THE EXPERIENCE OF ADULT LEARNERS IN ACADEMIC SERVICE LEARNING COURSES

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ABSTRACT

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Adult learners represent a significant, and growing, portion of enrollment at higher education institutions. Despite their growing enrollment, adult learners are not retained at nearly the rate of their "traditional" peers, leaving colleges and universities with the need to identify programs and services that specifically address the needs and interests of this group.

Adult learner scholarship identifies pedagogical strategies that are beneficial for adult learners. The pedagogical strategies identified in adult learner research significantly overlap with the strategies used in the delivery of academic serving learning courses. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to understand the experiences of adult learners enrolled in academic service learning courses to determine if this practice was a positive experience for students.

This study utilizes qualitative research strategies, including personal interviews, to understand that students' experiences in these courses. The study concludes with a summary, including implications for future research and practice.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Throughout American history, many groups of people have experienced marginalization, or even exclusion from participation, in higher education. In fact, in 1860, only 40 institutions in the United States offered degrees to women (Thelin, 2004). Today, higher education reflects a much more diverse student population that includes women, people of Color, and adult learners. Despite progress made over the past century, many populations still struggle to gain access to, and be successful in, American higher education. As changing societal demographics continue to impact enrollment at colleges and universities, institutions face increasing pressure to find ways to matriculate and retain those students historically excluded or marginalized in higher education. Additionally, the application of financial constraints levied by state and federal bodies continues to grow despite increasing accountability and simultaneously decreasing funding.

Adult learners are a population which can easily be seen as a growing revenue source for colleges and universities with estimates suggesting that they reflect one-third of the entire higher education population (Coulter & Mandell, 2012). While no common or clear definition for adult learner exists in the literature, there are certain, common themes that have developed to define the group. Knowles (1980, as cited in Wlodkowski, 1999) identified core components to identifying adult learners. First, Knowles suggests that if learners are actively performing roles that are typically assigned to adults, they may be adult learners. Examples might be living independently of parents (both physically and financially), having children, or being employed fulltime. Second, Knowles's model rests on the identification of the student as an adult who is responsible for their own life. Millheim (2005) offers, in addition, that adult learners who are baccalaureate degree seeking students, are generally over 25 years old, consistent with the definition from the National Center for Education Statistics (Ritt, 2008). Falasca (2011) asserts

that in fact there is not a single profile to an adult learner because of the broad range of characteristics, making adult learners hard to define.

Often referred to as a financial plum, adult learners today total more than "traditional" learners when looking at both community college and four-year institution matriculation (Coulter & Mandell, 2012; Kelly & Strawn, 2011). Further, the adult learner population is growing more rapidly than the traditional student population (Kasworm, 2014). From 2000-2009 adult learners grew at a rate of 43%, while traditional learners grew at a rate of 27% (NCES, 2009). Yet, in recent history, the majority of efforts related to college access have focused on increasing opportunities for women and people of Color, not adult learners. Not surprisingly, campus programs and services are often geared specifically toward women and people of Color as well, often leaving adult learners without similar support (Kasworm, 2014). Growth in the population of adult learners in combination with the different academic needs of adult learners underscores the need for deep understanding and research to support the population more effectively. The retention of adult students is not only critical, but it is understudied (Sissel, Hansman, & Kasworm, 2001). Given this information, finding ways to retain marginalized populations, and specifically adult learners, on campuses is essential for colleges and universities.

Paramount to success in retaining marginalized students, particularly at four year colleges and universities, is the creation of programs and services that meet the needs of the changing student body (Kasworm, 2008). Many programs and services currently available are targeted at traditional college students (typically identified as being between 18 and 24 years old), and are created based on research conducted with traditional students, almost to the exclusion of non-traditional age learners (Price & Nicks Baker, 2012). In fact, at elite colleges and universities demand for admission is high, therefore there is little incentive for these schools to change their

practices (Coulter & Mandell, 2012). Scholars further argue that, in fact, there are a dearth of programs and services at four year colleges and universities that have adult learner centered practices, resulting in a de facto segregation that often leads adult learners to community colleges and online institutions (Coulter & Mandell, 2012).

For those non-traditional students at four year campuses, there remain significant challenges related to their academic and social integration, which can impede their success. Scholarship focused on the experiences of historically marginalized populations at four year colleges and universities, while growing, often does not adequately provide colleges and universities the information needed to support all students. Adult learners' interests and needs, for example, are often inadequately reflected in higher education research focused on four year institutions. For example, Price & Nicks Baker (2012) argue that the classroom seems to be the place where adult learners must integrate both academically and socially, unlike their traditional peers, yet little has been done with this research. Ritt (2008) posits that "until a comprehensive and integrated infrastructure exists that collects and shares meaningful data related to the adult student population across U.S. colleges and universities… there will be limited gains" (p. 15).

Given the need for increased accountability on campuses nationwide, colleges and universities have looked to survey data to help drive decision making in programs and services. Often, however, the survey data used results in the development of programs and services that target traditional students. For example, many campuses rely on data from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) to help inform their policies, practices, and educational programs (Price & Nicks Baker, 2012). NSSE collects data from first year students, often between 17 and 19 years old, and from graduating college seniors, leading some researchers to question its use and applicability with populations like adult learners (Lerer & Talley, 2010).

Kasworm (2014) argues that while data from sources like NSSE are useful for younger college students, "these understandings have been shown to be paradoxical to the realities of many of the adult student population" (p. 69). Essentially, campuses who almost exclusively use NSSE data for decision making regarding student programs and services are employing a one size fits all model, one that Price and Nicks Baker (2012) suggest does not support most adult learners in higher education. Sissel, Hansman, & Kasman (2001) also note that adult learners face regular "neglect, prejudice and denial of opportunities" due to "policy, programs, attitudes, classroom environment, or funding support" not suited to adult learners' needs (p. 18). Price and Nicks Baker further suggest that using a model designed specifically for adult learners would better serve the population in terms of their academic and social integration to the institution. To support academic and social integration, Elkin, Braxton, and James (2000) posit that "administrators, faculty members and others involved on campuses should seek to validate students early in their transition to college regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, age, or institution attended…" (p. 264). Therefore, critical research by higher education scholars must be conducted to build a body of research that helps inform decision making, policy creation, and program development, with a particular focus on adult learners.

To further drive decision making, campuses have also relied on seminal retention scholarship from noted scholars like Vincent Tinto. However, Tinto and other retention scholars face criticism for focusing on traditional age students. And, many of the programs and services nationwide designed based on the seminal retention scholarship are still in use today. For example, Tinto's 1975 model of persistence and attrition, and the body of research developed as a result of Tinto's work, is often used by colleges and universities to support programs and services aimed at retaining students, despite a focus on traditional age students. Critics suggest

that research focused only on traditional age students is problematic because research on

traditional age students is not generalizable to other populations, such as adult learners (Elkins,

Braxton & James, 2000; Metz, 2004; Tierney, 1992). Further, Tierney (1992) and Metz (2004)

note that Tinto recognizes and acknowledges the imperfections in his model, indicating that adult

students may not "fit the schema he has outlined" (p. 607), even referencing the fact that adult

learners are less likely to graduate than their traditional age counterparts. Metz and Tierney

further outline Tinto's recognition that residential campuses are more likely to retain their

students than non-residential campuses as a complication in the adult learner puzzle, given the

high enrollment of adult learners on non-residential campuses. Further, much research on two

year colleges fails to focus on adult learners who comprise a significant portion of their student

enrollment (Metz, 2004), though increasingly current scholarship includes adult learners as

specific populations for study.

Yet some evidence, though limited, suggests that there are "high-impact educational

practices" that, if delivered correctly can deliver significant results in student success. Kuh

(2008) presents a series of teaching and learning practices that have demonstrated the ability to

positively contribute to student success. These practices include: first year seminars and

experiences, common intellectual experiences, learning communities, writing-intensive courses,

collaborative assignments and projects, undergraduate research, diversity/global learning, service

learning/community based learning, internships, and capstone courses and policy. Though the

results reflect a traditional age population, and not adult learners, there is a possibility that this

research might be useful. Despite these encouraging data for traditional age learners, Kuh argues

that these practices are neither systematically nor effectively used by four year institutions.

Further, he argues that while some institutions do effectively use these practices, they are not always applied to all populations of students.

Though the less than systematic and inefficient delivery of these services is discouraging, the data provide evidence of the effectiveness of these practices for many underserved populations. Kuh states that, "historically underserved students tend to benefit more from engaging in educationally purposeful activities than majority students" (2008, The Compensatory Effects of Engagement section, para. 1). In fact, Finley and McNair's (2013) American Association of Colleges and Universities report uncovers the significant self-reported gains by multiple marginalized groups engaging in high-impact practices. Their works suggests that even participation in just one high-impact educational practice in a college career generates significant gains in self-reporting of growth for first generation students, transfer students, African American, Asian American, and Hispanic students (Finley & McNair, 2013).

Though Kuh's comments and Finley and McNair's research do not directly refer to adult learners (as adult learners are not typically considered an historically underserved student population), their work has value for those interested in the success of adult learners. The demonstration of the increased value of high-impact educational practices with many marginalized populations, leaves room for the exploration of the impact of high-impact educational practices on other marginalized populations, such as adult learners.

High-impact educational practice research focuses specifically on certain marginalized populations such as students of Color and first generation students, none of the work explicitly explores the influence on adult learners. Though clearly some underserved populations benefit from high impact practices, there are still lingering questions. First, could these practices similarly impact other marginalized populations, such as adult learners? Second, how could adult

learners gain access to or participate in these high-impact educational practices more regularly, if they are effective?

Though primarily specific to traditional learners, Kuh (2008, *How Can We Raise Students' Level of Learning section*, para. 1) raises a series of questions that should also be considered related to adult learners,

> How do we help students actually achieve the forms of learning that serve them best, in the economy, in civic society, and in their own personal and family lives? How do we dramatically lift the levels of college engagement and achievement for students who, two decades ago or more would not have enrolled in college at all? How do we effectively raise the levels of accomplishment for all students, with special attention to those whose life circumstances – first generation, low income – may put them at particular educational risk?

Though the questions raise important issues, the challenge remains that there exists a need for additional data collection, as the data related to high-impact educational practices originates from the NSSE. As stated previously, NSSE data employ a one size fits all model (Price & Nicks Baker, 2012) that does not include adult learners based on its survey of first year students and graduating seniors. That said, the data do suggest that marginalized populations have seen positive results as a product of high-impact educational practices, which further underscores the need for inquiry of these practices related to adult learners.

Background of Problem

Adult learners continue to be a group whose persistence and graduation rates fall well below that of traditional learners, despite their increasing enrollment numbers in colleges and universities across the country. Though some research explores the needs of this marginalized group, research largely fails to understand their experience with, or in, specific educational activities. Southerland (2010) suggests that colleges and universities must "be acutely aware of what motivates these students, how they learn, how they interact with institutions to achieve their

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goals, and what institutions can do to help them succeed" (p. 4). Adult learner research focuses significantly on the structural barriers faced, and the preferred learning styles, of adult learners. While useful, current research does not often provide specific data about student experiences in particular programs or with particular services. Existing information about barriers for adult learners could lead to research around programs and services in both curricular and student service programs that aid in the retention of these students. Currently, limited research exists focused on adult learners in the areas of orientation, academic advising, financial aid, and other critical services and programs. And, the limited research that does exist is often more than 20 years old. Outdated research potentially fails to capture current issues, and does not include populations that are enrolled in significant numbers today such as adult learners. As well, such research is often focused outside of American higher education, often in either an Australian or British higher education context. Clearly, thoughtful recommendations for services and programs that effectively support adult learners at four-year institutions in the United States is limited at best, yet needed. At a time when adult learners are increasing on college campuses, data understanding the impact of specific programs and services would be valuable for campus leaders. Population specific data would give campus administrators an increased understanding of how to implement programs and services that are highly effective for adult learners. Without population specific data, efforts would likely be less specifically targeted, or effective for, adult learners.

Given the dearth of scholarship exploring specific programs and services and their impact on adult learners, my study explores adult learners' experiences with academic service learning. To select the particular high-impact educational experience I established the following guidelines. First, I chose a practice that is directly tied to the curricular, academic experience of

the student. Second, I chose a practice that is not often required. Third, I chose a practice that could reasonably be scaled for a large number of students.

The practice of service learning/community based learning met all of my guidelines. Kuh's (2008) work describes the service learning/community based learning practice as an instructional strategy designed to provide connection between curricular studies and analysis of problems in the community. Further, a service learning/community based learning practice must allow students to "both apply what they are learning in real-world settings and reflect in a classroom setting on their service experience." (High Impact Educational Practices, para 9). An example of such a practice is an academic service learning course. Academic service learning courses meet the criteria established for this study in that they are not generally required, do not typically require a financial investment outside of normal tuition and fees, are scalable, and are directly tied to the curriculum.

Therefore, I studied the experiences of adult learners in academic service learning courses. Halx (2010) argues that "many of the newer pedagogical methods in higher education, such as service learning, self-directed learning, and learning communities, are in fact quite similar and consistent with those that adult education has advocated for years" (p. 525). Literature suggests that specific pedagogical methods that are beneficial for adult learners are present in the delivery of academic service learning courses. For example, both the academic service learning pedagogy and the adult learner research call for reflection (Astin & Sax, 1998; Billig 2010; Moore, 2010; Shor, 1996), frequent and significant feedback, experiential learning (Dirkx & Lavin, 1991; Kasworm, 2014; Kenary, 2010), and real world or situated learning (Stein, 1998). Kasworm (2014) describes a "connected classroom" which recognizes the students as adults and welcomes their real life experience as being beneficial to adult learners. The

connected classroom is very similar to the types of classrooms created by academic service learning courses. These overlaps suggest that adult learners should have positive experiences in academic service learning courses, and that those positive experiences should enhance their educational experience. Further, Kuh's (2008) work suggests that academic service learning is a high-impact educational practice. High-impact educational research demonstrates that certain marginalized groups benefit from academic service learning courses, supporting the case for why studying the courses' impact on other marginalized populations, such as adult learners might be important. Currently, research does not explore the experience of academic service learning with adult learners and whether or not that resulted in positive outcomes for the learner. If the experience of the students in academic service learning courses is positive, research could help colleges and universities use such knowledge to inform policy and practice.

I sought to understand the experiences of this population in these courses to understand if, and how, academic service learning courses enhance the experience of adult learners. Adult learners' participation in higher education has grown exponentially and will not likely recede in the near future. Therefore, understanding these students' experiences in higher education is important. Further, as a population, adult learners persist and graduate at rates lower than their traditional age peers. Unequal persistence and graduation rates support the idea that researchers should ask questions about what colleges and universities are doing to try to bring parity to graduation rates and what programs, practices, or policies might be useful in doing so.

Data suggest that academic service learning (ASL) courses are a valuable tool, or high-impact educational practice for other marginalized populations; could academic service learning courses also be a way to engage adult learners in their education? Could such research contribute

to improved program development or provide an opportunity for faculty and staff to recommend students into programs, projects, or other educational activities that would meet their needs?

Significance of Study

This work is significant for many reasons. First, in the quickly changing demographics of college campuses, returning students are a growing demographic. Estimates vary but suggest that half of all undergraduates in higher education are adult learners and that the adult learner population grew as much as 41% since just the 2010-2011 school year alone (Coulter & Mandell, 2012, Calvert, 2014). While just a snapshot of data, and not a deep review of all statistics related to the adult learner participation in higher education (for example gender and race trends), these data underscore the importance of adult learners in higher education. Thomas (2001) argues that the "college environment must be reframed to be more contextually relevant and responsive to the needs of diverse students-many of whom are older, full-time employees" (p.17). Research suggests that adult learners are less likely to be retained in college, so information about their choices, preferences, learning styles, needs, and experiences in ASL could provide information useful to institutions interested in improving rates of retention. Indeed, changing demographics are already beginning to shape the way in which American higher education is delivered (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). The increased delivery of courses either online or in the evening to meet student needs demonstrates how changing demographics are impacting the delivery of higher education. Further, many support offices have adopted late night or weekend hours in an effort to be more accommodating to the changing needs of students.

Second, many universities and colleges have established citizenship as an outcome of higher education. To that end, many institutions which have historically used a curriculum that relies on the student acquisition of technical knowledge, are now looking at ways to enhance

their curriculum to meet a citizenship outcome. In *Our Underachieving Colleges*, Bok (2006)

argued against what he believed was the oversimplified goal of preparing technicians, stating that

colleges should "pursue a variety of purposes, including a carefully circumscribed effort to foster

generally accepted values and behaviors, such as honesty and racial tolerance," (p. 66). He goes

on further to identify communication, critical thinking, moral reasoning, citizenship, diversity,

and preparation for a global society as priorities for undergraduate education. Consistent with

Bok, many schools are attempting to educate well-rounded citizens as opposed to technicians.

Academic service learning courses are one strategy employed to create the well-rounded citizens

that Bok describes (Lowery, May & Duchane, et al, 2006). This paradigm shift, moving from

technicians to well-rounded citizens, likely impacts all students differently and colleges and

universities need to be prepared to support the variety of populations on their campuses if they

want to retain them. Therefore, institutions of higher education would be well served if they

understood the influence of the different styles of educational delivery for adult learners. One

possible way to increase understanding of the educational delivery styles most beneficial for

adult learners would be to understand the outcomes for this group in ASL courses.

Third, though a variety of scholarship exists around the topic of service learning, most of

the work revolves around adapting service learning for different academic disciplines, impact on

community, and educational and personal outcomes for students as a result of being in a service

learning course. Very little scholarship on ASL is currently available that focuses on adult

learners specifically.

Fourth, this work could help inform institutional policy and practice in how ASL

programs are implemented, marketed, and assessed. If in fact the research indicates positive

outcomes for adult learners in ASL, then there could be considerable new directions for educators, academic advisors, and others for the use of these programs.

Fifth, if there is considerable evidence to suggest that ASL courses are positive experiences for adult learners, then there are significant opportunities to conduct further research. Though considerable research exists exploring the pedagogy of ASL, there is little research to describe ASL's impact on particular populations, how ASL programs are advertised, and how adult learners prefer to receive information about academic opportunities. Further, work could be done to determine if this alignment is similarly true for other student populations on similar campuses or even at different types of institutions.

Research indicates that the pedagogy of ASL coursework should provide positive learning outcomes and be a high-impact educational practice that engages adult learners. If true, then there could be considerable new directions for educators, academic advisors, and others for the use of ASL.

Conceptual Framework

For the purpose of this study, adult learner and service learning scholarship provides grounding for my research. First, as stated previously, significant research exists around the pedagogy of academic service learning. This body of work provides an underpinning for the study. Second, there is also a fairly significant body of research related to adult learners. This work, too, is significant for this study. Specifically, the research on the preferred learning styles of adult learners is my focus. Finally, Kuh's (2008) work on high-impact educational practices provides support for the argument that in fact this research is needed. Kuh's work highlights service learning as a high-impact educational practice, and suggests benefits for many populations. However, the research does not specifically extend to adult learners. My study seeks

to examine whether or not those benefits apply to adult learners when the population is researched in isolation from other marginalized populations. If research demonstrates that the benefits of ASL impact adult learners positively, then colleges and universities could develop strategies to engage this population in this high-impact educational practice.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework
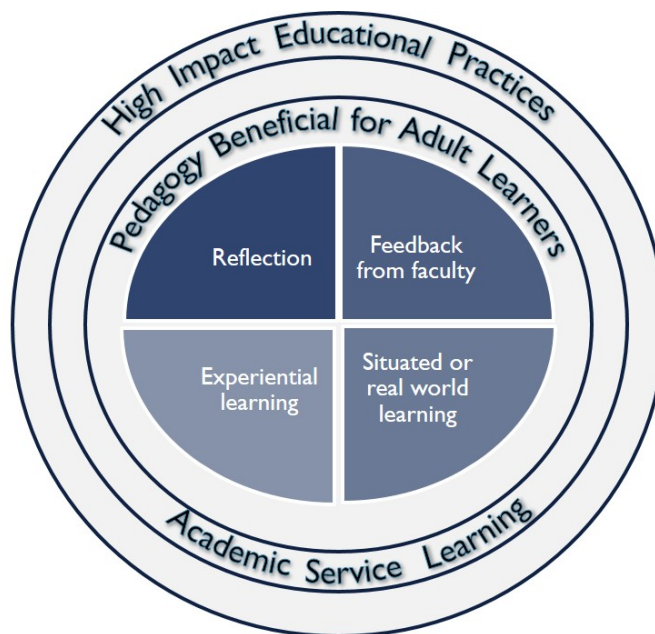
Purpose of Study

Using the bodies of scholarship identified above, this study seeks to determine how completion of an academic service learning course enhances the educational experience of an adult learner. The following questions serve as the basis for this study:

- How do adult learners view their education differently after completing an academic service learning course?

- Does an academic service learning course affect a students' self-efficacy about their ability to be successful in higher education?

- Does an academic service learning course enhance a students' overall experience in higher education?

- Do academic service learning courses engage an adult learner more than a class with a traditional pedagogy? If so, how?

Definitions

As stated previously, no common or clear definition for adult learner exists in the literature, though a few themes define the group, including: learners over 25 years old, bachelor's degree seeking students (for this study), have life roles typically assigned to adults (e.g., parent, employed full time, financially independent), and who self-identify as adults.

Academic service learning (or ASL) is defined as courses offered for academic credit, which blend work in community, or service, in combination with academic goals and outcomes of both the course and the academic program (Eyler, 2009; Kenary, 2010).

High-impact educational practices are defined as any educational practices that "according to a growing array of research studies, are correlated with positive educational results for students from widely varying backgrounds" (Kuh, 2008, introduction section, para. 2).

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

As higher education becomes more accessible in the United States, colleges and universities are seeing tremendous growth of individuals and populations previously excluded from participation. In fact, colleges and universities have seen significant growth over the past few decades in the number of matriculating adult learners (NCES, 2009). A review of the growing body of scholarship on this population is included in this section. In addition, this literature review discusses extant scholarship related to academic service learning. The literature presented gives a broad understanding of the pedagogy and delivery of academic service learning courses.

Adult Learners

This section of the literature review, focused on adult learners, begins by providing an historical overview of adult learners. Following is an exploration of three important concepts. First, is an exploration of the existing definitions of adult learners. Second, is a review of practices, programs, and strategies that create the most effective learning environments for adult learners. Third, is an examination of barriers that exist for adult learners that challenge their ability to be retained at colleges and universities. The current section then reviews other pertinent literature in the adult learner landscape and concludes with gaps in the literature base.

Historical overview. Despite some enrollment of adult learners in higher education in the 20th century, the body of research related to the population has only recently seen significant growth. In fact, outside of Edward Thorndike's book, *Adult Learning*, published in the late 1920s, very little was published on the topic of adult learners until the scholarship started to resurface in the 1960s and 1970s.

In 1961, Cyril Houle produced a book called *The Inquiring Mind*, which helped reengage interest in the study of adult learners. Houle's work, a seminal part of the early research done with adult learners, suggests that there are three types of adult learners. These three types include goal-oriented learners, activity oriented learners, and learning oriented learners (Houle, as cited in Cross, 1981). In this theory, goal-oriented learners use their education to meet specific goal ends. This learning happens, Houle argues, in a series of episodes based on the student's specific goal or interest. His second group, activity oriented learners are said to participate in continued education for the sake of the activity, rather than for skill development or specific knowledge acquisition. Finally, he cites a third group, the learning oriented as those pursuing learning for its own purposes, seeking the opportunity to learn and grow (Houle, 1961). The framework was considered a useful typology for thinking about adult learners.

Since the publishing of Houle's work, considerable research was conducted. Scholarship continues to expand as enrollment of adult learners simultaneously grows. Currently, adult learners total more than traditional learners when looking at both community college and four-year institution matriculation (Kelly & Strawn, 2011), and this research is becoming increasingly important to colleges and universities. Although adult learners comprise such a significant portion of those enrolled in higher education, they are not equally distributed, concentrated more highly at community colleges, online institutions, and second tier colleges and universities, schools that are significantly more dependent on enrollment (Coulter & Mandell, 2012; Kasworm, 2014). Despite the high population of adult learners at community colleges, four year institutions must place importance on understanding the ways in which adult learners learn, prefer to participate in higher education, and what assists them in being successful. Further, beyond just being aware of the needs of adult learners, colleges and universities must find ways

to implement more flexible pedagogy and curriculum to enhance both access and success for

adult learners (Coulter & Mandell, 2012).

What is the definition of an adult learner? There are varying definitions for the term

adult learner. A few consistencies in the scholarship are present, however. As stated in Chapter

One, if learners are actively performing roles that are typically assigned to adults, they may be

adult learners (Knowles 1980; Wlodowski, 1999). Types of roles typically assigned to adults

include working full time, financial independence from parents, living separately from parents,

or being a parent. Similarly, students must be responsible for their own lives or be independent

(Knowles, 1980; Wlodowski, 1999). Finally, adult learners are regularly identified as 25 years of

age or older (Millheim, 2005; NCES 2015; Ritt 2008,).

Programs, practices, and strategies that create the most effective learning

environment. Research suggests that the learning needs of adult learners may not match well

with common practices in the delivery of higher education because the academic structure is

often focused on transmission-based pedagogy (Chen 2013; Kasworm, 2014; Knowles, 1980).

Coulter and Mandell (2012) state, "For most professors and students, university study is based on

models of teaching and learning that have not changed for centuries" (p. 40) despite the seismic

change in student demographics. Adult learners generally prefer styles of delivery that are less

transmission based and allow for them to engage and participate more deeply.

Seminal in the adult learner scholarship is Malcolm Knowles's (1980, 1984) theory on

andragogy, which identifies six core tenets that guide thinking about how to best teach adult

learners (Knowles, Horton, & Swanson, 2011). These six tenets suggest that adult learners are:

self-directed, able to contribute life experiences, ready to learn, in need of the opportunity for

immediate application of their work, needing to make the coursework relevant to their personal

and professional lives, and motivated when entering the learning environment (Knowles, 1980; Knowles, 1984; Knowles, Horton, & Swanson, 2011). Since this theory emerged, the idea of drawing a distinction between the way adult learners and traditional students learn is widely accepted (Kelly, 2013). Following, are Knowles's six tenets, supported by other current research.

The first tenet describes adult learners as self-directed and ready to learn. Research suggests that adult learners have an innate desire to learn and want to be an active agent in the planning and execution of their learning (Knowles, 1980; Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2011). Further, adult learners are generally self-directed and their learning is optimized when their life experience becomes the medium through which the content is learned. Often, the life experience in combination with the academic learning allows the learner to define new goals to accomplish (Chen, 2013). According to Chen (2013), viewing the learner as self-directed, and as a partner in learning, changes the focus shifting away from the teacher as "the gatekeeper to knowledge" (p. 407). Instead, this idea views the teacher as a "facilitator and collaborator of knowledge who continuously guides the learner and helps create an environment for self-directed learning" (p. 407).

The second tenet describes adult learners as having the ability to contribute life experiences. Traditional pedagogy often ignores what experiences and knowledge students bring to a classroom, in favor of pre-determined course content (Forrest III & Peterson, 2006; Knowles 1984). However, Knowles's (1980) theory of andragogy suggests that the integration of life experience in an adult learner's education is critical to their success. Nelken (2009) describes adult learners differently than traditional students, citing adult learners as not being blank slates, reinforcing the need to utilize their life experience in their education to optimize understanding. Halx (2010) suggests that education should, "focus on the individual, and expression of those

lived experiences", which "also creates a faculty/student connection that helps break down barriers to student learning" (p. 523). Kasworm's 2014 work describes a connected classroom as being critical for adult learners, because it connects their "current adult worlds of work, family and community to the academic content in the classrooms, and for some, challenge(s) them engage in select class-related activities beyond the classroom" (p. 69). Further, Price & Nicks Baker (2012) argue that adult learners, through connected classrooms, can build informal networks with their peers before, during and after their course, often their platform for building a sense of community on campus.

Knowles, Holton, and Swanson (2005) suggest that "adults generally become ready to learn when their life situations create a need to know" (p. 192), forming the third tenet. This tenet, readiness to learn, is typically triggered by a life circumstance and the need to perform more effectively in adult roles as a result (Knowles, 1980). Life circumstances such as the loss of job, a divorce, or the birth of children can create opportunities for adults to recognize a need for, and makes steps toward, attaining increased education.

Adult learners prefer coursework that is relevant and allows for the immediate application of learning. This fourth tenet of Knowles's (1980, 1984) work suggests that adult learners prefer to understand why something is important to learn, before beginning the process of learning it so that they might be able to use or apply that content to perform a task or solve a problem (Knowles, 1984; Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2011). The 2014-2015 National Adult Student Priorities Report published by higher education company Ruffalo Noel Levitz suggests that adult learners seek courses that they believe to be valuable. In fact, the report indicates that in a survey of nearly 50,000 undergraduate adult learners, 94% cited valuable coursework as important, but only 74% were satisfied (Ruffalo Noel Levitz, 2015). To help them be successful, students

should be oriented fully to the academic program or class, giving them an understanding of available resources and allowing them to build confidence in their ability to be successful (Wlodkowski, 1999). Knowles, Horton, and Swanson (2011) also suggest that adult learners want to be respected as adults who are capable of making their own decisions, which can be operationalized through the use of pedagogical strategies that involve the learner in the process of learning and evaluation. Research indicates that incorporating coursework related to a students' professional goals increases motivation (Johnston, 2010). Similarly, as many adults come to campuses with significant work and life experience, instructional strategies should allow students to draw on those experiences (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2011). Further, hooks (1994) suggests that educators must listen to the goals and desires of the students in order to build on their personal life experiences effectively.

Hamilton (2003) suggests that a top priority for those wishing to retain adult learners is to provide course materials and assignments that are relevant to the population, another tenet in Knowles's theory. Research indicates that subject matter related to the needs and concerns of the learner is highly valuable (Vella, 2002). Since many adult learners are also minorities, appropriate subject matter becomes increasingly relevant. Given the exclusion of minorities in much of the literature taught in college courses, Hamilton suggests that freedom and flexibility in course design helps students find themselves in the canons, allowing these adult learners to be more academically integrated (2003).

Finally, Knowles highlights motivation as another tenet of his theory. He suggests that adult learners are very motivated when entering the learning environment. Often, adult learners are motivated by the opportunity to advance their career (Malhotra, Sizoo, & Chorvat, 1999; Thomas, 2001). Consistent with the desire for career advancement, adult students tend to be very

pre-occupied with professionalism in their studies (Kerka, 1996). In many cases, degrees are sought as a result of an opportunity for promotion, pay increase, or other professional goals. These external motivators are often important to the student, and they may change throughout the educational career of an adult learner (Wonacott, 2001).

However, many learners are motivated by internal factors (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). Coker (2003) identifies three major sources of motivation: self-development, family development, and community development. The motivation for self-development in education allows personal redefinition, empowerment, and transformation (Mezirow, as cited in Coker, 2003). Similarly, many adult learners are looking to enhance their intellectual and critical thinking skills. While long term intellectual and critical thinking skills may improve their marketability in the workforce, the motivations often stem from a personal development perspective (Coker, 2003). Further, studies showed that selected life experiences, such as higher education, were positively related to "an individual's increased sense of agency" (Coker, 2003, p. 662).

Motivation can also stem from the idea that an education can help individuals tackle their own real life challenges such as a job layoff, divorce, or other personal crisis (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2011; Thomas 2001). For example, adult learners often face bouts of poverty despite full-time employment (without a degree). Adult learners may feel that increased education could lead to more stable, higher paying jobs which could offset the bouts of poverty that were previously, seemingly unavoidable (Coker, 2003; Johnston, 2010). Women often experience increased financial stability as a result of their agency and improved educational attainment, the expectation of which served as a motivation for persistence (Coker, 2003).

Barriers to persistence and success. Another important component of adult learner scholarship is focused on barriers to education. Research suggests that there are significant barriers present for adult learners that can impede their ability to be successful in higher education (Kazis, Callahan, & Davidson, et al, 2007; Kerka, 1996; Wonacott 2001). A primary challenge of being successful often is that many adult learners are first generation students (Thomas, 2001). Other challenges include a variety of situational barriers, institutional barriers, and psychosocial challenges.

Often, institutional barriers present challenges to a student's re-entry and success in higher education (Cross, 1981). These barriers are often difficult for an institution of higher education to respond to despite creating a significant challenge for those students returning to college. For example, adult learners often struggle to find courses that are scheduled to meet their needs, because institutions have few required courses in the evenings or on the weekends. Often, classes in which the adult learner wants to enroll are not scheduled at a convenient time given the adult learner's availability, which is generally less flexible than their traditional learner peers. Further, there are few student support offices with night and weekend hours, leaving full-time employed adult learners with limited options for courses and support. Similarly, faculty office hours are often not convenient for the same reasons. Sissel, Hansman, & Kasworm (2001) critique higher education institutions, suggesting they make assumptions about students being able to "transact business and engage in key learning experiences by coming to campus during the hours of 8 am and 5 pm on weekdays" (p. 19), something they believe is not always possible for adult learners.

The development of online resources in the past two decades has certainly provided new access for students to find information on their own time. However, even online resources are

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not without their challenges. Online resources may have inaccurate, outdated, or less than thorough information. And, online resources do not allow an adult learner to access a person of whom they can ask specific questions, leaving the learner to only rely on the information provided. Further, adult student needs are often excluded from the key descriptions of services and programs published by higher education institutions (Sissel, Hansman, & Kasworm, 2001). Therefore, students may experience challenges in understanding how to get involved with, access, or benefit from the program or service with online content. Cumulatively, a lack of adequate or outdated information can mean that an adult learner may not be able to access support offices or resources, even if they intend or want to do so.

Situational barriers may also challenge an adult learners' ability to access, matriculate, and persist in higher education. As adult learners, by definition, have life roles typically assigned to adults (e.g., working full time, raising children) they regularly experience challenges in balancing those responsibilities. Many adult learners are employed part or full time, making it incredibly difficult to maintain work/life/school balance. For those adult learners with children, they must add the ability to negotiate childcare and maintain family life while adding the pursuit of their education to their list of daily responsibilities (Kerka, 1996; Wonacott, 2001). Balancing both time and financial responsibilities can present additional barriers for adult learners (Cross, 1981; Thomas, 2001).

Research demonstrates the importance of having support, financial or otherwise, as significant in predicting retention. Adult learners often have less parental support than their traditional age peers. Further, adult learners often come from homes with low parental educational attainment (Thomas, 2001). Because of low parental educational attainment, parents and families may simply not have the resources to be supportive, even if they desire to provide it.

Identified as financially independent of their parents, adult learners do not necessarily have the financial resources of their parents and other family to rely upon, like some of their traditional age student counterparts.

Other situational barriers may include a lack of adequate transportation to and from campus, increasing tuition rates at colleges and universities, and limited time. Concurrent with a lack of family support, work/life balance issues, and a variety of less significant situational barriers, adult learners are often challenged to persist successfully in higher education (Cross, 1981; Kazis, Callahan, & Davidson, et al, 2007). Further, research suggests that many of the issues that adult learners faced in the late 20th century are still present currently.

Psychosocial challenges present a third set of issues. Often, adult learners struggle with fears about academic and social integration, may have low self-confidence and be fearful that they are too old to enter or reenter higher education (Cross, 1981), and may have unpleasant previous educational experiences that give the student pause about their ability to be successful in higher education (Cross, 1981). Simultaneously, adult learners may interact with instances of racism and sexism on college campuses (Thomas, 2001) a particularly poignant concern given the high numbers of women and minority adult learners (Kuenzi, 2005).

Other relevant research. Beyond Malcolm Knowles's work on andragogy, a growing body of scholarship concentrated on adult learners has emerged focused on the ability of the adult learner to integrate academically, and the classroom culture needed to support that integration and subsequent learning. Coulter and Mandell (2012) suggest that adult learners may need help in acclimating to the demands of higher education, yet often are not served well.

Academic integration can include a variety of components, including: culture of classroom, context of learning, involvement of student, and orientation. Colleges and universities

must consider integrating adult teaching techniques into the traditional pedagogy of undergraduate education to increase the likelihood of an adult learner's academic integration leading to persistence and success (Halx, 2010).

The culture of a class is very important to an adult learner, who often prefers curriculum that is based on a learner culture (Kerka, 1995; Knowles, Horton, & Swanson, 2011). Classroom culture is a natural extension of Knowles's work highlighting the need to move away from transmission based pedagogy styles when working with adult learners. Instead of simply being a container into which information is poured, adult learners prefer to be involved in their learning to be successful (Galbraith, 2000; Knowles, 1980; Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2011). Vella (2002) offers that students should be involved in planning the methods and in setting the curricular direction of the class. Further, they should be a partner in learning, building on their motivation, and building a respect and connectedness between the student and the instructor in the classroom (Wonacott, 2001; Wlodkowski, 1999). Halx (2010) states that when the faculty and student relationship is defined by co-created learning, instead of faculty seeing the student as a receptacle for knowledge (a method regularly used in traditional content delivery), "the result is a much richer educational experience that builds on itself rather than relying on simple accumulation of facts." (p. 523)

Learners often need alternative arenas for success that enable them to display their competence, outside of the traditional classroom learning environment (Millheim, 2005). To accommodate the need for alternative arenas, educators can use situated learning experiences as a strategy for success. In situated learning, knowledge is acquired situationally and is grounded in the actions of everyday situations, engaging students in reflective thinking and helping them to make meaning (Shor, 1996; Stein, 1998). Learning becomes a result of a social process

encompassing ways of thinking, perceiving, problem solving, and interacting in addition to declarative and procedural knowledge received (Stein, 1998). In this strategy, learning is more robust in social environments and situations and is not separate from the real world, creating cooperative and participatory learning (Stein, 1998).

Learning styles also must be considered when thinking about the success and experience of adult learners. Knowles (1980) suggests that adult learners prefer problem centered learning rather than subject centered learning. To that end, contextual and situated learning is one strategy for engaging adult learners. In alignment with that strategy, educators of adult learners should use experience based learning strategies that allow for trial and error, rationality and reflection, creative expression, and discernment (Dirkx & Lavin, 1991). Experience based learning aligns with Hamilton's (2003) suggestion that dialogue and journal writing are necessary for retention. Further, Hamilton posits the importance of continual evaluation and assessment, allowing the student to improve over time in the course through future assignments. Hamilton's suggestion of the importance of continuous feedback is underscored by a 2015 Ruffalo Noel Levitz report. In the report, Ruffalo Noel Levitz states that 91% of undergraduate adult students surveyed found timely feedback about student progress to be important, yet only 64% of those surveyed indicated satisfaction (Ruffalo Noel Levitz, 2015).

Thomas (2001) suggests to "transform the chilly climate of institutions of higher education … a restructuring of the traditional undergraduate curriculum and campus environment must take place" (p. 17). Though adult learners are less likely to engage in co-curricular or extra-curricular activities (Kerka, 1995), both populations are likely to engage in community activities that they see as valuable and can find connection in those opportunities.

Gaps in research. Despite growing and significant scholarship on adult learners, a number of gaps in extant research exist. First, there is not a clear definition for the term adult learner, as described previously. Second, current research does not explore the experience of adult learners with particular programs or services. Therefore, accurately assessing reasons why adult learners do or do not persist in higher education is challenging.

Academic Service Learning

Over the past century, higher education has consistently expanded its boundaries in regards to outcomes. Expanded outcomes have increased the popularity and relevance of institutional initiatives focused on civic engagement in a curricular context (Butin, 2006; Calvert, 2011; Eyler & Giles, 1999; Keen & Hall, 2009; Kenary, 2010). Many institutions of higher education explicitly list civic engagement in their mission statement, a demonstration of their commitment to prepare students to be citizens (Melville, Dedrick, & Gish, 2013). Moreover, Melville, Dedrick, and Gish (2013) assert that American higher education exists in part to serve such a public purpose.

Through civic engagement efforts, campuses can pursue mutually beneficial partnerships that both address community needs and add value to the campus. Often, campus civic engagement initiatives focus on meeting broadly defined social and communal needs (Elrich & Jacoby, 2009; Saltmarsh, Hartley, & Clayton, 2009). Civic engagement initiatives allow campuses to meet institutional goals related to learning outcomes, increase student retention, and graduate students who are civic minded (Wittman & Crews, 2012). Through civic engagement, students can "gain practical and applied experience while serving the community and campus needs" (Wittman & Crews, 2012, p. 4).

Pressures from outside forces require institutions to be less insular and focus on real world concerns, with an increased focus on applied and practical learning. Higher education institutions find themselves reassessing their role in the democratic process (Lowery, May & Duchane, et al., 2006). Outside forces increasingly question the amount of energy and commitment higher education institutions invest in civic engagement activities. Starting in the mid-1990s, a renewed energy and movement for civic engagement activities spread across campuses nationwide (O'Connor, 2006). The renewed movement came in response to what was widely regarded as "an area of civic neglect by higher education" (Melville, Dedrick, & Ish, 2013, p. 259).

New research, newly developed organizations, reports, and campus initiatives were created to recommit higher education to its civic mission, citing that "institutions must be vital agents and architects of a flourishing democracy" (Melville, Dedrick & Ish, 2013). In 1999, the *President's Declaration on the Civic Education of Higher Education* was signed by over 300 higher education leaders (Melville, Dedrick, & Ish, 2013, p. 259). Another example of increased higher education commitment to civic engagement is the rapid growth of membership in organizations like Campus Compact and the American Democracy Project. In 2015, Campus Compact reached over 1,100 institutional members (Campus Compact, 2015). The American Democracy Project, founded by the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, was only intended to be a temporary, three year organization but has sustained due to interest (O'Connor, 2006). As institutions broaden outcomes for higher education and develop increasingly embedded civic engagement programs, service learning rises to the fore as a critical aspect of the engagement strategy (Wittman & Crews, 2012).

Service learning in its many forms is a popular strategy used by colleges and universities to achieve greater civic engagement and participation in community activities. The strategy maintains popularity among colleges and universities because of the integration of traditional academic learning and current college students' interest in volunteerism (O'Connor, 2006). Service learning activities are present at all types of higher education institutions including both two and four year schools. The use of academic service learning often can meet institutional needs while improving the community's self-perception and its perception of the institution (Lowery, May, & Duchane, et al., 2006). The concept of academic service learning builds largely on the concept of "primacy of experience" as articulated by Dewey, in which students can apply academic models to solve problems that exist outside of academia (Calvert, 2011). This practical experience is intentionally integrated into education and pedagogy (Kenary, 2010; Howard, 1998). Integration allows for work or service clearly related to the academic goals of the course or program (Eyler, 2009), thus providing a deeper, more contextual understanding of the subject matter (Calvert, 2011). The experience is designed to provide a transfer of learning, such that students can appreciate the environment and instruction in new contexts. Eyler and Giles (1999) posit that to be considered as a service learning experience, a course must meet four qualifications, including: personal and interpersonal development, understanding and application of knowledge learned in the classroom, transformation of personal perspectives, and increased sense of citizenship.

Also labeled as experiential education, academic service learning is a pedagogical strategy used to teach civic responsibility through active participation, using skills and knowledge in real life application (Astin & Sax, 1998; Furco & Billig 2002; Kenary, 2010). However, this strategy is differentiated from other experiential learning opportunities, like

internships, in that service learning is more directly linked to academic coursework. This type of situated learning is intended to develop a sense of caring for others and the opportunity to reflect on and evaluate that experience (Astin & Sax, 1998; Kolb, 1984; Moore, 2010). Situated learning is generally considered positive for both the community partner and the student (Calvert, 2011).

Academic service learning outcomes often compliment the outcomes of higher education institutions. ASL programs build capacity for continuous or lifetime learning, increase students' reflective judgment, and allow students to work with people different than them (Lowery, May & Duchane, et al, 2006). Further, research suggests that the student outcomes associated with ASL position the student for increased academic and professional goal achievement and better prepare students to be lifelong learners. As a result, employers can expect candidates who are able to demonstrate critical thinking and problem solving abilities over vocational abilities (Eyler, 2009).

There is no common structure for academic service learning; programs or classes can look very different across institutions and even across academic disciplines (Banerjee & Hausafus, 2007). As a result, creating a concrete definition or structure that applies across all practitioners and institutions is incredibly difficult (Bickford & Reynolds, 2002; Butin, 2006).

However, despite variations in how academic service learning is defined, a few common themes emerge when reviewing academic service learning definitions. First, academic service learning classes typically have a combination of classroom and service time. Second, the courses usually are framed as either social justice courses or community service courses. Third, reflection is a very important part of academic service learning. Each of these components is described in the following sections.

One theme in academic service learning definitions is that in most cases credit is earned for a combination of classroom and service time. Though some models are more theory based, while some are more service based, most colleges give ASL distinction to those courses that effectively blend the two (Moore, 2010). This practice allows students to be situated in circumstances where they can apply classroom learning to real world problems.

Another common feature in many ASL programs is a focus on a theoretical structure. Often two such structures emerge, social justice and community service. In a social justice structured model, also called a critical service learning approach, programs or classes incorporate an understanding of the root causes of social inequality (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002). Social justice courses are designed specifically to transform structural inequalities, using the student as the social change agent through contribution to the community. In social justice oriented courses service for an ideal is juxtaposed against service for critical consciousness (Mitchell, 2008).

This focus on social justice however, common to ASL, is not without critique. Critics, such as Ginwright and Cammarota (2002), suggest that a hyper focus on social justice makes the agenda too liberal, not allowing space for other ideologies. Further, critics maintain that this type of focus is not appropriate classroom content, because of the even balance between the needs of the learners and the community, when according to detractors, the needs of the student should always prevail (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002).

In a community service focused model, or traditional service learning model, students are instilled with the value of community service (Neururer & Rhoads, 1998). Often, these models are tightly tied to learning goals and reflection (Mitchell, 2008). Through their service, students become active learners, bring skills and information from community work, and integrate them with the theory and curriculum of the classroom to produce new knowledge (Mitchell, 2008).

The integration of student theory and experience results in the production of service for an individual group, while students ideally become more tolerant, altruistic, more aware of culture, and more critical thinkers (Mitchell, 2008). The community service model, too, has faced critique. Cited as paternalistic, critics of this model suggest that forced volunteerism reinforces hierarchies with its focus of service "for" others (Mitchell, 2008). Similarly, critics cite community service learning modeled courses as ignoring the root causes of injustices and the structures that support them (Kajner, Chovanec, Underwood, & Mian, 2013).

In any academic service learning course, whether community service or social justice based, a key practice is reflection. The value that reflection brings to the enhancement of learning is not a new concept, but one known to educators for over a century (Ash & Clayton, 2004). Dewey, in his seminal 1910 work describes reflection as, "active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it, and the further conclusions to which it tends" (p. 6). In the 1980s, Schon (1983) described reflection as "a continual interweaving of thinking and doing" (p. 250). However, the most commonly used definition now comes from Rogers's (2001) work, which states that reflection is a process in which the learner is able to "integrate the understanding gained into one's experience in order to enable better choices or actions in the future as well as enhance one's overall effectiveness." (p. 41). Ash and Clayton (2014) posit that reflection is incredibly important in academic service learning as learners often need help connecting material in their course with their service experiences, particularly when this might challenge some of the students' own beliefs, values, or assumptions.

Academic service learning also recognizes the disparate readiness of students for ASL, and work can be designed for a variety of student populations, given its flexibility (Lowery,

May, & Duchane, et al., 2006). The flexibility in design can lead to increased satisfaction with ASL curriculum by students. Similarly, research suggests that students may also increase satisfaction with ASL if they: have a strong religious or spiritual affinity, experience a match of personal motives and service, or experience a match of professional motives and service (Moely, Furco & Reed, 2008).

With flexibility in the design of ASL that recognizes the vast range of skills of students entering the course, many schools see ASL as a retention strategy. Although positively attributed to academic persistence and retention of first generation students (Yeh, 2010), very few studies directly investigate this correlation (Mundy & Eyeler, 2002) as social class mediates students' experiences with service learning (Molee, Henry, et al., 2010). Even less literature looks at the correlation between academic service learning and adult learners.

Gaps in research. Despite growing service learning scholarship, the research base is still underdeveloped. Further, Whitley (2014) suggests that although the literature base is diverse, it lacks a sense of "clarity or cohesion" and instead looks at single studies or programs but attempts to "fill significant gaps in knowledge about impact, implementation, and service learning" (p. 19).

A further gap in the literature relates to outcomes. First, extant research does not adequately argue that academic service learning courses provide outcomes beyond traditional pedagogical methods. Further, research does not adequately address positive or negative outcomes associated with particular populations of students. Further, the literature does not address the diversity and inclusion outcomes possibly associated with academic service learning, as students are often placed in service environments that are outside of their normal everyday

lives. Therefore, additional research is needed to better support arguments for the use of ASL as retention strategies.

In summary, research supports the idea that the preferences of adult learners for the delivery of academic content are consistent with the strategies used in academic service learning courses. The overlaps include the use of reflection, frequent and regular feedback, experiential learning, and real world or situated learning. Further, extant research largely fails to understand the experiences of adult learners in specific programs and practices, and more is needed to identify strategies for adult learner retention.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

The purpose of the current study was to determine how completion of an academic service learning course influences the educational experience of adult learners. Though much information exists about academic service learning courses themselves, there is little or no understanding of the experience of adult learners in the courses. The following discusses the selected worldview, research design, site selection, participant selection, data collection and analysis, and quality assurance methods used in the current study. These choices were informed by a thorough review of research methods scholarship, including Bodgan and Biklen (2007), Denzin and Lincoln (2008, 2011), Lincoln and Guba (1995), Merriam (2009), Moustakas (1994), and Patton (2002).

The current study is inductive and looks at specific examples of the phenomenon to draw transferable conclusions. Specifically, this study looks at experiences of adult learners in academic service learning courses in order to make meaning of the experiences in a way that can be transferrable to a broader adult learner context. Therefore, this study seeks to understand the experiences of a small number of adult learners to inform understanding and create a broader, more generalizable statement about the experience of adult learners in academic service learning courses. Given the lack of theoretical understanding or scholarship on the topic at the time of the study, an inductive approach was appropriate.

Constructivist Worldview

A constructivist worldview guides this study. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2011), constructivism holds a relativist ontology in that the research stems from "local and specific constructed and co-constructed realities" (p. 98). The constructivist worldview's ontology relies heavily on the co-constructed realities, which create knowledge through lived experiences.

Further, this worldview relies on "transactional and created findings" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 98) meaning that interview questions can often help participants to construct meaning through thoughtful discussion and interaction.

The constructivist worldview is guided by a subjectivist and transactional epistemology. This subjectivist epistemology suggests that humans create meaning from their experiences and those meanings are often created in concert with the researcher. In fact, in subjectivist and transactional epistemology, findings are often related to the interactions between participants and researchers (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

Given the purpose of the study, to understand the experience of adult learners in academic service learning classes, capturing the meaning that students make of the courses is imperative. Understanding the meaning that students make from their academic service learning course illuminates their experience and provides educational leaders insight into better supporting adult learners. A constructivist worldview is appropriate for the current study because constructivism relies heavily on participants' views and understandings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Further, a social constructivist worldview calls for open-ended questions, so that the researcher may listen carefully to what people say or observe what they do. Often, subjective meanings are then developed socially or historically, taking into consideration the specific contexts in which people live and work, which is particularly important in the current study. When trying to understand adult learners' experiences in academic service learning courses, the context in which their experiences occur, and the broader contexts in the students' lives are very important.

Research Design

The current study uses a qualitative strategy or approach to inquiry. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2008), qualitative research is:

> "a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretative, material practices that make the world visible…attempt to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them." (p. 4).

Qualitative research requires the researcher to collect and analyze a variety of materials and information including personal interviews, life stories, and cultural artifacts in tandem with the application of a broad set of practices that allow the researcher to better understand that which is being studied. Further, qualitative research allows the researcher to search for meaning rather than strict explanations or measurements (Moustakas, 1994). Indeed, many researchers utilize more than one practice in order to best establish their understanding or develop a more in-depth knowledge of the phenomenon (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). This use of triangulation, or multiple methods, allows for depth and richness, as well as rigor, in a study.

Qualitative methods are most appropriate to use in this study because this study relies on how participants make meaning of their experiences in academic service learning courses. In order to best capture the meanings made from the ASL experiences, interviews are needed to gather information. Therefore, qualitative research methods are the most appropriate choice.

Exploratory Study Approach

The current study uses an exploratory study approach for discovery. This study is interpretative and relies on a variety of strategies from the qualitative tradition to be described in following sections. A variety of research methods are used in order to help illuminate the ways in which study participants, or adult learners, make meaning of their experiences in academic service learning courses.

Site Selection

This study was conducted at Regional Public University (RPU) for a number of reasons. First, the University is the home to many undergraduate students who are over the age of 25. Second, the University has an academic service learning program, which formally credentials certain courses as "academic service learning" courses if the instructor and the course meet the University's established criteria. To be designated as an Academic Service Learning course, instructors must go through year-long training and the courses must be approved by the ASL Coordinator. The process established for ASL course designation ensures a common experience across courses and disciplines. The common experience of ASL at the Regional Public University benefits the study in that the researcher can interview students enrolled in any ASL course on the campus.

Given the researcher's employment at the institution from which participants are selected at the time of the study, a number of concerns need to be addressed. One such concern is the ability of the participant to feel comfortable to be honest while participating in the study. A second concern is the ability of the researcher to interpret results appropriately, regardless of the results and any potential impact to the researcher at the institution based on said results. A variety of methods are used to ensure validity and address the concerns. First, the researcher will clearly articulate to each participant that this research is in no way linked to institutional goals, an institutional agenda, or the employment of the researcher. Second, member checking, or the use of participants' review of the final analysis is used. Participants may review the entire verbatim transcript, and they are encouraged to review and comment on themes and analysis. Each participant is given the opportunity to provide feedback through either a follow up interview or through writing. Third, the findings are conveyed using thick, rich description.

When thick, rich description is used, it goes beyond simply reporting an act but describes in such a way that helps provide understanding of the direct lived experience (Glesne, 2011).

Participant Selection

In qualitative research, participants and sites are selected based on that which can best help a researcher to understand the phenomenon being studied. Unlike quantitative research, random sampling is not required; instead, access to participants and sites are required. In qualitative research researchers often do not work with populations whose size are large enough to make random sampling meaningful, therefore access to participants and sites is critical (Glesne, 2011; Patton, 2002). Consequently, participants for the study are selected purposefully in order to better understand the central phenomenon. Purposeful sampling leads to the collection of "information-rich cases for study in depth" (Patton, 2002, p. 46). This study uses purposeful sampling to discover, understand, and gain insight about the experiences of adult learners in academic service learning courses. Selecting participants from whom the most can be learned is imperative (Merriam, 2009). To increase participants' comfort in sharing information, participant names are not used in any reporting; instead pseudonyms are assigned to each participant.

Identification of thoughtful criteria for participation in the research is essential when using a purposeful sampling method. The establishment of criteria allows the researcher to identify participants who can provide rich, in-depth information directly related to the research questions. Both identifying and justifying the criterion being used for the study is important.

Specific criteria need to be met for participation in the current study. Each prospective participant must:

- Be a current undergraduate student or have graduated with an undergraduate degree within the 12 months prior to the interview.

- Be a minimum of 25 years old at the time during which the course was taken.

- Have a minimum of two of the following life roles typically associated to an adult:

    o financially independent from parents

    o are a parent

    o employed full time

    o do not live with parents (or in University housing facilities)

- Have completed an academic service learning course (as noted on the academic transcript) within the previous calendar year at the time of interview, or; are currently enrolled in an academic service learning course and have completed a minimum of 10 weeks of coursework.

The criterion above identifies study participants whose experiences and understanding should help inform the researcher and contribute to a study that can add knowledge to what is currently known in academic service learning research.

In order to identify appropriate participants, a two pronged approach was utilized. First, the researcher works with the Coordinator of academic service learning at the institution. The Coordinator agreed to assist the researcher by publicizing the opportunity for participation in the study to students who were either currently enrolled or recently enrolled in an academic service learning course. In addition, the Coordinator agreed to identify students who she personally knows who may meet the criteria for participation. Second, as the Coordinator's support may not net ample participation, a snowball or network strategy is also utilized. In snowball sampling, the researcher requests contact information from participants for other well-suited participants who could similarly provide information-rich descriptions (Patton, 2002). In exchange for participation, study participants are given a given a gift card for $25.

Interviews occur until the point of saturation in the information collected is reached. After determination of saturation, the researcher will no longer conduct interviews. According to O'Reilly and Parker (2012), the selection of respondents "cannot follow the procedures of quantitative sampling because the purpose is not to count opinions or people but to explore the range of opinions and different representations of an issue" (p. 3). The authors further state the number of participants is "dependent on the nature of the topic and the resources available" (p. 3). At the point of saturation, if there are prospective candidates wishing to be interviewed, they will be informed that no further participation is required and thanked for their interest.

Participants have no relationship to the researcher. Therefore, there are no formal structures that would prevent the participant from providing accurate answers. However, one limitation to the study is that participants may feel uncomfortable sharing negative information with the researcher, given the researcher's relationship to the institution.

Data Collection and Analysis

The study seeks to interview a minimum of 10 participants but continues seeking participants until there is saturation, or redundancy, in the information being gathered. In other words, interviews continue until the researcher feels that no new meaningful information is being generated. Conducting interviews until there is redundancy in information is consistent with qualitative research methods. Participants meet twice with the researcher over a period of time. Interviews are an appropriate qualitative method as they are important in uncovering what is happening and how the participants make meaning of what is happening. Interviews seek to understand specific experiences that adult learners have with academic service learning courses and how the learners understand and make meaning of those experiences. These type of data cannot simply be observed, therefore, interviews are most appropriate. Additionally, interviews

are important because the adult learners' experiences are based on past events that the researcher was not able to participate in.

Interviews are conducted using a semi-structured interview approach. The interviews include both more and less structured questions. The researcher is flexible throughout the interview, allowing the information provided by the participant to help guide the direction of the interview. Utilizing a semi-structured format allows the researcher to gather specific information needed for the study and allows participants to share their own feelings and how they have made meaning of their experiences. This structure allows the participants, through their responses, to illuminate themes for the researcher that were not initially known.

Despite the flexible approach, interviews are guided by a list of questions that the researcher prepared in advance of the interview. These questions are the result of thoughtful consideration of what information the researcher wants to explore. Using a semi-structured format, the researcher uses the prepared questions but stays flexible to ensure that the participants feel able to contribute information not directly related to the questions being asked. Therefore, the researcher may skip questions, ask them in a different order than on the prepared list, or offer questions not on the list, which emerge from something that the participant said.

Patton (2002) identifies six types of questions to stimulate an interviewee's response. These include: experience and behavior questions, opinion and value questions, feeling questions, knowledge questions, sensory questions, and background/demographic questions. For this study, prepared interview questions were more focused on opinions and values, feeling, and sensory questions. Because of the already applied criteria for being a part of the research, very few prepared questions focus on the background/demographic information of the participant. However, a participant information form is given to the participant at the beginning of the

interview to collect this information and to ensure participants meet the established qualifications

for involvement in the study. Should the form cause the researcher to have any additional

questions, the semi-structured interview format allows for additional questions to be added.

The prepared list of questions, or interview guide, for the first round of interviews can be

found in Appendix A. The participant information form can be found in Appendix B.

Figure 2: Data Processing
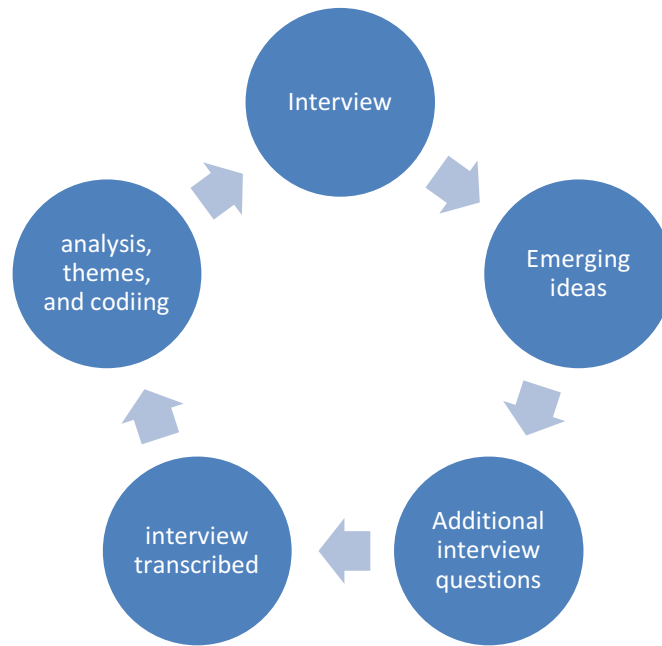
In qualitative research, data collection and analysis are ongoing, iterative, and dynamic

based on the emergent design of the method, as Figure 1 represents. This simultaneous process is

specific to the method and a distinguishing feature from a positivist, traditional research design

(Merriam, 2009). Because the researcher does not know what information will be discovered, the

simultaneous processes are important. Throughout the interview process in this study, emerging

themes are identified. Bodgan and Bilkin (2002) suggest that a researcher consider testing out

themes identified in early interviews through subsequent interviews to illuminate patterns.

Therefore, analysis for this study begins at the very start of the data collection process. That said,

however, a deeper analysis begins at the conclusion of data collection. A description of the data analysis methods employed follows.

Interviews are tape recorded, allowing an accurate record to be maintained, and ensuring everything said can be reviewed and analyzed. To minimize the participants' discomfort, a small unobtrusive recorder is used. All interviews are transcribed verbatim for analysis. In addition to recording the interview, the researcher takes notes throughout. Notes and audio recordings are reviewed at the conclusion of each individual interview to identify themes.

After all first round interviews have taken place, and all interviews transcribed, the text is again thoroughly reviewed. Establishing a general sense of the information, before moving to the next stage of organization and analysis is important. Personal identifiers (i.e., names) are immediately removed to protect all study participants. Next, data from the transcripts are coded into a variety of categories, leaving some information un-coded if it does not obviously fit into one of the established codes. Data is coded through what Brown, Stevens, Troiano, and Schneider (2002) describe as open coding. Open coding requires the researcher to "make comparisons and ask questions of the data" (p. 176), and eventually cluster the concepts into themes (Brown, Stevens, Troiano, & Schneider, 2002). Initially un-coded information are not discarded but set aside in the event that the information could be used at a later point in the research. Using the iterative process described above and in Figure 1, initially un-coded information might be coded at a later point in the process based on patterns and themes that emerge from subsequent interviews. Using an iterative process and coding data as soon after transcription, instead of waiting until all interviews are complete and transcribed, helps in reducing anxiety and keeping the researcher from feeling overwhelmed by the volume of data.

Once all first round interviews are complete and transcribed and a first round of coding is complete, the remaining un-coded data are re-reviewed. This process helps to determine any new links to existing data that have emerged. The codes are then grouped into themes based on strong patterns represented in the coded data.

Participants then complete a second interview with the researcher in which a member checking strategy is implemented. To operationalize a member checking strategy, themes are shared with any participant who agrees to provide feedback. Though not all themes may have been discussed by each participant, all themes are shared with every participant. This member checking strategy increases researcher confidence in drawing meaningful inferences and conclusions from the interviews. Participants will receive the themes from the researcher in second interview, and participants are requested to provide feedback and comments at that time. Additionally, participants are invited to share any other information not shared in the first round interview. After reviewing the information provided in the member checking process and completing the peer debriefing process, further review begins and final determinations made about themes present in the research. The final study results include major themes, supported by thick, rich description of examples shared in the interviews that best illuminate the themes. Finally, an overall analysis is provided to link the data back to the original research question, which helps to understand the experiences of adult learners in academic service learning courses.

Ensuring the Quality of Research

Incumbent upon researchers is ensuring the methods utilized in a given study are conducted in such a way that they are trustworthy. Patton (2002) states that qualitative research uses the researcher as the instrument which therefore, "hinges to a great extent on the skill, competence, and rigor of the person doing the fieldwork" (p. 14) and underscores the need for

ensuring appropriate research protocols. For this study, many protocols were used to ensure trustworthiness. The following section includes information about the study's use of credibility, transferability, reliability, and confirmability in maximizing study trustworthiness. Finally, this section will end with a discussion on researcher positionality.

Credibility. Triangulation is a critical strategy for ensuring credibility. Two triangulation strategies were employed in this study, drawn from Patton (2002). First, consistency of different data sources within the same method are reviewed. For this study transcripts of participants answering similar questions were reviewed. Second, the study uses multiple analysts to review the findings. To increase credibility, the study uses a member checking strategy as described previously as well as a peer debriefer. Peer debriefing involves a colleague's analysis of the data which includes a review of the data, methods, and findings to ensure that the researcher's own biases are not present. Further, the analysis includes the reviewer's assessment of whether the findings are reasonable given the data (Merriam, 2009). It is the peer debriefer's role to audit the techniques, not the interpretation of the data.

Transferability. A study's external validity, or transferability, is the extent to which findings from the current study can be transferred or applied to other situations (Merriam, 2009). To increase transferability and generalizability in this study a nonrandom, selective sample was chosen to ensure participants who could provide thick, rich description. Merriam (2009) argues that applying generalizations from "aggregated data of enormous, random samples to individuals is hardly useful" (p. 224) and the nonrandom, smaller, purposeful sample is selected "precisely because the researcher wishes to understand the particular in depth, not to find out what is true of many." (p. 224)

Reliability. A third method of ensuring a research study's rigor is reliability. Reliability "refers to the extent to which the study's findings can be replicated. In other words, if the study were repeated, will it yield the same results?" (Merriam, 2009, p. 220). However, this strict definition is problematic in qualitative research, and provides challenges given that human behavior is static. Lincoln and Guba (1985) identify a more important characteristic defined as dependability, which does not rely on an outsider being able to replicate a study. Instead, the concept argues that an outsider should be able to look at both the data and the results and determine that the concept makes sense, and that the findings are consistent to the data that have been collected (Merriam, 2009). To ensure dependability, the current study utilizes triangulation, peer debriefing, and an audit trail. Audit trails, first suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985), allow readers to follow the trail of the researcher. Information in the audit trail includes "how data were collected, how categories were derived, and how decisions were made throughout the inquiry" (Merriam, 2009, p. 223). The audit trail was created through detailed record keeping throughout the study.

Confirmability. The fourth method utilized for ensuring rigor in the research study is confirmability. Confirmability relates to the extent that the findings are not based on the researcher's interests and biases, but on participant interviews and the conditions under which the study took place (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Confirmability is important in a study as researchers often bring their own perspectives, biases, and ideas to a study, and the study may not support the researchers' hypotheses, beliefs, or interests. Therefore, a researcher should find ways to increase confirmability and ensure that their own beliefs and hypotheses have not been represented in the study results if the data do not support them. To increase confirmability in this

study, peer debriefing was used, as well as member checking. By presenting collected material to external and internal participants, the study's confirmability is increased.

Researcher Positionality. Consideration of researcher positionality in this study is critical to ensuring high quality, given that the researcher is the instrument. Bourke (2014) posits that qualitative research is a shared space, where the identities of not only the research participants, but also the researcher, are present. As such, it is imperative to consider the implications, unintended biases, or perceptions involved in the study. In his article, *Positionality: Reflecting on the Research Process* (2014), Burke states "through recognition of our biases, we presume to gain insights into how we might approach a research setting, members of particular groups, and how we might seek to engage with participants" (p. 1). Therefore, an important consideration for my research is my own biases and how to ensure those biases do not present themselves in interviews with research participants.

Given my own employment and my personal experiences with students at Regional Public University, I have a variety of assumptions about adult learners created prior to the start of the research study. My own experiences with adult learners at RPU leads me to assume that adult learners have a positive experience in their coursework and involvement. Because that assumption could influence the research, it is imperative that I create strategies for ensuring my biases do not affect the participants' experience or responses.

Therefore, I had to develop strategic tactics to eliminate my own biases. To do so, I paid significant attention to the question process. Important to my process was to create non-leading questions that do not assume my own biases. I further determined it would be important to read the prescribed question exactly as is written, without modification, directly from a question list.

Next, I practiced tone and intonation, ensuring the tone of my researcher's voice while asking the questions was not leading in any way toward a preferred, assumed, or predetermined outcome.

Additionally, it is important throughout the research study for me, as the researcher, to be constantly self-scrutinizing and highly aware of my own opinions and biases throughout the process. Bourke (2014), describe this as reflexivity, including a "self-conscious awareness of the relationship between the researcher and an 'other'" (p. 2).

Protocol for Institutional Review Board

This study was designed with specific attention to ensuring Institutional Review Board approval. First and foremost, participants are made aware of the purpose of the research study, and understand why the researcher chose to conduct the study. Second, given the importance of collecting honest information from participants, participant names are not included in the final report. Instead, pseudonyms are assigned to each interviewee to allow protection and ensure participant comfort in being truthful. Third, all relevant project information is provided to study participants for their review and signature via an informed consent form they receive prior to participating in the interview. The informed consent form can be found in Appendix C.

Participants should incur minimal risk as a function of their participation in the research. Outside of any time used to set up and conduct the interview, participants are not be required to have any additional interaction with the project. However, the researcher encourages the participants to assist the study by reviewing the emergent themes and commenting on them, either through a second interview or through writing.

Actual Design

This study utilized an exploratory qualitative approach. Brown, Stevens, Troiano, and Schneider, in their 2002 work on student affairs research suggest that qualitative methodology is

useful, "in exploring and describing the experiences of college students, especially when little is known about the phenomenon under study" (p.173). This study included a variety of techniques from the qualitative tradition for both conducting interviews and data analysis which will be described in detail throughout the following sections of chapter four.

Participant selection. The current study utilized a two pronged approach for recruiting study participants. First, the researcher was able to gather prospective participant names from faculty who teach ASL courses at RPU as well as from the Coordinator of RPU's Academic Service Learning program. Emails were sent to the prospective participants explaining the study and inviting them to participate. Faculty and ASL Coordinator referrals netted six interviews. The remaining interview participants were generated through participant referrals.

Interviews. Consistent with Brown, Stevens, Troiano, and Schneider (2002), the study utilized an interview approach that intended to explore students' experiences, with careful attention to the context in which the story was shared. Further, interview questions served as a way to obtain depth and details about the students' experiences in an ASL course and maximally engage the participant. Though questions were predetermined and asked as scripted, a flexible approach was taken to allow for additional questions, should a topic spark the need for additional inquiry.

Careful attention was also paid to ensuring that the study captured an appropriate and adequate sample. Barber (2001) argues that an "uncritical adoption of a range of criteria does not measure the quality of qualitative research because it is so diverse" (p. 2). Therefore, a firm number of participants was not selected prior to the start of the study, though a target of a minimum of 10 participants was identified. Though a minimum target was identified, the study focused more on the appropriateness and adequacy of the sample, as described in O'Reilly and

Parker (2012). Consistent with the 2012 article, the study was "pragmatic and flexible" (p. 3) in approach to ensure that the sample size "sufficiently answered the research question". The approach which promotes flexibility does not necessarily lead to generalizability, but instead to adequately answer research questions through demonstrating a depth of information gathered in the research process. Prioritizing a richness and depth of information, the researcher should be open to a variety of sampling methods. In this study both referral by faculty and referral by student participants were used.

Participant interviews were audio recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim. Each participant was invited to review a copy of the transcript from their interview. Further, they were given a chance to comment on their transcript or provide additional information that they believe was not captured in their initial interview. Finally, participants were given an opportunity to view the themes generated from the interviews and make comments.

Saturation. The study sought to interview qualifying participants until the point of saturation. Saturation places less emphasis on sample size, but instead focuses on the accuracy of the sample (O'Reilly & Parker, 2012). The information collected in the interviews sought to capture "a range of experiences but not so large as to be repetitious" (O'Reilly & Parker, 2012, p. 4).

Using the goal of gathering sufficient depth of information with which to describe the experiences being studied, interviews were conducted until a threshold of thematic saturation was reached. Thematic saturation is determined to have been reached when no new information is being generated (O'Reilly and Parker, 2012). Study saturation was achieved after 10 interviews.

Data Analysis. This study used an open coding model as described in Brown, Stevens, Troiano, and Schneider (2002). The primary goals of an open coding model are to "conceptualize and categorize data" achieved through two basic analytic procedures, "making comparisons and asking questions of the data" (p. 176). Open coding labels many individual phenomena and over time, those labels are clustered into related themes. From there, Brown, et al. (2002) describe a process where "concepts are gathered to form powerful and abstract categories" (p. 176).

This study followed the same process. Each transcript was reviewed line by line multiple times, at the conclusion of the first round of interviews. This review allowed for a general understanding of important concepts that emerged. Consistent with open coding practices as described by Brown, et al. (2002), an initial set of codes were identified based on the stories shared. After creating the initial set of codes, there was extensive review to capture any duplication or missing codes. Special attention was paid to ensuring the codes were tightly linked to the interviews and the refinement process did not distance the codes from the actual stories. Refinement and review continued until it was deemed exhaustive.

Second round interviews were then conducted, and participants had an opportunity to comment on the concepts generated by the first round interviews. Following second round interviews, another review of the concepts was undertaken to ensure the codes appropriately reflected the information presented in the interviews, particularly given any new information presented in second round interviews.

Subsequently, axial coding, as described in Brown, et al. (2002) was conducted. Brown, et al. (2002) states that axial coding happens through "four analytical processes occurring" (p. 177). First, subcategories are frequently related to categories. Second, categories were continuously compared to collected data. Third, the scope and scale of each category or theme

was reviewed, and finally, unusual data or inconsistencies were evaluated. This resulted in both primary themes and subthemes being identified. Initially un-coded information were not discarded, but set aside in the event for potential future use.

Peer Debriefer. This study utilized a peer debriefer as a qualitative research strategy to increase the study's credibility. The peer debriefing process involved a colleague providing her time to review of the data, methods, and findings. Having a peer debriefer involved is intended to ensure that the researcher's own biases are not present. Further, the debriefing process includes the reviewer's assessment of whether the findings are reasonable given the data (Merriam, 2009).

Through this process, the peer debriefer was able to access all study documents, including: audio recordings of all interviews, digital transcripts of all interviews, lists of codes, and clustered lists of themes. Together, the researcher and the peer debriefer reviewed each code and theme to ensure that there was a consistency of opinion. Further, the debriefer ensured codes and themes were in fact logical conclusions of the issues. Finally, the debriefer paid special attention to ensuring appropriate methods were followed.

Delimitation and limitations

There were two delimitations in this study. First, the pool of interview participants was very diverse which supported the decision to conclude the study when redundancy occurred. Of the 10 participants, there were both male and female participants, various races represented, an array of ages, and many different personal experiences and backgrounds. The second delimitation is the selection of RPU. This institution was a fit for the study given the high population of adult learners, a formalized ASL program, and the support of key faculty and staff to help the researcher recruit potential student participants.

There were also a number of limitations to this study. First, there was limited diversity in academic major and college. All but one of the participants in this study had an academic major housed in RPU's College of Arts, Sciences, and Letters. Further, even though students can take courses from many colleges outside their major, all students reported that the ASL course they took at RPU was housed in the College of Arts, Sciences, and Letters. Though not surprising given the rich tradition of academic service learning in the liberal arts, it did limit the potential breadth of information able to be captured.

Second, five of the 10 participants came to RPU through a specialized program supporting adult learners. Those involved in the program were inculcated into college life and academic rigor through a developmental program designed specifically to support them. Therefore, participants involved in that program have a different collegiate experience that may have skewed their perceptions.

Third, the nature of the participant selection process, while effective, may have resulted in a study limitation. Given that many of the study participants were identified via faculty and coordinator recommendation, it is possible faculty identified them because of their positive interactions in the course. Therefore, their stories and perceptions may skew towards a more positive experience than what is generalizable to a broader adult learner population.

The fourth limitation relates to the researcher's employment at RPU. Participants may have believed that the study was linked to institutional goals, which could be a limitation of the study. Although the researcher clearly articulated this research is in no way linked to institutional goals, an institutional agenda, or the employment of the researcher, it is possible participants felted compelled to answer in a way that they believed benefitted the institution. Similarly, participants may believe the researcher's employment at RPU could affect their grades or future

opportunities, scholarships, or other desirable outcomes and may therefore answer in a way they think benefits the researcher.

Finally, participant memory may be a study limitation. Given all of the students took their ASL course in a semester previous to the study, all information for the study is based on the recollection of the participant. Therefore, it is possible the participants' memories are inaccurate or incomplete.

Summary

The current study utilized an exploratory qualitative approach to understand the experience of adult learners in academic service learning courses. To gather data personal interviews were conducted. A variety of measures were included to ensure high levels of qualitative rigor including peer debriefing, member checking, and the use of an audit trail. Finally, a report was created to share results.

CHAPTER FOUR: STUDY PARTICIPANTS

This purpose of the current study was to explore the experience of adult learners in academic service learning courses. Extant scholarship fails to address the experiences of adult learners in academic service learning courses, yet, much evidence exists to suggest this may be a positive experience for the population, given the parallels between the ways in which adult learners prefer to learn and the delivery of ASL courses. The following provides information about study participants.

Below is a chart providing basic information about student participant followed by a few aggregate facts about the group.

Table 1: Study Participants

Name	Age*	Race	Gender	Major	Transfer**
Angie	52	African American	Female	Psychology	Yes
Bobby	28	African American	Male	Urban & Regional Studies	No
Diana	31	White	Female	Political Science	Yes
Gretchen	51	African American	Female	Health Policy Studies	Yes
Jane	38	White	Female	Psychology	No
Leah	48	White	Female	Behavioral Sciences	No
Penelope	41	African American	Female	Sociology	Yes
Selena	31	Latina	Female	Sociology	No
Steven	44	African American	Male	Criminal Justice Studies	Yes
Tina	59	White	Female	Criminal Justice Studies	Yes

* Age at the time of the interview

** Transfer is defined as someone who came to Regional Public University immediately after leaving another campus

Besides being enrolled at RPU, participants had other existing responsibilities while enrolled in their ASL course. Eight of 10 participants reported having children. Of their combined 20 children, 15 still live in the home with the adult learner. Additionally, six grandchildren, two of whom live in the same home as the adult learner, were reported. Six of the 10 adult learners indicated they were employed at the time of their ASL course, five working full-time, and one part-time.

The following sections provide a brief biography of each participant.

Angie. Angie is a 52-year old African American female majoring in Psychology. She never truly considered post-secondary education as an option for her. Immediately after high school, Angie married and had children. After her children were in school, Angie pursued a career. She served as a legal assistant for a number of years but thought little about career advancement.

However, after Angie's children became adults, and her subsequent divorce, she started to have concern for her own job advancement. At that time, her professional role involved providing support to recovering drug and alcohol addicts. Though she loved the work, she recognized her career would be limited by not having a bachelor's degree. Therefore, she started to think about pursuing higher education.

Her interest led her to start taking courses at a local community college, where she was academically successful. Given her success, she made the decision to transfer to a large, local research institution. Though she was academically successful there as well, she did not have a positive experience. She did not feel excited or supported in her academic journey at that institution. Feeling frustrated, she spoke with a friend who shared information with her about a

program at RPU designed specifically to support adult learners. After meeting with the RPU faculty member who runs the adult learner program, she decided to transfer.

She is now a senior at RPU. In her time at RPU, Angie has taken two ASL courses, but one stood out to her and it is what she spoke most about. In that course, she was assigned to assist in building urban gardens at a local non-profit agency focused on workforce development. Most recently, Angie became involved in research with the faculty member who taught her first ASL course, per his request.

Angie is pursuing a major that connects to her current professional role where she works with recovering addicts at a local non-profit agency. Earning her bachelor's degree will afford her career upward mobility, in a field she is passionate about. She is considering continuing on for a master's degree at some point after she completes her undergraduate degree.

Bobby. Bobby is a 28 year old African American male majoring in Criminal Justice Studies. Bobby started at RPU as a traditional student, entering college immediately after high school with a significant scholarship covering much of his tuition. However, due to his self-described immaturity, and lack of care and concern for his education, Bobby lost his scholarship because he did not meet the minimum grade point average required to maintain the funding. Though Bobby attempted to continue coursework paying for his tuition of pocket, it quickly became too expensive and subsequently Bobby had to take two years off of school.

During that time Bobby worked a variety of jobs, often working more than one at a time. He worked retail jobs as well as manual labor and warehouse jobs. It was his goal to work as much as he could in order to save money for tuition. Given continually increasing tuition rates, Bobby felt concern about his ability to be able to re-enroll. Simultaneously, Bobby felt frustrated all of this was happening because he felt he didn't put enough effort into his courses while he

was on scholarship. After two years away, Bobby returned to RPU taking classes part time and working part time.

At the time of the study, Bobby is an adult learner as described in this study, given his age. He has been re-enrolled at RPU for almost five years part time and is nearing enough credits to be of senior status.

Despite the nearly 10 years and less than stellar track record at RPU, Bobby speaks highly of the institution and very favorably of ASL. The ASL course in which he was enrolled was held at a local prison and involved him learning and doing service with both his fellow RPU students as well as inmates at the facility. He is unsure what the future holds but feels confident he needs a bachelor's degree at a minimum to be successful. He is open to graduate work but has not yet decided if he will pursue a master's degree.

Diana. Diana is a 31 year old White female majoring in Political Science. A high-achiever in high school, graduating in the top 10% of her class, Diana had always planned on going to college. Before the end of her senior year in high school, Diana was proud to have been accepted to a rigorous, private liberal arts college, where she was awarded significant scholarship dollars to defray the costs of a private education. Though Diana completed her freshman year with nearly a perfect GPA at the private liberal arts college, she suffered a series of personal challenges restricting her ability to continue, despite academic success.

Diana struggled to fit in at the school. Though she was part of a small circle of friends whom she felt were similar to her, she had a feeling she did not fit in with the other students whom she perceived as highly affluent. Coming from a less than affluent background, Diana didn't feel a strong sense of connection to the institution or its students. In addition, Diana was

suffering from mental health challenges that, in concert with her feelings of not fitting in, caused Diana to decide not to return to the liberal arts college for her second year.

Returning home, Diana opted to work, instead of pursuing enrollment elsewhere. She rotated through a variety of jobs including clerical roles, retail positions, and a variety of odd jobs to make sufficient money without a degree. Eventually, Diana started to work for a bank where she saw stable employment and income. However, issues with a supervisor caused some of Diana's mental health issues to resurface, eventually resulting in Diana being unable to work or go to school for over a year.

After a year off, Diana enrolled at local community college. Successful there, she then transferred to RPU, where she enrolled full-time and worked on campus as well.

Diana enrolled in one ASL course, which connected to her initial major, teacher education. Her course required her to work with students on behavior modification. Diana took the course in three different terms, withdrawing the first two times, before successfully completing on the third try.

Feeling on track now, but frustrated by her slow progress to a degree, Diana has aspirations for a master's degree after completion of her bachelor's degree. However, she cited her age as a challenge in continuing her education, noting education was getting more challenging for her as she aged.

Gretchen. Gretchen is a 51 year old African American female majoring in health policy Studies. Gretchen's major is housed in the College of Education, Health, and Human Services, making Gretchen the only participant majoring outside of the College of Arts, Sciences, and Letters.

Gretchen went to work immediately after high school. For much of her adult life Gretchen has been a single mom and as a result, did not feel able to pursue an education. Despite only having a high school diploma, Gretchen maintained steady employment with an airline company where she was regularly rewarded for outstanding efforts. In fact, she described many ways in which her employer gave her development opportunities and leveraged her leadership skills. Fairly satisfied in her role, and with a sense of self doubt about her own ability to be successful in higher education, Gretchen did not think much about not pursuing a bachelor's degree.

However, that changed when Gretchen's airline started to experience some financial challenges, and her future at the company was uncertain. Gretchen decided then to pursue coursework at a community college in a program preparing students to be surgical technicians. She believed a career as a surgical technician could provide a stable income with job security. Though she excelled in her coursework, she did not like it. Gretchen quickly knew being a surgical technician was not the right path for her.

Gretchen's daughter, who was scheduled to enroll that fall at RPU as a traditional freshman, encouraged her mother to apply for admission through a program that supported women returning to school. Gretchen applied and was accepted. She started part time soon after, maintaining her position with the airline.

Gretchen enrolled in one ASL course, unaware of what it was, only knowing it was a class that met a distribution requirement in her degree program. In her ASL course, Gretchen worked with a local soup kitchen on issues of housing security.

At the time of the study, Gretchen was one semester from graduation and had plans to pursue a master's degree.

Jane. Jane is a 38 year old White female majoring in Psychology. She was always recognized as talented in high school by her teachers and graduated near the top of her class. Jane was admitted into a four year liberal arts college during her senior year of high school. Instead of attending, she decided to defer her enrollment and take one year off. At that time she felt she needed a break from education.

Within the year, Jane got married and had a baby. As a result, she felt she was no longer able to accept her deferred enrollment to the liberal arts college, which was two hours away from home. In addition to her attendance in school being impractical given her life, her enthusiasm for going to school had lessened given her new priorities of marriage and a child. Though she had always felt she was college material, she was not unsatisfied with the path her life had taken. With her priorities changed, Jane started to pursue part time employment to supplement her husband's income. She worked in a variety of roles (bank teller, restaurant server, child care worker) throughout the years immediately after high school.

Throughout her twenties, she experienced a variety of life changes that continued to keep her away from participation in higher education. First, her husband's work caused their family to move across the country. Second, she had two more children, for a total of three for whom she was the primary caregiver. By her late twenties she and her husband returned to their hometown, with their kids. Shortly thereafter, they divorced and he was sentenced to prison. Jane, now faced with being a single parent, worked hard to make ends meet for her family. Returning to school was still not a realistic option for her.

Jane soon remarried and had a fourth child, leaving work to stay home with her children. Five years later, after the youngest child started school, Jane finally felt enough stability in her life to participate in higher education. She immediately enrolled at RPU. Though Jane had

always felt very confident in her ability to be successful in higher education, she had never before been able to find the time or resources to go back to school. Now, Jane felt her circumstances would allow her to not only participate but excel in higher education.

When Jane took her first ASL course, she chose the course because its meeting time fit into her hectic schedule and because it was a required class in her major. In fact, she did not realize upon registration what exactly she was signing up for. After the course concluded, Jane was asked by the instructor to be a teaching assistant the next term, which she happily accepted. Additionally, she registered for a second ASL course in the semester following her service as a teaching assistant.

Jane is looking forward to graduation in a few years. She has not decided on what she will do post-graduation.

Leah. Leah is a 48 year old White female majoring in behavioral sciences who had collegiate aspirations in high school. Immediately after high school Leah enrolled at a local community college. However, she did not even complete her first term because, in her own words, she simply stopped going.

Leah eventually married and started a family. As a wife and mom to multiple children, Leah needed to help her family financially. To do so, she took on a variety of jobs including working with a repossession company and working in a funeral home. Though she deeply disliked both roles, they provided steady sources of income.

Years later, despite consistent employment, Leah and her family struggled with bouts of homelessness and a variety of other financial challenges, which forced them to seek out social services. While at a social service agency, a case worker asked Leah if she would ever consider going to college. Thus began Leah's renewed interest in higher education.

After learning more about a program at RPU for returning women, Leah decided to apply. The enthusiasm she felt for returning to school was starting to grow. Leah was accepted and received financial support from the RPU program enabling her to enroll within the next term.

Leah has participated in two ASL courses and also works on campus. Her enrollment in the first ASL course was simply a function of schedule and distribution requirement, as the particular ASL course met both of her needs. In other words, Leah did not intentionally enroll in her first ASL course. In a subsequent semester she registered for a second ASL course given her positive previous experience. Leah cites both her ASL courses and her on campus employment as having significantly shaped her perspective on her career, guiding her change of major from biochemistry to behavioral sciences.

Despite a variety of circumstances in her personal life that could have distracted her from her educational journey, Leah has been very successful at RPU. During her time at RPU Leah served as the primary caretaker for her father who suffered from a prolonged illness (and later passed away), welcomed her first grandchild (who lives in Leah's home), and her family has continued to struggle with bouts of homelessness. At the time of the study, Leah is close to completion of her bachelor's degree and is already considering her options for a master's degree, which she believes she will likely pursue at RPU.

Penelope. Penelope is a 41 year old African American female who majored in sociology. She recently completed her bachelor's degree at RPU. She is now employed as a private investigator.

Penelope vividly described her experience as a poor, intercity youth without role models. There was no expectation for her to complete a college degree and subsequently no support to do

so either. Given no one in her family had ever been to college, there was not much conversation about college in Penelope's home.

Despite those influences, Penelope still had a desire to go to college and performed well academically in high school. Penelope decided to pursue a traditional higher education experience and enrolled in a mid-size public university about an hour from her home, where she was enrolled full time and lived in a residence hall. Without an understanding of financial aid, Penelope did not realize the loans and grants she received did not cover the entire cost of her attendance in the fall semester and she would have to supplement the aid with her own money. Since she had no way of paying off the balance for the fall semester, she was unable to enroll in the second term. After the end of the first term, she moved back home and put her college dreams on hold.

Back home she worked a variety of jobs, most full-time in retail over the next 10 years, never enrolling in higher education. In that time she also married and had four children. As her children were starting to grow older, Penelope began to think about going back to college, to set an example for her children by completing a college degree. She decided to begin her journey at a local community college.

After a number of semesters of academic success at the community college, Penelope transferred to RPU to complete her bachelor's degree in Psychology. However, she found majoring in Psychology was not a fit for her. She decided to try a course in sociology, which she immediately liked. Changing her major to sociology, she found her new major helped her think through some of the issues and challenges from her childhood that still plagued her. She continued to struggle with the question of why some students would never achieve success, despite their potential, while others would. She also struggled with what she described as

survivor's guilt, a deep guilt connected to her own success in concert with the lack of success of her childhood peers. Citing that almost no one from her childhood neighborhood ever participated in any type of postsecondary education, Penelope described a deep guilt she always carried with her.

Penelope took one ASL course near the end of her degree program, because it met a distribution requirement for her degree, not because it was an ASL course. Through her course, she worked on a mentoring program with young children, something very meaningful to her.

At the time of the study, Penelope indicated enthusiasm about her professional job and satisfaction with her career working as a private investigator. She is not planning on pursuing a master's degree.

Selena. Selena is a 31 year old Latina female majoring in sociology. Though she had a desire to go to a four year college right after high school, a pregnancy during her teenage years prevented her from achieving her dream. Selena attempted enrollment at a local community college but felt very discouraged by the lack of support from the community college and from her personal networks. Despite desperately wanting to be the first in her family to graduate from college, Selena stopping enrolling.

Instead, Selena started working full time, got married and in the next few years had more children. To earn money, she started working with a local college's School of Public Health where she was involved in community engagement work. Excelling in her work, she wanted more responsibility but not having a bachelor's degree held her back. Doing research into the possibility of going back to school to pursue a bachelor's degree, Selena found an RPU program designed to support adult learners returning to college and immediately enrolled.

Selena did significant research into the opportunities available to her at RPU. Therefore, Selena knew about academic service learning and identified a course she wanted to take, because of her interest and its reputation. In fact, she tried three different terms to register for the class, the first two without success. The first two times she tried, the class had already filled before she was eligible to register, due to its popularity. The course, which pairs RPU students with local prison inmates, is the same course Bobby took.

Nearing the completion of her bachelor's degree, Selena is beginning to think about a graduate degree in public health. She has been encouraged by faculty to consider continuing her education, and she is open to the idea. She believes a master's degree could provide her additional employment opportunities beyond which a bachelor's would provide.

Steven. Steven is a 44 year old African American male majoring in criminal justice Studies. Steven started in the workforce immediately after high school and had a career he was excited about as an account supervisor in the automotive field. Though he dreamed as a child of becoming a parole officer, when he found a job he enjoyed working in the automotive industry, he decided to let the dream go.

After many years in the automotive industry, Steven decided to move with his significant other as she had a new, promising job in another region of the country. Upon arriving in the new region, Steven could not find work comparable to his automotive industry role. Since it was important to bring in income, he ended up having to work in retail, eventually being promoted as high as an assistant manager position in a large store. A few years later, he and his significant other moved back to their hometown with their new son. Back home, Steven was incredibly disappointed he was unable to find work in the automotive industry due to the poor economic conditions in the area at that time.

Now, with a child to support, Steven wanted something more sustainable for his family than retail. His dream of being a parole officer started to reemerge, and Steven decided to pursue an associate's degree. Enrolling in the local community college he was academically successful. Steven was highly encouraged by his faculty at the community college to transfer to RPU and complete a bachelor's degree. He decided to try, applying for admission as a transfer student to RPU. He was accepted and started courses the next term.

It is only by chance he enrolled in an ASL course. He did not know what it was, just recognized the course counted toward his degree. The course involved Steven working at a local soup kitchen (in the same location as Gretchen), which was located just blocks from his childhood home. He, too, worked on issues of housing security.

Approaching the half-way mark in his undergraduate career, Steven is already thinking about the possibility of graduate school.

Tina. Tina is a 59 year old White female majoring in criminal justice studies. Never considering higher education, Tina spent much of her life working in security at the local airport. For years she scanned bags for weapons forty hours a week, while balancing the demands of being a single mother. Her daughter, a victim of rape and sex trafficking, was Tina's primary priority. Therefore, Tina's emerging interest in higher education was delayed by the need to take care of her family. Though she attempted part time enrollment at a community college intermittently, the many demands of her life hampered her ability to be successful, so she stopped enrolling altogether.

Some years later, in her mid-fifties, Tina became very ill requiring her to take extended time off of work. After the extended illness, Tina was no longer able to continue to work at all. Though she felt very down, but did not want her children to see. She wanted her children to

believe "when you are down, you do not quit", so she decided to pursue an education. She wanted to show her children college was an option for their family.

Through a friend at a social service agency, Tina heard about a program at RPU designed for adult learners who wished to return to college. Despite her own self-doubt, she enrolled and is working steadily toward a bachelor's degree. Much like many of her peers, Tina enrolled in ASL without knowing what it was. The course, which she was enrolled in, assigned Tina to work with a local rape clinic, a poignant assignment given Tina's family circumstances.

Tina is enthusiastic about the way she has role modeled strength for her family and looks forward to completing her degree. She is not actively considering graduate school, though not necessarily opposed.

In this section I have provided brief information about each study participant including key demographic information, their motivation for attending college, previous education, and the personal and professional challenges they faced along the way. Further, I also indicated (when able) the reasons why participants enrolled in an ASL course(s). The next section discusses the key themes identified out of participant interviews. Following the section on themes is a short discussion about other issues raised by participants that did fit into the identified themes, but were important to mention.

CHAPTER FIVE: FINDINGS

Four key themes emerged from the interviews about the experience of adult learners in academic service learning courses. The four themes are: (1) connections; (2) importance of theory to practice; (3) ability to use previous life experience in class; and (4) positive feelings about college. The first theme, connections, describes the ways in which participants understood their connections to other students, faculty and staff, and individuals in the communities they served through their experience in ASL or as a result of their ASL course. The second theme, importance of theory to practice, focuses on participants' perception of the value of the pairing of classwork and practical application. The third theme, ability to use previous life experiences in the classroom explores how participants were able to use their skills, knowledge or prior work experience within the context of their ASL course. The fourth theme, positive feelings about college, focuses on the ways in which students' had increased positive feelings about themselves as college students and about college as a result of their participation in an ASL course. Following a discussion of the themes is a section of other important contributions that were not included in the existing themes.

Theme #1: Connections

Often, adult learners do not feel a sense of belonging or connection to their campus. Participants talked about their concerns related to the potential of alienation, but shared various stories that suggested that in fact, in their ASL course, they felt anything but alienated.

In every interview, a sense of connection to others was described as a significant and positive component of the Academic Service Learning course experience. Throughout the interviews, participants described the ways in which other college students, faculty and staff, and

community organizations made them feel valued and welcome, something many indicated they did not feel, to a great degree, before taking this course.

Connection with classmates. Every participant indicated high levels of personal connection with other college students (both adult learner and traditional age) in meaningful ways through their participation in an ASL course. Through their stories they demonstrated a sense of belonging, they detailed ways in which their social integration led to continued engagement on campus long after the conclusion of the course, and shared stories of mentoring and being mentored.

Sense of belonging. Angie described herself as challenged by coming back to school and interacting with what she described as "the younger generations". Prior to her ASL course, Angie had employed a "meeting people where they are… not having great expectations on [sic] anyone" strategy she believed would role model to others how she wanted to be treated. She felt the strategy would allow her to get along with all students regardless of their age. She believes this strategy was successful for her.

That said, however, she was incredibly surprised to find out how much more connected she was in her ASL class than in all of her previous courses. As an older African-American female, she expected to feel somewhat isolated. In this course, however, she felt the level of acceptance and belonging was high. She expressed comfort in knowing she was valued by her peers. She noted, "the greatest thing is, you see all these young people and you think, oh my gosh, this is my competition. And then you realize that your age is actually an asset for you in certain places." Angie made special reference to her team's project, for which she served as a co-captain. The enthusiasm her team felt, she said, was indeed related to their own diversity, thereby encouraging her feeling of being valued. She believed she was being valued in fact *for* her age

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and experience. The ASL course was very different from what she experienced in her other, more traditional courses. She mentioned because of her connections with students in the class, they would carry out service projects even after the course ended.

> They told me they wanted to come back and to let them know what I was doing [after the class ended] because it was a great experience for them too. It wasn't just about the garden, it was about the connections.

After the course she did follow through and invited her former classmates to future service opportunities. She proudly noted many accepted her invitation and did additional service projects with her in the subsequent semester.

Steven recounted a specific story he felt best represented the strong connection he felt with his colleagues in the class. He and a few other students were working on a class project. When the other students in his group realized he had no cell phone, they decided to take up a collection of money to buy him a phone so he could be more connected. "So they say here's what we are going to do… we're going to get you a cell phone, old man!" Steven recalled with a big grin. Though he politely declined their offer, he noted their kindness and regarded the offer as an example of him being valued by his team. Though he recognized the offer of a phone was mutually beneficial in that it would have utility in the team project, he was still moved by the generosity.

Diana felt she was valued by her peers and she equally valued them. She vividly described how she and her peers regularly made plans to meet each other both before and after class to talk. The time together was of their own accord and not required by the instructor or due to a course project. To her, this class had a culture of collaboration that she hadn't experienced in other courses. Crediting the influence of the culture of collaboration in her ASL course, Diana recalls her and her peers seeking additional opportunities, outside of class, to gather together and

discuss course content. Diana shared, "I feel like it was more collaborative [than a traditional course]. It was just before or after class… I recall us discussing strategies… we could say, 'What are you doing in your middle school?' or 'What are you doing in your elementary school?' " Despite being assigned to different schools and grade levels, Diana and her peers were able to share and collaborate significantly outside of class.

Tina cites being a parent as helping her to build connections with her classroom peers in her ASL course. "I'm old enough for people who are way up there, and I'm cool enough to be with the young kids because my daughter and son are the same age as the kids here" she said. Tina felt the relationships between she and her traditional age colleagues were mutually beneficial. She noted she would find opportunities to share some of her own wisdom with students, while her colleagues shared theirs with her. "They showed me the computer. They explained why you do this and why you do that…how to keep you folders together." She talked at length about how kind other students in the class were to her. She later stated that because the relationships she created with some of her ASL course colleagues were so strong, they continued to meet for lunch occasionally after the completion of the course. These meetings, she cited, were purely social and a way to stay connected even though they did not have class together anymore.

Gateway to campus and community involvement. Strikingly, many participants spoke about their experience in an ASL course as providing a gateway for increased connection to the campus and community. Participants described their interactions with other students (often traditional age students) often led them to opportunities to get more involved. Participants highlighted a variety of ways in which they got involved on campus after their ASL course, including: joining student organizations, participating in university leadership programs, and

leveraging academic support or other campus resource programs. Additionally, participants described this class as providing a gateway for them to be more involved in the community through volunteer service even after the conclusion of the course. In fact, eight of the 10 participants discussed continuing their service with the specific community partner after the conclusion of the course.

Angie's ASL work was transformational for her. Despite the course lasting only one semester, Angie has not missed an opportunity to stay engaged with her colleagues from the course. "I still have connections with my classmates that I had in that particular class and they contact me, or I contact them, and I let them know what's been going on." Since then, she has found a variety of opportunities for her and her group from the class to present their work at different conferences and summits. Angie described being exposed through ASL to a variety of opportunities, noting "My involvement with school and outside projects has tripled. I think I got into a lot, maybe too much." Additionally, her engagement with and enthusiasm for her class colleagues has indeed grown over time, and she's found ways to bring her colleagues into other aspects of her life. She has even invited her peers into her professional work space, asking them for assistance in building a community garden at her work, as they did in their course. "Even though it started out as a class project, the continuing of it was mostly voluntary. And so I just put shout outs to the same students," she mentioned.

Steven described the ASL experience as life-changing. Not only did he cite powerful learning, he described the service as contagious. Though he had grown up just blocks from the non-profit he was assigned to, he had never been there before. However, once he started to get involved through the course, he could not imagine not continuing to go there, as he felt like such a part of their community. He continues to serve there, long after the conclusion of the course

because he feels so engaged with their community. "Everybody knows me there, they shake my hand when I arrive and say 'that's the RPU guy'. Steven saw the "RPU guy" title as a badge of honor connecting him not only more with the community, but also with the institution. "I stop at all of the [campus] boards now, check out what's going on", further describing himself getting involved with the campus student government and working on parking issues.

Mentorship. Mentorship was a concept raised in many interviews. In some instances participants reported they served as mentors, given their age and life experience to their classmates. But for others, it was mutually beneficial.

Angie shared as an older female, and a mom, she felt students gravitated toward her for advice about whatever was happening in their lives, including outside of the ASL course. For example, Angie offered in the following quote while she was surprised at the students' looking to her for advice, she was pleased. She said,

> I'm a mom first and so I was really surprised at the guys who kind of pulled toward me…
> they listened to what I had to say so whatever is going on in their personal life.

The idea of providing advice to younger students resonated for Tina as well. Tina utilized her own life experiences as a parent to offer guidance many times to her ASL colleagues. Describing why she felt she could provide guidance, she noted:

> I'm older than everyone in the class, so they all look to me for answers… my daughter
> and my son are same age as the kids here. So, I know what they go through as young kids
> and I know what adults go through looking into the big picture.

For Jane, the integration of her past work into mentorship occurred while she carpooled to the volunteer site with a traditional age student. During their time in transport to the site, the younger student regularly solicited Jane's advice and counsel on issues related to professionalism and appropriate conduct at the site, given Jane's extensive child-care work prior to entering college and her experience being a mother of four children. Similarly, Jane would ask the

younger student questions. Jane offered the following, comment, "All the way home we would discuss things. She would bring things to my attention, and I would bring things to hers. So it was mutually beneficial." Bobby agreed with Jane that the relationships between adult learners other students in the class were mutually beneficial. Adult learners, he noted, are able to help the other students around them in the ASL course because of their additional life experience. Leah also described the impact of the mutually beneficial mentoring relationship between herself and traditional students. She talked about the reciprocity of the relationship and shared,

> There are generation gaps. Sometimes the gap is large… but I am still able to learn from those students. And I think it's a mutual kind of benefit. They are more computer geared, they are born with a computer…, I think we [adult learners] offer maybe just more life experience, and we've lived through a little bit more and we offer a bit different perspective that we are able to share. So I think that sharing of knowledge is very beneficial… it's a give and take. It can be frustrating sometimes, I know they get frustrated sometimes with the older people who don't…. 'wait what is cut and paste again', right?

Connection with faculty. Participants described the positive relationships between student (both adult learner and others) and instructors in their ASL courses. The idea of connection with faculty was described in two primary ways, co-created learning and feedback from faculty, discussed in the following sections.

Co-created learning. Participants indicated a desire to be involved with their learning, identifying it as a factor in both their engagement and success. In interviews, the concept of co-creating learning emerged, where the students felt they contributed, through their participation, to their learning. Participants enthusiastically described, with rich detail, how they believed their contributions to the class enriched the experience of all students and advanced the learning.

For Angie, the concept of co-created learning reflected her experience in ASL. She cited the interaction between the professor and student as more engaged in the ASL course than her interactions had been in other courses. "There's just more one on one time with the professor…

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he asked 'what do *you* see'…" She recounted feeling her ideas and opinions mattered. Further, she noted she believes many people were responsible for helping her to learn, not solely the professor. She highlighted peers in the course and the people at the agency where she served as all contributing.

Leah shared her instructor was almost like another student in the course. Every day when they arrived at class the professor and students reorganized the furniture in the room, creating a space more encouraging of sharing and participation from all students. She noted, "We got there and set the desks in a circle… She [instructor] got right in the circle with us." Leah further described how the seating arrangement supported everyone's participation. "Everybody did participate. Nobody was forced to participate but everyone had an opportunity to… we would go around the circle and everyone would kind of put their two cents in". She also referenced feeling that "it was like a family so it wasn't like 'I'm not talking'." The ability for all students to contribute or to be heard, was important to Leah and helped her feel like she contributed to the learning.

Angie proudly described an opportunity she was offered, and immediately accepted, to share her ASL experience with other faculty interested in teaching an ASL course. Sitting on a panel of students, Angie was delighted to express her ideas about the value of this course in hopes other faculty might decide to create their own ASL courses. On the panel, she eagerly shared her enthusiasm about co-created learning. She told the faculty audience she felt student opinions were highly valued and often student ideas helped to create learning opportunities for faculty and students alike. Angie felt engaged in not only learning the material, but in contributing to others' learning. She further described her experience by saying that the

"professor was pouring [information] into me, but there was also something that I offered him as well."

Steven appreciated the way in which his instructor included students in her thinking about course assignments and projects and how projects and assignments would contribute to the students' learning. "She had a list of stuff, but said 'if there is something you wanted to do, or whatever, just pass it up to me and we'll see if we can work it out.' " Steven said. He continued to provide her suggestions and ideas, noting her openness to changing parts of the course if she could be convinced it would benefit the students' experience.

Diana also raised the idea of co-created learning in her interview. She cited the many ways in which different people contributed to the learning. In previous classes, Diana described experiencing learning through a transmission style delivery of information from professor to student. In this course, however, everyone shared their experiences from the field and thought critically about those experiences to create learning opportunities for each other. She felt "it required a lot of us to go deeper" further describing the level of depth classmates were able to reach as necessary to make substantive contributions to her learning. She also noted in her course she and her professor equally contributed to learning through group discussions. "We got to sit down and discuss case studies like equals."

Feedback. Volume and quality of feedback from faculty was regularly raised in participant interviews. Students acknowledged the many forms and ways faculty were highly engaged in the course through their verbal and written feedback but also their significant presence and attention paid to the class, creating a profound experience for many of the students.

Steven cited his professor's profound impact on his experience. He described the faculty member's consistent presence and feedback in his time with the non-profit agency and her

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regular review of their progress on their project. Finally, he cited her thoughtful feedback on his reflections. Sprinkled throughout the interview were comments about the professor connecting him and his classmates to resources, engaging them with interesting conversations, and being present at their service site. Her presence at the site allowed her to provide Steven and his colleagues with immediate verbal feedback and support. He described her as not just an instructor, but also an advisor.

> She does a lot of advising like even when I kind of got caught up some other kind of way and didn't know what direction to take, I could schedule something with her, email her and let her know what was going on and she would kind of you know, well hey let me make a phone call over here.

He noted how he continues to go back to that particular faculty member because of the bond created as a part of the ASL course experience.

Jane was eager to talk about her experience with her professor, someone who had a profound impact on her. She cited the professor's continuous positive feedback and encouragement throughout the semester. Noting a higher than usual frequency of writing assignments in the course, Jane was pleased she received regular and generally positive feedback from her professor, leading to Jane being selected for a special opportunity, an opportunity for her to be a teaching assistant in the subsequent semester. Jane offered:

> ASL changed my experience at the University because it introduced me to the professor. And of course she asked me to come back and TA for her which was a phenomenal experience and showed me a different side of the experience. It has changed me as a person.

Jane goes on further to state that because of her interactions with the ASL faculty member, she subsequently felt more comfortable with faculty in her other courses.

Though Leah actually disagreed with the faculty's teaching style on many occasions, she noted despite her concerns, the methods used really engaged students. In the course, students

were asked to read their work aloud to the class, soliciting verbal feedback from others, including the professor. Although Leah felt concern initially the method would create an uncomfortable environment, she acknowledged it led to a very open discussion and subsequently appreciated its value and the connections it created between the students and the instructor. "As awful as it sounds," she noted, "it opened the discussion… And if someone didn't say something a couple of times, the next time she'd start with them or ask them. So everybody was gently forced."

Connection with community organizations. A number of students described themselves as particularly moved by their interactions with the community organizations where they were assigned during their course. For many, the experience, assignments, and projects closely aligned to their own life and experiences. Given many participants' desire to positively contribute to their own family or community, the course motivated many of the adult learners.

Bobby spoke at great length about the power of his experience working with prisoners. He noted the prisoners' desire to be more and to do more, which in turn inspired him. He was greatly impacted by seeing the prisoners he worked with also striving to earn an education, which he says increased his level of effort in the course.

> With these people coming to our class and putting forth effort… it makes you want to almost work harder to make sure you're setting the bar. You want to come correct [sic], I guess. And to be part of the discussions. So that really pushed me in that class and I had a lot of beautiful experiences and conversations from it.

For Tina, the connection to the community organization was poignant. Tina's class was paired with a rape crisis center that works with victims of not only rape but sex trafficking. Since Tina's own daughter was a victim of sex trafficking, she found the course powerful. Tina was surprised to learn about the frequency of rape and sex trafficking, but exhibited a sense of comfort in learning her circumstance was more common than she previously realized. "Those

people unfortunately went through that crime could've… well were my daughter [sic]." She went on the say that because of her connection to the issue, there was an increased interest on her part to be involved resulting in her saying that she is "going to be volunteering now this organization." Tina indicated a positive outcome of her participation in working with the crisis center was her improved understanding of the resources available to victims. She expressed great appreciation for the opportunity to be exposed to an organization like the crisis center.

For Jane, the experience was life changing as a result of each of her ASL courses. Through participation in a second ASL course in political science, Jane was richly impacted. She thoughtfully detailed the ways in which her course impacted her everyday life, even after the course.

> It has shaped me and changed me… I care more about that stuff than I ever have in my life. I understand it more, I am involved more, my children and I – even after the ten hours –we continue to volunteer there and really supported my candidate. I got to know her. We worked the polls, I brought my kids there.

She noted her subsequent attendance at many local council meetings and her increased interest in helping to shape the future of her community with and for her children. For example, she noted her work forming a new youth organization.

> I formed the junior main street council meeting which is made up of all high school students and they are putting on a fashion show. It's just like [I've] gotten there all from being forced to engage in a course.

The interest in continuing to serve was not unique to Jane, since as stated previously, eight of the 10 student participants indicated they continued to serve community organizations after the conclusion of their course. However, what was unique about Jane's experience was she chose to include her own family in future service, supporting Steven's suggestion that the service the students engage in is "contagious". Steven stated "I thank her [instructor] all of the time for

helping me do this, because when we walked in to the soup kitchen it just grabbed me." He further stated that since the end of the course, he has "stayed on and worked for a year."

In Diana's ASL course, she was placed into an elementary school classroom. Diana, in her interview, shared how much she connected with the classroom teacher because the teacher made her feel valued and included her in decisions on how to approach behavior management for a child who was misbehaving. This resulted in Diana feeling an increased sense of confidence about her abilities. She noted, "I actually did get a lot of positive feedback which did really increase my confidence…my [classroom] teacher told my faculty member that I was better at it [behavior management] than the student teacher." Similarly, Angie spoke fondly of the connections she made with individuals at the non-profit site she worked at. "They have names like Mr. Joe and I can't remember what that girl's name was …she was definitely a character… her vibrant personality was what drew people back to you know these different sites."

The stories articulated in this section have demonstrated the participants' strong feelings about the sense of connection they experienced as a result of their ASL course.

Theme #2: Importance of theory to practice

Without question, the most commonly raised topic for study participants was the importance of theory translated into practice in this course. In fact, the importance of theory to practice was discussed in every single interview, and in many interviews the topic kept re-emerging into the conversation. Through their comments, study participants demonstrated enthusiasm for a curriculum they believed centered their learning, through the use of practical application. Participants appreciated the unique opportunity to marry theory and practice in their ASL course. Leah, most profoundly said "it just made it real".

Diana described the learning experience in her teacher education course as connecting the practice to theory as critical. She was particularly moved by the opportunity to learn theory on one day and to try out that theory the next day as she worked with middle school students on behavioral modification.

> If there is something we had discussed [in class] I could try it the next day, and then talk about it… did it work, and why did or didn't it… I was just more engaged. It brought the theory to life for us.

She further described her experience as "putting life into what we were learning" explaining how her instructor would regularly ask her to cite real life examples of how she used what she learned in class. Sara noted how her instructor would ask her, "how did you use what we learned in class with it?" Angie underscored those comments by offering she felt ASL gave students additional ways to learn other than just via traditional lectures.

Jane had a similar experience to Angie and Sara in her time at a local Head Start early childhood center working with infants. She did not just learn about what could happen or should happen. Instead, she learned about what did happen, calling ASL "the best of both worlds". She noted for her, ASL gave her the ability to bring together different aspects of learning to enhance the learning experience. Further, she argued, her ASL course experience made her feel she got more for her tuition dollars than she would have in a non-ASL course. Leah echoed Jane's sentiments, feeling the marriage of theory and practice brings together the best of both worlds and she appreciated the opportunity to do exactly what she was learning.

Angie shared that as an adult learner, she felt the learning opportunities that merge theory and practice fit her own learning style better. She also recognized the difference between adult learners and other students, noting how they have different learning needs.

> You've got people like myself who are nontraditional students who just do better when you're learning on a different type of level, you know? That's great to have that option…

You got people who could just sit and listen until after a while it becomes whomp whomp [boring]… but if I'm thinking thinking and moving, I can just grab it better, right? I'm a visual person and a physical person…

Enhanced learning. Participants, in their own words, described the powerful impact a theory to practice style class brought to their learning. Though they may have not been familiar with the concept of theory to practice, or some of the other related theories, they all seemed to inherently believe this model of course delivery was powerful for their learning. Using different language, participants meaningfully described the ways they felt their learning was enhanced as a result of being able to practice concepts from the courses, including: taking ownership of their learning, seeing things from multiple perspectives, use of relevant materials, high engagement, and the use of reflection activities.

Ownership. When Tina described herself in the interview, she regularly identified the ways in which she was not an equal to her peers, including being nearly 40 years older than many of her classmates and being a single mom of adult children.. But when she spoke about herself and her interaction in the class, she seemed to see herself as an equal and someone who brought experience and knowledge into the course in a unique way. Tina felt she, as an adult learner, had "wisdom going into the class, as opposed to going in blindly. Although the wisdom in the class is slightly different… than the younger students." She unquestioningly believed she contributed to the learning and learned an incredible amount herself, because the class model allowed her to take ownership of her education. She described her own insecurity but then offered the class, "helped me to be in charge again." Her interview uncovered her sense of ownership in the class and the learning generated from the blended theory and practice model. In her opinion, the course allowed her to learn more than she could have in a more traditional style course.

Angie felt she was more in charge of her education as a result of her ASL course. Through her course, Angie recognized a need to think differently about her education in order to maximize her experience. The ASL course, she noted, allowed her to think about how she might take a different path to her end goal. She stated, "I'm learning more about creating my own way, I'm taking my education, but I'm kind of creating my own way" referencing her use of her ASL coursework and projects in her professional role. She further noted a subsequent project with a faculty member describing it as "an independent study on providing sacred spaces" a concept she further developed as a result of the urban garden project and for her clients to "be where they can be comfortable." The independent study, she stated, a direct result of her project in the ASL course, allowed her to further take ownership of her education by developing a project that better met her needs.

Selena also took ownership of her learning in her course. Having tried to enroll in this course twice before getting in, she knew she was going to take advantage of every moment to advance her own learning.

> I felt really passionate about the subject…it was the interaction I prepared myself for. So I learned the content by reading the information and you know studying it, but then I had to go above and beyond to prepare to interact with my peers about it so I think I gave that course a lot more interaction.

Multiple perspectives. When asked about her experiences in the course outside of the reading and homework, Angie suggested viewing the concepts from multiple perspectives helped her to learn the most. Angie felt she benefited from the variety of perspectives to which she was exposed including perspectives from the agency, from other clients, and from her peers in class. Angie commented how multiple perspectives were valuable for her, saying,

> You have a number of people from a number of different backgrounds that can kind of see what the perspectives are. See, because I can only speak of my perspective from

where I'm at, and what I know, and my knowledge. But we have Hassan over here who speaks from his perspective, so that diversity is truly necessary.

Bobby, too, described himself as "learning from the experiences of other people and the views of other people" particularly from the prisoners he had the opportunity to interact with.

Gretchen, clearly articulated her sense of the importance of multiple perspectives and how it enhanced her learning.

> When you get a chance to work on these projects you really get to see people from different walks of life, the struggles they may or may not have, and it opens you up to think hmmm… maybe I need to change my attitude about things.

Further, she describes her learning was rooted in listening to other perspectives and less about sharing her own ideas. Selena felt similarly, urging the importance of the variety of perspectives she learned from. She noted regardless of the amount of articles you read on a topic "you won't really comprehend it until you actually are talking to someone who has experienced, say, racial discrimination or systemic issues."

Relevant material. Many participants expressed gratitude to their ASL course for providing course materials and assignments that were relevant to their own experiences.

For Penelope, the material connected closely with her own life, which allowed her to contribute in more significant ways. "I think I contributed more because my own background is so full of crap in itself" she stated. She felt she had not only learned from the coursework relevant to her own life, but was given a chance to share her experiences through the uniquely styled course in a way she believed would not have been possible in a more traditional course. She was able to share her experiences in the mentoring work she did with young girls through a local non-profit agency in her Women's Studies ASL course.

Gretchen believed her work with the clients at the soup kitchen was personally valuable. She said, "Some of the people I talked to at one point, they'd had jobs, they'd lost jobs. I looked

at it as I could have been in the same situation, so it was close to me." She talked about her owns fears about job security, before entering higher education. At times, she was unsure whether her job was safe. As a single mother, without a degree, that was scary to her. She shivered as she described the possibility of financial ruin if she were to lose her job. "Just because I've been on my job 20 plus years… it's not guaranteed. There's no certainty. One event can alter your entire life" she added, wiping tears from her own eyes. "Just be conscientious and grateful" she said. In this course, for Gretchen, the material was incredibly close to her own life experience, or what she believed could have easily been her experience.

Connections between his own life and those he was working with at the prison were clear for Bobby. Deeply reflecting before speaking, he offered that he:

> Necessarily would [not] interact with people in a prison. I had some biases myself coming in, although I've had some family members that were incarcerated…. If it is was not for my family that I was from and the mistakes I've made… It could possibly be me in there.

He continued throughout the interview to point back to the relevance of this experience for him, and the important role this experience played in his motivation toward degree completion.

Engagement. Of the 10 interviews conducted, eight students spoke specifically to the importance of the engagement and how engagement contributed to their learning. Participants regularly noted how appreciative they were to have had an opportunity to actually practice concepts they were learning.

When Penelope was asked what made her ASL course experience different than her other courses, she was quick to cite engagement. "It's one thing to sit in a classroom and listen to a lecture and read peer reviewed journals [but] getting out there and seeing, living, touching, and engaging in the subject" is what really excited Penelope when working with the assigned non-

profit mentoring younger women. For her, given her interest in social work, the engagement was critical. She stated the interactions she had allowed her to contribute more to the course and feel a greater sense of accomplishment upon completion.

Selena agreed, taking Penelope's ideas further by citing an ASL course as a once in a lifetime opportunity, "to engage with the material and really get a deeper understanding of what is going on… it really helped me to grow as a person" Steven's experience was similar, as he said the engagement with a community agency allowed him to see what he was learning in action, leading to a deep sense of personal satisfaction in his learning. "What you might see in real life, kind of correlates to what you are getting in your books." He further notes the connection between the learning and his previous work life, "I've always been a fan, having worked my way up in automotive, so the hands on thing." Gretchen agreed stating, "It's a hands on class. It keeps students more interested."

At first, Tina was unsure how she felt about the idea of the blended model course where she would have to spend time working with an agency. She wasn't aware this class was going to be any different than any other class she had ever taken. When she heard she would have to do service, she did not find that appealing initially, given that much of the work she deemed menial, such as stuffing envelopes for mailings. "I was thinking… really? You're going to make me do this and I'm paying [tuition] for this?" But as the semester progressed, Tina described her attitude changed, "I thought, you know this is actually really good for me." By the end of the term she determined that in fact learning and serving at the same time was helpful, and she appreciated the opportunity she had unintentionally signed herself up for.

Angie found the experience of engaging with both textbooks and community to be highly effective. She describes the style of learning as being beneficial in helping students understand the concepts.

> At some point you need to be lectured because you need that to understand what the course is about. But when you can actually go into practice with it, using what you're learning… that's what was best.

Use of reflection. Throughout each interview, participants were asked about the use of reflection activities in their learning. Every respondent indicated reflection was a practiced teaching tactic in their ASL course, though the amount they were asked to participate in reflection activities varied per course from once per semester (two participants) to nearly every class (six participants). Consistently, participants mentioned the value and utility of the reflection activities in their learning.

Angie described the use of reflection as forcing her to think critically, to "think about what our experience was and to utilize the social theories we had learned to what we saw". Detailing reflections that were required almost every class, Angie was able to apply what she learned right away in her reflections. The same was true for Penelope who found the reflections to be a tool for increasing self-awareness, "it makes me more self-aware. More cognitive of what's going on around me. It has given me that ability to make connections." Further, she indicated the skill of reflection, which she learned in her ASL course, has served her well in her academic as well as her personal life.

Bobby, too, felt his regular reflection and critical thinking activities helped him to not only put things in perspective, but to challenge him. "It challenged me. In fact, it challenged my perspective on a lot of things I would not normally question." Diana described her experience

doing reflective activities like journaling, in her case, as causing her to dig in and go deeper, that it "couldn't be just surface level".

Gretchen, though only having to reflect once during the semester, felt incredibly moved by the activity. The professor asked Gretchen and her colleagues to reflect on what they got out of the course. "I didn't want to sound cliché," said Gretchen, "but it just felt really personal to me. You see it on TV, but until you see it [poverty] with your own eyes…" She mentioned while she was reflecting she realized the depth and breadth of her learning. She not only learned things for a class, but she could possibly help someone with her new, uniquely acquired knowledge.

Selena described her experience with reflection as the opportunity to interact with or try on different characters or different ideas, giving her a chance to feel empathy for others who may be going through challenging situations. Her assessment was it would be impossible to know exactly how one might "truly feel about something" until having a chance to engage in a reflective activity. For Selena, therefore, reflection activities were central to her learning.

Relationship to career. For many of the study participants, the connection between their ASL course and their career was valuable. Seven of the 10 participants referenced a connection to career in their interviews.

Clarity of career choice. For some, the ability to blend theory to practice provided a lens through which he or she could see themselves as a professional. ASL provided the opportunity to practice working in the field and build an increased understanding of not just what the work is about, but how it is accomplished. Steven said for him, the course boosted his confidence in his selection of his major, stating, "it definitely boosted my confidence as far, you know, if being Urban and Regional Studies was something I wanted to do."

Leah eloquently described how she felt about ASL and how it connected to career aspirations.

> It puts you out there, I think it's a great way to see if you're actually interested in following a certain career… it puts you out there and puts you in contact with what you're learning. If that [field] is something that you're thinking of going into it is best to find out early whether you really like the work or not.

She mentioned ASL experiences could cause some students to choose another path, or to simply determine their current path is not a good fit. Even in that case, however, she noted her belief that ASL is a useful experience.

Diana, in fact, did choose another path because of her ASL experience. Though she loved the study of education and psychology, being in the classroom gave her the real world experience she needed to determine working in education was not the right career choice for her. "I was good at it, I just didn't have the passion for it… so I decided not to pursue teaching from that point on."

For Angie, though, the experience was different. Her class helped her to find an area of concentration that excited her.

> I've found a focal point, you know? I think that's why ASL really helps. It really helps to figure out the area you want to concentrate on because you're being exposed to so many different things… it helps you become more focused in the areas you want to go into.

Gretchen's sentiments were similar. She spoke at length about the ways in which an ASL experience, like hers, can drive the selection or change of major.

> So I would tell you if you're looking for something that would open your doors or something that you might be interested in, although that might not be your career choice, just check it out. You might find that you like it, and some might change your major. I've talked to some classmates that were going to do something else but when they went into this, they seen [sic] that they liked it. So you may change your career path or alter it up after a service learning project…it just opens your mind up to new ideas.

Connection to current work. For many adult learners, working full or part time while going to school is a reality. Of the participants in this study, six of the 10 were employed during their ASL course, of which five were employed full time. Accordingly, some of the participants talked about the value of being able to connect both the theory and practice portion of their learning to their current employment.

Angie's experience motivated her to try to integrate some of what she did for the course, into her professional role. In the class, her team was responsible for planting a garden at an urban farming site. Inspired by the enthusiasm she and her peers felt about the project, she decided she wanted to try to find a way to integrate the idea of an urban garden into her own work with recovering addicts. After her ASL course was over she approached her supervisor with her idea. Her supervisor agreed to support the idea of an urban garden planted by the recovering addict population their organization serves. Angie got right to work, even engaging some of her teammates from the class to come help her accomplish the goal. "I just put a shout out to the same students, and actually got some new students as well who knew about the garden and wanted to do volunteer projects." she recalled. She described the sense of accomplishment she felt for being able to translate an idea from her course into action immediately in her professional role. "I did feel a sense of accomplishment,' she stated, "because it was something I feel was needed. I was looking at it as being an outside project but when I thought about it, I thought it was really going to be beneficial [to learning]." And, she enjoyed being able to leverage the support of her former class colleagues, a concept consistent with this study's first theme.

For Selena, who held a full time position in public health for years prior to taking the course, the experience of marrying theory to practice was still incredibly useful. Her enthusiasm initially stemmed simply from her ability to read the theory. She kept reading articles or books

she says made her think, "I know someone who does that… so I actually see it in the literature, like, I had no idea that was happening." But later, her enthusiasm stemmed from the immediate opportunity to engage the literature in practice. "I can relate with things and material a lot more personally. It's helped me have a deeper understanding of the information".

Connection to future work. In Steven's case, ASL was not about a current role, but instead about what he was learning for the future. He described in great detail how he believed the practical experience he was gaining at the non-profit could parlay to his own future in criminal justice. The practical experience occurring at what he called "the ground level" gave him a functional perspective and clearer vantage point from which to make decisions when he is a leader in community work in his future personal and professional endeavors.

> You can be in your glass tower and make decisions, but if you don't know how the people at the ground level are functioning and how they're feeling, it's a bit problematic. You see things sooner and from a clearer vantage point when you're immersed in it.

For Leah, her future work was informed by her ASL course. Working with prisoners gave her insight to her future, given her professional interest in helping incarcerated women reintegrate into civilian life once released. Leah, through her course, realized the incredible challenges that face reintegrating women who have been incarcerated and are transitioning into civilian life. She realized these women have little access to higher education, yet are very interested in pursuing their degree. Her ASL course gave way to a new dream for Leah, whose goal now is to "have a transition program that starts inside and then follows them [prisoners] outside. So, that when the leave they either have a job or they're enrolled in school."

Theme #3: Ability to utilize previous life experiences in class

Central to the interviews was the idea adult learners were able to weave their own lived experiences into the course. In fact, the idea of the ability of the learner to use previous life

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experiences in class was mentioned by all 10 participants. Participants talked about the myriad life experiences, both personal and professional, they encountered prior to their course and how this course allowed them the opportunity to weave those experiences into assignments, projects, and class discussions. Participants recounted a variety of situations in which their professional skills, learned through their previous employment, supported their engagement and learning in the class. Also referenced were personal experiences that were relevant to the course topic and allowed the adult learners to feel more confident about actively participating in the course. Angie stated, "You contribute something that you know or got [sic] history with… engagement is more because this is an area I am familiar with".

Bobby described his ability to use life experiences differently, citing an ability to combine the professional and academic worlds. He stated this process allows participants to:

> Combine a world they already know with something they're trying to get used to. Some adult learners have been proactive, have done things in the real world, and helping them apply in a college course is a benefit, not a negative. They can probably help the students around them that have not done it.

Tina agreed allowing students to contribute to classes using their previous experiences is a powerful tool to increase learning. Additionally, Tina noted her course allowed students to bring their own personality into the learning, which she found incredibly valuable and also unique to her ASL experience. She described ASL as a "structured learning environment where your personality and any life skills that you have can only become more positive."

For Jane, merging her own life experiences and skills meant enhanced learning. The ability to merge her own life experiences and skills into the class also meant an opportunity to show off some of the knowledge she gained through her previous employment.

> You get to show off all of your life skills that apply what you are learning over here. You get to bring both of these together to enhance your learning experience and get everything you can for your money.

Jane provided examples of what she would "show off" including disseminating knowledge to her younger peers about professionalism and decorum in an early childhood environment, how to engage the children, and appropriate dress.

Professional skills. Participants talked about their employment experiences prior to their return to higher education. For many, previous employment was relevant in their academic service learning course. Most participants worked a variety of jobs, often in multiple fields, prior to their time as an adult learner. Though the tenor of the conversations around previous employment were often negative, with many stories of financial hardship due to work with low pay or even dislike for the work, all cited a variety of skills they gained in those roles. Specifically, participants mentioned the following skills: ability to connect with or work with different people, communication skills, and ability to juggle competing priorities. Those who were employed in fields similar to the academic discipline of their ASL course also discussed their opportunity to bring some of that experience based knowledge in to the classroom.

Ability to connect with different people. Although almost all participants cited their ability to connect with people unlike them as serving them well in their courses, four did so with great enthusiasm, including Angie, Gretchen, Steven, and Tina. The ideas of these four participants will be described in the following sections. Drawing from experiences working in different service industries, study participants highlighted their ability to work with different types of people as an asset and something that proved valuable for them in their ASL course. First, the adult learners noted they felt comfortable working with individuals at the assigned service sites, in contrast to their perception of this as a challenge for their traditional age peers. Angie discussed an ability she has to "talk to people on a humanistic level", crediting that skill to her professional role working with recovering addicts.

You have to have a heart for people… and not putting great expectations on anyone. Allowed me to get along with not only the staff [at the agency] and faculty but with you know other students whether they were my age or not.

Second, they cited this ability to work with others as useful in course projects and assignments. Participants described their ability to engage all students, regardless of the student's background or identities. Consequently, many described themselves as strong leaders on group projects in their courses.

Angie talked in detail about her growth in being able to work with people and treat people with dignity, continuously crediting her employment. She also raised an important point about her ability to not take things personally, which she described as an asset in the course. She noted acquiring the ability to not take things personally was a hard lesson to learn. She believes time, age, and experiences are required to fully understand how to treat all people with respect. Some of her younger colleagues, she thought, might not have learned that skill yet. "And then you realize that your age is actually an asset." As a result, Angie believes she provided strong leadership on her team project, of which she was co-captain.

Gretchen described herself as a chameleon, mentioning her ability to blend in to any situation. "I've worked with a lot of diverse individuals. I learn from them. They learn from me." She spoke about being open minded and how valuable this was at her service site where all of the clients felt comfortable to talk with her. Gretchen went on further to offer her own hypothesis, that the ability to connect with diverse groups is highly connected to a person's exposure. "It just depends on what you're exposed to. Exposure is a lot... seeing something up close or experiencing it." Though she mentioned the possibility of traditional age learners having wide exposure to different people or circumstances, she felt it was less likely they would have the same level of exposure compared to someone like herself. Largely, she credits this exposure to

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her professional work. Employed at the airport for many years, she regularly interacted with people different than her.

Steven recounted his group work, and the role his people skills and ability to connect with others played in helping them bond. His team included himself (a mid-40's African American male), a 17 year old White male, a hijab wearing Muslim woman, and a 25 year old African American male. Describing their initial interactions, he mentioned the personal challenge he undertook to ensure each of the participants was comfortable and felt able to contribute. He mentioned one particular group member who he felt struggled to connect to the others, so he "went out of [his] way to engage her." He talked about the ways in which he used his skills in working with others, learned through his automotive account management and retail experience, to help bring some common ground to the group and enhance their team dynamic. He credits his success to his previous work experiences stating it gave him "leadership skills, tactics, and ways to communicate with people on various levels." He intentionally engaged each person in different ways, and stayed aware of any personality or team dynamic issues, so he could ensure a smooth semester for the group. Recalling his account management days in the automotive industry, he shared similar stories of finding ways to engage every person, from the janitor to the senior executives and all of his clients, helping him ensure his work projects were as successful as possible. He recognized the parallels between what he did in his class and what he had done in his career.

Tina remembers in her career she had to make immediate decisions on how to interact with people based on their facial expressions, when working in airport and baggage security. She believes her ability to make immediate decisions, in conjunction with her work in security for athletics stadiums, provided her with excellent people skills that allow her to interact with

anyone, and quickly de-escalate any situation she comes in contact with. "You're often dealing with people that already feel they're being judged before they walk in…", so she says she learned quickly how to not only treat people with respect and dignity, regardless of their background or situation, but also how to convey to them her intent to do so. Given the service work in which her ASL course engaged, dealing with rape and sex trafficked victims, Tina was able to utilize those skills with her peers and with agency staff and clients.

Communication skills. The value of having strong communication skills was mentioned consistently throughout the interviews. The topic was often accompanied by a description of a job, or a variety of jobs, in which participants were able to improve their communication skills. Years later, participants said those skills have proven useful in both their academic service learning course.

In her professional roles, Diana noted that "I had to develop my communication skills almost immediately. Working as a leasing consultant and then a secretary I was in constant communication with people." Working at a coffee house, it was her responsibility to train new employees. Diana noted her success at orienting new staff grew as her communication skills grew. Honing those skills did not only prove useful at the coffee house, but also in her various roles at banks and at a leasing company. In her ASL course, she noted the ability to interact and communicate effectively with not only her instructor, but also the teacher at the middle school where she served, was absolutely imperative. Not feeling comfortable to communicate openly about ideas and challenges could have negatively impacted her success with the behavior modification strategies she was expected to implement. Had she been more passive and less active in communicating with all of the important parties involved she believes the outcomes would have been different, and she would have not been able to learn as much as she did.

I don't know if I had taken that class as an 18 year old if I would have felt comfortable having that discussion with her [instructor]. Or even, putting what she said into practice.

But I felt empowered enough to try it out. I felt empowered by the person I was working with to trust me. And I felt empowered enough to go back and tell the professor 'hey this worked' or 'hey I don't think I really got this – how do I continue on'.

Jane indicated her experience in the ASL course also leveraged her communication skills, which she had acquired through a variety of work experiences. In her course, teams were required to do projects, and often her team had questions about their work. Jane was surprised by how uncomfortable her team members were about having to communicate with the instructor when such questions arose. Jane says she regularly spoke up and offered to write emails to the instructor with their questions. She was reminded of a time when she offered to do so, and another student inquired as to whether Jane thought the instructor would respond. Her peers questioned her, "They said, 'he emails you back?'" to which Jane confirmed his responses, noting the professor also regularly responded to the other adult learner student. Baffled, Jane explained she emailed the instructor regularly with questions to which she received prompt responses. Jane wondered why the other students would assume a professor wouldn't respond but offered her theory that maybe the traditional age student isn't clear in the email to the email to the professor. "Maybe he's not clear that he's expecting an email in return… I never seen [sic] their emails but I thought that was interesting." Later, Jane would go on to say she wondered if the younger students hadn't yet developed the communication skills needed to successfully interact with their professors.

For Leah, strong communication came naturally based on her previous roles as a car repossession specialist and as a funeral planner. In those roles, she spent a lot of time delivering

unpleasant messages and hearing the sad stories of her clients. She developed a strong sense of empathy and compassion, necessary for success in her roles. "I could empathize. I was able to put myself in their position." She believes she was able to translate that skill into her ASL course. Leah referenced her ability to feel comfortable approaching anyone, particularly with individuals at her service site, because of her confidence in her own strong communication.

Previous employment in a field related to course content. For a number of participants, the engaged learning experiences connected with their ASL course had strong connections to their professional roles. More specifically, a number of the participants were taking an ASL course in a topic closely aligned to their current or previous jobs.

Having worked with recovering addicts and others who were struggling in her most recent career endeavor, Angie felt very prepared and connected to the work she did in her ASL course with poverty. She described in detail how her employment provided an excellent training ground for her in preserving dignity, in self-care, and in the ability to not take things personally, skills that proved very useful to her in her ASL course. "It's a great thing that you learn how to get all these technical skills, but I think the most important skill that I learned how to do was I learned how to approach this job on a humanistic level." Not only did some of her technical skills of having resource knowledge about poverty and bureaucratic systems assist her, but also the ability she acquired to be non-judgmental and supportive of people, due to working with a population that often faced similar issues. The conversations were familiar to her, and this gave her a sense of confidence to demonstrate those skills.

Jane spent years working in child care, therefore her assignment in an early childhood psychology class to spend time at a pre-kindergarten facility was comforting to her.

> I was really able to put a lot of the skills I had acquired towards that… I walked in with a lot of confidence… I did go in feeling more confident than I typically am. Cause even

though I walk into every experience looking confident, I'm not always real confident. But this time I was.

That confidence was recognized by some of her traditional age peers who did not have the same level of exposure to the work and often solicited her advice and counsel on issues related to their service.

Selena spent nearly a decade in public health work at a university before returning to higher education. Her work exposed her to a wide variety of people, most of whom lacked opportunity, education, and knowledge, consistent with many of the individuals she interacted with through her engaged ASL course. She leaned on her self-described strong "communication and listening skills", skills which she says are necessary at her employment. When asked why those were important, she said it was to be able to "present yourself to [both] community and academic people… communicating with a vast array of populations." Given her self-described ability to "communicate with a vast array of populations" she felt some confidence going into the class, knowing she'd have to communicate with a variety of different people, not just students and faculty. Even with confidence, however, she found the course intimidating. "So it wasn't like, 'Oh, I've been working in this field all along so I will breeze right through it.' It was still a learning curve."

Her understanding of public health was deepened by her interactions with the prison, learning about concepts such as systems of oppression and juxtaposing them with her own experiences. She recalled many moments when reading the theory gave her a chance to better understand why "she does the things she does, and why we do what we do", which she believed deepened her ability to be successful at her job. "I was so blind for so many years while I was 'practicing' and I was like so 'oh duh'..." she noted.

Personal experiences. For many of the participants the topics in their courses along with their service assignments drew on their personal experiences. The participants commented their own life experiences and world exposure likely meant they have interacted with more of the circumstances they are studying than their traditional age peers. The participants recounted drawing on those experiences in their course. Key concepts raised included relatability and ability to juggle competing demands, to be described in the following sections.

Relatability. For Gretchen, being able to relate was critical. As a single mom, she mentioned repeatedly her sense of a lack of security or certainty. Though she had no degree to rely on, she felt lucky to have relatively stable employment and earn an income that could support herself and her daughter. But she also commented throughout the interview, based not only on her own life, but on her experience working at the soup kitchen that, "one event can change your whole life. So that's why I took it [sic] reflective…". With tears in her eyes while sharing these thoughts, Gretchen described her ability to relate to the challenges those who came to the soup kitchen faced. She continued by offering that her research project for the soup kitchen would be something she could usefully take away and store for her own purposes. Her project required her to gather resources about temporary housing and foreclosure prevention so the soup kitchen could make those resources available to their clients. "Although it was for a class for school, if sometime I'm faced with that [homelessness], I know I have the knowledge that I can use or to share it with someone." For Gretchen, the project was also an opportunity to gather knowledge that could help anyone in her own life who might be struggling. She recognized a lot of people in her family and social circles were just one life event away from financial catastrophe. "Not only did I learn because it was for class" she noted, "but I learned it so I could really help someone."

For Penelope, the ability to connect this learning to her own life was poignant. In her interview, she talked in great detail about her own challenges growing up and how those challenges limited her ability to be successful. "I appreciated it, especially with my personal background, my upbringing…where you grew up in an impoverished neighborhood, I grew up with a single mother, your dad was absent, all of those things." For her, the ability to serve in a mentoring capacity to youth for her ASL course helped her to better understand her sociology coursework, connect it with her own personal challenges from childhood, and prepare her for the career path she intended in social work.

Tina did not hesitate to comment on how her personal experiences were relevant to the service aspect of her course. Though she had no idea what this class would entail, she was stunned when she learned she was assigned to work with a rape crisis center that also worked specifically with sex trafficked youth. Her surprise about her placement came from the parallels between her own personal life and the course. Tina's own daughter was a victim of sex trafficking, and therefore the course was very personal to her.

> Constantly doing more was always on my mind and still pretty much is. Because everything that you learn in that class you can pretty much, unfortunately like in my life I can take it back to a situation that has happened. I have a daughter with real issues… and she's trafficked and raped… And I thought this is so good for me, because of my life skills, because I've lived it….

Ability to juggle competing priorities. For the study participants juggling a variety of competing priorities was a reality of everyday life. As has been stated, almost all of the participants have children who still live with them, and two even have live-in grandchildren. Further, each of them is, or has been, the primary income earner for their family.

Leah identified time management and prioritizing as key to her success in her ASL course. Drawing on her own personal experiences, she noted her own hectic world, balancing

"four kids, a grandkid, a full-time job, and school. And sometimes you have to be able to … to get that balance." But those skills learned from balancing the competing demands in personal life, have been beneficial to her time in ASL. The course required her to do traditional assignments, but also go on field trips, do service projects, and engage in significant group work. Leah was able to leverage those skills in her personal life to help her be successful academically.

Penelope was also familiar with the juggling act required of many adult learners. She recognized participation in ASL was incredibly time consuming and required more of her than a traditional course. Though critical of the amount of time needed, she felt her ASL experience was incredibly valuable, once she figured out how to juggle the competing demands effectively. To do so, she had to utilize her own personal strengths in time management and prioritization much the same way she had done during her previous semesters in college.

> It's funny because, so, while at RPU I had a nearly perfect GPA, I had more kids, a husband at home, sometimes I was working four jobs, all that kind of stuff. I would tell people and they would say, 'oh you're so smart'. And I would tell them, it's not that I'm smart, this is a system, almost a game. And once you figure that out…

Penelope's experience was not unlike other participants in that they described the extra workload of an ASL course as a challenge. The courses, many participants cited, required more effort than a traditional course, therefore necessitating strong organizational, time management, and prioritization skills.

As a mom with two kids, Selena had to stay organized and prioritize her work and school during her ASL course, which required her to drive an hour from her home to the service site once a week on top of her in class time. She vividly recalled the challenges of managing her time during that term. However, she considered herself lucky, given a husband at home who could help with the children and household duties.

I was lucky because I had someone at home to do that for me. But adult learners have to do that. I was getting home at 10 pm and with grade school kids, that's, well they're sleeping. I was up until midnight getting laundry ready and lunches ready and that kind of stuff that my other peers didn't have to deal with.

Selena's situation is somewhat unique in that she was prepared for the extra challenges of time and prioritization needed for her academic service learning course and she had intentionally registered for the experience. Most participants, though, enrolled for their ASL course with no understanding of what might be needed. They were grateful to have the time management skills needed to juggle the multiple priorities of not just attending class, but participating at the service site as well.

Theme #4: Positive feelings about college

In nine out of 10 interviews, participants provided stories indicating their positive feelings about college. Participants shared their enthusiasm about their futures and how they could contribute to the world around them. They also described a newfound confidence in their ability to be successful in higher education and beyond. The sense of confidence was described in three ways: increased classroom contributions, increased confidence in ability to be successful, and increased aspirations.

Increased classroom contributions. Eight out of the 10 participants identified their class contributions as exceeding what they would normally contribute in a course. Many further stated the confidence they felt was a result of their connected knowledge which gave them the courage to participate more in class. As described in previous themes, one important part of participants' descriptions of their ASL course has been their ability to connect their own life experiences with the content, thus allowing them to make significant contributions.

Angie cited her contributions as being connected with the prior knowledge she brought with her into the classroom. When discussing how much she engaged in class, she noted that her

engagement was higher in her ASL course. She shared, "[My] engagement is more because this is area I am familiar with" and she could be more involved in discussions because of here familiarity of what is being discussed. She went on to further offer the excitement she felt inspired her level of engagement and her enthusiasm for learning more.

Bobby agreed with Angie, saying his contributions were more significant than in a non-ASL course because he was totally engaged. He was excited to be a part of the discussions, which he said "really pushed me in that class and had [sic] a lot of beautiful experiences and conversations in it."

Leah, too, felt her levels of class contributions in her ASL course exceeded what she had done in previous courses. "I think it's much different. It gets, at least with me personally, it got me more involved." Unlike Angie, however, she did not believe the increased contributions had anything to do with being an adult learner or the opportunity to use previous life knowledge. Leah noted instead, in her class everyone contributed regardless of the type of student they were, and credited the enthusiastic participation to the style of the course.

Increased confidence in ability to be successful. Almost all participants discussed the sense of confidence they felt within their ASL course. Many related confidence to the knowledge, skills, and abilities they were bringing to the classroom, as has been discussed throughout this study. Beyond just within their course, participants also described a growth in overall confidence in ability to be successful, which they attributed to participation in ASL.

Participants described their initial anxiety walking into classrooms prior to their participation in ASL. Tina described her anxiety about college by saying, "Coming to college somewhat makes me feel insecure and inadequate." For some, the anxiety related to their own insecurities about their fitness for higher education or never having imagined themselves in

higher education. Gretchen noted, "I guess I thought it was farfetched that I would never attain it…" when referring to her pursuit of a bachelor's degree. More broadly, most indicated in some way they regularly experienced anxiety in their academic career. However, many said one result of their ASL experience has been a feeling of increased confidence in their ability to be successful, and thus a lessening of their anxieties moving forward in their coursework.

When Bobby spoke, he vividly described how meaningful the course was to him. "I feel like it helped me break down barriers. Barriers for myself and about myself." He went on to further state the opportunity raised his confidence. "You get confidence from writing a good paper but it is a different level when you go out and apply and see the fruit firsthand of what you are capable of doing."

Diana also spoke about her sense of increased confidence that came as a result of her course. "I did come out feeling more… I don't know if control is the right word, but like I had more things to say, I guess… in like I didn't have to be as passive." Further, she shared a goal of being more personally engaged in her education, a goal which this course helped her achieve.

> I got to the point where I wanted more than just being the smart kid who knew her stuff, I wanted to engage in discussion, I wanted to be able to bring in outside things and see if they are relevant. So I think this gave me the confidence to look at it from that prospective and go beyond the classroom.

In Tina's case, her confidence was also related to her ability to be in charge of her own education and path, something she felt she had lost to some extent after leaving her job at the airport due to extended illness. She credits the new confidence and take charge mindset to her experience in academic service learning.

> It helped me kind of be in charge again, which I needed to be in charge again, because I'm used to being in charge. It's really hard when you're not in charge. And in the classroom, I'm not in charge at all.

She further went on to say her increased self-confidence has risen because academic service learning "gave me what I've been missing".

For Jane, her increased confidence in her ability to be successful developed for two reasons. First, she believes her confidence may be a result of her relationship with her ASL instructor. As Jane began to build a relationship with the instructor, she realized the instructor was much more human than she expected, which eased her mind. The result was Jane felt more comfortable asking questions, seeking assistance, or getting clarification.

> Seeing her office is as much of a disaster as my house is… Yes you have a PhD, I get it, I don't, but you're just a person. I can communicate with you…I'm much more confident talking to my professors now.

The second reason was also related to the instructor. As stated earlier, Jane was asked by the instructor to become a teaching assistant in the subsequent semester. This simple request gave Jane a significant amount of confidence as she now knew the instructor saw something special in her abilities.

Steven's confidence was growing even before he got to RPU, but with the help of the RPU faculty member in his ASL course, it grew even more. In his time at the community college, Steven says he was challenged by his professors to think more about the career he wanted to pursue. "You get professors who tell you, 'you're so much more than a parole officer' and this was a professor who actually served as a PO!" Thus began his interest in a bachelor's degree. But his confidence also grew at RPU through academic service learning. In the course he had specific projects for which he was responsible. Steven exuded excitement about the results of the project. "Actually seeing something I plotted out come to fruition is kind of vindicating". What seemed to matter to him more, however, was his instructor taking notice. When the instructor saw his work she praised him and expressed surprise by how much he was able to

accomplish. Steven believes she knew then he had potential, noting, "I think she saw that I was more strategic than the others."

Increased aspirations. Participants readily shared their enthusiasm about their ASL courses throughout their interviews. During the conversations, they implied a bit of surprise about their own success in school thus far, seeming to even exceed their own expectations. Further, many mentioned an increased confidence in their ability to earn their bachelor's degree. As stated in the biography section, a bachelor's degree is more than what many of the participants ever believed they would accomplish. Recall six of the 10 participants considered or attempted to pursue higher education after high school, yet only one completed even two full semesters. The five who attempted to go to college attended only part time for a semester or two, or never even made it to their first term despite being accepted. Four of the participants did not even have aspirations of earning a college degree when they graduated from high school.

Yet, the interview process made clear each of the nine students yet to receive their degree (Penelope received her bachelor's degree the semester before the study), not only expected, but assumed, they would easily earn their degree. And, many spoke of their interest and consideration of graduate school. Five of the 10 participants specifically indicated their intention to pursue a master's degree. While the others were not sure, no participant had totally ruled it out as a possibility.

Initially attending RPU with the sole purpose of a bachelor's degree, Angie has raised her aspirations. Thoroughly enjoying her work as an addiction counselor, but wanting advancement, Angie intends to pursue a master's degree for licensure in therapy.

> To advance myself in the area that I am already in, and I already work as a counselor, an addictions counselor, but in order to really make the money that I would like to in that area, I would become a therapist… because it would allow me to be more.. I'll have more options available to me than I have now.

She says ASL has changed how she thinks. Now, she has a goal and a focal point she says she didn't have before. She credits her faculty for her new mindset, stating he encouraged her to "use her gifts and talents", in that faculty in ASL courses, "allow you to go out there and do… if they see you as an asset to a particular project that they're working on, they've given me the opportunity to spread my wings and I think that's great."

Leah, too, was surprised by how her dreams changed after participation in ASL. Originally planning on a major in biochemistry and planning to work in a laboratory, Leah was determined for a career where she didn't have to interact with other people. "I want to do biochemistry, I want to be locked in a room with a microscope for hours, I don't want to see people, anybody, nothing [sic]!" Leah now aspires to develop support programs for women transitioning out of incarceration. She credits her ASL course and her faculty. She noted her instructor saw skills and abilities in her, even she did not know she had. Further, she cites the "not so subtle encouragement" as she describes it, of her faculty as helpful for her during her re-evaluation of what she wanted to do with her life. As a result, Leah changed not only her career goal but her major, electing to leave biochemistry for behavioral sciences.

Other important topics raised in interviews

Though the themes above provide a strong understanding of the most commonly raised topics throughout the interviews, other topics emerged that although less frequently raised bear inclusion in this chapter. The following section details a variety of topics raised in the interview process which did not fit into the themes discussed above, yet added value to the study. As described in the section of this chapter about coding, some coded information that was not in any of the themes was set aside for future use.

Additional stress of ASL. During interviews, a few of the participants spoke at some length about the extra time, effort, and expense (for transportation) of an ASL course. Selena shared the degree to which the extra stress was hard on not only herself but her family. The site where she served was over an hour away from her home by car. Additionally, she noted transportation might be an impediment for some learners. Though she described herself as fortunate to have access to reliable transportation and the support she needed at home with her children to facilitate her participation in the course, she recognized not everyone had those same privileges. Penelope also described academic service learning as "highly time consuming". But, both women indicated that they thought that overall the investment of time and resources was worth it in the end.

Lack of awareness about what ASL is. While talking about their experiences in the courses, most study participants indicated they did not know they were signing up for an ASL course. Further, most indicated they did not even know what that meant. As a result, many participants indicated the need for more communication by colleges and universities so that students could actively choose to participate. Given the positive overall feelings about ASL by the participants, they were eager to suggest that more students, and specifically more adult learners should be aware of the opportunity to enroll in this type of course.

Suggestion that all adult learners be required to participate. The previous suggestion led to a number of participants suggesting academic service learning should be required for not only adult learners, but maybe all students. Bobby said:

> I might be a little radical, but I think that people should take or be required to take an ASL course. I would definitely would take more, if they coincidence with the couple credits I have to finish, but I think it's an experience every college student should take.

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And he wasn't alone, as many of the participants agreed this was an experience that others should have.

This chapter has provided a detailed description of the results through discussion of emergent themes and critical stories or topics raised by participants.

CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION

In this chapter, I review the purpose of the current study followed by an exploration of the study's research questions and the subsequently constructed themes. Implications for future practice and research follow, and a conclusion closes the chapter. Throughout, I connect my thinking to extant literature on adult learners, academic service learning, and high-impact educational practices.

Purpose of the study

The purpose of the study was to explore the experience of adult learners in academic service learning courses. Research suggests pedagogies used in academic service learning courses are consistent with the preferred learning styles of adult learners. Yet until this study, little research was conducted to determine if, in fact, ASL courses are a positive experience for adult learners.

My interest in this topic stems from my awareness of the parallels between the preferences of adult learners (as articulated in adult learner scholarship) and current best practice in academic service learning. I explored whether academic service learning provides a beneficial experience for adult learners in their academic journey, given the parallels.

As I became increasingly aware of the research demonstrating ASL as a beneficial experience for many student populations, including many underserved groups, my interest in studying the experience of adult learners in ASL courses grew. Community based learning, including academic service learning, is considered one of many high-impact educational practices as described in Kuh's (2008) work. High-impact educational practices are a series of teaching and learning practices with demonstrated ability to support student success, measured by the National Survey for Student Engagement (NSSE). NSSE is a survey tool used primarily

with traditional age undergraduates. Kuh argues NSSE data show participation in high-impact

educational practices resulting in benefits for all surveyed students. Further, Kuh argues the

benefits of participation in high-impact educational practices for marginalized communities are

significant, and are especially striking "for students who start further behind in terms of their

entering academic test scores. The benefits are similarly positive for students from communities

that historically have been underserved in higher education." (Kuh, 2008, p.1) Despite the

promising results of Kuh's work, questions remain about the generalizability of the work for

other populations such as adult learners, given the survey tool's primary use with traditional

students.

Finley and McNair (2015) shed light, however, on another concern related to Kuh's work

in that it is drawn solely from survey data and fails to include rich information about the

students' experiences. Finley and McNair state (2015):

> What is known about the nature of the student experiences with high-impact practices
> comes almost entirely from surveys, which often fail to reflect the rich detail that is
> present when students articulate, in their own voices, what these experiences mean to
> them in the context of their lives, their learning, and their hopes for obtaining a degree.
> (p.2)

To fill that gap, Finley and McNair conducted a mixed methods study, which provided

more detail about student participation in high-impact educational practices and further

underscored the benefits of such practices for historically underserved groups. However, again

that study did not include adult learners.

Despite adult learners' exclusion from both of the previously mentioned works, the

studies provide evidence a variety of marginalized students see significant benefit from

participation in high-impact educational activities. Given the broad impact of these practices

with a variety of underserved groups, I determined exploring the experience of a high-impact educational practice in rich detail with adult learners was useful.

Therefore, the current study sought to conduct interviews, which provide detailed and rich descriptions to better understand adult learners' experiences in ASL in an effort to fill a gap in the literature. Based on the themes constructed from participant interviews, I argue participation in academic service learning courses is indeed a positive experience for adult learners, as it is for so many underserved groups as evidenced in both Kuh's (2008) and Finley and McNair's (2015) work.

Review of research questions

The current study is based on four research questions identified in Chapter One which include:

- How do adult learners view their education differently after completing an academic service learning course?

- Does an academic service learning course affect a student's self-efficacy about their ability to be successful in higher education?

- Does an academic service learning course enhance a student's overall experience in higher education?

- Do academic service learning courses engage an adult learner more than a class with a traditional pedagogy? If so, how?

The research questions were explored through a series of qualitative interviews and utilized a variety of qualitative protocols to ensure research integrity.

Constructed themes

Four themes were constructed from the study's data. The constructed themes include: connections, importance of theory to practice, ability to use previous life experience in class, and positive feelings about college. A detailed analysis of each constructed theme as well as connection to extant literature is presented in this section.

Theme #1: Connections. The first theme discussed in Chapter 5 relates to a sense of connectedness students felt as a result of participation in an ASL course. The theme was constructed from rich information shared by participants about their meaningful connections to: their peers, the faculty who taught their ASL courses, and the community organizations where they served.

Connection to peers. Academic service learning scholarship encourages students to work more effectively with people different than them (Lowery, May, & Duchane, et al., 2006). The encouragement to work with others was present in my study, often happening via the interactions adult learners had with traditional age students in their course. Participants frequently cited their success in connecting with others unlike them as learned from prior work and life experiences. Examples of mutually beneficial mentoring relationships in ASL courses were described by a number of participants. For example, Jane detailed her commutes to and from the service site, during which she engaged in conversations about professionalism in child care work. Angie and Tina both cited younger students as seeking them out for personal advice. Tina leveraged her younger peers to help navigate technology. These examples support Lowery, May, and Duchane's research as described above.

Students also identified the personal connections they made in their ASL course as being a gateway for future involvement. Adult learners' interest and willingness to get involved on

campus, as demonstrated through this study, contradicts some extant adult learner research, which suggests adult learners typically do not desire an opportunity to participate in co-curricular or extra-curricular activities. Kasworm (2014) argues "although some of them [adult learners] valued their student peers, most noted their limited time and interest in participating in activities beyond the classroom with their peers" (p. 69). Kasworm did note, however, a small subset who valued those engagement opportunities, but stated that usually adult learners do not rely on an institution as a "primary socializing agent nor did they desire the college experience to incorporate extra- or co-curricular activities" (p. 69). Yet, participants in the current study described their significantly increased involvement in a very positive way. Recall eight of 10 participants continued to be engaged, Angie cited her involvement as "tripling", and Steven joining the campus's student government as a result of their ASL experiences. Study participants not only identified the course as positive for involvement, but expressed enthusiasm about it, contrary to Kasworm's suggestion which suggests that activities outside the classroom are not generally preferred by adult learners.

   Connection to faculty. Extant research suggests connections to faculty are important to adult learners. Data from the current study support the research, highlighting the many ways in which ASL faculty played a valuable role in the participants' college experiences. Price and Nicks Baker (2012) suggest adult learners can utilize highly connected classrooms to form informal networks with their peers from which they can find great benefit (Price & Nicks Baker, 2012). Connected classrooms, according to Kasworm (2014) create a sense of engagement based on academic learning, offering adult learners the opportunity to build a sense of community on campus by assisting the student in creating positive relationships with faculty. Further, Halx

(2010) believes the relationships between student and faculty contribute to the removal of barriers for adult learners.

The current study connects to the existing research. The concept of co-created learning aligns tightly with ASL scholarship, in which service learning pedagogy is described as being designed to provide a transfer of learning (Eyler, 2009). Study participants discussed their increased sense of contribution to their learning whereby they were active participants in creating learning. In other words, the notion of co-created learning was new to most study participants and changed the paradigm in which they understood their role in shared responsibility for their learning. Many participants described their learning in other courses as more aligned with a transmission model where an instructor simply fed them information, as opposed to their experience in ASL where they took part in creating the learning. In Diana's interview, she recalled the way in which everyone in her course, including other students, contributed to the class in meaningful ways thereby deepening her learning. Leah described the ways in which her instructor rearranged chairs in the classroom to increase student contribution to the learning.

Student participation in the creation of learning is a concept also found in adult learner scholarship. Halx (2010) describes a much richer learning experience as occurring when a student is involved in co-creating learning. This study supports existing research in that students referenced their participation in, and ownership of their learning. The students' stories about their participation in class and in their learning, in combination with extant literature, further supports the idea ASL is a beneficial experience for adult learners. This is further underscored in ASL literature which calls for strategies that allow learners to learn in new contexts (Eyler & Giles, 1999).

Supporting current research, many participants described their participation in non-course related work with faculty after the conclusion of their ASL course. For this population, being selected by faculty to support research, civic engagement work, or teaching was very positive. In other words, participants were moved by the way in which faculty felt the learners were capable of being included in the faculty members' other work or projects. Jane was moved by her professor's request for her to serve as a teaching assistant. Similarly, Angie was pleased when her professor asked her to work on research after the conclusion of the ASL course.

Connection to community organizations. Extant research states adult learners are often motivated by internal factors such as self-development, family development, and community development (Coker, 2003; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). The current study supports the research through the many shared vignettes about the value participants found in their community service activities, leading to their continued involvement. Multiple adult learners referenced their connection to the community organization as important given their own personal histories. For example, Tina was particularly moved by her placement given the sex trafficking experiences in her own family. Bobby noted how easily it could have been him in prison instead of the inmates with whom he worked. Gretchen described how her own life could have dramatically changed with a loss of job, potentially putting her in the same circumstances as those she worked with at her service site. Many participants were personally inspired by their service and the development of self, family, and community as is posited in extant research. Therefore, this research fully supports extant research.

Theme #2: Importance of theory to practice. The second theme discussed in Chapter 5 describes the importance of theory to practice. This theme illuminated the ways in which

participants felt integrating theory and practice into the course enhanced their learning and was related to their career.

Enhanced learning. Adult learner scholarship encourages alternative arenas for learning and enabling adult learners to display their competence (Millheim, 2005). In parallel, ASL pedagogy uses situated learning strategies, often in off-campus venues, to provide alternative arenas for learning because it is generally considered positive for both the institution and the community partner with whom the ASL course is working (Calvert, 2011). Data from the current study support existing research. For example, participants recounted the value of time spent working with and learning about issues related to class content outside of their campus classrooms. Many discussed the opportunity to learn real-world skills in a real-world environment. Additionally, Gretchen and Steven provided in depth descriptions of the way in which their placements were powerful in their learning. Similarly, Diana discussed how important the time in her assigned high school classroom was to her overall learning. This study confirms existing research.

Relationship to career. The second theme also illuminated a relationship between a student's ASL experience and their career. Recent research by Johnston (2010) argues adult learners' motivations are increased by coursework that incorporates their professional goals. Johnson's research is supported by this study in that many study participants articulated a sense of motivation stemming from their ASL course. Eyler (2009) argues that the integration of work and learning (as found in ASL courses) builds bridges to academic and program goals. This was demonstrated in the study. For example, Angie was moved to bring ideas from her class into her work immediately, through the creation of an urban garden. Leah talked at length about how her work in ASL was directly contributing to her changing her career plans. Finally, Steven

described the work he was doing in ASL as critical to his future, in that he was learning about non-profit work from the ground up.

Chen (2013) posits that adult learners thrive and define new goals to accomplish when learning is paired with life experience. This study provided data to support Chen's theory. For example, Leah's new plan to work with prisoner's transitioning to civilian life, was created as a result of her work in ASL. Similarly, Angie's creation of new safe spaces (including gardens) at her existing workplace, an idea developed through her course, demonstrates a new goal created as a result of learning paired with life experience. In this study five of the participants described clarity of career choice as a result of their course. Further, three participants detailed the ways in which their course had significant connection to their current or future professional roles, providing them skills useful in their professional work.

Theme #3: Ability to use previous life experience in class. The third theme discussed in Chapter 5 explores the ability to use previous life experiences in class. In this theme the use of both personal and professional skills was described as a positive aspect of participants' ASL courses. Information shared by participants suggests the ASL courses' culture allowed them to integrate their previous life experiences, both personal and professional, into their class contributions.

An ability to leverage past life experiences in the classrooms connects directly to the adult learner literature base. Kasworm (2014) suggests an ability for adult learners to connect their multiple worlds to an academic classroom, including previous employment or community roles, is critical to their success (Kasworm, 2014). This study supports Kasworm's research as the data provide numerous examples of how students leveraged past life experiences. Examples include the use of both professional and personal skills, as described in the following section.

Professional skills. Gretchen, Leah, and Steven all described the ways in which their own previous professional experiences were valuable in their ASL coursework, consistent with Nelken's (2009) work, which reinforces the importance of allowing adult learners to utilize their life experience to enhance their learning. Further, the current study demonstrates Knowles' second tenet citing life experience integration into a classroom as key to an adult learner's success (1908, 1984). For example, many participants described the ways in which their ability to work with others not like them proved extremely valuable in the ASL course context. Adult learners in the current study demonstrated an understanding of how their education and experience can be married, a concept that, based on their descriptions, they did not seem to understand prior to their ASL course. For example, Jane described how her previous work experience in a childcare setting could be leveraged in her service time and allowed her to provide guidance to other students. Gretchen, too, thought her communication skills were relevant; skills she learned from twenty plus years in a full time working role with an airline. Angie noted in the study for the first time in her college experience, she felt her age and experience was an asset.

Personal skills. Participants shared information in their interviews about ability to juggle a variety of priorities, a skill need to overcome the challenges associated with having various life roles. Research agrees adult learners often have a variety of life roles often such as being a parent and working full time (Kerka 1996; Wonacott, 2001). My study clearly supports the aforementioned research. For example, eight of the 10 reported having children. And, of the 20 children reported, 15 live in the homes of the adult learners, as well as two grandchildren living in participants' homes. Finally, five of the 10 participants reporting working full time at the time of the course.

The ability to balance the variety of responsibilities adult learners can create a significant barrier to success (Cross, 1981; Thomas, 2001). Though the study's participants readily described the life circumstances that challenged their ability to persist in higher education, they described in tandem how they were able to navigate those challenges. For example, Selena described the support she had at home which enabled her to manage her responsibilities more effectively. Similarly, Penelope reported balancing her "kids, husband at home and sometimes up to 4 jobs" during her college career. Extant research reports the potential challenge adult learners face because of having to balance life responsibilities. While supported by this study, participants demonstrated their ability to manage the challenge effectively.

Theme #4: Positive feelings about college. The fourth theme discussed in Chapter 5 is positive feelings about college. Yeh's (2010) research suggests ASL is positively attributed to academic persistence and retention of first generation students, which is important given the high percentage of adult learners who are first generation. However, extant literature does not provide overall evidence of increased positive feelings about college by adult learners as a result of participation in an ASL course. Therefore, the notion of ASL participation resulting in an increased positive feeling about college expands what is currently known.

Highlighted below are three significant ways in which adult learners described their increased positive feelings about college as a result of ASL: increased classroom contributions, increased aspirations, and increased confidence in ability to be successful as will be described in the following sections.

Increased classroom contributions. Participants in the current study stated they contributed more in their ASL course than they did in other, traditional courses. Eight of the adult learners described their participation in ASL as exceeding their efforts in other classes.

While Bobby attributed his increased contributions to his high level of engagement in the course, Angie credited the confidence that her relevant life experiences provided. Currently, scholarship recognizes the importance of classroom culture to adult learners (Gailbraith, 2000; Kerka, 1995; Knowles, Horton & Swanson, 2011), and similarly encourages flexible pedagogy (Coulter & Mandell, 2012) like is found in ASL (Lowery, May, & Duchane, et al., 2006). The current study provides evidence the classroom culture provided in ASL supports increased contributions by adult learners, expanding what is known.

Increased aspirations. Current research suggests outcomes associated with ASL position students for increased academic and professional goal achievement and better prepare students to be lifelong learners (Eyler, 2009; Lowery, May, & Duchane, et al., 2006). The current study clearly connects to this research. For example, all participants expect to earn their bachelor's degree, with five indicating an interest in graduate work, despite four who never even considered higher education after graduating from high school. Additionally, Angie described ASL as influential in her decision to pursue a career in therapy, a path requiring an advanced degree. Increased aspirations, including the desire to obtain a graduate degree was regularly mentioned in interviews, primarily attributed to ASL coursework. The suggestion ASL led adult learners to increase their educational or career goals supports the assertion ASL leads to lifetime learning, as stated by Lowery, May, and Duchane, et al. (2006).

Increased confidence in ability to be successful. The concept of increased self-confidence builds on existing research. Cross describes adult learners as often having low self-confidence when entering or re-entering higher education (1981). The current study provides evidence to support Cross's work. For example, Tina and Gretchen both described their feelings of inadequacy upon re-entering higher education. For Steven, it took encouragement from faculty

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for him to believe he could achieve more than the associate's degree he was planning to pursue. Wlodowski (1999) argues adult learners' confidence can be boosted through their clear understanding of a class as well as the resources available to support them. Though current academic service learning research provides evidence about preferred classroom culture, practices that increase learning, and identification of barriers to success, little connects directly to an adult learner's sense of confidence in their ability to be successful. Yet, study participants readily described their increased sense of confidence as a result of ASL. Bobby described his ASL course as breaking down barriers for him, while Diana described herself as taking charge of her education resulting in her additional confidence. Therefore, evidence from the current study expands what is currently known about increased confidence that can be a result of academic service learning for adult learners.

The previous sections outlined the themes constructed from the data collected in this study. Throughout, the themes and subthemes were connected with extant literature.

Implications for future practice

The current study provides important information that can be used to impact future practice. The following section will outline those implications.

Adult learners in this study expressed significant interest in seeing not only adult learners, but all learners, enroll in an academic service learning course. The sense of engagement they felt both in, and as a result of, the course compounded with the opportunity to entwine theory and practice, led adult learners to experience increased levels of both academic and social integration.

Academic service learning courses, as mentioned throughout, are an identified high-impact educational practice. Literature regarding high-impact educational practices indicate

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participation is beneficial to all populations surveyed and is particularly beneficial to marginalized populations (Kuh, 2008; Finley & McNair, 2015). Adult learner research demonstrates many of the pedagogical practices found in the delivery of ASL are similar to the practices preferred by adult learners. Therefore, this study's results are not surprising, but instead confirming, of the utility of high-impact educational practices as demonstrated with other marginalized populations and through this study with adult learners.

Given the positive experience of the learners interviewed and extant research, I believe colleges and universities should be looking more closely at the increased adoption of academic service learning courses all students, not just adult learners. A possibility for integrating ASL more significantly into the curriculum would be to include ASL as a requirement in an institution's general education program. In this study, participants mentioned their reasons for choosing an ASL course had nothing to do with service learning pedagogy. Instead, participants regularly cited their reason for choosing an ASL course as convenience; the course met at a time when they were available. In many cases, participants also noted the course satisfied a requirement for graduation.

The adult learners regularly referred to their complicated lives, citing the need to balance a variety of priorities. Participants frequently went on to note their lack of interest in being involved in activities not required for the completion of their degree before their ASL course. Therefore, a student may be more likely to participate in an ASL course if it was a part of a general education requirement. Finley and McNair (2015) cite obstacles to participation for many students in high-impact practices like ASL including "limited time and money, competing priorities, and inadequate social support networks." (p. 31). A concern about constraints by adult learners is consistent with the current study and calls attention to the need to be thoughtful in

identifying ways an institution might encourage participation in ASL. Making ASL a part of general education makes it more visible to students and increases the likelihood of participation by a variety of populations, like adult learners, who can most benefit from the activity.

Kuh (2008) suggests although students benefit greatly from participation in ASL courses, they are not necessarily participating in significant numbers. He notes, "the question, of course, is whether underserved students actually participate either frequently or equitably in these high-impact practices" (p.1). The current study suggests the lack of participation may be related to a lack of knowledge or understanding about ASL. Many study participants indicated they weren't familiar with the concept of ASL prior to their enrollment in the class. In fact, only one participant was familiar with ASL prior to her course. Therefore, a logical next step for colleges and universities who wish to increase adoption of, and enrollment in, ASL courses is to find increased ways to make students aware of ASL. Campuses should consider a review of their course catalog to see if ASL courses have a special designation. An ASL specific designation on an academic transcript or in an academic catalog could be a way to increase awareness about academic service learning by providing increased visibility of the courses. Further, campuses should consider a review of general education or specific degree requirements to determine if there are ways to integrate ASL courses into requirements for degree attainment as described previously. Including ASL into general education could lead to increased matriculation by adult learners into ASL, thereby exposing adult learners to the themes described in this study (connections, importance of theory to practice, ability to use previous life experience in class, positive feelings about college), which are identified as preferred in extant adult learner research.

Additionally, given the adult learners' general lack of knowledge about the academic service learning experiences available to them, it may behoove institutions to find ways to

increase training for academic advisors about ASL. If the number of adult learners enrolled in ASL courses is to be increased, faculty and staff must be able to explain their value, with special attention to the benefits for adult learners. If academic advisors, or others who regularly assist students in selecting courses, are aware of the benefits and able to effectively share those with students, interest and enrollment in ASL may increase. Finley and McNair (2015) provide support for this idea, through their 2015 work, stating, "Research highlights the need for greater intentionality in articulating the value of high-impact practices." (p. 33) In other words, campuses may find it useful to educate students about the value of experiential learning opportunities like ASL.

While finding ways to connect adult learners to ASL (or other similar high-impact educational programs) is important, it may not be practical at institutions who do not have a robust offering of ASL or similar experiences. Therefore, institutions can look more broadly at the particular characteristics of ASL to create a list of attributes that make the learning experience meaningful. From there, institutions can review the learning experiences they already offer to see if any offer the same characteristics. In other words, there may be other existing learning opportunities on campuses that include the same characteristics, resulting in a meaningful learning experience for an adult learner as can be found in ASL.

Implications for future research

Though this study provides insight on the experience of adult learners in academic service learning courses, there are a variety of directions for future research to continue to build understanding about the population in ASL courses.

First, the study provides great detail about a small group of adult learners enrolled in an ASL course at one institution, but a multi-institutional research project would add significant

value to the body of scholarship. The argument could be made the culture of RPU, which heavily encourages students to participate in civic engagement activities, may have influenced the results of the study. If a research project included a variety of institutions, the data would likely be more transferable. However, since adult learners are least likely to be represented in elite four-year institutions based on enrollment data, the focus of a multi-institutional type study should be at regional four-year institutions or two year institutions.

Second, the study included a majority of female students. Further research to identify the influence on male adult learners may be useful for a deeper understanding of how ASL courses affect all adult learners, given their limited representation in this study. Further, specific research based on the experience of adult learners from particular racial/ethnic backgrounds may be useful as well. A study looking at the experiences of adult learner persons of Color participating in an academic service learning course could bring helpful information forward. As graduation rates lag for both adult learners and for people of Color at many institutions, a study that could identify positive experiences for more specific groups of students might be useful. The current study included a significant overrepresentation of people of Color compared to RPU's enrollment data. RPU's website indicates 26% of RPU students identify as people of Color. Since 60% of study participants identify as people of Color, significantly over-representing the campus population, clearly that there is a need for additional research that looks more specifically at race and ethnicity.

Third, the current study included 10 participants who all indicated their likeliness to complete their bachelor's degree, with none citing the possibility of leaving college. Further, many participants clearly expressed their interest in attending graduate school. Since research suggests adult learners are more likely to be at risk of leaving school without completing a

degree, the current study may serve as a starting point for the consideration of longitudinal research exploring the retention and graduation of adult learners who have participated in academic service learning courses compared to other adult learners who have not. If longitudinal data could demonstrate a statistically significant difference between the graduation rates of adult learners who participated in ASL coursework versus adult learners who did not, the data would be compelling to institutions. As external pressures from outside forces increase institutions' need to improve graduation rates, colleges and universities would likely be open to any evidence supporting programs or practices that increase the retention of adult learners.

Another area for continued research is the experience of adult learners in other high-impact educational practices. Given the current study demonstrated one high-impact educational practice is valuable for adult learners, evaluating the experience of adult learners in other high-impact educational practices seems reasonable. However, I would caution some high-impact educational practices come with significant time or cost commitments, something adult learners did not respond positively to in the interviews. Therefore, selection of which high-impact educational practice(s) to study should be mindful to select those practices that add little additional time or cost to students.

This study demonstrated that adult learners found new ways of learning through their ASL course. In other words, adult learners learned how to learn in different ways than what they knew before. With these newly found ways of learning, it would be useful for research to capture the students' experiences post-ASL course, and how they applied the new ways of learning to future coursework or professional work.

Final thoughts

Academic service learning could play an important role in growing the persistence and retention of adult learners. Extant literature suggested ASL might be a positive experience for adult learners, and this study's interviews illuminated that suggestion. With the knowledge ASL is a positive experienced for adult learners, researchers and administrators must evaluate the role of practices like ASL for not only adult learners but all populations.

Colleges and universities face increasing pressure to improve graduation rates and lessen achievement gaps across demographics. Higher education administrators must look for financially viable solutions to the retention challenges and must find ways to increase achievement while maintaining academic quality. If within that framework administrators see adult learners as a priority, then they might look to academic service learning courses to provide a solution.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: Interview Guide

1. Can you describe the circumstances that brought you to college? (Based on demographics form, if enrolled previously elsewhere, ask specifically what brought participant to the institution.)
2. Please describe any work experiences prior to coming to college? What specific skills & abilities did you learn from those experiences? Have you been able to apply any of those skills or abilities in coursework at this institution?
3. As defined by this study, you are considered an adult learner. Have you faced any challenges as a result of being an adult learner?
4. How did you find out about academic service learning courses? What impacted your final decision to take an ASL course?
5. How many ASL courses have you taken, or are you enrolled in, to date?
6. What kind of feedback did you receive from faculty throughout the term? Did you experience more or less feedback that in your non-ASL courses? How did you feel about the amount of feedback you received in the ASL course?
7. As part of your coursework were you required to do any reflection? If yes, was is valuable to you? How?
8. In academic service learning courses, students are often required to spend significant time with a community partner/agency/non-profit. Did you have to do so? If yes, please describe your experience with the community partner/agency/non-profit.
9. What allowed for the most learning in this class for you – ie. readings, class discussions, time working with community partner, writing assignments, etc? Why?
10. Do you think ASL courses are different than non-ASL courses? If so, why? Please cite specific examples.
11. If you had to describe this course to another adult learner, how would you describe it? Would you recommend it?
12. Describe your sense of academic confidence (ie – your confidence in your ability to be academically successful) prior to taking the ASL course. Did that confidence change at all as a result of your ASL course? If so, how so?
13. Do you feel that you contributed more, less or the same amount in the academic service learning course as you would in a traditional course? Please provide examples to support your answer.
14. Have your feelings about your ability to successful in higher education changed at all as a result of being in an academic service learning course? Why or why not?

APPENDIX B: Participant Demographics Form

First Name:
Last Name:

Phone number:

Date of birth:

Race:
Gender:

Semester(s) enrolled in an ASL course:
Number of ASL courses completed:

First semester started at Regional Public University:
Dates of enrollment at other institutions, if any (including community colleges, for-profit colleges):

Please circle all of the following that apply:
- I am a current undergraduate student
- I graduated with an undergraduate degree less than six months ago
- I was enrolled in an ASL course at Regional Public University in the last calendar year
- I am currently enrolled in an ASL course at Regional Public University
- I consider myself an adult
- I am financially independent from my parents
- I myself am a parent
- I am employed full time
- I live with my parents
- I live in the Union at City

APPENDIX C: Informed Consent Form

First Name:

Last Name:

The purpose of this research study is to understand the experiences of adult learners in academic service learning classes. Because you are believed to be an adult learner who has participated in an academic service learning course, you are a candidate for participation in this study.

The study will include two interviews where the researcher will meet with participants. Each of the interviews is estimated to last approximately one hour. During these interviews, the research will be asking questions of the participants about their experience in college, and more specifically, in their academic service learning courses. Prior to the start of the interviews, participants will be asked to complete a demographics form. After the interview, participants will be invited to review the study's findings prior to publication. Additionally, the participant will be welcomed to comment or provide feedback. This is not a required part of participation.

Participation in this research project is completely voluntary. You have the right to say no. You may change your mind at any time and withdraw. You may choose not to answer specific questions or to stop participating at any time. The researcher does not believe that there is risk of any harm associated with participation in this research project.

You must be at least 25 years old to participate in this research.

Participants who complete an interview and demographics form will be given a $25 gift card for their participation.

If you have questions or concerns about your role and rights as a research participant, would like to obtain information or offer input, or would like to register a complaint about this study, you may contact, anonymously if you wish, the Michigan State University's Human Research Protection Program at 517-355-2180, Fax 517-432-4503, or e-mail irb@msu.edu or regular mail at Olds Hall, 408 West Circle Dr Rm 207, East Lansing, MI 48824.

Your signature below means that you voluntarily agree to participate in this study.

_____

Name

_____

Date

For more information about this research study, or to share any concerns please contact:

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APPENDIX D: Pseudonym Form

This study's final report will utilize pseudonyms. Every participants name will be changed to protect their identity. Below, please indicate if you have a preferred pseudonym.

Name:
Preferred pseudonym:

APPENDIX E: Course List

Table 2: Course List

Participant Name	ASL Course	Major	Was the course in the participant's major?
Angie	Sociology 440 – Urban Studies	Psychology	No
Bobby	Sociology 423 – The Criminal Justice System	Urban and Regional Studies	No
Diana	Teacher education 301 – educational psychology	Political Science	No*
Gretchen	Urban Studies 401 – Community Research	Health Policy Studies	No
Jane	Psychology 325 – Infancy	Psychology	Yes
Leah	Anthrology 321 – Issues of Oppression	Behavioral Sciences	No
Penelope	Women's Studies 350 – Social change	Sociology	No
Selena	Sociology 423 – The Criminal Justice System	Sociology	Yes
Steven	Urban Studies 401 – Community Research	Criminal Justice Studies	No
Tina	Criminal Justice 350 – Intersections of women and the law	Criminal Justice Studies	Yes

*course was in the participant's major at the time of the course, but the participant has subsequently changed majors

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