers and saw value in helping each other by passing along information, critiquing papers, and forming study groups. Groups also indicated an increased initiation of and involvement in class discussion compared to non-cohort classes they had previously participated in. In a study of first-year students in both two- and four-year institutions, Strauss and Volkwein (2004) concluded that, “programs focusing on the vitality of the classroom experience, such as active learning, may be especially fruitful” (p. 221). They found positive classroom experiences to be strong predictors of institutional commitment. Researchers credit active learning strategies to the development of critical thinking skills and a deeper level of learning through class discussion with peer feedback and encouraged active listening (Dahlgren, Wille, Finkel, & Burger, 2005; Maher, 2005). A study of first-year psychology students also connected active learning strategies with increased classroom involvement and persistence (Dahlgren, Wille, Finkel, & Burger, 2005).

Braxton, Milem, and Sullivan (2000) also provided evidence that active learning directly and indirectly influences persistence. Although the study sought to link active learning strategies to social integration, they noted that active learning strategies served as a precursor to academic integration and influences a student's perception of institutional congruence. A replication of the study found that active learning strategies had a positive and statistically significant influence on students' institutional commitment but, again, failed to link active learning strategies to social integration (Braxton, Jones, Hirschy, & Hartley III, 2008). Items used to measure active learning included class discussion, higher order thinking skills, group work, and a final question related to exams limited to knowledge of facts which served as a negative indicator of active learning. Although previous studies sought to link active learning strategies to social integration, the measurements pertain to in-class, academically focused activities and would therefore seem more appropriate as measures of academic integration originally defined as "A measure of the general expansion of the individual's intellectual breadth and scope, of the person's ability to think systematically and critically, and of his stimulation in his academic coursework" (Tinto & Cullen, 1973, p. 56). Therefore, this current study used Braxton, Milem, and Sullivan's (2000) instrument to measure active learning strategies (class discussion, higher order thinking skills, and group work), but quantitatively tested the link to academic integration rather than social integration.

Class discussion. One of the most commonly used active learning strategies is classroom discussion (Bonwell & Eison, 1991). The use of discussion, as compared to lecture, allows students to retain the knowledge longer, apply the content to other settings, and increase thinking skills. A study by Wolf (2009) revealed, "Discussion boards, group projects, collaborative

projects, and dialogical classroom interactions offer a framework for bonding and support” (p. 57). Providing further support, a qualitative study of adult women returning to college (Deutsch & Schmertz, 2011) concluded that intellectually stimulating classroom discussion strengthened the sense of academic community in the classroom and developed a sense of congruence or academic fit with the campus. Students in Kasworm’s study (2001) cited class discussion as important to an engaging classroom in which students discussed course content from the perspective of diverse life experiences. Another study (Braxton, Milem, & Sullivan, 2000), conducted at a highly selective private research I university found active learning strategies, including class discussion, to have a statistically significant positive influence on persistence.

Higher order thinking skills. Critical thinking is a cognitive process “associated with applying information and recognizing the uncertainty inherent in making decisions” (Beachboard et al., 2011). Studies indicated that student exposure to classroom activities using higher order thinking skills creates the perception of an increased institutional contribution to academic development (Beachboard et al., 2011) and are significant to student motivation (Rugutt & Chemosit, 2009). Researchers cited student-centered active learning techniques as important classroom strategies to engage students regardless of discipline (Ahern, O’Connor, McRuairc, McNamara, & O’Donnell, 2012; Guagliardo & Hoiriis, 2013; Madhuri, Kantamreddi, & Prakash Goteti, 2012; Tanner, 2013) and link higher order thinking skills to enhanced student motivation and increased educational outcomes.

Bonwell and Eison (1991) cited the importance of students moving beyond listening, as in a lecture-based learning environment, to actively engaging through reading, writing, discussing, analyzing, synthesizing, and evaluating what they are learning. They continued,

“Within this context, it is proposed that strategies promoting active learning be defined as instructional activities involving students in doing things and thinking about what they are doing” (Bonwell & Eison, 1991, p. 2). A study of the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) found higher-order thinking skills to be a statistically significant predictor of academic development (Beachboard & Beachboard, 2010) with questions related to educational activities including analysis, synthesis, and evaluation of information or ideas. The connection of higher order thinking skills to academic development is an important finding in relation to the study as academic development is consistent with the original definition of academic integration as cited by Tinto and Cullen (1973).

Group work. Active learning strategies, such as group work, create an opportunity to enhance classroom inclusion (Sutherland, 1996), provide social support, and encourage student persistence (Kraska, 2008). Group work builds collaborative skills; provides opportunity to engage with different cultures, ages, and genders; and promotes peer relationship building (Sutherland, 1996). An analysis of research concluded that collaborative group work, as compared to individual work, improved learning outcomes such as academic achievement, interpersonal interactions, self-esteem, perception of social support, student attitudes, and overall retention (Prince, 2004). Research suggests that positive student outcomes resulting from group work is not discipline specific. A meta-analysis of research related to group work in fields of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) revealed significant positive effects related to greater academic achievement, increased persistence, and more favorable attitudes (Springer, Stanne, & Donovan, 1999).

Another meta-analysis of research by Johnson, Johnson, and Smith (1998) comparing the influence of collaborative learning, competitive learning, and individual learning on college achievement concluded with findings similar to Prince (2004). The analysis resulted in three common themes of achievement: academic success, quality of relationships, and psychological adjustment to college. As compared to competitive or individual learning, collaborative learning produced higher individual achievement. Other advantages related to academic success included “promoting meta-cognitive thought, willingness to take on difficult tasks, persistence (despite difficulties) in working toward goal accomplishment, intrinsic motivation, transfer of learning from one situation to another, and greater time on task” (Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, 1998, p. 31). Regarding quality of relationships, research revealed that working in groups created greater perceived peer support, faculty support, academic development, and social adjustment to college life. Research also connected feelings of social membership, increased commitment, and persistence to the relationships developed through student collaboration. Finally, multiple studies revealed a strong correlation between working in groups and psychological health including self-esteem and social skills development.

Collaborative groups form in the classroom formally or informally (Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, 1998). Instructors develop informal groups throughout the class session to promote discussion and synthesis of course material. Instructors structure formal groups for the purpose of longer course assignments requiring students to work together. For formal groups to be effective, attention to group assignments, explanation of objectives, and instruction related to group processes is critical. For traditionally marginalized populations, Sutherland (1996)

emphasized the importance of taking steps to ensure community responsibility and equitable participation when implementing group projects.

Active Learning Summary

Despite evidence that active learning strategies such as class discussion, higher order thinking skills, and group work are effective, instructional change is challenging. Some of the barriers include “the powerful influence of educational tradition; faculty self-perceptions and self-definition of roles; the discomfort and anxiety that change creates; and the limited incentives for faculty to change” (Bonwell & Eison, 1991, p. 3). They continued,

Perhaps the single greatest barrier of all, however, is the fact that faculty members' efforts to employ active learning involve risk--the risks that students will not participate, use higher-order thinking, or learn sufficient content, that faculty members will feel a loss of control, lack necessary skills, or be criticized for teaching in unorthodox ways. (Bonwell & Eison, 1991, pp. 3-4)

Regardless of the active learning strategy, Bonwell and Sutherland (1996) emphasized, “The important consideration is student engagement in the learning process” (p. 4). Since studies have linked active learning to student engagement (Prince, 2004), including these strategies in the integration framework as measures of academic integration is an important step in identifying ways to engage student populations such as nontraditional students whose opportunities for engagement are primarily limited to the classroom.

Summary

Ambiguity exists as to what factors might influence integration among nontraditional students who might only come to campus for class and would, therefore, have different patterns of campus engagement. Kuh (2003) noted,

Fortunately, nobody flies a plane across the Atlantic anymore without navigational instruments. Nor should colleges and universities make judgments about the effectiveness of their policies and practices in the absence of student engagement data or some comparable source of information about the quality of the student experience. (p. 32)

This current study began to fill the gap in literature as it relates to nontraditional student integration by focusing on measures consistent with nontraditional student experiences in the classroom.

Tinto's (1975) integration theory served as the theoretical framework to explore social and academic integration and the link to nontraditional student persistence. The purpose of this research was to further analyze Tinto's position, further supported by Deil-Amen (2011) that social and academic integration are not only important but, when in reference to the classroom, may not be as linear as once thought but may represent an integrational convergence. As mentioned by Tinto (1997), theory elaboration to include classroom-specific integration measures may prove to be of most benefit to educational institutions in their interactions with commuter students and nontraditional student populations whose only opportunity for social and academic integration may be the classroom. Based on the review of literature, constructs used to measure social and academic integration in this current study were sense of belonging and active

learning strategies which were common to educational programs citing success with nontraditional student persistence (Beachboard & Beachboard, 2010; Beachboard, Beachboard, Li, & Adkison, 2011; Bonwell & Eison, 1991; Bonwell & Sutherland, 1996; Braxton, Jones, Hirschy, & Hartley, 2008; Braxton, Milem, & Sullivan, 2000; Buglione, 2012; Cooper, 2009; Dahlgren, Wille, Finkel, & Burger, 2005; Deil-Amen, 2011; Donaldson & Graham, 1999; Harris, 2006; Hausmann, Ye, Schofield, & Woods, 2009; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Tinto, 1987, 1993, 1997, 2012; Townsend & Wilson, 2009; Umbach & Wawrsynski, 2005). Therefore, the focus of this research, as stated in the research questions and visually displayed in Figure 1, was to quantitatively test and qualitatively explore (1) how active learning strategies in the classroom influence academic integration and, therefore, persistence; (2) how students' perception of sense of belonging influences social integration and, therefore, persistence; and (3) what effect the perceived presence of both sense of belonging and active learning strategies have on persistence when combined. The current research utilized concurrent triangulation, a mixed methods design, to provide a comprehensive analysis based on the comparison of existing literature, quantitative data derived from a census of the population, and qualitative data gathered from nontraditional student focus groups.

This research expanded upon Tinto's (1997) idea that the classroom might serve as a conduit wherein social and academic integration converge to produce an interconnected outcome. A theoretical model (see Figure 1) further demonstrated the idea of these "spheres" of influence. However, unlike Tinto's idea of academic and social integration appearing as two interconnected spheres, the current study researched the interaction effect that each of the factors

(sense of belonging and active learning strategies) have on student persistence individually and whether or not an increased commitment occurs as the two converge.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

This mixed methods research study investigated Tinto's Integration Theory (1975) by quantitatively testing and qualitatively exploring the relationships between social integration, academic integration, and nontraditional student's intent to persist. Mixed methods research, also referred to as the third wave of research and used in various fields (Creswell, 2014), originated in the late 1980's. Creswell explained that the choice to use mixed methods research (MMR) and the rationale for its use can be general, practical, and procedural. Generally speaking, MMR allows for a stronger approach from multiple perspectives as compared to use of a monomethod. Practically speaking, MMR provides a multi-faceted approach which appeals to a more diverse audience. Procedurally, MMR allows for comparison of data which provides a more complete understanding of the phenomenon studied.

The current study expanded upon qualitative research of Tinto's theory identifying the classroom as a site of integration in which socio-academic integrative moments (Deil-Amen, 2011) might occur for nontraditional students. Deil-Amen's findings followed Tinto's (1997) suggestion that social and academic integration might not be as linear as once thought but might converge in a classroom setting. This current study, designed to elaborate on Tinto's theory, explored integration constructs specific to the classroom and how they might influence persistence of nontraditional students independently and as the constructs converge in a classroom setting. The constructs used to measure social and academic integration, as identified in the review of literature, were sense of belonging and active learning strategies.

The Good Reporting of a Mixed Methods Study (GRAMMS) (Cameron, Dwyer, Richardson, Ahmed, & Sukumaran, 2013) framework served as the guide for the mixed methods research design, data collection, and analysis used in this study. This current study followed steps based on the GRAMMS guidelines as outlined in this chapter: (1) justification for utilizing a mixed methods design; (2) description of the purpose, priority and sequence of methods; (3) definition of the population and sampling procedures, data collection, and analysis; (4) identification of data integration method; (5) description of any limitations presented by the mixed methods design; and (6) discussion of confirmatory or contradictory data as a result of the merged results.

The study utilized a concurrent or convergent mixed methods design to collect quantitative and qualitative data concurrently. The researcher collected quantitative data through a 38-item survey exploring social and academic integration as measured by sense of belonging and the presence of active learning strategies in the classroom. Qualitative data consisted of three focus groups with interview questions to assess beliefs and experiences related to integration, sense of belonging, active learning strategies, and persistence. Analysis of quantitative and qualitative data occurred independently with integration and discussion of data following after. This chapter defines the population and sampling procedures, explains the mixed methods research design, describes the specific measures and instrumentation, and outlines specific data collection procedures to answer the following research questions.

Research Questions

1. What is the relationship of academic integration through classroom active learning strategies with nontraditional student intent to persist?

2. What is the relationship of social integration through a perceived sense of belonging with nontraditional student intent to persist?
3. What is the relationship of the interaction of variables (perceived sense of belonging and classroom active learning strategies) with nontraditional student intent to persist?

Justification of Mixed Methods Design

“Social scientists conduct mixed methods research primarily because they believe multiple approaches may provide better information to understand a particular phenomenon under investigation” (Ary, Jacobs, & Sorensen, 2010, p. 558). The selection of mixed methods research and in the case of this current study, a concurrent triangulation design, allowed for a broader understanding not easily obtained with a single method. “The aim of *concurrent* mixed methods data analysis is to look for convergences resulting from merging, or embedding the results from different datasets” (Gelo, Braakmann, & Benetka, 2008, p. 285) with data merging following independent data collection and analysis. The purpose of the concurrent design was to yield meta-inferences at the point of discussion and conclusion to reveal confirmatory or contradictory evidence and to provide a broader understanding of the phenomenon (Klassen, Creswell, Plano Clark, Smith, & Meissner, 2012). Rather than viewing quantitative and qualitative methods as paradigmatically incompatible, combining the methods provided a pragmatic approach which strengthened the study by utilizing strengths of one approach to compensate for weaknesses in the other (Ary, Jacobs, & Sorensen, 2010).

Description of the Purpose, Priority, and Sequence of Methods

A mixed methods study is a single study in which quantitative and qualitative data “are collected concurrently or sequentially, are given a priority, and involve the integration of the data

at one or more stages in the process of the research” (Creswell, Plano Clark, Gutmann, & Hanson, 2003, p. 212). This current study, which utilized a concurrent triangulation design, assigned equal priority to quantitative and qualitative methods both in the data collection and data analysis phase. Sequencing included concurrent data collection and independent analysis with the convergence or comparison of data occurring at the findings discussion stage, per the notation in Figure 2. This concurrent triangulation design is common in MMR with the purpose of better understanding answers to the research question from multiple perspectives and comparing any corroborating or contradicting evidence.

Mixed Methods Design: Concurrent Triangulation

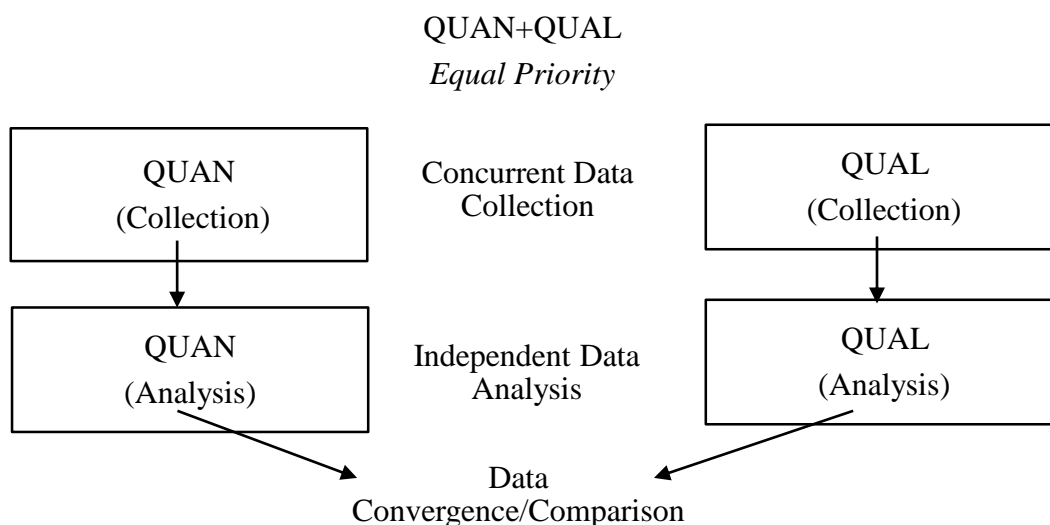


Figure 2. Concurrent Triangulation Design

Definition of the Study Population and Sampling Procedures

To allow for data comparison, selection of a study population and sampling procedures in mixed methods research requires intentional design decisions related to the population utilized for each method and the size of each sample. “Challenges to concurrent design include having adequate sample sizes for analysis, using comparable samples, and employing a consistent unit of analysis across the databases” (Klassen et al., 2012, p. 380). To mitigate these challenges, the researcher for this current study utilized a quantitative survey or census of the study population for adequate sample size; conducted focus groups comprised of members of the same study population with focus groups continuing to the point of redundancy; and made use of focus group questions which paralleled the quantitative survey content for data comparison, as recommended by Creswell (2014).

The study population included all on-campus undergraduate nontraditional students enrolled in the spring 2014 semester at a Midwestern public four-year research institution (Carnegie Classification: Research University – high research activity [RU/H]). Although nontraditional students are commonly defined as having characteristics such as delayed enrollment, part-time enrollment, full-time employment, financially independent, and family commitments (NCES, 2002a), most institutions do not collect this information from students and, as a result, alternate query specifications are needed to identify an institution’s nontraditional student population. Query points consistent with nontraditional characteristics and available through admissions or financial aid data included age, marital status, and dependent status. Consequently, for the purpose of this current study, nontraditional was defined as age 25 and over or age 18-24 (married and/or with dependents). A list of students matching

this query, as retrieved from the institutional database for spring 2014 undergraduate on-campus enrollments resulted in 1,696 students. Because surveying the entire population was feasible, the researcher conducted a census study through a 38-question quantitative survey (see Appendices C and D) and 10-question demographic data survey (see Appendix B) emailed via the institution's student database and email system with access obtained through the Institutional Research and Studies office. All students meeting the defined criteria received the email survey mid-way through the spring 2014 semester, the first week of April, to allow time for integrational development to occur given a 16-week semester. The researcher instructed students to answer questions based on currently enrolled courses as research cited nontraditional students at risk for "re-adoption of a non-college student identity" (Deil-Amen, 2011, p. 78) when setbacks occur. Therefore, student experiences within a semester are critical to understanding influences that might contribute to the choice to persist to the next semester and to continue to develop their college student identity or to depart from their academic goal.

Concurrently, collection of qualitative data through the use of focus groups provided an additional dimension of meaning related to the role of the classroom in nontraditional student integration. Focus group questions used to guide the interview process paralleled the quantitative survey content and explored consistent theoretical concepts to allow for data comparison. Guided by best practices for qualitative research, selection of focus group participants included purposeful sampling which refers to "careful selection of members of the community who are likely to provide the best information" (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013, p. 314). Purposeful selection of focus group members maximized variation to represent diversity of

student characteristics of interest including age, gender, race, employment status, marital status, and dependents.

Data Collection Procedures

The researcher received approval to conduct this research from the institution's Human Subjects Committee (HSC) prior to data collection. Quantitative and qualitative data collected for this mixed methods research study, a concurrent triangulation design, occurred concurrently yet independently. The concurrent design assigned equal priority to both quantitative and qualitative data as development of the quantitative instrument and qualitative questions occurred in advance rather than the results of one informing the other. In other words, the concurrent design allowed for collection of data to compare findings as opposed to a sequential design in which one set of data builds on the results of the other. Appendix M demonstrates the link between survey instruments, quantitative data collection items, and the study's research questions. Focus group questions (see Appendix I), developed to parallel the quantitative survey instrument, were used to add meaning to the quantitative data through focus groups interviews.

The researcher collected quantitative data by administering a measurement instrument consisting of the modified SOBS (Hoffman et al., 2003; Tovar & Simon, 2010), Braxton, Milem, and Sullivan's instrument (2000), and a demographic data form (see Appendices B, C, and D). Approval to use these instruments was obtained from the respective journals (see Appendices E and F). Combination of instruments resulted in a single survey for administration via email, using web software obtained through Google Forms, to the study's population as specified in the previous section. An email solicitation request form (see Appendix A) preceded the survey as required by the institution's Human Subjects committee. The study employed two strategies to

maximize response rate: (1) participation incentives including three \$25 Amazon gift cards awarded through random drawing of participants; and (2) a second participation request sent to non-respondents within two weeks of the initial request.

The email survey requested participant's institutional ID number for incentive drawing purposes. The researcher also identified duplicate surveys through a sort of identification numbers. The survey consisted of four sections: demographic information, social integration measures, academic integration measures, and measures of persistence. The measures and instrumentation section of this chapter includes a complete explanation of these measures.

Concurrently, focus group interviews provided qualitative data. "A *focus group* is a gathering of a limited number of individuals, who through conversation with each other, provide information about a specific topic, issue or subject" (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013, p. 374-375). Data collection through focus group interviews allowed for both information gathering and for understanding overall group perceptions and experiences related to a particular topic, which in the case of this study, was nontraditional student integration.

The researcher in this current study served as the focus group moderator. Focus group questions ranged from general to specific and drew from theoretical considerations and from content obtained from the quantitative surveys utilized in this study to allow for data comparison. The goal was to hold two focus group sessions with four to six participants in each group which "allows for diversity of opinion yet avoids having so many people involved that conversations becomes challenging" (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013, p. 388). However, the researcher reserved the right to hold additional focus group sessions if needed to reach the point of redundancy of information or saturation. The researcher followed the focus group guide (see Appendix I),

which ensured participants reviewed and signed the focus group consent (see Appendix J) prior to participation. The length of time to conduct each focus group was anticipated to be one to one and a half hours.

A potential consequence of a concurrent design included the possibility of focus group participation influencing a subject's responses to the quantitative survey or vice versa. To address these concerns, the following procedures were followed:

1. Selected focus group participants as indicated in the sampling procedures.
2. Conducted focus groups.
3. Upon completion of focus groups, collected quantitative data from study population.
4. Omitted survey responses of focus group participants to eliminate possible bias as a result of focus group discussion.

Following independent analysis of quantitative and qualitative data, the researcher converged or integrated data at the point of discussion to allow for data comparison and determination of congruent or contradictory findings.

Data Analysis

As determined in the study's design phase, the researcher collected and analyzed quantitative and qualitative data concurrently yet independently with data convergence or comparison occurring at the point of conclusion/discussion. The use of a concurrent design maximized the strengths of the two methodologies as "quantitative data may speak to the strength of associations while qualitative data may speak to the nature of those associations" (Fetters, Curry, & Creswell, 2013, p. 2144). Therefore, the following discussion of data analysis considered quantitative analysis independent of qualitative analysis.

Non-Response Bias

For a response rate less than 100%, as is common among email surveys, the procedures used to address non-response bias was a comparison of early responders to late responders. Non-response bias, which poses a threat to the external validity of research findings, exists when people surveyed do not respond or “fail to provide usable responses and are different than those who do on the characteristics of interest in the study” (Lindner, Murphy, & Briers, 2001, p. 44). Research suggests that early responders, those completing the survey promptly, “possess more of the characteristics which lead to the act of returning a questionnaire than those who do not return it” (Pace, 1939, p. 391). Furthermore, research cited similarities between non-responders and late responders who, in the case of this current study, submitted a delayed response when prompted by a second or follow-up request. Therefore, this current study utilized a chi-square test of independence to compare early and late responder demographics and conducted an independent samples t-test to compare survey scale means of early responders and late responders, a commonly used method of analysis and accepted practice (Lindner, Murphy, & Briers, 2001; Pace, 1939) to control for non-response bias to determine generalizability of findings.

Quantitative Analysis

For the quantitative portion of the study, the researcher utilized regression analyses to explore the relationship of social and academic integration, as measured by sense of belonging and active learning strategies, to nontraditional student intent to persist. The quantitative methodology used in this current study was multiple regression, a correlational analysis that “enables researchers to find the best possible weighting of two or more independent variables to

yield a maximum correlation with a single dependent variable” (Ary, Jacobs, & Sorensen, 2010, p. 360). In addition to analyzing independent variables separately, a moderated regression model determined the moderator or interaction effect of social and academic integration measures when combined or, in other words, when students perceive that both were present in the classroom or learning environment. Including the moderated regression model informed theory related to the idea that social and academic integration might not be as linear as once thought (Tinto, 1997), but that socio-academic integrative moments might exist as suggested through structured interviews of students at two-year institutions (Deil-Amen, 2011).

Consistent with Tinto’s model, the researcher also conducted analysis to determine the influence of student entry characteristics, initial institutional commitment, initial goal commitment, and subsequent institutional commitment to nontraditional student intent to persist. This analysis adds to the body of knowledge related to integration and persistence, particularly with the specific population of nontraditional students who have been the subjects of few studies. The researcher used descriptive statistics to describe and compare various characteristics exhibited by subjects.

Qualitative Analysis

For the qualitative portion of the study, the researcher utilized focus group interviews for data collection with an inductive cyclical analysis of data. Savin-Baden and Major’s (2013) Wheel of Research Choice model outlines steps or choices to guide qualitative research, which starts with the choice of research paradigm and concludes with the choice of an analytical strategy. For this current study the research lens began with a pragmatic paradigm, common to

mixed methods research, which focused on the centrality of the research question when selecting a research approach.

Pragmatic qualitative research employs a practical approach of connecting theory to practice through the interpretation of lived experiences. Focus group interviews, a common data collection approach in pragmatic qualitative research, were transcribed verbatim with constant comparison analysis utilized to identify patterns. As outlined by Savin-Baden and Major (2013), steps to the constant comparison process include these: (1) identifying categories; (2) coding passages; (3) comparing passage codes to previously coded passages to determine congruent or inconsistent patterns; (4) noting data patterns for categorization; (5) continuing the coding and comparison process to the point of code redundancy; and (6) determining core categories based on the centrality of data. Due to the concurrent research design and need for quantitative and qualitative data comparison, theoretical categories derived from Tinto's integration theory provided the initial coding framework with substantive categories created for participant narratives revealing experiences outside of the theoretical framework and theoretical categories. The use of theoretical categories allowed for placement of coded data into a general framework developed from existing theory (Maxwell, 2005) and established consistency for comparison with other data sets (Creswell, 2014). Categories based on the study's research questions, Tinto's theoretical framework, quantitative survey concepts, and qualitative focus group questions included these: student entry characteristics, initial commitment to education goal, initial commitment to institution, social integration, academic integration, subsequent commitment to education goal, subsequent commitment to institution, and intent to persist. For the purposes of this study, the addition of socio-academic integrative moments represented the

overlap of social and academic integration that might occur in the classroom environment as noted by Deil-Amen (2001) and Tinto (1997).

To maintain quality and address interpretive validity issues, the researcher utilized member checking and peer review strategies. As it Savin-Baden and Major (2013) noted, In terms of quality in pragmatic qualitative research, the researcher tends to take a position of striving for validity and in particular seek descriptive validity or an accurate accounting of the meanings with which participants would agree. They employ a range of strategies for ensuring validity, such as member checking and peer examination of codes, themes and findings. (p. 175)

In other words, member checking allowed focus group participants to review the interview transcript for accuracy and to provide feedback related to any discrepancies in their interview statements. Peer examination provided an additional level of review to determine if the researcher's interpretations and findings were reasonable.

Data Integration and Validation Procedures

The use of mixed methods research provided an intersubjective research approach that allowed for the integration of objective (quantitative) and subjective (qualitative) perspectives (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). Data integration decisions were made at the study design level with three basic design options: exploratory sequential in which qualitative data informs concepts measured in quantitative analysis; explanatory sequential in which quantitative data informs qualitative exploration; or convergent design in which quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis occurs concurrently with findings converging at the point of discussion or conclusion (Fetters, Curry, & Creswell, 2013). This current study utilized a convergent or

concurrent design due to the existence of a well-established theory, Tinto's integration theory, to inform data collection with a rarely studied population, nontraditional students, and due to time sensitivity given a semester-based analysis.

The integration of data at the point of discussion or conclusion allowed for a comparison of data to determine confirmatory or contradictory conclusions. Confirmatory conclusions provide greater credibility of findings and also serve to expand insights into the phenomenon studied (Fetters, Curry, & Creswell, 2013). On the other hand, the presence of contradictory findings necessitates additional analysis to determine potential sources of incongruence including bias, need for re-analysis, or a need for additional data collection.

As recommended by Creswell (2014), the researcher intentionally developed focus group questions to parallel the content measured by the quantitative instruments to provide consistency at the point of integration. Fetters, Curry, and Creswell (2013) noted, "By making this choice intentionally during the design, integration through merging would naturally follow" (p. 2149). As a result, integration of data was achieved through the discussion of meta-inferences obtained through the combination or convergence of the quantitative and qualitative data sets. This convergence followed the theoretical framework that guided both the quantitative survey and the qualitative focus group questions. The researcher aligned meta-inferences with the study's research questions.

Reliability and Validity

Reliability refers to "the degree of consistency with which it [the instrument] measures whatever it is measuring" (Ary, Jacobs, & Sorensen, 2010, p. 236). The quantitative instruments utilized in this current study proved reliable in other studies as identified in the Measure and

Instrumentation in this chapter. The researcher conducted Cronbach's alpha analysis to determine internal consistency reliability of the scales for this current study. Analysis resulted in all scales exceeding .70, an acceptable level of the Cronbach's Alpha coefficient taking into account the number of items in each scale (Cortina, 1993).

Validity refers to "the interpretation and meaning of the scores derived from the instrument" (Ary, Jacobs, & Sorensen, 2010, p. 225). When using mixed methods, validity focuses on accountability and legitimacy of inferences and interpretation (Gelo, Braakmann, & Benetka, 2008). Researchers recommend the term legitimization for mixed methods research as opposed to validation due to the complexity of inference combination. "The *problem of legitimation* refers to the difficulty in obtaining findings and/or making inferences that are credible, trustworthy, dependable, transferable, and/or confirmable" (Onwuegbuzie & Johnson, 2006, p. 52). The term *inference quality* is preferable in MMR and refers to quantitative standards of internal validity and qualitative standards of interpretation trustworthiness and credibility. For the qualitative portion of the study, the researcher provided each focus group participant with their corresponding session's transcription and initial inferences. This process of member checking allowed participants to examine the representation of the data for appropriate documentation and interpretation. By design, concurrent triangulation also allowed for a comparison of quantitative and qualitative inferences to determine congruency or contradiction by discussion of how the datasets converge and how the inferences might be supported by literature. Employing a triangulation design provided opportunity to reveal areas in which the meaning assigned to quantitative and qualitative data inferences might need to be re-examined or additional data collected to resolve interpretative errors or inconsistencies.

Measures and Instrumentation

Consistent with Tinto's theory, variables used in measurement instrumentation were student entry characteristics, initial commitment to educational goal, initial commitment to the institution, social integration, academic integration, and subsequent commitment to the institution. The dependent "criterion" variable was student's intent to persist. The independent "predictor" variable representing social integration was sense of belonging as operationalized by perceived faculty understanding, peer support, and classroom comfort. The predictor variable representing academic integration was active learning strategies as operationalized by class discussion, higher-order thinking skills, and group work. Selected measurement instruments included the Sense of Belonging Scale (Hoffman et al., 2003; Tovar & Simon, 2010) and measures for active learning strategies as adapted from Braxton, Milem, and Sullivan (2000). Focus group questions used to collect qualitative data were guided by the literature and were consistent with the quantitative data collection survey to allow for comparison of common data.

Quantitative Measures of Social Integration

The Sense of Belonging Scale (SOBS), developed by Hoffman et al. (2003) originally consisted of 26 items representing five subscales: perceived peer support, perceived faculty support/comfort, perceived classroom comfort, perceived isolation, and empathetic faculty understanding. Tovar and Simon (2010) conducted a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to determine the best fit model which resulted in the retention of 16 items representing three subscales: perceived faculty understanding, perceived peer support, and perceived classroom comfort (see Appendix C). Five items were removed from the original scale due to cross-loading on two or more factors and one item was removed due to loading $<.40$. Factor loadings of the

remaining three subscales were statistically significant ($p < .001$). Perceived faculty understanding measures student-faculty interaction; perceived peer support measures peer relationships; and perceived classroom comfort measures student-classroom interactions.

Internal consistency reliability, also known as Cronbach Alpha (α), tests for internal consistency or average correlation of items or “measures the extent to which the scores of the individual items agree with one another” (Ary, Jacobs, & Sorensen, 2010, p. 639). Tovar and Simon reported the modified SOBS internal consistency reliability (see Table 1) as total scale, 16 items ($\alpha = .90$); perceived faculty understanding, 7 items ($\alpha = .87$); perceived peer support, 6 items ($\alpha = .84$); and perceived classroom comfort, 3 items ($\alpha = .93$). Acceptable level of the Cronbach Alpha coefficient is .70 or higher, a level at which the total SOBS and three subscales exceed.

Table 1

Measures of Social Integration

Variable	Operationalized Definition	Cronbach's Alpha
Sense of Belonging	Perceived Faculty Understanding (7 items)	.87
	Perceived Peer Support (6 items)	.84
	Perceived Classroom Comfort (3 items)	.93

Source: Hoffman et al. (2003) and Tovar and Simon (2010)

Quantitative Measures of Academic Integration

The instrument used to measure academic integration was an adaptation of Braxton, Milem, and Sullivan's (2000) instrument utilized in their study of active learning strategies and influence on student departure. The measures originated from survey questions compiled from

UCLA's Student Information Form (SIF), the Early Collegiate Experience Survey (ECES), and the Freshman Year Survey (FYS) and contain composite measures consistent with Bonwell and Eison's (1991) definition of active learning. Items used to measure the presence of active learning strategies (see Table 2) were class discussion, 3 items ($\alpha = .71$); higher order thinking skills, 6 items ($\alpha = .84$); exams limited to knowledge of facts, 1 item; and group work, 2 items ($\alpha = .68$). As noted in the original study, class discussion involves students thinking about course topics and engaging in discussion; higher order thinking skills require deep level thinking about course content; knowledge level exam questions limit the level of deep learning and are considered a negative indicator of active learning; and group work entails student collaboration during class or on course assignments (Braxton, Milem, & Sullivan, 2000).

Table 2

Measures of Institutional Commitment, Academic Integration, and Departure Decision

Variable	Operationalized Definition	Cronbach's Alpha
Institutional Commitment	Whether or not institution was student's first choice (1 item)	---
Academic Integration	Presence of active learning strategies	
	Class discussion (3 items)	.71
	Higher order thinking skills (6 items)	.84
	Exams limited to knowledge of facts (1 item)	---
	Group work (2 items)	.68
Subsequent Institutional Commitment	Likelihood of graduating from institution (1 item)	
	Confidence in institutional decision (1 item)	.72
	Indication that institution is a good fit (1 item)	
Departure Decision	Intent to persist	
	Likelihood of re-enrollment (3 items)	.89

Source: Braxton, Milem, and Sullivan (2000)

Braxton, Milem, and Sullivan used the instrument to explore links between active learning strategies and social integration but found conflicting results. One study (Braxton, Milem, & Sullivan, 2000) offered initial support that active learning strategies influenced social integration. However, another study (Braxton et al., 2008) failed to conclude that active learning strategies influenced social integration. Because of this inconsistency, the instrument was modified to exclude social integration measures as the Sense of Belonging scale was selected for these measures.

Quantitative Measure of Persistence

Braxton, Milem, and Sullivan's (2000) instrument was also be used to measure student's departure decision. Items used to measure intent to persist (see Table 2) included three items related to likelihood of re-enrollment ($\alpha = .89$).

Qualitative Focus Group Questions

The focus group question items paralleled Tinto's integration theory variables and the quantitative survey instrument used in the present study to establish similar categories from which to compare data at the point of integration. At the start of each focus group session, participants completed a consent form (see Appendix J) along with a demographic questionnaire (see Appendix L) to determine student entry characteristics. The researcher used a focus group guide (see Appendix I) to communicate focus group instructions prior to the interview and to present structured focus group questions to guide discussion. Questions to direct focus group discussion related to the following pre-determined categories, consistent with the theoretical model (see Figure 1) and with quantitative survey instruments, to allow for data comparison at the point of integration: student entry characteristics, initial commitment to education goal,

initial commitment to institution, social integration, academic integration, subsequent commitment to institution, and intent to persist. For the purposes of this study, the addition of socio-academic integrative moments represented the merge of social and academic integration.

CHAPTER 4

QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS: SURVEY FINDINGS

The purpose of this current study was to empirically test and explore the applicability of Tinto's theory as it relates to nontraditional student integration and persistence through classroom measures of sense of belonging and active learning strategies. In addition, the current study examined the possibility of socio-academic integrative moments within the classroom or learning environment by testing and exploring the convergent influence of the social and academic integration factors. Tinto's Integration Model (see Figure 1) served as the theoretical guide for this study along with three research questions.

1. What is the relationship of academic integration through classroom active learning strategies with nontraditional student intent to persist?
2. What is the relationship of social integration through a perceived sense of belonging with nontraditional student intent to persist?
3. What is the relationship of the interaction of variables (perceived sense of belonging and classroom active learning strategies) with nontraditional student intent to persist?

Mixed methods research consisting of a concurrent triangulation design (see Figure 2) called for concurrent yet independent collection and analysis of both qualitative and quantitative data. Focus group interviews provided the qualitative data as interpreted in Chapter 5 and a 38-question online survey provided the quantitative data with results presented in this chapter.

Instrumentation and Methods

The methods used to analyze the survey data included descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation analysis, and regression analysis. In addition, chi-square analysis and an independent

samples t-test compared early survey responders to late survey responders to address non-response bias. The collection of quantitative data consisted of administering a 38-question survey (see Appendices C and D), which included the modified SOBS (Hoffman et al., 2003; Tovar & Simon, 2010), Braxton, Milem, and Sullivan's instrument (2000), and a 10-question demographic data form (see Appendix B). Respective journals granted approval to use these instruments for this study (see Appendices E and F).

The researcher used Google forms to develop and administer the survey with responses loading directly into an Excel document. Survey administration to the study's population began during week 12 of the spring 2014 semester. An email solicitation request form (see Appendix A) preceded the survey as required by the institution's Human Subjects Committee. The study employed two strategies to maximize response rate: (1) participation incentives included three \$25 Amazon gift cards awarded through random drawing of participants; and (2) a second participation request sent to non-respondents within two weeks of the initial request.

Instrument Reliability

The researcher tested the measurement instrument for internal consistency reliability using the statistical test Cronbach Alpha (α). An acceptable level of the Cronbach's Alpha coefficient is .70 or higher, a level at which the five measurement scales exceeded (see Table 3).

Table 3

Measurement Scales: Internal Consistency Reliability

Measurement Scales	Cronbach's Alpha
Initial Commitment to Goal (3 items)	.96
Academic Integration: Active Learning (12 items)	.84
Social Integration: Sense of Belonging (16 items)	.91
Subsequent Institutional Commitment (3 items)	.73
Departure Decision/Intent to Persist (3 items)	.99

Descriptive Analysis**Population Sample**

The study's population consisted of nontraditional undergraduate students enrolled in the spring 2014 semester at a Midwestern public four-year research institution (RU/H). For the purposes of this study, nontraditional was defined as age 25 and over or age 18-24 (married and/or with dependents). The total number of students enrolled during the spring 2014 semester and fitting the stated definition was 1,696.

The first survey request, emailed April 8, 2014, resulted in 200 complete responses within two weeks representing 11.8% of the population. To maximize response rate, a second request followed on April 22, 2014, resulting in an additional 111 complete responses, representing 6.5% of the population for a total of 311 responses (18.3% response rate). The email survey requested participant's institutional ID number for incentive drawing purposes. The researcher also utilized the ID numbers to identify duplicate surveys. A sort of identification

numbers revealed six surveys with the same ID number. As a result, the researcher deleted duplicate responses retaining original answers for each respondent. In addition, as outlined in the study's data collection procedures (see Chapter 3), the researcher omitted survey responses from any focus group participants to eliminate possible bias as a result of focus group discussion. The early responder group included four focus group participant responses and the late responder group included two focus group participant responses. After deletion of duplicate responses and focus group responses, the first responder group (n=194) and late responder group (n=105) totaled 299 responses, which equated to a 17.6% response rate.

Non-Response Bias

As outlined in the sampling procedures (see Chapter 3), since the response rate was less than 100%, the researcher compared the ten demographic variables of the two groups: early responders (independent group 1) and late responders (independent group 2). Given the nominal data, the researcher performed a chi-square test of independence to examine the demographic relation between early responders and late responders. The relation between groups was not statistically significant with $p > .05$ for any of the demographic characteristics. In other words, a statistically significant difference between early and late responders did not exist as compared by entering college GPA, $X^2(3, N = 299) = 1.824, p = .61$; current college GPA, $X^2(3, N = 298) = 6.078, p = .11$; gender, $X^2(1, N = 298) = .523, p = .47$; race, $X^2(5, N = 299) = 5.87, p = .32$; current standing, $X^2(4, N = 299) = 3.262, p = .52$; mother's education, $X^2(8, N = 299) = 6.034, p = .65$; father's education, $X^2(8, N = 299) = 7.562, p = .48$; marital status, $X^2(1, N = 299) = 3.498, p = .06$; or dependent status, $X^2(1, N = 296) = .559, p = .46$. Therefore, no statistically significant difference existed between demographics of early and late responders.

The researcher also performed an independent samples t-test to compare the early responder and later responder means of the survey scales: initial institutional commitment (IIC), initial goal commitment (IGC), academic integration (AI), social integration (SI), subsequent institutional commitment (SIC), and departure decision or intent to persist (ITP). The difference between groups were not statistically significant with $p > .05$ for all scales (see Table 4).

Table 4

Comparison of Scale Items: Early and Late Responders

Scale Items	N	Mean	SD	<i>t</i> -Ratio	Sig.
Initial Institutional Commitment (IIC)				-1.120	.264
Early	194	1.51	.92		
Late	105	1.63	.95		
Initial Goal Commitment (IGC)				1.253	.212
Early	194	14.21	1.66		
Late	105	13.91	2.23		
Academic Integration (AI)				-.904	.367
Early	194	34.37	6.47		
Late	105	35.14	7.41		
Social Integration (SI)				.419	.676
Early	194	59.88	12.72		
Late	105	59.20	13.62		
Subsequent Institutional Commitment (SIC)				-.398	.691
Early	194	9.68	2.44		
Late	105	9.79	2.19		
Intent to persist (ITP)				1.407	.161
Early	194	12.02	2.60		
Late	105	11.58	2.52		

No statistically significant difference existed between early and late responder survey replies as compared by initial institutional commitment, $t(297) = -1.120, p = .26$; initial goal commitment, $t(297) = 1.253, p = .21$; academic integration, $t(297) = -.904, p = .37$; social integration, $t(297) = .419, p = .68$; subsequent institutional commitment, $t(297) = -.398, p = .69$; and intent to persist, $t(297) = 1.407, p = .16$.

To conclude, results of the chi-square analysis and independent sample t-test revealed no statistically significant difference between the demographics or survey responses of first responders as compared to late responders. Pace (1939) explained, “A comparison of early and late returns should reveal differences in the same direction as would a comparison of returns and non-returns” (p. 392). Therefore, given that late responders were similar to early responders in this current study, the researcher recognized late responders as representative of non-responders for generalization purposes and to address the issue of non-response error as it pertains to external validity (Lindner, Murphy, & Briers, 2001; Pace, 1939).

Demographics

The survey included 10 demographic questions to determine entering college GPA, current college GPA, gender, race/ethnicity, current college standing, mother’s educational attainment, father’s educational attainment, marital status, dependent status, and employment status. Table 5 includes a numerical representation of demographic frequencies of total responders, early responders, and late responders.

Female students represented a slightly higher percentage (53.2%) of respondents as compared to male students (46.5%). Over half of respondents (55.2%) were seniors at the institution followed by junior status (22.1%), and senior with degree status (15.4%). Freshman

and sophomore student represented a total of 7.3% of respondents. A summary of demographics reveals that, overall, respondents tend to be strong academically with 84.6% reporting a current grade point average (GPA) of 3.0 or higher which exceeds respondents' entering college GPA with 77.3% reporting a 3.0 or higher. Given their academic performance, it is interesting to note that one 73 respondents (24.4%) indicated that neither parent had attended college, indicating that they are first-generation students. Of those 73, over half (55%) had at least one parent who had less than a high school education and 16 respondents indicated that neither parent had finished high school.

Although nontraditional students tend to report family responsibilities as a characteristic, a higher percentage of respondents in this study had no spouse/domestic partner (56.5%) and only one-third of total respondents (33.1%) had children under the age of 18 years old. The survey did not include questions related to having children over the age of 18 or to determine single parent status. However, a more detailed look at data revealed that 38 respondents (12.7%) indicated having children under the age of 18 but did not have a spouse or domestic partner.

As for employment, the largest percentage of respondents (64.6%) indicated that they were balancing school with either full-time employment (25.8%) or part-time employment (38.8%). One-third of respondents were not employed. Of the 193 (64.6%) that were employed, 61 (31.6%) indicated having children under the age of 18 and were, therefore, balancing school, work, and dependent responsibilities.

Table 5

Demographic Frequencies: Early and Late Responders

Demographic Characteristic	Total Responses (N = 299)		Early Responses (N = 194)		Late Responses (N = 105)	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Entering College GPA						
4.0 (A)	106	35.5%	73	37.6%	33	31.4%
3.0 (B)	125	41.8%	78	40.2%	47	44.8%
2.0 (C)	63	21.1%	39	20.1%	24	22.9%
1.0 (D)	5	1.7%	4	2.1%	1	1.0%
Current College GPA						
4.0 (A)	139	46.5%	100	51.5%	39	37.1%
3.0 (B)	114	38.1%	67	34.5%	47	44.8%
2.0 (C)	39	13.0%	23	11.9%	16	15.2%
1.0 (D)	6	2.0%	3	1.5%	3	2.9%
Missing	1	.3%	1	.5%	0	0.0%
Gender						
Female	159	53.2%	100	51.5%	59	56.2%
Male	139	46.5%	93	47.9%	46	43.8%
Missing	1	.3%	1	.5%	0	0.0%
Race/Ethnicity						
Non-Hispanic White	219	73.2%	148	76.3%	71	67.6%
Black or African American	30	10.0%	16	8.2%	14	13.3%
Latino or Hispanic American	17	5.7%	12	6.2%	5	4.8%
East Asian or Asian American	9	3.0%	6	3.1%	3	2.9%
Middle Eastern or Arab American	8	2.7%	5	2.6%	3	2.9%
Native American	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
Other	16	5.4%	7	3.6%	9	8.6%
Current College Standing						
Freshman	7	2.3%	4	2.1%	3	2.9%
Sophomore	15	5.0%	8	4.1%	7	6.7%
Junior	66	22.1%	40	20.6%	26	24.8%
Senior	165	55.2%	108	55.7%	57	54.3%
Senior with Degree	46	15.4%	34	17.5%	12	11.4%

Table 5 (continued)

Demographic Frequencies: Early and Late Responders

Demographic Characteristic	Total Responses (N = 299)		Early Responses (N = 194)		Late Responses (N = 105)	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Mother's Educational Level						
Less than High School	36	12.0%	22	11.3%	14	13.3%
High School Diploma/GED	75	25.1%	51	26.3%	24	22.9%
Some College	64	21.4%	38	19.6%	26	24.8%
Apprenticeship/Technical School	10	3.3%	7	3.6%	3	2.9%
Associate Degree	29	9.7%	16	8.2%	13	12.4%
Bachelor's Degree	57	19.1%	38	19.6%	19	12.4%
Master's Degree	24	8.0%	18	9.3%	6	5.7%
Doctoral Degree	2	.7%	2	1.0%	0	0.0%
Unknown	2	.7%	2	1.0%	0	0.0%
Father's Educational Level						
Less than High School	34	11.4%	25	12.9%	9	8.6%
High School Diploma/GED	94	31.4%	57	29.4%	37	35.2%
Some College	36	12.0%	24	12.4%	12	11.4%
Apprenticeship/Technical School	22	7.4%	13	6.7%	9	8.6%
Associate Degree	14	4.7%	6	3.1%	8	7.6%
Bachelor's Degree	50	16.7%	34	17.5%	16	15.2%
Master's Degree	30	10.0%	20	10.3%	10	9.5%
Doctoral Degree	8	2.7%	7	3.6%	1	1.0%
Unknown	11	3.7%	8	4.1%	3	2.9%
Marital Status						
Spouse/Domestic Partner	130	43.5%	92	47.4%	38	36.2%
No Spouse/Domestic Partner	169	56.5%	102	52.6%	67	63.8%
Dependents under the age of 18						
Yes	99	33.1%	62	32.0%	37	35.2%
No	197	65.9%	132	68.0%	65	61.9%
Missing	3	1.0%	0	0.0%	3	2.9%
Employment						
Full-time (25+ hours)	77	25.8%	48	24.7%	29	27.6%
Part-time (less than 25 hours)	116	38.8%	81	41.8%	35	33.3%
Not employed	106	35.5%	65	33.5%	41	39.0%

Regression Analysis

As outlined in the data analysis section (see Chapter 3), the researcher conducted multiple regression analysis to test how well variables of Tinto's model (initial institutional commitment, initial commitment to goal, academic integration, social integration, and subsequent institutional commitment) predicted the criterion variable (nontraditional student intent to persist). The researcher also explored how well the combination of academic and social integration variables, or socio-academic integrative moments, predicted nontraditional student intent to persist. The measure of academic integration was the perceived presence of active learning strategies in the classroom. The measure of social integration was a perceived sense of belonging in the classroom. The researcher selected multiple regression as it "enables researchers to find the best possible weighting of two or more independent variables to yield a maximum correlation with a single dependent variable" (Ary, Jacobs, & Sorensen, 2010, p. 360).

Test of Assumptions

Regression analysis requires data to meet a set of assumptions: reliability of measurement, homoscedasticity, multicollinearity, and normality (Osborne & Waters, 2002). Measurement instruments were reliable as indicated by Cronbach's Alpha reliability estimates (see Table 3). The assumption of homoscedasticity was not violated given that the variances were constant and the line of best fit was parallel. The researcher used the Durbin-Watson statistic test for multicollinearity to determine if any independent variables were highly correlated. A Durbin-Watson statistic of 2 represents no correlation and, therefore, analysis concluded that the multicollinearity assumption was not violated. The researcher examined a plot of residuals (errors) to determine normality. The normality of residuals assumption was not met

for the analyses conducted. Further exploration of the dependent variable, intent to persist, through data transformations (log, square root, and inverse) resulted in little improvement in the plot of residuals. Research indicates that multiple regression is generally robust to the normal distribution of errors assumption (Osborne & Waters, 2002); however, results should be interpreted with this violation of assumption in mind.

Composite Variables: Descriptive Statistics and Correlation

Descriptive statistics indicated the mean and standard deviation of composite variables based on 299 respondents (see Table 6). Pearson correlation analysis among composite variables revealed statistically significant relationships among several variables (see Table 7). Statistically significant positive yet moderate relationships existed among two sets of variables: initial commitment to goal (ICG) and intent to persist (ITP), $r(299) = .42, p < .01$; and academic integration (AI) and social integration (SI), $r(299) = .49, p < .01$.

Table 6

Descriptive Statistics for Composite Variables

Scale Composites	<i>M</i>	SD	N
Intent to Persist (ITP)	11.86	2.58	299
Initial Institutional Commitment (IIC)	1.56	.94	299
Initial Commitment to Goal (ICG)	14.11	1.89	299
Academic Integration (AI)	34.64	6.81	299
Social Integration (SI)	59.64	13.03	299
Subsequent Institutional Commitment (SIC)	9.72	2.35	299

Table 7

Correlations among Composite Variables

Scale Composites	IIC	ICG	AI	SI	SIC
ITP	.04	.42**	.18**	.27**	.25**
IIC		-.09	-.08	-.12**	-.23**
ICG			.20**	.27**	.28**
AI				.49**	.33**
SI					.32**

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Other variables having a statistically significant, yet weak, positive correlation to the intent to persist (ITP) variable (see Table 7) included the following: academic integration (AI), social integration (SI), and subsequent institutional commitment (SIC). Initial institutional commitment (IIC) presented a statistically significant, yet weak, negative correlation to the social integration (SI) and subsequent institutional commitment (SIC) variables. Initial commitment to goal (ICG) presented statistically significant positive correlation, ranging from weak to moderate, with all variables with the exception of initial institutional commitment (IIC). Academic integration (AI) and social integration (SI) both presented a statistically significant positive correlation to subsequent institutional commitment (SIC) albeit weak.

Research Question One

What is the relationship of academic integration through classroom active learning strategies with nontraditional student intent to persist?

To answer research question one, the researcher conducted regression analysis to determine the relationship of academic integration, as measured by the presence of active learning strategies, with nontraditional student intent to persist. The researcher used statistical analysis software, SPSS, to calculate descriptive statistics and regression analysis.

Stepwise multiple regression analysis determined if the following independent variables, consistent with Tinto's Integration Theory, were statistically significant predictors of nontraditional student intent to persist: initial institutional commitment, initial commitment to a goal, academic integration, and subsequent institutional commitment. The results of the regression indicated that two of the predictors were statistically significant (see Table 8): initial commitment to goal, $\beta = 0.524$, $t = 7.043$, $p < 0.0001$; and subsequent institutional commitment, $\beta = 0.153$, $t = 2.563$, $p = 0.011$. Combined, the two predictors explained 19.6% ($R^2 = .196$) of the variance in the dependent variable, intent to persist. The final regression equation, $F(2, 296) = 36.091$, $p < 0.0001$, then, was as follows: Intent to persist = $2.992 + 0.524$ (initial commitment to goal) + 0.153 (subsequent institutional commitment). Predictor variables found not to be statistically significant (see Table 9) and, therefore, excluded from the final model were initial institutional commitment (IIC) and academic integration (AI).

Table 8

Predictors of Nontraditional Student Intent to Persist: Research Question One

Variable	Intent to Persist		
	Model 1 <i>B</i>	Model 2	
		<i>B</i>	95% CI
Constant	3.715**	2.992**	[.920, 5.065]
Initial Commitment to Goal (ICG)	0.578**	0.524**	[.377, .670]
Subsequent Institutional Commitment (SIC)		0.153*	[.035, .270]
R^2	0.178	0.196	
F	64.41**	36.09**	
ΔR^2		0.018	
ΔF		6.567	

Note. $N = 299$. CI = confidence interval.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Table 9

Variables not Included in the Model: Research Question One

Model	Beta In	t	Sig.	Partial Correlation
2 IIC	.031	.573	.567	.033
AI	.061	1.104	.271	.064

* $p < .05$.

Research Question Two

What is the relationship of social integration through a perceived sense of belonging with nontraditional student intent to persist?

To answer research question two, the researcher conducted regression analysis to determine the relationship of social integration, as measured by sense of belonging, with nontraditional student intent to persist. The researcher used statistical analysis software, SPSS, to calculate descriptive statistics and regression analysis.

Stepwise multiple regression analysis determined if the following independent variables were statistically significant predictors of nontraditional student intent to persist: initial institutional commitment, initial commitment to goal, social integration, and subsequent institutional commitment. The results of the regression indicated that two of the independent variables were statistically significant predictors (see Table 10): initial commitment to goal, $\beta = 0.516$, $t = 7.009$, $p < 0.0001$, and social integration, $\beta = 0.033$, $t = 3.081$, $p = 0.002$. Combined, the two predictors explained 20.4% ($R^2 = .204$) of the variance in the dependent variable, intent to persist. The final statistically significant regression equation, $F(2, 296) = 37.872$, $p < 0.0001$, then, was as follows: Intent to persist = 2.619 + 0.516 (initial commitment to goal) + 0.033 (social integration). Predictor variables found not to be statistically significant (see Table 11) and, therefore, excluded from the final model were initial institutional commitment (IIC) and subsequent institutional commitment (SIC).

Table 10

Predictors of Nontraditional Student Intent to Persist: Research Question Two

Variable	Intent to Persist		
	Model 1 <i>B</i>	Model 2	
		<i>B</i>	95% CI
Constant	3.715**	2.619*	[.512, 4.726]
Initial Commitment to Goal (ICG)	0.578**	0.516**	[.371, .661]
Social Integration (SI)		0.033**	[.012, .054]
R^2	0.178	0.204	
F	64.41**	37.87**	
ΔR^2		0.026	
ΔF		9.493	

Note. $N = 299$. CI = confidence interval.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Table 11

Variables not Included in the Model: Research Question Two

Model	Beta In	t	Sig.	Partial Correlation
2 IIC	.018	.339	.735	.020
SIC	.103	1.847	.066	.107

* $p < .05$.

Research Question Three

What is the relationship of the interaction of variables (perceived sense of belonging and classroom active learning strategies) with nontraditional student intent to persist?

To answer research question three, the researcher conducted regression analysis to determine the combined relationship of social and academic integration with nontraditional student intent to persist. The researcher used statistical analysis software, SPSS, to calculate descriptive statistics and regression analysis.

Stepwise multiple regression analysis determined if the combination of social and academic integration predicted nontraditional student intent to persist. The regression analysis consisted of the following variables: initial institutional commitment, initial commitment to goal, social integration, academic integration, social integration/academic integration interaction variable, and subsequent institutional commitment. The results of the regression indicated that two of the independent variables were statistically significant predictors (see Table 12): initial commitment to goal, $\beta = 0.516$, $t = 7.009$, $p < 0.0001$, and social integration, $\beta = 0.033$, $t = 3.081$, $p = 0.002$. Combined, the two predictors explained 20.4% ($R^2 = .204$) of the variance in the dependent variable, intent to persist. The final statistically significant regression equation, $F(2, 296) = 37.872$, $p < 0.0001$, then, was as follows: Intent to persist = 2.619 + 0.516 (initial commitment to goal) + 0.033 (social integration). Predictor variables found not to be statistically significant (see Table 13) and, therefore, excluded from the final model were initial institutional commitment (IIC), academic integration (AI), the combination of social and academic integration or socio-academic integrative moments (AI*SI), and subsequent institutional commitment (SIC).

Table 12

Predictors of Nontraditional Student Intent to Persist: Research Question Three

Variable	Intent to Persist		
	Model 1 <i>B</i>	Model 2	
		<i>B</i>	95% CI
Constant	3.715**	2.619*	[.512, 4.726]
Initial Commitment to Goal (ICG)	0.578**	0.516**	[.371, .661]
Social Integration (SI)		.033**	[.012, .054]
R^2	0.178	0.204	
F	64.41**	37.87**	
ΔR^2		0.026	
ΔF		9.493	

Note. $N = 299$. CI = confidence interval.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Table 13

Variables not Included in the Model: Research Question Three

Model	Beta In	T	Sig.	Partial Correlation
2 IIC	.018 ^c	.339	.735	.020
AI	.026 ^c	.439	.661	.026
AI*SI	.022 ^c	.215	.830	.013
SIC	.103 ^c	1.847	.066	.107

* $p < .05$.

Total Model Analysis

Although the three research questions of this current study focus specifically on the integration piece of Tinto's models, it is worth noting that the model (see Figure 1) also includes student entry characteristics as part of the longitudinal process of departure. Therefore, to complete this current study, the researcher conducted a final regression analysis, which included all student entry or demographic variables of the model. The researcher used statistical analysis software, SPSS, to calculate descriptive statistics and regression analysis. Because five respondents submitted incomplete demographic data, the researcher analyzed 294 responses.

The regression analysis consisted of the following variables: previous GPA (Prev_GPA), current GPA (Curr_GPA), gender, race, current standing (Curr_Standing), mother's educational attainment (Mother_Educ), father's educational attainment (Father_Educ), marital status (Mar_Status), dependent status (Dep_Status), employment status (Emp_Status), initial institutional commitment (IIC), initial commitment to goal (ICG), social integration (SI), academic integration (AI), and subsequent institutional commitment (SIC). The results of the regression indicated that four of the independent variables were statistically significant predictors (see Table 14): initial commitment to goal, $\beta = 0.483$, $t = 6.418$, $p < 0.0001$; social integration, $\beta = 0.022$, $t = 1.957$, $p = .051$; current standing, $\beta = 0.372$, $t = 2.306$, $p = .022$; and subsequent institutional commitment, $\beta = 0.124$, $t = 2.010$, $p = .045$. Combined, the four predictors explained 22.9% ($R^2 = .229$) of the variance in the dependent variable, intent to persist. The final statistically significant regression equation, $F(4, 289) = 21.430$, $p < 0.0001$, then, was as follows: Intent to persist = 1.159 + 0.483 (initial commitment to goal) + 0.022 (social integration) + 0.372 (current standing) + 0.124 (subsequent institutional commitment).

Table 14

Predictors of Nontraditional Student Intent to Persist: Total Model Analysis

Variable	Intent to Persist				
	Model 1 <i>B</i>	Model 2 <i>B</i>	Model 3 <i>B</i>	Model 4	
				<i>B</i>	95% CI
Constant	3.646**	2.650*	1.662	1.159	[-1.174, 3.492]
Initial Commitment to Goal (ICG)	0.584**	0.526**	0.517**	0.483**	[.335, .631]
Social Integration (SI)		0.03**	0.028*	0.022	[.000, .044]
Current Standing (CS)			0.336*	0.372*	[.054, .689]
Subsequent Institutional Commitment (SIC)				0.124*	[.003, .245]
<i>R</i> ²	0.185	0.206	0.218		0.229
<i>F</i>	66.27**	37.80**	26.94**		21.43**
ΔR^2		0.021	0.012		0.011
ΔF		7.794	4.358		4.041

Note. *N* = 294. CI = confidence interval.

p* < .05. *p* < .01.

Predictor variables found not to be statistically significant (see Table 15) and, therefore, excluded from the final model were initial institutional commitment (IIC), academic integration (AI), previous GPA (Prev_GPA), current GPA (Curr_GPA), gender, race, mother's educational attainment (Mother_Educ), father's educational attainment (Father_Educ), marital status (Mar_Status), dependent status (Dep_Status), and employment status (Emp_Status).

Table 15

Variables not Included in the Model: Total Model Analysis

Model	Beta In	t	Sig.	Partial Correlation
4 IIC	.039	.730	.466	.043
AI	.016	.271	.786	.016
Prev_GPA	-.075	-1.430	.154	-.084
Curr_GPA	.072	1.364	.174	.080
Gender	-.052	-.995	.321	-.059
Race	-.098	-1.880	.061	-.110
Mother_Educ	-.030	-.566	.572	-.033
Father_Educ	.028	.530	.597	.031
Mar_Status	.045	.860	.390	.051
Dep_Status	-.016	-.304	.762	-.018
Emp_Status	.020	.378	.705	.022

* $p < .05$.

Conclusion

The quantitative portion of the study utilized regression analyses to explore the relationship between social integration, academic integration, and persistence of nontraditional students. In addition to analyzing predictor variables separately, a moderated regression model determined the moderator or interaction effect of social integration (sense of belonging) and academic integration (active learning strategies) when respondents perceived both to be present. Consistent with Tinto's model, analysis also determined the influence of initial commitment to goal, initial commitment to the institution, subsequent institutional commitment, and student entry characteristics and demographics on nontraditional student intent to persist.

The results of the quantitative analysis for the three research questions consistently included only one variable, initial commitment to goal, in the model summary explaining 17.8% of the variance. The model summary for research question one, which explored the relationship of academic integration with intent to persist, indicated that subsequent institutional commitment also explained a small portion of the variance (just less than 2%) but academic integration was not found to be a statistically significant predictor of persistence. Research question two, which explored the relationship of social integration with intent to persist, indicated that social integration explained a small portion of the variance (2.6%). Research question three, which explored the combined relationship of social and academic integration with intent to persist, revealed the same results as research question two indicating that the combined relationship or, as Deil-Amen (2011) described as socio-academic integrative moments, was not a statistically significant predictor of persistence.

A final analysis included all variables to explore the relationship of student entry characteristics and demographics with intent to persist. Similar to the three research question analyses, initial commitment to goal explained the most variance (18.5%, $n=294$). Three other variables explained a small portion of the variance: social integration (2.1%), current standing (1.2%), and subsequent institutional commitment (1.1%). Therefore, in this current study, student entry characteristics or demographics such as race, gender, parent's educational attainment, marital status, dependent status, employment status, or previous GPA were not statistically significant predictors of nontraditional student intent to persist.

CHAPTER 5

QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS: FOCUS GROUP FINDINGS

The purpose of this current study was to explore the relationship of social and academic integration, as measured by sense of belonging and classroom active learning strategies, to nontraditional student intent to persist. A mixed methods design guided the concurrent collection of quantitative data, through a 38-question survey, and qualitative data, through structured focus groups. This section presents the focus group findings, a description of lived experiences of 10 nontraditional students enrolled at a public four-year research institution (RU/H) located in the Midwest. The focus group findings combine with the survey results presented in the previous chapter to provide a broader understanding not only of the numerical data, but of the nontraditional student integration and persistence issue.

Focus Group Recruitment and Procedures

The researcher utilized purposive sampling to select invitees who represented a diverse group of nontraditional students enrolled at the university in the spring 2014 semester. Invitee selection criteria consisted of identifying students who had interacted in some way with the institution's Non-Traditional Student Services office with student interactions ranging from limited to extensive. The researcher defined limited as a single interaction in person or via email. The researcher defined extensive as multiple interactions in person or via email. Since multiple characteristics describe the nontraditional student, the goal of purposive sampling was to demonstrate the group's diversity related to gender, race or ethnic heritage, marital status, dependent status, employment, parents' educational attainment, degree program, and year in undergraduate studies.

The researcher emailed the focus group participant recruitment email (see Appendix K) to 27 invitees on March 23, 2014. Seven students responded within one day and three additional students responded following a second participation request. Four students replied that they were unable to participate, twelve did not respond. A total of 10 nontraditional students participated in three separate focus groups conducted during the 10th week of the spring 2014 semester, more specifically, the last week of March.

Focus group sessions took place in a centrally-located room on campus reserved to maintain privacy. Participants had three different sessions to choose from which represented three different days of the week and three different times of the day: morning, noon, and afternoon. Depending on the time of day, various refreshments were offered as many of the students were participating between work or class. The researcher welcomed participants as they entered the room and offered refreshments. Once seated, participants completed the focus group consent form (see Appendix J) and a demographic data form (see Appendix L). As part of the demographic data form, participants chose a pseudonym and placed it on a name card in front of them for reference during the session. Once all forms were completed, the researcher read the focus group instructions, provided opportunity for questions, and then started recording. The researcher followed the structured focus group questions (see Appendix I) developed to parallel the quantitative survey and expanded upon questions as needed. Each focus group session lasted approximately 1 to 1 ½ hours. The researcher summarized participant demographics (see Table 16) and retained focus group recordings to conduct constant comparison analysis as described in Chapter 3.

Table 16

Focus Group Participant Demographics

Name	Age	Race and Gender	Marital Status	Dep. Under Age 18	Work Status	Major	Current Standing	H.S. GPA	Mother's Education Level	Father's Education Level
Bob	early 30s	White Male	Married	Yes	PT	Workforce Education	Sr.	2.0	Some College	Some College
Lauren	25	African Am. Female	Not Married	Yes	None	Social Work	Sr.	2.0	Associate's Degree	H.S. Diploma
Grammy	53	White Female	Married	No	PT	Social Work	Jr.	2.0	Less than H.S.	Less than H.S.
Faith	28	African Am. Female	Not Married	Yes	PT	Information Systems Tech.	Sr.	2.0	Associate's Degree	H.S. Diploma
George	54	White Male	Not Married	No	None	Equine Science	Soph.	2.0	H.S. Diploma	Associate's Degree
Jane	50	White Female	Not Married	No	FT	Art	Soph.	3.0	Less than H.S.	Less than H.S.
Lana	36	African Am. Female	Not Married	No	None	Criminology and Criminal Justice	Sr.	2.0	H.S. Diploma	Less than H.S.
Arthmis	31	Hispanic Am. Female	Not Married	Yes	PT	Communication Disorders	Sr.	3.0	H.S. Diploma	Vocational Training
Monica	20	African Am. Female	Not Married	Yes	PT	Criminology and Criminal Justice	Jr.	4.0	Associate's Degree	Associate's Degree

Participant Demographics

Of the 10 participants, three were male and seven were female. Five of the participants were Non-Hispanic White, four were African-American, and one was Latino or Hispanic American. Participants ranged in age from 20 to 54. Only two participants had a spouse or domestic partner at the time of the focus group session. Half of the participants were caring for dependents under the age of 18, three had adult children, and two participants had no children.

As for employment status, only one participant balanced school with full-time employment, as defined by 25 hours or more per week. Five of the participants worked part-time as defined by less than 25 hours per week. Four participants were unemployed. Half of the participants were first-generation students as defined by parent's educational attainment as high school diploma, less than high school, or some college, but no degree. For two of the first-generation students, neither parent had finished high school. Four participants had at least one parent who had earned an associate's degree. The final participant's mother had earned a master's degree. Since all of the students were in bachelor degree programs, nine of the ten participants were seeking a degree that neither parent had attained.

Tinto's seminal work (Tinto & Cullen, 1973) cited the student entry characteristic of academic ability as the single greatest predictor of persistence. Of the ten focus group participants, six reported a 2.0 high-school GPA; two reported a 3.0; and two reported a 4.0 (all on a 4.0 scale) resulting in varied abilities. Self-reported entering college GPA or previous college work were slightly higher with only three reporting a 2.0; four reporting a 3.0; and three reporting a 4.0. Following are profiles of individual focus group participants, which highlight

their background, reasons for returning to college, and a brief summary of how they described integration. Participant summaries include their chosen pseudonym to protect their identity.

Participant Introductions

Bob

Bob is a White male in his early 30s finishing his senior year of college as a returning adult and is studying workforce education and development. He is married and has children from a previous marriage. Bob returned to college as a part-time student while working full-time as an auto technician and eventually transitioned to a full-time student with a part-time job on campus. Both of his parents have some college, but no degree. Bob, like his parents, gained knowledge and skills over the years, but had no degree to show for it. He knew that he needed to do something different for career advancement or to change careers.

Bob initially enrolled in college by taking a class or two at a time and had a low commitment to finishing his degree because the end (degree completion) seemed so far away. After two years as a part-time student attending school “on the side,” he decided to enroll full-time. As a full-time student with a student job on campus, Bob felt more a part of the campus than he did as a part-time student. He tends to be self-reliant and entered college with an established outside support system. As for developing a social system at the institution, he can “take it or leave it. If it works out it works out. It’s better for it to not work out than to end up as a distraction.” He credits faculty and staff with providing the guidance needed to clarify both his academic path and institutional processes or all the “little things that you have to do along the way.”

Lauren

Lauren is a 25 year-old African American female in her senior year of college as a returning adult and is studying social work. She is a single parent with two children, ages eight and five. Lauren returned to college to expand her job opportunities, but also wanted to set an example for her children. Even though she previously spent three years at a community college, like Bob, she enrolled at the university having college credits but no degree to show for it. She is highly committed to completing her degree and is “motivated to just get it done.” Lauren’s mother completed an associate’s degree and her father obtained a high school diploma.

Although they live at a distance, Lauren views her family as her primary support system, but has developed a secondary support system of friends she has met through her children’s activities who can assist with child care and other support as needed. She does not feel fully accepted in her classes, but does not feel isolated either, “I don’t know if I go there to BE accepted; I go there to learn.” However, Lauren has developed bonds with students that she has had multiple classes with, but describes the relationships as academically-focused such as reminding each other of assignment due dates. She prefers structure in the classroom and struggles most with inconsistencies of assignments or faculty expectations. Lauren is determined to complete her bachelor’s degree and feels that academic successes and finding people who share the same motivation and goals are important to helping her to continue to move forward.

Grammy

Grammy is a 53-year-old White female in her junior year as a transfer student from a local community college and is studying social work. She is married, has three grown children, eight young grandchildren, and works part-time on campus. Grammy returned to college with a

goal to help others. Having been in an abusive relationship for 21 years, she regained her self-confidence and decided to pursue a college degree. Even though she transferred directly from a community college, like Bob and Lauren, she had college credits, but no degree to show for it. She is determined to complete her bachelor's degree even though she sometimes struggles. Grammy is a first-generation college student and neither of her parents finished high school.

Grammy already has an outside support system, but feels that connecting with other nontraditional students is important as they are likely to step up when she needs help in the classroom. Even though she is older, she feels accepted and welcomed even by some of the 'regular' (or traditional) students. However, she does become agitated when less serious students create distractions in class because she has "paid a lot of money for the class." Grammy's classroom relationships are academically-focused and they "kind of watch out for each other" when one misses class. Like the others, instructor inconsistencies or lack of willingness to help, although not a common occurrence, are Grammy's biggest sources of frustration, but she does not give up easily and finds way to get through it with the help of others in her class or major.

Faith

Faith is a 28-year-old African American female finishing her senior year as a community college transfer and is studying information systems technology. She is a single parent raising a 10-year-old son and works part-time. After working "paycheck to paycheck," she decided to pursue a bachelor's degree; the first in her family to do so. Her mother completed an associate degree and her father earned a high school diploma. Faith previously attended two community colleges, one of them having a close relationship and capstone program agreement with the

university. She is very committed to completing her degree as the capstone program helped her to transfer successfully and to understand exactly what she had to do to finish.

Although Faith has a child and is slightly older than the traditional student, she tends to see everyone as “just students” and is not concerned about traditional or nontraditional because “everyone’s there for a specific reason.” She has high expectations for herself and is competitive in her field of study, which is predominately male. She feels that other students initially looked at her as an outcast because of her ethnicity and gender, but had no choice but to accept her because of her motivation to succeed. She agreed with Grammy that the more dedicated students tend to gravitate to each other and create a support system. However, Faith also remembers what it was like to be a traditional student who might not be as focused and finds that sharing her own experiences with younger students, a mentoring-type relationship, has opened their eyes to what is possible.

George

George is a 54-year-old White male in his sophomore year. He is single, but has three adult children and one grandchild. He attends school full-time and was a homeless veteran prior to entering college. George is unemployed but was once a truck driver forced to retire due to health issues. Because of his love for horses, he is pursuing a degree in equine science. His father completed an associate’s degree and his mother obtained a high school diploma. Earning a bachelor’s degree, something others in his family have not done, is a personal goal for George and he has also considered pursuing an advanced degree.

Although George lives in campus housing designed for graduate students and students with families, socializing tends to be primarily in the classroom as he is not interested in the

“college town atmosphere.” However, he feels accepted in the classroom even though he is older than other students, “old enough to be their parent.” He is very committed to finishing his degree and, even when days get tough, he refuses to throw away the time already invested.

Jane

Jane is a 50-year-old White female. She is single and has three grown children and two grandchildren. She is a first-generation student; neither her mother nor father finished high school. Jane is in her sophomore year studying art, a passion from high school but abandoned when she was steered into a different direction by “well-meaning adults.” To make ends meet, she has two part-time jobs, but both have flexible hours so that she can attend school.

Jane feels accepted by other students even though she feels old enough to be their mom. In fact, just a few weeks before the focus group session, Jane welcomed her second grandchild to the world. Anticipating her daughter’s due date, Jane took online classes for one semester to allow for flexibility when her granddaughter was born, but plans to return to the classroom the next semester. Although Jane feels accepted in the classroom, she continually has more difficulty fitting in outside the classroom. She attempted to attend campus-wide events, but feels alone because her friends, or primary support system, are outside of her academic interests. Jane is very committed to finishing her degree and feels that making friends is great if it works out, but “if it doesn’t, I’m here to get my degree and do well.”

Lana

Lana is a 36-year-old African American female finishing her senior year studying criminology and criminal justice after years working in the field. She is single and not employed. Her mother earned a high school diploma but her father did not finish high school,

classifying Lana as a first-generation student. She enrolled in college to pursue a degree when becoming homeless after having to leave her job. Like others, Lana re-entered college having previous credits, but no degree to show for it. During the admissions process, she learned that she was very close to finishing her degree, which elevated her goal commitment even further.

Lana relocated to finish her degree, leaving her immediate support system behind. Integrating and finding a new support system among other students has been difficult since she is older and has more life experience and, therefore, relates more to faculty than to her peers. Because of a lack of connection, she has not had a positive college experience, but feels she is too close to degree completion to not finish.

Arthmis

Arthmis is a 31-year-old Hispanic American female finishing her senior year studying communication disorders and sciences. She is a single parent raising an eight-year-old son and works part-time on campus. Arthmis is a first-generation student; her mother earned a high school diploma and her father completed vocational training. Like others, she previously attended college, but did not finish and, as a result, was in the workforce for eight years with only a high school diploma. She credits having her son as the motivation to go back to earn her degree to set an example for him and to make a better life for them both.

Her son continues to serve as motivation not only to finish, but to maintain a high grade point average. She learned to embrace how different her life is as compared to that of the traditional student and how to balance multiple responsibilities and roles in addition to being a student. Arthmis relocated to enroll in college and knew no one. Interactions with the institution's support staff early in her transition helped her to feel welcomed and accepted at the

university. While finishing her degree program, she had her share of ups and downs related to acceptance by other students in her program. Academically she performed well, maintained high standards for herself, and plans to not only complete her bachelor's degree, but will also pursue a master's degree.

Monica

Monica is a 20-year-old African American female and is a junior studying criminal justice with a minor in psychology. She had her now three-year old daughter when she was a 16-year-old high school junior, and is successfully raising her as a single parent in college. Like Arthmis, making a better life for her and her child and setting a good example drives her to push forward to earn her college degree. Monica's mother and father both attended college and both earned an associate's degree.

Despite being a teen mom, Monica wanted to attend college directly out of high school; but, her biggest concerns were childcare and where she would live on campus with a child. Her decision to enroll at the university came from a discussion with her cousin, also a single mom, who attended the same institution and knew of its services for single parents. Like Arthmis, Monica left her entire support system to enroll in college. Her grades suffered her first year as she was not only transitioning from high school to college as a traditional age student, but had the added adjustment of moving away from home as a new mom raising a toddler on her own. Finding a mentor on campus made the difference to help her transition from struggle to success. Monica is committed to finishing her degree within the next year and has contemplated moving on for a master's degree.

Steve

Steve is a White male in his early 30s or, as he stated, “nearly 12-years older than the average student.” He is a senior studying sociology and decided to enroll in college when realizing that, after years in the workforce, he could not advance without a bachelor’s degree or higher. He first enrolled at a local community college then transferred to the university because it was close to home and he needed to be available to care for a family member. As for his parents’ educational attainment, Steve was the only participant whose parent had earned a four-year degree or higher; his mother earned a master’s degree at the same institution he is attending and his father has some college, but no degree.

When Steve initially enrolled at the university, he was unclear about what degree program was the best fit. This lack of focus caused him to withdraw, refocus, and return with clarity of purpose that propelled him not only toward degree completion but with an expanded goal of earning a master’s degree and, quite possibly, a doctorate. Although Steve feels academically part of the classroom and the institution, he definitely feels disconnected from other campus life because of his age. However, because Steve already had an established support system and life experiences that most traditional students gain in college, he does not feel a need to make friends. What he does need is a degree.

Theoretical Model and Categories

Questions for the focus group sessions followed Tinto’s integration theory model (see Figure 1) for the purposes of comparing quantitative and qualitative data collected for this mixed methods study. As a result, categories consistent with the model and the focus group questions served as a guide for thematic placement. Pre-determined theoretical categories included student

entry characteristics, initial commitment to education goal, initial commitment to institution, social integration, academic integration, subsequent commitment to goal, subsequent commitment to institution, and intent to persist. For the purposes of this study, the addition of socio-academic integrative moments represented the merge of social and academic integration. Although concurrent quantitative and qualitative data collection occurred according to the study's methodological design, the researcher intentionally completed focus group transcription, data analysis, and written findings prior to analyzing the quantitative data in order to reduce bias or the possibility of quantitative findings influencing the qualitative data interpretation.

Thematic Categories and Sub-Themes

Verbatim transcription of focus group recordings served as the first review of data. Once transcribed and sent to participants for member checking, a constant comparison method of analysis included coding passages, comparing codes for congruent or inconsistent patterns, and noting data patterns for categorization (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). The process continued to the point of redundancy resulting in 18 separate themes related to the nine pre-determined theoretical categories (see Table 17). Further analysis resulted in additional organization of themes into five core categories: Arriving; Can I Do It?, Fitting In, Belonging is Academic, and Means to an End.

Table 17

Focus Group Analysis: Categories and Themes

Theoretical Category	Thematic Category	Themes
Student Entry Characteristics	Arriving	Some college, no degree. Here for a purpose.
Initial Commitment to Goal		Determined to finish.
Initial Institutional Commitment		Place bound. Support Services.
Integration: Academic	Can I Do It?	Early successes. Importance of faculty/staff. High expectations of self and others. Active learning equals satisfaction, not persistence.
Integration: Social	Fitting In	Feeling different. In class, I'm just a student. Acceptance. Everybody needs somebody.
Socio-Academic Integrative Moments	Belonging is Academic	Student identity. Academic-focused socialization.
Subsequent Commitment to Goal	Means to an End	Bachelor's degree is just the beginning.
Subsequent Commitment to Institution		Mixed responses.
Intent to Persist		Definitely finishing.

Arriving

Student Entry Characteristics

Demographically, half of the focus group participants were first-generation students with some having parents who never completed high school. First-generation students tend to require additional support so this characteristic alone might threaten persistence. However, common themes from this study's focus groups indicate that these students also entered with life experience which, many times, includes some college, but no degree and a clear purpose to earn their degree that seemingly catapults them forward and motivates them to stay the course regardless of other background characteristics they might have. In studies exploring traditional student persistence (Berger & Braxton, 1998; Braxton, Jones, Hirschy, & Hartley, 2008; Braxton, Milem, & Sullivan, 2000; Cabrera, Castaneda, Nora, & Hengstler, 1992; Chapman & Pascarella, 1983; Jones, 2010; Pascarella, 1982; Pascarella, Duby, & Iverson, 1983), factors such as life experience and previous college attendance do not typically enter into the theoretical equation. However, these focus group participants entered the institution not only with life experience and previous college experience, but entered as mothers, fathers, grandparents, and military veterans with a clear purpose in mind: earning a college degree.

It did not seem to matter that over half of the participants entered college as a single parent. The characteristic of single parenthood that had the potential to lead to dropout seemed to do just the opposite as the children of these students became the driving force to do well in school; these students wanted to set an example for their children and build a better life for their family. It did not seem to matter that only one of the participants had a parent who had earned a bachelor's degree or higher. Rather than being limited by their parent's educational attainment,

these students were adults who were making their own decisions and creating their own lives. The influence of their family background did not seem to even enter into the conversation.

Although many of these students had been out of high school for many years, it did not seem to matter that over half of them were less than stellar students in high school with a self-reported GPA of 2.0. On the contrary, participants seemed to have high academic expectations for themselves and self-reported college GPA's were slightly higher with 7 of the 10 participants reporting a 3.0 or higher.

The student entry characteristic that did seem to matter was that all of the participants communicated a clear purpose and high level of commitment to their educational goal. Despite family background, high school GPA, parent's educational attainment, or outside obligations, commitment to their goal and the determination to earn their degree appeared to be the most influential characteristic that these students entered the institution with.

Many of the participants also entered college with an increased appreciation for higher education. Nine of the ten had been to college as a traditional student or had other experiences that caused them to better appreciate their education as a more mature adult. Speaking of his appreciation of the knowledge he is gaining, George said, "Had I attended [the institution] when I first graduated high school, I don't think I would have enjoyed it as much as I do now." Jane could relate as she did enter [the institution] just out of high school but was not mature enough to handle the freedom or lack of rules and regulations, so she left college and joined the military at the advice of "well-meaning adults." Lana agreed as she studied in the same major just out of high school but, like Jane, did not succeed. She elaborated, "Because I now have a background in law enforcement it is so much more smoother this time around because I understood the

concepts, I could actually, um, put two and two together because I've either done it or I've seen it or I know about it." For these students, their life experience not only led to a greater appreciation of their education but helped them to make meaningful connections between the classroom and their career.

Some college, no degree. A common element among 4 of the 10 participants was the college credits they had earned previously but without degree completion. An additional five participants had years of work experience or military experience, but lacked marketable credentials for career advancement without a degree. Only one participant, a single mom, entered the institution directly from high school and was in her junior year without a gap in her education.

Walking out of a community college or working for years in a particular field with little to show for it seemed to provide students the motivation to finish their degree. Lauren commented, "I had spent three years at a community college and I still hadn't completed my associate degree. And so I was really motivated to just get it [bachelor's degree] done." Grammy also spent two years at a community college without earning a degree. Faith attended two different community colleges and finally saw the light at the end of the tunnel when introduced to a capstone program agreement one of the community colleges had with the four-year institution. She described completing her degree as being able to gain more from her existing knowledge than a paycheck to paycheck existence. Arthmis enrolled at a university just out of high school but did not finish. Although she had college credits, her lack of degree credentials left her "in the workforce for eight years with just a high school diploma," which not only limited her options but, in her opinion, did not set a good example for her son.

Although Jane came to the institution with years of life experience including time in the military, she still had no degree and decided to go back to school at the age of 50 to pursue art, an interest left unfulfilled since high school. Bob made reference to the years of work experience he had and how he spent a lot of time reading and engaging in informal learning, but had “no credibility to go with that knowledge” which left him in a dead end job. He shared, “I could’ve gone a little farther [in his job], but where I was at was probably as far as I was going to go...so I just needed to do something different.”

Here for a purpose. Without a doubt, these adults did not enter college on a whim. Enrolling was an intentional decision with a clear goal in mind: to earn a college degree. Some returned for career advancement or job change, others wanted to set an example for their children, and a few enrolled simply as a personal goal to earn a degree. Although they sometimes felt nervous about performing in the academic arena, the fear did not factor in to whether they would finish their degree or not. They are a determined and resilient group with a clear purpose.

Steve and Bob returned to college after reaching a plateau in their careers. Advancement or other career opportunities required a degree and, despite their years of work experience, they lacked academic credentials. Bob said, “I had reached basically a level in my technical career that I couldn’t advance anymore in a way that I wanted to.” Faith, tired of earning minimum wage, knew that a college degree represented opportunity for her and her children. Lauren agreed with Faith, but she also wanted to set an example for her children. Like Lauren, having a child prompted both Arthmis and Monica to further their education. For Arthmis, she looked at her young son and wondered how she could set the expectation for college if she never finished

college herself, “I just remember looking at his little face and knowing, what do I have that I would expect him to have as an expectation, such as a college degree, if his mother didn’t have one?” When Monica, a teen mom, had her daughter, everyone doubted that she could or would go to college. She used that negativity to push her forward and enroll in college to make a better life for her and her daughter. However, she knows others who enrolled but “left after the first semester because they didn’t feel a part, they had no support system here, they were just like in a world of so many.” She felt that her friends who abandoned their college education early on did not have a strongly developed purpose for being at the institution and did not connect with others that could provide support until they found their purpose or focus.

Two of the participants were homeless prior to making the decision to enroll in college and were encouraged to pursue higher education. For George, previously a homeless veteran, earning a degree is a personal goal and something that no one in his family has obtained. George explained, “I spent three months at the VA hospital and that’s where they encouraged us to look into higher education.” Lana became homeless after having to leave her previous job. Lana felt that she “had to go back to school,” as earning her degree equated to a better future and more opportunities. Jane entered college to study art, something she always dreamed of, but “well-meaning adults” steered her in different direction. Now that she is a “well-meaning adult” and her kids are grown, she entered college with the purpose to follow her dream and said, “I’m committed to finish here [the institution] and I’m committed to my degree. Definitely!”

Initial Commitment to Education Goal

Like Jane, most all of the participants entered the institution with a high commitment to their educational goal, a commitment that might have escaped them previously. Some had prior

college credits and just needed to finish the degree. Others were committed to finishing their degree in order to set an example for their children, to make a better life for themselves through career advancement and other opportunities, or for personal fulfillment. Regardless of the reason, this group had a purpose and each had their eyes fixed on their goal.

Determined to finish. Grammy expressed that returning to college was not easy but that she is, “very determined to get this degree. Struggling but determined to get it!” Like others who had some college but no degree, Lauren revealed, “I spent three years pursuing a two year degree [at a community college] that I did not get so I was really disappointed in myself...it just really put a fire in me that I really need to succeed.” Entering the institution with existing college credits not only served as a motivation to finish, but helped many of the participants to see an end in sight which also increased their determination. Lana shared, “I was very committed in wanting to finish my degree considering when I transferred in I was so close anyway.” Faith found the commitment to her goal as a motivating factor when times get tough, “even though the world’s on my shoulders, I came here for a reason. I need to get this accomplished.” Others echoed this determination and, like Jane, described an unwavering commitment to finish “even when it gets really hard and I wonder what the heck I was thinking.”

Although he returned to college for career advancement, Bob shared a different story. Unlike many of the others, he initially enrolled part-time and was not very committed as he “had kind of gotten talked into the degree by advisors” and, by taking classes part-time, degree completion seemed far away. He recalled, “at the very beginning, I couldn’t even see the end of it.” He continued that, over time, his commitment grew, he enrolled full-time, and he “got more

serious about it.” For George, determination to finish comes from the personal fulfillment of “knowing that I’ve completed something that others in my family hadn’t done.”

Arthmis also expressed determination but her motivation was clearly her son, “I was going through a lot of life changes before my son was born and, after I had him, I felt I was more committed, more determined.” Like Arthmis, becoming a mother prompted Monica to place her education as a “number one priority” and choosing an institution that offers daycare and other resources provided her with the stability needed to make that priority a reality.

Initial Commitment to Institution

Participants described their commitment to completing their degree more passionately than they described the reason for choosing a particular university. For most of them, the university they chose was close to home and, therefore, seemed to be the obvious or only choice. For others, particularly those relocating, reasons for choosing the institution seemed to focus around specific support services for them and their children. One participant, Faith, chose the institution because of a capstone program agreement between her community college and the university, but her experience was not the norm.

Place bound. Several of the participants reside in the region surrounding the university and chose the institution because it was close to home. Because he lived close by, Bob viewed the university as his only option, “I mean I’m sure I could have gotten admitted to other programs but I didn’t want to travel or move.” Jane lived 20 miles from the institution and was, therefore, committed to enrolling there when she made the decision to return to school. Although Steve lived in the area and his mother had also attended the university, he planned to enroll at a different institution until his grandmother became ill and Steve became the caregiver.

Although the institution was not his first choice, he now admits, “I’m happy I came here, it’s close to home. I’m completely committed...I’ll probably end up staying here for my master’s also.”

Support services. Of the students who felt they had multiple options when choosing an institution, support services became the deciding factor. Even though Grammy lived in close proximity to the institution, it was the supportive environment that made the difference. She recalled, “I came on a campus visit with my community college and everybody that was here was always very friendly, very willing to answer questions...and that’s what I liked about [the institution].” Arthmis had a similar experience as early email communications with student services staff helped her make the decision to move away from everything she had ever known, from the city to a rural area, and leave her support system behind to relocate and start school, “I mean through an email, you could FEEL that connection, you could FEEL that welcome and, without that, that was one of the main purposes that brought me here.”

Monica’s biggest motivation to choose the university was resources for her and her child, including housing and childcare, which provided the stability she needed to focus on her education, “When I came to this university I was like 110% committed to this university mainly because of the things they do offer for single parents.” However, she felt that the campus does not do enough to publicize those services or to acknowledge single parents as she learned about resources by word of mouth and was not aware of many of the services until well into her sophomore year. She also mentioned that, although she might not always take advantage of all the resources and services available to her, “just to know that it’s there and that I can just call, come up, email, anything...if I like really need help” is important to her.

Can I Do It?

Integration: Academic

Although participants entered with a clear purpose and determination to earn their degree, they also entered with some hesitation and anxiety about how they would perform or integrate academically. Many of them had been away from school for an extended period of time so returning to the classroom brought along a combination of fear and excitement. Contrary to the purpose of this study, students did not describe academic integration as a result of classroom engagement experiences such as class discussion, group work, or the challenge of higher order thinking. Rather, students credited early successes, the encouragement of faculty and staff, and setting high expectations for themselves as vital pieces to helping them to succeed academically and persist to degree completion. When asked about classroom experiences, namely active learning experiences, participants did describe a deeper satisfaction with those particular courses but satisfaction did not necessarily seem to be a deciding factor in persistence.

Early successes. Not unlike most students, the focus group participants credited success early in their degree program as essential to persistence and to feeling like a student. Bob said that, “I can’t speak for everyone but my personal experience is just from success. I think that first semester, if I’d fallen on my face, I probably wouldn’t have kept going.” He continued “I did very well right in the beginning and that motivated me, that made me feel like, yeah I can do this, even though I’m older coming back I can still, I can hang with these guys, I can still do this.” Lauren shared, “I think the successes you get reinforces your goal, your motivation, and it makes you want to do better.” George was apprehensive just signing up for his first English composition class but early successes changed everything, “Once I started turning things in and

the comments and the grades I received after I turned it in I thought, this isn't as bad as I thought it would be. I'm enjoying this." He commented, however, that he feels most at home in courses related to his major,

When I'm in those settings, because of my personal experience in that field, it's just refreshing that which I already know or maybe have forgotten over the years. Still, it reinforces the things that you do know and you say, I know what I'm doing, I can do this! And that's what I think has helped me along.

Monica, on the other hand, struggled during her first year as she was not only making the transition from high school student to college student, but also to being a new mom on her own for the first time. Although Monica was highly committed to her education, a campus mentor helped her to not only perform better academically, but to also begin enjoying her college experience more.

Importance of faculty and staff. In addition to their own motivation and perseverance, the difference makers for these students were faculty and staff that encouraged them along the way. Monica's mentor on campus meant the difference between near failure and success and the understanding of faculty members when her daughter was sick provided the additional support she needed to succeed. She also mentioned that some professors pushed her to always improve and were willing to meet outside of class to help her do so. She described these faculty members as caring.

Faculty support and feedback seemed to help participants integrate academically as they needed someone to acknowledge that they could compete in the academic arena before they could believe in it themselves. Arthmis shared that the transition from working full-time to

going to school with a part-time student job was an adjustment, but she was most anxious about her math classes. She credited her math instructor for helping the math class go smoothly.

Because of her perceived lack of acceptance by students in her academic program, Arthmis also acknowledged that faculty played an important role in helping her feel accepted, which led to persistence. Jane, an art major, doubted whether her artistic abilities were good enough.

Although she was not getting much feedback from the teaching assistant, she recalls one particular person who believed in her, “I found someone, a mentor, and she told me ‘you keep drawing, you keep drawing, you keep learning’.”

High expectations of self and others. For Arthmis, her son became her motivation to not only return to school, but to excel, “I would never settle for less than a B. Having a B was like a D to me. Every time I would go to class, I would think of him [her son] and he was my motivation.” Bob’s expectations related not only to grades, but to valuing the cost of his education, “I’m going to owe a lot of money for that class and I’m going to get an A in it...and I’m not walking away with, ‘I did half the work and got a C and let’s go to the next semester.’ That’s not happening.”

Participants also have high expectations of faculty and described clarity and consistency in the classroom as pertinent to increasing success and decreasing frustrations. Faith explained that instructional clarity, classroom structure, and clear attendance policies helped her to know exactly what she needed to do to set a game plan and to stay on track. Bob mentioned the times that have tested his commitment most was excessive hours required outside of class but not because the course necessarily required it but because “teaching methods are ineffective and they

try to make up for it by having you learn it on your own.” Fortunately for Bob, those occurrences were rare, but did cause significant obstacles.

In a defeated tone, Lauren spoke of her own challenges in one of her current classes, “It’s really hard because there’s a lot of inconsistencies. You say this, but you want that, you want that but you say this, and I’m really having a hard time with the class and I just don’t know what to say about it.” With obvious frustration, Grammy also described an instance where she missed a class, attempted to contact classmates for information with no response, and the instructor was unwilling to help. Again, these seemed to be isolated incidents for participants who shared their experiences, but clearly brought about passionate responses.

Active learning equals satisfaction, not persistence. Jane shared that classes where she felt most connected was due to how the class was organized. She described how the teaching assistant for her speech class arranged desks in a circle, partnered students up, and made name cards and introductions on the first day of class. With a smile, she shared, “That was a great class!” and she felt integrated. She recalled that a feeling of integration took much longer in other classes, if at all, and she wondered why other instructors do not take the opportunity to connect students, particularly in the smaller classes. Jane concluded, “So I’d have to say my speech class was my best experience and my other ones were ‘ok’ after a while.” Monica referred to her instructors as “awesome rock star professors!” Like Jane, Monica elaborated by describing the professors she enjoyed most as interactive, able to keep her attention, and available both in and out of the classroom. She went on to say, “My teachers and the classroom experiences have made my college journey wonderful to the point where I’m thinking about staying here to continue my education to my masters.” Students described these interactive

classroom experiences as preferable and they explained that those interactions made their college experience better. Yet, even if they did not have those experiences, they felt they would still be determined to finish their degree.

Fitting In

Integration: Social

Like interactive learning being preferred, but not required, participants felt the same about integrating socially or making friends on campus. Many of them entered the institution with an existing support system and were not really expecting an additional social system to develop. What they found was that, despite feeling noticeably different from the traditional student population, they also felt accepted and, at least in the classroom, they were a student just like everybody else. Even for those who did not necessarily come to college to make friends, they realized that everybody needs somebody along the way.

Feeling different. Participants definitely viewed themselves as different from the traditional or ‘regular’ students. Much of this difference related to life choices, responsibilities, and seriousness with which they pursued their education. However, age was the most common theme related to feeling different. Bob said, “You do feel really out of place when you’re in your 30s going to school with a bunch of kids just out of high school. You kind of feel like an alien walking around campus.” Jane mentioned that, because of her age, most people she meets on campus assume that she is not a student, “but that’s ok. I don’t say ‘I’m a student and ...why can’t I be? You’re making assumptions!’”

Steve and Bob also cited noticeable differences in academic commitment of nontraditional versus some of the traditional students. Bob noted, “A lot of those kids are just

not as committed as I am and so it's kind of hard to relate to them." George agreed that nontraditional students "seem to relate more with the instructors or the professors rather than student peers...just because of the age difference." On the other hand, relating to instructors as peers creates its own set of challenges. Lana recalled, "Many of my instructors don't know how to take me...they don't want to talk to you as if you're 19, but they don't want to talk to you as if you work with them." Lana found trying to walk this line and finding her place or group to fit into as very difficult. When asked if she felt integrating socially was important, Lana responded in a slightly defeated tone, "I used to think so but, I mean it is a lot harder when you're just basically out there by yourself, you know. I've gotten to the point where I just don't care."

Steve described feeling different as a separation "since I'm about 12 years older than the average college student" and since his interests tend to be different. He also found difficulty obtaining a student work position on campus and, despite repeated attempts and follow ups, felt overlooked because he perceived that he "wasn't representable enough of the university." Although Jane tends to be a self-proclaimed 'people person', she added, "I know why I'm here and I really don't need to socialize and I have my own friends outside, you know, I do all that." Although she did mention feeling alone when attending campus events or something required of a class as her outside support did not necessarily connect to her academic interests, "Whenever I go to something I'm supposed to go to, I'm the one by myself. My family and friends aren't interested in my major." Like Lana, Jane feels alone at campus events and just stopped going but hopes to have more opportunities, "When I'm working on my major I'll be more involved with the people who are doing what I do and I'll attend more things." It seemed that Lana and

Jane, along with the other participants, would welcome peer relationships at the institution but, either way, their focus is on the degree.

In class, I'm just a student. Even though nontraditional students in the focus groups sometimes felt out of place on campus, the classroom seemed to provide a place where they could temporarily leave behind their other roles and just be a student because, as Faith described “everyone’s there for a specific reason” and, as Bob described, “they’re in the same place I am.” Jane admitted that she felt uncomfortable at first as she was older than the teaching assistants but was glad she was still treated like a student, “I wasn’t going to blend, but to do that as much as possible and to BE a student, just be a student” was the goal she set for herself.

George also feels isolated or alone outside of the classroom, but the learning environment offered opportunity for interaction, “Like in lab, I don’t have any problems there. In fact, there I’m just another student...we work well together even though there is such a significant age difference.” For Monica, a traditional-age student and mother of a preschooler, the classroom allows her to just be a ‘regular’ student. She shared that her relationship with classmates is not necessarily a personal one and says, “You would never know that I do have a child unless you knew me personally.” She concluded that, “Although I’m a nontraditional student I don’t feel like it once I enter the classroom or this campus. I don’t feel like it whatsoever.” It’s only when she goes home and tends to parenting and household responsibilities that she knows her college experience is different than the traditional student who does not have those outside responsibilities. However, when she takes her daughter to out-of-class activities, she admits that she feels odd because others sometimes pass judgment or make assumptions that they would not make when she is just a student in an academic setting. Monica also shared that a couple of

times she had to take her daughter to class when the day care was closed, “I feel, you know, like uncomfortable, and I feel like everybody just judges me but you have to look at the big picture” or, in other words, Monica had to stay focused on her goal.

Acceptance. Although participants shared experiences of *feeling different*, many of them felt accepted at the same time, particularly in the classroom. For Steve, the classroom is one place on campus where he feels “completely at ease.” George shared that his age and life experiences provide him with a different perspective in the classroom but he adds, “My classmates have accepted that I’m, you know, as old as their parents and they’re accepting of my views even though it differs from theirs.” Jane recalled a similar experience,

My classmates, um, were more accepting of me and did not say things like ‘well you’re old enough to be my mom’. They were just VERY encouraging, especially in my very first speech class...Feeling a part outside the classroom though has been a little more difficult but I think that getting done with my general studies and getting more into my major, that will change.

Lauren said, “I don’t know if I feel fully accepted in the classroom because I don’t know if I go there to BE accepted, I go there to learn. But then I don’t feel completely isolated either.”

Arthmis’ determination kicked in early on in her first semester when she felt a lack of acceptance by other students in her academic program. She began second guessing herself and wondering if she made the right choice to go back to school or if she was in the right field but shared,

I quickly had to turn that around and the reason was because I knew I came down here for a purpose, you know. I had to quickly shake myself out of it and know that, every day I

walked into the classroom, I had to walk in with my head held up high and that I was equally...equal enough to have that opportunity just as any other student in that classroom.

Arthmis credited the university's support services as helpful in finding acceptance, establishing an identity, solidifying her educational purpose, and acknowledging the additional responsibilities that nontraditional students enter college with. Regarding her early interactions with support staff, Arthmis shared that staff seemed to care about her and her son when they offered to meet them when they arrived at the university and help them find their way around, "that alone was the acceptance, you know." She also shared the importance of self-motivation,

I just have to really learn, too, how to pat myself on the back and realize that we come with a lot of struggles and not just ourselves but being able to still maintain and balance life *outside*, such as parenting, which a lot of students don't have. And, I have to learn to really step back and, instead of having that stigma where it's like you're looked down upon, to be able to just embrace it because this is our lives.

Arthmis described the stigma that, many times, goes along with being a single mother and how she started to believe the statistics. However, at the institution, she found acceptance and a place where she could begin telling herself that, "despite everything you've been through in your life in one particular area, HERE IS WHERE YOU CAN MAKE IT, HERE IS WHERE YOU CAN GET AN EDUCATION." She feels that being accepted and becoming a part of the institution, even if just in a small way, makes all the difference. She concluded, "You have to be able to fit in somewhere, somehow."

Everybody needs somebody. For those who previously resided in the region, developing a support system did not seem to be as important as for those relocating. However, even locals like Grammy found a need to connect with others who were,

going through the same thing you are, trying to finish the same thing you are. It's just your group, whether it's in a certain class or your major, I just feel they're really important because they have your back other than you *normal* support group.

Lauren also described these connections as a secondary support system indicating an already existing support system outside of the institution. Like Lauren, Faith has established a support system or 'third leg' consisting of others who are similar in age or have children. She even references her children as part of that support system,

The dedication that you may have towards each other or the support that you may have towards each other is what helps you to keep going. Because, you might have a down time to where you may feel like giving up but you have someone there to make you feel like, you know, you're almost there, you can do it, you can make it. And, those children, your children are also part of that support system because they're the support that you need to keep going.

Bob, on the other hand, feels the social aspect is simply extra and not necessary. He described completing his degree as "an individual against a goal system...as far as the social system, take it or leave it, if it works out it works out, it's better for it to not work out than to end up as a distraction." Bob did, however, reference relationships and interactions with support staff as possibly a 'social' element or connection with others, "When it comes to academic advisors, financial aid people, people in admissions, instructors, professors, whatever, graduate assistants,

those people are VERY important in my opinion as far as getting through the process.” He credited faculty and staff as important in helping with the ‘little things’ along the way (the steps or institutional processes), which can either help or hinder depending on how well that person does their job. “If you don’t have those people doing their job well and having the right personal skills to work with you then you’re up against an undefined goal and that is impossible.” When asked if the ‘impossible goal’ would be a deterrent to completion, Bob shared that this type of situation actually did deter him from his goal at the community college, “It shut me down and I took a year or two off and then I went back to try again and I really had to have my mind made up to overcome those people, the classes were a breeze.”

Faith challenged Bob’s idea of a ‘take it or leave it’ approach when it comes to a social system. She felt that the group was viewing the term ‘social’ as related to parties or group functions, but should broaden their definition of a social system to include relationships with faculty, support staff, and other students in class. Bob agreed that he can see those relationships as being part of social integration and feels more connected now as a full-time student working on campus than when he attended part-time and only came to campus for class. Faith continued, “In actuality, you can’t do without it [social interaction] because if you’re not socially integrated, you wouldn’t associate with anyone...I believe everyone needs that social integration, you know, to make it.”

Monica said, “If you don’t have that support or if you’re not integrated into a place where you feel comfortable, you’re going to fall behind, like ‘that’s just not for me.’” She provided the example in another concept of going to a party with friends and, if you feel isolated or uncomfortable, you are going to leave. She said students can be motivated to attend a certain

university or to be an ‘A’ student, but if they do not feel a part, do not feel support from the university, or professors do not care, she feels that the student will fall behind and withdraw. Arthmis agreed and, although she already had a clear purpose coming into the university she commented, “I still needed that guidance, I still needed mentoring, I still needed somebody to relate to in so many ways.” For Arthmis, she found mentors, faculty, and staff who became that ‘somebody.’

Belonging is Academic

Integration: Socio-Academic Integrative Moments

Focus group participants continually described experiences in which the social and academic realms intermingled and became indistinguishable. Not only did conversations with their peers tend to be academically-focused but, for them, integration or belonging meant feeling like a student by fitting in and performing academically.

Academic-focused socialization. Participants’ primary relationships on campus generated from classroom interactions with faculty and students. George mentioned that, because nontraditional students have outside obligations such as career and family to consider, “You may not socialize with anyone in courses other than in the classroom or something pertaining to your coursework. So I don’t think you have to really socialize other than during your time spent on campus.” Bob, who mentioned that he did not necessarily come to college to make friends, has come to know other students in his degree program and also described conversations as being academic or classroom-focused. Bob admitted that having these relationships was helpful, but make no difference in whether or not he will finish his degree.

Lauren, Grammy, and Faith have also developed friendships with classmates but, like Bob, the relationships are academic rather than personal and relate to 'looking out for one another' when it comes to assignment due date reminders, passing along class notes if one is absent, or talking about whether or not to take a particular class or instructor. As for the social aspect, participants agreed that socializing can be distracting but, as Lauren commented, can also be helpful if you find a "group of people who foster that motivation, they share the same goals, the same commitment," therefore, reiterating the goal-focused community rather than a purely social group.

Faith, one of the participants who is most active on campus, described times when she was most engaged on campus as academic and social at the same time. She shared, "Just by me going to the computer center, or talk to someone as far as careers, I build a support system." Lauren sees benefits of finding a group of people to connect with, but looks for those who are goal-oriented, committed to their education, and who foster motivation to do well academically. When she finds students who share her same goals, she shared "I think it brings out something in you that's really good, that really helps you to move forward."

Because of his age, Steve does not feel that he fits within Greek life or even the college town social scene but he does feel at home in the classroom, "I feel so out of place but, as far as like the educational-wise, I feel a part of the classroom. I've made plenty of friends with professors and students and I feel like I'm a part of [the institution]." However, Steve spoke of one class in which he was not doing well academically or in grasping the concepts, "In all of my other classes I felt really at home but, in that one class, I could not answer one question. I just felt completely isolated." Like the other participants, Steve's engagement tended to primarily

relate to the classroom and academic participation rather than purely social participation on or off campus.

Student identity. Steve's lack of clarity and purpose caused him to withdraw from the institution previously when he was taking classes, but was unsure of which major he wanted to focus on. He took time off to step back, refocus, and return with a clear idea of what program would be the best fit. For him, integration "is not exactly a feeling, it's a KNOWING situation" or being committed to an academic direction and as a result, knowing that you are a student with a purpose. Arthmis shared a similar point about first coming to the university and not having a clear purpose. Once faculty and staff came into place to help her mold and define that purpose "then that's when I was able to be committed to the institution, to my career goals." Like Steve, Arthmis described integration as the point in which you find academic purpose as a student.

Arthmis explained that 'purpose' is what she felt was missing when she enrolled in college just out of high school and that she sees that piece missing in many of the traditional students she meets on campus, "Don't get me wrong, you have some that are committed...but the majority of [traditional] students, they struggle. And those first two years, they don't get it until the end." Arthmis described integration as understanding your academic goal and purpose and referred to faculty and staff as critical pieces to that understanding. Steve, struggling to describe integration as a nontraditional student, summarized it as academic belonging "as in belonging as a student, identifying as a student, as being a student, if that makes sense, in the academic sense."

Means to an End

Subsequent Commitment to Educational Goal

Focus group participants started with a clear purpose and commitment to their educational goal. As they moved forward in their degree programs, many of them ended with an even stronger commitment to not only finish their bachelor's degree but to earn an advanced degree. For some, the bachelor's degree was no longer the end; it was a step along the path to a bigger goal.

Bachelor's degree is just the beginning. All of the focus group participants returned to school with the goal of earning a bachelor's degree, but 5 of the 10 now aspire to pursue an advanced degree. Four plan to pursue a master's degree and one hopes to pursue a master's and then continue toward a doctoral degree.

Although Steve had interest in pursuing an advanced degree, he spoke of how faculty acknowledgement of his academic potential became a strong influence in his final decision to apply for graduate school. Lauren, a senior, is also continuing on to graduate school following graduation and is looking forward to a new adventure as she and her children prepare for another move. Although George is just in his sophomore year, he is not only committed to finishing his bachelor's degree, but has "actually considered continuing on past that." For Monica, she entered college with a goal to earn her bachelor's degree, but quickly saw that she might need an advanced degree to compete in the changing economy. Arthmis knew she would need a master's degree to work in her field but, after being mentored on a research project, she said faculty opened her eyes to options she never dreamed would be possible, "They've motivated me for higher education like, oh, maybe I could get a PhD, maybe I could go into research." For these

students, returning to school to earn a bachelor's degree once seemed like a huge hurdle. Now, for some of them, a bachelor's degree is just the beginning.

Subsequent Commitment to Institution

Although participants did not speak poorly of the institution, the passion and commitment they expressed toward earning their degree far surpassed their allegiance to a particular institution. Responses were mixed as some participants felt their college experiences helped them develop a long-term relationship with the institution. Others were appreciative of the opportunity and the knowledge gained but did not feel a strong connection.

Mixed responses. Of all of the participants, Faith and Monica, who were the two youngest participants, seemed to seek out more of the 'traditional' college experiences such as student organizations and campus events. Because of this, they both felt strong connections to the institution and hope to give back to the school because of the great academic experiences, career development, and growth throughout their degree programs. One of the oldest participants, Grammy, also seemed to be more involved on campus than some of the others and, as a result, reacted similarly, "If I have anything to do with it, my grandkids will be going here."

Most of the participants, however, were undecided. Bob shared his appreciation for the institution and the experiences he had, but did not portray a strong connection. Lauren felt similar but focused most on moving on to graduate school, which would be at another university. However, as for finishing their bachelor's degree, all of them seemed committed not only to finishing their degree, but to finishing it at the institution.

Intent to Persist

The common theme from beginning to end, throughout nearly every question asked through the structured focus group questions, was that these students intended to persist to degree completion. They entered the institution with a clear purpose and, although interactive classroom experiences and social interactions enhanced their educational experience, the absence of these experiences did not deter them from their goal of earning their degree.

Definitely finishing. Jane shared, “I’m here for my degree. The other [social] stuff is great if it works and if it doesn’t, but I’m here to get my degree and I’m here to do well!”

George agreed,

There may be a day ‘why am I doing this?’ but we all have days like that and we just continue on...And if the commitment is there that you want to continue to higher education to the degree, as long as you maintain that mindset that that’s what you’re going to do, you’re gonna do it. So, it doesn’t matter how my day goes or that particular class, I’m not just gonna chuck it all and walk away, I’ve already spent too much time invested in it.

Although Lana had negative experiences in some classes and in trying to integrate socially that might have affected her goal commitment, she concurred with George, “It’s kind of too late for that. Too close, no point in turning back.”

As Arthmis prepares to graduate, she summed up her experience with ups, downs, and perseverance,

I’ll be crossing that stage this May so somewhere along the line I was able to shake myself out of it with the help of great mentors. I’ve had my moments, you know, where

I've had to cry it out and shake it out and, you know, just again, having that reassurance, having people who cared, having people who know, just being able to identify yourself and know that you ARE worthy and you CAN get through this and you deserve it just as much as the person sitting next to you.

She explained that her mentors were primarily faculty and staff who helped her to look at the big picture and helped her through challenges and obstacles. In the end, her concluding comments echoed that of other participants, "I am here for a purpose and I can't allow anyone to take that from me."

Summary

This chapter brought to life the experiences of 10 nontraditional students in relation to social and academic integration and persistence. Even though these nontraditional students entered or returned to college with a clear goal in mind, they say academic and social integration is still important, but not necessarily a deterrent to degree completion. Many entered with some college, but no degree and seemed determined to finish no matter what. Although they were pleased with their choice of institution, several thought it was the only choice as they were place bound. For others, institutional support services played a key role in their institutional choice.

Regarding academic integration, students in the focus groups seemed a bit nervous about returning to the classroom but credited academic success early in their first semester as the assurance that they could compete in the academic arena. Much of this success was a result of the expectations they had set for themselves but was also prompted by feedback from faculty and staff, which helped build their confidence. As for active learning contributing to academic

integration, students indicated that active learning such as discussion and real-world application were preferred, but did not influence their goal commitment.

Regarding social integration, nontraditional students in these focus groups definitely felt different from other students on campus but, in the classroom, they became just another student. Overall, they felt accepted on campus by faculty, staff, and students even if they did sometimes feel out of place. Although some might have thought they could get through college alone, in the end most agreed that they all needed somebody in their corner. That somebody could have been a classmate, faculty member, staff member, or an outside support system.

Regarding socio-academic integrative moments, students definitely described these types of experiences. These experiences included academic belonging related to development of their identity as a student or, in other words, knowing that they belonged and could perform in an academic setting. They also described any socialization in the classroom or on campus as academic in nature rather than purely social. Social and academic integration for these students did not seem to be separate spheres as indicated in Tinto's model. Rather, integration seemed to occur when the two converged and that convergence occurred primarily in the classroom but in ways different from the integration constructs defined in this current study.

For these nontraditional students, returning to school to finish a bachelor's degree was just the beginning as far as their educational goals were concerned. They did not necessarily enter the institution with the goal of earning an advanced degree but, once they got started, they saw potential for moving beyond their initial goal. The bottom line for these students is that they came from various backgrounds, arrived committed to their goal, realized they could compete academically, discovered support along the way, and persisted. The three focus group sessions

could be summed up in two of the participant's statements. Jane said, "I'm here to get my degree and I'm here to do well." Faith continued, "even though the world's on my shoulders, I came here for a reason. I need to get this accomplished."

CHAPTER 6

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this mixed methods study was to explore the link of social and academic integration to persistence of nontraditional students. Tinto's (1975) integration theory served as the theoretical foundation for the study and guided three research questions:

1. What is the relationship of academic integration through classroom active learning strategies with nontraditional student intent to persist?
2. What is the relationship of social integration through a perceived sense of belonging with nontraditional student intent to persist?
3. What is the relationship of the interaction of variables (perceived sense of belonging and classroom active learning strategies) with nontraditional student intent to persist?

A literature review of research related to nontraditional student experiences revealed the potential for the classroom to play an important role in nontraditional student integration since many of these students might only come to campus for class (Braxton et al., 2008; Deil-Amen, 2011; Donaldson & Graham, 1999; Harris, 2006; Price & Baker, 2012; Tinto, 1997; Townsend & Wilson, 2009). Although new to Tinto's model, literature identified sense of belonging and active-learning strategies as classroom-related variables connected to social and academic integration (Flynn, 2009; Hebert & Reynolds, 1998; Kraska, 2008; Reynolds & Hebert, 1998; Spaid & Duff, 2009; Tinto, Goodsell-Love, & Russo, 1993; Uyder, 2010). The current study built upon Tinto's (1997) suggestion that social and academic integration, when occurring in the classroom, might overlap or converge as opposed to the linear nature of his original integration

model (see Figure 1). Deil-Amen's (2011) study revealed the classroom as a possible integration site as well.

Given the limited research on the topic of nontraditional student integration, mixed methods research allowed for a multi-faceted approach for a more complete understanding of the issue and of the sense of belonging and active learning constructs since they were new to the integration model. A concurrent or convergent mixed methods design provided the framework for data collection. The concurrent collection of quantitative data through a 38-question survey and qualitative data through focus group interviews allowed for independent data analysis and for reporting of findings with convergence of data occurring at the point of summary or conclusion. Consistent with the convergent design, this chapter discusses meta-inferences obtained through the combination or convergence of the quantitative and qualitative data. These meta-inferences were organized to answer the study's three research questions.

Summary

Although the study and its concurrent triangulation design appear complex, the conclusions of the study are quite simple. The most significant finding, consistent with both the quantitative and qualitative data, related nontraditional student's intent to persist to their initial commitment to their educational goal. While this finding might seem to be one of common sense, it is consistent with research that continually portrays nontraditional students as committed students and ones who are most likely to enter college with one goal in mind, to earn a college degree (Hagelskamp, Schleifer, & DiStasi, 2013). The finding also connects back to Tinto's earliest work (Tinto & Cullen, 1973) indicating that a high commitment to the educational goal might positively influence persistence even with minimal integration.

Statistical analysis of all three research questions resulted in similar conclusions: initial commitment to the educational goal explained the largest percentage of variance at 17.8%. Two other variables, subsequent institutional commitment and social integration, explained a very small percentage of the variance at 1.8% and 2.6% respectively. Obviously, much of the variance is yet to be explained.

Research Question One

What is the relationship of academic integration through classroom active learning strategies with nontraditional student intent to persist?

Quantitative data revealed a weak, but statistically significant positive relationship between academic integration, as measured by classroom active learning strategies, and nontraditional student intent to persist (see Table 7). The academic integration composite variable was not included as a statistically significant predictor in the regression model. Survey questions measured active learning strategies as the frequent observance of or engagement in class discussion, higher order thinking skills, and group work. Students in the focus group sessions offered similar explanations. Although students appeared to enjoy and gain more satisfaction from classes in which active learning occurred, the existence or absence of these strategies did not seem to influence their educational goal commitment. Therefore, while nontraditional students might prefer opportunities for active learning, as cited in other research (Benschhoff, 1993; Kasworm, 2001, 2003), this current study concluded that students might overlook that preference in pursuit of the larger goal of degree completion.

Similarly, focus group participants preferred quality teaching, clarity, and organization in the classroom; but, contrary to Wolniak, Mayhew, and Endberg's (2012) study, these preferences

also seemed to have more influence on student satisfaction than persistence. Students, like Jane and Monica, described their best academic experiences as interactive, connected through participation, consistent, and structured. Although active learning strategies were not a statistically significant academic integration construct in either data set, early successes surfaced in the focus groups as possible factors in academic integration. Bob, Lauren, and George described feeling academically integrated when they experienced academic success early in their first semester. These early successes are consistent with Brown's (2002) definition of academic integration as early success appears to help nontraditional students feel that he or she fits into the academic life of an institution. Bob equated success in the first semester to a feeling of, "I can do this, even though I'm older coming back...I can hang with these guys, I can still do this."

To summarize, the convergence of survey and focus group data related to active learning strategies and intent to persist resulted in consistent findings. Academic integration, through active learning, does not appear to influence nontraditional student persistence; but, according to focus group data, it does seem to play a role in student satisfaction or in improving the college experience. In addition, early academic successes also appear to play a role in feeling academically part of the institution.

Research Question Two

What is the relationship of social integration through sense of belonging with nontraditional student intent to persist?

Quantitative data revealed a weak, but statistically significant positive relationship between social integration, as measured by sense of belonging, and nontraditional student intent to persist (see Table 7). The social integration composite variable was included as a predictor in

the regression model but explained only a small portion (2.6%) of the variance (see Chapter 4). Survey questions measured sense of belonging by three factors: perceived faculty understanding, perceived peer support, and perceived classroom comfort.

Students in the focus group sessions offered similar explanations as factors such as peer support and faculty understanding were helpful, but not required for students to persist to degree completion. In fact, ‘fitting in’ as a nontraditional student on a traditional college campus did not even seem to be a high expectation for focus group participants. Just as active learning in the classroom seemed to increase student satisfaction, focus group participants also described peer and faculty relationships as welcomed, but not required. Students did, however, describe a feeling of acceptance and belonging when they performed well in the classroom and connected with students or faculty on an academic level.

Research Question Three

What is the relationship of the interaction of variables (perceived sense of belonging and classroom active learning strategies) with nontraditional student intent to persist?

Quantitative data revealed a weak, but statistically significant relationship between socio-academic integrative moments, as measured by the combined presence of active learning strategies and sense of belonging, and nontraditional student intent to persist. The socio-academic integration variable was not included as a statistically significant predictor in the regression model. Although the idea of socio-academic integrative moments as defined in the quantitative survey did not result in strong findings, focus group participants described moments in which social and academic integration not only existed, but overlapped. Participants described being socially integrated, or belonging, as academic in nature. Much of their

socialization was not only academically-focused, but their sense of belonging seemed to be a direct result of developing their identity as a student.

Consistent with Deil-Amen's (2011) findings, focus group participants in this current study described instances in which faculty validation of early academic performance and future academic potential equated to a feeling of academic belonging. Kasworm (2003) described this academic belonging as student's finding a sense of place or, as described in a separate study (Samuels, Beach, & Palmer, 2011), a sense of acceptance but not in the social sense but, rather, in the academic sense. This current study's focus group descriptions were also congruent with findings that conversations, both in and out of the classroom, tended to be academically focused and the expectation for outside social interaction among students did not necessarily exist (Deil-Amen, 2011; Kasworm, 2001, 2005).

Conclusions

This current study sought to understand more about what influences the persistence of nontraditional students, a population considered at risk for non-completion (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Guidos & Dooris, 2007; Wlodkowski, Mauldin, & Gahn, 2001). Although the specific research questions did not result in significant relationships, the study clearly indicates that nontraditional students tend to have a high commitment to degree completion and, therefore, persistence. This study confirms a finding from Tinto's seminal work (Tinto & Cullen, 1973) which concluded that, "high commitment to the goal of college completion, even with minimal levels of social and/or academic integration and therefore institutional commitment might not lead to dropout from the institution" (p. 43). Of the variables analyzed in this current study, initial commitment to the educational goal surfaced as the single greatest predictor of

nontraditional student persistence. Academic integration, as defined by active learning in the classroom, seemed to increase student satisfaction according to the focus groups, but did not influence intent to persist in the quantitative or qualitative findings.

Focus group participants also described social integration, as defined by sense of belonging related to peer support, faculty understanding, and classroom comfort, as helpful but not required in order for them to complete their degree. Quantitative data did reveal social integration as predicting a portion of nontraditional student intent to persist, albeit it small. Without the focus groups, the quantitative data alone might have suggested that sense of belonging was not important for nontraditional students and their persistence. However, the qualitative data broadened the understanding to include that belonging was important, but belonging is academic and identifying as a student might play a role in academic belonging.

While a student's initial commitment to their education goal might seem elementary, this finding validates much of the nontraditional student research that indicates returning adults typically enroll in college with a clear purpose. Tinto's integration model posits that students enter higher education with certain characteristics that can, in turn, serve as a predictor of academic success. For example, studies indicate that first-generation students might need additional support to succeed as would students demonstrating lower academic ability or socio-economic status (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Petty, 2014; Stebleton & Soria, 2012). However, Tinto's original study (Tinto & Cullen, 1973) also cited the possibility of goal commitment superseding student entry characteristics that might typically predict failure. For nontraditional students who are typically beyond the life stage of high school and early adult development, their background

does not seem to play as large of a role as that of an 18-year old fresh out of his/her parents' home.

The classroom does appear to play a role in nontraditional student integration and persistence but possibly in a different way than this current study examined. According to focus group participants, integration does occur in the classroom, but how it occurs seemed to relate more to student identity: feeling like a student, being recognized as a student, performing as a student. This finding is consistent with previous research citing that, as students felt more confident and accepted in their student role, they became more engaged (Samuels, Beach, & Palmer, 2011). For nontraditional students, this engagement occurred in the classroom and was academically-focused.

Townsend and Wilson's (2009) qualitative study concluded that, "Academic and social needs seem to blend together into a desire for socially-oriented academic integration" (p. 419). Data from this current study resulted in a different viewpoint. In other words, the academic and social needs of nontraditional students did tend to blend together; but, rather than socially-oriented academic integration, participants in this current study described academically-oriented social integration. Much of the social integration that students in this current study described were certainly academically-oriented. This finding is consistent with Deil-Amen's (2011) study of nontraditional students in a two-year setting, which suggested that academic integration presented itself in a more social form and social integration developed in the academic context, "the tight interconnectedness of the two forms of integration often make them indistinguishable" (p. 82). Regarding the classroom, while this current study adds to the understanding of how integration might be occurring in the classroom, it confirms the sentiments of Tinto and others

that much is yet to be learned about the classroom serving as smaller social and academic communities that might influence persistence (Deil-Amen, 2011; Tinto, 1993, 1997, 2012).

To conclude, it seems that nontraditional student persistence may not necessarily be related to WHAT happens in the classroom but, rather, that the classroom provides the setting in which nontraditional students feel like a student and the self-efficacy that comes with being able to perform in the academic arena. Kasworm (2010) alluded to this in her article related to nontraditional student identity negotiation in a research university. She summarized, “Their senses of place and authority were dependent on demonstrated academic competence” (Kasworm, 2010, p. 150). Nontraditional student identity in the research institution equated to proving themselves worthy given that they were not part of the dominant culture.

Deil-Amen (2011) described socio-academic integrative moments as the academic and social elements combining to provide increased college belonging, identity, and competence. Likewise, for the students in this current study, early successes and high GPA equated to a feeling of academic competence or feeling like a student. This ability to perform in the academic arena, combined with the high commitment to the educational goal, resulted in a perseverance to finish no matter what. Donaldson and Graham (1999) noted, “The classroom provides a context to socially construct, for themselves and others, what it means to be a college student” (p. 31). Students in this current study described being a college student as the point in which they discovered “I know what I’m doing, I can do this!” (George) or, as Arthmis and Steve noted, the point in which you find your academic purpose.

Recommendations for Practice

As Tinto (1993) stated, for nontraditional students, “going to college is more frequently a matter of economic needs than it is a youthful rite of passage” (p. 76). Kasworm (2005) added that college attendance for nontraditional students is a personal life choice. This current study adds to the understanding that, although nontraditional student’s lives might be complex, they tend to enter or return to college with purpose and for one simple reason: to earn a college degree. As Kasworm (2005) stated, enrolling is an intentional life choice, not typically decided on a whim. Higher education institutions, particularly faculty and staff within those institutions, can prioritize the early transition experiences for nontraditional students by (1) helping them to clarify their educational goal commitment and (2) helping them to understand their academic purpose and develop their student identity. If commitment to the educational goal is important, finding ways to keep the goal in front of them when times get tough is crucial.

Although nontraditional students are committed to completing their goal, concerns identified in this research and others include multiple roles and school/life balance (Hagelskamp, Schleifer, & DiStasi, 2013). Recommendations to help them carry out their goal include providing pre-entry and early transition support to assist with institutional processes, resource identification, and financial aid concerns. Pre-entry student counseling that emphasizes the importance of a support system might also help students evaluate what existing support they might have available and what gaps exist. Pre-entry support that engages students early in their decision-making phase of returning to school is ideal. The challenge for institutions is finding ways to connect with students during this phase as the decision-making cycle for nontraditional students is very different than the traditional high-school student decision-making process and

timeline. In other words, nontraditional students are rarely on the traditional admissions timeline for application processes for admissions, financial aid, or even child care.

Since many of the focus group participants resided near the institution and had some college, but no degree, institutional recruitment strategies to identify prospective students within their region who fit the 'some college, no degree' criteria would benefit enrollment numbers as well as increase regional educational attainment. For focus group participants who relocated from outside the region, support services played a key role in the decision-making. Recruitment efforts that raise awareness and inform prospective students of the institution's support services might make the difference between selecting one institution over another.

Once a nontraditional student decides to enroll at the institution, advisement that focuses on the best fit of major and helps students to clarify their educational goals can be beneficial to solidifying their academic purpose. Focus group participants clearly stated that enrolling without a clear purpose was detrimental to persistence. For students like Bob who might work full-time, attend class part-time, and cannot see an end in sight, finding ways to decrease time to degree might also be helpful. Helping students make progress toward degree completion through credit for work experience, prior learning assessment, or exams for credit could make the difference in goal attainment or abandonment. Finally, clarity of institutional processes and consistency in the classroom surfaced as factors that were important for institutions to consider when seeking to recruit and retain nontraditional students.

Recommendations for Future Research

Research related to Tinto's Integration theory rarely includes the nontraditional student population. Therefore, much is still unknown about this growing population and what factors

might influence their decisions to continue to degree completion or depart prior to earning their degree. This current study raises several questions related to nontraditional student integration and persistence. Recommendations for future research include further examination of constructs meaningful to nontraditional student integration and persistence; additional exploration of the existence of socio-academic integrative moments; continued study into the classroom as an integration site; and the idea that belonging is academic for nontraditional students. Finally, consideration of what student entry characteristics might be more applicable to Tinto's model when studying nontraditional students is suggested.

Integration Constructs

Constructs meaningful to social and academic integration of nontraditional students are still largely unknown. Since the regression model for research questions in this current study identified only two predictors, initial commitment to goal and social integration, as explaining 20.4% of the variance in the criterion variable, intent to persist, much is yet to be discovered. Tinto and Pusser (2006) commented that academic and social integration are difficult for institutions to operationalize and assess. That challenge continues as operationalizing social integration and academic integration in ways that might account for the variance remaining from this current study, as it relates to nontraditional student persistence factors, is still at large.

Examination into the possibility of student identity being connected to social and/or academic integration seems reasonable given this study's qualitative findings. Although integration was difficult for focus group participants to put into words, Steve described integration "as in belonging as a student, identifying as a student, as being a student, if that makes sense, in the academic sense." He continued to explain that integration "is not exactly a

feeling, it's a KNOWING situation" or the point in which one knows they are a student with a purpose.

Regarding academic integration, additional inquiry into the relationship of nontraditional student persistence with factors such as first semester GPA or the self-efficacy that comes with early successes is warranted. Despite limited opportunity for campus involvement, students in this current study reported high academic performance, which is consistent with studies citing nontraditional students as having academic and intellectual development equal to or greater than that of traditional students (Graham & Donaldson, 1999; Graham & Gisi, 2000; Kuh, Gonyea, & Palmer, 2001). A convergence of the current study's data revealed that 85% of survey respondents reported a current college GPA of 3.0 or higher. Focus group participants added insight into this high percentage by describing the high academic expectations they set for themselves. Arthmis shared, "I would never settle for less than a B. Having a B was like a D to me." Bob agreed, "I can't speak for everyone but my personal experience is just from success. I think that first semester, if I'd fallen on my face, I probably wouldn't have kept going".

Socio-Academic Integrative Moments

This current research added to the notion that socio-academic integrative moments do seem to exist but finding the ways in which they exist requires additional research. Socio-academic moments, as tested in this study as the combination of active learning and sense of belonging, did not prove quantitatively to be true in the lives of these nontraditional students. However, focus group participants continually described moments in which the social and academic converged to produce a form of academic socialization. Answering the question as to what constitutes a socio-academic integrative moment and how those moments might be

measured will be important to furthering the idea and addressing the theoretical implications. As socio-academic integrative moments are further explored, adaptations to Tinto's model may be necessary to demonstrate the convergence of academic and social integration that researchers, for the past several decades, defined and studied as separate spheres of influence.

Classroom as Integration Site

This current study adds insight into Price and Baker's (2012) recommendation to further investigate what nontraditional student engagement looks like as part of the academic curricular context rather than through outside, extra-curricular activities. Focus group participants described the majority of their engagements as academic and occurring in or originating from the classroom. Further exploration of the classroom as a site of integration might, as Tinto (1993) alluded to, reveal ways in which institutions can view the classroom as smaller communities in which the social and academic might overlap.

Belonging is Academic

Future research is also suggested to explore the idea that 'belonging is academic' for nontraditional students. Tinto (2012) stated, "Retention requires that a student see him or herself as belonging to at least one significant community and find meaning in the involvements that occur within that community" (p. 67). This current study indicates that a significant community that nontraditional students might find meaning or connection to is the academic community or the sense that he or she belongs at the institution as a result of academic competence. Kasworm (2010) equated this academic belonging to student identity that nontraditional students in her study constructed through knowledge, preparedness, classroom engagement, and academic competence. This along with findings from the current study identify a need for further

exploration as to how institutions can assist nontraditional students with academic belonging or student identity, particularly in the first semester, as this might influence persistence.

Nontraditional Student Entry Characteristics

Although not a direct result of this current study's research questions, it is worth noting that demographic or student entry characteristics that typically play a role in predicting traditional student persistence were not statistically significant factors for nontraditional students. (see Tables 14 and 15). Initial commitment to the educational goal seemed to transcend any influence that race, gender, parent's educational attainment, dependent status, marital status, employment status, or previous GPA might have on nontraditional student persistence. Survey and focus group data corroborated to reveal returning adults who were first-generation students, minority students, and students with less than stellar academic past performance, as not only performing well but having a steadfast commitment to finishing. Even the multiple responsibilities, assumed to be high risk factors leading to dropout such as employment status, dependent status, and marital status did not play a statistically significant role (see Tables 14 and 15). Since nontraditional students typically balance multiple life roles while attending college, research into how role conflict and the locus of control related to external factors influence persistence could prove insightful.

Final Comments

The findings of this study add to the limited amount of nontraditional student integration and persistence literature. This current study challenges the judgments and assumptions indicating that competing roles of nontraditional students equate to high risk of dropout. What is understood, according to the students of this current study, is that they tend to enter the

institution highly committed to their educational goal and that commitment tends to propel them forward to completion. Findings of the study also indicate that classroom active learning strategies and feeling a sense of belonging might be important to student satisfaction but do not seem to play a role in overall persistence. We also know that, for the students in this study, belonging is academic and could be linked to developing their identity as a student.

As cited previously in this study's literature review,

Fortunately, nobody flies a plane across the Atlantic anymore without navigational instruments. Nor should colleges and universities make judgments about the effectiveness of their policies and practices in the absence of student engagement data or some comparable source of information about the quality of the student experience. (Kuh, 2003, p. 32)

This current study adds a small piece to begin filling the gaping hole that exists to understand persistence among one of the fastest growing student populations. To reiterate opening comments of this research study, as nontraditional students continue to enroll in higher education and national agendas promote increased educational attainment among U.S. adults, it is not enough for higher educational institutions to just enroll these students. The priority must be to understand their unique needs, provide integration opportunities in ways that are meaningful, and keep students' eyes focused on the goal at hand: earning their college degree.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A
E-Mail Solicitation Consent

From: Deborah Barnett (dbarnett@siu.edu)

Subject: Research Request

Dear <first name>:

I am conducting dissertation research in the Department of Workforce Education and Development at Southern Illinois University Carbondale. Your e-mail address was obtained from SIU's institutional database of undergraduate students enrolled in the spring 2014 semester. A blind copy format was used so that the list of recipients did not appear in the header.

The purpose of the following survey is to gather data related to factors influencing nontraditional student integration at institutions of higher education. You were selected to participate in this study because you meet the criteria of a nontraditional student as outlined in the study. Participants will be entered into a drawing for one of three \$25 Amazon gift cards.

The survey will take 5 to 10 minutes to complete. All your responses will be kept confidential within reasonable limits. Only people directly involved with this project will have access to the surveys.

[Completion and return of this survey indicate voluntary consent to participate in this study.](#)

Questions about this study can be directed to me or to my supervising professor, Dr. C. Keith Waugh, Department of Workforce Education and Development, SIU, Carbondale, IL 62901-4605. Phone (618) 453-4868.

If you choose to have your name removed from any future mailings, you may select to opt out below.

If you do not respond to this survey or return the opt-out message, you will be contacted again with this request one time during the next two weeks.

Thank you for taking the time to assist me in this research. To participate, click on link above.

Deborah Barnett (dbarnett@siu.edu)

This project has been reviewed and approved by the SIUC Human Subjects Committee. Questions concerning your rights as a participant in this research may be addressed to the Committee Chairperson, Office of Sponsored Projects Administration, SIUC, Carbondale, IL 62901-4709. Phone (618) 453-4533. E-mail: siuhsc@siu.edu

Appendix B Demographic Data Collection Instrument

Adapted from Braxton, Milem, and Sullivan (2000)

Pre-Entry Characteristics

1. High School GPA (self-reported high school grade point average) A=4, B=3, C=2, D=1
2. Entering College GPA (self-reported, previous college work GPA) A=4, B=3, C=2, D=1
3. Gender (student gender) male=0; female=1
4. Race/Ethnicity: 1=Non-Hispanic White; 2=Black or African American; 3=Latino or Hispanic American; 4=East Asian or Asian American; 5=Middle Eastern or Arab American; 6=Native American; 7=Other
5. Current College Standing: 1=Freshman, 2=Sophomore, 3=Junior, 4=Senior, 5=Senior w/Degree
6. Mother's Education Level: 1=less than high school; 2=high school diploma/GED; 3=some college; 4=apprenticeship/technical school; 5=associates degree; 6=bachelor's degree; 7=master's degree; 8 = PhD; 9=unknown
7. Father's Education Level: 1=less than high school; 2=high school diploma/GED; 3=some college; 4=apprenticeship/technical school; 5=associates degree; 6=bachelor's degree; 7=master's degree; 8 = PhD; 9=unknown
8. Marital Status (spouse/domestic partner=1; no spouse/domestic partner=0)
9. Dependents under the age of 18 (yes=1; no=0)
10. Employment (not employed=0; part-time less than 25 hours=1; full-time 25+ hours=2)

**pre-entry characteristics #5, #8, #9 and #10 added. Not part of original survey by Braxton, Milem, and Sullivan (2000).*

NOTE: For email survey, students will be asked for their institutional student ID number for incentive drawing purposes and to reveal duplicate survey completion. Otherwise, identification numbers will be kept separate from other data.

NOTE: For focus group sessions, the following text will be included on the demographic data form and communicated verbally.

All reports based on this research and written by the researcher will maintain the confidentiality of individuals in the groups. Only group data will be reported and no participant names will be used. Since this is a group process, all members of the group will be privy to the discussions that occur during the session; therefore, the researcher cannot ensure that group members will hold this information confidential.

By completing the demographic data form, permission is granted for researcher to use descriptive information along with a pseudonym in data reporting. In addition, permission is granted for follow-up contact to clarify responses and/or conduct member checking to confirm interpretation of responses.

Appendix C
Sense of Belonging Scale: Quantitative Data Collection

Participants respond to questions based on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1=completely true; 5=completely untrue). Questions are listed in order by factors measured but will be presented to participants in random order. Participants are asked to respond to questions based on interactions in currently enrolled courses.

Factors measured include:

Perceived Faculty Understanding (PFU)

Perceived Peer Support (PSP)

Perceived Classroom Comfort (PCC)

Perceived Faculty Understanding (PFU): 7 items; $\alpha=.89$

1. I feel comfortable talking about a problem with faculty.
2. I feel that a faculty member really tried to understand my problem when I talked about it.
3. I feel that a faculty member would be sympathetic if I was upset.
4. I feel that a faculty member would be sensitive to my difficulties if I shared them.
5. I feel that a faculty member would take the time to talk to me if I needed help.
6. If I had a reason, I would feel comfortable seeking help from a faculty member outside of class time (i.e., during office hours, etc.).
7. I feel comfortable socializing with a faculty member outside of class.

Perceived Peer Support (PSP): 6 items; $\alpha=.84$

1. I have developed personal relationships with other students in class.
2. I discuss events which happen outside of class with my classmates.
3. I have discussed personal matters with students who I met in class.
4. No one in my classes knows anything personal about me.
5. I have met with classmates outside of class to study for an exam.
6. I know very few people in my classes.

Perceived Classroom Comfort (PCC): 3 items; $\alpha=.93$

1. I feel comfortable contributing to class discussions.
2. I feel comfortable volunteering ideas or opinions in class.
3. I feel comfortable asking a question in class.

Appendix D
Academic Integration Measures: Quantitative Data Collection

Adapted from Braxton, Milem, and Sullivan (2000)

Initial Institutional Commitment (IIC) (students choice of institution) 1st = 1; 2nd=2; 3rd = 3; Less than 3rd Choice = 4

Initial Commitment to Goal (ICG): 3 items; *items related to initial commitment to goal were not part of original instrument; language adapted from questions related to departure decision.*

Likelihood that the student would complete their goal given commitment at initial time of enrollment.

1. 1=extremely unlikely; 5=extremely likely
2. 1=certain NOT to complete; 5=certain to complete
3. 1=no chance; 5=100% sure to complete

Academic Integration: Composite Measure (Active Learning Strategies)

Class Discussion (CD): 3 items; $\alpha=.71$

How frequently students observe the following activities in their classes (1=never; 4=very often)

1. Instructors make class discussion intellectually stimulating.
2. Instructors answer students' questions in a way that helps students understand material.
3. Instructors encourage students to participate in class discussions.

Higher Order Thinking Skills (HTS): 6 items; $\alpha=.84$

How frequently students observe or engage in the following activities in their classes (1=never; 4=very often)

1. Instructors engage me in classroom discussion or debate of course ideas and concepts.
2. Instructors' questions in class ask me to point out any fallacies in basic ideas, principles, or points of view presented in the course.
3. Instructors' questions in class ask me to argue for or against a particular point of view.
4. Exams require me to argue for or against a particular point of view and to defend my argument.
5. Course papers or research projects require me to argue for or against a particular point of view and to defend my argument.
6. Course papers require me to propose a plan for a fair research project of experiment.

Exams Limited to Knowledge of Facts (KF): 1 item

How frequently students observe that exams are limited to knowledge of facts (1=never; 4=very often)

Group Work (GW): 2 items; $\alpha=.68$

How frequently students do the following in their classes (1=never; 4=very often)

1. Instructors require students to work in groups.
2. Instructors require students to work in cooperative groups to do course assignments.

Subsequent Institutional Commitment (SIC): 3 items; $\alpha=.72$

How much respondents agree with the following statements (1=strongly disagree; 4=strongly agree).

1. It is not important to graduate from this university.
2. I am confident I made the decision to attend this university.
3. I am sure that this university is the right place for me.

Departure Decision (DD): 3 items; $\alpha=.89$

Likelihood that the student will re-enroll at the focal university the following semester.

1. 1=extremely unlikely; 5=extremely likely
2. 1=certain NOT to re-enroll; 5=certain to re-enroll
3. 1=no chance; 5=100% sure to re-enroll

Appendix E
Permissions: Sense of Belonging Scale

October 23, 2013

Permissions Editor
Sage Publications Inc.
2455 Teller Road
Thousand Oaks CA 91320
permissions@sagepub.com

Dear Permissions Editor,

I am a doctoral student at Southern Illinois University Carbondale writing my dissertation tentatively entitled “Social and Academic Integration of Adult Learners: The Role of Active Learning Strategies and Sense of Belonging in Integration and Persistence”. I am writing under the direction of my dissertation committee chaired by Dr. C. Keith Waugh.

For purposes of my dissertation research, I would like permission to use the survey instrument utilized in:

Tovar, E, & Simon, M. A. (2010). Factorial structure and invariance analysis of the sense of belonging scales. *Measurement and Evaluation in Counseling and Development*, 43(3), 199-217. doi: 10.1177/0748175610384811

Reply to this permissions request along with any requirements of use can be made to Deborah Barnett at dbarnett@siu.edu.

Thank you for consideration of this request.

Sincerely,

Deborah R. Barnett
Doctoral Candidate
Southern Illinois University Carbondale

Permissions Request

Deborah Barnett <dbarnett@siu.edu>
To: permissions@sagepub.com
Cc: Deborah Barnett <dbarnett@siu.edu>

Wed, Oct 23, 2013 at 7:38 PM

Dear Permissions Editor,

Attached is a request for permission to use a survey instrument published in a 2010 edition of the *Measurement and Evaluation in Counseling and Development*.

I appreciate your consideration and response.

--

DEBORAH BARNETT
Doctoral Candidate

dbarnett@siu.edu
P: [618/453-7521](tel:6184537521)
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permissions (US) <permissions@sagepub.com>
To: Deborah Barnett <dbarnett@siu.edu>

Thu, Oct 24, 2013 at 11:22 AM

Dear Deborah,

Thank you for your request. Please consider this email as permission to reprint the material as detailed below in your upcoming dissertation. Please note that this permission does not cover any 3rd party material that may be found within the work. We do ask that you properly credit the original source, SAGE Publications. Please contact us for any further usage of the material.

Good luck with your dissertation,

Michelle Binur

Appendix F
Permissions: Academic Integration Measures

October 23, 2013

Permissions Editor
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180 Pressey Hall
1070 Carmack Road
Columbus, OH 43210-1002
Fax: 614-292-2065
permissions@osupress.org

Dear Permissions Editor,

I am a doctoral student at Southern Illinois University Carbondale writing my dissertation tentatively entitled “Social and Academic Integration of Adult Learners: The Role of Active Learning Strategies and Sense of Belonging in Integration and Persistence”. I am writing under the direction of my dissertation committee chaired by Dr. C. Keith Waugh.

For purposes of my dissertation research, I would like permission to use the survey instrument utilized in:

Braxton, J. M., Milem, J. F., & Sullivan, A. S. (2000). The influence of active learning on the college student departure process: Toward a revision of Tinto’s theory. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 71(5), 569-590.

Reply to this permissions request along with any requirements of use can be made to Deborah Barnett at dbarnett@siu.edu.

Thank you for consideration of this request.

Sincerely,

Deborah R. Barnett
Doctoral Candidate
Southern Illinois University Carbondale

Permissions Request

Deborah Barnett <dbarnett@siu.edu>
To: permissions@osupress.org
Cc: Deborah Barnett <dbarnett@siu.edu>

Wed, Oct 23, 2013 at 7:36 PM

Dear Permissions Editor.

Attached is a request for permission to use a survey instrument published in a 2000 edition of the Journal of Higher Education.


I appreciate your consideration and response.--

DEBORAH BARNETT
Doctoral Candidate

dbarnett@siu.edu
P: [618/453-7521](tel:6184537521)
F: [618/453-7518](tel:6184537518)
SIU.EDU

 **SIU** Southern Illinois University
CARBONDALE

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OSU Press Journals <taralee@osupress.org>
Reply-To: journals@osupress.org
To: dbarnett@siu.edu

Fri, Oct 25, 2013 at 7:39 AM

Deborah,

Permission is granted to use the survey instrument in your dissertation. Should you move forward with publishing the dissertation, or a form of the dissertation that contains the material from *JHE*, we would ask that you seek permission for that kind of use.

Thanks for checking with us,
Tara

Tara Cyphers
Journals Manager
OSU Press
180 Pressey Hall
1070 Carmack Road
Columbus, OH 43210-1002

phone: [614-292-1407](tel:6142921407)
fax: [614-292-2065](tel:6142922065)
taralee@osupress.org

Appendix G
Permissions: Tinto's Integration Model, Modified
(see Figure 1)

October 29, 2014
Permissions Editor
The Ohio State University Press
180 Pressey Hall
1070 Carmack Road
Columbus, OH 43210-1002
Fax: 614-292-2065
permissions@osupress.org

Dear Permissions Editor,

This letter is to serve as a request for permission to include an adaptation of Tinto's Integration model, as found in the publication listed below, in my doctoral dissertation entitled "Social and Academic Integration of Adult Learners: The Role of Active Learning Strategies and Sense of Belonging in Integration and Persistence". I am a doctoral student at Southern Illinois University writing under the direction of my dissertation committee chaired by Dr. C. Keith Waugh. I am requesting to include an abbreviated version/modification of Figure 1, page 615, of:

Tinto, V. (1997, November/December). Classrooms as communities: Exploring the educational character of student persistence. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 68(6), 599-623.

Reply to this permissions request along with any requirements of use can be made to Deborah Barnett at dbarnett@siu.edu.

Thank you for consideration of this request.

Sincerely,

Deborah R. Barnett
Doctoral Student
Southern Illinois University Carbondale

Sent: Wednesday, October 29, 2014 4:18 PM
To: permissions@osupress.org
Subject: Permissions Request

Dear Permissions Editor.

Attached is a request for permission to include in my doctoral dissertation an adaptation of Figure 1, pg. 615 as found in:

Tinto, V. (1997, November/December). Classrooms as communities: Exploring the educational character of student persistence. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 68(6), 599-623.

Further details are included in the attached request. I appreciate your consideration and response.

DEBORAH BARNETT
dbarnett@siu.edu



From: Rebecca Sullivan <rebecca@osupress.org>
Sent: Wednesday, November 5, 2014 11:08 AM
To: Deborah R Barnett
Subject: Re: Permissions Request

Dear Deborah,

Hello, my name is Rebecca Sullivan, and I handle permissions at the Ohio State University Press. We grant you non-exclusive permission, free of charge, to use the adapted model in your dissertation. Could you please include a copyright credit to The Ohio State University Press when referencing the Tinto source. Perhaps Source: Adopted from Tinto (© The Ohio State University Press) 1997.

If you have any further questions or concerns, please let me know.

Best,

Rebecca Sullivan
rebecca@osupress.org
614-292-6376

Appendix H
Permissions: Concurrent Triangulation Design
(see Figure 2)

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Appendix I
Focus Group Guide: Qualitative Data Collection

Focus group instructions:

My name is Deborah Barnett and I am a doctoral candidate in the SIU's College of Education, Department of Workforce Education and Development. I am currently in the dissertation stage of my program and this focus group discussion is a part of my dissertation work.

All reports based on this research and written by the researcher will maintain the confidentiality of individuals in the groups. Only group data will be reported and no participant names will be used. Since this is a group process, all members of the group will be privy to the discussions that occur during the session; therefore, the researcher cannot ensure that group members will hold this information confidential.

By completing the demographic data form (see Appendix L), permission is granted for researcher to use descriptive information along with a pseudonym in data reporting. In addition, permission is granted for follow-up contact to clarify responses and/or conduct member checking to confirm interpretation of responses.

Are there any questions?

This focus group session is expected to take approximately an hour to an hour and a half. The focus of the discussion is on nontraditional student integration in higher education institutions. There is no right or wrong answer to these questions and you are free to share your experiences and opinions honestly and openly.

The focus group discussion will be audio taped so, to ensure accurate reporting, please speak one at a time.

Please place your tent card in front of you with their pseudonym name of choice as indicated on the demographic data form. Once the tape recorder is turned on, each participant should introduce him/herself by their pseudonym name with the first discussion question following introductions. Are there any questions? Let's begin.

- I. Pseudonym name introductions.
- II. Discussion questions:
 1. What influenced you to pursue a college degree as a nontraditional student?
 2. When you enrolled at this institution, discuss how committed were you to your educational goal?
 3. When you enrolled at this institution, discuss how important was it for you to finish your degree at this institution?
 4. As a nontraditional student, how do you define integration as it relates to the college environment?

5. Do you consider integration to be an important part of the nontraditional student experience? Please explain.
 6. When thinking about your classroom experiences, describe any instances in which you felt socially integrated or felt like you belonged.
 7. When thinking about your classroom experiences, describe any learning experiences that contributed to feeling academically integrated or a part of the academic system.
 8. How have your classroom experiences influenced your commitment to your educational goal? Please explain.
 9. How have your classroom experiences influenced your commitment to the institution? Please explain.
 10. How have your classroom experiences influenced your intent to persist from one semester to the next? Please explain.
- III. Closing
1. Do you have any final questions?

Thank you for participating.

Appendix J
Focus Group Consent to Participate in Research

I (participant), agree to participate in this research project conducted by Deborah Barnett, doctoral candidate, Department of Workforce Education and Development, SIU Carbondale.

I understand the purpose of this study is explore factors influencing nontraditional student integration at institutions of higher education.

I understand my participation is strictly voluntary and may refuse to answer any question without penalty. I am also informed that my participation will last one to one and half hours.

I understand that my responses to the questions will be audiotaped, and that these tapes will be transcribed/stored and kept in a locked file cabinet until completion of research. Afterward, these tapes will be destroyed.

I understand that all reports based on this research and written by the researcher will maintain the confidentiality of individuals in the groups. Only group data will be reported and no participant names will be used. Since this is a group process, all members of the group will be privy to the discussions that occur during the session; therefore, the researcher cannot ensure that group members will hold this information confidential.

I understand questions or concerns about this study are to be directed to Deborah Barnett (dbarnett@siu.edu) or her advisor Dr. C. Keith Waugh, Department of Workforce Education and Development, SIU, Carbondale, IL 62901-4605. Phone (618) 453-4868. Email : ckwaugh@siu.edu

I have read the information above and any questions I asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to participate in this activity and know my responses will be tape recorded. I understand a copy of this form will be made available to me for the relevant information and phone numbers.

“I agree _____ I disagree _____ to have my responses recorded on audio tape.”

“I agree _____ I disagree _____ that Deborah Barnett may quote me in his/her paper”

Participant signature and date (signatures of participants required)

Pseudonym name of choice: _____

This project has been reviewed and approved by the SIUC Human Subjects Committee. Questions concerning your rights as a participant in this research may be addressed to the Committee Chairperson, Office of Sponsored Projects Administration, SIUC, Carbondale, IL 62901-4709. Phone (618) 453 4533. Email:siuhsc@siu.edu.

Appendix K
Cover Letter: Focus Group Participant Recruitment

Dear <name here>:

I am a doctoral student in the Department of Workforce Education and Development at Southern Illinois University Carbondale. The purpose of my research project is to find out how nontraditional students integrate into higher education institutions both academically and socially.

The purpose of your participation in my research project will be to access experiences from nontraditional students as defined by age 25 and over, or age 18-24 (married and/or with dependents).

I will be conducting focus groups of approximately 4-5 participants in each group. Each focus group session will take approximately 1 – 1 ½ hours to complete. All responses will be kept confidential within reasonable limits. If you elect to participate in my research study, please contact me by replying to this email (dbarnett@siu.edu).

Thank you for taking the time to assist me in this research.

Deborah Barnett
dbarnett@siu.edu

This project has been reviewed and approved by the SIUC Human Subjects Committee. Questions concerning your rights as a participant in this research may be addressed to the Committee Chairperson, Office of Sponsored Projects Administration, SIUC, Carbondale, IL 62901-4709. Phone [\(618\)453-4533](tel:6184534533). E-mail: siuhsc@siu.edu

Appendix L
Demographic Data Collection Instrument

All reports based on this research and written by the researcher will maintain the confidentiality of individuals in the groups. Only group data will be reported and no participant names will be used. Since this is a group process, all members of the group will be privy to the discussions that occur during the session; therefore, the researcher cannot ensure that group members will hold this information confidential.

By completing the demographic data form, permission is granted for researcher to use descriptive information along with a pseudonym in data reporting. In addition, permission is granted for follow-up contact to clarify responses and/or conduct member checking to confirm interpretation of responses.

Please check appropriate answer:

11. **High School GPA** (self-reported high school grade point average)

- A B C D

12. **Entering College GPA** (self-reported, previous college work GPA)

- A B C D

13. **Gender:**

- MALE FEMALE

14. **Which of the following best represents your racial or ethnic heritage?**

- Non-Hispanic White Middle Eastern or Arab American
 Black or African American Native American or Alaskan Native
 Latino or Hispanic American Other
 East Asian or Asian American

15. **Mother's Education Level:**

- less than high school high school diploma/GED some college
 associates degree bachelor's degree master's degree PhD

16. **Father's Education Level:**

- less than high school high school diploma/GED some college
 associates degree bachelor's degree master's degree PhD

17. **Marital Status:**

- spouse/domestic partner no spouse/domestic partner

18. **Dependents under the age of 18:** YES NO

19. **Employment:**

- full-time 25+ hours part-time less than 25 hours not employed

Chosen Pseudonym Name: _____

Thank you. Please return data form to researcher when completed.

Appendix M
Research Questions and Related Survey Items

Research Question	Appendix C	Appendix D
1. What is the relationship of academic integration through classroom active learning strategies with nontraditional student intent to persist?		Initial Institutional Commitment (IIC): 1 item Initial Commitment to Goal (ICG): 3 items Academic Integration: Composite Measure: 12 items Subsequent Institutional Commitment (SIC): 3 items Departure Decision (DD): 3 items
2. What is the relationship of social integration through a perceived sense of belonging with nontraditional student intent to persist?	Perceived Faculty Understanding (PFU): 7 items Perceived Peer Support (PSP): 6 items Perceived Classroom Comfort (PCC): 3 items	Initial Institutional Commitment (IIC): 1 item Initial Commitment to Goal (ICG): 3 items Subsequent Institutional Commitment (SIC): 3 items Departure Decision (DD): 3 items
3. What is the relationship of the interaction of variables (perceived sense of belonging and classroom active learning strategies) with nontraditional student intent to persist?	All Items: Interaction effect of social and academic integration measures when combined	All items: Interaction effect of social and academic integration measures when combined

VITA

Graduate School
Southern Illinois University

Deborah R. Barnett

dbarnett@siu.edu

Mid-Continent University
Bachelor of Science, Business Administration, December 2008

Southern Illinois University Carbondale
Master of Science in Education, Workforce Education and Development, December 2010

Dissertation Title:

Academic and Social Integration of Nontraditional Students: The Role of Active Learning Strategies and Sense of Belonging in Integration and Persistence

Major Professor: Dr. C. Keith Waugh

Publications:

Barnett, D. R. (*under review*). Telling a Compelling Story with DATA: Assessment of Adult Learner Programs and Services. NASPA's Adult Learner and Students with Children Knowledge Community Excellence in Practice submission.

Sims, C., & Barnett, D. R. (2014). Devalued, Misunderstood, and Marginalized: Why Adult Students' Experiences Should Be Included in the Diversity Discourse. *Online Journal for Workforce Education and Development*, 7(1). Retrieved from <http://opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/ojwed/vol7/iss1/10/>

Barnett, D. R. (2014, Fall). Review of the book *Increasing Adult Learner Persistence and Completion Rates: A Guide for Student Affairs Leaders and Practitioners*. NASPA Adult Learner and Students with Children Knowledge Community. *Crossroads*, 3(1), pp. 4-5. Retrieved from http://www.naspa.org/images/uploads/events/NASPA_ALSC_KC_Newsletter_FA14.pdf

Stephens, C., Barnett, D. R., & Chen, X. (2014). Cutting edge technology in the learning environment. *33rd Annual Research to Practice (R2P) Conference in Adult and Higher Education*, Ball State University, Muncie, IN, September 19-20, 2014.

Chen, X., Barnett, D. R., & Stephens, C. (2013). Fad or future: The advantages and challenges of massive open online courses (MOOCs). *Proceedings of the 32nd Annual Research-to Practice Conference in Adult and Higher Education*, Lindenwood University, St. Charles, MO, September 20-21, 2013.

Barnett, D. R. (2011, Summer). Partnering industry and education for curricular enhancement: A response for greater educational achievement. *Online Journal for Workforce Education and Development*, 5(2), 1-15.

Barnett, D. R. (2011). The adult learner focused institution: A review of midwestern institutions and the use of the principles of effective practice for serving adult learners. *Proceedings of the 30th Annual Midwest Research to Practice Conference in Adult, Continuing, Community and Extension Education*, Lindenwood University, St. Charles, MO. <http://www.lindenwood.edu/mwr2p/docs/Barnett.pdf>

Barnett, D. R. (2010). *Adult education: Motivation and recruitment of working adults in the pursuit of higher education*. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses. Publication 1488849.