

CASE STUDIES INVOLVING DISPLACED WORKERS' TRANSITION TO
COMMUNITY COLLEGE

By

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ABSTRACT

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The focus of this qualitative study is how community college transition programs and services accommodated students who experienced a major life transition event (job loss) using Schlosberg's (1984) Life Transition Model and the updated model with Anderson and Goodman (2006). Students' perceptions of transition programs and services were juxtaposed with the perceptions of faculty, counselors, and administrators to understand how close or how far the colleges' were in offering wrap-around level services. Three overarching themes emerged from the research data: 1) the student participants reported that, where wrap-around level supports were available and they utilized them, many difficulties in transitioning to college were alleviated; 2) there were organizational issues that mitigated the colleges' ability to sustain wrap-around level services; and 3) the administrators, faculty, counselors, and staff in both cases reported that the colleges' willingness to provide services at the wrap-around level varied depending on external funding resources.

Analysis of students' perspectives revealed two transition experiences characterized by moving away from being a displaced worker to becoming fully engaged as a college student. The second transition experience manifested transition barriers which revealed a *gap* in student services at the main campuses. Significant themes that emerged were learning math, using computers, organizational issues, and building relationships between students and college personnel. Sub-significant themes included orientation, credit articulation, counseling and advising, cohorts and learning communities, and bureaucratic processes.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES	x
LIST OF FIGURES	xi
Chapter 1: Introduction	1
Statement of the Problem	6
Purpose of the Study	11
Significance of the Study	12
Research Questions	13
Theoretical Framework	14
Psychosocial Transition Theory	15
Guiding Framework Tool	16
Adult Learning Theory	17
Community College Transition Strategies	19
Definition of Terms	20
Summary	23
Chapter 2: Literature Review	25
National Trends	26
Adult Learners	29
Who are adult learners?	29
Life-Cycle Phases	30
Student Characteristics and Transition	32
Adult Learning Theories	34
Educating Adults	34
Teaching Adults	35
Transformative Learning	37
Psychosocial Development	39
Psychosocial Transitions	39
Cognitive Development	40
Self-Efficacy	42
Life Transition Theories	44
Coping with Life Events	45
A Helping Model	45
Developmental Education	46
The Developmental Debate	48
Contextualized Instruction	48
Community College Transition Strategies	49
Institutional Characteristics	49
Student Services	51
Institutional Culture	55
National Transition Projects	55
Summary	56

Chapter 3: Methodology	60
Restatement the Problem	60
Research Questions	60
Qualitative Rationale	61
Philosophical Orientation	62
Inductive Process	62
Constructivist Approach	63
Multi-Case Approach	65
Case Studies	65
Two Cases	66
The Research Sites	66
Participant Selection	69
Participants	71
Student Biographies	72
Data Collection	76
Interview Protocols	77
Field Observations	79
Case Site Narratives	79
Data Analysis	80
The Database	80
Answering the Research Questions	80
The Guiding Framework Tool	83
Trustworthiness	83
Limitations	84
Summary	85
 Chapter 4: Gateway Community College	 88
Historical Information	89
Current Mission	90
Workforce Preparation Center	91
Main Campus	97
Here to Assist Latinos Organization (HALO)	98
Family Resource Center	100
Counseling Services	102
Developmental Education Services	102
West Campus	104
Psychology 101	104
College Math 005	105
Summary	107
 Chapter 5: Midstate Community College	 109
Historical Information	109
Current Mission	110
Main Campus	111
Enrollment Office	111
Workforce Training Office	112

Technical Training Center	112
A Delivery System	114
Applying Best Practices	116
Developmental Education Office	117
A Developmental Perspective	118
Student Transition	120
Women's Assistance House	121
Career Forward Program	122
Career Forward Class	123
Career Coaches	124
Personal Development	125
Supplemental Services	126
Senior Service Center	125
Gerontology as a Transition Agent	127
Personal Development	129
Summary	130
 Chapter 6: Discussion of the Findings	 132
The Guiding Framework Tool	132
Gateway Community College	134
4 S System Transition Aspects	136
Situation	136
Self	136
Support	137
Missing Support and Strategy	137
Midstate Community College	139
4 S System Transition Aspects	142
Situation	142
Self	142
Missing Support	142
Missing Strategy	143
A learning community	144
Discussion of the Theoretical Framework	144
Psychosocial Transition	145
Balancing school, work and family	146
Overcoming fear and anxiety	147
Relieving stressors through activities	151
Adult Teaching and Learning	152
Curriculum development	154
Academic supports	155
Class instruction	156
Math instruction	158
Computer skills	160
Community College Transition Strategies	161
Gateway's Programs and Services	162
Midstate's Programs and Services	163
Organizational Issues	164

Orientation for Older Students	164
Credit Articulation	167
Prior learning assessments	167
Accrediting job training	168
Funding	169
Bureaucracy	173
Building Relationships	174
Important Interactions	175
Counseling and Advising Services	176
Learning Communities and Cohorts	180
Summary	181
Chapter 7: Answers to the Research Questions, Implications and Recommendations for Practice, and Topics for Future Research	185
Answers to Research Questions	186
Research Question 1: How do displaced workers who are older students (ages 35-60) and academically underprepared transition to community college? a) What types of programs and services are provided at community colleges during transition?b) How responsive or accommodating are these programs and services for older students?	187
Research Question 2: What are the older students' perspectives on transitioning to community college?	190
What the students wanted	191
Supports and services that helped	193
What were the students' difficulties?	194
Research Question 3: How do older students' perspectives of programs and services utilized during transition compare to the perspectives of administrators, faculty, counselors, and staff who administer them?	196
Differing expectations	197
Conflicting operational objectives	198
Future plans	198
Implications and Recommendations for Practice	199
Age-A Fear Factor	199
Computer Proficiency	201
Teaching and Learning Math	202
Counseling and Advising	203
The Divided College	205
A Cost Comparison	206
Topics for Future Research	208
A More Comprehensive Study	208
Affinity Groups Supplementing Student Services	209
Special Training for Counselors and Advisors	209
Collaborations across Educational Departments	210
Funding that Sustains Bridge Programs	211
Conclusion	211

APPENDICES	216
Appendix A: Interview Protocol-Students	217
Appendix B: Interview Protocol- Faculty, Counselor, Advisor, or Staff	219
Appendix C: Interview Protocol- Administrators	221
Appendix D: Observation Protocol	222
Appendix E: Participant Request Letter	223
Appendix F: Participant Consent Form-Faculty, Counselor, Advisor, Staff	225
Appendix G: Participant Consent Form-Student	227
REFERENCES	229

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1.Guiding Framework Tool	17
Table 2. Names of Locations or Programs	68
Table 3. Administrators, Faculty, Counselors, Advisors, and Staff	71
Table 4. Student Participants	72
Table 5. Guiding Framework Tool: Gateway Community College	134
Table 6. Guiding Framework Tool: Midstate Community College	140
Table 7. A Cost Comparison	207

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1.Theoretical Framework	14
Figure 2. Case Site Sample Framework	69

Chapter 1: Introduction

Over the last 30 years there has been a shift in societal values toward an emphasis on market-driven interests in financial capital and profit-making (Giroux, 2002; Levin, 2001, 2007). This shift, termed *neoliberalism*, has influenced every sector of American society, especially attitudes towards the utility and functioning of higher education (Levin, 2007). The socioeconomic conditions of the last 30 years are the result of “unbridled” corporate advancement at the expense of many social and educational programs (Giroux, 2002). Changes in workforce needs have influenced changes in educational preparation. The 1980s marked a time of corporate growth in service industry sectors and the rapid decline of manufacturing sectors (US Department of Labor, 2010). As companies strove for greater profits and efficiencies, the reliance on technology-based applications became the preferred method of doing business (Friedman, 2007; Levin, 2001, 2007). The jobs that emerged during these restructuring decades required technical knowledge more than physical labor and students became more interested in obtaining a certain credential to be more “marketable” in the workforce (Giroux, 2002; Levin, 2007). Michael Crow, president of Arizona State University, described the change in attitude toward education: “We use knowledge as a form of venture capital” (Giroux, 2002, p. 432).

During the 1990s, a neoliberal operational attitude emerged that emphasized high productivity with less overhead (labor costs) with fewer profits dedicated to employee training and development (Giroux, 2002). With most of the major companies operating with maximizing profit margins as the primary goal, the middle and the bottom of the corporate machine were left with a deficit of opportunity for employee growth. The responsibility of learning how to operate the technology in the post-industrial marketplace transferred from individual companies to the

public domain (Friedman, 2007). New hires were expected to start entry-level jobs with sufficient knowledge to work immediately. As a cost-cutting measure, training and employee development moved from an internal corporate function to an individual one. Community colleges were able to capitalize on this shift by partnering with businesses to provide workforce training. Hence, learning at many community colleges became “structured for economic purposes: for workforce development...retraining, or career advancement” (Levin, 2007, p. 167).

In the next decade, more individuals turned to educational institutions to obtain skills for the new technological knowledge economy. Community colleges were especially attractive because they have historically offered job training in addition to academic preparation (Levin, 2001, 2007; Mullin, 2011). People whose futures included postsecondary education were introduced to new knowledge sectors in community colleges offering programs that kept pace with the metamorphosis of industrial sectors (Levin, 2001). For those who relied on work that did not previously require any college learning, many employment choices dwindled. The automobile industry exemplified this metamorphosis and thousands became displaced workers, as was the case in the state of Michigan.

Since 2000, the American workforce has been in a critical situation. There is push to produce a more highly educated workforce because the industries that are creating the newest jobs opportunities require workers with knowledge and skills beyond a high school education (Duderstadt, 2000). In order for the US to remain globally competitive, the adult population needs some form of postsecondary education (Louie, 2007). Companies have justified the outsourcing of many jobs to China and India, where a sizeable proportion of the workforce is more technically trained and there is lower per capita expenditure per workers (Friedman, 2007). The Lumina Foundation reported that “the nation’s labor force includes 54 million adults who

lack a college degree; of those, nearly 34 million have no college experience at all” (Pusser et al., 2007, p. 1). The Lumina Foundation’s efforts are aimed at improving the skills of the adult working population, which also helps the US remain globally competitive. However, in a 2004 report of first-time postsecondary students at public two-year institutions, the “percent completing certificates or associates degrees within 150% of normal time” was only 20.3% (US Department of Education, 2009). The lower rate of completion among students in community colleges has become a national concern (Hagedorn, 2005; Levin, 2007; Levin & Montero-Hernandez, 2009, US Department of Education, 2011a & 2011b).

Another concern is the number of older students (age 35-60) with no previous college preparation entering community colleges. Their numbers have steadily increased in the last decade (Bailey, 2008b). As Hagedorn (2005) asserted, “traditional colleges - and especially community colleges - must acknowledge that the population they serve is aging” (p. 29). According to the 2000 Census, the median age of adults in the US was 35.3 years. Of the total adult population, the largest age group was 25-44 year-olds, followed by 45-64 year-olds. As of the 2010 Census, the number of 45-64 year olds rose 31.5%, more than any other age group. Even though the number of 25-44 year olds declined 3.4%, they were the second largest age group, which included a large number of people approaching midlife (US Census, 2011). The census data from 2000 and 2010 shows that the majority of the US population was between the ages of 25 and 64, so it would be logical for colleges to design services and programs to address the needs of older students because they are the larger population.

Community colleges are the first-line access for nontraditional students to receive the education necessary for careers in growth sectors, such as manufacturing, medical fields, multi-industry customer service, nursing and teaching, which involve technology-based positions for

entry-level jobs (Alssid, Goldman, Klerk, 2010; Levin, 2007). Because of its general open enrollment policy and variety of program offerings, the community college has become the “go-to” institution for workers to obtain vocational certification in various industries and baccalaureate degree preparation (Levin, 2007; Mullin, 2011).

There are significant numbers of individuals seeking a college education who require developmental education (also referred to as remedial education) in order to study a field of interest to them (Bailey, 2008b; Levin, 2007). The developmental portion of their education through traditional programming can take up to two years of additional schooling, if they follow through the program diligently. Some individuals take up to four years to complete the developmental coursework, which has been reported as disheartening, time consuming, and expensive for those in need of employment sooner than later (Bailey, 2008b; Bailey, Jeong & Cho, 2008). Many workers seek college-going as a way to obtain new skills for moving up in the workforce. However, for those displaced from downsized industries or laid off from companies totally eliminated, going to college can be particularly challenging because they have been away from formal education for ten or more years and may have never considered going to college (Brooks, 2011). This is especially the case for older students who are described as “nontraditional” because they are likely to be head of their household, have dependents, attend college part-time and be in urgent need of full-time employment (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Levin, 2007).

In addition to the economic impact of college, there are psychological factors which can be more problematic than the cost and time required for college (Hardin, 2008). Many older nontraditional students suffer severe anxiety about attending college (Brooks, 2011). For those who are displaced workers, unemployed or underemployed, there is an acute sense of urgency,

high apprehension about their ability, and sensitivity about the expected outcome (Goodman, Schlossberg, Anderson, 2006). The transition to the academic environment, for those with no prior disposition towards it, often involves a physical adjustment as well as a mental one. Students expressed that sitting in a class for an extended period, being in a campus setting, asking for directions, and essentially being more visible than perhaps they have ever been before, can be an unnerving experience (Brooks, 2011). The mental aspects of adjustment include building self-confidence, exploring curiosity about subjects that were previously avoided or deprived access to, expanding or disputing formally held beliefs, expressing opinions, and developing capacities for navigating the world (Conley, 2008; Hardin, 2008; Merriam, 2008). Going to college can be a truly transformational experience, but unless older nontraditional students received the proper supports, it can become a harrowing experience.

More recently, many community colleges recognized the social, economic, and psychological challenges of specific student segments. The Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation (MDRC) reported on several pilot programs that offer extended supports to improve students' transition and better orient them to college-going. However, these programs are primarily targeted for first-generation, low-income students, and traditional-age students. In the latest MDRC policy brief, *Opening Doors to Student Success*, nontraditional students are mentioned cursory to the larger focus on the traditional-aged student segment (Scrivener & Coghlan, 2011). The mention of nontraditional students as a secondary consideration is consistent with the literature; information about programs that focus specifically on the issues of older nontraditional students is lacking. Several authors have stated that more research is needed to explore the underlying factors related to nontraditional student retention and persistence (Bailey, Calcagno, Jenkins, Kienzl, Leinbach, 2005; Horn & Weko, 2006; Levin, 2007; Purnell

& Blank, 2004). Other literature suggested that qualitative studies on nontraditional students are warranted because it is likely that such an inquiry will reveal the “underlying factors” missing from quantitative studies involving student enrollment patterns and attrition (Bailey, et al., 2005; Horn & Weko, 2006). My study adds to the qualitative literature on older nontraditional students and offers a unique perspective on the transition to community college.

Statement of the Problem

National data on undergraduate students’ persistence and completion show nontraditional students are less unlikely to complete an associate degree or certificate at a community college than traditional-age students (Bailey, 2008b; Choy, 2002; Horn & Weko, 2009; Levin, 2007; Vorhees, 1987). Many older students face personal barriers to attending college. Some are rooted in psychological realms, such as low self-esteem and low self-efficacy toward education (Hardin, 2008). Personal barriers are compounded by social challenges, such as feeling out-of-place among considerably younger students, lack of computer literacy, and academic underpreparedness (Brooks, 2011). Psychologists have coined the term “psychosocial” to describe the combined psychological and social issues that arise from major life transition events (Parkes, 1971; Schlossberg 1984). For students who decide to attend college in midlife because of a major life transition event (such as a job loss), the psychosocial ramifications resulting from the event can be overwhelming. Older students have considerably different psychosocial and educational needs from traditional-age students (Hagedorn, 2005). Despite recent efforts to create strategies for improving community college completion rates, many institutions’ programs are structured to accommodate traditional-aged students (Hagedorn, 2005; Levin, 2007; Levin & Montero-Hernandez, 2009; Schaefer, 2009).

Several scholars in the field of adult learning, such as Knowles (1980), Cross (1981)

Brookfield (1986), Cranton (2006), and Merriam (2008), assert that adult learning is characterized by self-directed learning which is voluntary and influenced by accumulated life experiences. The role of the educator is to facilitate learning through participatory and collaborative techniques rather than to transmit knowledge from a position of authority (Knowles, 1980). Within this body of knowledge, there are authors who emphasize that adults seek additional education when life transition events occur that create “teachable moments” in their lives (Cross, 1981; Knowles, 1980). These teachable moments can happen as a natural course of life or suddenly creating “a powerful motivating force for learning” (Cross, 1981, p.144). In counseling adults, a job loss is a significant “trigger,” that prompts many adults to seek higher education in midlife (Cross, 1981; Schlossberg, 1984).

Among the most recent innovations in adult learning are programs designed to accommodate the academically underprepared by combining personal development with academic development. The concept of “contextualized learning strategies” aims to bridge personal development gaps in the academic and social aspects of college-going while simultaneously incorporating self-actualization techniques with basic coursework (Alssid et al., 2010; Bailey, 2008b; Downing, 2008). For example, I did a pilot study on nontraditional students who successfully transitioned to community college which highlighted institutional characteristics that facilitated successful transition. While collecting data, I observed a writing class where students learned college writing while practicing self-reflection and personal discovery by crafting essays about their life experiences (Brooks, 2011). The essays prompted the students to recall specific life events, rather than prompting questions that would evoke thinking about a life transition because of a job loss, which was the “trigger” that brought them to college. Schlossberg (1984) suggested that a learning strategy that helps students understand

the life transition process will reduce the trauma of a life transition event.

The following example describes a scenario that is all too common for displaced workers and illustrates how a life transition event can be linked to the transition to college. Losing a job can trigger the desire to pursue education as way of enacting a solution to a crisis. As such, coping with the life transition event becomes integral to the decision to attend college. When many older students summon the courage to arrive at a college, feeling ready to enroll, they can become quickly overwhelmed by what it will actually take for them to achieve their goal. This becomes a discerning point because the impact of the life transition begins to register- the extent to which going to college will alter his or her daily life begins to crystallize (Schlossberg, 1984). At this juncture some people can become preoccupied with the impact of the event and become lost in it. For those who form an active “appraisal” of their situation, such as considering the time and energy necessary for attending college, they find productive ways for handling the life transition event (Schlossberg, 1984). If the college they choose to attend offers comprehensive transition services, students can create a viable transition plan that will helps them integrate the trigger event (such as job loss), appraise their options for a resolution, and begin to move toward that which they will believe will bring satisfaction, which is obtaining an education credential (Goodman, Schlossberg & Anderson, 2006; Schlossberg, 1984).

The transition period for displaced workers is a critical time when a student’s motivation can be nurtured and directed toward learning college-ready behaviors, such as such as self-reflectivity, formal discourse, time management, homework, critical thinking, and writing (Boswell & Wilson, 2004; Conley, 2008; Cross, 1981; Knowles, 1980). The transition experience, characterized by considerable self-determination and commitment, can be the beginning of a potentially transformative experience- a change in how students view themselves

and their relationship to the world around them (Dirkx, 1997; Merriam, 2008; Mezirow, 1997). If a college transition program provides critical resources that include strategies for coping with the life transition event, students have a greater opportunity to sustain their motivation and commitment by engaging in a personal transformation (Goldman et al., 2006; Merriam, 2008; Mezirow, 1997; Schlossberg, 1984).

Many community college faculty and administrators recognize the importance of the transition process, as evidenced by the national BridgeConnect (2010) survey. Commissioned by the Joyce Foundation and compiled by the Workforce Strategy Center, a national survey was conducted to determine the depth and breadth of bridge programs (programs designed to facilitate the transition to college for underprepared adults). The Workforce Strategy Center reported there is a “critical mass” of bridge programs across the US and “no community of practice exists to advance the field (Alssid et al., 2010, p. 13). During a regional forum on adult learning concerns, the Michigan Adult Learning Work Group (2008) reported “We were told that adult learners often fall into the gaps between programs and agencies during transitions” (p. 58). The group also observed, “Forum participants frequently stated that the adult learning system needs to allow for seamless transitions and be responsive to the needs of adult learners” (p. 58). Given that the transition process is important for the reasons mentioned above, transition programs are the focus of this study.

Missing from the literature are studies of community college transition programs where the content of the course work is geared toward conceptualizing life events more relevant to and aimed for older students and midlife. As Cross (1981) described it, “capitalizing on teachable moments by gearing an entire program to a particular transition in the life cycle” (p. 145). Factors resulting from a job loss become particularly stressful if compounded with loss of

income. Although there are social service agencies that address these issues, nontraditional students are often unaware of the community resources available to them (Brooks, 2011; Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2010). They look to the college counselor to provide advice on many personal issues (National College Transition Network, 2011).

There is also very little empirical evidence on the types of support services that specifically accommodate the older student segment. Levin (2007) defined accommodation as “certainly an aspect of access...encompasses educational services that ensure that programs and support are appropriate for the students” (pp. 12-13). Community college transition programs and services that do accommodate nontraditional students offer services with a “wrap-around” dimension that is quite different from the general transition efforts offered for traditional-age students. Of the institutions that have added this dimension, such as the Capital IDEA program in Austin, Texas and the Backpacks to Briefcases program in Lexington, North Carolina, their efforts are showing some progress (National College Transition Network, 2011). However, there has not been significantly quantifiable progress as reported in the Opening Doors to Student Success MDRC Policy Brief (Scrivener & Coghlan, 2011). One of their projects was the BridgeConnect survey which indicated that “new research will be needed” that outlines “what strategies work best with which populations” and “which are truly innovations” (Alssid et al., 2010, p. 13).

Other scholars note that qualitative studies are important for understanding how nontraditional students transition to college. Louie (2007) observed that quantitative methods that report statistics on test scores and completion rates do not adequately tell the whole story of student transition. She stated that “in the absence of qualitative methods like interviews and participant observations, we do not have the tools to understand the meanings individuals attach

to events and situations” (p. 2243). Louie (2007) further noted that there are tensions between how scholars approach their research and how policy is determined. She asserted that “the inclusion of student voices would strengthen our understanding of topics that remain under-examined in history” vis-à-vis qualitative inquiry (p. 2243).

The problem is there is little empirical data that shows which support services are best for accommodating the older student segment. An interesting question is whether community colleges are adequately accommodating older students (ages 35-60) with programs and services that facilitate a successful transition. This qualitative study illuminates the transition experiences of older displaced workers who are also academically underprepared and includes the student voices as well as the perceptions of faculty and college administrators.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to gain a better understanding of how displaced workers transitioned to select community colleges and to explore how programs and services accommodated older underprepared students who experienced job loss. This topic is especially relevant in Michigan where massive job layoffs have resulted in large populations of unemployed and displaced workers who need further education to obtain gainful employment (Adult Learning Workgroup, 2008; Carnevale, 2009; Cherry Commission, 2004), and where state initiated programs, such as No Worker Left Behind (2010), were designed to encourage dislocated workers to enroll in community colleges. Since community colleges are the places where a large proportion of nontraditional students begin their college education, they are the targeted institution (Alssid et.al, 2010; Bailey, 2008b; Levin, 2007; Mullin, 2011).

Michigan offers a rich field of study because there are multiple community colleges with a diverse array of program offerings and educational goals. There is also a diverse population of

unemployed or underemployed dislocated workers who are age 35 or older and seeking to advance their education to reenter the workforce (Cherry Commission, 2004). Michigan's Adult Learning Work Group (2008) reported that there was a "dangerously large number of working age adults in Michigan- 1.7 million- who lack basic skills needed for post-secondary education" (p. 3). The report also stated that "we were told that adult learners often fall into the gaps between programs and agencies during transitions" (p. 60). From studying the results of the Cherry Commission's (2004) and Michigan's Adult Learning Work Group's (2011) reports, I felt there were ample resources for conducting this study in Michigan.

The literature on nontraditional students indicated that the older student segment has unique needs that require special attention (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Hardin, 2008; Kilgore & Rice, 2003; Lumina Foundation, 2009; Purnell & Blank, 2004; Terenzini, 1992). Adults moving through a life change encounter the "4S" elements of transition (Situation, Self, Support and Strategies) in order to cope with or move forward from a crisis, such as a job loss (Goodman et al., 2006; Parkes, 1971; Schlossberg, 1984). Most community college transition programs and services touch upon each of these components, but the central inquiry of this study was whether the programs and services at the case sites included all of the components, which addressed the special needs of displaced workers who were older (ages 35-60) and academically underprepared.

Significance of the Study

The results of the study provide valuable insights for faculty who encounter older students in their classes and look for transition strategies that differ from those for traditional-age students. For administrators who are developing programs or evaluating existing programs, the guiding framework tool offers a method for assessing the aspects of transition that are critical for

older students who have undergone a major life transition event. In an increasingly competitive educational arena with for-profit universities and technical colleges increasing enrollments (Boswell & Wilson, 2004), this study contributes to the literature on student transitions, which could help improve older students' success at public community colleges.

In a more general sense, examining how displaced workers transition to community college is a timely inquiry. The federal government recently announced plans to invest in community colleges "which represents the first serious consideration by the federal government to invest in broad community college improvement" (Bailey, 2010, p.3). Thus, it is important for community college administrators as well as policy makers to know if programs and services designed to facilitate transition to college are effective and whether students are responsive to them. As Louie (2007) exclaimed, "The stakes are high, depending on whether we take the lead or alternatively remain where we are, the transition to college will represent either the promise or the decline of the American future" (p. 2247). Louie's comment reflects the significance of this study.

Research Questions

As community colleges are eager to improve college completion rates for the general student population (Bailey, 2010; Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2010; US Department of Education, 2011b), I question whether they are adequately facilitating transition for dislocated workers who are older students. The research questions for the study are:

1. How do displaced workers who are older students (ages 35-60) and academically underprepared transition to community college?

- a) What types of programs and services do community colleges provide during transition?

- b) How responsive or accommodating are these programs and services for older students?
2. What are older students' perspectives on transitioning to community college?
 3. How do older students' perspectives of programs and services utilized during transition compare to the perspectives of administrators, faculty, counselors, and staff who administer them?

Theoretical Framework

Figure 1 Theoretical Framework

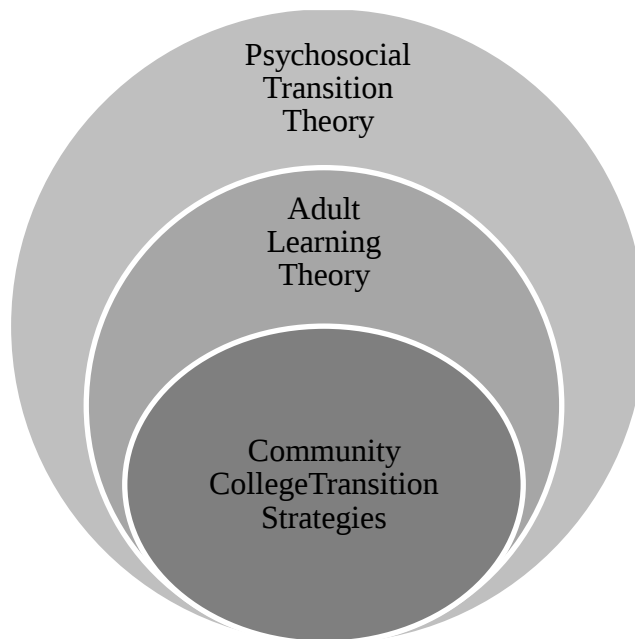


Figure 1 depicts the theoretical dimensions that frame the research of this study. Adapted from Merriam's (2009) "three-frame model," the theoretical framework moves from "the general topic and then more specifically to the academic setting" (p. 69). The outer frame is the general notion of transition as it relates to how adults navigate life transitions as a result of significant events in their lives. The middle frame relates to adult learning theory within the context of life transitions. The innermost frame depicts the community college transition strategies that were derived from adult learning theories.

Psychosocial Transition Theory

The first dimension describes how displaced workers navigate life transitions as a result of job loss. Psychologists have coined the term “psychosocial” to describe the combined psychological and social issues that arise from major life transition events (such as job loss). When the event requires immediate attention or action, there is set of responses that occur. Parkes (1971) defined psychosocial transition as “those major changes in life space which are lasting in their effects, which take place over a relatively short period of time and which affect large areas of the assumptive world” (p. 103). The psychosocial state of mind accurately describes the life transitioning effects that older nontraditional students face when starting college.

The theory of life transition became relevant to me when I considered that displaced workers in midlife who may have never considered going to college until they were faced with being unemployed with no viable job prospects. While conducting a pilot study, I listened to stories filled with panic and despair from students who experienced job loss (Brooks, 2011). Many stated that the job loss- particularly in employment sectors that do not even exist anymore- was a critical turning point. They decided that going to college was their best option for securing future employment (Brooks, 2011). The job loss, a life transition event, prompted them to think differently about their lives and to take action. Similar to victims of traumatic events, such as war or crime, the emotions invoked by the experience first produced a sense of loss, then anger, confusion, and then a desire to take action (Parkes, 1971). The pressures of college-going compounded with the stressors of unemployment required careful psychosocial considerations (Brooks, 2011).

Schlossberg (1984) described the reaction to life events as a transition process. She

framed it as involving three components: the transition itself in terms of “its type, context and impact;” the transition process examined by how a person “appraises” his or her situation; and the “coping resources” available to them (p. 42). In the case of a job loss, the transition is “an event,” that affects multiple areas in a person’s “life space.” Parkes (1971) used job loss as an example of a psychosocial transition. He stated that “in order to understand the effects of job loss, it is necessary to identify the areas of the life space and assumptive world which will or should change as a consequence of the initial change” (p. 104). Schlossberg added to Parkes’ notion that those major life events, whether they are of crisis nature or less traumatic, prompts people to search for solutions.

Schlossberg’s (1984) framework, “helping the individual in transition” (p. 68), was of particular relevance because it is a useful tool for academic counselors. She expanded her work on transition with co-authors Goodman and Anderson (2006) and furthered the topic of work transitions. The advice provided for handling work-related life events was useful in developing the guiding framework tool for the current study (see Table 1 below). The 4 S System (Goodman et al., 2006) is an extension of Schlossberg’s original theory of life transition. It outlines a typology for advising adults through life events (such as the transition to college).

Guiding Framework Tool

I created the guiding framework tool to illustrate how the case sites address transition displaced workers. Table 1 depicts a matrix of elements that integrates the 4 S System for transition (Goodman et al., 2006) and the wrap-around services model, a benchmark of services for nontraditional students (Purnell & Blank, 2004). The value in constructing the guiding framework tool is it illuminates where there are “wrap-around” type services are in place and where they are missing.

Table 1 Guiding Framework Tool

Components of Wrap-around Services Model ¹		The 4 S System ² (Coping with Life's Changes)		
	Situation	Self	Support	Strategies
Academic Guidance and Counseling	What is the institution doing to support this element of the transition process?			
Educational Planning and Academic Supports				
Personal Guidance and Counseling				
Career Counseling				
Supplemental Services (i.e. childcare and transportation)				

1. Purnell & Blank (2004) Supporting success: Services that may help low-income students succeed in community college (pp. 8-9).

2. Goodman, J., Schlossberg, N. & Anderson, M. (2006). The 4 S System (pp. 32-41) and the Transition Model for counseling adults in transition (p.184).

Adult Learning Theory

Adult learning theories underpin the efforts at community colleges to create developmental interventions for underprepared students by capitalizing on how adult students respond to teaching and how they prefer to learn. Effective developmental strategies are characterized by self-directed, self-reflective, collaborative and problem-solving learning activities (Brookfield, 1986; Cross, 1981; Knowles, 1980). Research over the last 30 years has

shown that the learning ability of adults does not diminish, but their learning needs shift in ways that are less responsive to the traditional lecture format in the classroom (Brookfield, 1986; Cranton, 2006; Merriam, 2008). Community colleges that have invested in reforms to improve the learning environment for adult students have created smaller classes, with informal furnishings and technological equipment (Levin, 2007). Group projects and shared personal experiences are encouraged to foster a sense of camaraderie and equality among students and the professor (Brookfield, 1986). These types of efforts reflect an attempt to meet students' needs, since respond not only to mental stimuli from new knowledge, but also their physical surroundings (Merriam, 2008).

According to several authors, motivation theory is useful for understanding older students' transition to college. When high levels of motivation are established based on an individual's prominent needs (such as supporting a family), any previous disposition toward education becomes less of a factor in motivation (Brookfield, 1986; Courtney, 1992; Cross, 1981; Schlossberg, 1984). Courtney (1992) discussed the extent to which motivation is the key for older adults to persist in higher education. He stated that underlying the motivation are several incentives, such as public assistance, and he questions whether this type of assistance really provides a real incentive for adults to embrace the mental state necessary for learning. Knowles (1980) described it as a "ready to learn" disposition. He hypothesized that unless a student has reached that state where they want to learn, they will not be successful at it. Many nontraditional students do not persist because they enter college without a clear understanding or disposition for learning. If the desire for college was never truly born from within a person, there may not be enough personal motivation to do the work that is required (Courtney, 1992). So at the base of adult learning theory is personal motivation, which can be nurtured and encouraged

with contextualized material incorporated into courses, such as the *On Course* strategies authored by Skip Downing.

In the last 30 years many people in Michigan have become displaced workers and have turned to higher education to prepare for reentering the workforce with added skills and abilities (Adult Learning Work Group, 2008). While teaching older adults with this ambition, I became curious whether educational institutions offered appropriate services to accommodate older students experiencing a life transition because of job loss. From the conversations I had with the students and administrators at local community colleges, there are places where older nontraditional students are thriving. In fact, at one college the displaced workers were beginning to outperform the general student body (Brooks, 2011). The next step for understanding the experiences of displaced workers was to conduct research on how they transitioned to college and the institutions where these transitions took place.

Community College Transition Strategies

The inner most dimension of the theoretical frame is a sampling of transition (bridge) programs from across the country. I found there are many programs showing promise for facilitating the transition of nontraditional students to community college. According to the National College Transition Network (2011), the most promising practices use very intrusive techniques to keep students engaged in learning. The term “wrap-around” refers to the all encompassing nature of the services because they cover a wide range of supports and are continuous for every student until they graduate or are fully employed. An example is the Capital IDEA project (a community-based collaboration with Austin Community College in Texas). Capital IDEA created a wrap-around services program, which was adapted from the Core Elements of Student Services (Purnell & Blank, 2004). The program’s highlights are the types of

supportive services that recent studies suggest are producing the most promising outcomes for nontraditional students (National College Transition Network, 2011).

The focus on these programs has recently been heightened because the federal government issued a goal of increasing the number of college graduates by 2020 to shore-up the US' competitive advantage around the world (US Department of Education, 2011b). Because of this commitment, states are granting funds to community colleges to improve completion rates. For displaced workers who are older and often underprepared, this should include a commitment to developmental education and advancing the supports that go along with developmental learning. Elements such as cohorts and learning communities, financial counseling, flexible scheduling and flexible course deliver options, on-campus childcare assistance, and transportation to campus have all been found to alleviate barriers and improve older students' completion rates (Matus-Grossman & Gooden, 2002; Purnell & Blank, 2004).

Definition of Terms

Accommodations: Levin (2007) described his definition as

Accommodation encompasses educational services that ensure that programs and support are appropriate for the students...Accommodation also suggests, ideally, that students benefit from their college experience...I equate authentic accommodation with justice-the extent to which community colleges provide programs, services, and an institutional climate to advantage students who are disadvantaged. (pp. 13-14)

College-ready: Conley (2008) defined college readiness as “the level of preparation a student needs in order to enroll and succeed, without remediation, in a credit-bearing general education course at a postsecondary institution that offers a baccalaureate degree or transfer to a baccalaureate program” (p. 4).

Developmental coursework: Bailey et al. (2008) defined development coursework as “Designed to provide students who enter college with weak academic skills the opportunity to strengthen skills enough to prepare them for college-level coursework ... Most practitioners use the term “developmental” rather than “remedial” because the latter term is often considered to carry a negative connotation (p. 1).

Dislocated workers: Defined as persons 20 years of age and older who lost or left jobs because their plant or company closed or moved or there was insufficient work for them to do, or their position or shift was abolished (US Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2010).

Life transition: “Periods of change calling for adjustment to new phases of the life cycle” (Cross, 1981, p. 127). Transitions involve significant *life events* that require coping with “what is perceived to be a crisis situation” (Goodman et al., 2006, p. 23)

Midlife: For the purposes of this study *midlife* includes ages 35-60, a combination of the life cycle phases “becoming one’s own person” (ages 37-42), “settling down” (ages 45-55), and “the mellowing” (ages 57-64) (Cross, 1981, pp. 174-175). The traditional life events related to these phases overlap due to the instability of certain sectors of the workforce. However, the “psychic tasks” (Cross, 1981, p. 173) associated with them, such as reexamining one’s life structures, confronting mortality, and reassessing personal priorities and values relate to experiences of student participants in this study.

Nontraditional students: Characteristics of nontraditional undergraduates include any or all of the following: over age 24, delaying enrollment (i.e., not entering postsecondary education in the same calendar year as finishing high school), attending part time for at least part of the academic year, working full time while enrolled, being financially independent from one’s parents, having dependents, being a single parent, or not having a high school diploma (National Center for

Educational Statistics, 2002).

No Worker Left Behind: A Michigan initiated and state funded incentive program created to train or retain workers with credentials for high-demand industries. The policy offered up to two years of free tuition at community college for workers to obtain marketable skills to reenter the workforce. The goal was to “invest in workers’ career agility while furthering the economic growth of employers” in Michigan (Good, 2008, p. 3).

Older student: For the purposes of this study, “older” nontraditional students are ages 35- 60, unemployed or underemployed due to involuntary separation from employment, but not chronically unemployed, and who have completed high school or received a GED.

Student services: Supports that include academic guidance and counseling, academic assistance (tutoring, remedial assistance, time management, and study skills training), personal guidance and counseling (crisis intervention, mental health counseling, life-skills coaching, and peer support), career counseling (aptitude tests, career plans, and skills assessment), supplemental services (child care subsidies, transportation vouchers, and book and supply vouchers) (Purnell & Blank, 2004, p. 7).

Traditional-age students: Students ages 18-24 (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2002).

Transition programs: Garner (2004) defined transition programs as

Designed to encourage students to enroll and enable them to persist in postsecondary education. These programs usually partner in some way with postsecondary institutions, providing counseling and academic services tailored to the needs of ABE students who are college-bound or enrolled in college. (p. 2)

Underprepared students: Adults entering postsecondary education with reading and math skills below the 9th grade level (Alssid et al., 2010).

Wrap-around services: Comprehensive (and often intrusive) services, including (but not limited to) academic, nonacademic, personal, and financial support services that are coordinated across college departments in order to support students until they graduate from college or enter full-time employment (National College Transition Network, 2011).

Summary

Enrollment statistics on undergraduate students reported through the National Education Longitudinal Study (NELS) and the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) NELS and IPED show that nontraditional students are least likely to persist beyond the first year in community college or complete a college credential (Bailey et al., 2008; Bailey, 2008b; Choy, 2002; Horn & Weko, 2009; Vorhees, 1987). But these studies did not examine the non-statistical data, referred to as “unobservable characteristics” that include institutional barriers which could be more influential than NELS and IPEDS data (Bailey et al., 2005). From the Community College Taxonomy (2009), similar unquantifiable data was referred to as “underlying factors,” that the study did not explore, but the authors recognized as contributing to nontraditional students’ reasons for dropping out of college (Horn & Weko, 2009). Scholars suggest more studies are needed to explore the unobservable characteristics at community colleges and the underlying factors related to nontraditional students’ decisions to drop out of college (Louie, 2007; Purnell & Blank, 2004).

By examining the transitions of displaced workers and programs and services at community colleges, this study aimed to understand whether the student participants were provided with sufficient supports for coping with job loss (a life transition event) which was often the “trigger” at the core of the decision to go to college (Goodman et al. 2006; Merriam, 2008; Schlossberg, 1984). This study also explored the transition factors in relation to colleges’

programs and services through the perspectives of the students, faculty, staff, counselors, and administrators. Where community colleges services are not adequately addressing the effects of job loss, this “underlying factor” may be a barrier to the successful transition to college.

The study’s theoretical framework is represented by three dimensions, psychosocial and transition theory, adult learning theories, and community college transition strategies. These dimensions outline the research direction of the study. The guiding framework tool was created for examining transition using Schlossberg’s (1984), and the more recent update from Goodman, Schlossberg and Anderson’s (2006), 4 S System integrated with the “wrap-around” services model, an expanded range of academic and support services that serves as a benchmark for developing transition programs and services for nontraditional students (National College Transition Network, 2011). The value of this integrated tool was it provided a method for summarizing how programs and services offered by the college facilitated students’ transition.

The next chapter is the Literature Review (Chapter 2) based on the theoretical framework that directed the research agenda for each case site. I present the study’s methodology in Chapter 3 and it includes information about the case sites, participant selection, the cast of characters, and short biographies of the student participants. Chapters 4 and 5 provide perspectives from the study participants that form a comprehensive picture of the students’ transition experiences and the colleges’ programs and services. Chapter 6 presents the guiding framework tool (a summary of the findings in terms of the 4 S System), a discussion of the findings in terms of the three dimensions of the theoretical framework, and a discussion of organizational issues that affected students’ transitions. The answers to the research questions, implications, recommendation for practice, and topics for future research are presented in Chapter 7.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Adult learning theories in the last 30 years have addressed how adults process knowledge and offered strategies for effectively engaging the adult learner. I found that research topics moved from questioning whether adult learners (particularly older students) are capable of continuous learning to how the mature disposition of adult learners has been integrated into teaching methods. At the root of the research questions for the current study is whether sufficient attention has been given to older students who are processing a major life event and then take on transitioning to college. Literature that is relevant to this subject links theory across three disciplines, adult learning, psychology, and sociology. Adult learning theories describe how adult learners respond to instruction as self-motivated and self-directed learners. Psychological theory relates how students navigate life transitions, such as job loss. Sociological studies relate how older learners adjust to the college environment.

The literature review starts with an overview of two nationally recognized organizations that have conducted studies on effective bridge programs designed to facilitate nontraditional students' transition to college. Since students targeted for this study are considered in midlife, I present a brief description of the traditional life-cycle phases which once marked midlife as a "time of settling down" or "preparing for retirement" (Cherry, 2011; Cross, 1981). Because of recent economic conditions, midlife for many displaced workers is now marked by involuntary job separation, so instead of preparing for the end of working, they are reinventing themselves by going to college to continue working (Shermer, 2008). Studies focused on nontraditional students' personal characteristics highlight any demographic variables (such as age, gender or ethnicity) related to college transition.

A discussion of adult learning theories follows with information on the cognitive

developments and psychosocial adjustments and literature on life transition theory with an emphasis on how adults process life events. As part of coping with job loss, displaced workers make decisive moves that can “trigger” the desire for further education (Cross, 1981; Goodman et al., 2006; Schlossberg, 1984). In this “life space” there is an opportunity for a significant “teachable moment,” which begins a process of altering one’s perspective about their selves and their surroundings (Parkes, 1971; Cross, 1981). The resulting new self perspective can be described as a transformative learning experience (Cranton, 2006, Dirkx, 1997).

The next section includes perspectives on the ideology of mature learners and how education influences personal transformations. Many scholars recognize that unless students receive support with the right mix of institutional services, their transition to college can become problematic (Conley, 2008; Hardin 2008; Purnell & Blank, 2004; National Student Transition Network, 2011a). I present several strategies for how colleges can accommodate nontraditional students’ needs. The last section is a list of current national transition projects that illustrate the multiple approaches being employed to address the transition barriers for underprepared nontraditional students. A summary recaps the literature that was most relevant to the current study.

National Trends

There are concentrated efforts in community colleges to improve performance and completion rates among students. There are numerous state-level and institutional-level programs designed to bridge gaps in academic readiness for students who are underprepared. The Center for Workforce Strategy (2010) conducted a study of these programs, commonly referred to as “bridge” programs. They found that “no cohesive community of practice in this area and no national standards for how to ensure student success” (Alssid et al., 2010, p. 13). The

BridgeConnect group wants to create a scholarly community to sharing best practices from the field. In their study of private, public and community-based institutions, they found seven key themes that emerged across institutions where their programs showed success in helping underprepared students successfully transition to college. The seven key themes include:

- Start with a solid curriculum
- Seek out inspirational leaders
- Integrate funding sources
- Forge cooperative partnerships
- Provide extra support services
- Encourage peer networks
- Learn from measurable performance markers

The BridgeConnect group stated that “the single most important factor in running a successful bridge program lies in keeping focus squarely on the students and the students’ needs” (Alssid et al., 2010, p. 17).

The National College Transition Network (NCTN) has been tracking the best practices of colleges across the nation. Their list of fourteen promising practices includes programs that have shown success in moving underprepared students through certificate and associate degree programs. A notable dimension of these practices is its intrusive nature, referred to as “wrap-around” services that are intended to cover a student from initial enrollment to attainment of a college credential or securing full-time employment (NCTN, 2011b). Wrap-around supports and services extend beyond academic supports and include personal and financial assistance as well as covering tuition, books, childcare, transportation and psychological supports (Purnell & Blank, 2004). One of the more successful programs is the Capital Idea, Austin, TX where

counselors were described as becoming like “surrogate family members” because of how closely they work with students (NCTN, 2011b). The NCTN fourteen promising practices include:

- Orientation
- Student transition portfolios
- Memorandum of understanding between the college and its community partners
- Creative methods for preparing students for college-level math
- Monthly mentor-student meetings
- Career planning for SUCCESS
- Building relationships with elected officials
- Create an alumni connection
- Wrap-Around services: Capital Idea College Transition Program
- Leverage existing relationships with business partners
- College for a day program
- College math curriculum alignment with GED test
- Using syllabi in transition classes
- Backpacks to Briefcases College Transition Program

Common elements between the BridgeConnect (2010) and NCTN (2011) findings are: 1) forging cooperative partnerships with businesses and community resources; 2) providing extra services, such as creative math instruction, pre-enrollment college visits, and wrap-around level services; and 3) creating and encouraging mentoring relationships with peers, recent alumni and faculty, and sponsoring monthly meetings to facilitate these relationships. I consider the information from these two sources as benchmarks- levels of supports and services that have been found to positively impact the transition of nontraditional students to college.

Adult Learners

Who are adult learners?

The Lumina Foundation works to promote a better understanding of the spectrum of supports for adult students in order for them to be successful. According to the Lumina Foundation's (2009) report entitled *What We Know about Adult Learners*, the US Department of Education defines adult learners "as anyone engaged in some form of instruction or educational activity to acquire the knowledge, information, and skills necessary to succeed in the workforce, learn basic skills, earn credentials, or otherwise enrich their lives" (p.1). The report went on to state that "a significant portion of adult learners may be categorized as 'nontraditional students,' as defined by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (2002)" (p.1). Nontraditional students possess one or more of the following characteristics: over age 24, delaying enrollment (i.e., not entering postsecondary education in the same calendar year as finishing high school), attending part time for at least part of the academic year, working full time while enrolled, being financially independent from one's parents, having dependents, or being a single parent, does not have a high school diploma (NCES, 2002).

The *Returning to Learning* (2007) report profiled adult learners and their educational needs. It stated that "there is no 'typical' adult learner...the well-worn path will not work for most adult learners" (Pusser et al., 2007, p.4). It reported that "adult learners generally seek convenient access and a high degree of certainty in choosing a program. The study also revealed that understanding the diversity of adult students' needs is necessary for developing effective programming. To grasp the spectrum of adult learners' needs, the report suggested "on one end of the continuum features adult students whose risk of failure is minimal — that is, they are well equipped with information, skills and resources [and] at the other end are high-risk students who

lack the skills and resources necessary to succeed” (Pusser et al., p. 5). Another important finding from the study is that students who are older than the traditional-aged students are still “in the early stages of their working lives.” A critical discovery was that “in an era in which most individuals intend to work beyond the age of 65, these adults were repositioning themselves to use their postsecondary training in the labor market for many years” (Pusser et al., p. 9). The lesson to be gleaned from the Lumina research is postsecondary educational institutions need to be responsive to a larger and longer spectrum of adult learners.

Life-Cycle Phases

For the purposes of this study *midlife* includes ages 35-60, a combination of the life cycle phases as outlined by Cross (1981), “becoming one’s own person” (ages 37-42), “settling down” (ages 45-55) and “the mellowing” (ages 57-64) (pp.174-175). The traditional life events related to these phases overlap due to the instability of certain sectors of the workforce, but the “psychic tasks” (p. 173) associated with them, such as the reexamining one’s life structures, confronting mortality and reassessing personal priorities and values, remain relevant for the life span of the student participants in this study.

Cross’s (1981) description of life-cycle phases is an indicator of what adults experience at particular stages in life. Midlife was depicted as the “phase” of life when an individual is “becoming one’s own person” (ages 37-42). This phase is marked by personal turning points, a confrontation of mortality, a reassessment of life’s priorities and values, and thoughts about whether there is time to change one’s life (p. 174). The next part of midlife was “settling down” (ages 45-55), which traditionally marked the time in life when careers were “capped” and people settled into their life choices (p.175). It was also a time when people experience “increased feelings of self-awareness and competence” and were motivated people to pursue learning for

leisure purposes. Rather than “settling down,” many are “still searching for stability,” the life phase that Cross described as ages 29-34 (p. 174). The “mellowing phase” (age 57-64), marked by “loss of mate,” “health problems,” and “preparation for retirement,” (p. 175) is relevant for the student participants only for the first two conditions. Today, the settling down and mellowing phases have been delayed because of the current economic conditions.

Erikson (1959), noted for his psychosocial stage theory, believed that at certain stages of ego development people experience conflicts that cause them to evaluate their lives (Cherry, 2011). Erikson described the stage of midlife as either “generative” versus “stagnate,” meaning that people between the ages of 40 and 65 look for activities where they feel useful or accomplished, otherwise they develop feelings of boredom or being stuck (Cherry, 2011). For displaced workers in midlife, going to college offers an opportunity to be generative. Older students often feel this is their last chance to be successful at something or accomplish a goal, so their focus and sense of urgency is intense, but so is their fear of failure (Brooks, 2011). This intensity can be a great source of self-efficacy, which has been found to be an essential factor for underprepared students’ success (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, and Pastorelli, 1996)

Some psychologists recognize that the prescribed notions of life stages and predictable life transitions are no longer relevant for certain segments of the population (Shermer, 2008). Carol Tavris, a social psychologist, noted “those stage theories reflected a time when people marched through life predictably...those “passages” theories evaporated with changing social and economic conditions that blew the predictability of our lives to hell” (as cited by Shermer, 2008, p.1). For displaced workers, the current economic conditions reflect the instability of midlife marked by a significant life transition event. If they seek counseling, updated models of adult development that reflect the context of the current economic reality are needed.

Student Characteristics and Transition

The Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) reported that student characteristics are important factors to consider “for improving the effectiveness of developmental education” (2006, p. 7). Other scholars found that background characteristics among students who attend college part-time had a direct effect on the transition to higher education and persistence to degree (Bailey et al., 2005; CCSSE, 2006; Levin & Montero-Hernandez, 2009, Vorhees, 1987). Studies that measure the success of nontraditional students in college show that socioeconomic factors are the most significant and are consistently related to students’ outcomes, especially for those of lower-economic means (Bailey et al., 2005; Horn & Weko, 2009; Levin, 2007; Levin & Montero-Hernandez, 2009; Vorhees, 1987; Zajacova et al. 2005).

Vorhees (1987) studied how students’ background characteristics affected persistence. He found that “gender had little empirical evidence” (p. 117); students “attending part-time are more likely to drop out, more likely to be older and more occupied with commitments outside of the college environment” (p. 118); and “ethnicity had no significant factors in attrition rates between minority students and whites when factors such as academic ability and SES are controlled, especially at two-year colleges” (p. 118). Zajacova, et al.’s (2005) study showed that older students have high grades, but drop out more frequently. They found no relation between age and the intent to continue in college among nontraditional students. Although women earned higher grades in the study, they acknowledged that other studies have shown no correlation between gender and persistence. Similar to Vorhees’ (1987) conclusions, Blacks and Hispanics were more likely than whites to drop out, but there were no other significant effects attributed to race. Zajacova, et al. reported that recent immigrants had a slightly higher GPA than immigrants who

have been in the US longer, “which perhaps reflects either better academic preparation in high school or motivational differences” (p. 697). The CCSSE (2006) reported that data on student characteristics further informed decision-makers because of the “all too common disparities in outcomes” among minority student populations (p. 7). Survey results showed that “disaggregating data” on student characteristics, such as age, ethnicity, and gender, provided important information for evaluating the effectiveness of programs and services.

The *Taxonomy of Beginning Community College Students and Their Outcomes 3 Years after Enrolling: 2003-04 through 2006* (2009) was prepared for the US Department of Education (henceforth referred to as the Community College Taxonomy or CCT). The CCT sample included 5800 students from the most recent Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study (2006), which represented all first-time undergraduates. The average age was 24 with 20% who were 30 or older. The CCT’s results offered a new perspective where *age* was found to be a statistically significant factor, but did not explain any implications related to age (Horn & Weko, 2009). The results also implied that older students were less likely to obtain an associate degree or certificate or transfer to a 4-year institution. In regard to transitioning to college, the reasons for not persisting beyond the first were cited as either “financial” or “other,” as reported by about 30 % of first-year leavers. The CCT did not provide any details about “other reasons” or “personal reasons,” so it is inferred that these factors are some of the “unmeasured variables” which they pointed out were not part of the study.

Because of the potential inferences that could be made about older students, the data from the CCT concerned me. The CCT did not offer any evidence of student performance within any of the classifications or across age groups. Although age was found to be statistically significant, it was also negatively correlated to success in community college. This aspect of the CCT results

greatly influenced the development of this study. Some scholars suggest further qualitative research is needed to illuminate the issues that are not represented by statistical reports (Louie, 2007).

Although the studies mentioned above show that background characteristics have a bearing on success, scholars do recognize that there are other societal factors which have put nontraditional students of various ethnicities at a disadvantage (Levin, 2007). Even though Vorhees' (1987) study reported "there appeared to be little relationship between minority status and persistence patterns" (p. 127), he commented that "the intervening effects of other measures on minority status and purpose for enrolling should not be overlooked in future models of community college persistence (p. 127). In other studies, student services that reflect culturally relevant supports have been reported to improve the persistence of African American students, such as those found at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (Bailey et. al., 2005; Hedgpeth, 2007). The Opening Door study (2002) found that discrimination on community college campuses was a notable factor and racial discrimination was only one of the dimensions of a "wide-range" of discriminatory incidents. Other dimensions included age, gender, and parental status (Matus-Grossman and Gooden, 2002). From my pilot study, the challenges of the displaced workers transcended any disadvantage associated with race or ethnicity (Brooks, 2011). In this study, the most salient factor among the participants' stories was a perception associated with them being older and academically underprepared.

Adult Learning Theories

Educating Adults

There is much literature on educating adults, as outlined by several scholars in the field, such as Knowles (1980), Cross (1981) Brookfield (1986), Cranton (2006) and Merriam (2008).

These scholars asserted that adult learning is characterized by self-directed learning, which is voluntary and influenced by accumulated life experiences. The role of the educator is to facilitate learning through participatory and collaborative techniques rather than to transmit knowledge from a position of authority. Adult learning theories underpin efforts at community colleges to create interventions for underprepared students by capitalizing on how adult students respond to teaching and how they prefer to learn. It is characterized by self-directed, self-reflective, collaborative and problem-solving learning activities (Brookfield, 1986; Cross, 1981; Knowles, 1980).

Research over the last 30 years has shown that the learning ability of older adults does not diminish, but their learning needs shift in ways that are less responsive to the traditional lecture format in the classroom. Colleges that have invested in reforms to improve the learning environment for adult students have created smaller classes, with informal furnishings and technological equipment (Levin, 2009; Merriam, 2008). Group projects and shared personal experiences foster a sense of camaraderie and equality among students and the professor (Dirkx, 1997). These types of efforts reflect how older adults are highly responsive to the learning context, the learning atmosphere, and relationships in and out of the classroom. They respond not only to mental stimuli from new knowledge, but their physical surroundings as well (Dirkx, 1997; Merriam, 2008; Terenzini, 1992). As more nontraditional students filled classrooms, questions emerged about how these students, who attend college part-time while juggling multiple and equaling pressing responsibilities, process learning new information. In the 1980s and 1990s adult learning literature was focused on cognitive development and teaching methods, which emphasized techniques that were believed to support “adult” behaviors, such as self-directed learning (Brookfield, 1986; Cross, 1981; Knowles, 1980).

Teaching Adults

Many nontraditional students do not persist because they enter college without a clear understanding of the rigors or a strong commitment to learning (Conley, 2008). Knowles (1980) describes this as a “ready to learn” disposition. He hypothesizes that unless a student has reached that state where they want to learn for their own sake, they will not be successful. He developed the concept of *andragogy*, which he defined as “the art and science of helping adults learn, in contrast *pedagogy* as the art and science of teaching children” (p. 43). The premise is rooted in assumptions about the learner, the learner’s life experiences, his or her “readiness to learn,” and orientation to learning. Knowles posits that adults have accumulated experiences which they can reflect upon through the process of “self-evaluation.”

Teaching adults is about facilitating their sense of curiosity, which promotes self-directed thinking and learning. In this sense, andragogical teaching methods are quite different from pedagogical ones that are taught primarily through the transmission technique. The classroom is a participatory environment where learners “share the responsibility for planning and operating a learning experience, and therefore have a feeling of commitment toward it” (Knowles, 1980, p. 57). Critics of Knowles’s approach were concerned about how to apply it. Cross (1981) noted, although it appears to address “quite a legitimate need- the need to provide an alternative to traditional ‘school-like’ education- it seems quite difficult to devise a workable definition of andragogy” (p. 225). She wrote that, while Knowles defended the purpose of his technique, he did not clearly identify the implications of using such an approach for teaching adults or children. However, Cross did find the concept of andragogy important for heightening the awareness of the difference between how adults and children learn.

Brookfield (1986) also promulgated the notion of self-directedness as essential to adult

learning. He explained that the highest form of self-directed learning occurs when adults tie their pursuit of learning to their personal pursuit of meaning. During the process of critical self-reflection and examination of one's life's purpose, a person becomes more open to "the exploration of alternative perspectives and meaning systems, and the alteration of personal and social circumstances" (p. 59). In the classroom, the teacher is seen as a "facilitator" of learning rather than one who holds a superior position over the students. The goal of the educator is to "assist" the adult in becoming self-directed through various participatory activities in which the students work in groups. Brookfield also commented on Knowles' (1980) concept of andragogy. He cautioned that as enticing as Knowles' ideas appear, educators should not be swept up by its comforting notions. He described andragogy as "comforting" because it offered adult educators a "sense of professional identity in that it makes clear distinctions between the characteristics of adult learners and those of children" (p. 96). He further cautioned educators from ascribing to a practice that could potentially become too narrowly defined, thus, leading "practitioners to neglect the complexity and multi-faceted nature of learning" (p. 99).

Transformative Learning

Another purpose for facilitating a self-directed teaching approach to adult learning is to help adults achieve a transformative experience. Mezirow (1997) related the higher level of maturity in adults to their ability to be self-reflective, which results in learning becoming transformative. He described the process of transformative learning as "transforming frames of reference through critical reflection of assumptions, validating contested beliefs through discourse, taking action on one's reflective insight, and critically assessing it (p. 11). Mezirow (1997) asserted that the "essence of adult education" is critically reflecting on the assumptions of others and becoming critically reflective of one's own assumption. Mezirow viewed the purpose

of adult education as means of producing “autonomous thinking” by teaching the learner to “negotiate his or her own values, meanings, and purposes rather than to uncritically act on those of others” (p. 11).

Dirkx (1997) expanded Mezirow’s theory by emphasizing that learning for adults should be nurtured beyond “sociocultural structures” and approached as an all-encompassing life endeavor. Dirkx describes this as “learning through the soul” (p. 83). He pointed out that, although Mezirow’s theory laid the foundation for self-actualization, adults often experience a deeper and more spiritual learning transformation which should be nurtured and encouraged in the classroom. Merriam (2008) furthered the concept of transformative learning by recognizing that adult learning has more complexity than “cognitive processing.” She suggested that adult learning is a “multidimensional phenomenon” involving the mind, the body, and the spirit, so evolved learning theories are using “narrative learning” techniques that include more comprehensive dimensions. Merriam (2008) acknowledged that the narrative approach has been a part of traditions in many non-Western cultures and the inclusion of multiple epistemologies has expanded the scope of adult teaching and learning.

Knowles (1980), Brookfield (1986) and Mezirow (1997) defined effective adult learning as a self-directed and self-actualizing process that leads adults toward autonomous thinking. They suggested that when people engage in critical self-reflection and they release personal assumptions about what they already know deeper learning occurs. They also recommended that the teaching of adults should include participatory activities in which the students work in groups, act as the class facilitator as well as decide the learning and assessment goals for the class. Other scholars are advocates of teaching approaches that take into account more than the cognitive aspects of learning. A multidimensional approach to teaching and learning offers the

prospect of a truly transformative experience. If students are committed, receptive, and fully engaged in the learning experience, every aspect of their existence could be enlightened (Dirkx, 1997; Merriam, 2008).

Psychosocial Development

Psychosocial Transitions

Psychosocial transition theory posits that as people move through the cycles of life, they encounter major life events that trigger a set of emotions involving thoughts and feelings about a particular happening or situation. When an event requires immediate attention or action, there is a set of responses that occur. Parkes (1971) defined psychosocial transition as “those major changes in life space which are lasting in their effects, which take place over a relatively short period of time and which affect large areas of the assumptive world,” (p. 103). He described the effect of job loss as altering the way a person looks at the world and influencing his or her orientation to living in it, where “old patterns of thought and activity must be given up and fresh ones developed” (p. 102). Parkes identified unemployment as “a form of crippling” and equal in its devastating effects as imprisonment and loss of a loved one. He asserted “that society should become sensitive to the damage inflicted on others by psychological mutilation” (p. 111). This psychosocial state of mind accurately describes the life transitioning effects that many displaced workers students face when transitioning to college (Parkes, 1971; Schlossberg 1984).

A large body of literature focuses on the mental adjustments necessary for transitioning to college. For older students who decide to attend college in midlife because of a major life transition event, such as a job loss, the psychosocial ramifications resulting from the event can be overwhelming. Several personal barriers are rooted in psychological realms, such as low self-esteem and low self-efficacy toward education and are compounded by social challenges, such as

feeling out-of-place among considerable younger students, lack of computer literacy and academic underpreparedness (Brooks, 2011). A few of the compelling arguments on cognitive development are presented below.

Cognitive Development

Conley (2008) wrote about the need for students to be mentally prepared for college. He asserted that many students become lost and disengaged in the process because of a lack of information about what it requires to be “college ready” (p.4). Successful completion of a degree requires learning a new set of behaviors, such as cognitive strategies, content knowledge, academic preparation, and contextual skills. A student who is “college ready” is familiar with college culture and academic expectation which enables him or her to relate to professors, classmates and family members differently than he or she did in high school. For older students who chose not to pursue education beyond high school, the college-ready skills were never cultivated.

Hardin (2008) described adjusting to the challenges and rigors of going to college as “creating a new identity.” She said “there are many characteristics of nontraditional students that “put them at risk for being unsuccessful,” they include: part time enrollment, full time jobs, financially responsible for dependents and being academically unprepared (p. 50). Hardin (2008) classified these characteristics as stemming from “institutional barriers,” “situational barriers,” and “educational barriers” (pp. 51-54). The most challenging barriers to overcome are “psychological barriers,” which include “inadequate coping skills due to lack of confidence, peer-self image and school created anxieties based on negative prior experiences or expectations about outcomes” (p. 53).

Hardin (2008) further explained that it is sometimes difficult for older adult students to

start over in a new discipline, especially if they once had a successful career. Having to learn a new set of skills causes feelings of “vulnerability” as students adjust to the beginner role in an academic program. For some it causes a midlife identity crisis. Adequate psychological preparation reduces the stressors of multiple mental adjustments involved in developing a college disposition. Overcoming the transition barriers is challenging, but not impossible. As Conley and Hardin suggested, students become prepared for success and the transition to higher education is less difficult if readiness skills are included in college orientation programs.

Terenzini’s (1992) study exemplifies the effects of psychosocial factors as producing certain emotional states. His study included both traditional and non-traditional students, but it contributes much to the literature on nontraditional student transition because of the cross-sectional scope of the data. He was interested in the transition experiences in relation to the type of institution attended and the aspects of transitioning that occurred outside of the classroom. Terenzini concluded that several out-of-class experiences had a significant impact as nontraditional students transitioned to college. These experiences were described as “emotional states” resulting from “cultural disjunction- the painful break from cultural conventions and traditions- the agony of choice” (p. 29), which are: a) “the place of college in the life trajectory” (p. 44); b) high school friends as assets or liabilities; c) joining new social groups; d) the extent to which a student’s family is supportive; e) the importance of “validating” experiences; f) college as a “cooperative.” These emotional states stem from the psychosocial effects of adjusting to the college environment.

Terenzini (1992) outlined several policy implications that emphasized a need for more attention to be given to first-generation college students, developing programs that acknowledge the lives of students outside of the classroom, pedagogical elements that affirm students’ self-

esteem, improving their feeling of connectedness to the institution, and recognizing that the transition process differs from student to student depending on their background. Terenzini asserted that orientation programs should be responsive to these differences. He concluded that with the appropriate institutional supports, the emotional states could be effectively managed.

Self-Efficacy

Several scholars believe that the motivation to start or return to college is a function of a person's self-efficacy. Bandura (1993) asserted that "self-efficacy beliefs affect college outcomes by increasing student motivation" (as cited by Zajacova, Lynch and Espanshade, 2005, p. 679). Bandura et al. (1996) found that of the many "mechanisms of personal agency, the most pervasive are a person's beliefs in their ability to exercise control over their level of functioning and environment demands" (p. 1206). Efficacy beliefs have the power to "influence aspirations and strength of goal commitments, level of motivation and perseverance in the face of difficulties setbacks, resilience to adversity, quality of analytical thinking" (p. 1206). For adults who believe they "are capable of controlling the event of their lives," self-efficacy is a "protective factor against feelings of futility or despondency" (p. 1217). Bandura's work on self-efficacy provided insight into the psychology of motivation, especially for understanding why older students' return to school, particularly during periods of financial difficulty (Bandura et al., 1996).

Zajacova et al.'s (2005) study on self efficacy and stress supported the conclusions of Bandura et al. (1996) and Terenzini (1992). They focused on the effects of social cognitive factors within nontraditional, immigrant, and minority college-student populations. Zajacova et al. created a survey instrument to measure 27 stress-related tasks of college freshmen. The results revealed "a moderate to strong - but not perfect - negative correlation between each stress and

self-efficacy factors” (p. 690). However stress and self-efficacy “despite being measured similarly in the survey, [were] related but distinct constructs” (p. 691). Zajacova et al. (2005) found that self-efficacy was a strong factor for first-year students and had a positive effect on grades. While stress was found to negatively impact grades, they also found that it positively (although only marginally) effected persistence. The researchers concluded that “self-efficacy [was] more important than perceived stress in predicting the accumulation of college credits and a higher GPA, while perceived stress [was] marginally more important in accounting for subsequent enrollment” (p. 698). The affects of stress on self-efficacy for college-going was considered for the study’s students participants who experienced stress from job loss and developed self-efficacy for learning new information.

Gecas (1989) offers a view of older students in his assessment of self-efficacy “over the life course” (p. 306). From his perspective, self-efficacy in later years is more related to consequences of life rather than a specific age. If events occur more “untypically” than one would expect in comparison to the experiences of peers (i.e., returning to school), there are possible negative associations with “off-time” events. Events that increase “role strain, economic or social disruption” (such as losing a job) can have a negative impact on self-efficacy (p. 307). The resulting effects are the “psychological barriers,” as Hardin (2008) described, which cause challenges for older students attempting to adapt to the college environment. Conversely, Gecas believes this type of adversity is less likely to affect the self-efficacy of older students because they have developed the adaptive capacity to deal with crises over the course of their lives. This idea supports a more positive view of the capacity of older students to adapt to the rigors of going to college. Perhaps for some students, the transition to college is less about creating of a “new” identity, as Hardin suggested, and more about extending their identity to include a new

level of academic efficacy.

Hagedorn (2005) noted that nontraditional students often find challenges within the typical college environment. She found that:

Despite this growth in nontraditional life paths, many researchers find that colleges have not redefined themselves to serve adult students more effectively... Web pages, admissions information, campus newspapers, and administrative office hours all remain geared toward younger, more traditional students. (p. 24)

Hagedorn further asserted that community colleges must recognize that their student populations are aging. She created an “age-step” measure for comparing the performance of first-time community college students using TRUCCS data (the Transfer and Retention of Urban Community College Students Project is a five-year longitudinal study of 5,000 students drawn from the Los Angeles Community College District). Hagedorn concluded that institutions should accommodate nontraditional students by creating classes designed explicitly around what they need. She stated “these courses may help alleviate typical adult student anxiety about being conspicuously older than their peers [and] fostering staff, faculty, and student interactions that support the confidence and self-efficacy of adult students may be equally important” (p. 28).

The findings of all of the aforementioned scholars reflect similar conclusions.

Nontraditional student who are older and often underprepared need institutional supports and services that address the psychosocial aspects of adjusting to the college environment. Services that are most helpful during transition are those that help older students build self-efficacy and self-confidence by alleviating the psychosocial effects of “emotional states,” as Terenzini (1992) described, and providing resources appropriate for their age.

Life Transition Theory

Coping with Life Events

Several authors emphasize how seeking additional education becomes important when life transition events occur that create “teachable moments” in a person’s life (Cross, 1981; Knowles, 1980). These teachable moments happen as a natural course of life or suddenly creating “a powerful motivating force for learning” (Cross, 1981, p.144). In counseling adults, a life transition event is a significant “trigger,” that prompts many adults to seek higher education in midlife (Cross, 1981; Schlossberg, 1984). Schlossberg (1984) described the reaction to life events as a life transition process. She frames it as involving three components: the transition itself in terms of “its type, context, and impact;” the transition process examined by how a person “appraises” their situation; and the “coping resources” available to them (p. 42). In the case of a job loss, the transition is “an event,” that impacts multiple areas in a person’s “life space,” which “includes everything we know or think we know” (p. 53). Schlossberg added to Parkes’ notion that those major life events, whether they are of crisis nature or less traumatic, prompts people to search for solutions. She further suggested that life transitions can also be nonevents, but just as affecting because the lack of an anticipated event can produce as much anxiety as one that comes as a surprise.

A Helping Model

Schlossberg (1984) expanded her ideas about transition with a helping model. She referred to Egan’s Helping Model (1982) for counseling adults in transition, which has three phases: “*explore* the client’s situation, *understand* it more fully, and then help the client *cope* more effectively by taking appropriate action” (p. 111). Schlossberg combined her knowledge of adult development with Egan’s model and produced a helping scheme for advising adults. Her

“model for helping adults in transition” (the 4 S System) is of particular relevance because it provides a useful tool for counselors to advise nontraditional adults in educational settings. Schlossberg further developed her work on transition with co-authors Goodman and Anderson (2006) and added more on the topic of work transitions. A new chapter on counseling strategies for the “worklife cycle” included stages of “moving out,” for a person who has been laid off or retired. For people who are unemployed, they were referred to as “trying to move in again.” The advice for handling work-related life events was useful in developing the guiding framework tool for this study.

The advice provided from the “trying to move in again” stage mentioned above was helpful for developing the Strategy category of the 4 S System. For the other categories: Situation was what “triggers” the decision to go to college and includes elements such as the timing, how much control the individual feels he or she has, any particular role change, and previous experiences that relate to the situation; Self refers to the individuals life stage, socioeconomic status, gender, health, culture, outlook or self-efficacy, and personal values; and Support is the “convoy” of supports a person has available, such as counselors, social workers, faculty, friends, and tutors (Goodman, Schlossberg, Anderson, 2006, pp.66-77).

As described in the example from Chapter 1, losing a job can trigger the desire to pursue education as way of enacting a solution to a crisis. As such, coping with the life transition event becomes integral to the decision to attend college. College programs and services that support students through the trauma of losing a job (a life event) coupled with strategies that ease the transition to college help displaced workers channel anxiety into productive activity.

Developmental Education

A commitment to developmental education is warranted for nontraditional students, who

are often underprepared (Purnell & Blank, 2004). Advancing the supports that go along with developmental learning, such as the cohort model and learning communities, financial assistance and financial aid counseling, flexible scheduling and flexible course deliver options, on campus childcare assistance and transportation to campus, has been found to help nontraditional students transition more successfully (Matus-Grossman & Gooden, 2002). Traditional developmental preparation can take up to two years of additional schooling before a student is academically ready for courses within a specific discipline, which results in a delay in obtaining a college credential and incurring additional costs (Bailey, 2008a). In addition, developmental courses generally do not count toward degree or certificate requirements (Bailey, 2008a).

In *Lives on the Boundaries*, Rose (1989) described in great detail the struggles of older students who chose furthering their education as a way to open new doors for a better life. Rose's observations were based on the experiences he encountered while teaching veterans. He found parallels between their troubles and his own challenges in higher education. From his teaching experience, he formed a strong affinity for older adults who were academically underprepared. Throughout the book he was critical of teachers, administrators, and policies that reflected an unsympathetic attitude towards nontraditional students. He commented on the effects of neglecting remediation for underprepared students:

Once you start to think about underprepared students in terms of these overlapping problem areas, all sorts of solutions present themselves... They need more opportunities to develop the writing strategies that are an intimate part of academic inquiry and what has come to be called "critical literacy" – comparing, synthesizing, analyzing... They need opportunities to talk about what they are learning, to test their ideas, reveal their assumptions, talk through the places where new knowledge clashes with ingrained belief,

talk through the ways they have felt excluded and may feel threatened by it in present...If students did not get the type of learning before coming to college-and most have not-then what are we willing to do to give it to them now? (pp. 193-194)

The Developmental Debate

The debate among scholars about the utility and functioning of remedial (developmental) education continues. On one side of the argument, scholars believe that reducing remediation at the college level would enable students to engage in their discipline content a lot sooner, which could positively affect persistence and retention as well as reduce institutional and personal costs (Bailey, 2008b). However, the other side of the argument is the concern about access to college for underprepared nontraditional students who have been away from formal education for five to ten or more years. Since the average age of the typical community college student is 29, even if the secondary schooling problems were fixed soon, most students arriving at community college would still be in need of developmental coursework (Boswell & Wilson, 2004; Levin & Montero-Hernandez, 2009). From a report prepared by the Education Commission of the States (2004) on the future of community colleges, the authors proclaimed there is a “crucial need is for community colleges to do remedial education *both unapologetically and exceedingly well*” (Boswell & Wilson, 2004, p. 15).

Contextualized Instruction

Recent developmental courses, such as *On Course* authored by Skip Downing, were developed to facilitate the transition of underprepared students. Among the most recent innovations are programs designed to accommodate those are academically underprepared by combining personal development with academic development. The concept of “contextualized learning strategies” bridges personal development gaps between academic and social aspects of

college-going by simultaneously incorporating self-actualization techniques with basic coursework (Downing, 2008). The contextualized approach is used in developmental courses as a way of orienting students to college level thinking and learning.

As mentioned earlier, developmental preparation can take up to two years of additional schooling before a student is academically ready for courses within a specific discipline (Bailey, 2008a). The extended time and additional costs that delay obtaining a college credential are a big disappointment for many nontraditional students and negatively affects their persistence (Bailey, 2008a, 2008b). One of Bailey's more recent studies involved an assessment of developmental education. He found that 58% of those students attending community college and 59% of the students matriculating through Achieving the Dream take at least one remedial course. He contended that most institutions' remediation policies are voluntary, so the students who most likely need them may be opting out, which contributes to the higher drop-out rate in community colleges (Bailey, 2008b).

Community College Transition Strategies

Institutional Characteristics

As mentioned previously, Terenzini (1992) outlined several policy implications that emphasized more attention to be given to nontraditional students as they transition to community college. Similarly, Vorhees's (1987) research on students' background characteristics and community college persistence shows that "frequent contact with faculty outside the classroom seems to be the most important from of academic integration that influences persistence" (p. 118). These scholars provided insight into the institutional characteristics that affect nontraditional students' transition to college. Bailey's body of work adds to this insight.

Bailey's work includes studies on traditional and nontraditional aged students, a review

of credit-based transition programs, and a study of institutional characteristics that impact student transition. Bailey (2008a) acknowledged that most of the transition research is focused on remediation (developmental education) initiatives and the cause of remediation as a failure of the public K-12 to adequately prepare high school students for college entry. He also pointed to the misalignment of high school graduation and college entrance requirements. While researchers have attempted to show causation between remediation and successful college-going, Bailey (2008a) found that there has not been any concrete evidence that there is a positive relationship.

Bailey, Calcagno, Jenkins, Kienzl and Leinbach (2005) created an empirical model for measuring institutional effects on community college graduation rates. Using data from NELS and IPEDS, they constructed three models. The models included unobserved factors such as leadership, faculty relations, the local political environment, and the number of institutions a student attended in the production function to test whether they had any bearing on student outcomes. Bailey et al. (2005) found that graduation rates go down as school size increases, institutions with higher part-time faculty have lower graduation rates, where there are high concentrations of minority students there are lower graduation rates, and financial factors did not have strong effects for community college students. The results of the study showed implications for greater student services because students who face multiple barriers need more counseling and guidance. Other variables related to “pedagogical, faculty culture, and organizational structure” were not analyzed and could be more influential than the NELS and IPED data measured by this study. Bailey et al. (2005) referred to these variables as “unobservable characteristics” and stated they are missing from a number of studies on remediation and dual enrollment and suggest they be included in further research.

An interesting outcome of Bailey et al.'s study worth noting was the effect of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), which showed statistically significant positive effects on graduation rates (Bailey et al., 2005). Other studies of student outcomes at HBCUs show that when student services are specifically designed to help African Americans with transition and persistence issues, the students are more successful. By providing culturally relevant support services, the students' specific needs are addressed more effectively (Hedgspeth, 2007). This outcome suggested a need for more targeted support services for minorities at other institutions.

Kilgore and Rice (2003) advocated for a special approach to program planning for adult education, whereby, the organization of academic, social and administrative functions take place in "a web of interrelated people." Rice (2003) identified specific areas in institutions where changes are needed to accommodate nontraditional students. For example, she stated that "many student services offices meet the needs of older students by offering alternative office hours" (p. 54). She also mentioned that offering a "unique orientation program" provides a forum for nontraditional students to get information tailored to their needs and situations. Kilgore (2003) discussed a "holistic approach" to the higher education planning process which is flexible enough "to meet the diverse motivations and needs of adult students" (p. 87). Kilgore and Rice offered valuable information for understanding the transition factors in the context of curriculum and program planning for adult students.

Student Services

Purnell and Blank (2004) outlined the *Core Elements of Student Services* in a report prepared as part of an Opening Doors project. According to them, student services consist of: academic guidance and counseling, academic supports (tutoring, remedial assistance, time-management and study skills training); personal guidance and counseling (crisis intervention,

mental health counseling, life-skills coaching and peer support); career counseling (aptitude tests, career plans, skill assessment); and supplemental services (child care subsidies, transportation vouchers, and book and supply vouchers) (p. 7). Their report asserted that these types of supportive services are producing the most promising outcomes for low-income students, which includes displaced workers who are often academically underprepared. These service elements have all been found to be barriers to transition when lacking at colleges (National College Transition Network, 2011; Purnell & Blank, 2004).

Another Opening Doors project gathered opinions from older, former, and new students to discuss their college-going needs. Several students suggested that they could have benefitted from a review of basic skills and taking a refresher course (Matus-Grossman & Gooden, 2002). Participants highlighted financial aid counseling, personal counseling, academic advising, and packages of services as being critical in making it possible for them to enter and complete a college program. A barrier to using the college's services and supports was that participants did not know that the services existed. Another common problem was the student service office hours did not accommodate students who attended on weekends or evenings, a factor that Rice (2003) also noted. Students who attended evening classes were disgruntled they could not go to the cafeteria or the book store because these places were closed during the evening.

Financial aid issues were brought up as a "source of concern" (Matus-Grossman & Gooden, 2002). Because of the way the financial-aid system is structured:

Part-time students in general face a financial aid trade-off. If they attend college less than full time, they may not receive sufficient aid; but if they attend full time, they may be taking on more coursework than they can handle, given family and work responsibilities. (p. 42).

The results of the Opening Doors qualitative research project revealed very detailed suggestions about what the students wanted or needed. By giving the students an opportunity to voice their specific challenges, institutions are able to use the information to enact productive ways to accommodate older students' needs.

According to the National College Transition Network (2011b), the most promising practices use very intrusive techniques to keep students engaged and motivated. Wrap-around services are comprehensive and include academic, nonacademic, personal, and financial, support services that are coordinated across college departments in order to support “every student enrolled in the program until they graduate from college or enter employment” (NCTN, 2011b, Promising Practices 9 section, para. 4). An example from Chapter 1, the Capital IDEA project in Austin, Texas, adapted the wrap-around services model from the Core Elements of Student Services (Purnell & Blank, 2004). Wrap-around services have also been recognized by the Workforce Strategy Group as a comprehensive range of services that effectively facilitate college-going for underprepared and dislocated workers (Alssid et al., 2010).

Institutional Culture

Many community colleges have initiated transition interventions that show promise of improving nontraditional student persistence and retention, but why are they difficult to sustain? Levin (2007) examined the relationship between community colleges and nontraditional students. In *Nontraditional Students and Community Colleges: The Conflict of Justice and Neoliberalism*, Levin discussed the distinct needs of nontraditional students. He reiterated much of what has been written about what nontraditional students need in order to transition to and persist in college, but he took it a step further by declaring it a social injustice if the needs of the nontraditional student population are not addressed adequately and immediately. He stated “the

community college bears a particular responsibility for remedying unjust conditions for disadvantage populations” (p. 185). Levin believes that “institutional effects are far outweighed by student effects” for nontraditional students who are severely underprepared for college (p. 158) , thus, the community college’s “first imperative” is to change its policies and practices in a fundamental way to alleviate the inequities in education attainment that these students face. In Levin’s next book, he discussed the evolution of the community college culture as the path to sustainable change. Levin and Montero-Hernandez’s (2009) research included multiple examples of case studies from around the US where colleges that have implemented cultural changes that resulted not only in the desired results for students’ outcomes, but also have resulted in significant changes that have improved the overall functioning of the college. Their study provided examples of external demands, such as accountability measures imposed by state policy and the commitment to the local community’s workforce development. It also outlined internal demands, such as finding cuts that affect program sustainability, technological advancement needs, additional student services, and how faculty reduction could be turned into opportunities to advance the college’s performance and improve student outcomes.

Institutions that are more adaptive and responsive to change have enacted policies and processes that reflect Senge’s (1990) model of “a learning organization.” The strategy of a learning organization includes five disciplines that create “a strategic management approach capable of evolving with a dynamic culture and able to position the college to deal adeptly with rapid external change” (Thor, Scarafiotti and Helminski, 1998, p. 61). More recent research indicates that in order for an intervention or innovation to become permanent, a reconstruction of the institutions’ cultural orientation toward change is essential. McGrath and Tobia (2008) described this as “developing a culturally effective institution” that requires a “reorientation of

research, policies and practices” (p. 48).

National Transition Projects

Listed below are examples of nationally recognized transition projects that focus on alleviating barriers for nontraditional and underprepared students at community colleges.

BridgeConnect Project: Commissioned by the Joyce Foundation and compiled by the Workforce Strategy Center, a national survey was conducted to determine the depth and breadth of bridge programs. The Workforce Strategy Center reported there is a “critical mass” of bridge programs across the US and “no community of practice exists to advance the field (Alssid et al., 2010, p. 13). The results from the BridgeConnect survey indicated that “new research will be needed” that outlines “what strategies work best with which populations” and “which are truly innovations” (Alssid et al., 2010, p. 13).

National College Transition Network: The National College Transition Network (NCTN) at World Education, Inc. “supports adult education staff, programs, states, regional, and municipal agencies in establishing and strengthening college transition services” (NCTN, 2011a, About Us section, para.1). NCTN offers an Internet resource for community college practitioners and provides technical assistance, professional development, collegial sharing, and advocacy. It also publishes policy papers and research reports on the most recent developments from the field.

Breaking Through: A collaboration of Jobs for the Future and the National Council for Workforce Education, the goal of Breaking Through is to “promote and strengthen the efforts of community colleges to help low-skilled adults prepare for and succeed in occupational and technical degree programs” (Breaking Through, 2012, Overview section, para.1). A notable achievement of Breaking Through colleges is the creation of effective pathways for low-skilled adults to advance through remediation and earn credentials while saving time and money

(Breaking Through, 2011).

Achieving the Dream: A national nonprofit organization created to address the institutional processes that impede the success of students who are most at-risk and “have faced the most significant barriers to success” (Achieving the Dream, 2005, Logic Model). Its mission is to help more community college students, particularly low-income students and students of color, stay in school and earn a college certificate or degree (Achieving the Dream, 2012). There is positive evidence that schools that have implemented the ATD strategies since 2004 are showing better retention rates (Jaschik, 2010).

Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation (MDRC): Created in 1974 by the Ford Foundation and a group of federal agencies. Its primary purpose was the launching of “large-scale evaluations of real-world policies and programs targeted to low-income people” (MDRC, 2012, Overview section, para. 2). Their work “has helped to shape legislation, program design, and operational practices across the country,” including policy at the US Department of Education (MDRC, 2012, Overview section, para. 2).

Opening Doors: The Opening Doors project is a MDRC initiative. Between 2003 and 2009 various intervention programs were tested at community colleges in several states. The Opening Doors demonstration was based on research that identified mitigating factors affecting low-income students’ enrollment and completion of college.

Summary

Nontraditional students’ transition experiences can be studied through multiple disciplines. The literature spans sociological, psychological, and educational realms. Studies on working adults have shown that students in midlife are still “in the early stages of their working lives” (Pusser et al., p. 9). Although several age phases seem to be out sync with the traditional

order of life events, the “psychic tasks” associated with them, such as the continued search for stability, reexamining one’s life structures, confronting mortality, and reassessing personal priorities, remain relevant for person in midlife (ages 35-60).

Studies that have measured the success of nontraditional students in college show that socioeconomic factors are the most significant and are consistently related to student’s outcomes, especially for those of lower-economic means. The CCT offered a new perspective where *age* was found to be a statistically significant factor in college outcomes. My concern about statistical data on older students is that many of the “unobservable” or “immeasurable” factors that these studies do not measure could indicate institutional barriers that raw numbers cannot explain. Scholars suggest a need for further qualitative research on transition factors that are not covered in statistical reports (Louie, 2007).

Adult learning theories underpin the efforts at community colleges to create interventions for underprepared students by capitalizing on how adult students respond to teaching and how they prefer to learn. Adult learning is characterized by self-directed, self-reflective, collaborative and, problem-solving learning activities (Brookfield, 1986; Cross, 1981; Knowles, 1980). The role of the educator is to facilitate learning through participatory and collaborative techniques rather than to transmit knowledge from a position of authority. More recently, the implementation of “contextualized learning strategies” aim to bridge person’s personal development gaps and social aspects of college-going by simultaneously incorporating self-actualization techniques with basic coursework. Using the contextualized approach in developmental courses is an effective way of orienting students to college level thinking and learning (Brooks, 2011; Downing, 2008).

For older students who decide to attend college in midlife because of a major life

transition event, such as a job loss, psychosocial adjustments can be overwhelming. Motivation spurred by self-efficacy is the key for older adults to successfully transition to community college (Bandura et al., 1996; Gecas, 1989; Zajacova et al., 2005). However, if the desire for college was never truly born from within the person, there may not be enough personal motivation to do the work that is required (Courtney, 1992). Hagedorn (2005) concluded that institutions should accommodate nontraditional students by creating classes designed explicitly around what they need and foster staff, faculty, and student interactions because it improves students' self-efficacy, confidence and motivation.

Several authors emphasize how seeking additional education becomes important when life transition events occur that create “teachable moments” in a person’s life (Cross, 1981; Knowles, 1980). Schlossberg’s (1984) “model for helping adults in transition” and the 4 S System was of particular relevance for the current study because it offered a guide for counselors. Schlossberg further developed her work on transition with co-authors Goodman and Anderson (2006) by adding more on the topic of work transitions. The advice provided by Schlossberg’s work transition model was useful because it characterized people who were unemployed and it offered a perspective that was instrumental in the creation of the guiding framework tool that was developed for this study. The most promising practices are very intrusive techniques designed to keep students engaged in learning. The term “wrap-around” refers to the all encompassing nature of the services because they cover a wide range of supports and are continuous for every student until they graduate or are fully reemployed (National College Transition Network, 2011b).

There is a national concern about the transition of nontraditional students to college, as evidenced by the BridgeConnect project (2010) and the Opening Doors (2002) study. The results

from the BridgeConnect survey indicated that several initiatives from across the country are being tested yet, “no community of practice exists to advance the field (Alssid et al., 2010, p. 13). An Opening Doors study gathered opinions from older, former, and new students to discuss their college-going needs. Students would have benefitted from a review basic skills (refresher courses), additional counseling, more supplemental services, and greater awareness of services (Matus-Grossman & Gooden, 2002). While many of these programs target students who have faced significant barriers transitioning to college, the specific needs of older students were often addressed cursory to traditional-aged underprepared students. The next chapter describes the research methodology of the study which includes information about the choice of case sites and short biographies of the student participants.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Restatement the Problem

Despite recent efforts to create strategies for improving completion rates, many institutions' programs are structured to accommodate traditional-aged students (Hagedorn, 2005; Schaefer, 2009). There is little research on how community colleges address the transition of older students who have lost a job, which can cause much trepidation about college-going. The transition period is a critical time when a student's motivation can be nurtured and directed toward learning college-ready behaviors, such as self-reflectivity, formal discourse, time management, homework and critical thinking and writing (Conley, 2008; Cross, 1981; Knowles, 1980; Boswell & Wilson, 2004).

Older students who decide to attend college in midlife because of a major life transition event, such as a job loss, will likely experience psychosocial adjustments (Hardin, 2008). College transition programs that address psychosocial factors recognize that older students have considerably different educational needs from traditional-age students (Hagedorn, 2005). Schlossberg (1984) suggested a learning strategy that helps students understand the life transition process and reduce the trauma of a life transition event. At present, there is little empirical data that shows which support services accommodate the older student segment and whether community colleges are adequately accommodating older students with programs and services that facilitate a successful transition.

Research Questions

There are many studies on academic interventions for underprepared students, but few focus specifically on displaced workers who are older and experienced the psychosocial effects of job loss. To further understand how these students transition to college, I posed the following

research questions:

1. How do displaced workers who are older students (ages 35-60) and academically underprepared transition to community college?

a) What types of programs and services do community colleges provide during transition?

b) How responsive or accommodating are these programs and services for older students?

2. What are older students' perspectives on transitioning to community college?

3. How do older students' perspectives of programs and services utilized during transition compare to the perspectives of administrators, faculty, counselors, and staff who administer them?

Qualitative Rationale

Several authors have stated that more research is needed to explore the underlying factors related to nontraditional student retention and persistence (Bailey, et al., 2005; Hagedorn, 2005; Horn & Weko, 2006). Some scholars have suggested that qualitative studies on nontraditional students are also warranted because it is likely that such inquiry will reveal the “underlying factors” missing from quantitative studies involving student enrollment patterns and attrition (Bailey, et al., 2005; Horn & Weko, 2006; Louie, 2007). Louie (2007) observed that quantitative methods that report statistics on test scores and completion rates do not adequately tell the whole story. She stated that “in the absence of qualitative methods like interviews and participant observations, we do not have the tools to understand the meanings individuals attach to events and situations” (p. 2243). Louie went on to note that there are tensions between how scholars approach their research and how policy is determined. She asserted that “the inclusion of student

voices would strengthen our understanding of topics that remain under-examined in history” (p. 2243), vis-à-vis qualitative inquiry. The current study adds to the qualitative body of literature on older nontraditional students by focusing on their transition to community college and the programs and services provided for them. Where community colleges services are not adequately addressing the effects of life transition events, this “underlying factor” may be a barrier to the successful transition to college. For the current study, the opinions of faculty, counselors and administrators will be juxtaposed with the students’ perceptions about the colleges’ intervention efforts using qualitative multi-case study methodology.

Philosophical Orientation

Inductive Process

This study was an *inductive* inquiry because there is little existing theory that adequately explains how older adult students transition to college, particularly through the lens of life transition events. As Merriam (2009) pointed out “because there is a lack of theory or an existing theory fails to adequately explain a phenomenon...the process is *inductive*, that is, researchers gather data to build concepts, hypotheses or theories rather than deductively testing hypotheses” (p. 15). The inductive process is appropriate for the purpose of this study because a goal is to build upon what is known about the transition to community college for older students by adding the lens of life transition events. Merriam (2009) described the inductive process as “bits and pieces of information from interviews, observations or documents combined and ordered into larger themes as the researcher works from the particular to the general” (p. 15-16). In this case, the larger context was to compare the data with a benchmark level of student service, such as places where the wrap-around services model is fully employed and to distinguish services that set a college close to or far from this benchmark. For the current study an inductive process will

be applied along with a constructivist research orientation.

Constructivist Approach

Merriam (2009) defined *constructivism* as a term “often used interchangeably with interpretivism” (p. 9). She explained that interpretive research assumes that the reality of a phenomenon is “socially constructed” and meaning is derived from multiple interpretations based on the researcher’s understanding of the context of a situation (Merriam, 2009). In the current study, I followed this tradition. I brought forth a fuller understanding of the transition process through the lens of life transition events. Personal experience teaching older nontraditional students, who were often underprepared and displaced from employment, underlies the interest in this topic and emphasizes my desire to better understand the phenomenon of transition.

My interest piqued after conducting a pilot study in which the results suggested that supportive services provided by the college positively affected the outcomes of older students (Brooks, 2011). I related to the students who returned to formal education after a long period because I also switched careers in midlife and wondered about my own ability to return to college. The combination of personal, professional and scholarly experiences provided a wealth of understanding the context of older students’ apprehensions as well as insights into the perspectives of faculty and administrators. Several scholars view qualitative inquiry as the product of the constructivist approach, where by “the inquirer makes knowledge claims based primarily on constructivist perspectives” (Creswell, 2003). As such, the constructivist approach best described the philosophical orientation of this study.

Creswell (2003) asserted that “participatory knowledge “gained from the typical qualitative inquiry approaches, such as case study, are appropriate within the constructivist

domain. He recommended that using open-ended questions in an interview setting enables the researcher to capture the participants' meanings through the voices of experience. Creswell also said qualitative methodology is "exploratory" and useful when "the topic has never been addressed with a certain sample or group" (p.22). In light of the fact that there are few studies on older students' transition to college and even fewer that incorporate the theory of life transition, Creswell's criterion for qualitative constructivist inquiry applied to this study.

As the researcher, my role was to interpret the participants' responses in the context of job loss for older and underprepared students' as they transitioned to college. This interpretation also came from observations of the transition process. Charmaz's (2010) described the interpretive (or constructivist) approach as "emphasizing practices and actions" and "[relying] on the theorist's interpretation of the studied phenomenon" (p. 127). She asserted that the constructivist approach is dependent on the researcher's view and "the resulting theory is an interpretation" (p. 130), so the researcher should be conscious of his or her presuppositions.

Levin (2007) pointed out if nontraditional students with varying levels of prior academic experiences are truly being given equal access to college, there should be policies and practices in place that include services which accommodate a successful transition. The Lumina Foundation's (2009) reported that "with over 54 million adults without a college degree, the US' workforce is grossly underutilized" (Pusser et al., 2007, p.1). Levin and the Lumina Foundation's works influenced the development of my study. Because I favor developmental education for underprepared students, I was careful to listen to alternative perspectives that perhaps did not support the notion that community colleges should offer developmental education for displaced workers. I discovered a personal bias did emerge due to my belief in the democratizing purpose of community colleges, particularly when I encountered opinions that questioned the utility of

programs that targeted displaced workers.

Other life experiences, such as being an older student as well as having taught nontraditional students, were not anticipated to detract from the research. In fact, I believe that having some commonality with the participants (students and college personnel) reduced any perceived status difference (up or down the power hierarchy) and enabled me to develop a closer connection which encouraged their responses and enhanced my interpretations of the research data (Glesne, 2006).

Multi-Case Study Approach

Case Studies

The development of the theoretical framework led to the examination of transition programs at community colleges through the life transition lens. My task was to create “an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system” (the definition of a case study) for multiple community colleges (Merriam, 2009, p. 40) with the purpose of “illuminating” how older and academically underprepared students transitioned to college. Having a *heuristic* purpose, “case studies illuminate the readers’ understanding of the phenomenon under study” (Merriam, 2009, p. 44). Stake (1981) asserted that “previously unknown relationships and variables can be expected to emerge from case studies leading to a rethinking of the phenomenon being studied” (as cited by Merriam, 2009, p. 44). Merriam’s and Stake’s perspectives on the use of the case study described my intentions for developing the study’s theoretical perspective. Yin (2009) asserted that the development of the theoretical framework is an important part of the research design. He recommended “for case studies, theory development as part of the design phase is essential, whether the ensuing case study’s purpose is to develop or test theory” (p. 28).

Two Cases

Since the transition experience differs from institution to institution because of the unique missions within a particular community, the exploration of more than one community college was necessary. The goal was to capture the nuances of the students' transition experiences within the range of the colleges' programs and services. The case approach was useful for this study because of the "replication logic" of the research design applied across the cases (Yin, 2009). According to Yin (2009), each case is treated like a separate "experiment" for answering the study's proposed research questions. The data came from "the shared experiences and relationships with participants and other sources of data" (Charmaz, 2010, p. 130). I found that including more than one site provided a variety of participant responses within contrasting contexts as well as contributed to the overall robustness of the study (Yin, 2009).

The thrust of this study was not to survey the students' outcomes per se, but to discover what happened when students transitioned to college in the context of losing a job, a life transition event. Merriam (2009) stated that "qualitative case study is valued for its ability to capture complex action, perception and interpretation" (p. 44); and using the case study method also "underscores the value of unique or atypical cases" (Abramson, 1992, as cited by Merriam 2009, p. 46). The transition of *older* students is an "atypical" case (phenomenon), as evidenced by the suggestion of many scholars that this student segment is an understudied topic (Bailey et al., 2005; Hagedorn, 2005; Louie, 2007; Schaefer, 2009; US Department of Education, 2011b), and the transition process differs from institution to institution, so the multi-case study approach was the appropriate research method.

The Research Sites

I selected the case sites from community colleges in Michigan with a sizeable population

of nontraditional student population, a number of which were displaced workers (as described in Chapters 4 and 5). I chose colleges that offered extensive developmental education courses and provided a bridge program or transition services for underprepared students. Midstate Community College's involvement in the Breaking Through initiative indicated that it had a history of helping displaced workers' transition to college. Gateway Community College's satellite at a state employment agency indicated its history of working with displaced workers. Another consideration was where the community was economically distressed because of plant closings and where businesses relocated to other areas leaving behind a considerable number of displaced workers. I found this factor relevant for Gateway and Midstate. A further consideration was where there was economic restructuring and recovery and displaced workers are now finding new opportunities, which was the situation at Midstate. The economic conditions in the two communities provided context for the students' transition and the types of programs and services offered at the colleges. For each site, I observed the physical, academic and service environments through visits to the campus, using the services, attending program meetings, visiting classes and one-on-one interviews. I gathered historical and strategic information from the Internet.

In order to gather adequate data from each site within the research period, two cases were determined to be sufficient. The campus visits commenced in January 2012. I spent 4 hours per week from January to May and then 2-4 hours per week in July and August collecting field notes, collecting artifacts, and conducting interviews at Gateway. My time was split among the main campus and two satellite locations. As for the Midstate campus, I took four trips collecting field notes, collecting artifacts, and conducting interviews. During the first trip, I spent about 10 hours with faculty, administrators and staff. The second trip I stayed for a week and spent 8

hours/day between the main campus and a satellite campus and a half-day at the state employment office. On the third trip I went to a program meeting for the day (10 hours) and on the fourth trip I spent 10 hours conducting follow-up interviews with the student participants. I also toured the Women's Assistance House from which several student participants were referred to Midstate. In addition to physically being on the campuses, I spent about 20 hours on the Internet collecting background information about the two colleges, reviewing their websites, practicing with their class scheduling modules (as if I were a student), and reading the annual reports on their economic and strategic plans. I also perused local newspaper articles related to events associated with the colleges to become familiar with actions within in their communities. Midstate required a formal Internal Review Board (IRB) process for conducting research, so I obtained approval to conduct research on campus. For the other institution, I spoke directly to the General Counsel at Gateway and received verbal permission to conduct research on campus. The table below lists the names of programs and locations along with the acronyms used in the forthcoming chapters.

Table 2 Names of Locations or Programs

Name	Institution	Acronym
Career Forward Program	Midstate	CFP
Developmental Learning Center	Gateway	DLC
Family Resource Center	Gateway	FRC
Great Lakes Building	Midstate	GLB
Here to Assist Latinos Organization	Gateway	HALO
Job Training First Program	Midstate	JTF
Senior Service Center	Midstate	SSC
Technical Training Center	Midstate	TTC
Women's Assistance House	Midstate	WAH
Workforce Preparation Center	Gateway	WPC

Participant Selection

The participant sample is drawn from the students, faculty and administrators and the data covers three dimensions: 1) students' perspectives of support services that the college offers; 2) faculty opinions of specific transition interventions or program changes that were designed to improve the transition experience; and 3) the administrators' views of their colleges' policies related to transition and any organizational adjustments that have been implemented to accommodate nontraditional students. The figure below depicts the sampling framework. It shows a description of the type of data within each dimension for each sample group.

Figure 2 Case Site Sample Framework

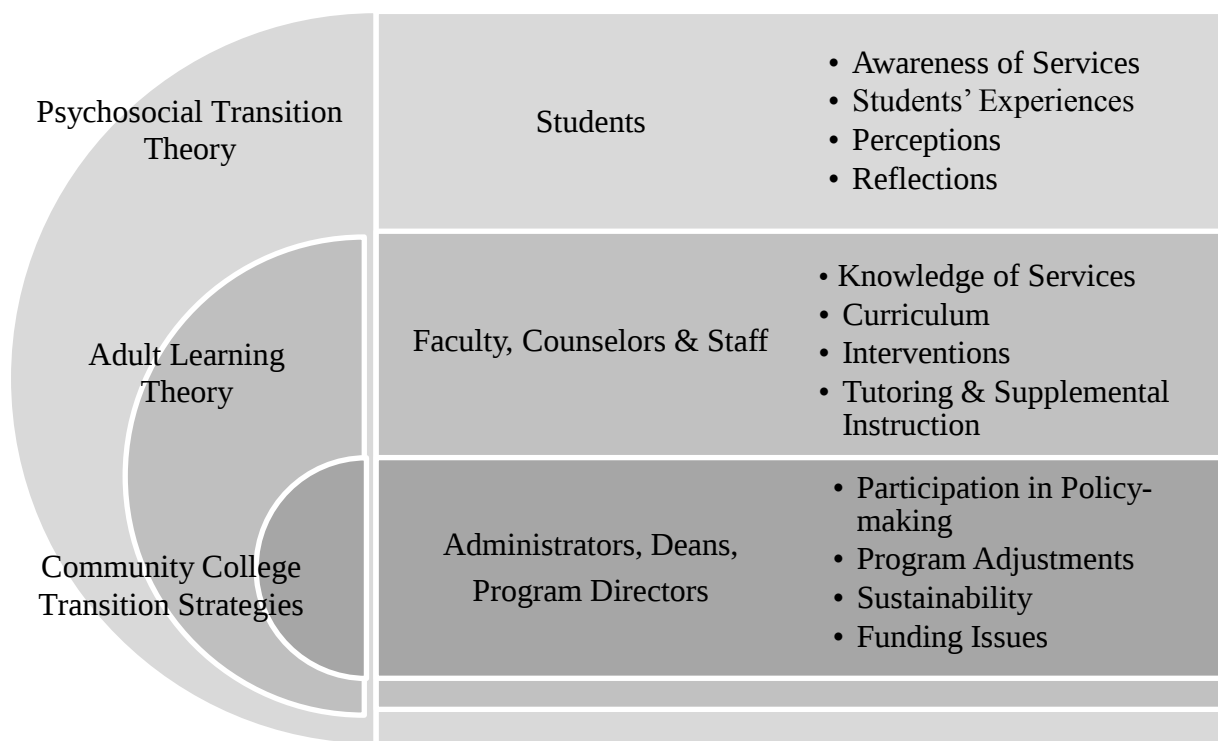


Figure 2 shows the sample groups and the dimensions of the theoretical framework.

I began collecting data by contacting the institutions through emails with a brief description of my study's purpose and to request a meeting with administrators. I targeted deans in workforce development and developmental education departments or directors who led

programs specifically for displaced workers. I utilized the administrators to purposefully identify counselors, faculty, and students who fit the interview criterion. The administrators recommended other administrators. I followed their leads and reached counselors and faculty who recommended students. I gave flyers to program managers, counselors, and faculty. I also distributed electronic versions that were sent via email to the students on their distribution lists. I interviewed a total of 6 administrators, 4 faculty, 3 counselors, and 3 staff members across sites. The students who were considered viable participants possessed the following criterion: displacement from previous employment; between the ages of 35 and 60; participated in workforce development bridge programs or developmental education courses; were enrolled as students when the research period commenced or intended to enroll in the immediate next semester (some students were recruited during the summer). I wanted students who were “older” or in midlife, which Erikson (1959) defined as ages 40 and 65 and Cross (1981) described as ages 37-42 (Cherry, 2011; Cross, 1981). Keeping Erikson and Cross’ theories in mind, I included participants between the ages of 35-60. I looked for students who were able to reflect on their transition experiences from utilizing the college’s academic and nonacademic programs and services. The students’ tenures at the colleges varied from having completed developmental courses to graduating with a certificate or an associate degree. The varying tenures of the students provided multiple dimensions of the transition experience which enhanced the data. I interviewed 11 students across the sites who represented a good sampling of age range, length of time at the college, educational outcomes and varied life experiences. In accordance with Merriam’s (2009) guide to qualitative research, when I noticed that several themes were repeating in the stories of new recruits, I stopped interviewing. Although the students were referred by counselors or faculty, their confidentiality was honored by having them contact me

directly via phone or email.

I interviewed participants using the same protocols across cases. Each initial student interview was 60 minutes and every participant signed a consent form that stipulated they would receive a \$10 gift card and they would agree to a follow-up interview. In most cases, I met the students on campus or at one of the satellite locations. In other cases, I met the students in class and then conducted the interviews over the phone when it would better accommodate them. I applied the same approach to the follow-up interviews, but they were limited to only 30 minutes. The total interview time allotted per participant for both interviews was 90 minutes. In several cases the students voluntarily talked beyond interview questions and the time allotment. The administrators, counselors, faculty and staff interviews were 60 minutes and no incentive was offered. To ensure the confidentiality of the interviews and maintain compliance with IRB requirements, pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of the participants, the names of the programs, campus buildings and satellite locations at the case sites.

Participants

The following tables list the interview participants from the case sites. Following the tables are short biographies of the student participants.

Table 3 Administrators, Faculty, Counselors, Advisors, and Staff

Name	Title	Institution
Alex	Adjunct Professor-Psychology	Gateway
Fran	Director, Developmental Learning Center	Gateway
Ilene	Director, Workforce Preparation Center	Gateway
Jenny	Adjunct Professor- College Math	Gateway
Juan	Manager, HALO Program, Academic Advisor	Gateway
Linda	Dean, Lifelong & Community Learning	Gateway
Lydia	Licensed Career Counselor	Gateway

Table 3 (cont'd)

Tanya	Academic Advisor	Gateway
Wayne	Academic Advisor	Gateway
Anna	Director, Technical Training Center	Midstate
Cynthia	Tenured Faculty-English	Midstate
Elaine	Dean, Workforce Training	Midstate
Jerry	Assistant Dean, Technical Training Center	Midstate
Peter	Manager, Career Forward Program	Midstate
Sarah	Adjunct Instructor, Career Forward Program	Midstate
Wanda	Career Coach, Career Forward Program	Midstate

Table 4 Student Participants

Name	Characteristics	Institution
Amy	Female, White, age 55	Gateway
Carrie	Female, White, age 40	Gateway
Gail	Female, White, age 57	Gateway
Marcos	Male, Latino, age 46	Gateway
Maria	Female, Latina, age 45	Gateway
Ellen	Female, White, age 49	Midstate
John	Male, Black, age 57	Midstate
Kathy	Female, White, age 49	Midstate
Keisha	Female, Black, age 38	Midstate
Rose	Female, White, age 52	Midstate
Victoria	Female, Black, age 49	Midstate

Student Biographies

Amy attended Gateway over 30 years ago, but never completed a degree. After six months, she was still heartbroken over being laid-off from her “dream job.” Amy wants to be a counselor who helps people with dementia. She had limited ability using computers so her first priority was to improve her computer skills. Amy reported having a difficult time in the computer class and problems keeping up in the other classes. She did not want to continue with

college because it was “too stressful” for her.

Carrie went to Gateway right out of high school, but she was not doing well so she dropped out. She attended a back-to-college workshop on the same day she lost her job. Carrie started at age 35 and has been taking classes at Gateway for five years. She is one class away from her associate degree, but math has been a struggle for her. She plans to continue on and earn a bachelor’s degree. She feels that, if it were not for the part-time job at Gateway and the network of colleagues who provided advice, her transition to college would have been much more difficult.

Ellen was looking for a career path. She was laid-off from two jobs since 2009 and instead of just getting another job she wanted to update her skills by pursuing a degree in a promising field. Ellen earned an associate degree 20 years ago, but she feels that “my skills are obsolete.” Persuaded by a career coach at the Women’s Assistance House, Ellen attended the Career Forward Program at Midstate to brush-up on basic skills, such math and writing, while exploring possible degree programs. She found the classes challenging, especially the math, but she gained confidence and self-esteem by participating.

Gail worked as a nurse’s aide until her hours were significantly reduced and then she was laid-off. She considered looking for the same type of job, but a friend encouraged her to look into information technology. Gail enrolled in an information technology certificate program at the Workforce Preparation Center (WPC). She said the online classes were challenging because her computer skills were not where they needed to be. She was able to attend computer classes through the WPC that helped her complete the program and earn a certificate. She is using her new skills in the current job but with additional duties that include data entry and patient record-keeping.

John worked at Chrysler Motors for 30 years until he was forced into retirement. When representatives from Midstate gave a presentation at the plant about going to college through the Job Training First program, he was convinced that was the path for him. John was not encouraged to pursue education while he was growing up. In fact, as a teenager he was told “you are a dummy.” John became determined to prove that he was not dumb and earned a GED as well as a high school diploma. With the help of Midstate’s Senior Service Center, he found out that he had a learning disability which had been an impediment for most of his life. He is now one class away from an associate degree and he is already earning credits toward a bachelor degree. He says he is determined to get a master’s degree by the time he is 65. John also has a part-time job where he has been given supervisory duties and learning about non-profit organization management.

Kathy was divorced and laid-off from her job. She desperately needed a way to support herself and her children. While working as an AmeriCorps volunteer, Kathy met a few faculty members from Midstate whom she credits with changing her life. She is the youngest of six siblings and the first in her family to go to college. Before going to college, she described herself as “I had a high school mindset,” but now she has become “much more independent” and she has “stretched herself socially.” She was hired to work at the Senior Service Center at Midstate where the career services helped her map out an educational path that would lead to a promising career. Kathy first earned a certificate which enabled her to secure an internship in her career field. A year later she earned an associate degree and secured a full-time position. She said it took her five years as a part-time student to finish, but now she can earn a sustainable wage and not have to rely on public assistance.

Keisha had previously attended online colleges, but she was never able to finish a

program. After being laid-off, she found herself depressed so she sought the help of a career counselor at the Women's Assistance House. The counselor suggested the Career Forward Program (CFP) at Midstate. Upon completion, Keisha had achieved a silver-plus rating on the Michigan National Career Readiness Certificate exam. She also finished a certificate program. Although she has not found employment, her outlook is much brighter. Keisha explained that before the CFP she really lacked self-confidence. With the help of her career coach, she now understands a lot more about how to use her skills and what is necessary to become "sustainable." Keisha plans to continue in college as soon as she is able to find full-time employment.

Marcos came to the USA eight years ago. He found work right away, but he was not making enough to provide for his wife and child. When the company reduced its workforce, he was one of the first laid-off. Marcos understood that he needed to further his education and learn to speak English better in order to secure employment. He started at the Workforce Preparation Center where he learned about career possibilities and they helped him enroll at Gateway to study business. He said "it was the best decision of my life." Marcos has been at Gateway for 4 years. Although he enjoys being in college, he feels there are not enough supports for older students. He thinks the instructors are insensitive toward older learners and non-native English speakers, especially in the math classes. Marcos hopes to earn an associate next year and transfer to a university to continue studying business.

Maria was a stay-at-home mom until her family's financial situation forced her to find a job. She is married to Marcos. She found work as a Spanish tutor, but she was laid-off. Maria could not speak English so her first priority was to learn. She enrolled in the ESL program at Gateway. While she was doing very well in her classes, she was terrified of being on campus.

Marie described how she could not understand the signs on the buildings or communicate with anyone to ask them for help. Even after learning to speak English, she felt very isolated in the classroom because the other students were not welcoming to her. Maria found part-time work at the college which helped her become more comfortable on the campus. After two years, Maria was accepted into the TRIO program which she declared “they helped me a lot!” She has two more semesters to finish her associate degree and then she is going straight to a university to pursue a bachelor’s degree in social work.

Rose worked as a receptionist until the company down-sized and eventually closed. She was always an avid fan of aerobics, so she found a part-time job at an aerobics studio. Rose really wanted to teach classes, but in order to teach full-time she needed to be a certified fitness trainer. Midstate offers a certificate for physical fitness, but Rose’s assessment tests indicated that she needed to brush-up on academic skills, particularly in math. She was referred to the CFP to help her map an academic plan. After six weeks, Rose dropped out of the program. She said it was too demanding on her plus she was having marital problems. She is still looking for full-time work.

Victoria attended Midstate when she graduated from high school but never finished. When she got laid-off from her job as a school bus driver, she decided it was time to go back to college. Victoria’s assessment scores were pretty good so she started with some college-level classes. However, she placed into developmental math and took a personal development class to help her acclimate to college-going. Victoria started in the TRIO program, but she explained that as she became more adjusted the program was not helping her. She found the support services through the Senior Service Center were better for her needs. She talked about how a few negative experiences with faculty prompted her to get involved with academic governance

through the student senate. After her first year, Victoria started a certificate program and stayed enrolled another year to complete an associate degree. Victoria plans to attend a university next year to work on a bachelor's degree in social work.

Data Collection

Interview Protocols

Creswell (2003) recommended that using “open-ended” questions in an interview setting enables the researcher to capture the participants’ “meanings” through the voices of experience. I created open-ended questions to allow the participants to speak freely about their experiences (see Appendices A-C). The organization of the interview questions follows Charmaz’s example of using three sections: the first section gathers background or introductory data; the second section poses “intermediate” questions; and the third section includes “ending questions” that bring a sense of closure to the interview (Charmaz, 2010, Box 2.1, p. 30). The 4 S System model has four elements so the student interview protocol has a section to cover each element and framed around the Charmaz’s recommended organization. I purposely created the interview questions to inquire about the students’ transition experience and perspectives of college services using the elements of the 4 S System model as outlined in Table 1. For the Situation section, the questions were related to the “trigger,” the event that “makes the learning necessary” (Goodman et al., 2006). The questions in the Self section were designed to probe the student’s thought related to identity, autonomy, past experience, and self-efficacy (Goodman et al., 2006). The Support section includes questions about a student’s “person-centered network of social support” by asking if the student received the appropriate aid (Goodman et al., 2006). The Strategies section’s questions related to the institutional characteristics that have been shown to improve adult student engagement (Merriam, 2008) and include the closing questions.

I designed the faculty, staff, counselors and administrators' interview questions to learn about their opinions of students' transitions, transition programs and developmental education using the same method described above. The questions for the administrators were more pragmatic and designed to evoke thoughts from their vantage point. From my pilot study, I found that the administrators spoke more from their role as a leader of a department or program and related to the larger mission and future vision of the college, so the questions were not as pointing (Brooks, 2011). The faculty, staff and counselor protocol was organized around the elements of the wrap-around services model as outlined in the Table 1. The sections were: Academic Guidance and Counseling; Educational Planning and Academic Supports; Personal Guidance and Counseling; and Supplemental Services (Purnell & Blank, 2004). I designed the questions in each section to probe their perspectives and opinions as well as solicit individual descriptions of the support services.

The interviews were tape-recorded in order to facilitate an interactive and "less obtrusive" atmosphere (Glesne, 2006), as opposed to using other technical equipment that could intimidate the participants, such as a computer device. Glesne (2006) recommended, "the tape recorder [because it] provides a nearly complete record of what has been said and permits easy attention to the course of the interview...most persons will agree to the use of a tape recorder" (p. 89). I designed the interview questions to probe the respondents' thoughts, feelings and actions related to the aforementioned categories. To assure participants of the confidentiality of the interviews and maintain compliance with Institutional Review Board standards, each participant signed a consent form. For the final report, pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of the participants and the colleges selected as research sites (see Tables 2, 3 and 4).

Field Observations

The responses from the three perspectives outlined above provide a triangular view of the transition process and programs at each case site. To supplement the participants' views, I made observations of the colleges' physical environment by visiting classes and common areas, such as the cafeteria, library, student centers, and computer labs. I also had the opportunity to attend a program meeting where administrators from both case sites as well as several other colleges were in attendance. Field observations were documented with voice recordings and hand-written notes. As a further supplement, I collected artifacts such as program brochures, informational flyers, campus maps, course catalogs, and registration materials. The physical information from each site was relevant because these artifacts substantiated the descriptions of the types of services offered as reported by the participants. The artifacts were also useful for determining how information is disseminated to students.

Case Site Narratives

I constructed in-depth portraits for each case site, which I present in Chapters 4 and 5. I included a brief report on the demographic make-up of the college and its surrounding community. Background information was gathered from Internet searches and artifacts collected from the campuses. A description of the campus' physical environment and the learning atmosphere helped describe the context of transition. Merriam (2009) recommended "detailed description of particulars is needed so that the reader can vicariously experience the setting of the study...to assess the evidence upon which the researcher's analysis is based" (p. 258). To support the findings, I used poignant quotes from the participants to illuminate specific topics. The resulting portraits tell the transition story for each case site through the lens of job loss for older underprepared students. Collectively these stories are anticipated to reveal, as Stake (1981)

said, “previously unknown relationships...leading to a rethinking of the phenomenon being studied” (as cited by Merriam, 2009, p. 44).

Data Analysis

In order to facilitate the transcription process, I initially used Merriam’s (1998) *interview log* technique. Although, the purpose of this technique was to record only “specific phrases or sentences that appear important” rather than a complete verbatim account (as cited by Glesne, 2006), it was difficult to stay with this method because the participants’ stories were too compelling and the full of account of their experiences contributed to the richness of the data. I also transcribed field observations and tape-recorded notes.

The Database

I uploaded the transcribed interviews along with field notes to QSR NVivo9 software (NVivo) and created a database that greatly facilitated the sorting, organizing, and storing of the research data. I identified a total of 18 codes. The parent codes were: programs, services, student interactions, teaching and learning, transition, and organizational issues. The child codes were: class experiences, college participation, family relations, feelings, learning experiences, and socialization; and to a lesser extent, ad-hoc services, negative experiences and gerontology. The coded interview responses were gathered under “nodes” for each of the research questions. Word frequency and text search queries were useful for identifying themes that were not considered initially. The results of these queries produced key words that indicated significant new themes, which were computers, math, and funding.

Answering the Research Questions

Using the NVivo queries, I used the participants’ responses to answer the research questions. For research question one, the subject was “types of programs and services provided

during a student's transition." I used a word frequency query for the interview responses coded at "RQ1" (research question one) paired with the nodes *programs*, *transition*, and *services*. The query yielded the top 50 words with 4 or more letters occurring most frequently. I filtered out common words, such as "have," "because," or "would" and found words that represented specific themes. The words were: math, career, credit, support, learning, and older. I also surveyed the source of the responses to determine whether they occurred within a specific sample group and found that they were distributed variably among the participant groups. Math stood out as most frequently used by students within *program* node, with 7 out of 11 student responses. Credit (and noncredit) stood out among administrators' responses within the *program* node, with 5 out of 6 administrators' responses. Learning stood out within the *transition* node with 5 administrators' responses and within the *services* node there were 2 students' responses. The words support and older were in the research questions, so they were not considered as separate themes. The responses associated with these words were used to answer research question one.

For research question two, the subject was "the perspectives of older students transitioning to community college." I used a word frequency query that paired the students' interview responses with the nodes *programs*, *transition*, and *services*. The query yielded the top 50 words with 4 or more letters occurring most frequently and filtered for common words. This query yielded words that were predominant among the students' responses, such as time, help, support, counseling, and older. Although I used these words in the interview questions, when I looked at the word trees generated around each word, I found phrases that indicated meaning beyond how it was mentioned in the research questions. For example, for "time," I found "out of time," "time in my life," "time management," and "having a hard time," phrases used by the students to describe aspects of their transition. In analyzing the frequency of specific words and

the associated phrases related to the students' responses, I determined the answer for research question two.

The subject of research question three was "how do the students' perceptions about transition programs and services compare to the perceptions of the administrators, faculty, counselors, and staff." I coded the administrators, faculty, counselors, and staff responses to the node "RQ3" (research question three) so the responses related to this topic were gathered together. I ran a word frequency query of the top 50 words with 4 or more letters and filtered out the common words to review the responses at the node RQ3 paired with the student responses. The query of the RQ3 node and the students' responses yielded words frequently used such as "classes, college, students, programs, feel, and work." The words "classes, students and programs" were in the research questions, so they were not considered separate themes. I used the responses gathered from this query to answer research question three.

Since there were a higher number of references in the last query, I did a word frequency query with the top 100 words with 4 letters or more to see what it would produce. I found additional words that were significant: math, support, older, career, working, skills, computer, and classroom. After accounting for words that were mentioned in the research questions, two key words emerged, *math* and *computer*. I ran a text search of the word "math" across all participant categories which yielded the results: 10 out of 11 students; 4 out of 4 staff; 2 out of 2 counselors; 4 out of 4 faculty; and 6 out of 6 administrators. I also ran a text search of the word "computer" which yielded the results: 8 out of 11 students; 3 out of 4 staff; and 3 of 6 administrators. Because of the frequency in the response, I concluded that these words represented themes for further analysis. Other nodes with a large number of responses among students and administrators, faculty, counselors, and staff responses were *feelings*, *learning*

experiences, organizational issues, and funding, which I will discuss in detail in Chapter 6.

The Guiding Framework Tool

With the data gathered from the interviews, I constructed the guiding framework tool (see Tables 5 and 6 in Chapter 6) to illustrate how each college simultaneously responded to the psychosocial and educational needs of its older student population. The elements of the tool include Goodman, Schlossberg and Anderson et al.'s (2006) 4 S System model coupled with the wrap-around services model adapted from the Core Elements of Student Services (Purnell & Blank, 2004). As explained previously, the term “wrap-around” refers to the all encompassing nature of the services because they cover a wide range of supports and involving multiple departments (Alssid, Goldberg & Klerk, 2010; National College Transition Network, 2011b). For dislocated workers, wrap-around level services include an intensely focused career development element that connects students until they graduate or are fully reemployed (National College Transition Network, 2011b). The guiding framework tool was useful for summarizing the types of support services offered at each site. It was also useful for identifying the areas which were missing in terms of the 4 S's (Situation, Self, Support, and Strategies) and the wrap-around level services.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness or research validity is important in “determining whether the findings are accurate from the standpoint of the researcher” (Creswell, 2003, p. 195). To achieve reasonable trustworthiness for each case, I employed several useful strategies for verifying whether the study's research design achieved its objectives. I collected data primarily from interviews with students, faculty, staff, counselors and administrators. The data also included observations across case sites and physical artifacts. By utilizing multiple sources for data collection, my findings

were “likely to be much more convincing and accurate if based on several sources of information” (Yin, 2009, p.116).

A second method for establishing trustworthiness was spending “extended time in the field” (Glesne, 2006). I spent more than 100 research hours for 8 months at each site gaining first-hand knowledge about the culture of the college (Glesne, 2006). While recruiting participants and recording observations, I looked for information that would contradict my theoretical stance, as Yin (2009) suggested “rival explanations” can strengthen the study’s overall argument. As Merriam (2009) further suggested, purposely including “discrepant data” and providing “alternate explanations,” adds to the credibility of the study, so I looked for any information that would fit this category. I was hard pressed to find anyone who did not express appreciation and enthusiasm for my research topic. Two of the administrators I interviewed did mention there were people who did not want to help nontraditional students as much, but they did not provide enough information to follow-up. However, I did encounter a faculty member in developmental education who posed an alternative argument about transition programs for displaced workers.

The third method was to solicit feedback during the data collection process with a peer and a few participants as a “member check” (Yin, 2009). I conducted follow-up interviews with the student participants and reconnected with a few of the administrators and staff to confirm and clarify some of the data. I also solicited a colleague who identified with the students’ experiences to review a draft of the study’s findings. While collecting the data, I was especially sympathetic to the difficulties that older students experienced, but I also kept in mind the broader context of the colleges’ environments.

Limitations

This study is limited by the number of case sites and participants under study. Although the sites have similar characteristics which are found across community colleges in general, the selected sites were not intended to represent community colleges at large. In Michigan, there were particular economic circumstances that provide a rich research environment for the current study (Adult Learning Group, 2008; Cherry Commission, 2004; National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2006). In other sectors of Michigan, the findings could be significantly different.

Overarching generalizations of transition programs cannot be inferred by the study results. It was not my intent to show causal relationships from the data. It was only within my ability to offer one perspective through my interpretation of the data. The participants' perspectives did not represent every possible context for transition or every program and service. I could only report what was mentioned to me or what I observed from the field. A study of a similar nature that includes all of Michigan's community colleges would provide a more comprehensive view of transition programs. However, a research endeavor of that magnitude is beyond my scope at this time. I do believe that the results of this study will provide a unique and informative perspective of the transition of displaced workers and older students as well as community college transition programs and services from the selected sites. The results will also contribute to the literature on older underprepared students as well as expand the knowledge of how life transition events affect the transition to college.

Summary

This study adds to the qualitative body of literature on displaced workers who older and academically underprepared. My goal was to build upon what is known about transition

programs at community college by adding the lens of the life transition event, job loss. The research involved an inductive process (Merriam, 2006). I followed in the constructivist tradition where I assumed that the reality of the phenomenon was “socially constructed” and meaning is derived from multiple interpretations based on the researcher’s understanding of the context of a situation (Merriam, 2009). Charmaz (2010) asserted that the constructivist approach is dependent on the researcher’s view and “the resulting theory is an interpretation,” so as the researcher I was conscious of my presuppositions (p. 130). As a constructivist exercise, I brought forth a fuller understanding of the transition process for older students, while remaining sensitive to how my personal experiences affected the research.

Since the transition process differs from institution to institution and because of the unique mission within a particular community, I explored two community colleges- Gateway and Midstate. The multi-case approach was useful because of the “replication logic” of the research design applied across the cases (Yin, 2009). In accordance with Yin’s (2009) approach, each case was treated like a separate “experiment” for answering the study’s proposed research questions. Also, as Yin recommended, a study that included several sites is expected to provide a variety of participant responses within multiple contexts as well as contribute to the overall robustness of the study. The case sites were selected from community colleges in Michigan with a significant displaced worker student population and were examined with the same protocols across cases.

The data and analysis came from “the shared experiences and relationships with participants and other sources of data” (Charmaz, 2010, p. 130). The use of “open-ended” questions in an interview setting enabled me to capture the participants’ “meanings through the voices of experience” (Creswell, 2003). The participant sample groups included: students who

participated in federally funded job training programs or any other workforce development bridge programs; deans of the workforce development departments or those who lead developmental education departments or outreach department directors; and those involved with programs specifically for nontraditional student, staff, and counselors. Analysis of the data using NVivo was helpful for indentifying key themes that emerged across the participants' responses, which led to the discovery of additional themes that were not initially considered. The guiding framework tool was constructed to highlight details of the colleges' programs and services in relation to the elements of the 4 S System (a transition model) and wrap-around level support services.

The next two chapters describe findings from the two case sites, Gateway Community College and Midstate Community College. The narratives are in-depth portraits of the colleges and include a brief description of the surrounding communities in which they serve. The program and services mentioned in these chapters reflect the places that student participants encountered during their transition and the perspectives of the administrators, faculty, counselors, and staff within their respective college environments.

An important aspect of the students' experiences was there were two contexts from which to understand the transition experience. The first context was of the students just starting out, either at the Workforce Preparation Center or in the Career Froward Program. Their stories provided information on the colleges' programs and services that were in place at the time of the interviews. The second context was of students who transitioned as developmental students and then experienced another transition when they began coursework in a formal program. At the time of the interviews, these students were still matriculating. Their perspectives added a reflective quality of the transition experience that contributed data about what students needed in

order to transition successfully and what caused them difficulties. Together, the two contexts provide a comprehensive understanding of how students transitioned at the case sites.

Chapter 4: Gateway Community College

Historical Information

Gateway is located in a small urban area with a population near 290,000. According to the Michigan census data, the ethnic make-up of the area is predominantly White, followed by proportions of other ethnic groups (in descending order), Black, Latino, Asian, and Native American (US Census Bureau, 2010). The education distribution includes: a quarter of the population achieved a high school diploma or GED certificate, another quarter achieved a bachelor's degree, a tenth earned associate's degree, and just over a tenth possessed graduate or professional degrees. In terms of relevant ages, young adults ages 15-24 are 23% of the population and older adults ages 34-55 make up 24% of the population (US Census Bureau, 2010). Established in the 1960s, Gateway's mission was to provide civil mechanical and electrical education, as well as nursing and apprenticeship programs in trade fields such as construction and automobile repair. In response to educational needs of the population over time, GCC also operates as a training resource for local police, fire, and healthcare personnel. The average age of students is 27 and attendance reaches approximately 22,000 enrollees per year. The student/teacher ratio averages 23:1. In 2011, Gateway graduated 4500 students with either an associate's degree or certificate. The college is accredited by the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools and the Higher Learning Commission and participated in the National Quality Improvement Project. Gateway was also a member of the National Association of Developmental Education from 2003-2010.

During the decades of 1960-1980, there were thriving automobile plants that provided sustainable wages for the citizens and attracted a diverse mix of ethnicities to the area. From 1980 to 2000, there was a steady decline in output at the automobile plants until one closed

permanently. Another was closed, sold, and eventually reopened employing only a fraction of its previous capacity. The plant closings affected all of the supporting businesses in the area. Many businesses closed or relocated to other areas of the state. As I drove through the city, there were empty lots, abandoned stores, and unfinished retail developments sprinkled amongst recent attempts to revitalize the city. In the last decade, there has been a real push for entrepreneurialism. There are several success stories- small business owners who have been able to survive in spite of the economic recession. The primary employers in the city are government offices, the hospital, and the college. The close proximity of a large research university contributes much to the local economy. Gateway serves the surrounding region, which is a mix of farmland, rural neighborhoods, and suburban communities.

Current Mission

At present, the leadership of the college strives to continue the original mission but with an expanded vision that includes educational advancement in subjects for 21st century knowledge, such as information technology. Gateway's goal is to equip students with a solid foundation for further studies at any of the 4-year colleges and universities throughout the state and supplying the surrounding communities with well-trained workers. Growth industries in the area include sales and administrative support services, healthcare, pharmacy and medical training, and alternative energy technology (Michigan Department of Technology, Management and Budget, 2012). Gateway achieves its mission with multiple locations throughout the community to better serve the diverse population. Linda, the Dean of Lifelong and Community Learning, described the college's role as:

We co-locate in certain areas where there is say a specific population that needs assistance. Now [Gateway] is already an urban campus but we have some locations and

some populations that need special assistance ... And one area that we felt there was a strong need for is in the area where people are unemployed and are already coming into the center there.

Linda went on to say that there is a definite need for a satellite location for displaced workers because the resources for job training programs are not readily understood at the main campus (downtown). The workforce development team at the Workforce Preparation Center helps students who seek job training and receives funding from specific state and federal programs. Linda commented on how older students have responded:

They'd be lost trying to find their way and they were trying to figure out and nobody really downtown could understand the grant and all these kinds of grants that people have that are paying for their education, so we just have that all taking place and taking part in one place and it's a delivery mode.

The transition process at Gateway varies from student to student depending on whom one encounters when he or she shows up on the campus or at one of the satellite facilities. The following stories reflect the college's programs and services and how the students navigated them without the benefit of a prescribed transition pathway. I present the perspectives of administrators, faculty, and staff in the locations where the students connected with GCC and describe a range of activities in which they participated, such as workshops, auxiliary services, and developmental courses. The following locations are not exhaustive of GCC's network of locations and services, but represent the places where the study participants' experiences occurred. For specific information on the students, refer to the Student Biographies in Chapter 3.

Workforce Preparation Center

In an effort to reach deeper into the greater community and provide greater access to

services, Gateway established a satellite office, the Workforce Preparation Center, within a state employment agency. This location has become a valuable resource for guiding the unemployed toward furthering their education as a means of re-entering the workforce. I spent a considerable amount of time at the Workforce Preparation Center (WPC) to get a sense of how students experienced transition through this location. I attended the employment service orientation, workshops, and networking sessions to observe the actions of the attendees who were all older (ages 35- 60) displaced workers. The WPC provides greater access for displaced workers because it is located closer to residential neighborhoods and connected to a major bus line. In addition, parking is free. Clients appreciate that environment feels more “intimate” and the services are housed in one building. Several of the staff commented on the convenience of this location for clients compared to the main campus. The WPC has become as close to a “one-stop-shop” for servicing displaced workers as GCC has been able to provide.

Gateway received a \$4 million grant from the US Department of Labor to partner with the state employment agency for job training. A portion of the grant funding supports GCC employees who work out of the WPC. The director, Ilene, splits her time between WPC and main campus. She has created special training for the student assistants and the support staff on how to interact with the public, namely older clients, as she described:

My student aids are trained to work with individuals in this population. Not only work with older adults, we work with ex-offenders, people with low skills and along those lines so I am very sensitive to that when we hire and train. I don’t think that same sensitivity is demonstrated on [main] campus.

Ilene pointed out how critical it is to engage older students as they transition to college because the first semester is the most difficult. She explained that students exhibit a “lack of

confidence” in their ability to be a student, so she and her staff do a lot of “hand-holding.”

Ilene also employs instructional staff to conduct assessment preparation classes. They provide individual advising and coordinate clients’ interests and academic needs with the agency’s case managers. Wayne explained his instructional role:

When we come with our underprepared students...they go through the registration and the assessment process and work with an [GCC] advisor. Then they get forwarded to me and I assist the students with math, reading and writing tutoring. I also help them with getting acclimated to the college life. So after they get enrolled and they start taking classes, if they need any assistance, they can come back and I’ll help them in whatever manner they need.

Ilene also provides workshops for older people who are looking for new careers. I attended the age 50+ Job Seekers workshop. At the beginning, we introduced ourselves and announced why we were there. I asked the group “has anyone considered furthering their education?” The prospect of going to college was frightening to many because they expressed concerns about their college-going ability at their age. Others expressed immediate financial needs, so they imagined going to college would take too long. Listening to their stories, I could hear stress in their voices and feel the angst among them. One woman held back tears as she related how she had recently been laid off from a job with the state.

I first met Amy in Ilene’s 50+ Job Seekers workshop. She explained she had been laid off from her “dream job” about six months ago. The experience was still very troubling to her. While explaining what happened, Amy held back tears forming in her eyes. Although she said there had been a decline in the business and everyone at her job had hours reduced, she believed that her age (55 years) and lack of computer skills contributed to losing her job. Amy described

herself as from the “Flintstones.” She went on to say “I do not know any computer skills. I’m not with it in today’s world. I need to be revamped.” Amy decided that going to college was her best chance for earning a sustainable wage so she took the assessment tests for placement in the appropriate classes. I asked Amy how she felt about going to college. She responded “very insecure, very lost, and confused.” I asked Amy what she thinks going to college will do for her. She explained:

I want to get something so I can get a certificate because I need to get back out there as soon as I can, making money ...I mean if there is something that I can zero-in on that I have a passion for I know it’s going to be a lot of work...I want to be somebody that can really help people.

Amy explained how she met with an advisor at WPC to discuss options for a career path. She was interested in human resources or becoming a counselor. The advisor told her about the classes she would need to pass before entering a formal program. She expressed anxiety about taking classes, but she felt assured there were ample resources available to help her, such as tutoring and math labs. At the time of the interview, Amy was attending the computer course at the WPC, which she hoped would prepare her for classes at main campus. I noticed when Amy talked about future prospects her mood improved. At the end of the interview, I noticed she was smiling. I asked, “Tell me how you feel about your outlook?” Amy responded:

I’m excited about it. I hope to be able to become someone worthy enough to help others and also be able to make a living out of it so I can have a roof over my head and food in my mouth so I can take care of my husband.

After the general orientation provided by the agency, people who want to attend college are referred to a GCC advisor who gives them an overview of how to apply. Instructional staff

members conduct the assessment preparation classes, which cover basic math, reading, and writing. One of their goals is to help clients pass the assessment tests with scores as high as possibly in order to minimize the number of developmental classes. Instructional faculty also assists with filling out the college application and registration forms that are only available online. The WPC offers workshops on how to use computer applications such as Microsoft Word, PowerPoint, LinkedIn, and Facebook. The staff mentioned that exposure to computer applications is extremely helpful while clients are preparing to take classes or retaking the assessment tests. There were several desktop computers available at the agency for practicing computer applications.

Gail arrived at the WPC right after being laid off, but she did not appear to be anxious about it. She went through the orientation and started attending the networking group meetings. Gail was recommended for a certificate program in information technology. She told me about her experience so far:

So far they realize that I'm not very computer savvy. I have to work a little extra harder. My computer skills are not what younger people's are and what I really need for this program, so I have to work harder at that point- getting back into studying a little more and being consistent with it. Reminding myself to stop doing the house work or whatever and get back to studying. Those are my goals now.

Overall, Gail reported that the certificate program met her expectations. Her transition went smoothly because she approached college-going with curiosity and excitement instead of with fears and anxieties about her skill deficits. She talked excitedly about the new information she was learning.

Another student who started at the WPC was Marcos, who immigrated to the US from

Mexico eight years ago. Marco was upset that he had quit one job for another only to be laid off after 3 months. He was told he needed some type of credential, so he headed to the state employment agency. At the WPC, Marcos was introduced to a GCC advisor who encouraged him to give college a try because there was some grant money available for English as Second Language (ESL) students. He took classes like writing and typing because he said, “I didn’t know how to type.” Marcos described his thoughts about going to college:

I didn’t really believe I was coming to college, but you know I was doing it and it was like a career at the beginning. But then when I moved from ESL to the regular classes I got more scared because I still had some issues with my English, but everybody told me I could do it, so I tried, but I was scared at the beginning.

He was in the ESL program for a year and then moved into developmental classes that would prepare him for classes in a formal program. Marcos talked about what he learned during his transition:

I can use more technology. I can read. I can write, maybe not 100%, but I can do things that I never did before. So what I learned here is a new kind of friends. Your social life is not the same as it was before. Now you are dealing with students; people who are thinking about starting a career. I think that’s important. When you have the acknowledgement of friends and you know another kind of people, especially like those who are teaching me at the same time. That really helps with a new kind of friendship, so that’s what I really learned.

Over the weeks that I visited the WPC, I noted the importance of providing continuous individual attention. There were days when the lobby was full of clients so appointments had time restrictions. When the traffic was lighter, the staff and student aids offered as much time as

necessary to review homework, resumes, and job applications in small conference rooms. They also circulated around the computer stations offering assistance rather than waiting to be asked. There was a true service-oriented atmosphere, which was markedly different from the environment I observed at the main campus. The next section describes the main campus and the places where other students experienced transition programs and services.

Main Campus

The main campus is the hub of the college's major activities, academic, administrative, and community-based social events. It is also within walking distance of the commercial and governmental sectors of the city. There are several large buildings anchored by a parking structure and a large park-type green space adjacent to the buildings. On the other end, across a major road, there is a residential area that has many homes designated as historical landmarks. The student services building houses the welcome center, counseling services, academic services, the registrar, the financial aid office, mini food court, and student account services. I spent several days here observing interactions among students, asking questions about the college, getting directions, collecting brochures, and eventually meeting with various participants. I observed a very diverse student body of multiple ethnicities, ages, and genders.

Surrounding the central hub of main campus are administrative offices, parking garages, the library, and a child day-care facility. Linda, Dean of Lifelong and Community Learning, recognized that Gateway's campus setting lacked some accommodations for older students. She also commented that since many functions are now done online many procedures inhibit older students from registering. She explained a recent adjustment to the registration process that offers an alternative registration process because for older students "it's difficult for them to simply go online and do the kinds of things they need to do in the normal application process."

Because the main campus is in the downtown area, parking is limited and expensive, which discourages displaced workers from spending time there.

Here to Assist Latinos Organization (HALO)

The student services building houses auxiliary service centers, such as the office of HALO (Here to Assist Latinos Organization). The purpose of HALO is to help students of Latino/Latina origin make positive connections with college personnel, faculty, and peers in a culturally supportive environment. The organization has grown into a vast network of comprehensive support services that includes individual guidance and counseling, supplemental instruction, financial aid assistance, leadership development, cultural and community events, and field trips. In addition, the HALO staff provides useful insiders' information that helps students avoid registration mishaps or unnecessary running around campus to get answers to questions regarding financial aid, student billing, grading policies, class sequencing, or program details. Juan, the manager of HALO, described the specific assistance offered:

We have a lot of tutoring... for science, math, and writing and a few other courses, like accounting and psychology. We also have SI, supplemental instruction. There is only a few of them and I am lucky to bring them to my program here at [HALO]. I have three of them come here to help our students with reading, writing, science and math. They help our students, but it is not offered campus-wide because in some locations it is not as busy as going to a tutoring center.

The supplemental instructors (SIs) are students who have received 3.0 – 4.0 in the class and are recommended by faculty to help other students. Juan believes that the SIs provide the best academic support because they are peers and they know how to relate the material more effectively. The students are less intimidated by SIs, especially when there is a language barrier,

and they learn course content at a slower pace than when they attend the larger class.

Juan believes it is important to cultivate trusting relationships with students. He has increased the number of Spanish-speaking supplemental instructors, who are indispensable for tutoring students in math, science, and English. He has leveraged relationships with community organizations to provide networking opportunities, speakers, recognition programs, and field trips. Another benefit is the involvement of several faculty members so students are able to interact with their teachers. Juan is a firm believer in the wrap-around services approach and he is willing to help anyone seeking assistance. He professed that some of his colleagues are not willing to dedicate the level of service that he extends to students. Juan said:

A lot of people are not willing to go outside of their job description and so that's a problem. My approach is not like that. Like I told you before, it's about leadership and my leadership helps the students and it requires you to be nonconventional and do things differently.

When I asked Marcos was there any particular program that helped him through his transition to GCC, he mentioned how the Here to Assist Latinos Organization (HALO) helped him:

Well you could say a program, if it is considered a program, [HALO], which encouraged the Latinos to go to school and keep going. They never did this before [Juan] moved in and he started helping the students by trying to get some tutors in writing and math and some other subjects. I do believe that he was the only one that helped with FAFSA that is helping us pay for college. But in my opinion there are not too many programs that encourage the students to do better.

Maria, who is Marcos' wife, had great difficulty transitioning to GCC until Juan took

over as the manager of HALO. She started at Gateway in the ESL program and performed so well that she was encouraged to continue taking college courses. Maria explained that she earned some income tutoring people learning Spanish until the job was discontinued due to budget cuts. She said there were few other employment options because she did not speak English very well. Maria described her initial experience in the classroom as, “I mean it’s been hard. At the beginning, it was really difficult in the classroom with hearing the instructor tell me a lot he didn’t understand me.” For Maria, the HALO organization became an indispensable resource because of the cultural and academic supports she received, especially from Juan. She talked admirably about how his advice helped her navigate the college’s services to her advantage and how participating in activities that the organization sponsored helped her feel less isolated as a Latina student.

As a conduit for student transition, HALO offers academic support through supplemental instruction in core subjects, such as English, science, and math. The cultural supports provide opportunities for personal connections and address many of the psychosocial aspects of transition. As Maria and Marcos’ stories indicated, their interactions with HALO were integral to their transition and persistence at GCC.

Family Resource Center

Juan explained how the Family Resource Center (FRC), another auxiliary service, helps students with child-care grants, transportation vouchers, and school supplies. He mentioned that the FRC also provides scholarships. At one time, the Family Resource Center focused primarily on helping women go to college with child-care grants and tuition assistance. Today, there is a concentrated effort to include men who may have dependents and need assistance in bridging any financial gaps between Pell grants and other scholarships for low-income students.

According to the FRC director, the number of women at the college has steadily risen as the number of men has declined, which currently “puts men in the minority.” In addition, a state law (Proposal 2) that restricted public funding for strictly gender-based and race-based organizations was enacted, so it became necessary to expand the Center’s mission. Although the constitutionality of Proposal 2 is still being debated (Yearout, 2012), the FRC director feels that the changes it prompted for the Center have helped men who are displaced workers.

Carrie’s transition started with a workshop presented by FRC. She shared how on the same day she was laid off from her job she attended a two-day workshop on going back to college. She explained:

I think the biggest thing was first seeing the flyer about the back-to-school workshop.

That really opened things up. It told us about the different support services on campus, the different steps we had to go through, and then talking to an advisor was helpful. I did the FAFSA for financial aid and started looking for employment on campus that would work around my school schedule.

Carrie mentioned that talking to an advisor helped her think through going college and meeting with representatives from financial aid helped her understand how she could afford to pay for classes. However, she experienced a challenge due to a lack of career advising. She explained that when she met with the advisor she was not given much direction for the program she chose. As a result, Carrie said:

[GCC] has sort of done away with that program, so I had to switch to a different major. It was frustrating when that happened because I had done so much on my core classes and, because I go part time, I didn’t have enough time to complete that degree. So that was kind of a wall I hit about a year ago.

Counseling Services

The student services building also houses the counseling department. Lydia, a licensed counselor, explained how the counseling services operate:

Well we have a director of support services and within the support services area we did opt for counseling services to be in collaboration with other types of support areas that weren't specifically counseling focused. We have counseling support services in here, we have [HALO] support services, we have TRIO support services, and we have [Family] Resource Center support services.

Lydia explained that she helps many potential students organize a career plan for achieving their personal goals. Sometimes it is a short conversation because the person knows what they want to do and then they are referred to an academic counselor to create an educational plan. Referrals to WPC or the Family Resource Center or HALO are often next steps depending on the outcome out of their sessions. She pointed out that, "there are support services but we don't have them in place for older learners, so there is no central place that an older learner would know to go to get help." Lydia further explained that she has connections within the community for students who require further assistance, such as mental health agencies, veteran services, or financial services.

Developmental Education Services

Across the courtyard from the student services building is the Developmental Learning Center (DLC), where reading and writing tutoring is available. DLC is adjacent to a large study room and a full-service cafeteria. Inside the DLC office, there was a reception desk and chairs and couches for students waiting to be serviced. I asked the receptionist how students in developmental classes get academic help. She explained that there is tutoring for enrolled

students and, if they do not have a high school diploma or need a GED, they should seek the help of a counselor.

I met with Fran, the Director of the DLC. She explained that many students in developmental education face challenges as they transition to college because they discover there are classes that they did not expect to take and there is sometimes “extra stress” because of economic hardship. Fran further pointed out that for older students the adjustment is “magnified.” She went on to say “I think there’s an extra level embarrassment greater than the younger students feel.” I asked her to describe how she thinks this behavior manifests. She responded:

Not wanting to participate in class or not wanting to contact the teacher if an issue comes up that’s going to affect attendance. They tend to disappear if there’s a life issue... They don’t navigate the overall college system very well.

I probed Fran’s knowledge of services specifically for displaced workers and she replied that “Other than the Michigan employment agency, the case management available through the [Workforce Preparation Center], I don’t think the college has any specific programs aimed at dislocated workers.” Fran reported that there is “more intensive advising, cohorts of advisors dedicated to developmental students, having easier access to counseling, and partnerships between the developmental education department and the student support services, so that the students don’t get lost between the two areas.” I asked Fran why she feels students “get lost” and she explained that:

The older student has more responsibility, so they have their schedule set up with the class time but if the appointment runs into them getting a kid from school or daycare then that’s going to affect their ability to keep the appointment. Access to support services

[and] all of the life issues just enter in at a greater level.

Fran's perspective on older students' challenges echoed the sentiments expressed by other GCC administrators, as evidenced by Linda's comment earlier and literature presented in Chapter 2.

West Campus

Similar to the WPC, West Campus was easier to maneuver than the downtown campus because everything was housed in one building and parking was free. Several students and a faculty member remarked that they preferred classes in this location for these reasons. The welcome counter was stocked with course catalogs and pamphlets on academic programs, student health and counseling services. There was a large common area with big chairs and couches and tables and chairs for students to study or meet in small groups. The computer lab had desktop computers for math tutoring and assessment testing as well for students' academic and personal use. This location is also used for professional events, such as college recruitment and career fairs.

I observed classes and connected with faculty at this location. The classes I visited were Psychology 101 and College Math 005. The psychology class was of interest because two of my student participants had taken the class. Also, the instructor was recommended as a "good person to talk to" because of the breadth (he worked at multiple community colleges in Michigan) and length (over 20 years) of his experience teaching older students. The math class was of interest because several student participants complained about math instruction, so I wanted to observe a developmental math class in operation.

Psychology 101

Alex, the psychology instructor, informed me that students in this class represented the

typical class at GCC. The class was comprised of 20 students who represented multiple ethnicities, an equal number of females and males, and two students who appeared to be over age 30. Alex reported being very purposeful about creating a comfortable environment for students of all ages and backgrounds because of his experience teaching in urban and suburban settings around the state. He further explained that many older students have a tendency to cling to ideology that creates a tension in the class, so he works on “breaking down mental barriers.” Alex encouraged students through group activities that promoted interaction and active engagement.

Alex offered his perspective about older students and technology. He related an episode from one of his classes:

When I walked into class, they were like ‘where’s the syllabus?’ It’s online! Everything is online, so students have a printing allocation so they can print it. So I’ll say it’s online. The younger students will say I already saw it. I already downloaded it. Some [older students] will say “what do you mean it’s online?” So you have to explain it to them. So for the benefit of the older students, I show it on the overhead, not the smart board. I’ll show the process of getting to that place. It’s not just showing them how to do it. It’s showing them the concept.

I asked Alex what else he perceived older students experience differently from younger students. Again, he talked about the use of technology. He said some of the older students do not associate learning with technology as younger students. It is definitely a “stumbling block” for them. He reported “The whole idea of using online chalkboards or the notice center...that’s been my biggest problem.”

College Math 005

I wanted to observe a math class because every student as well as the staff from WPC

talked about the challenges in developmental math classes. There were about 15 students in the class, mostly female and younger (estimated ages 18-25) and only one older male student who appeared to be over 30 years old. The instructor, Jenny, taught for an hour and then there was a 15 minute break. During the second half of class, a few students asked questions about the material. The students appeared to be taking copious notes as Jenny demonstrated problem after problem. She paused a few times to allow the students to catch up with their notes and asked if anyone had any questions. The students' faces held serious expressions fixed on the instructor. I did not observe any group exercises for solving math problems.

I asked Jenny if she made any accommodations for older students. She said that since older students have many other responsibilities, she accepts homework within a "two-week window." Jenny talked about how she has very little time with them because "They just have so many other things that just to getting to class is a huge deal for them." She commented that older students are the most focused and, in spite of all their other obligations, they get more of the work done than the traditional-aged students

The class visits broadened my observations of the student experience at GCC. I noted how the instructors' teaching styles within the subject matter affected the students' interactions in the classroom. In both cases, the teachers recognized that older students operate differently than the traditional-aged students, so they have made some accommodations. A goal of Alex's teaching method was to encourage students to communicate with each other in order to facilitate deeper engagement in the coursework. Jenny explained that because she has so much material to cover, she preferred for students who needed further instruction to see her after class or during office hours. She professed that not many students took advantage of her assistance outside the class period because of other priorities in their lives.

Summary

The aforementioned sections described the programs and services the student participants utilized during their transition. The Gateway personnel described services that the institution provided for displaced workers who transitioned to the college. The students' experiences illustrated their paths as they moved away from being a displaced worker to becoming a student.

The Workforce Preparation Center was a satellite location housed within a state employment agency where several students began their college journey. At the WPC, the GCC staff members prepared displaced workers for the college-entry assessment tests. Students had access to career exploration workshops and computer training. The main campus included the student services building which housed the HALO organization, the Family Resource Center, and counseling services. The services provided by these groups helped students with nonacademic assistance, such as cultural and supplemental supports. Adjacent to the student services building, the Developmental Learning Center administered tutoring services for students who needed academic assistance. The West Campus served suburban areas by offering developmental courses in core subjects as well a computer lab. Students appreciated that the classes and services were all in one building and the parking was free.

Student participants expressed anxiety about attending classes because of fears about being older and how they would be received by the teacher and younger students. Students who transitioned to GCC through ESL felt a sense of isolation when they began taking formal program courses. Common difficulties among students were learning math and using the computer. The ESL students' difficulties were compounded by cultural differences that manifested in the classroom. I will discuss more about the students' transition challenges in Chapter 6. The next chapter is the narrative for Midstate Community College. It describes the

college's programs and services through the perspectives of the administrators, faculty, counselors, and students' experiences.

Chapter 5: Midstate Community College

Historical Information

Midstate was established in the 1900s to serve the needs of a growing industrial community. Community leaders wanted to create a junior college for occupational and mechanical training purposes. In the late 1960s, Midstate officially became a community college that offered a wide variety of vocational and technical education programs which attracted students from numerous counties across the state as well as several neighboring states.

According to Michigan's census data, the population of the area is close to 610,000 and the ethnic composition is predominately Whites, followed by proportions of other ethnic groups (in descending order), Black, Latino, Asian, and Native American (US Census Bureau, 2010). The education levels of the citizenry were reported as: over a quarter achieved high school diplomas or GED, another quarter achieved bachelor's degrees, a tenth achieved graduate degrees, and less than a tenth achieved associate's degrees. The majority of the population is between the ages of 35 and 54 (US Census Bureau, 2011). The unemployment rate is slightly lower than the state's at 7.8% in 2012- down 1.5% from 2011. Growth industries in the regions include health technology and diagnostics, information technology, automobile engineering, information and records, and retail sales (Michigan Department of Technology, Management and Budget, 2012).

Midstate is surrounded by a medium-sized urban area that is home to an art museum, a symphony orchestra, and a sprawling public park where several summer music festivals are held. As I drove around the city, I could see vestiges of former prosperity in the architecture of office buildings and grand homes along the main street leading from the center of the city. Many of these mansions are now law, medical, and insurance offices or non-profit agencies, and some are extensions of the college campus. I observed where the commerce sector ebbed and the industrial

area began. There was a maze of railroad tracks that at one time carried raw materials from local mines to factories. Further down the railroad tracks were newer factories and sprawling parking lots filled with employees' automobiles. I continued driving beyond the industrial area and onto a main thoroughfare. Lining the street were many abandoned buildings that appeared to have once been small businesses. Similar to Gateway's region, the downsizing of the manufacturing industry has resulted in a downward shift in the local economy.

Current Mission

Midstate continues in its mission as a college of great distinction in the region. The college is nationally recognized for the quality of its liberal arts programs and job training in technical fields. The average age of students is 26. Enrollment in 2012 was 20,000, which was down 1% for the first time on 10 years and job training was down 2.5%. These factors are attributed to the rise in local employment. The student/teacher ratio is about 25:1 and the average time to graduation is 3 years. Midstate is accredited by the North Central Association of Colleges and School. It is also one of the Higher Learning Commission's Academic Quality Improvement Project colleges and an active member of the National Association of Developmental Education. Midstate's workforce development department is a leader of the Breaking Through initiative in Michigan.

The students' transition experiences reflected a range of engagement at MCC and provided several unique perspectives. The experiences are enhanced by the perspectives of administrators, counselors, advisors, and faculty in the places where the student participants utilized services while transitioning to Midstate. Students in the Career Forward Program related early transition experiences. Their stories demonstrated how the CFP's services helped the move away from the affects of job loss and toward opportunities to gain job skills. Students in the

gerontology program related experiences from a reflective perspective which provided a longer view of transition. Two of the students experienced transition without any involvement in a bridge program and one was in the last Job Training First cohort. The following locations are not exhaustive of MCC's network of locations and services, but represent the places where the participants' experiences occurred. For specific information on the students' statuses, refer to the Student Biographies section in Chapter 3.

Main Campus

At the city center, the main campus is comprised of several large buildings with a mammoth parking structure connected directly to the student services building. The main street between the parking garage and a row of campus buildings was closed to vehicular traffic which provided a place for students to promenade between classes. Most of the students appeared to be traditional-age of various ethnicities. Adjacent to the student service's building were administrative offices, academic halls, and the field house. Further from the campus' epicenter were a large public library, a theatre, and two large churches. I noticed there were also buildings marked as satellite locations for a university.

Enrollment Office

On my first visit I found the student services building. I visited the enrollment office on the first floor. Upon entering, I was asked by the receptionist if I needed any help. I asked how to enroll and was immediately directed to computer stations to fill out an application. As I assessed the availability of the computer stations, I was told that I could also schedule an appointment with an advisor, but on another day because all of the counselors were presently in a meeting. Before I could respond, I was asked which program was I interested in and when could I return for an appointment or did I need an appointment or would I rather just apply online. I responded

that I was unsure about which program, so I would start at the computer. The receptionist replied “OK” and signaled the end of our conversation by turning her head downward to resume reading. I paused to contemplate this experience in the context of my targeted student group. I imagined if I were a displaced worker needing assistance and I came with much anxiety about how to start the college-going process, this initial encounter would not have given me much direction.

I also visited the registrar’s office to ask about developmental classes-where are they held, who are the instructors, what are the days and times for the classes. I was informed classes were held in the Great Lakes building, which was where I had appointments in two days. I found the student lounge in the basement and sat there for a couple of hours to observe the college atmosphere. There was a food court with multiple vendors and café style tables and chairs in the center. It was mid-day and most of the students appeared to be traditional-aged. This scenario differed from my observations at Gateway where there were more older students around at the same hour and the atmosphere felt somber.

Workforce Training Office

The Workforce Training Office was within the student services building where I met with the Dean of Workforce Training. I asked Elaine, the dean, to talk about any services to assist dislocated workers transitioning to college. She replied “Having prerequisites for classes to prevent students from wasting time and money on classes they are not prepared to take.” I inquired, “What about for older students?” Elaine told me “that is the piece that we still struggle with- the role of job placement as an outcome for community college students.” She talked about how the recessive economy has discouraged older people from going to college because “it’s very difficult for community college to ensure that most of our students in our occupational programs could get a job once they get a degree.”

Elaine further explained how the demand for college credentials has grown during her tenure at MCC. She said there has been “a 180 degree flip from the climate 4 years ago” when employers were less concerned about the credential, now they want people to earn the credential. It was apparent from her responses that she was most concerned about persistence and completion. At the close of the interview, I asked Elaine to talk about anything that future transition programs should include. She responded:

As a college, we are working harder and deeper around faculty advising...My ideal would be that every student here would have a name that he or she could go to. We are not certainly quite there yet, but we would try to determine how our faculty and, as a department, could do more advising.

I wondered out loud why Elaine’s vision was not already in place. She believed that it was a matter of time and the fact that the college had 17,000 students plus 8,000 non-credit students with only 1000 faculty. However, Elaine asserted “in spite of this age of technology, human beings have a need for human contact... and beyond the faculty in a particular class students should have someone saying ‘Hey I’m here. How are you doing?’ I think this would be helpful.” The next section describes the satellite location where I met the workforce development team.

The Technical Training Center

The Technical Training Center (TTC) is situated among the industrial complexes about two miles from the main campus. The building is a newer structure with an ample parking lot. Just inside the entrance was a reception counter adjacent to a learning center with computer stations and a wall of brochures. There were offices along the perimeter and corridor that led to the mechanical training area. It was virtually silent in the building.

Peter, the manager of the Career Forward Program (CFP), greeted me. He informed me

that the workforce development team operated from the TTC. Their goal was to ensure that job training programs met employers' demands for skill development and provided students with training to secure employment in high demand industries. They were also partners with the regional state employment agency where prospective students were screened before being referred to the TTC. Peter told me about their efforts to reach displaced workers through monthly meetings held in the community. He further explained that by going to them first, "we ease them into the college process." He mentioned that the Job Training First (JTF) was designed for "the trade folks who had lost their jobs and didn't know what to do," so having them come to the TTC as opposed to going downtown made it easier for them to acclimate to college-going because the TTC environment was less intimidating.

A Delivery System

I visited with Assistant Dean, Jerry, who gave me an overview of his department's activities. He reported that their "delivery system" for job training was a short-term program with accelerated learning, which attracted displaced workers because it does not involve "the same rigor" as a traditional two-year or four-year commitment. The schedule for job training is "more like work so that doesn't look unattractive to them, so they would come 5 days a week maybe from 7 am to 3:30 pm." Jerry said this system worked very well.

I inquired about the types of activities related to transition that his department provided. Jerry told me that at the height of job loss in this region of the state they created a program that catered to displaced workers. He explained it was "a semester of career exploration, some developmental education courses, and a psychology class" funded through the federal Trade Adjustment Act. Jerry provided some history of the JTF. When the last rounds of workforce reductions took place between 2005 and 2008, the workforce development department worked

with the developmental education department to create a bridge program that helped laid off workers with retraining. With the guidance of the Breaking Through initiative, a comprehensive curriculum was designed to ease the transition for displaced workers to the college environment.

John, one of the student participants, was in the last JTF cohort. He explained how he was formerly employed at an automobile factory and worked there for 30 years until he was forced into early retirement. He recalled that there was a meeting at the automobile plant with “people from the TAA.” They presented the option of going to Midstate and explained that participation in the JTF program would be paid for by the government. He talked about the program’s benefits:

And it was to help us to get restarted, to initially find out our weaknesses, and where we needed help since we had been out of school for so long. I believed if I didn’t take that course I probably would not have made it at all. Writing papers...they took us from basic math all the way through geometry. We had psychology. We had literature. Three kinds of English classes and they kept testing us to see which area could be improved. So it was very helpful.

After completing the JTF program, John moved into college-level classes and began working toward his associate degree. However, outside of the bridge program, he encountered some difficulties transitioning to classes at the main campus.

Jerry boasted that the program had an 80% completion rate, which was “unprecedented for that kind of population.” He went on to say that they were not currently running the full program, but they did have a scaled-down version running at the time of the interview. Anna, the TTC Director, told me that they needed a program to continue offering services, as the JTF once did, because there was still a stream of displaced workers coming to them. She pointed out that

the value of the JTF was that it attended to the needs of older students because it was cohort based and short-term with accelerated learning. Anna explained that she wrote for a grant to continue offering services for displaced workers (which she received) and developed the CFP.

Applying Best Practices

The most recent bridge program was made possible by \$2 million grant from the US Department of Labor. The Career Forward Program (CFP) was based on the best practices from the highly successful Job Training First program. According to the staff, the TTC has become the “go-to” place for displaced workers and any older person seeking employment. I asked the staff and career coaches what happens when a displaced worker asks the enrollment office at main campus about going to college. They said there is an assumption that displaced workers are inquiring about college for job training purposes. They also explained that some people are referred to disability services because, if they have reached a certain age and they are academically underprepared, perhaps they have a learning disability and they can receive diagnostic services.

I inquired how the CFP classes were developed. Anna explained that what happened in the classrooms influenced their programming decisions the most. She said, “The instructors had to go through some pretty big training over the last three to four years to understand how to work with older students and to understand that they were going to be challenged.” She explained that the CFP students provided feedback for adapting the curriculum to their needs, particularly for math instruction, and the computer training classes were added because of student feedback.

The feature that set the CFP apart from any services at main campus was the one-on-one career coaching. As Wanda, a career coach, explained:

The way this particular program was designed, the career culture process, is a one-on-one

process. So at the very beginning we look at their assessments to determine if they need additional foundation courses. The difference with us and the other foundational courses is ours are specifically designed for our program. Before they even get to the point where they take classes, [CFP] is supporting them.

Wanda went on to explain that they used tools such as Work Keys and CFP students could earn the National Career Readiness Certificate (NCRC) as they worked toward a certificate in a particular field. She said “the goal is to get them into some type of gainful employment while they are taking courses and preparing for state certification exams.” I asked about those who wanted to pursue an associate degree. Wanda expressed that her goal is to get them employed first and for many “once they get a good-paying job, they are content.” She pointed out that many who go into the certificate programs do have further educational goals in mind, so they earn a certificate to begin working in a field and then come back for an associate degree.

Since the certificate programs are non-credit bearing, I was curious about what happens when a student wants to enroll in credit programs. Anna explained that they are in the process of figuring out some type of articulation for credits toward an associate degree. In her opinion, students should earn some kind of credit because “it would be a great feeder system for the college and help people on their career pathway.” Anna said the dean supports this idea and she knows of other community colleges that are giving credits for job training. She also pointed out that “21% of students that came to the college last year” came through workforce development and enrollment is “leveling off or decreasing on the credit side of the college,” so better articulation would be a “value-added way to build their programs.” Anna felt that establishing clearly defined accreditation for job training programs was important for students in transition because they need to know what a particular career path will involve. At the time of the

interview, there was pilot program for accrediting a few of the job training programs. The next section offers a perspective from a faculty member in the developmental education department. She offered an interesting commentary on bridge programs, particularly as an organizational challenge for the college.

Developmental Education Office

The Developmental Education Office was in the Great Lakes building was a few blocks from the administrative buildings on main campus. It was a three-story colonial style structure nestled in a residential area and surrounded by large oak and pine trees, which gave it a cozier appearance than the high-rise structure of other campus buildings. I met with Cynthia, a tenured English professor who teaches developmental reading and writing classes.

I asked Cynthia to describe how MCC addresses transition for new students. She happily proclaimed “That’s huge! We have a new Title 3 grant, we will have a student success center, which will be really a more extensive assessment intake process, and a more extensive menu of options based on intake.” I asked her to talk about any transition services for older nontraditional students. She mentioned coffee roundtable discussions and the JTF program. Cynthia explained that the JTF was no longer running because “trade adjustment funds were no longer available.” She added that the college had not “made a good transition” with the best practices from that program.

A Developmental Perspective

Cynthia was a member of the team that created the JTF program. She offered a developmental perspective of the program’s content. She explained that the thrust was “directed to specific careers” and there were classes for the psychosocial effects of job loss. She said:

We did a paper on Kubler Ross’ stages of grief related to their job loss...the entire

program was geared at changing their identity from factory worker to lifelong learner...this was a very meta-cognitive kind of class. They worked well in cohorts as they moved along...And our graduation rates are really high.

She further explained that displaced workers needed a full semester to acclimate to college and build academic skills. Cynthia commented that the CFP did not provide enough time for displaced workers to adequately transition to college because it was six weeks shorter than the JTF. I asked Cynthia whether credits were earned when the bridge program was a semester long. She responded “At that point they did get credit toward graduation. Now they don’t. The higher education commission said that we couldn’t do that.” According to Cynthia, there were no specific programs for displaced workers other than the CFP through the workforce development department.

Since the JTF program proved to be so successful at Midstate, I asked Cynthia why it was not sustained in its original form. She explained that recently the mode is “get through and get out fast, so it’s difficult to put them in a cohort” She went on to say:

Colleges don’t do cohorts and learning communities well. Go around the country where there are registration and procedural issues that make them very difficult. So getting the right students and filling the classes, it just doesn’t work. Colleges like it when people can randomly fill classes and when it’s full they will randomly open another.

I was surprised that Cynthia expressed resistance to sustaining the types of services that the JTF program offered. She offered an alternate view of bridge programs. She added “The pool of displaced workers with educational benefits is diminishing and that is going to fluctuate with the economy. Right now there are people hiring, so there is not the same incentive to go to school.” However, I thought about what the workforce development team reported. Based on their intake

numbers, there is a steady stream of people displaced from employment, so they felt it necessary to continue offering the bridge program's services.

Regarding the credit versus non-credit issue related to job training programs, Cynthia offered her perspective. She said more career advising should be added to the orientation classes for developmental students because "more developmental students should go into short-term training since they aren't doing well." She went on to say developmental education students "should have a shorter-term goal that they can reach that is stackable so that they can get a certificate." If students want to go further, they would be able to "translate" credits earned from a certificate into an associate degree or a bachelor's degree. Cynthia recognized the need for articulation between job training and associate degree programs, not only to help displaced workers but as a general service for all developmental students.

Student Transition

Cynthia continued to describe how students transition at Midstate. She said all students should see a counselor to review the results of their assessment tests and formulate an academic plan for a desired career. Cynthia said some students figure out their own academic plan, but they are usually unsuccessful, "What a mess! They can get 70/75 hours and none of it adds up to 3 credits." Cynthia commented on students who need academic support. She reported that the college has "an alert system," free tutoring, both group and individual peer tutoring, counseling, and advising. She added that with the new Title 3 finding there will be some coaches or "navigators" to check-up on developmental education students. Cynthia also mentioned that older students as well as traditional-age developmental education students would benefit from the extended career services. Some students' transitions begin outside of Midstate. The next section introduces Ellen and Keisha, who enlisted the help of a community service agency where

they were informed of the opportunities at MCC.

Women's Assistance House

The Women's Assistance House (WAH) is not part of the MCC campus system. However, a number of its "clients" are referred to MCC for educational advancement and job training opportunities. The WAH is a public resource that provides counseling, shelter, and child-care services. The thrust of its programming is to empower women with economic independence. As a visitor, I was given a guided- tour of the facility. There was a business center with printers, copiers, scanners, and computers for applying to job postings. Ellen and Keisha used the counseling staff to help them decide on a career path, so their transition to college initiated at the WAH, and then they were referred to the CFP at Midstate.

Ellen was laid off from two jobs since 2009 and she sought assistance for creating a career plan rather than "just finding another job." Ellen had to be convinced that the CFP would not be "a waste of her time." She resisted the notion of spending 12 weeks in classes when she really needed employment. The WAH counselor explained that she would be assigned a career coach who would help her decide on a career. At the time of the interview, Ellen reported "Once I really decided to commit to it, I knew that's where I wanted to be." She had formed an idea that the program would be easy, but the rigor of the classes really impressed her. She said "I'm impressed with it and how much work they require." Ellen's outlook on the remainder of the program was very positive. She said "When I first lost my job, seriously, at age 49, I thought, I will never work again because I am too old. I cannot get a job, yet I am too old to retire." Although she had not decided on a career path, Ellen believed that as she progressed through the CFP she would gain a better idea of the possibilities available for her.

Keisha's outlook was not as positive as Ellen's. She had been struggling with many

personal issues. Keisha sought help from the WAH because she said “I didn’t know which way to go, I needed help and I didn’t know where I was going to get the help. And then it came along.” Keisha recalled how her WAH mentor talked to her about “sustainability” and “what was most important” for her survival. She told me that the counselor taught her how to “capitalize” on her strengths and how to use her skills to find a job that would sustain her.

Keisha talked about difficulties she has overcome. She professed that she had been married and divorced and struggles with depression, which often kept her “in like a sleepy mode.” The “sleepy mode” Keisha mentioned was apparent in her body position. I noticed that she walked very slowly, tentatively with slumped shoulders. Her eyes appeared tired and her face seemed to express sadness. When I asked her to talk about the decision to participate in the CFP program, the tone in her voice went up an octave when she said “I think it was a great decision. I feel a little more positive about myself and things that I have to do. It’s gonna help me accomplish the things that I’ve been wanting to do for a long time.” The next section provides additional details of Ellen and Keisha’s experience and introduces Rose, another CFP participant.

Career Forward Program

As explained previously, the workforce development team operated the Career Forward Program (CFP). It involved 12 weeks of academic and career preparation that included 20 hours per week of classroom instruction. The class subjects were lessons in locating information, reading for information, and applied mathematics, which prepared students for the Michigan National Career Readiness Certificate (MINCRC) tests (Michigan Department of Energy, Labor, and Economic Growth, 2011). Students were required to meet regularly with career coaches who explained their Work Keys results and advised them on how to dress for interviews, how to write resumes and cover letters, and how to apply for jobs. The coaches were also a source of

encouragement, which kept students focused and motivated throughout the program.

Career Forward Class

The CFP math class was held in the Great Lakes building. On the day I visited the atmosphere felt relaxed. The amenities in the classroom included two walls of whiteboards, long tables, and chairs (conference room style as opposed to individual desks). There were 13 people: 8 females, and 5 males. Sarah, an adjunct instructor, has been working at MCC for 24 years. She mostly worked in the athletic department, but when the opportunity to teach for CFP came along, she was happy to join the program. Sarah used a computer that displayed the lessons on a whiteboard. The textbook was Applied Mathematics, and other supplies provided by the CFP included a 3-ring binder with loose-leaf paper, calculators, and a pencil case.

Sarah started the class with definitions of math terminology. She passed out a handout and announced a choice to work in groups or alone. It was a complex problem of how to balance a business account. A workbook exercise on rounding rates, averages, and proportions was the next task and more students formed groups to solve the problems. The lessons explained the real-world purpose of proportions for bookkeeping and averages in sports and daily life. Sarah randomly called people to answer questions. The energy in the classroom energy was enthusiastic as students worked in small groups on the assignments.

When Sarah and I met after class, she talked about her teaching methods. She explained that she provides situations that resemble what happens in the workplace and she offers students a choice to work together or individually. She said “most of my top students will quickly have somebody walk over to them and say ‘Do you want to work together?’” Sarah said a third of her students achieved assessment scores high enough to place out of developmental courses. However, they still may need “to acclimate to the rigor of attending classes four to five days per

week.” She explained that the personal development component of the CFP helps them become “college-ready” by overcoming “personal barriers.” Sarah receives reports on students’ academic progress and communicates their status with the career coaches. I asked Sarah how she handles students who need additional academic help. She described the special services available:

If their skill set is below minimum standards for this program, they will get more remedial help in those types of areas. We also have career coaches that will work with them directly. They are assigned to them personally. They work with them on a semi-daily basis to update where they are and how they are working in their classes.

I asked about activities outside of the classroom. Sarah said students are given a 3-hour computer lab and she is available during that time. She also holds group tutoring sessions when students need additional help. Sarah mentioned that she took a group of students on a campus tour once so they could “gain a greater sense of what MCC had to offer.”

Several students inquired about my purpose in the class. Rose approached me and enthusiastically launched into telling me her story. She remarked that she worked at an insurance company until she was laid off and then the company went out of business a year ago. Rose was working part-time as an aerobics instructor. She was participating in the CFP to advance another level in the physical fitness field by earning a certificate. Rose told me that she was recruited by CFP representatives when she attended an event at the YMCA downtown. One of representatives eventually became her career coach.

Career Coaches

Rose explained how encouragement from her career coach really kept her focused on the long-term benefits of the program when she doubted her ability to keep going. Rose related there were nights when the homework on top of her family responsibilities was overwhelming and she

had trouble sleeping. In addition, she and her husband “were having some problems” and she was concerned about her marriage. In spite of her stressors, Rose wanted to persevere because she was providing a good example for her daughters and she needed a greater source of income to support them. She told me that the career coach’s advice eased her anxiety on days when she felt overwhelmed.

Ellen described how meetings with her career coach boosted her self-confidence. She said “I feel a lot more positive about my skills and I know I can contribute to the workforce.” She reported that after reviewing her assessments scores she felt more “hopeful about the whole job search and career training things, whereas before, [she] felt it was kind of a thing of desperation.” In Keisha’s case, the individual attention of the career coaches was her greatest source of support. She said “the resources in the CFP and my career coach, that’s about the only support system I have right now.” Keisha reported that regular meetings with the career coach prevented her from sinking further into depression.

One of Rose’s stressors was travelling to two different locations for CFP classes. I visited the class at the Great Lakes building, but on other days the class met at a community service location about five miles from the main campus. This location’s surroundings were unfamiliar to the CFP participants and they reported feeling less comfortable in that area. I was curious whether the challenge was going to multiple sites or with the community service site in particular. Ellen alluded to the problem as the community service site. She told me she liked going to the TTC or the Great Lakes building because they were easily accessible and there was no cost for parking.

Personal Development

The program also offered personal development workshops designed to help participants

reframe aspects of their identity. Ellen mentioned a specific exercise, called a *career journey*, which she says “caught her off-guard emotionally.” She was surprised by how difficult it was to recall events from when she was 20 years old. The “emotional stuff” that resurfaced from that period of her life caused her to pause and reflect about her entire life. Keisha talked about having difficulty with procrastination, which was associated with her depression. She told me the psychology classes taught her about prioritizing tasks, meeting deadlines and keeping appointments.

Supplemental Services

Other benefits from the CFP were supplemental services. Participants were encouraged to obtain the Midstate student identification card, which gave them access to all the services on the main campus, such as the library, the tutoring labs, the field house, and discounts on campus events. The ID cards could also be used for discounts at community attractions like the art museum. Ellen remarked that having an official Midstate ID “entitled you to all community college student status things” rather than receiving a “special ID” as a CFP participant. Students also received gas cards or public transportation vouchers to travel to and from classes. The next section describes the transition experiences of students who sought support and services from the Senior Service Center.

Senior Service Center

Located about two blocks north of the student services building was the Senior Service Center (SSC). It serves older students at MCC as well as the senior population in the greater community. The SSC is co-supported by the Area Agency on Aging, several eldercare businesses and private contributors. The director told me that from the Center’s outreach efforts, he found a growing need in their community for specially trained caregivers, so an important part

of the Center's goal was to educate future eldercare workers. There are noncredit courses available as training for eldercare professionals and credit courses through the Gerontology Certificate Program. The SSC also offers scholarships for students 45 years or older who pursue any of its educational program offerings.

Students who sought resources at the Senior Service Center (SSC) were often recruited for the Gerontology Certificate Program. The faculty at the SSC developed the curriculum and encouraged students to enroll. Student participants told me they were not initially interested in gerontology, but they were sold on the program because of encouragement from the director and relationships they cultivated through personal interactions with the staff at SSC. They also became involved with community activities sponsored by the SSC, which kept them engaged in their coursework and motivated them to finish. According to the students, these connections played a significant role in their transition. Although the following stories are from students who were close to graduating, their reflections provided a longer view of how the utilization of the college's programs and services affected them while they were transitioning.

Gerontology as a Transition Agent

The gerontology program was not a transition program per se, but the students who participated in it said the supports and services helped them during their transition unlike any other programs or services at Midstate. Kathy explained that she met representatives from the SSC while she was volunteering at a community event. They encouraged her to think about going to college because she had been laid off from full-time employment and needed to support her children. Kathy credits her success to the faculty and staff members within the Gerontology Certificate Program who provided extensive guidance throughout her college experience. Their mentoring sustained her through many emotional adjustments as well as helping with logistical

challenges, such as transportation. I asked Kathy about aspects of her program that she found especially helpful. She said “the opportunity to engage in a cohort group which is very big difference from when I started. I knew no one and I wasn’t particularly signed up for a program of study” Kathy stated that having a cohort group to travel to classes, exchange notes, and complete homework assignments “enriched and supported” her. As opposed to her first two years at the college when, she said, “I randomly took what I could handle.”

Similarly, John reported that he developed positive relationships at the SSC. As mentioned previously, John started at MCC in the JTF program. After several developmental courses, John was able to enroll in the Gerontology Certificate Program while he continued to work towards earning an associate’s degree. During his college journey, John discovered that he had a learning disability. He recalled how a professor pointed out consistent mistakes in his classwork. He went to his counselor and told her that he failed the class and wanted to be tested. Through the resources at the SSC, John was sent to the appropriate place to diagnose his disability. John said, “I’m glad I found that out. I always wondered why it was so hard for me to catch-on. I told all my professors about it.”

Through his participation in the Gerontology Certificate Program, John found mentors who helped him secure an internship that had turned into a part-time job. In his current position, John applies the gerontology concepts in a leadership role at a community center. He commented on a professor’s advice:

My professor in gerontology said we have to create the job for ourselves. And so I am creating something for myself. I am even thinking about one day having my own center, maybe having a few adult foster homes. It’s [the internship] giving me something to look at for the future.

The first time Victoria first enrolled at MCC it was immediately after graduating from high school and she did not make it through the first year. This time (27 years later), she started with a few developmental courses to improve her skills, especially in math. Victoria told me that the people around her were not very supportive at the start, except for her daughter and a few friends from church. I asked Victoria how she became involved in the gerontology program. Victoria said a counselor influenced her decision to switch majors by suggesting she take one of the introductory classes. A faculty member in the gerontology program was impressed by her performance and encouraged her to pursue the gerontology certificate. She explained, “I started in interior design and then my granny passed away... When I got into it [gerontology] more, I was like I can really do this because I took care of my grandmother before she died.”

Personal Development

Within the gerontology curriculum, psychology courses were part of the core curriculum. Kathy explained that an assignment from one of these classes really caused her “to think deeply about the rest of her life” within the forum of aging. The class created an opportunity for personal reflection in the context of the stages of life she was encountering as opposed to other psychology classes with topics more related to traditional-aged students. Kathy’s comment about the content of the psychology class reflected the sentiment of the other gerontology students. Also, because the content was more relevant to their personal stage of life or they had friends and senior relatives in similar circumstances, they felt less apprehensive about contributing in class.

John talked about how the classes helped him build better student habits. One of his challenges was procrastination. He said it bothered him if he went into class and was not prepared for a certain subject. I inquired whether John was able to overcome this challenge. He replied, “I learned that I have to discipline myself to the point where I can’t let anything interfere

with my education. And sometimes things do interfere, but I am trying to get a hold of that.”

Victoria reported that the faculty and staff encouraged her to volunteer at several events sponsored by the SSC. Victoria said these activities really boosted her confidence and increased her engagement in the classroom and at the college as a whole. She was able to apply the concepts from her coursework to real-world activities, which greatly improved her morale and performance in the classroom. Victoria also worked with several student organizations. She emphasized how important it was to be “well connected” on campus so when opportunities arose she would be considered for them. She stated “I first started with the Black Student Union and the Student Congress...the diversity Club and then the Gerontology Club.” She went on to say that being involved with these groups “puts me out there and I can interact with students that are not in my classes.”

Summary

The workforce development team operated out of the Technical Training Center and it was where the CFP students began their college experience. The administrators and staff described the evolution of the bridge program and the development of services and classes that supported students during their transition. The Developmental Education Office, housed in the Great Lakes building, was where a tenured faculty member provided an interesting perspective on the organizational challenges of sustaining bridge programs. I also observed one of the CFP math classes and received the instructor’s perspective on teaching in the program. I included the Women’s Assistance House (WAH) because two students were referred from their “clientele.” The WAS regularly sent students to MCC for job training or degree seeking. The Senior Service Center was a resource where older students found support services and those who entered the Gerontology Certificate Program found additional supports which were more accommodating

than services available to them at the main campus.

Students' experiences reflected how instrumental support services were during their transitions away from job loss and toward learning new job skills or pursuing an associate degree. Their stories demonstrated how many psychosocial stressors, such as learning disabilities, dealing with situations from their pasts, and being the oldest student in the classroom, affected them during transition. The reflective nature of stories from students close to graduation provided a longer view of transition, which was instrumental in understanding how the support programs and services helped them. Additional details about the students' transition challenges and the administrators, faculty, counselors, and staff perspectives are included in the next chapter. In Chapter 6, I present further findings and discuss them in terms of the three dimensions of the theoretical framework, the guiding framework tool, organizational issues, and building relationships.

Chapter 6: Discussion of the Findings

In this chapter, I continue the presentation of the study's findings. First, the guiding framework tool illustrates how the elements of the wrap-around services model intersected with the 4 S System of transition through the lens of job loss for each case site. Second, I discuss the findings in the context of the three dimensions of the theoretical framework, which are psychosocial adjustments, adult learning theories, and community colleges' transition strategies. Part three identifies the organizational issues that emerged from analyzing the guiding framework tool's data. The fourth section discusses how relationships between students and administrators, faculty, counselors, advisors, and staff affected students' transitions. The last section summarizes the discussion of the study's findings.

Three overarching themes emerged from the interview responses and observations from the field: 1) student participants reported that, where wrap-around level supports were available and when they utilized them, many difficulties in transitioning to college were alleviated; 2) there were organizational issues that mitigated the colleges' ability to sustain wrap-around level services; and 3) administrators, faculty, counselors, and staff at both sites reported that the colleges' willingness to provide services at the wrap-around level varied depending on external funding resources. The discussion begins with the analysis of the Guiding Framework Tool.

The Guiding Framework Tool

I examined the transition to college experiences of 11 students who started with job loss. Their college journeys continued with the utilization of programs and services they encountered while attending Gateway Community College (GCC) or Midstate Community College (MCC). To further understand the transition of displaced workers, I also examined whether community colleges are accommodating older students with programs and services that facilitate successful

transition to college. I obtained the perspectives of 4 faculty members, 4 staff members, 2 counselors and 6 administrators to learn what their respective colleges had in place for displaced workers and older students.

I created the GFT guiding framework tool for summarizing the programs and services that were found at the case sites (Tables 5 and 6 shown below). The axes for the tables include the 4 S System (Goodman et al., 2006), a typology for advising adults through a transition (such as job loss) and the wrap-around services model, which outlines services and supports that have been identified as effective for nontraditional students to succeed in college (Purnell & Blank, 2004). The value in constructing the GFT is it illuminates where the wrap-around services intersect with the 4 S aspects of the transition system (Situation, Self, Support, and Strategies) and indicates the programs and services that the colleges had in place. It also provides insight into how close or far the colleges programs and services are from the benchmark level of services. The highlighted elements designate areas not mentioned by any of the participants or observed in operation, so they were considered missing in terms of the participants' awareness or utilization of them.

Gateway Community College

Table 5 Guiding Framework Tool: Gateway Community College

Components of Wrap-around Services Model ¹	The 4 S System ² (Coping with Life Transitions)			
	Situation	Self	Support	Strategies
Academic Guidance and Counseling	•action “trigger” •pre-enrollment workshops •community outreach	•emotional adjustment •physical adjustment •new priorities •time management	•academic advisors •academic counselors (limited)	•orientation (mandatory) •building relationships •accelerated learning •contextualized formats
Educational Planning and Academic Supports	•low-skills assessment •developmental plan •remedial courses	•assessment of skill levels •computer adaptation •tentative outlook •overall despondency	•assessment prep classes •study skills classes •tutoring (individual) •supplemental instructors •cohorts •learning communities	•strategic course choices •short/long-term plans •mandatory check-ins •active monitoring
Personal Guidance and Counseling	•financial stressors •family adjustments •new personal work skills •referrals to community services	•reluctant to ask for help •skeptical about receiving help •forming a new identity •“contextual” guidance	•family •faculty •affinity groups •counselors •mentors (assigned) •peer/alumni connections	•affinity group orientation •group counseling •alumni mentoring •transition portfolios

Table 5 (cont'd)

Career Counseling	•setting goals •interest assessment •review of abilities	•skills inventory •self-exploration •experiential opportunities •connecting life-story	•workshops •websites •computer applications •faculty •career coaches •alumni mentors	•employer connections •job fairs •job shadowing •volunteering •internships
Supplemental Services	•child care •transportation •equipment and supplies •learning diagnostics •financial planning	•disability awareness •accepting public assistance •needing financial guidance	•grants •scholarships (limited) •public / community services •student support groups •alumni support groups	•co-op jobs •field trips •community resources (at one place on campus) •follow-up mechanisms

1. Purnell & Blank (November 2004). Supporting success: Services that may help low-income students succeed in community college (pp. 8-9).
2. Goodman, J., Schlossberg, N. & Anderson, M. (2006). The 4 S System (pp. 32-41) and the Transition Model for counseling adults in transition (p.184).

4 S System Transition Aspects

Situation.

Where the wrap-around services components intersected with the 4 S aspects of transition, Gateway had services in place for most of the Situation and Self aspects. The aspect with the most services and supports was Situation- the time during transition when job loss “triggers” the decision to go to college. The colleges sponsored many pre-enrollment workshops on the main campus, at the satellite centers, and at community events (job fairs and career expos), which provided information to the public. Orientation was mandatory and these sessions covered career paths, supplemental services available, and financial aid qualifications. GCC offered many resources in the form of brochures and written and live sessions with instructions on how to apply for financial aid. The only missing aspect was where Personal Guidance and Counseling intersected with Situation. There was no data related to the counselors or advisors talking with students (or students receiving information) about applying “new personal work skills,” an element that is part of the wrap-around services model.

Self.

At the Workforce Preparation Center (WPC) displaced workers received targeted services. There were several workshops that focused on many of the transition aspects included in Situation, Self, and Support. As for the Self aspect, there was the 50+ Job Seekers session. Ilene provided a plethora of materials on topics such as adjusting to job loss, assessing skills, improving self-esteem, and exploring a new career path, and obtaining college credentials. There were also classes on using the computer and preparing for the assessment tests. The staff received special training for working with older people who experienced the trauma of job loss, so extra time and patience was extended for these clients.

Support.

For the Support aspect of transition, Gateway had licensed counselors who were skilled in offering students personal and academic advice. They were also connected to community resources for personal services, if needed. However, the number of counselors was deemed insufficient to adequately handle the thousands of students enrolled Gateway, especially student populations that needed special assistance, such as older students, students with disabilities, and veterans. According to the counselors, there were no immediate plans to invest in additional counselors. Instead, the number of academic advisors was increased to provide students with “more targeted” advising in specific disciplines and to assist students with better educational planning. This strategy was designed to help more students complete certificate and associate degree programs. Although the new advising scheme generally provided better service to students, it was not at the optimal level of operation. The optimal level would be where all students are assigned a specific advisor for their entire college tenure.

Missing Support and Strategy.

The aspects of transition that were not covered at Gateway were in the areas of Support and Strategy. The college lacked a consistent transition *mechanism* with targeted supports at the main campus for older students. Other studies found that nontraditional students were more successful when they became intimately connected to the college through relationships with faculty, advisors, and peers and where personal and academic services are available in one physical place (Brooks, 2011; Levin & Montero-Hernandez, 2009; Matus-Grossman & Gooden, 2002; NCTN, 2011). In spite of the services available at the WPC, which a student must seek independently, the college does not have a coordinated program that would ensure every student’s transition supports are consistent.

The goal at the WPC was to help students achieve assessment scores high enough to place out of as many developmental classes as possible. There were generally three levels of developmental courses for reading, writing, and math and each class was a semester-long, which could result in two years of study before a student reached college level classes. Even though the HALO organization provided wrap-around level supports for Latino/Latinas students and Juan said he helps students from any ethnic background, this level of support was not provided college-wide. Two of the administrators from Gateway said they would like to have a bridge program such as the Breaking Through initiative recommends. This type of program would include a comprehensive strategy with accelerated developmental courses and services that cover the transition aspects within Support and Strategy that were found to be missing at Gateway.

On the main campus, I found the Family Resource Center and the HALO organization provided support services. The Family Resource Center offered grants and scholarships that covered tuition and many supplemental needs, such as child care, books, and supplies. It sponsored workshops and the staff referred students to community resources, but it was not a place where students could get direct access to these supports. HALO was particularly effective in covering all of the 4 S's- Situation, Self, Support, and Strategies- for Latinos/Latinas transitioning to college. It offered cultural as well as academic supports. HALO also sponsored activities that introduced students to faculty and peers and provided information about other campus services, such as ESL classes, and the TRIO program.

Since HALO is considered a student group, academic services (tutoring and supplemental instruction) were provided by personnel from student services. Activities and events were sponsored by community organizations and collaborations with the student activities department. HALO does occupy a space where students gather for workshops, tutoring, and networking

events. The HALO organization has become a formidable resource for Latino/Latina students, but it only serves approximately 300 students. The manager reported that the organization's services have become very popular among the general student population because he has helped many non-Latino/Latina students as well.

Midstate Community College

Table 6 Guiding Framework Tool: Midstate Community College

Components of Wrap-around Services Model ¹	The 4 S System ² (Coping with Life Transitions)			
	Situation	Self	Support	Strategies
Academic Guidance and Counseling	•action “trigger” •pre-enrollment workshops •community outreach sessions	•emotional adjustment •physical adjustment •new priorities •time management	•academic advisors •academic counselors (assigned)	•mandatory orientation •accelerated learning •conceptualized formats •academic advancement
Educational Planning and Academic Supports	•low-skills assessment •developmental plan •remedial courses	•recognizing developmental areas •basic skills “refresher” •tentative outlook	•tutoring (individual/group) •supplemental instructors •cohorts (informal) •study skills classes •learning communities	•education learning plan- tied to career goals •mandatory check-ins •active monitoring
Personal Guidance and Counseling	•financial stressors •family adjustments •new personal work skills •referrals to community services	•reluctant to ask for help •skeptical about receiving help •“contextual” guidance •forming a new identity	•family •faculty •mentors (not assigned) •career coach •licensed counselors •affinity groups	•group counseling •alumni mentoring •transition portfolios

Table 6 (cont'd)

Career Counseling	•setting goals •interest assessment •review of abilities	•skills assessment •self-exploration •experiential opportunities •connecting life-story	•career coach (assigned) •workshops •faculty •mentors (from the field) •alumni mentors (assigned)	•employer connections •job fairs •volunteering •internships •job shadowing
Supplemental Services	•child care •transportation •equipment and supplies •learning diagnostics •financial planning	•disability awareness •accepting public assistance •needing financial guidance •connecting life-story	•public / community services •student support groups •alumni support groups •grants •scholarships	•co-op jobs •internships •stackable credentials •follow-up services

1 . Purnell & Blank (November 2004) Supporting success: Services that may help low-income students succeed in community college (pp. 8-9).

2. Goodman, J., Schlossberg, N. & Anderson, M. (2006). The 4 S System (pp. 32-41) and the Transition Model for counseling adults in transition (p.184).

4 S System Transition Aspects

Situation.

The strongest aspect of transition at Midstate was Situation where I found supports and services at the main campus and through the satellite location, the Technical Training Center (TTC). For the Self and Support aspects, CFP participants received personal developmental sessions and individual career coaching. The primary goal of the career coaches was to provide guidance for job training so the students could obtain employment as quickly as possible. The CFP classes prepared students for the Michigan National Career Readiness Certificate (MINCRC) test so they would have a marketable credential for job searching. The class work also prepared students for the college's assessment tests if they intended to pursue an associate degree. Midstate recently received Title 3 funding to create a student success center, so representatives from workforce development and the developmental education departments reported that they hoped some of the funding would be dedicated to extending career advising at the main campus.

Self.

While the personal development courses helped students overcome many psychosocial affects of transition, a few students mentioned that they would have liked more experiential opportunities for them to explore personal interests, such as art or music, as potential career paths. The interactions with career counselors mainly focused on their chosen programs of study with little time available for guidance in exploring "other possibilities" for educational development.

Missing Support.

In spite of the targeted services that the CFP provided, the programs' components lacked

the comprehensive structure as its predecessor, the Job Training First program (JTF). The original bridge program offered more classroom instruction (18 weeks versus 12 weeks), case management style advisors that provided more directed career planning, and extensive tutoring for math instruction, which helped students enroll right into college-level courses. These former components covered all of the 4 S's- Situation, Self Support and Strategy. As Cynthia recalled about the JTF program, "those that went on for degrees, almost every last one of them has graduated." The grant for the CFP was for only two years and 370 students were assisted during its existence, but the funding was considerably less than that of the JTF program.

At present, the workforce development administrators are working to articulate a few of the job training programs so students can earn credits toward "stackable credentials," which would enable students to accumulate credits from certificate to associate to bachelor degrees. These programs will provide direct pathways for certain disciplines and were reported to include accelerated and contextualized learning formats. This information will help students at the start of college because it influences their decisions about programs and informs them of the necessary time commitment.

Missing Strategy.

For the Strategy aspect of transition within the CFP, a missing element was licensed counselors to assist with personal needs such as financial planning or public assistance programs. Students who required these supports were referred to community resources, such as the Women's Assistance House. Other missing Strategy elements were campus-wide learning communities or a cohort system for students who needed support in formal programs. There was also no mention of students connecting to community members or alumni to form mentorships. At the main campus, orientation was not mandatory and the developmental courses were not

accelerated or contextualized. Developmental courses were offered in the traditional manner, as semester-long classes with multiple levels that students had to pass before reaching the credit-earning college level classes. The students, administrators, and staff members reported a need for scholarships targeted for older students.

A learning community.

In terms of the Support and Strategy aspects of transition, the students in the Gerontology Certificate Program experienced the closest semblance of a learning community. The structure of the gerontology program greatly enhanced the students' transition to the college as well as their entire college-going experience. Although their involvement came a year to two years after starting at the college (some attended part-time), they were still transitioning and becoming acclimated to the college environment. One student reported that during the first two years she "randomly took" classes, but once she joined the gerontology program she exclaimed "I had a cohort group that I traveled to one of my classes with and that really enriched and supported me." The other students reported similar experiences.

The gerontology coursework included content that students reported as more relevant to their age and the next stage of their lives. Students also reported that the psychology classes really helped them process personal feelings and taught them about maintaining their well-being. Another important benefit of the gerontology program was that all of the students gained experiential learning through paid internships at nursing homes or senior service centers in the community early in the program, which increased their motivation during transition and facilitated persistence throughout their tenures at the college. The gerontology program's curriculum was developed by the faculty who run the Senior Service Center (SSC). According to the students, the team of faculty and staff members was readily available to assist them with

academic and nonacademic needs. The SSC offered resources for personal developments as well as connections to public services and agencies.

In sum, both colleges covered most of the Situation and Self aspects of transition very well, particularly at the satellite locations where the services targeted displaced workers. I identified areas where the Self aspect intersected with Personal Counseling and Supplemental Services (components of the wrap-around model) were missing. For helping students merge their new student identity with “contextual” guidance and an exploration of personal interests, both colleges could use additional services. However, the services offered through the Women’s Assistance House (for Midstate students) covered these elements. Where the Support aspect intersected with Educational Planning and Academic Supports, both colleges lacked campus-wide cohorts or learning communities and counselors or advisors for students with specific needs, such as older students. Supplemental Services, such as assigned mentors and scholarships targeted for older students overlapped with the Strategy aspect. Other missing Strategy elements were accelerated and contextualized courses, job shadows, and a formalized student follow-up system. The next sections discuss the research findings in terms of the three dimensions of the theoretical framework, psychosocial adjustments, adult learning theories, and community college transition strategies.

Discussion of the Theoretical Framework

I discuss the findings in terms of the three dimension of the theoretical framework. Adapted from Merriam’s (2009) three-frame model, the theoretical framework moves from “the general topic and then more specifically to the academic setting” (p. 69). The first dimension explains the psychosocial adjustments that the students experienced during transition. The second dimension moves to the adult learning theories that I found in use by the instructors at the

case sites. The third dimension discusses the colleges' transition strategies through programs and services that student participants utilized during their transition to college.

Psychosocial Transition

For older students who decide to attend college in midlife because of a major life transition event, such as a job loss, I found the psychosocial ramifications to be significant. Evidence for this finding comes from student responses that I coded under “feelings,” “student interactions,” “socialization,” and “family relations.” These themes relate to psychosocial aspects of the transition experience because they reflected how the students felt about their decision to go to college and how the decision affected thoughts about themselves. Students expressed how they felt when they attended classes and reported on their interactions with classmates, faculty, and staff. Students also talked about how going to college affected the people around them, such as spouses, children, friends or other family members. Students' responses showed that there were concerns about capabilities prior to starting classes and these concerns reflected worries about being older than other students and being able to balance family responsibilities with schoolwork. After taking the skills assessment tests, students-expressed worries about being placed classes at levels higher than they could handle, particularly math. Other concerns were the pace of the class instructions, participating in class, and fears about using the computer.

Balancing school, work and family.

The Opening Door study of “students' perspectives” showed that “balancing work, family and college is difficult” (Matus-Grossman & Gooden, 2002, p. es-3). Student participants in this study reported similar challenges. As Rose said:

Sometimes I feel overwhelmed like I did tonight because I had to go to work and school and then I had math to do and then I had about 80 pages to do in the book, and then I had

an application to fill out so it was kinda difficult to balance all that stuff.

And Maria talked about the pressures of college going and balancing work and family responsibilities:

Well I think of myself, not college, it's a lot of pressure, a lot of pressure because you are an adult. You don't have time to lose. In my case, I need to prove to myself that I can do well, I mean very well, so sometimes I am under a lot of stress and I get sick because of that.

Rose and Maria's comments reflect how many students balanced multiple priorities and felt pressure keeping up with all of their responsibilities.

Overcoming fear and anxiety.

From the students' responses, there was evidence that they increased self-efficacy and self-esteem amid multiple stressors, such as feeling older than other students and fears about returning to school (Zajacova, Lynch & Espenshade, 2005). Ellen mentioned "I am now boosting my outlook and my self-esteem. I'm grateful [CFP] was available and that I decided to go through with it. I was afraid I'd be the oldest person in the class." Although Rose did not complete the Career Forward Program, she did walk away with greater self-confidence. She reported "I guess that in some ways it helps me build confidence, because of knowing, you know, I know more than I thought that I did." Keisha, who concerned me at our initial interview, displayed a much improved disposition and outlook for her future. She said, "I feel a little more positive about myself and things that I have to do... Yes, I feel more stronger, you know? I feel more like I can make it, I can do it."

Students who were not nurtured in education while growing up appreciated the experience because it affirmed their self image. Kathy professed that going to college improved

the level of confidence about her entire life. She explained:

It allowed personal growth at that time of my life and self-esteem and the affirmation of my instructors was just what I needed in my life. I grew by leaps and bounds in confidence, not only in my ability as a student, but just in life in general.

And for John, going to college gave him confidence in expressing himself. He declared:

This is the best thing that ever happened to me in my life. It really is. I enjoy school so much. It's a challenge, but I love it. I don't know where my life would be if I wasn't in school. I'm speaking more clearly, my writing is more legible. I want to make an impression on the world. I want to be something great. I want to be an entrepreneur. I want to be a mentor to somebody. I'm like wow! I mean, it's so much out there. There is life in a book. I didn't know that.

Students expressed anxieties because they perceived their age as a barrier. Alex, the psychology professor, provided insight into why age presents a challenge:

The thing is for younger students, especially those that just came out of high school; they have this idea of learning that involves technology. And in many ways, I think the older students, some of them, not all of them, but some of them don't associate as much learning with technology.

Amy's anxiety about her age was reflected in how she felt about being laid off. She believed that her age (55 years) and lack of computer skills were the reasons she lost her job. Although she mentioned that where she worked had been losing clients and cutting back everyone's hours, she ignored these very probable causes and focused on personal characteristics. According to Amy, she was enrolled in classes that were too advanced for her. I asked if she had been placed in the classes based on her assessment scores and she replied "They

made up my schedule for me and then I started school. I just couldn't keep up with the classes."

Amy further explained how fears about using the computer and being older than the other students really bothered her:

I was accepted into the TRIO program, but then she told me to withdraw. So I don't even know if I am a real student or not, because this [computer] class that I just took was on my own. The other people are so much younger than me and it's a part of their future college courses. I would like to learn how to use a computer. It's just becoming very hard for me... I was very overwhelmed and I just couldn't keep up. And the computer really threw me.

Underpinning her anxiety about computers was her perception that her age was affecting her ability to transition into classes. Amy became so consumed with self-doubt about her skills that feelings of embarrassment prevented her from using the services available to her and she eventually dropped-out.

Other students thought that their age was a factor initially, but once they became engaged in the coursework fears about age dissipated. Gail gave her perspective:

I've learned that I am younger than my real age. You know, I kinda feel like at this point some people are thinking of retirement coming up. I'm not thinking that way. I am actually going out and getting another skill. I plan on getting back into the workforce.

It seemed that Gail adjusted pretty well to the class environment. Although she mentioned the age of the other students in comparison to her own, being older did not appear as much of an issue as she anticipated.

Victoria commented that at first she worried that her age would limit her, but she found that once she and the other students came to know each other, they all had the same goal- to

graduate and move into new careers. She went on to say “I learned not to let the younger people get to me when we are in school. They may get a good grade on their test and I may have an average grade, but I don’t let that bother me.”

There were a few situations where students felt that being older and ethnic minorities were at the root of negative experiences in the classroom with faculty at both institutions. John’s talked about an encounter with an English teacher that left him feeling stereotyped. He related this story:

And one thing is I was always the oldest student in the classroom. I had spoken with my English professor and, although she was my age, that lady didn’t understand was what I was struggling with one little bit. I turned a paper in and asked her ‘What you think?’ She said, ‘You know you didn’t do a good job.’ I hadn’t put enough information in there about stuff. I said, ‘Well, what did you really want?’ She said, ‘John have you been to prison or something?’ I was like, ‘What are you talking about have I ever been to prison?’ I said, ‘You are stereotyping me.’ She said, ‘No, I didn’t mean it like that. I didn’t know if you had been to prison or not.’

John and the instructor reconciled after he reported her to the dean. He reported that she apologized and she told him, “I want to start taking university classes and I want to understand older students like you.” He explained how he felt about her assumptions:

Is this how you are looking at older students? Where you been all your life? What have you been doing? We have lives, we have families, and we have jobs. We always wanted to go to school, but we couldn’t go because we had people to take care of. Some of you all are looking at us because, at this age, we are going back to school because we were a failure or something.

Marcos also talked about how being older affected his speed in recalling certain concepts, especially in math, and he felt some consideration should be given for how long he was away from school. He said:

So I feel that in my case, a student that is an older student, there are not too many supports. And I actually tried to get into to TRIO, but they didn't accept me because I didn't have the math skills at the level you are supposed to have. I think they should have support programs for people like me.

Marcos described multiple factors, such as language barriers, cultural differences, and his age, as challenges during transition when he moved from the ESL classes into a formal program. He described the adjustment as:

When you go from ESL to the regular classes or the 'American' classes, we [Latinos] feel kind of disconnected. We feel we don't belong to the group. I was feeling it because most of the people are fast and they are not polite like in ESL classes.

Terenzini (1992) described students as experiencing "emotional states" resulting from "cultural disjunction- the painful break from cultural conventions and traditions- the agony of choice" (p. 29), which Marcos voiced as part of his experience. Marcos would not indict a particular teacher or class, but he expressed very strong feelings about experiences where he was the oldest and only Latino in class. Both John and Marcos felt that some of the faculty displayed insensitivity toward them because of their academic level for their age.

Relieving stressors through activities.

A few of the administrators talked about strategies developed to help relieve some of the students' psychosocial stressors. The director of the Workforce Preparation Center (WPC), Ilene, recognized that older students, especially displaced workers, "cope with many stress-filled

circumstances,” so she provided additional training for her staff and advisors. As mentioned in Chapter 4, Ilene said that the same sensitivity towards older students is not demonstrated at the main campus. Another administrator mentioned that her college sponsors cultural events to help students connect with other students, faculty, and staff. Linda described these events as “promoting greater understanding among students and the college community.” Peter, the Manager of the Career Forward Program (CFP), told me that one of the most helpful strategies for displaced workers was having the classes at the TTC rather than downtown “so that they don’t have to deal with all the other stuff before they even get to class.”

For those who participated in the CFP at Midstate, the experience increased their confidence and self-esteem, as evidenced by the students’ responses from above. The participants in the CFP were assigned career coaches. The coaches conducted one-on-one meetings at least once per week and reviewed the participant’s assessment scores, communicated with their class instructor, and coached them on professional and personal improvements. At Gateway, specially trained staff members who attended to displaced workers and older students at the WPC facilitated transition. The HALO organization filled in gaps where student services lacked specialized services and provided culturally relevant supports and connections to peers and faculty.

Although there were some unfortunate incidents involving ethnic and cultural perceptions in the classroom, students were able to adequately process these events such that they did not distract them from continuing their education. In fact, these experiences reflected an opportunity for students’ to exercise self-reflection and provided moments for deeper learning and ultimately becoming a “transformative experience” (Merriam, 2008; Mezirow, 1997). Dirkx (1997) described this transformation as “learning through the soul” (p. 83). When students are

committed, receptive, and fully engaged in the learning experience (as the students' experiences demonstrate above), every aspect of their existence becomes enlightened by the college experience (Dirkx, 1997; Merriam, 2008). Understanding how students processed negative incidents contributes to a fuller understanding of the psychosocial adjustments they experienced.

The aforementioned statements reflect how students coped with psychosocial adjustments. They reported that significant aspects of their transition to college involved psychosocial aspects: how they anticipated feeling when in the classroom with younger students or students of a different culture, the pressure of balancing homework and studying with family responsibilities, and overcoming self-doubts about their capacity to keep up with the class work. After attending classes and becoming engaged in the course content, 6 of the 11 student participants felt that their anxiety about age dissipated.

Adult Teaching and Learning

Adult learning theories underpin the efforts at community colleges to create developmental interventions for underprepared students by capitalizing on how adult students respond to teaching and how they prefer to learn. Self-directed, self-reflective, collaborative, and problem-solving learning activities characterize effective developmental strategies (Brookfield, 1986; Cross, 1981; Knowles, 1980). I coded the participants' responses associated with teaching and learning under the themes "class experiences," "learning experiences," and "college participation." Student reflected on what happened in the classroom through interactions with faculty and classmates. Administrators, counselors, and advisors reported adaptations to the curriculum and new directions for instructional staff. Faculty talked about accommodations for older students and their specific teaching methods. Two specific themes emerged from the responses. I found that major challenges for students at both sites were learning math and using

computers, which manifested as significant barriers to transition.

Curriculum development.

Knowles (1980) developed the concept of *andragogy*, which is rooted in assumptions about the learner, the learner's life experiences, his or her "readiness to learn," and orientation to learning. He believes that the classroom is a participatory environment where learners "share the responsibility for planning and operating a learning experience, and therefore have a feeling of commitment toward it" (Knowles, 1980, p. 57). Linda, a dean from Gateway, talked about the pedagogical challenge when there are competing expectations between older students and traditional-aged students in the same class. Her viewpoint reflects the thinking of the other administrators. She said:

I see you're probably familiar with the term andragogy and so I think one issue is you're dealing with students who have expectations, nontraditional students who have expectations about what they'll get from their learning experience which is very different from the traditional student.

Terenzini (1992) found that pedagogical elements affirmed students' self-esteem and improved their feeling of connectedness to the institution. Such was the case at Midstate. Anna, the Director of the Technical Training Center (TTC), noted that older students' presence was keenly felt in the classroom because "they aren't afraid to challenge the instructors." As Anna mentioned in Chapter 5, "Instructors here at the college had to go through some pretty big training over the last three to four years to understand how to work with older students." She commented on how students' feedback helped them with continuous improvement of the CFP curriculum. Jerry, the Assistant Dean at the TTC talked about how they had to make adjustments to the curriculum and the faculty. Cynthia, one of the program's collaborators, offered a

developmental perspective on how the JTF program was created. She said “And we helped them understand exactly what had happened to them; exactly what they were currently going through. Why they were feeling the things they were feeling and where they were going to end up.” Although the JTF program was not running at the time of the interviews, some of its best practices were put into the CFP that became its replacement. According to Cynthia, other than the CFP through workforce development at TTC, there were no other programs or services through the developmental education department for displaced workers.

Academic supports.

Gateway recently changed its developmental education courses because students were scoring very low on the assessment tests. Juan, the Director of the HALO organization, talked about the new developments at Gateway:

We began, maybe four years ago, a student development for first-time college students to give them a refresher. It’s not a requirement, but we encourage it especially if students have low scores on Acuplacer. We are trying to fill in the gaps, because we don’t want, also the students to come and can barely read and write, so how do we close the gap between them? Because now it takes two years just to get to sociology [for credits], so in a way are we failing these students because we know the longer they go they might fail or drop out because they don’t see the benefit [of the refresher courses].

What stood out to me was the fact that these types of classes are not mandatory, especially if a goal of the college was to facilitate student persistence.

Juan further explained that to help students through the developmental coursework, he believed supplemental instruction (SI) was necessary. He professed “there are only a few of them and I am lucky to bring them to my program here at [HALO].” He explained how SI works:

We are doing this because now you have peers teaching you and who know what it's like and that the SI is learning skills that are applicable when they go to a 4-year or when they become professional. We need to do more of that, especially in science and math...

The professors recruit [SIs] and hire them in and they start doing a mini classroom with about 30 students for extra help.

As discussed in Chapter 4, Juan believed that the supplemental instructors provided the best academic support because they are peers of the students and they know how to relate the material more effectively.

Class instruction.

Faculty talked about how they accommodated older students in the classroom. Cynthia told me about her teaching philosophy. She believed “You don’t just tell them to do the job. You teach them what the tools are and how to use the tools in order to get the job done. I don’t give them baby assignments.” Cynthia also felt it is important to “require on one kind of assignment that they get an A.” She explained that students need to know what it feels like to earn “very excellent grades,” otherwise, they will never know how to work towards excellence. Alex accommodated older students by recognizing there are multiple generational influences in his classes.

Brookfield (1986) promulgated the notion of self-directedness as essential to adult learning. The goal of the educator is to “assist” the adult in becoming self-directed through various participatory activities in which the students work in groups, act as the class facilitator as well as decide the learning and assessment goals for the class. When I visited the CFP at Midstate, Sarah’s teaching combined the transmission teaching method, where students listened to a lecture and took notes, with group activities for solving math problems, which kept the class

highly engaged in the subject matter (Brookfield, 1986). Sarah explained how she balanced differing levels instruction:

I will turn my higher level students on material that I will not get to, material that we will not cover. I might say on lesson number 12 I'm going to take these 8 or 9 people and I want the 5 or 6 to get going on lesson 25. And then I will just bounce back and forth between the two.

I also found that Alex used aspects of Brookfield's (1986) teaching strategy at Gateway. He described his approach:

And for older students...they are listening to what I'm saying and they're writing things down because they think this is how it is learned. And this is not how I'm teaching. But that's how the old way was; teacher talks and student writes, but that's not my method.

I'm trying to get them to think and trying to get them to interact with one another.

Alex engaged students informally by encouraging them to openly talk about the subject matter with him and among themselves using group activities and encouraging students to talk about their personal experiences. From my observation, the students enjoyed this form of interaction and most of them participated in the class discussion.

From the student perspective, the pace of some classes was a challenge. Marcos voiced strong opinions about a need for services for students who have been away from formal education for long time and how he felt his needs had been neglected. He said:

We have different customs that really impact the students in my classes... I like my classes, some I don't. The only problem in my case, you know, as a nontraditional students and when you are the age when you are away from school for many years and then return, the school doesn't care whether you know math or not. They teach very fast

and they don't really care about the other people.

He commented that the concepts were not completely foreign to him. He just needed a slower pace so he could follow the teacher's instructions as he translated the lesson from English to Spanish. He did not comment about tutoring, but said that he tried to get into the TRIO program and was not accepted because his math scores were too low.

Math instruction.

As I mentioned, math surfaced as a significant theme across all of the participant categories from both case sites. Wayne, an academic advisor who also has the role of facilitating instruction, commented on how he addresses students' needs with math instruction. He reported that most students have difficulty getting through the minimum math requirements. Wayne told me that students come back to him for help with their math because the structure of the tutoring at main campus does not "break it down in the simplest form." This type of support is offered at the WPC, a satellite location at Gateway. Although students could go to math labs for tutoring at GCC's main campus, they did not receive as much individualized attention. Even with the support of the SIs, as described previously, the tutoring involved group sessions as opposed to one-on-one lessons.

I observed a math class at GCC over three weeks and noted that it was taught via the transmission method (Brookfield, 1986). This class differed greatly from a math class I visited during my pilot study where contextualized learning techniques were infused with math instruction. The thrust of a contextualized program is to bridge social aspects of college transition with self-actualization techniques while simultaneously incorporating the basic coursework (Alssid et.al, 2010; Downing, 2008). I did not observe any contextualized information in the math class at Gateway. Maria, a Gateway student, offered her opinion of how

math was taught:

And the system they use to teach math at community college, in my opinion, is not good because you go into the classroom and you wait on the instructor, then if you buy your textbook it explains it in another way, so I cannot say they offer you, they force you to do math homework in the math zone. And the math zone teaches you another way, so it's crazy. It's really crazy. And many of the instructors are not good in the reality. They are math genius, but they have no skills to teach.

According to Maria, math instruction was given using multiple formats, which was confusing to her. Her perspective was shared by several other students across institutions. For Maria and Carrie, math was a hurdle in the way of completing their degrees. Fortunately, the tutoring services from TRIO and the supports from HALO helped Maria finally complete her math requirement. Carrie talked about having to take math courses online. She did not care for online classes because of her difficulty in learning math, but expressed resignation that she had to take them. Carrie preferred a "face-to-face" class format. Similar to Maria's struggle with math, Carrie was frustrated by being held up from completing the degree because of this one subject.

For students outside of the CFP at Midstate, tutoring was available at the main campus. However, students reported that the tutors were often less helpful when interacting with older students. Kathy reflected on how she (and other students) would have benefitted from individual tutoring for learning math, as the CFP students received, because the classroom instruction did not provide enough personal context for her to readily comprehend the material. As for the developmental math class observed at Gateway, students would benefit from more contextualized and interactive instruction.

Computer skills.

The other major transition challenge was using computers. Recalling Amy's story from above, her anxiety over computers contributed to her withdrawal from GCC. I inquired whether she sought any tutoring at GCC's main campus. She told me she used the computer lab and the library, but she "didn't connect well with the tutors." I asked her to tell me more about her experience with the tutors. She replied:

I just didn't feel comfortable with it. I think I felt like I wasn't getting enough help or she didn't realize just how bad my skills are off... You know, being so incompetent at the computer really made me embarrassed and quite humiliated.

Carrie's troubles with computers were related to access- a few of the classes she needed were only offered online. Without access to the Internet at home, her progress was slowed because she had to schedule time on campus or wait to enroll in the on-ground class. Carrie reflected on her acclimation to online classes. She said, "Just getting more knowledge, getting more experiences and dealing with like technology like I didn't have before. Having online classes, I've had to learn how to navigate more on the computer." In contrast, Gail embraced the opportunity to learn a new skill. She expressed a lot of confidence in herself and what she hoped to gain. Gail explained "I am looking forward to learning more about computers. It's something I've been wanting to do for a while... so the opportunity to learn more about it is exciting to me."

When I asked administrators what they perceived as challenges older students experienced that traditional-aged students did not, the use of computers was among several of their responses. Jerry said, "I think computer technology scares older students, nontraditional students. I think older students in particular. I think for older students you have to almost

convince them that they are not too old to learn.” Fran, the director of the Developmental Learning Center at Gateway, made a similar comment. She said “They don’t feel they are familiar enough with computers to really use the technology well.” The challenge of computers was not only in the physical usage. As Alex explained in Chapter 4, computer application terminology was a problem among older students in his classes. Although the satellite locations at both sites provided computer training workshops, many of the students resisted attending them. I found that because the training was voluntary, the students’ unfamiliarity with the use of computers impeded their grasp of how important it was for them seek training. Also, as Jenny pointed out, having competing responsibilities did not leave much time for participating in activities outside of their class schedules.

The teaching and learning aspects of transition became apparent at Midstate when the CFP students provided feedback to the administrators about the class curriculum- wanting the content to more relevant to their life experiences and having instructors who could relate to their age group. The feedback was instrumental in the development of the current bridge program and resulted in the addition of math tutoring and computer training at the TTC. I witnessed contextualized learning techniques in parts of the classroom instruction, as Sarah demonstrated while teaching a basic math class. Students who were not involved in the CFP program found academic supports through faculty members or tutoring services at the main campus. Both colleges needed computer training as a compulsory activity rather than a voluntary one.

Community College Transition Strategies

Many community colleges have initiated transition interventions that show promise of improving nontraditional student persistence and retention. However, several scholars have found institutional characteristics that impede this goal. Levin (2007) purported that

“institutional effects are far outweighed by student effects” for nontraditional students who are severely underprepared for college (p. 158). In Bailey et al.’s (2005)’s study where the institutional effects on community college graduation rates were measured, one of the findings was students who face multiple barriers needed more counseling and guidance, an implication for greater student services, particularly for nontraditional student segments.

A conclusion from the data was, where a bridge program existed, displaced workers who were older and academically underprepared received the most supports. However, when the programs were not comprehensive in terms of offering adequate academic preparation, students were at a disadvantage. Also, students reported difficulty transitioning to credit classes at the main campus because of a lack of supports for older students. I identified the following resources where displaced workers found academic and personal support at each case site.

Gateway’s Programs and Services

- Workforce Preparation Center
- HALO
- Family Resource Center
- Counseling
- Developmental Classes (non-credit)
- TRIO

For Gateway, the services are dispersed in multiple departments and locations. Students were referred to either a particular service or stumbled upon them. There was no cohesive structure for accessing services that provide a complete wrap-around affect. The WPC comes close and offers displaced workers a good start. Students can continue to get assistance from the staff, which is more individualized than at the main campus, but limited. For additional academic assistance,

students were referred to services at main campus, where administrators and students reported many “get lost” along the way.

Midstate’s Programs and Services

- Career Forward Program (formerly Job Training First)
- Women’s Assistance House
- Senior Service Center
- Developmental Classes (non-credit)
- TRIO

At Midstate, the CFP offered many of the wrap-around type services. Students received individual career coaching, personal coaching, and preparation for the Michigan National Career Readiness Certification exam, which equipped them with a credential for job searching. The primary focus of the CFP was job training with less attention to preparation for formal programs. Although the CFP classwork helped participants with the assessment tests, several did not score high enough to enroll directly into credit classes.

Student services at both case sites offered academic advisors for educational planning and tutoring as the primary form of academic support to assist underprepared students. Both sites also offered personal development courses through the main campus that focused on topics such as time management, study habits, and self-motivation. However, enrollment in these courses was voluntary so most students were reluctant to spend the time and money for them and often did not fully grasp the necessity of taking them. Students who did not participate in CFP and took developmental courses reported that when they took classes at the main campus, they experienced another transition. This second transition was described as just as overwhelming as their initial transition to college. Coping with the second transition was beyond the scope of

services offered through developmental classes or the workforce development programs, so their actual transition experience extended further than the prescribed length of a particular bridge program or service.

Organizational Issues

There was evidence from the interview responses of organizational issues that affected student transition, which included orientation, credit articulation, funding, and bureaucracy. Cohorts and learning communities and counseling and advising were also frequently mentioned in the data and indicated a need for further analysis. These themes will be addressed in the next section on building relationships between students and college personnel. The transition strategies discussed in this section are organizational themes that administrators, faculty, and counselors brought to light as issues that affected the transitions of older students.

Orientation for Older Students

Terenzini (1992) recognized that the transition process differs from student to student depending on his or her background, so orientation programs should be responsive to these differences. Orientation was mandatory at Gateway but it was a universal event where the only differentiating aspect was a student's academic level. At Midstate, orientation was voluntary and offered either as a live session or online.

The main campus at Gateway had only recently made orientation mandatory because for many years attendance had been scant, especially after registration moved online. It was explained to me that, with the national completion agenda tied to state and federal funding, the college's leadership decided that orientation was an imperative. All students were required to attend an orientation prior to starting classes. Tanya, an academic advisor, described the orientation process:

All students are required to do a 4 hour orientation. If it's live orientation, students learn about academic advising, financial aid and the support services that the college offers.

They go on a tour of the school and they meet with academic advisors at the end of the session or group advisors depending on their placement levels.

Ilene, the Director at the WPC, expressed opposition to grouping students based on their academic level. She believed that specific populations, particularly older students, deserved targeted orientations because of the questions they ask or the concerns they voice that are relevant to them. In her opinion, older students do not receive adequate attention when they are in a room with younger students. Ilene has conducted orientation workshops at the WPC for displaced workers for many years. When I asked what type of service is needed for older students, she responded:

Orientation for that older adult! I think we have gotten support over that last couple of years from the people in student services recognizing that we do provide a revenue source for the college and I think before we were just out there and no one really paid attention to us...we need to target our services to specific populations as opposed to targeting all new students. Target for this population, target for that population...And it shouldn't be done in the exact same way.

Alex, an adjunct faculty member at GCC, also believed an orientation for older students would be helpful. Alex said:

For older students they are shifting orientation, to orient them to ways education has manifested itself. The way of the world has changed. I've dealt with felons who have been in for 15-20 years and haven't seen a cell phone before. I mean, if this is how the world changes in 20 years, you're talking about at minimum they are 35, it's got to be

disorienting. There's got to be an orientation to acclimate them, some transitional thing, if they are returning after 20 years or so. Some students may not need it, but I think a vast majority who has not been in a learning environment in the last 15-20-30 years would probably do well.

A critical factor that Midstate has overlooked by not mandating orientation is that research shows "in faculty focus groups, participants recognize that students are more likely to take advantage of support when it is not optional" (CCCSE, 2010, p. 16). I asked Jerry, an assistant dean, how he accommodated older students. He mentioned that, although the main campus does not sponsor activities targeted to older students, his department makes an effort. He responded:

I think we accomplish that in our marketing materials by showing older students in the picture, showing nontraditional students in the picture. We have for older students a weekly open house tour that's nonthreatening. So it's come in, you don't have to have an appointment, stop by. Having testimonials from older students and nontraditional students showing there are people like me in their 40s, 50s or 60s graduating. So I think we have tried to overcome it by doing those kinds of things.

Jerry was very emphatic about how the orientation at main campus does not give the same attention to the needs of older students in the way his department does it at TTC. Peter, the CFP manager, talked about how important it was to do community outreach. He said:

We hold coffee roundtable discussions for nontraditional students every month at their orientation and before they can step foot on campus we run out to our partners. We have awareness session of what college is going to be like. We get out into the community, rather than have people come here all the time, tell them about college, what it takes to go

to college, how to be prepared for it.

The CFP participants received an extensive orientation at the TTC. Before participants were enrolled in the CFP, they were provided information about the college, the job training programs, financial aid, and potential employment opportunities.

Credit Articulation

Credit issues have an impact on student transition in terms of decisions about possible career paths and the number of credits a student should prepare to take. Credit articulation was discussed in two distinct types of conversations: GCC was in the process of establishing a consistent policy for providing credits for students' work skills and experience, referred to as prior learning assessment (PLA); and MCC was working on accrediting some of its job training programs.

Prior learning assessments.

Gateway offers PLA on a case-by-case basis. Ilene, from the WPC, explained that in order for a student to obtain credits for a skill, he or she had to appeal to the department of the discipline and demonstrate an aptitude as determined by that department. She felt that the process was very subjective and inconsistent across the college's departments, which resulted in some students receiving them and some not. Ilene has worked tenaciously for some students to convince their major departments to grant them credits toward certificates or associate degrees. She offered her perspective:

I think our college is very poor when it comes to PLA. I think we had 4 last year. But we really don't look at prior learning in a way that I think we should. Especially look at 35-55 year olds, you have people who have skills sets that they have learned and they should be receiving credit for that. ..They shouldn't have to start all over at zero when they have

skill sets that they could bring into the classroom and the other students are going to learn from them, which generally happens when you have older students in the classroom.

Linda, the Dean of Lifelong and Community Learning at GCC, also weighed in on the PLA issue. She said:

And then the third area that I think we've been inactive in is the PLA, higher learning assessment, we just have received a grant to do a project where we will help adults to get a higher learning assessment going. So actually giving them credit for their higher learning activities is something that we've been working on but we haven't gotten it in place, but we're working on it.

Anna, the TTC director, acknowledged that the PLA issue has been debated at MCC and, with the accrediting of certain job training programs, standards for granting them would become clearer.

Accrediting job training.

Midstate was working on accrediting one of their job training programs. Anna reasoned that being able to offer credits that count toward the fulfillment of a certificate or associate degree will be a win-win for the college as a whole. She pointed out that the workforce development side has a consistent stream of new students who could increase enrollment in the college's other programs. Anna explained that the challenge has been aligning their credentials with the Department of Education's standards for degree programs and navigating the faculty's response to who will teach the classes. Anne commented,

Remember, our classes [job training] are taught by adjunct faculty members. Not taught by members of the faculty. We use them if we choose. Faculty members see us as competition. They should see us as a value-added and a way to build their programs.

She further explained that the faculty's concerns weigh-in when the job training programs' enrollment numbers are high because of implications to the faculty contract. This issue had not been settled at the time of the interview.

Elaine, the dean of workforce development, wants the accreditation because it promotes "stackable credentials," which enable students to accumulate credits as they earn job training skills and certificates and on to associate degrees and potentially transferring to baccalaureate institutions without having to repeat any subjects. The value pertaining to transition is that students will be better informed at the onset of their college tenure. They will be shown a clear pathway for obtaining a specific career and for obtaining a degree even though their college experience began with job training, which traditionally only led to employment.

Funding

After closer examination of the interview responses, I found that "funding" was a common thread across the all of participant categories. Since there was no mention of funding or financially related questions in the interview protocol, I determined that the emergence of this theme was significant. Words such as "fund," "funding" or "financial" and "grant" showed that students and staff members' responses were mostly about financial aid or the Pell grant. The counselors, advisors, faculty, and administrators mentioned financial aid, but most of their responses related to funding sources, such as government grants and Title 3 funding. The students did not report any problems receiving financial aid. Their primary issue was that the Pell grant amount was not enough to cover the types of financial obligations for people in midlife.

Student participants from Gateway did not report financial aid as a barrier during transition. The college provided extensive workshops on how to complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FASFA) and students took advantage of the Pell grants offered to them.

Ilene, from the WPC, explained how she made sure students were able to get financial assistance and were well informed of the cost of attending college. She said:

One of the things we do differently than the main campus is, I started this back in 2005, first of all we work with the Workforce Investment Act programs and Trade Investment Act programs and we create an education plan that has to include the estimated cost of attending the school.

Students from Midstate were also well informed about financial aid and did not report any difficulties receiving Pell grants. Even attending as part-time students, they were able to take advantage of Pell grants. Kathy mentioned that she was able to get through the completion of her associate degree without incurring any debt. However, she reported there was one area that could have been improved. Kathy was not aware of the potential conflicts when financial aid was combined with other public assistance. She said her case was not typical of Pell grant recipients because she was paying child support for her daughter who lived out of state with her father. She explained:

You can't have a payroll deduction from work study money because it's federally titled money, not just plain old money. So it became this huge mess between the agents, and the public officials. So I spent a lot of my time running around between payroll and friend of the court.

She went on to explain that the Pell grant paid for books and tuition, but parking costs were a burden. Kathy said "the hardest thing to work through...was always worrying about being behind in my bills. I needed to have money to park, so it discouraged my ability to really be able to focus on my studies."

From a national perspective, federal laws regarding welfare and work requirements affect

students' ability to complete postsecondary education. In Michigan, there are stipulations with time limits for pursuing vocational or job training instead of working full time and these restrictions affected Kathy because she was working toward an associate degree and could only afford to attend part-time (Matus-Grossman & Gooden, 2002). The experiences with financial aid reported by the student participants reflect how access to Pell grants for community college students has changed in the last 10 years. Studies from a decade ago found financial aid to be a significant barrier for nontraditional students (Matus-Grossman & Gooden, 2002; National College Transition Network, 2011; Purnell & Blank, 2004). Without the recent changes, several of the student participants would not have been able to support themselves while they attended college.

The other funding issue was the dependency on funding from external sources to sustain programs regardless of effectiveness or success. This was not a new discovery, particularly with Michigan's financial climate, as I outlined previously. However, it particularly affected programs proven to help displaced workers, despite them being a considerable segment of the college-going population at both case sites. I asked the administrators why it was difficult to sustain programs for displaced workers. Fran, the DLC director at Gateway gave her perspective:

Sometimes they do have special grants that come and go. You know the Department of Labor puts out a lot of grants and the Department of Commerce puts out some, but they're usually one or two years, or five which is pretty much the max, so when the grant goes the program tends to go.

Jerry, from Midstate explained his perspective;

Different funding came from the federal government to support different paths.

Employers could connect to the workforce development side...So I think it's just our

culture. At our institution, the biggest changes have been who our provost, our president, or even where our dean came from. If their history or background was in Arts & Sciences, then it seems like we have a trend that way. If they come from workforce development, then our resources trend that way.

Because funding for programs that target displaced workers is a combination of resources that relies mostly on state and federal monies, several of the comments emphasized the importance of continuing the partnership with the state employment agency. Ilene said, “The continuation of our strategic partnership with [the Michigan Employment Agency] is imperative!” The partnership enabled Ilene’s team to operate out of the state employment agency and continue to offer transition services for displaced workers without the college having to bear all the costs. Her team’s work involved assisting workers, who were not necessarily going to enroll at the college, with preparations for state certifications and licenses in trade vocations.

The supports and services that workforce development teams created became greatly hampered when external funding resources were cut. Wayne, one of Ilene’s staff members, reported that they recently endured a 10% budget cut. He remarked that what hinders them the most is “when they cut our budget and that pretty much limits us to the things we can provide.” And Peter, from MCC, related a similar sentiment. Peter told me:

It’s financial. That’s the biggest thing budget wise... how do we leverage our resources? How do we get community folks who will help us so the student can get that credential? So we know state funding is not reliable right now. Property taxes were the biggest way community colleges got most of our money, but property taxes are gone, and tuition is creeping up there, so our funding is not stable. But that should not stop us from our mission. It is our mission for students to complete their education.

The administrators, faculty, and staff in both cases reported that the colleges' ability to provide support services for displaced workers at the wrap-around level varied depending on funding resources from governmental agencies. There was an expectation at both sites that funding was to come from state or federal work programs, which was constantly subject to fluctuations because of the state and national economy. As Peter professed, in order to continue the mission of a student-centered completion agenda, community colleges need to consider alternative resources from within the community.

Bureaucracy

The subject of bureaucracy was mentioned by several participants. Participants across sites mentioned how students faced many organizational hurdles that affected their transition and persistence in college. Anna's comment reflects what several other administrators have observed. She said:

They [students] are very frustrated by the bureaucracy that we have at the college. You have to go to 6 offices to get one thing. And you have to be tenacious. You have to ask questions, which is a terrible thing to say about colleges. But we are not very good. We are getting better at being socialized.

Students from both colleges talked about how the bureaucracy caused them confusion, disappointment, and setbacks while they transitioned. Amy and Maria talked about how the bureaucracy contributed to difficulties because of tedious paperwork. Maria mentioned frustration with a grant application from the Family Resource Center. She said:

I applied for women's resources or something like that, but they ask for a lot of paperwork and I had a lot of homework to do and I had to take care of my family and stuff like that, so I needed to go to different places to look for this paper and that paper

and I try.

Her comment reflected how several students felt about some of their colleges' paperwork and processes.

Communicating information was reported as an issue. Juan, the manager of HALO, commented on how information was disseminated to students. He expressed:

I think in terms of delivery we could do a better job of getting to those people [displaced workers] because I'm sure the Internet is not the best way... so figuring out better and more efficient ways... how do we let the students know these changes are happening?

An illustration of Juan's point was Carrie's story. She mentioned her original major was eliminated and how the college failed to notify her of the change in curriculum. She accumulated a number of credits for a program that no longer existed and her time-to-degree had to be extended. Although Carrie's case did not result in her withdrawal, incidents such as this contribute to students stopping-out or dropping-out.

Building Relationships

As in mentioned in the previous section, there was evidence from the participants' responses that cohorts and learning communities and counseling and advising were themes that emerged as significant. Although the topics of counseling and advising were mentioned in the interview questions, data analysis revealed new meanings associated with them. Cohorts and learning communities were topics that the participants introduced and were mentioned frequently enough that I determined it necessary to analyze them further. After considering the participants' responses, I found that building relationships emerged as a transition theme. Underlying the functional components of programs and services, there was evidence that meaningful relationships between students and faculty, counselors, and advisors were an important aspect of

transition that the colleges made an effort to address.

Important Interactions

Interactions with faculty are integral to a successful transition to college (Matus-Grossman & Gooden, 2002; Terenzini, 1992; Vorhees, 1987). Vorhees's (1987) research on students' background characteristics and community college persistence showed that "frequent contact with faculty outside the classroom seems to be the most important form of academic integration that influences persistence" (p. 118). This assertion parallels Terenzini's (1992) findings that out of class experiences have a significant impact on how students transition to college, which includes the extent to which they interact with faculty. Kathy greatly appreciated the support she received from a faculty member at Midstate. She said:

I had an exceptional instructor who just had the patience to build confidence and poured the ability out of his pores to get out of students that 'I can't get away with that' attitude. He went out of his way and above and beyond to get me through his class.

Although John had a negative encounter, he reported there was a faculty member who inspired him:

I was encouraged by one of my instructors and he was a member of [my] church. He was a dean of students and he was a friend of mine. So he encouraged me to stick with it. He pulled me aside and gave me a little book, and said 'you can do it.'

Students at Gateway found that the HALO organization offered a place where they received support among peers with similar backgrounds. Maria found the assistance from Juan, the HALO director, indispensable. She reported "American advisors don't have the experience that we need because they are American and we come from a different country." Maria went on to explain how Juan's presence made a difference to her and Marcos because he helped them

with many transitional difficulties.

However, Carrie brought up issues about adjunct faculty members that affected her learning experience. She said “Sometimes it can be challenging dealing with different instructors. You never know what you’re gonna get... And that can be very frustrating and they don’t care. It’s like either you get it or you don’t.”

Carrie’s interaction with adjunct faculty reflects a common issue that community colleges across the US have been challenged to address (Scrivener & Coghlan, 2011). This is an important issue because studies show that the relationship between faculty and students affects the level of student engagement in the class room (CCCSE, 2010). Although there was evidence that the colleges recognized the importance of relationship building between students, faculty, and even some staff members, there was no mention of how adjunct faculty fit into these efforts.

A few of the administrators admitted that their contact with students was limited because their administrative role placed them more in touch with faculty. I thought about the difference in the distance between how the administrators described their interactions with students and Juan’s interactions with students. Juan’s administrative decisions for HALO benefitted from his direct contact with students. As such, increased interaction among students and administrators would have an impact on administrative decisions related to students’ needs.

Counseling and Advising Services

The Opening Doors (2002) research revealed that students are “looking for more direction” in the form of counseling and academic advising (Matus-Grossman & Gooden, 2002, p. 45). The participants in this study certainly would concur with this statement. Kathy, a student from MCC, offered a perspective that summed up her experience with counseling. She remarked:

They [main campus] are excellent at giving academic advice on the credit side, but if it

came to any noncredit, they couldn't really answer it. It seems like there is a disconnect at our college between the credit and the noncredit side and receiving academic counseling. Kathy's assessment points to a factor I found to be prevalent at both sites. Ilene, the WPC director from GCC, offered her assessment of the counseling and advising situation at her college:

I don't think the college has done a very good job of this as far as anything for older students. That's one of my greatest frustrations. I think it's just structural. I think they just have to look at it and restructure.

Ilene went on to explain how counseling and advising at the WPC has historically been about creating relationships between the clients and the college personnel. She talked about working with displaced workers who often manifested psychosocial challenges that include trust issues, self-esteem, and motivational issues that were overcome when they receive encouragement and direction from someone with whom they built a relationship over time.

Relationship building is a function that the counseling and advising departments at main campus had not focused on until recently. Tanya, an academic advisor at GCC, talked about the changes in the academic advising department. She reported that they are "moving to a cohort model where there will be advisors trained specifically to answer business questions, specifically to answer social science questions or humanities." Tanya pointed out that using the cohort model was a "very intentional" effort to connect students with people in certain subject areas who would see students "on a continuous basis."

Juan, the HALO manager at GCC, also talked about the changes to the counseling and advising functions. He said "There's a problem with counseling now. There is problem for me and my colleagues. There used to be 16 counselors and there's only like 6 left and they're not

posting for them.” According to Juan, Gateway had to redistribute funding, which meant cutting back on counselors to expand the number of advisors. Juan brought to light another reason why the advising functions have changed at GCC. He stated that some students accumulate credits, but none of them count toward a degree. His point related to the colleges’ efforts to improve graduation rates in order to maintain state and federal funding. Juan believed that the college’s investment in the advising model that Tanya mentioned does not adequately cover students’ needs, particularly students that require the expertise of a licensed counselor or a social worker.

The grant funding for the CFP at Midstate provided for career coaches to cover career counseling. They also had workshops on financial aid where students could arrange individual appointments with advisors. As far as specific counseling for personal needs, students were referred to community resources outside of the college, such as the Women’s Assistance House. Anna, the TTC director at Midstate, commented on the counseling services within the workforce development department. She said “For some time in here we had no counseling services. This is the first time. Career coaching we got through this time... But our department hasn’t had counseling. We hadn’t had career or financial aid counseling.” Jerry would like to see the return of a best practice at MCC. He described a counseling service that was in place when the JTF was at the height of operation. He recalled, “We used to have dedicated case managers just for nontraditional students. We’re trying to recreate this level of service... I think of all the best practices, we need to continue to develop that pathway for nontraditional older students.”

Elaine, the Dean of Work Force Development at MCC, felt that the addition of faculty advisors would help facilitate transition and persistence at community colleges. She commented:

It’s a small thing around student engagement but student awareness of the ability to utilize that person as a resource. We all know that we are less likely to go to someone if

don't know their name and ask them for help. And that's a very simple small piece, but as an institution it would be a very lofty goal.

As Elaine mentioned in Chapter 5, there are not enough faculty to accommodate every student. Similar to this situation, faculty advising was considered at GCC, but as Lydia, a counselor, pointed out, "We are challenged in many cases about having office hours for faculty because we have anywhere up to 1,800 faculty which only a couple 100 or so are full-time." Her assumption being that only full-time faculty would be expected to act as advisors.

From the deans and directors to the counselors and advisors who deliver counseling or advising services across sites, there was much demand for additional career counseling. As the Opening Doors (2002) research found, "students are not getting enough time with counseling staff" (Matus-Grossman & Gooden, p. 48). The administrators, counselors and advisors' opinions from this study echoed the Opening Doors' finding. They voiced a desire for more hours to be allotted for students' sessions as well. Fran, the Director of the Developmental Learning Center at GCC commented, "I think at this point the services are here. I just wish that we had more of them, more advisors, more counselors, more time available." While GCC has moved toward establishing more meaningful relationships between students and advisors, the counselors felt that this move was at the expense of their expertise. Students from Gateway who received additional support from HALO reported that many of their transition difficulties were relieved because of the manager's direct assistance. The Dean from MCC hoped that some of their newly granted Title 3 funds would be invested in providing students with faculty advisors. Students from Midstate who did not participate in the CFP reported that they needed more guidance during their first year.

Learning Communities and Cohorts

A study on the impact of learning communities and student engagement reported that students who participated in learning communities “exerted more effort” in befriending other students, interacting with faculty, and completing coursework (Rocconi, 2011, p. 185). The study also reported that “participating in a learning community is significantly and positively related to all three types of student engagement, and student engagement is in turn strongly related to educational gains” (p. 188). Administrators at both colleges acknowledged the benefits of learning communities in spite of the challenges in administering them.

Ilene recognized that GCC does not have an organized transition program, so she would like the college to adopt some type of bridge program that would provide a mechanism for helping underprepared students become “college ready.” Ilene said:

We really need some sort of bridge program. I think that’s something the college should have and that’s something I would like to be able to offer is a bridge program for these adults to help them be more successful, especially when the college is looking at what is college ready?

Ilene’s vision was to “combine occupation training with the remediation component” where students would be placed in cohorts as they moved through purposely sequenced developmental courses, similar to programs I observed in my pilot study and recommendations from the Breaking Through (2004) research. Linda, the dean, had a similar vision. She mentioned “So we don’t have a Breaking Through, but we are looking at a Breaking Through initiative and how we can start doing more things for those nontraditional learners.”

At Midstate, the Breaking Through initiative provided guidance for developing the JTF program. One of the best practices was the use of cohorts and learning communities. As Cynthia,

one of the program collaborators recalled “They worked as a cohort so they hung together even as they were moving along. So that was a phenomenally successful program...it was a very tightly linked learning community.” Cynthia highly praised the program at MCC, but she went on to point out that “colleges don’t do cohorts and learning communities well.” Although the JTF was hailed by many of administrators and staff members as accomplishing this focus exceptionally well, the college had not adopted it as a permanent practice.

Students in the gerontology program experienced the closest semblance of a learning community. I asked Kathy, who graduated from the Gerontology Certificate Program, if there was a specific aspect of the program that she found especially helpful. She responded:

I think the opportunity to engage in a cohort group is a very big difference from the first part of schooling when I started out and I knew no one and I wasn’t particularly signed up for a program of study.

I found similar favorable responses to cohorts and learning communities among the students in my pilot study (Brooks, 2011). Despite the success of utilizing the cohort model at MCC, Cynthia implied that coordinating these types of programs was not a profitable venture at most community colleges because of their logistical complexity. However, based on my findings, the sustainability of learning communities or cohorts depended mostly on external funding sources; thus, the colleges did not invest in them.

Summary

In this chapter, I presented the study’s findings within the context of the guiding framework tool and discussed them within the three dimensions of the theoretical framework: psychosocial adjustments, adult learning theories, and community colleges’ transition strategies. Students reported that significant aspects of their transition to college involved psychosocial

adjustments which were aggravated by circumstances of midlife such as being older, interacting with younger students, and balancing homework and studying with family responsibilities. For most of the student participants, the anxiety about age dissipated after attending classes and becoming engaged in the course content.

In the second dimension, administrators, counselors, and advisors reported adaptations to the developmental curriculum were based on feedback from students. Two specific themes emerged from the research data related to teaching and learning. Learning difficulties associated with math and using computers represented significant transition barriers at the both case sites. Supplemental instructors (SI) provided the best academic support because they were peers of the students, they related the material more effectively, and they offered more individual attention at a slower pace than in larger classes. Students who reported improvement in their computer skills utilized free workshops at either a community service center, such as the Women's Assistance House (for those at Midstate), or at the Workforce Preparation Center (for those at Gateway). Student services at both case sites offered tutoring as the primary form of academic support to assist underprepared students. Both sites also offered personal developmental courses through the main campus that focused on topics such as time management, study habits and self-motivation.

The third dimension included community colleges' transition strategies. Where a bridge program existed, displaced workers who were older and academically underprepared received the most support. However, when the programs were not comprehensive in terms of offering adequate academic preparation, as with CFP, students interested in pursuing a formal program were at a disadvantage. In addition, once students moved to credit classes at the main campus, they experienced further transition difficulties because of a lack of services for older students.

Organizational factors that affected students' transitions emerged from the research data as orientation, credit articulation, funding, and bureaucracy. Although orientation was mandatory at Gateway, administrators and faculty expressed concerns about the college not providing targeted orientations for older students. Orientation was not mandatory at Midstate on the main campus, but the CFP participants received an extensive orientation at the TTC before and after they enrolled. Credit articulation was discussed from two perspectives, both of which affected student transition in terms of decisions about possible career paths and the number of credits students would expect to take. Funding issues were a common thread across the all of participant categories. Student participants did not report financial aid as a barrier during transition. The administrators talked about the dependency on funding from external sources. For bridge programs dedicated to displaced workers there was an expectation that funding was to come from state or federal work initiatives. Several administrators emphasized the importance of continuing the partnership with the state employment agency. Bureaucracy, ineffective communication, and class scheduling were identified as impediments to transition.

Building relationships emerged as a transition theme. The functional components of programs and services were more obvious to discern. Further analysis of the data revealed evidence of an effort to establish meaningful relationships between students and faculty, counselors, and advisors as way of further engaging student at the colleges and improving academic performance. However, there was no mention of ways to include adjunct faculty in the relationship building effort. From the deans and directors to the counselors and advisors who deliver counseling or advising services across sites, there was much demand for additional career counseling. While GCC has moved toward establishing more meaningful connections between students and advisors, the counselors felt that this move was at the expense of their expertise.

The Dean from MCC hoped that funding from Title 3 grants would be invested in providing students faculty advisors. Although cohorts and learning communities promote greater student engagement and academic performance, neither college had a campus-wide investment in them. However, students in the gerontology program reported that the connections made within their cohort were an important part of their transition. In the next chapter, I present the answers to the research questions, implications for practice, topics for future research, and the conclusion of the dissertation.

Chapter 7: Answers to the Research Questions, Implications and Recommendations for Practice, and Topics for Future Research

The transition period for displaced workers is a critical time when a student's motivation can be nurtured and directed toward learning college-ready behaviors such as self-reflectivity, formal discourse, time-management, completing homework, critical thinking, and writing (Boswell & Wilson, 2004; Conley, 2008; Cross, 1981; Knowles, 1980). The transition experience, characterized by considerable self-determination and commitment, can be the beginning of potentially transformative experience- a change in how students view themselves and their relationship to the world around them (Dirkx, 1997; Merriam, 2008; Mezirow, 1997). The transition process for displaced workers is a phase that can either facilitate persistence to a certificate or associate degree or inhibit it because of institutional and personal barriers.

An important aspect of the students' experiences in this study was that there were two contexts from which to understand the transition to college. The first context was of the students just starting out. Their stories provided information on the colleges' programs and services that were in place at the time of the interviews. The second context was of students who went through a transition as developmental students and then experienced another transition when they began coursework in a formal program. Students within the second context added a *reflective* quality to the transition experience that contributed data about what students needed in order to transition successfully and what caused them difficulties. Together, the two contexts provided a comprehensive understanding of how students transitioned at the case sites and illuminated the gap in service coverage at the main campuses.

This chapter includes the answers to the research questions and themes that emerged after analyzing the research data across sites. Some of the themes were not in the initial research

agenda and surfaced as significant in relation to the transition of displaced workers who are older students. A discussion of what the study's findings indicate for practitioners at community includes recommendations for accommodating displaced workers who are older and start the college experience academically underprepared. There were also topics that emerged during the research process that were beyond the scope of this study. Based on the study's finding, I offer suggestions for future research. The last section of the chapter concludes the dissertation.

Answers to the Research Questions

As community colleges are eager to improve college completion rates for the general student population (Bailey, 2010; Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2010; US Department of Education, 2011), I questioned whether there were adequate supports to facilitate transition for displaced workers who were older and academically underprepared. I posed the following questions as the research objectives for this study:

1. How do displaced workers who are older students (ages 35-60) and academically underprepared transition to community college?

a) What types of programs and services do community colleges provide during transition?

b) How responsive or accommodating are these programs and services for older students?

2. What are older students' perspectives on transitioning to community college?

3. How do older students' perspectives of programs and services utilized during transition compare to the perspectives of administrators, faculty, counselors, and staff who administer them?

The following sections answer the research questions based on the findings of the study.

The guiding framework tool summarizes the colleges' programs and services for answering the first research question. It also provides insight into how close or far the colleges programs and services are from the benchmark level of wrap-around services. For research question two, I present the students' perspectives as what they wanted during transition, what helped them, and difficulties they encountered. To answer the third research question, I compare the students' perspectives to those of the administrators, faculty, counselors, advisors, and staff.

Research Question 1: How do displaced workers who are older students (ages 35-60) and academically underprepared transition to community college? a) What types of programs and services are provided at community colleges during transition? b) How responsive or accommodating are these programs and services for older students?

The transition experience varies from student to student depending on whom they encounter when they show up on the campus or at one of the satellite facilities, or if they meet college representatives at a community event. For displaced workers, transitioning to college involves a range of psychosocial adjustments that personal developmental courses are designed to relieve. If students are academically underprepared, they require academic refresher courses or individual tutoring to improve basic skills, particularly in math, reading, and writing. Overall, displaced workers and older students are accommodated more where there is a bridge program in place. However, if they decide to pursue education beyond the preparation provided by the bridge program, older underprepared students often encounter less support when transitioning into formal programs at the main campus.

The first research question required a broad summary of the colleges' programs and services. Based on the participants' responses and site visits, I constructed the guiding framework tool (GFT) for Gateway and Midstate (Tables 5 and 6). As discussed in Chapter 6, the GFT summarizes the types of programs and services provided at the college. It also provides insight into how close or far the colleges' programs and services were from the benchmark

(wrap-around level services) which has been shown as providing programs and services that are responsive and accommodating for nontraditional students (Alssid, Goldberg & Klerk, 2010; National College Transition Network, 2011b; Purnell & Blank, 2004) .

The 4 S System of transition aspects illuminated how responsive or accommodating programs and services were for displaced workers who were older and academically underprepared. The Situation aspect of the GFT represents the time during transition when job loss “triggers” the decision to go to college. Both sites offered programs and services that covered the Situation aspect of transition including: assessment testing and skill evaluation, educational and career planning, workshops on the personal and financial commitment involved, and resources for supplemental services. The Self aspects represent how the students reframe their identity in terms of their aspirations and expectations. Self aspects were covered through personal developmental supports. Students reported classes with subjects such as time management, study habits, and self-motivation were very helpful and presented in a way that they could immediately apply to their lives. The developmental courses at both sites included these subjects.

As for the Support and Strategy aspects of transition, many elements were missing as consistent transition programs and services at both sites. The Support aspects include learning communities and cohorts, assigned mentors and alumni, and career coaches. Strategies that have been nationally recognized as effective include: accelerated curriculum, learning communities, contextualized course content, extended financial guidance, alumni mentoring, and faculty networking events (purposely pairing students with mentors and providing opportunities to cultivate professional relationships), follow-up services (tracking students’ outcomes and extending support if they stop-out), and job shadows/experiential career exploration (Downing,

2008; Matus-Grossman & Gooden, 2002; National College Transition Network, 2011b; Purnell & Blank, 2004; Scrivener & Coghlan, 2011). My findings indicate that students' transitions were enhanced when they found mentors in their discipline and participated in experiential learning opportunities, which was reported as occurring at only one college. As a campus-wide practice, both sites lacked formal mentoring strategies that assigned students to alumni or professionals from the community. There was a time when one of the sites offered accelerated curriculum and learning communities, but they did not extend it to all disciplines and it was not sustainable because of periodic and limited funding resources.

Overall, the accommodations for displaced workers and older students were greater where there was a bridge program. Successful bridge programs offer a structured mechanism that helps displaced workers overcome the initial psychosocial affects of job loss and they offer academic supports for helping them become "college ready." The bridge program at Midstate offered many wrap-around levels services, but lacked academic services and supports for students to advance to college level courses. Furthermore, the administrators were not tracking how many students were able to place out of developmental courses, so there was no procedure for evaluating the academic effectiveness of the classes. Where bridge programs do not offer a full range of wrap-around services, students are done a disservice. Unlike nationally recognized bridge programs, such as the Capital IDEA at Austin Community College, developing academic ability was not the primary focus of the bridge program in this study.

In comparison, Gateway offered some wrap-around level services and supports through the satellite location, if students started there and continued to seek support from there. The instructional faculty worked with students to help them place out of as many developmental courses as they could. After the students moved into college-level courses, they could also return

for informal tutoring. Another aspect was that students felt more comfortable seeking help from someone familiar to them. While this college did not have a formal bridge program, it offered limited individual academic support and sent students who needed extensive tutoring to the main campus. On the main campus, there were multiple places with wrap-around type supports, but they were not organized such that a consistent mechanism was in place for students to access them in one place. That is why the HALO organization proved to be such a valuable service for Latino/Latina students. It was a place that combined academic services and personal supports that covered all of the 4 S aspects of transition.

Research Question 2: What are the older students' perspectives on transitioning to community college?

I present the students' perspectives as what they wanted during transition, what helped them, and difficulties they encountered. According to the students, they gained more confidence and greater self-esteem during the transition experience. They wanted better information from college personnel, greater academic supports, and respect for what they bring to the classroom. The most common difficulties were overcoming anxieties about college-going and learning math.

The student interview protocol included four sections representing the 4 S's of transition, Situation, Self, Support, and Strategy. The students' responses reflected what they were aware of as available to them and the services that they utilized during transition. In order to get a sense of the students' "self" in terms of their aspirations and expectations, I asked what they expected college would do for them. The most common responses were related to gaining new frames of reference on their personal outlook and self-esteem. A frequent response was a desire for greater income and earning a credential would open greater job prospects. Another frequent response was the desire to "help others" by gaining additional skills and knowledge that could be passed

along; and the sentiment that they will use their abilities to “give back to the community” that helped them. Several of the respondents felt that they were great role models for their children.

What the students wanted.

After analyzing responses from the three categories-Situation, Support, and Strategy, I determined what the students wanted while transitioning to college. They expressed a desire for more help through individualized services. They wanted better information about available resources and clearly defined academic pathways. Students felt that what they brought to the classroom in terms of their life experiences should be respected. They also wanted respect from family, friends, and peers for going back to school.

More help. Students wanted individualized advising from people who cared about their outcomes. Career guidance from mentors and professionals from the field were not consistent at the colleges, but students who developed these types of relationships were more motivated and self-assured. Where students utilized supplemental instruction, they needed it particularly for learning math. A different form of supplemental instruction was the help of the instructional faculty who prepared students for passing higher levels of the assessments tests in reading, math, and writing. Affinity groups, such as the HALO organization, provide sources of cultural, academic, and peer support. Although all of the students received the Pell grant, many wanted financial help for supplemental needs such as transportation.

Better information about available resources. Students expressed frustration about having to visit several departments at the main campus for academic advising, financial aid, and tutoring services. They were also frustrated by receiving misinformation after waiting in lines and making appointments only to be told they had to go to some other office. Students wanted to be sent to the right people and not have to schedule multiple appoints about the same problem.

They also wanted people who knew what they are talking about and who would deliver what they promised. Juan, the manager of HALO, was so beloved because he was quite knowledgeable of the college's departments and he followed-up with students regularly to inquire about their status.

Clearly defined academic pathways. Students wanted academic plans to lead to viable job prospects in as little time and for the least amount of money possible. At the same time, the majority also wanted to obtain associate's degrees. Job training programs for specific certificates through the state employment agency were available, such as information technology that one student achieved, but the programs were not connected to a degree program within the college. An example of a program with a clearly defined pathway was the Gerontology Certificate Program. Although the students had a very clear pathway and they gained marketable job skills, the program was not linked to a degree program. With the accrediting of some job training programs at Midstate, students will be able to stack credits towards an associate or bachelor's degree.

Respect for what they bring to the classroom from their life experiences. Several students reported classroom experiences in which they felt disrespect from faculty or younger students. In the case of faculty, there were incidents in which the students felt stereotyped as less intelligent because of their academic level for their age compounded by being an ethnic minority with different cultural expectations. When students overcame these feelings, they believed that their contributions in class benefitted the younger students. One student expressed a sense of responsibility toward the instructor –not wanting to miss class or turn in late homework assignments. Other issues reported were related to work ethic. Students did not want classes to end early and they abhorred disruptions in class such as talking on mobile phones or typing on

laptops, which distracted them from the instruction and showed disrespect to the instructor.

Respect from family, friends, and peers for going back to school. Many of the students' stories included references to what the people in their lives thought about them. They wanted their children to see them as motivators and role models. For some students there were conflicts with spouses over the amount of time dedicated to school work versus less time in the home. In two situations, students' domestic conflicts superseded their college-going. Other students received encouragement from friends and family, but when friends were not supportive, these relationships changed and the students' focus remained on going to college. Students also mentioned that family members and friends noticed their improved self-esteem and confidence and they were inspired to encourage others to go back to school. Many expressed the sentiment that, although the journey was fraught with challenges, they were committed and would eventually reach their goals.

Supports and services that helped.

Another dimension of students' responses was how the supports and services they utilized helped them during transition. Students reported that they learned how to overcome challenges, how to get out of their "comfort zone," and gained greater confidence and self-efficacy for learning new things. Contact with career coaches or advisors helped them develop a clearer sense of direction. The value of the transition experience was that it helped them gain more confidence and greater self-esteem so that asking for help was less fearful. Students also found value in connecting with peers who were like themselves- balancing family responsibilities while focused on studying.

Affinity groups, student clubs, and campus events provided activities for connecting with peers and faculty as well as sponsoring culturally themed events. Students found emotional and

cultural supports through student organizations, such as HALO. Other students utilized workshops at the satellite location. One student noted that co-workers from her job at the college helped the most with becoming acclimated to the college. Another student found valuable connections through student government. The bridge program included components designed to help alleviate transitional anxieties with peer association, individual career coaches, and sessions involving exercises on self-exploration. Some students found connections through the Senior Service Center and internships that introduced them to people in their community. Students appreciated meeting new people who supported their personal transformation and encouraged the behaviors that would enable them to reach the goals that they strived to attain.

Several students used tutoring services, especially for learning math. Supplemental instruction through the tutoring centers and HALO proved to be helpful. One student found the TRIO program helpful for math. Students who gained computer skills learned how to operate hardware and software for educational and personal functioning. The computer workshops at the satellite campuses were free and easily accessible and the instructional faculty gave individual computer help upon request. The bridge program included sessions on how to navigate MCC's systems and how to complete homework modules. Workshops on time-management helped students understand their role as a student and learn how to prioritize multiple tasks. Both sites had non-credit classes within the developmental departments that taught time-management and study skills. Sessions on interviewing and resume writing were part of the bridge program at one site and offered in conjunction with the state employment agency at the other.

What were the students' difficulties?

In describing their difficulties, students revealed challenge areas where the colleges' services either helped alleviate the problem or did not meet their expectations. Their anxieties

about college-going were first and foremost. The most frequent responses were related to emotional issues such as feeling depressed about the economic effects of their job loss, worries about fitting in among younger students who they feared were smarter, feeling isolated because they were “the only person like me” in the class, and spending less time with family and more time on themselves doing homework, meetings for class projects, and going to classes. For most, once they established a routine, became familiar with the people and places, and, most importantly, saw that they could manage the course content, these anxieties abated.

Students who did not find supportive resources during their initial transition endured quite a struggle. Students reported difficulties associated with specific subjects, such as writing and math. Because math subjects were taught via many methods, the classroom, text book, and tutors’ instructions confused students. Students reported writing as a challenge too, but it was the type of subject that the students said they could easily practice at home. Several reported conflicts with tutors who were younger and acted impatient with them, which was off-putting and distracted them from learning. Although several students were qualified to receive assistance through the TRIO program, only one student utilized its services. Several students expressed that TRIO’s programmatic orientation was more for traditional-aged students.

Class scheduling was a problem for a few students when they were placed in classes above their comprehension, even though they tested into them. There were instances when students had to wait for a spot in required courses because they were full, which slowed their progress and momentum. In one case, a student did not receive notification of a program change in a timely manner so she took and paid for classes that she did not need and then had to take additional classes in another discipline. Students frequently mentioned financial concerns. Several students commented that the Pell grant was not enough to cover all of the living

expenses that older students carry, such as home mortgages, teen-age children, or elder dependents.

The students' perspectives for answering research question two showed that students gained more confidence and greater self-esteem during the transition experience. They wanted better information from college personnel, greater academic supports, and respect for what they bring to the classroom. Their most common difficulties were overcoming anxieties about college-going and learning math.

Research Question 3: How do older students' perspectives of programs and services utilized during transition compare to the perspectives of administrators, faculty, counselors, and staff who administer them?

The colleges had supports and services in place, as reflected in the Situation and Self aspects of transition that were described earlier. These aspects covered services that moved students from the devastating effects of job loss to developing new frames of references regarding personal skills and abilities to cultivating student and professional behaviors. The administrators, faculty, counselors and staff responses were closely aligned with the students' stories related to these aspects. There was a general consensus among participants that services for older students were nonexistent at the main campuses for both sites. The transition aspects missing at both sites were in the Support and Strategy categories. Students reported that academic supports (such as tutoring) at the main campus were lacking, yet the majority of the administrators, faculty and staff members felt their colleges generally provided adequate supports. There were operational issues that promoted the colleges' objectives over programs that the students reported as important for their success.

Differing expectations.

Concentrated services in the workforce development departments targeted displaced

workers and students gravitated to them or were referred because, as older students, they were assumed to be looking for job training programs. The administrators and staff members' responses indicated an intense focus on job training in the workforce development programs which contrasted the goal of degree attainment that most of the students desired. In recruiting student participants, the pursuit of a degree was not a criterion, but 7 of the 11 students revealed a desire for obtaining an associate's degree and believed they could accomplish earning one.

I discovered that there were varying interpretations among the administrators, faculty, counselors, and staff that manifested in conversations about what the students needed to be successful for job training and much less consideration given to students' needs for degree attainment. So while job attainment was the assumed reason that the students were using the workforce development services, the goals of these support services were focused on providing marketable job skills as opposed to developing cognitive skills for obtaining a degree.

Students reported that the classes at main campus were larger, the instructors were generally impersonal, and the academic supports did not include content relevant for older learners, when compared to the environment at the satellite locations. Students also reported becoming discouraged and overwhelmed all over again when they moved from the developmental education environment into the credit classes at main campus. The level of support in this second transition was beyond the scope of workforce development programs. Although administrators reported there were many forms of support at the main campus through student services, some were not aware of how the lack of supports for older students instigated additional psychosocial adjustment. Thus, older students were vulnerable to a gap in service and support coverage. This gap was reinforced by the division between main campus and workforce development- a systematic as well as a physical divide.

Conflicting operational objectives.

Another contrast was between the operational goals of the colleges and students' needs. One administrator explained that cohorts and learning communities, albeit effective transition strategies, were difficult to maintain because they required carefully planned enrollment cycles with smaller class sizes, thus, the college risked losing revenue utilizing this type of programming. Although several students professed that moving through a program with a cohort provided extra academic and psychosocial support, the colleges' operational objectives took precedence over programs that students found helpful.

Future plans.

Developmental education administrators at Midstate recognized the successes of the workforce development bridge programs. With the newly acquired Title 3 funding, a student success center is in development. Details of the center's range of services are forthcoming. Building more meaningful relationships between students and administrators, faculty, counselors, and advisors emerged as an important factor in facilitating student transition. Administrators and counselors reported a need for additional counseling and advising, especially with a career development focus. Students expressed a desire for additional counseling and advising at the main campus, but with a focus on older students' interests. Students also expressed very strong opinions about math instruction. They want math tutoring and supplemental instruction that is tightly coordinated with the course instruction. Although administrators, faculty, and staff acknowledged that math was a significant transition barrier and there was tutoring available, no one commented on any changes in math instruction.

With the articulation of credits for certain job training programs, it appeared that collaborations between the workforce and developmental departments were evolving, which will

result in clearer pathways for students. Another result will be services at the main campus with more benefits for the nontraditional student population, which should include needs of older students and cover the 4 S transition aspects provided at the wrap-around level.

Implications and Recommendations for Practice

When many of the student participants moved away from being “displaced workers” (characterized by moving from the workforce development environment or moving from developmental level classes), they experienced another transition (identified when starting classes in formal program) for which there are few supports or services. A second transition experience involved a pivotal point when they came into *knowing* they had really become “students.” This realization manifested as participating more in class and connecting to the college through student organizations, working on campus, volunteering, and internships (where they applied what they learned from coursework). For older students who were academically underprepared, the full transition experience did not occur within a clearly definable period, such as within the limited parameters of bridge programs or a several semesters in developmental courses. Their full transition to the college was a continuum of cognitive development and self-actualization. The reflective perspectives from students who experienced this second type of transition illuminated a *gap* in service coverage at the main campuses. The following sections discuss recommendations that would fill the gap in student services.

Age-A Fear Factor

A finding of my study was that the transition to college for displaced workers was aggravated by circumstances that occurred in midlife (ages 35-60). Student participants reported that significant aspects of their transition to college involved psychosocial adjustments that related to how they anticipated feeling in the classroom with younger students or students of a

different culture, the pressure of balancing homework and studying with family responsibilities, and overcoming self-doubts about their capacity to keep up with the class work. For most of the study participants, these fears dissipated once they became engaged in the class work and developed friendships with classmates. The results indicated *a need for a special orientation for older students* because they often pose questions or concerns that are not addressed in the general orientation sessions. Another finding showed that staff members in service departments needed training in how to interact with older students. *Multigenerational communication training should be added to professional development for staff*, so they are prepared to respond to older students appropriately.

Other activities that assuaged transition-related anxieties were social events on campus. Participating in campus events increased familiarity of the campus and provided opportunities for connecting with peers, staff and faculty members. In addition, social events with students would also inform administrators. A few of the administrators admitted they did not interact much with the students. In comparing their responses to the depth of the HALO manager's responses, it was evident that where the distance between students and administrators was greater, their perspectives of students' needs were less informed. If administrators narrowed this distance by participating in campus events with older students, they could gain a greater perspective of their needs. Community events were reported as important, particularly for recruiting older students who may not otherwise consider going to college. Two of the student participants mentioned that their curiosity about going to college was sparked when they met college representatives at events away from campus. Since displaced workers and older people are less likely to come to the college, *efforts to reach older students through community outreach are a practice that should be continued.*

Computer Proficiency

The need for computer skills among older displaced workers is not a new phenomenon. Not knowing how to use the computer is a transition barrier. For one student, it contributed to her withdrawing from college. Another common problem was not completing homework because of limited computer skills, particularly in math classes. Other troubles related to computers were access- many of the core classes were offered online. Without access to the Internet at home, several students reported they had to either schedule time to use the computers on campus (or at a satellite location) or wait for a spot in the on-ground class. The challenge of using computers was not only in the physical sense. As reported by one of the faculty, using terminology related to computer applications presented a problem as well. Since students use computers for every aspect of their college-going experience and most of the college processes (homework, registration, financial aid, etc.) require access via the Internet, *I recommend offering computer training classes through student services for enrolled students, rather than as a non-credit developmental course.* Although there were multiple computer stations and workshops on software applications available at the satellite locations of both colleges, of which all student participants had access, only two of the students reported utilizing these resources. The training was voluntary so in some cases the students' unfamiliarity with the use of computers impeded their grasp of how imperative it was that they learned how to use them. *Therefore, older students' who require computer training need compulsory training that is a component of their orientation programming.*

Teaching and Learning Math

This study affirmed that the teaching methods for developmental math need attention, which is also not a new phenomenon. Difficulties with the remedial levels of math are a

significant barrier to transition. The Center for Community College Student Engagement (CCCSE) reported that one of the most significant aspects of “moving the needle on student outcomes at community colleges substantially depends on what happens in the classroom” (2010, pg. 8). Students’ assessments of their experiences in math classes reflected frustrations because there was no consistency between the text books, the course content, and the online tutorials.

First, there needs to be consistency between the teaching methods employed in the classroom and the tutors’ methods and alignment within the colleges’ math departments. Next, *math should be taught by incorporating group activities to work through complex problems, not with a straight-forward transmission method.* One of the conclusions from the CCCSE (2010) study was “students learn and retain more information - and persist and succeed at higher levels - when they are actively involved in learning rather than passively receiving information” (p.10). The techniques that the instructor used to teach the CFP math class exemplified active involvement with the students.

The NCTN (2011) recommended employing “creative methods for preparing students for college-level math” as one its 14 components for building effective bridge programs. For example, the Portland Adult Education program employed creative methods for teaching math that included a game created with math concepts and having the students play during the class. Creative math methods proved to be effective; it was reported that 86% of the students placed into college-level math. *I recommend that community colleges invest in creative math instruction involving, at least, interactive classroom instruction that promotes a deeper understanding of concepts using contextualized lesson plans.*

Counseling and Advising

Effective counseling for displaced workers who are older students involves understanding their needs through a transition framework (Schlossberg, 1990). The results of this study showed that in applying Schlossberg's 4 S System, the case sites lacked in the areas of Support and Strategy. There was a gap in counseling and advising services at the wrap-around level on the colleges' main campuses for older students. Schlossberg (1990) recommended "Counselors of older adults should study adult development and aging to help them understand how this population differs from young adults, adolescents, or preschoolers" (p.1). Administrators need to understand the gravity of this notion when making decision around their colleges' counseling and advising services. As a dean from one of the colleges in my pilot study stated:

For nontraditional students we have advisors that are particularly assigned for nontraditional students. They take a little longer in the advising session and they do a more thorough discussion, I think, of what the students are going through and what skills they come from. (Brooks, 2011, p. 17)

Workshops on how to advise older students would be helpful, but investing in licensed counselors or social workers who have specialized training and experience would enhance the counseling and advising functions. *To achieve the goal of providing effective counseling, I recommend specialized training for counselors and advisors.*

The new advising system at Gateway was designed to provide students with "tangible relationships they can tap into and leverage" throughout their tenure at the college. The method of advising within the bridge program at Midstate included individual career coaching where the students met with their coaches at least once per week. As my findings indicate, several administrators recognized this type of advising strategy is beneficial for all developmental

students who need guidance in mapping out realistic career paths early in their college tenure. The individual career coaches were an effective strategy at one of the sites, so community colleges should invest in enough advisors or counselors to accommodate every student. *I recommend providing students with individualized counseling and advising throughout their college tenure.*

I found that a student follow-up system, a component of the Strategy aspect of transition, missing at both sites. Midstate had an “alert system,” which was a form of follow-up, but it was administered only when a student was in academic trouble. Another problem with the alert system is it sends a negative signal which discourages students from wanting to interact with a counselor or advisor (Matus-Grossman & Gooden, 2002). *I recommend a follow-up system that involves regularly scheduled meetings throughout the year, especially when students are transitioning from developmental education and into formal programs.*

In addition, where ethnic and cultural issues intersect with age between faculty and students, faculty members need to evaluate biases that are transmitted to students as offensive. There are training modules that teach how to approach multiple generational perspectives, how to cope with difficult people, and how to facilitate better group dynamics, so that faculty become more aware of how subtle and direct behaviors affect students in their classes. Although, an aspect of the instructor’s role “helps challenge people’s assumptions and beliefs,” interactions that do not foster acceptance and respect undermine the valuable nature of the teacher-student relationship (Cranton, 2006, p. 105). *I recommend professional development for faculty and advisors on how to respond to cultural and generational differences between them and older students that arise in the classroom.*

The Divided College

I noticed that there was a dichotomy within the institutions in this study. The workforce development administrators and staff often referred to operational functions at the main campus as a separate entity, as if they were not a part of the same institution. The students also expressed this sentiment. Several participants talked about experiences in terms of “the credit and non-credit sides of the college” and one student commented that the non-credit side was “treated like the red-headed stepchild of the college.”

The division stems from the inception of workforce development in 1966 with the Adult Education Act and continued to the current decade with Trade Adjustment Act funding. Over the decades, both of the case sites have maintained this division of departments. Levin and Montero-Hernandez’s (2009) research pointed out a similar finding at one of the case sites in their study. The authors pointed out that many the college’s personnel “experienced the existence of two orientations with a certain degree of tension” and it affected students “as both beneficial and problematic” (p. 141). The colleges in this study exhibited a similar organizational structure, operating with two academic orientations that have produced different approaches for providing academic supports, which has created confusion among students.

Another problem with maintaining two academic orientations was inadvertently directing older students who want to pursue a degree to workforce development programs where the support services are less academically oriented. In many ways older students have found more services and supports that align with their needs within the workforce development programs. However, they also experience an alienating effect- feeling out-of-place in relation to their traditional counterparts- when they enrolled in a formal program. A student participant from Midstate described when she went from the bridge program to main campus. She said “I was

worried about how I would survive” because the same level of individual support and guidance she received in the bridge program was not found at the main campus.

Rather than students receiving unequal supports from two separate departments within the college, the two sides need to work in tandem. Collaboration would reduce expenses where services are duplicated and the sharing of expertise between departments would lead to greater creativity in finding educational solutions and implementing innovations. Workforce development has proven its expertise in facilitating student transition through bridge programs. As a developmental educator pointed out, developmental students at the main campus could use the career counseling as well as the academic supports that the bridge programs are already providing. *I recommend ending the division between workforce development and the main campus.* There are community colleges in Michigan that do not have this division. At an institution from my pilot study, the workforce development functions evolved into the “support services arm” for the entire college because of the extended services developed for displaced workers (Brooks, 2011).

A Cost Comparison

Administrators cited infrequent funding as the reason transition programs were not sustainable. Transition programs at other institutions operate at significantly less expense per student and are not solely dependent state and federal. In reviewing the institutions that the National College Transition Network (2011) cited as implementing best practices, I discovered cost differentials that could be examined could reduce the bridge program costs at the colleges in this study. Table 7 depicts the elements and costs of the CFP from Midstate in comparison to the Capital IDEA Project from Austin Community College.

Table 7 A Cost Comparison

	Career Forward Program, Midstate Community College, MI	Capital IDEA Project , Austin Community College, TX ¹
Services	Career coaching, employment skills training, personal development, and academic refresher classes	Wrap-around services from initial enrollment to college credential or full-time employment
Length of Program	12 weeks	12 weeks
Funding Source(s)	US Department of Labor grant	A mix of city, county, federal, and private donations
Outcomes	Full-time work placement= 80%	Completion Range= 75-100%
Transfer to College-level Courses	No data on transfer to certificate or degree program	Placement directly into college-level courses= 64-84%
Costs	\$15,000 per student	\$6,000 per student

1. National College Transition Network (2011) *Promising Practices*.
www.collegetransition.org/promisingpractices.

Gateway does not have a bridge program. Dislocated workers typically start at the WPC, which is in partnership with the state employment agency. Students receive career counseling and if they are interested in college, they receive coaching for the college assessment exams, which determines the class level they can begin at the college. At a Breaking Through conference I attended in 2012, the Executive Director of the Michigan Center for Student Success reported that costs for job training programs through the Michigan employment agency run about \$27,000 per student per year with a 3% placement rate. I could not find any information from the Michigan Department of Technology, Management and Budget to confirm

or refute these figures. I mention them to demonstrate how much the costs for job training through the state employment agency can exceed the costs of college bridge programs. Based on the comparison depicted above, *I recommend reevaluating the costs of bridge programs and modeling best practices from institutions with lower per capita expenses.*

Topics for Future Research

I discussed the following topics in conversations with the faculty, staff, counselors, and administrators. Although these topics were related to many of the facets in this study and I found them to be compelling, the subjects exceeded the scope of my research. Based on my findings, topics for future research are: a) a more comprehensive study of all of Michigan's community colleges, b) affinity groups supplementing student services, c) special training for counselors and advisors, d) collaborations across educational departments, and e) funding resources for bridge programs.

A More Comprehensive Study

A study of a similar nature that includes all of Michigan's community colleges would provide a more comprehensive view of transition for displaced workers and older students. The study would also provide a more comprehensive view of bridge programs and support services. As I mentioned, there are community colleges I visited during my pilot study that have modified their student services to accommodate the needs of displaced workers with programs that include supports specifically for older students. There are also community colleges that serve rural areas with programs delivered completely online. Important questions are: What are the perspectives of displaced workers on transitioning to college using only online courses? How does distance learning compare to traditional college-going in terms of the support services available to older students?

Affinity Groups Supplementing Student Services

There are studies on how student organizations promote assimilation and personal growth, similar to the nurturing aspects students experience at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (Hedgspeth, 2007; Levin, 2009; Tinto, 1993). Many student organizations provide networking opportunities for students to connect with peers and faculty. Some provide peer tutoring and workshops for personal development. Others provide culturally enriching events and field trips. Others represent a specific interest or promote a civic cause. However, student organizations that effectively accomplish all of these functions are a unique entity.

Further research on student organizations that provide supports with the breadth and depth as the HALO organization and those that supplement academic supports typically provided by student services and developmental departments is needed. The study would include a method for measuring whether affinity organizations contribute to students' success. The results of this type of study would shed light on student services and developmental education departments, particularly how they support specific student segments.

Special Training for Counselors and Advisors

Based on the findings from the case sites, I recommended specialized training for counselors and advisors who work with older students. Although I found that staff at the satellite locations received this type of training, students' reported that the main campus' staff were not as sensitive to their needs. A study of specialized training for assisting older students among counselors and advisors would identify where there are gaps in service. Questions to consider: Are counselors and advisors hired because they possess any special skills? Does the college provide professional development in this area? What do professional organizations offer in terms of training for assisting older students?

Another finding from my study was administrators said students needed more time with counselors and advisors during transition and throughout their college tenure. A study of the amount of time that students spend with counselors and advisors and how it affects their academic performance, persistence, or completion of a degree would provide useful information for student services. Factors for the study would include creating a protocol for measuring blocks of time, the frequency of meetings, and the nature of the visits- are they personal or academic?

Collaborations across Educational Departments

Where the “divide” between workforce development and main campus (a division that started over 45 years ago) still exists, there may be two separate academic orientations that results in conflicting practices. By undoing the divide between workforce development and the main campus and promoting collaborations across educational departments, community colleges could share expertise and best practices to improve the institutions overall operation.

Levin’s (1998) research on organizational change in the community college posited that an examination of an institution’s culture can provide clues about its change orientation-whether change is motivated by external or internal factors-and how responsive it is to innovation. More recently, research indicates that in order for an intervention or innovation to become permanent, a reconstruction of the institutions’ cultural orientation toward change is essential (McGrath & Tobia, 2008). A study of the mechanisms that promote effective collaborations across departments (such as between workforce development and other departments) and how these mechanisms provide a catalyst for change would help institutions identify its cultural orientation. A question to ask: What are the mechanisms within the operational structure supporting or inhibiting innovation?

Funding that Sustains Bridge Programs

Since funding was cited as the main reason that transition programs were not sustained, a study of the various resources that contribute to bridge programs interests me. What drives the efforts of these programs- students' needs, national policy compliance or revenue generation? The colleges noted for best practices by the NCTN, such as the Capital IDEA program mentioned earlier, reported funding comes from a combination of public and private funding sources. Who invests in community college programs and why? When comparing the costs, what are the variable factors and the fixed factors that affect per capita expenses? What are the implications for college administrators managing the programs?

Conclusion

The goal of this study was to identify how displaced workers transition to community colleges and the programs and services provided at the case sites. Within the identification of programs and services, I determined the extent to which they accommodated displaced workers who were older and academically underprepared using Schlossberg's 4 S System, a transition model, through the lens of job loss. The theoretical framework (Chapter 1) defined the three dimensions of the study, which were psychosocial adjustments, adult learning theories and community colleges' transition strategies. I determined the dimensions from the literature (Chapter 2) which directed the research agenda for each case site. I presented the methodology of the study in Chapter 3. It includes information about the case sites, participant selection, participants' names, case site locations, and short biographies of the students. The compilation of interview responses from the study participants included perspectives from students and personnel from several organizational levels which formed a comprehensive picture of the colleges' programs and services as demonstrated in the case site narratives in Chapters 4 and 5.

Chapter 6 presents the guiding framework tool, which illustrates and summarizes the study's findings. The research data was analyzed in terms the 4 S aspects of transition-Situation, Self, Support and Strategy- coupled with the wrap-around services model. I found both sites offered programs and services that covered the Situation aspect of transition. I found the Self aspects were covered through personal developmental supports that were especially useful for displaced workers. The missing elements at both sites for the Support and Strategy aspects were services and programs that actively engaged students in experiential activities, such as learning communities, contextualized course content, faculty networking events, and job shadows. The second section discusses the findings in the context of the three dimensions of theoretical framework. Students reported that significant aspects of their transition to college involved psychosocial adjustments which were aggravated by circumstances of midlife. Learning difficulties associated with math and computers represented significant transition barriers at the both case sites. Organizational issues that affected students' transitions emerged from the research data as orientation, credit articulation, funding, and bureaucracy. Further analysis of the data revealed an effort to build meaningful relationships between students and faculty, counselors, and advisors. This theme related to student interactions, counseling and advising, and cohorts and learning communities as vehicles for improving student engagement and academic performance.

I presented answers to the research questions, implications, and recommendations for practice in Chapter 7. The data from the guiding framework tool answered the first research question. It also provided insight into how close or far the colleges programs and services were from the benchmark level of services. Overall, I found that displaced workers benefit most from bridge programs with comprehensive services that include individualized supports (extensive

counseling, advising, and mentoring) for both cognitive (advancing academic abilities) and job skill development (through internships or job shadowing). Older underprepared students also need support when transitioning from bridge programs or developmental-level courses into formal programs at the main campus.

For research question two, I presented the students' perspectives as what they wanted during transition, what helped them, and difficulties they encountered. According to the students, they gained more confidence and greater self-esteem during the transition experience. They wanted better information from college personnel, greater academic supports, and respect for what they bring to the classroom. The most common difficulties were overcoming anxieties about college-going, learning math, and using computers.

The third research question compared the students' perspectives to those of the administrators, faculty, counselors, advisors and staff. In sum, all of the study participants recognized that there were no services for older students at the main campuses. I found contrasting perspectives in the varying interpretation of students' needs- job skills versus developing cognitive and academic abilities and operational objectives- enrollment efficiency versus programs to improve student engagement.

From the results of the study's findings, I conclude that the transition to college of displaced workers who are older students and academically underprepared could be improved with following recommendations; 1) creative teaching strategies that would improve student engagement and comprehension of developmental math concepts; 2) computer training classes available to all enrolled students through student services and compulsory computer training for older students; 3) specialized training for counselors and advisors, especially for those outside of the workforce development environment; 4) dismantling the division between workforce

development (noncredit) and the main campus (credit) through more collaborations between departments; and 5) reevaluating expenses for bridge programs and the costs for services at the state employment agency. I also recommend important topics that were beyond the scope of this study for further research, which include: a) a more comprehensive study of all of Michigan's community colleges, b) affinity groups supplementing student services, c) special training for counselors and advisors, d) collaborations across educational departments, and e) funding resources for bridge programs.

The overall message about the transition to college of displaced workers and older students is that their transition requires an accumulation of adjustments that are both psychosocially and cognitively challenging. Although the ultimate responsibility of transcending these challenges lies with the student, community college programs and services should facilitate the transition process rather than inhibit it because of gaps in support services. I am referring to the elements of the wrap-around services that intersect with the Support and Strategy transition aspects, which I found to be inconsistent at both sites.

Since stakes are high for displaced workers, their investment and sacrifices deserve to be matched with supportive services at the wrap-around level. In other words, community colleges with similar characteristics as the cases in this study need active programs and services for older students or they need to ensure that existing programs include components that incorporate older students' needs. Successful examples from this study would be the gerontology students. They stumbled during the first and even second years until they received guidance and support from the Senior Service Center. The cohort structure of the Gerontology Certificate Program and their internship experiences contributed more to their self-actualization and motivation than any of the other experiences reported by other student participants.

For older students who are ultimately successful, full transition to college is a continuum of cognitive development and self-actualization. As such, community colleges should have a range of programs and services without gaps that older students are susceptible to falling through, especially in Michigan where their contributions to the workforce are of significant value.

APPENDICES

Appendix A

No. _____

Interview Protocol-Students

Length of time in program _____

Age _____

Gender _____

Ethnicity _____

Questions

I. Situation (15 min)

1. Describe any special experience or event that affected your decision to attend college
2. What were your thoughts about going to college before you started?
3. How has your going to college affected the important people in your life?
4. Talk about anyone who helped you decide to go to college (directly or indirectly)
5. Describe any special programs that were presented to you as options for attending college

II. Self (15 min)

6. How do you feel about your decision to go to college?
7. What do you think going to college will do for you?
8. Describe how being in college has affected other areas of your life
9. Talk about how your classes are going. What do you like? What do you dislike?
10. Describe any feelings about yourself that have changed since you started college

III. Support (10 min)

11. What types of support have you receive from the college (career, academic or personal)?
12. How do you feel about the support services the college offers?
13. Talk about the new people you have met. Describe your interaction with classmates.
14. Describe your interaction with your instructors/professors.
15. What has been your interaction with counselors, other staff and administrators?
16. What types of school related activities are you involved in (clubs/organizations, volunteerism)

IV. Strategies (20 min)

17. Talk about how you became familiar with the campus
18. What are your thoughts about the campus related to these areas?
 - a. transportation to and from campus
 - b. safety on campus and in the classroom
 - c. classroom spaces (amenities, cleanliness, heating and cooling systems)
 - d. other facilities, like the library, computer labs, study rooms
19. Describe your classroom environment

- a. the physical classroom set up
 - b. the teaching methods used by your instructors
 - c. the equipment used in the classroom (computers, overheads, white/black boards, or videos)
 - d. the other students in your classes (too many, too few, behavior, friendliness, etc.)
20. How connected do you feel to your college?
21. Describe any difficulties you encountered since starting school: where you are now with them? Have they been resolved or still present?
22. Think back to question #2 (repeat the question): talk about how your thoughts about college have changed since you have been going.
23. Talk about the aspects of your experience that have been the most rewarding and the least rewarding.
24. Describe what you have *really* learned (academic or non-academic) by going to college; what is it like for you as a woman, man, minority, parent, older student, etc?
25. Do you expect to complete your degree in the time you originally thought it would take?
26. If you could change anything about your college experience so far, what would it be?

Appendix B

No. _____

Interview Protocol- Faculty, Counselor, Advisor, or Staff

Department _____

Title _____

Length of tenure _____

Questions

I. Academic Guidance and Counseling (15 min)

1. Describe how your college facilitates transition for new students
2. What support services are offered?
3. In what ways do they accommodate nontraditional students? What about for older students?
4. Talk about any formal or informal programs in place to facilitate student transition to college
5. Describe the aspects of these programs that target nontraditional students.

II. Educational Planning and Academic Supports (10 min)

6. How do students choose their classes?
7. Describe the classes for underprepared students
8. Talk about how underprepared students move into formal programs of study
9. How are students assigned to professors?
10. What is in place to assist students who need academic support?

III. Personal Guidance and Counseling (15 min)

11. Describe how counseling services are administered
12. Talk about your interaction with students:
 - a. How often do you meet with students individually?
 - b. How often do you meet with students in small groups?
 - c. Who usually initiates a meeting?
 - d. What are the topics of discussion?
13. Describe how career-related counseling is handled:
 - a. How often are career related issues discussed in class?
 - b. How much do you discuss your career experiences?
 - c. What types of career-related services are you aware of?
14. What is available for students in terms of personal assistance?
15. Talk about your role (or activities) at the college that goes beyond your specific job title
16. Talk about any activities you have engaged in with students outside the classroom

IV. Supplemental Services (20 min)

17. Describe any nonacademic services the college offers to students

18. What organizational changes have been made within the college to accommodate nontraditional students? (For Professors: What changes have you implemented in your classes?)
19. Talk about any organizational changes implemented for older students. (For Professors: What changes have you implemented in your classes?)
- a. Which ones do you feel are most helpful? Why?
 - b. Anything you feel is not helping?
 - d. What are some things you feel are needed for older students?
19. Describe any difficulties you perceive (or have witnessed) that nontraditional and/or older students face that traditional-age students do not
20. Briefly discuss services (educational or personal) that your department does not provide, but you wish it did, related to facilitating student transitions to college
- a. Why do you think these services are not in place?
 - b. If services used to exist, but are no longer in place, discuss why

Appendix C

No. _____

Interview Protocol-Administrators

Department _____

Title _____

Questions

1. What are your thoughts about your college's vision and mission related to nontraditional students? For older students?
2. Tell me about the general services provided by your department
3. How would you describe the typical student profile of the developmental education students?
 - a. What about those involved in the No Worker Left Behind program?
 - b. What about those in Achieving the Dream or Breaking Through programs?
4. What types of activities related to facilitating the transition to college does your department provide?
5. Describe what you think the adjustment to college involves for older nontraditional students?
6. Describe any difficulties you perceive (or have witnessed) that nontraditional and/or older students face that traditional-age students do not
7. Explain the services provided to assist students. Talk about those that are aimed specifically for the unemployed and dislocated workers
8. Tell me about your personal experience with transition programs (nationally recognized or in-house ones).
9. What are some activities you engage in with students beyond academics?
10. Talk about any organizational changes implemented for older students.
 - a. Which ones do you feel are most helpful? Why?
 - b. Anything you feel is not helping?
 - d. What are some things you feel are needed for older students?
11. Briefly discuss services (educational or personal) that your department does not provide, but you wish it did, related to facilitating student transitions to college
 - a. Why do you think these services are not in place?
 - b. If services used to exist, but are no longer in place, discuss why
 - c. Talk about any future plans
12. What do you think the future of transition programs will be on your campus?

Appendix D

Observation Protocol

Campus Location: observe transportation options, landscaping, parking lots, access to buildings, operational hours of businesses (i.e. restaurants, banks, grocery, retail), and surrounding neighborhoods.

Campus Environment: observe student demographics, average age of students, campus structures (i.e. renovated buildings), classrooms, parking lots, cafeteria, library, study rooms, size of classrooms and equipment, and the number of students in classes.

Student Center: observe the layout and access (location on campus and hours of operation), amenities, such as food offerings, automatic teller machines, computers, furniture, and temperature (appropriate for the season).

Transition Services: observe any special programs (formal or informal), such as student organizations, tutoring centers, library services, and computer stations with knowledgeable staffing.

Supplemental Services: observe the use of transportation assistance (i.e. bus fare vouchers), book vouchers, computer services, supply vouchers, child care on campus or vouchers for off-campus child care facilities, social workers, financial counselors, and liaisons to public services.

Materials: collect brochures, flyers, handbooks, course books, posters, any materials that describe services offered related to transition programs or services.

Internet: search for college information regarding annual reports, student enrollment data, strategic plans, newspaper articles, community engagement, and regional census data.

Appendix E

Participant Request Letter

<Address of Contact>

January __, 2012

Dear _____:

Hello, I am a fourth-year doctoral student in the Higher Adult Lifelong Education Program at Michigan State University collecting data for my dissertation research. My research interest is the transition of older nontraditional students to community colleges in Michigan. I am conducting a qualitative study on the types of services community colleges offer for nontraditional students who have undergone a major life transition event, such as job separation. I am particularly interested in students who are involuntarily unemployed due to workforce reduction (displaced workers). I am also interested in the thoughts of faculty, staff and administrators on the transition of older nontraditional students and their thoughts about support programs (academic and nonacademic) that your college offers. I would like to conduct face-to-face interviews on your campus during the spring and summer semesters, January-September, 2012. The results of this study will be used for my dissertation. Using qualitative research methodology, I hope to illuminate the experiences of older nontraditional student transition to community college. Your college has been identified because of its participation in the Achieving the Dream and/or the Breaking Through initiatives, national programs designed to improve the transition to college for academically underprepared students. I appeal to you for assistance in identifying participants. Your help is greatly appreciated.

A one-on-one interview protocol will be used for collecting data. The identity of the participants will be confidential and their participation strictly voluntary. Participants may choose not to answer specific questions or to stop participating at any time. Each student interviewee will receive a \$10 gift card for completing the interview. The interview process will take about one hour to complete and require a face-to-face, voice-recorded format. For the final report, the information from the interviews, the names of the participants, the institutions or any other identifiable elements will not be used. You are welcome to view the final paper at the end of the spring semester, May 2013.

Your institution was selected because of its high enrollment of nontraditional students. Your institution may potentially benefit from participating in this study, in that; the participants could provide valuable information for understanding your college's unique transition process. The participants may also provide useful feedback about the benefits gained through participation in specific programs, such as Achieving the Dream and/or Breaking Through, at your institution. In general, the study of nontraditional students' transition to college, especially older students, deserves much more attention and the results of this study could provide indicators for further research in this area.

If you have any questions about this study or the researcher, please contact Lillian Brooks by email or phone. I thank you in advance for your assistance.

Sincerely,
Lillian R. Brooks
HALE Doctoral Candidate
Michigan State University
College of Education

Appendix F

Participant Consent Form-Faculty, Counselor, Advisor, Staff, or Administrator

Nontraditional Student Transition to Community College
Michigan State University College of Education
Lillian R. Brooks, HALE PhD Candidate
Email
Phone

January____, 2012

Dear Participant:

You are being asked to participate in a qualitative research study of nontraditional student transition to college. The purpose of the study is to better understand how community colleges facilitate the transition of older nontraditional students to college. Of particular interest are students who have undergone a major life transition, such as involuntary job separation, and the types of services and supports offered by the college to assist underprepared students as they transition. You have been selected for this study because you are a faculty member, staff or administrator at a community college who is familiar with transition programs, developmental courses, and nontraditional students.

A one-on-one interview will be used for collecting data. Your identity will be confidential and your participation is strictly voluntary. You may choose not to answer specific questions or to stop participating at any time. The interview process will take about one hour to complete and require a face-to-face, voice-recorded format. For the final report, the information from the interview, your name, your school or any other identifiable elements will not be used. The results of this study will be used in a dissertation paper to illuminate the experiences of nontraditional student transition and highlight the transition supports and services that facilitate their transition to college.

Although you may not directly benefit from participating in this study, your contribution will provide valuable information for understanding the transition of older nontraditional students to college and could provide indicators for further research on transition programs at community colleges in Michigan. Your participation in this study will result in no penalty of any kind and it will not affect on your employment status. You are welcome to view the final paper at the end of the spring semester, May 2013.

If you have any questions about this study, please contact the researcher, Lillian Brooks by email or phone. Thank you in advance for your participation. If you have any questions about your role and rights as a research participant, or would like to register a comment about this study, you may contact (anonymously, if you wish) Dr. Kris Renn (517)355-4538 or e-mail renn@msu.edu or regular mail at: Dr. Kris Renn, 426 Erickson Hall, MSU, East Lansing, MI 48824.

I agree to participate in this study by signing below and I agree to allow my responses to be

voice-recorded and used in a research paper which may be publically presented or published by the researcher.

Signature_____Date_____

Name (Printed) _____

Or I agree to participate in this study by signing below and my responses will not be voice-recorded, but can be used in a research paper which may be publically presented or published by the researcher.

Signature_____Date_____

Name (Printed) _____

Appendix G

Participant Consent Form-Student

Nontraditional Student Transition to Higher Education
Michigan State University College of Education
Lillian R. Brooks, HALE PhD Candidate
Email
Phone

January____, 2012

Dear Participant:

You are being asked to participate in a qualitative research study of nontraditional student transition to college. You have been selected for this study because you are between the ages 35 and 60, you are starting or returning to college after being out of formal education more than five years, you are financially independent, and you were involuntarily separated from employment. The purpose of the study is to better understand factors that older nontraditional students face when experiencing a major life transition, such as job loss, and the types of supports and services that community colleges offer during the transition to college.

A one-on-one interview will be used for collecting data. Your identity will be confidential and your participation is strictly voluntary. You may choose not to answer specific questions or to stop participating at any time. The interview will be conducted in two sessions (45 minutes each) between March and August, 2012 and require a face-to-face, voice-recorded format. You will receive a \$10 gift card (i.e. from Meijer) for participating. Personal information from the interview, such as your name, your school or any other identifiable elements will not be used. The results of this study will be used in a dissertation paper to illuminate the experiences of nontraditional student transition and highlight the transition supports and services that facilitate transition.

Although you may not directly benefit from participating in this study, your contribution will provide valuable information for understanding the transition of older nontraditional students to college and could provide indicators for further research on transition programs at community colleges in Michigan. Your participation in this study will result in no penalty of any kind and it will not affect on your student status. You are welcome to view the final paper at the end of the spring semester, May 2013.

If you have any questions about this study, please contact the researcher, Lillian Brooks by email or phone. Thank you in advance for your participation. If you have any questions about your role and rights as a research participant, or would like to register a comment about this study, you may contact (anonymously, if you wish) Dr. Kris Renn (517)355-4538 or e-mail renn@msu.edu or regular mail at: Dr. Kris Renn, 426 Erickson Hall, MSU, East Lansing, MI 48824.

I agree to participate in this study by signing below and I agree to allow my responses to be

voice-recorded and used in a research paper which may be publically presented or published by the researcher.

Signature_____Date_____

Name (Printed) _____

Or I agree to participate in this study by signing below and my responses will not be voice-recorded, but can be used in a research paper which may be publically presented or published by the researcher.

Signature_____Date_____

Name (Printed) _____

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