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Higher Education and COVID-19: Impact on Nontraditional Students Following a Traditional Path

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Traditional Path

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Abstract

This phenomenological research aimed to examine the impact that transitioning to online education in March of the Spring 2020 semester in response to COVID-19 had on nontraditional students. Students are considered nontraditional if they meet at least one of the following criteria: are at least 25 years old, attend school part-time, work full-time, are a veteran, have children, wait at least one year after high school before entering college, have a GED instead of a high school diploma, are a first-generation student (FGS), are enrolled in non-degree programs, or have reentered a college program (MacDonald, 2018). Nontraditional students hold multiple roles by definition. Holding multiple roles can lead to role strain and role conflict when one role is in direct conflict with another.

This study purposively identified 12 participants. Participants completed an online survey and a face-to-face interview over Zoom in Fall 2020. Both qualitative and quantitative data were collected. Of the nontraditional students in this study 75% (n=9) identified as male and 25% (n=3) identified as male. Seventy-five percent (n=9) of participants identified as white, while 25% (n=3) identified as Black. There were zero freshman, one sophomore, two juniors, and nine seniors. The mean number of years participants had spent in higher education as of Fall 2020 was 5.4 years. All participants (n=12) had access to a laptop and the internet. The emergent themes identified in this study were preference for in-person education, struggles with solo/independent learning, having less compartmentalization of time, feelings of overwhelm and stress, and experiencing differences in the online teaching styles of professors.

Chapter 1

Introduction

I have been working in higher education for over four years. In that time my focus has been on working with students to successfully complete their math requirement. These are the math courses required to complete their general education curriculum; this is most often college algebra or statistics I have taught students of many different races, ethnicities, life stages, socioeconomic statuses, and incarceration statuses. A unifying trait among these students is the desire to learn. Horace Mann said that "Education, then, beyond all other devices of human origin, is the great equalizer of the conditions of men," (Rhode et al., 2012). The path to a higher education degree is not a level playing field, but when provided with appropriate support systems all students can succeed. In this chapter I will introduce the personal, situational, and national context for my research (Buss & Zambo, n.d.). This chapter will also include brief definitions of concepts needed to set the stage for my research questions. These concepts will be explored in greater depth in chapter two, with a review of the literature.

Personal Context

I did not graduate high school. I dropped out my junior year. I received my General Education Diploma (GED) when I was nineteen after taking a GED prep course at my local community college. It took me another three years to enroll in college full-time. I was older than my classmates and had a career as an American Board of Opticianry certified optician. The optometrist and office manager I worked with

encouraged me to enroll in college. I did not know it at the time, but I would have been considered a nontraditional student. Students are considered nontraditional if they meet at least one of the following criteria: are at least 25 years old, attend school part-time, work full-time, are a veteran, have children, wait at least one year after high school before entering college, have a GED instead of a high school diploma, are a first-generation student (FGS), are enrolled in non-degree programs, or have reentered a college program (MacDonald, 2018). The previous definition of nontraditional students is in contrast to traditional students who meet all of the following criteria: they earn a high school diploma, enroll in college full-time immediately after high school, complete college without interruption through graduation, receive financial support from their parents, and do not work during the school year or work part-time (Choy, 2002; Zerquera et al. 2018).

I did not refer to myself as a nontraditional student at the time, but I knew my college experience was different from the majority of my peers. As compared to my traditional student peers, I felt I had to put in twice the effort of a traditional student. My employment often conflicted with my studies. Managing the demands of both school and work was a constant challenge. I recall having to miss class for a work meeting, and as a result my grade was dropped a letter due to a punitive attendance policy. With both my professors and employers vying for my time I often had to choose between my grade point average and my livelihood. This is a common experience for nontraditional students who by definition hold multiple roles, also referred to as social identities (Berker & Horn 2003). These roles each come with responsibilities and benefits. One can hold many social identities such as mother, student, neighbor, wife, daughter, etc. (Openstax College, 2019). The study of the way these roles overlap is called role theory (Openstax

College, 2019). When one has multiple roles, which require continued time and energy, role conflict can often result. Role conflict is when two roles create friction, such as being a student and being a full-time employee (Openstax College, 2019).

The COVID-19 pandemic did not make succeeding in college any easier for nontraditional and traditional students alike. In March of 2020, just after Spring break, the leadership at my university notified students, faculty, and staff of campus closure, with all courses to be delivered in online formats. At this time, I was both a full-time student and adjunct faculty. Instructors were given two days to complete the transition to online teaching. I had previous experience teaching online, but many of my colleagues did not. In a survey conducted by Fox and associates (2020) to examine the impact of COVID-19 on higher education, it was discovered that only 43% of instructors at four-year universities had previous experience teaching online. The rapid shift of course modality added additional challenges. Courses in the Spring 2020 semester that had been originally designed as in-person courses were forced to shift to an online format. When these courses were shifted to an online format, 52% of faculty had to adjust their course outcomes to work in an online environment, and 71% adjusted how their course was graded (Fox et al., 2020). As a result, these courses that switched formats may not have had the same rigor as in-person courses or planned online courses. At four-year universities, 38% percent of faculty were concerned about moving their instructional practices online (Fox et al., 2020). The technological hurdles for students and faculty alike became quite a burden. Some of these hurdles included becoming familiar with Zoom teleconferencing or other synchronous web-based platforms, learning how to prepare and record videos, and proctoring exams online (Fox et al., 2020).

Prior to Spring 2020 I had taught an online course, as well as taken a course on online course design. However, despite my professional experience and development efforts, I did not feel confident in my ability to successfully facilitate an online course. Prior to teaching my first course online in 2018, I was given a master online course template. This template included homework, projects, and exams from a previous instructor. I was instructed by the department chair not to alter any part of the course as it met all learning objectives. This course had been designed quite a few years earlier and, in my opinion, needed an update to the instructional materials activities, projects, homework, and exams. As adjunct faculty I did not feel it was under my purview to alter this course, nor did I have the time. Upon reflection on my feelings towards this course regarding the limited control I had and the lack of student engagement, I requested not to teach online again.

When I took the course on online course design, I was of the mindset that I would never need this information. The course was primarily about designing an online course and identifying what style of course would work best for the content. This course did not cover the pedagogical differences in online education or strategies to keep students engaged.

When my own courses moved online in Spring 2020 due to COVID-19 restrictions, I decided to teach asynchronously, meaning students did not meet at a scheduled time, instead working on their own schedules to complete the course requirements (Vai & Sosulski, 2016). I had many students in multiple time zones so asynchronous learning best addressed the needs of varied learners.

I started recording videos of my lectures and moved all of the course homework to the online learning management system. I developed discussion board prompts and attempted to maintain a connection with my students. I offered virtual office hours via Zoom, and even hosted a virtual "happy hour" via Zoom, where most students dropped by just to say hello. Despite these efforts, the disconnect between the course and my students was apparent. I lowered my expectations for student participation and reduced the number of course outcomes in four out of my seven courses. I had a few students become completely disengaged, even after I reached out to them multiple times via email. There was an increase in academic integrity issues as compared to previous semesters. The academic integrity that occurred the most in my courses were cheating on exams. This added to my workload, as I had to file a report for each incident. I do not believe that some of the students who passed my online courses would have successfully completed the course in-person. These students may have successfully completed my courses due to the reduced rigor or the fact that all academic honesty issues were not identified.

Moving my courses to an online format was mentally and physically exhausting. I was working over 80 hours a week just to keep up with work that would typically have been accomplished in 40-50 hours of work. The personal trauma of living through a pandemic was an additional relevant challenge. I missed teaching in a classroom, my students, and the way life had been at the start of the Spring 2020 semester.

I often thought of my nontraditional students who worked, had children, and cared for elderly parents. I worried about the effect this forced migration to online instruction had on them. The nontraditional students I knew had chosen to follow the traditional

college path: taking classes in person during regular class hours. They wanted to be in the classroom. I believe this forced online migration had an effect on the thousands of nontraditional students nationwide. The goal of my research was to determine the specific effects forced online course migration had on nontraditional students.

National Context

The first case of COVID-19 in the United States was documented on January 20, with the nation's first officially recognized death occurring on February 29th of the same year (Taylor, 2020). As the nation collectively began to react to the global pandemic, universities began discussions about how to offer instruction while limiting risk to students, faculty, and staff (Bernhard & Kohler, 2020). On March 11th, I learned that one of the universities where I taught would suspend instruction for a week following their previously scheduled Spring break to make a plan for the remainder of the semester. That university ultimately decided to move all coursework online for the rest of the Spring 2020 semester. The two other universities where I taught followed suit within a matter of days. Immediately thereafter, conversations among university instructors focused on how to best shift modality from in-person to online instruction, specifically addressing: How can we support our neediest students?

Nationally, nontraditional students have an attrition rate more than double that of their traditional peers with 38% of nontraditional students leaving within their first year of college, compared to only 16% of traditional students (Goncalves & Trunk, 2014). In 2011, 74% of students at two- and four-year colleges met at least one of the criteria to be a nontraditional student, and that percentage continues to steadily rise (Bohl, Haak, &

Shrestha, 2017). That same year, one-third of those enrolled in two- and four-year colleges were nontraditional by the age criteria alone (Markle, 2015). As the population of nontraditional students' trends upward, it is crucial to support this unique group of students and identify their specific needs.

Situational Context

During my career in academia as an instructor at multiple universities, I have heard a range of nontraditional students speak of their stressors from the multiple roles they fill. I have witnessed a pregnant student struggling with morning sickness grow frustrated at her professor's inflexibility in moving the time of her 8 a.m. final. I have seen the frustration from a student who identified as a veteran, having to drive five hours for reserves training or drop everything for a Veterans Affairs hospital appointment. I have listened while older-identifying students lament about their younger peers, who they believe take their education less seriously. Nontraditional students have candidly spoken with me about concerns they have with access to education and university resources; for example, when a child gets sick, or a car breaks down.

The concerns expressed by these students are warranted. My unique position as both having been a nontraditional student and now being a faculty member, has allowed me to address the concerns of the nontraditional students in my course designs. This may not be the case for all faculty and university services.

Universities decide what academic support systems are available to students, and when those supports are available. Some examples of academic support systems are the registrar, library, bookstore, business office, and student success/tutoring centers. Many

of these resources are available during day-time business hours which can make it difficult for nontraditional students to access or utilize these services (Sun, 2019). These resources are also located on campus, which requires nontraditional students to drive to campus. Academic support systems are designed to improve students' academic achievement; this is especially true "for students who may be at risk for academic achievement," such as nontraditional students (Peterson et al., 2014, p. 2). "The increase in number of nontraditional students returning to college campuses has resulted in the need for colleges and universities to look at the various factors and attributes of [nontraditional students] and what institutions need to do in order to serve their unique needs," (Wyatt, 2011, p.10). These challenges in access to academic support systems existed before COVID-19 and the forced migration to online instruction.

When courses moved online many of these support systems changed or were no longer available. In-person tutoring had ended. In-person classes had ended. Due to this forced migration in the time of COVID-19, nontraditional students would face increased stressors including completing coursework in shifted modalities, in addition to those stemming from their multiple roles more than ever.

Research Questions

The primary research question guiding this study was:

What was the impact of courses shifting modality from in-person to online instruction during the Spring 2020 semester due to COVID-19 on nontraditional students who had chosen a traditional path?

Secondary questions include:

Role Theory

1. How did moving to an online course format midsemester Spring 2020 due to COVID-19 impact nontraditional students' amount of time devoted to their various roles?

2. In what ways did moving to an online course format midsemester Spring 2020 due to COVID-19 impact nontraditional students' role priority?

3. How did moving to an online course format midsemester Spring 2020 due to COVID-19 impact nontraditional students' value of their roles?

Feelings Around Higher Education

1. Did moving to an online course format midsemester Spring 2020 due to COVID-19 impact nontraditional students' view of their pursuit of higher education?

2. Did moving to an online course format midsemester Spring 2020 due to COVID-19 impact nontraditional students' feelings towards their university?

3. Did moving to an online course format midsemester Spring 2020 due to COVID-19 impact nontraditional students' feelings towards their professors?

Conclusion

In this chapter I have addressed my own experiences as a nontraditional student and as an educator of nontraditional students. Nationally, nontraditional student enrollment is on the rise, while their attrition rates remain higher than their traditional peers (Bohl, Haak, & Shrestha, 2017; Goncalves & Trunk, 2014). This dissertation focuses on the problem of practice (POP) that nontraditional students have a lower success rate of completing a college degree than their peers. COVID-19 altered and continues to alter life as we know it and had a major impact on all students (Means et al.,

2020). Nontraditional students hold multiple roles, compared to their traditional counterparts. Thus, a thorough investigation to determine the impact that the forced online course migration due to COVID-19 had on nontraditional students is warranted. In the following chapter I examine the current research on traditional and nontraditional students, as well as some preliminary results on the effect of COVID-19 on higher education. I also discuss the theoretical frameworks and additional factors to consider when approaching my research. These frameworks and factors influenced my epistemological stance and methodology by allowing me to view them through a social justice lens.

Chapter 2

Introduction

As described in chapter one nontraditional student enrollment is growing rapidly (Bohl, Haak, & Shrestha, 2017). As such, there is need for additional supports directed at this population. As Donovan Livingston (2017) describes in his poem Lift Off:

To educate requires Galileo-like patience.

Today, when I look my students in the eyes,

all I see are constellations.

If you take the time to connect the dots,

You can plot the true shape of their genius-

shining even in their darkest hour (p.26).

The darkest hour in my career thus far was when in-person instruction was suspended due to COVID-19. With the forced migration to online instruction in the Spring 2020 semester due to COVID-19, it became more difficult to help my students "connect the dots." In this chapter I analyze the literature on the contemporary student body, including both traditional and nontraditional students. Then, I discuss the theoretical frameworks of andragogy and critical role theory. Lastly, I examine the history, pedagogy, and rigor of online instruction.

Traditional Students

Imagine a typical college student. What do they look like? How old are they? I contend that the student you imagined would be a traditional college student. Traditional

undergraduate students meet the following criteria: they earn high school diplomas, enroll in college full-time immediately after high school, complete college without interruption through graduation, receive financial support from their parents, and do not work, or work only part-time, during the academic year (Choy, 2002; Zerquera et al. 2018). This definition does not encompass all students that are seen on college campuses today. The complement of traditional students are nontraditional students.

Nontraditional Students

The two major definitions of nontraditional students are provided by Horn (1995) and MacDonald (2018). An examination of these definitions, their origin, and their application to this study follows.

Horn's Definition

Horn's definition of and research on nontraditional students generated increased awareness in the higher education community. Horn (1995) defined nontraditional students as meeting at least one if the following criteria: having delayed enrollment, being enrolled part-time, working full-time, being considered financially independent for purposes of determining financial aid eligibility, having dependents other than a spouse, being a single parent, or not having a high school diploma. Notice in Horn's definition, age is not a criterion, while age is typically what is first thought of when discussing nontraditional students (Miller, 2020). Also unique to Horn's (1995) definition is a description of nontraditional students on a continuum of minimally, moderately, or highly nontraditional based on the number of characteristics of nontraditional student with which they identify.

A student is considered minimally nontraditional if they identify with one characteristic, moderately if they identify with two or three, and highly if they identify with four or more (Horn, 1995). Based on Horn's definition, in the United States during the 1999-2000 school year, of the number of students enrolled in two- and four-year institutions both public and private, 27% were traditional students, 28% were highly nontraditional, 28% were moderately nontraditional, and 17% were minimally nontraditional (Choy, 2002). At four-year public institutions in the US, 58% of students were at least minimally nontraditional compared with 50% of students in private nonprofit four-year institutions (Choy, 2002).

Horn (1995) refers to the individual characteristics of being a nontraditional student as risk factors. The greater the number of nontraditional characteristics one has, the more likely they are to leave school before completing their degree (Horn, 1995). Forty-two percent of nontraditional students pursuing a bachelor's complete their degree, compared to 59% of traditional students (Horn, 1995). "Nontraditional students are much more likely than traditional students to leave postsecondary education without a degree" (Choy, 2002, p. 12). One could think of these characteristics used to identify nontraditional students as barriers to degree completion.

MacDonald's Definition

MacDonald (2018) provides a synthesized definition of nontraditional students as follows: students are considered nontraditional if they meet at least one of the following criteria: are at least 25 years old, attend school part-time, work full-time, are a veteran, have children, wait at least one year after high school before entering college, have a GED instead of a high school diploma, are a first-generation student (FGS), are enrolled

in non-degree programs, or have reentered a college program. MacDonald (2018)

expands on Horn's (1995) criteria for being a nontraditional student. A comparison of

Horn's and MacDonald's definitions can be seen in Figure 1.

Figure 1.

A Comparison of Horn (1995) and MacDonald's (2018) Definition of Nontraditional

Student
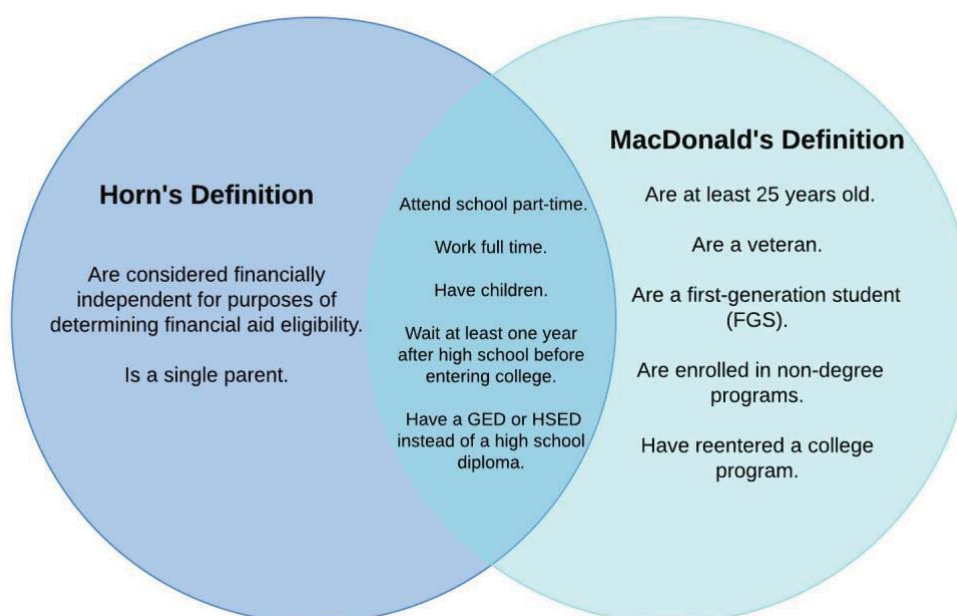
The first three additional criteria in MacDonald's (2018) definition, being at least 25

years old, being a veteran, or having reenrolled in a degree seeking program, could be

categorized under Horn's (1995) criteria of *delayed enrollment*. The two novel criteria

are being enrolled in a non-degree seeking program and being an FGS. According to

MacDonald's (2018) definition, students are considered nontraditional if they enroll in

programs that do not result in degrees. Examples of these programs include certificate

programs such as those required to work in the trades (i.e. electrician, plumbing, etc.).

The FGS criteria is one that directly affects this research as none of the students included

in this study are enrolled in non-degree seeking programs. This study will use

MacDonald's (2018) definition as it is more inclusive. This definition can be found in

Table 1. Research supporting the addition of FGS into the definition of nontraditional

students follows.

Table 1

Definitions of the types of college students being used for the purpose of this study.

Term	Definition
Nontraditional Student	A nontraditional student must identify with at least one of the following criteria: (1) are at least 25 years old, (2) attend school part-time, (3) work full-time, (4) are a veteran, (5) have children, (6) wait at least one year after high school before entering college, (7) have a GED instead of a high school diploma, (8) are a first-generation student (FGS), (9) are enrolled in non-degree programs, (10) have reentered a college program (MacDonald, 2018).
Traditional Student	Traditional undergraduate students meet the following criteria: they earn a high school diploma, enroll in college full-time immediately after high school, complete college without interruption through graduation, receive financial support from their parents, and do not work during the school year or work part-time (Choy, 2002; Zerquera et al. 2018).
First-Generation Student	(a) an individual both of whose parents did not complete a baccalaureate degree; or (b) in the case of any individual who resided with and received support from only one parent, an individual whose only such parent did not complete a baccalaureate degree (Higher Education Act of 1965, 2008, p.9)
Continuing-Generation College Student	Continuing-generation college students are students who enrolled in postsecondary education and who have at least one parent who had some postsecondary education experience (Redford & Mulvaney Hoyer, 2017, p.3).
Adult Learners	A self-directed person, 24 years of age and above whose engagement and readiness to learn is based on the

Table 1

Definitions of the types of college students being used for the purpose of this study.

Term	Definition
	immediate applicability to the development tasks of his/her social role incorporating his/her reservoir of experience (Chao, 2009, p. 906).

First-Generation Students and Continuing Generation Students. Redford and

Mulvaney Hoyer (2017) define first generation college students as "students who are

enrolled in postsecondary education and whose parents do not have any postsecondary

education experience," (p. 3). While this is not the only existing definition, it is the one

utilized by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). Alternatively, the United

States Department of Education defines first generation students as a student whose

parent(s), or guardian(s), did not complete a bachelor's degree (Higher Education Act of

1965, 2008). In this definition the parent(s) or guardian(s) of first-generation students

(FGS) could have some college experience. For this study I will be using the definition

from the United States Department of Education as it is more inclusive. You can find this

definition in Table 1.

The converse of an FGS is a continuing-generation college student (CGS). These

students were defined by Redford and Mulvaney Hoyer (2017) as "students who enrolled

in postsecondary education and who have at least one parent who had some

postsecondary education experience" (p.3). This definition does overlap with the United

States Department of Education definition of FGS. However, it is necessary to include as

this is how continuing-generation college students are defined in the research discussed below.

Literature on First-Generation Students. Horn (1995) does not include FGS in the early definition of nontraditional student. However, Horn (1995) found in their study that 49% of traditional students identified as FGS while 63% of nontraditional students were FGS. This data is almost three decades old as it was based on data collected from 1986-1993; at that time nontraditional students were 14% more likely to be FGS (Horn, 1995).

According to a recent study by the Postsecondary National Policy Institute [PNPI] (2020), during the 2015-2016 school year 35% of undergraduates identified as FGS. Of these FGS, 48% enrolled in college part-time, which is a characteristic of nontraditional students; comparing this to 17% of continuing-generation students (Redford & Mulvaney Hoyer, 2017; PNPI, 2020). There are additional statistics that support the addition of FGS to the definition of nontraditional student, for example 60% of FGS have dependents (PNPI, 2020). The median age of FGS was 24 years old, which is the accepted cap in age for some definitions of adult learners (Chao, 2009). In addition to that 34% of FGS were found to be over 30 years old, this is compared to 17% of continuing-generation students (PNPI, 2020).

Adult Learners

It is important to note that the terms *adult learner* and *nontraditional* student are defined differently (see Table 1). This may be because age is the one characteristics of nontraditional students that faculty and researchers can identify from a student's appearance, also the definition of adult learner includes their attitude toward learning. The largest group of nontraditional students are those who meet the criteria of being age

twenty-five or older (Goncalves & Trunk, 2014; Wyatt, 2011). Between 2000 and 2017, there was a 41% increase in students aged 25-34, and a 6% increase in enrollment for those 35 and older (Hussar & and Bailey, 2020). Age is the most pervasive characteristic used to identify nontraditional students (Thompson-Ebanks, 2017).

Chao defines an *adult learner* as "a self-directed person, 24 years of age and above whose engagement and readiness to learn is based on the immediate applicability to the development tasks of his/her social role incorporating his/her reservoir of experience" (2009, p. 906). This definition can be found in Table 1. Chao (2009) brings the characteristics which Knowles' (1990) theory of andragogy attributed to adult learners into this definition, whereas most definitions of adult learners rely on age alone, this is where the definition of adult learner overlaps with that of nontraditional students. I will discuss Knowles theory of andragogy, which addresses the motivations of nontraditional students, is described in the theoretical frameworks section of this chapter.

Barriers to Degree Completion

Previous sections reviewed the definitions of the different types of students addressed in this study. The next few sections examine the barriers to successful degree completion for nontraditional students.

Nontraditional students are much less likely than traditional students to complete their bachelor's degree than their traditional peers (Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005). Nontraditional students have more than double the attrition rate compared to their traditional peers (Choy, 2002; Bohl, Haak, & Shrestha, 2017; Goncalves & Trunk, 2014). Degree completion (Markle, 2015) or retention (Wyatt, 2011) is a clear priority for

academic support systems given the high rates of attrition for nontraditional students. A study by Goncalves & Trunk (2014) found that 38% of nontraditional students leave college within their first year.

Reasons nontraditional students consider withdrawing from school include financial issues, role conflict, or feeling like they do not belong (Markle, 2015). Goncalves & Trunk (2014) also found that nontraditional students feel isolated from their peers and their university. This was due to the fact that nontraditional students do not live on campus, and do not spend much time on campus due to outside obligations; they found it difficult to interact with traditional students (Goncalves & Trunk, 2014). Some of the challenges identified by nontraditional students include difficulties adjusting to an academic routine, balancing school and family life, and not receiving appropriate support from their university (Bohl, Haak, & Shrestha, 2017). Men were more likely to contemplate leaving college for financial reasons, whereas women were more likely to consider leaving due to role conflict (Markle, 2015). Nontraditional students who have children are significantly less likely to complete their degree (Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005). Taniguchi & Kaufman (2005) also found that students who have multiple reenrollments in university are also less likely to complete their degree than students who complete their college degree after their first enrollment without a break. This research supports Horn's (1995) findings that these factors are barriers to degree completion. These barriers to degree completion can be intrinsic or extrinsic. Intrinsic barriers are due to internal factors and extrinsic barriers are caused by external factors (Openstax College, 2019).

Extrinsic Barriers

Many nontraditional students fill not only the role of student, but of caregiver, partner, parent, and employee (Thompson-Ebanks, 2017). Role theory helps to clarify the many demands these students face in and out of school. Role theory is "the theory of the many roles we hold and the results of when these roles do not always work to support each other" (Openstax College, 2019). When these roles result in conflict this can be a barrier to staying enrolled in college. Role theory will be discussed more in depth in the theoretical frameworks section of this paper.

An additional extrinsic barrier stems from the institution of higher education itself. Universities are designed to support traditional students (Benshoff & Lewis, 1992), as evidenced by university efforts to engage students (Fairchild, 2003). "Most institutions are ill equipped to take on the diverse needs of their adult student population," (Fairchild, 2003, p. 14). Until universities answer the call to expand student services specifically curated for the nontraditional student population, the attrition rate for nontraditional students will not improve (Benshoff & Lewis, 1992; Fairchild, 2003; Osam et al., 2016).

Intrinsic Barriers

Intrinsic barriers stem from factors internal to the student (OpenStax College, 2019). These could include stressors, a learning disability, or a gap in knowledge due to delayed enrollment. Another intrinsic barrier for nontraditional students is decrement stereotype threat; there is evidence that the older the student the higher the level of decrement stereotype threat (Hollis-Sawyer, 2011). Stereotype threat (see Table 2) is a self-perception issue which is defined as the reaction to a personal belief that when one completes a task that they are at risk of confirming a negative stereotype of a group they

identify with, be that age, race, or sex (Hollis-Sawyer, 2011). An example of stereotype

threat would be nontraditional students believing in the stereotype that they are too old to

learn (Hollis-Sawyer, 2011). Stereotype threat is an examples of an internal barrier

nontraditional students face towards degree completion (see Table 2).

Table 2

Definitions of Stereotype Threat (Hollis-Sawyer, 2011, p.293)

Term	Definition
Stereotype Threat	Stereotype threat is a self-perception issue which is defined as the reaction to a personal belief that when one completes a task that they are at risk of confirming a negative stereotype of a group they identify with, be that age, race or sex
Decrement Stereotype Threat	Stereotype threat imposed by age; an example of this is nontraditional students believing they may fill the stereotype that they are too old to learn.

Theoretical Frameworks

The theoretical frameworks relevant to this study are that of role theory and

andragogy. It is also necessary to keep in mind several socio-cultural concepts which are

relevant to the present study. Theoretical frameworks are interrelated theories that are

used to draw "a researcher's attention to particular events of phenomena and can shed

light on relationships that might otherwise go unseen," (Buss & Zambo, n.d., p. 27). Next

is an introduction into role theory, andragogy, the socio-cultural factors used in this

study, and how these frameworks interact. The frameworks are identified in Table 3, and

their associated supplementary definitions and research will be further discussed in the

following sections of this chapter.

Table 3

Theoretical Frameworks Definitions

Term	Definition
Andragogy	Andragogy is the art and science of teaching adults (Knowles, 1990). The following are characteristics of adult learners, these are the five assumptions of andragogy theory, (1) is that they are self-directed, and internally motivated (2) they use their life experience to aid in their learning, (3) their readiness to learn depends on their stage in life, (4) they want to be able to apply their knowledge, (5) they need to know why what they are learning is important (Knowles, 1990).
Role Theory	Role theory is the theory of the many roles we hold and the results of when these roles do not always work to support each other (Openstax College, 2019).
Role	The typical behaviors of a person given their social responsibilities and benefits (Openstax College, 2019). For example, one can hold many social identities such as mother, student, neighbor, wife, daughter, etc. that become their roles (Openstax College, 2019).
Role Strain	Role strain is when too much is required of a single role (Openstax College, 2019. Goode (1960) defines role strain as "felt difficulty in fulfilling role obligations," (p. 483).
Role Conflict	"Role conflict is the presence of incompatible expectations between a person's roles so that by fulfilling the expectations of one role the person is

Table 3

Theoretical Frameworks Definitions

Term	Definition
	neglecting expectations of the other role," (Gigliotti & Huff, 1995, p. 330).
Role Relations	"Role relations are seen as a sequence of 'role bargains,' and as a continuing process of selection among an individual's alternative role behaviors, in which each individual seeks to reduce his role strain," (Goode, 1960, p. 483).
Stress	"Stress is the perception and response of an individual to events judged as overwhelming or threatening to the individual's well-being," (Openstax College, 2019, p. 495;Gyllensten & Palmer, 2005).
Self-efficacy	"Self-efficacy is the feeling of being able to control things that happen to oneself," (Gigliotti & Huff, 1995, p. 334).

Role Theory

Sociology defines one's roles as typical behaviors of a person given their social responsibilities; for example, one can have many social roles such as mother, student, neighbor, wife, daughter, etc. (Openstax College, 2019). Nontraditional students by definition can hold multiple roles, and are more likely to identify as parents, spouses, employees, homeowners, or caregivers than traditional students (Gigliotti & Huff, 1995). When an individual holds multiple roles that require continued time and energy, role strain and role conflict can often result.

Role Strain and Role Conflict. Role strain occurs when too much is required of a single role (Openstax College, 2019). For example, role strain for students could be cause by all of the responsibilities of being a student; such as homework, studying, and extracurriculars. Role conflict occurs when two roles have "incompatible expectations" suggesting that "the expectations of one role led to the person neglecting expectations of the other role" (Gigliotti & Huff, 1995, p. 330). For example, two-thirds of working nontraditional students believed their primary role was as an employee and not a student (Berker & Horn 2003). Nontraditional students indicated that their professors expected them to put their role as a student ahead of their other roles (Markle, 2015), thus role conflict between their role as a student and another role occurred.

Role conflict can lead to cycles of guilt and self-conflict. An example of role conflict could be a nontraditional student having to decide between missing class or a meeting at work. As noted previously, role conflict has been found to be the main reason women nontraditional students consider dropping out (Markle, 2015). Role conflict induced additional stress in nontraditional students (Gigliotti &Huff, 1995). Stress is defined as "the perception and response of an individual to events judged as overwhelming or threatening to the individual's well-being," (Openstax College, 2019,0. 495; Gyllensten & Palmer, 2005). Stress does can have positive or negative outcomes. Gigliotti and Huff (1995) note that self-efficacy "is often an important factor in whether strain and stress promote negative outcomes," (p. 334).Self-efficacy is "internal belief and self-confidence that one has the power and skills to shape the directions of one's learning experience," (Hammond, 2015, p. 159).

Role Relations.

In order to lessen role conflict, individuals engage in role relations. Role relations are "a sequence of 'role bargains,' and as a continuing process of selection among alternative role behaviors," (Goode, 1960, p. 483). The motivation for an individual to participate in role relations is to reduce role conflict (Goode, 1960). As role conflict increases stress, the ultimate goal of role relations is to lessen one's stress level (Gigliotti & Huff, 1995). An example of how nontraditional students can engage in role relations when they choose to spend more time in their role as a student during finals and lessen the amount of time they devote to being a parent. The most significant role relation for nontraditional student could be removing a role entirely, such as withdrawing from college.

Andragogy

College faculty are required to define their teaching philosophy, commonly understood as pedagogy, when applying for new positions or tenure. As the student body continues to change, universities may be better served by inviting faculty consideration of andragogy, over pedagogy. Andragogy is the theory of adult learning, while pedagogy is the theory of child learning.

Traditional college students may present to the university at the apex of pedagogy and andragogy given their age at initial enrollment. For nontraditional students this may not be the case, because in addition to age differences, nontraditional students may also have societal roles differing from that of their traditional peers. Knowles (1990) defined andragogy as "the art and science of teaching adults," (p.6). Knowles (1990) identified the following characteristics of adult learners: they are self-directed, internally motivated,

they use their life experience to aid in learning, their readiness to learn is dependent on their stage in life, they desire to apply knowledge in real-life contexts, and they want to know why the content being learned is important.

While Knowles theories have been criticized as these traits are not present in all adult learners, they are still widely used today (Chao, 2009). While the age and life experiences of nontraditional students are important, consideration must also be given to the diverse cultures and social groups in which they are members. Chao (2009) suggested "the adult learners' interaction with social and societal forces also influences his value system, priorities and views about life and learning in this particular context," (p. 906).

Socio-Cultural Factors and Equity Impact

In addition to the aforementioned theoretical frameworks, the following socio-cultural concepts are relevant to the present study in that they address inequities in education and offer a path towards equity. I am going to be discussing the factors of culture, intersectionality, culturally responsive teaching and assessment, and equity. Comparisons between social structure and culture, and the overlap of implicit bias and intersectionality inform this study. Finally, culturally responsive teaching is a tool to promote equity in classrooms.

Culture

Culture is defined by Montenegro and Jankowski (2017) as:

> (1) the explicit elements that makes people identifiable to a specific group(s) including behaviors, practices, customs, roles, attitudes, appearance, expressions of identity, language, housing region, heritage, race/ethnicity, rituals,

religion; (2) the implicit elements that combine a group of people which include their beliefs, values, ethics, gender identity, sexual orientation, common experiences (e.g. military veterans and foster children), social identity; and (3) cognitive elements or the ways that the lived experiences of a group of people affect their acquisition of knowledge, behavior, cognition, communication, expression of knowledge, perceptions of self and others, work ethic, collaboration, and so on. (p.8).

Culture influences one's identity and can have many dimensions that affect other aspects of one's culture. This is depicted visually in Figure 2.

Figure 2.

Dimensions of Cultural Identity

Source: Allegheny County, Pennsylvania, DHS LGBTQ Community Training Team/SOGIE Project Team (Collins, 2018).
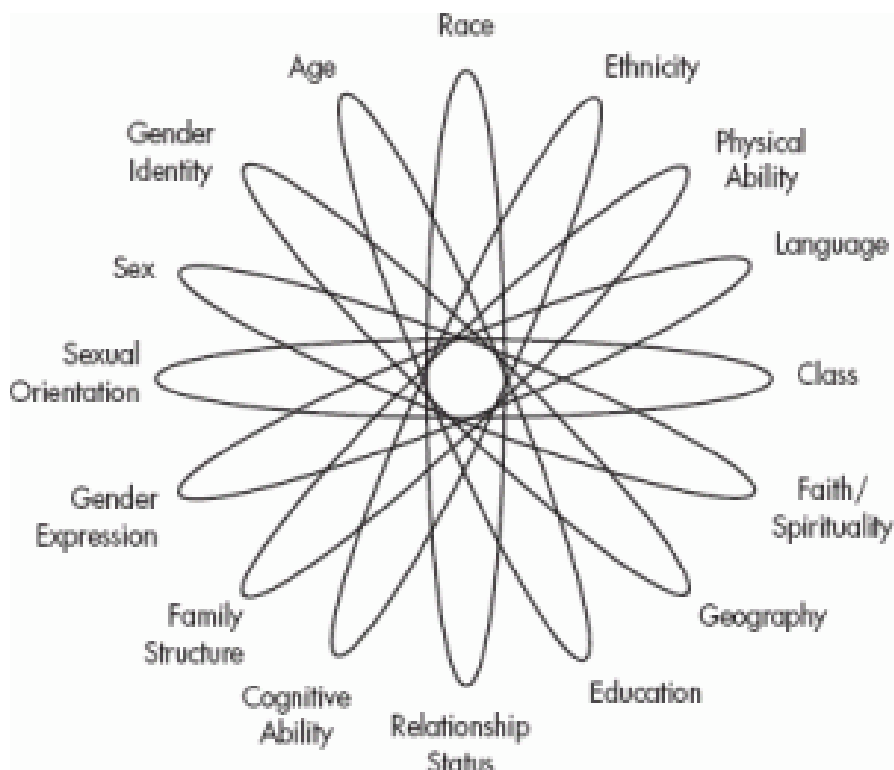
Culture can also influence one's roles and role priority. Culture is the intersection of the pieces of our identity, many of which we cannot choose for ourselves (Smith et al., 2017).

Intersectionality

This section will examine three definitions of intersectionality, which was first defined by Crenshaw in 1989. These definitions are organized in Table 4. Each of these definitions contains unique characteristics which are central to understanding the concept of intersectionality and the influence it has on nontraditional students.

Table 4

Definitions of Intersectionality

Author(s)	Definition
Montenegro and Jankowski	"the way that aspects of a person's identity cannot be fully separated from one another, play a central role in people's experiences and making meaning of those experiences," (2017, p. 9).
Merriam-Webster Dictionary	"the complex, cumulative way in which the effects of multiple forms of discrimination (such as racism, sexism, and classism) combine, overlap, or intersect especially in the experiences of marginalized individuals or groups" (2020, Intersectionality section).
Oluo	"the belief that our social justice movements must consider the intersections of identity, privilege, and oppression that people face in order to be just and effective," (2018, p. 74).

Crenshaw, a black activist and scholar, first defined intersectionality in 1989 to describe the overlapping discrimination she experienced from being Black and a woman. Since April 2017, the Merriam-Webster dictionary has recognized this concept by including a definition of intersectionality. Contemporary scholars, Montenegro and

Jankowski define intersectionality as "the way that aspects of a person's identity cannot be fully separated from one another, play a central role in people's experiences and making meaning of those experiences," (2017, p. 9). Simply stated, certain aspects of oneself cannot be separated, and the inability to separate aspects of one's identity goes to affect one's lived experience. Unique to this definition is that the effects of intersectionality I cannot be undone by separating aspects of oneself.

More recently there has been a movement to acknowledge that intersectionality exists, and that this knowledge should be included in social justice activism. Oluo (2018) defines intersectionality as the as "the belief that our social justice movements must consider the intersections of identity, privilege, and oppression that people face in order to be just and effective," (p. 74). The concept of intersectionality is necessary to make sure that academic supports are design to aid all nontraditional students. Intersectionality, as Oluo defines it, helps make sure that less are left behind and that in the strive to make things better, we do not make them worse for some (Oluo, 2018). This is a crucial tenant in culturally responsive teaching which is used to address systemic inequities and to help close the opportunity gap. This will be addressed after the synthesized definition of intersectionality is discussed and intersectionality is compared with the theoretical framework of role theory.

The definitions discussed above have been synthesized to create the definition of intersectionality that will be used in this study. Intersectionality is the compounding effect of the characteristics which make up one's culture (sex, race, gender, sexual identity, class, physical ability, education, etc.) that (1) cannot be separated, (2) impacts people's life experiences both positively and negatively, and (3) affect the meaning of

these experiences which influence one's motivation for social justice. This revised definition addresses the negative effects of intersectionality, the fact that the makeup of one's culture cannot be separated, and the influence intersectionality has on social justice movements.

When comparing intersectionality and role theory it is necessary to look back at the concepts of extrinsic and intrinsic. Intersectionality is the way the outside world affects one based on aspects of their identity, and possibly their roles. Intersectionality is extrinsic, whereas role theory is intrinsic. Role theory focuses on the internal conflict of nontraditional students. Intersectionality is the effect of multiple biases held by others, namely faculty, staff, peer traditional students, on nontraditional students.

Implicit Bias

Implicit biases are the unconscious attitudes and stereotypes that shape one's view and responses to certain cultural groups based on race, class, or language (Hammond, 2015). These biases are held by all but are not under one's control. In fact, many are not aware that they hold such biases (Hammond, 2015). The implicit bias against the various identities of nontraditional students, such as parents, veterans, immigrants, compounds due to intersectionality. Biases held by faculty and staff may impact the way they interact with students, especially those who present as nontraditional students (Markle, 2015). Nontraditional students report feeling marginalized by university policies, as they believed these policies inequitably support traditional students compared to their nontraditional peers (Markle, 2015). A quote from one nontraditional student in Markle's (2015) study brought specific cases to light, saying "Class schedules, advisor schedules, and professor schedules are all geared towards traditional students," (p. 277).

Nontraditional female students discuss being talked down to by professors, this occurred primarily in discussions regarding family issues (Markle, 2015). Conversely, Goncalves & Trunk (2014) found that some of nontraditional students have enriching interactions with their professors. Additionally, work by Brinthaupt & Eady (2014), suggests there is a correlation among university instructor attitude and student success, finding that the more positively faculty and adjuncts feel about nontraditional students, the more willing they are to make accommodations to support student success. Thus, we can train instructors accordingly.

Culturally Responsive Teaching and Assessment

Culturally responsive teaching is a pedagogical approach to education which can assist in closing the opportunity gap and eliminating inequities in education. Hammond (2015) defines culturally responsive teaching as "the process of using familiar cultural information and processes to scaffold learning" (p. 156). Culturally responsive teaching is a pedagogical theory focused on relationships between students and their environments and works within the knowledge base our students already have (Hammond, 2015). This theory can apply to andragogy as well, as Knowles (1990) contends, adult learners what to be to apply their knowledge to the knowledge that have collected over the course of their lives. Culturally responsive teaching is one way to initiate creating equity in schools.

Equity

Equality is when everyone gets the same thing, and equity is when everyone gets what they need to succeed (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2020). Equity promotes equality by prioritizing resources to those who need them. This is achieved with

culturally responsive teaching. Based on Maslow's hierarchy of needs Smith and colleagues created a building equity taxonomy, which can be seen in Figure 3.

Figure 3.

Building Equity Taxonomy (Smith et al., 2017, p. 5).
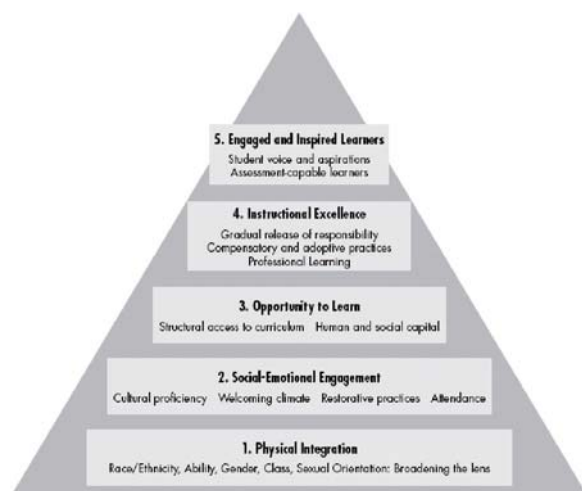
Source: Smith, D., Frey, N., Pumpian, I., & Fisher, D. (2017). Building equity: policies and practices to empower all learners. ASCD.

Culturally responsive teaching helps play a role in building equity taxonomy. Allowing schools who adopt these practices to create competent and motivated learners who are "building and reinforcing their identity and agency" (Smith et al., 2017, p. 4). Building equity is significantly important for nontraditional students who enter college with diverse life experiences and more developed identities than their peers.

Online Education

Currently distance education is synonymous with online education, however this was not always the case. There is evidence of distance education occurring as early as the 18th century (Kentnor, 2015). Kentnor (2015) defines distance education as "a method of teaching where students and teachers are physically separated," (p. 21). Interest in

distance education increased greatly with the development of the internet, this is commonly known as online education (Kentnor, 2015).

In 2012 one-third of students in higher-education were enrolled in online course (Kentnor, 2015). Online courses can be taught synchronously, asynchronously, or a combination of both. Synchronous courses meet online at a set time (Vai & Sosulski, 2016). A course is asynchronous if students do not meet at a scheduled time and students work on their own schedule to complete the course (Vai & Sosulski, 2016). In a study by Woods & Frogge (2017) they found that 40% of nontraditional students preferred online learning compared to 9% of traditional students (2017). This study identified students as nontraditional based on the characteristic of age alone (Woods & Frogge, 2017).

In the United States a college credit hour represents 15 hours of class time, so a three-credit course represents 45 hours of class time (Silva et al., 2015). Most college courses meet three times a week for 15 weeks. There is also an expected amount of time students are to work on classwork outside of class time, typically two to three hours per credit (Vai & Sosulski, 2016). "An online course must be equal in content and challenge to the on-site course," (Vai & Sosulski, 2016, p. 23). "The course content [of an online course] is driven by the identical learning outcomes that drive the on-site course," (Vai & Sosulski, 2016, p. 23).

Course Modality Shifts Due To Pandemic

When COVID-19 levels rose drastically in Spring 2020 the majority of universities responded by moving their course work online. Of the courses that moved online, approximately 26%were synchronous, 35% were asynchronous, and 40% were a combination of synchronous and asynchronous (Fox et al., 2020).

"This transition occurred in the context of emergency remote teaching online versus the careful design and delivery of a course always intended to be delivered online"(Fox et al., 2020, p.3). Ten percent of faculty reported having to make a significant change to their courses goals and learning objectives, 42% reported a moderate change (Fox et al.,2020).

During the Spring 2020 semester I was teaching six courses for three universities. I made moderate changes to two of my courses, and a significant change to one course. Seventy-one percent of faculty changed how their course was graded (Fox et al., 2020). I did change how three of my courses were graded.

Faculty Perspectives. When courses moved online in Spring 2020 due to COVID-19 faculty did not have "time to build online courses using researched-based practices for effective learning online" (Means et al., 2020, p.3). Forty-three percent of faculty at four-year universities had no prior experience teaching online before the forced migration of courses to remote instruction in Spring 2020 (Fox et al., 2020). Means et al. (2020) describe instructors in "triage mode" when coursed were forced to migrate online (p. 3).This was my experience as well. Triage implies thoughts of the aftermath of a tragic accident, such as physicians providing triaging care for patients in order to assist those who have the greatest chance of survival. As an instructor, it was difficult to provide adequate support to those who were doing poorly in a course before the forced migration online. The students who quit participating were impossible to *revive*.

Chugani & Houtrow (2020) discuss in their Op-Ed how the pandemic has increased the visibilities of the already present inequities in higher education. These inequities could be access to a computer, stable internet, and lack of a university support

system. Fox et al.'s (2020) mixed-method study solicited perspectives directly from faculty. One such faculty member stated "(My biggest concern moving forward) is equity. Students who don't have access/support/space suffer greatly in an online environment. It's hard to identify these students early enough in an online environment to get them the support they need," (Fox et al., 2020, p. 21).

 Undergraduate Student Perspectives. Forty-three percent of students had not taken an online course prior to their instruction being moved online in Spring 2020 due to COVID-19 (Means et al., 2020). Fifty-seven percent of students said that being online reduced their ability to stay interested in the course content (Means et al., 2020). Courses that were moved from in-person to online modalities did have an effect on student satisfaction with their courses (Means et al., 2020). Using a scale of *very satisfied, somewhat satisfied, somewhat dissatisfied* and *very dissatisfied* Means and et al. (2020) found that before in-person courses were switched to online modality 51% of students felt very satisfied with their course. After the courses moved online only 19% of students reported that they were very satisfied with their course (Means et al., 2020). Interestingly, the percentage of students who selected *somewhat dissatisfied* or *very dissatisfied* rose from 12% to 40% after in-person courses moved online (Means et al., 2020). There is a lack of existing research because the COVID-19 pandemic is still occurring and impacting higher education. The existing research did not focus exclusively on the nontraditional student population. This study will fill a gap in the literature.

Epistemological Stance

I conducted this study because I wanted to support nontraditional students when teaching. I know due to the nature of their roles that their online learning experience may differ greatly from that of a traditional student. I wanted to understand how their experiences differed, and how they were supported through the transition to online education due to COVID-19.

Methodological Rationale

The use of survey followed by interview was identified as an appropriate methodology to understand the experience of a sample of nontraditional students impacted by COVID-19 course modality shifts during the Spring 2020 semester. This is a phenomenological study utilizing a mixed method approach given the collection of ethnographic data (Burkholder et al., 2020; Creswell, 2018). Many studies of nontraditional students used mixed methods surveys (Goncalves & Trunk 2014; Markle, 2015; Woods & Frogge, 2017). Culturally relevant frames were utilized in the preparation of student surveys and interview protocol (Montenegro & Jankowski, 2017). Candidates were selected purposively (Creswell, 2018). This study has been approached with a social constructivism lens (Creswell, 2018, Buss & Zambo, n.d.). This lens was chosen as this study was done to better understand the impact that migration to online coursework due to COVID-19 had on nontraditional students(Creswell, 2018).

Identifying the impact that the migration to online coursework due to COVID-19 had on nontraditional students could lead to the development of new academic supports and thereby lead to increased retention for nontraditional students.

Conclusion

In summary this chapter reviewed the existing definition of nontraditional students and the barriers to their degree completion. The history of online education and its utilization during the shift in course modality due to COVID-19 were then explored. This study used the theoretical frameworks of andragogy and role theory, as well as additional socio-cultural concepts to support to fortify my epistemological stance. The methodology is introduced and will be explained more deeply in chapter three. The following chapter will discuss the application of these ideas to the study's population and how the data was collected in order to address research questions presented in chapter one.

Chapter 3

Introduction

In the previous chapter an exploration of the existing literature on nontraditional students and online education was presented. The theoretical frameworks and additional factors necessary to view this study through a social-justice lens were also presented. The following chapter describes the study's setting, participants, and my role as a researcher. It will also discuss the data collection instruments, how these data were collected, and the methods used for analyzing these data.

Study Setting

The data collection for this study occurred during the Fall 2020 semester at a small liberal arts Catholic university in the Midwest. As of Fall 2020, the enrollment comprised of 1,100 students, 810 of whom were enrolled at the undergraduate level (Ong, nd.). For the 2019-2020 school year, the average age of the undergraduate population was 23 years old (M. Ong, personal communication, December 5, 2020). Of the entire student body 86% of students were enrolled full-time and 14 % of students were enrolled at or below part-time. Three percent of the students enrolled were veterans. In the undergraduate population for the 2019-2020 school year, 44 % of students were classified as low-income, and 27% of students were classified as first-generation students (FGS). Thirty-seven percent of the undergraduates transferred from another university (M. Ong, personal communication, December 5, 2020).

Ninety-nine percent of the undergraduate students received institutional scholarships according to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2019). Over the past few years, the university population reflects greater racial diversity than it had previously. This was partially influenced by a scholarship program that annually provided over thirty students a year complete tuition reemission as they expected no family financial contribution; this was calculated by the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). These scholarship recipients come from lower socioeconomic areas, and lower performing schools for secondary education. From the Fall 2018 to Fall 2019 semesters the retention rate was 60% for domestic students of color and 73% for domestic white students. In research by Harper and Simmons (2018), the Midwest state where this study occurred had one of the lowest equity scores in the country when comparing the equity of race, gender, black student degree completion and black student to black faculty ratio in higher education.

Participant Recruitment

This study purposively found nontraditional students. Purposive sampling is an example of nonprobability sampling, which is when the probability of a participants sampling is unknown (Burkholder et al., 2020). Purposive sampling seeks out participants who meet desired criteria, in this case meeting the characteristics of being a nontraditional student (Burkholder et al., 2020). I personally invited three participants who were students I had instructed previously and were known to meet the desired criteria. The remaining participants were found by sending my recruitment email (see Appendix B) to faculty and asking them to forward it to students they believed met the

criteria of being a nontraditional student. This method of sampling is called snowball or chain sampling (Creswell, 2018). This type of sampling relies on the information of those who are able to identify possible participants who meet the desired criteria (Creswell, 2018). This sampling method found seven additional participants.

After preliminary analysis of the first 10 participants' interview's, it was discovered that none were sophomores, and none identified as a veteran. Thus, a targeted purposive search was completed to recruit participants meeting these criteria. A call for participants who identified as 25 and older, in the category of sophomores, juniors, or veteran status, was placed as an announcement on the main page of the universities learning management system (LMS). This announcement can be found in Appendix E.

Potential participants were first surveyed via Google Forms. The first page of this Google form was informed consent (see Appendix A). Once consent was given their participants' demographic information was collected using Appendix C. After participants completed the survey, interviews were scheduled and confirmed via email. Twenty-four potential participants responded to the survey, and 15 were selected for scheduled interviews. However, the total number of participants interviewed for this study was 12. These participants were interviewed through Zoom teleconferencing. Two potential participants missed their initial interviews and were rescheduled. These two also missed their rescheduled interviews, and the appointments were not rescheduled. The third potential participant missed their initial interview and was not rescheduled as it was the last week of the Fall 2020 semester, and the desired number of participants had been reached.

My Role as a Researcher

As the researcher I performed the face-to-face interview on Zoom personally, as well as analyzed the data. These interviews were recorded using Zoom for accuracy, stored in the password protected Zoom online server, and then transcribed by a third party. Transcripts were then reviewed, coded, and the data were analyzed. There is a possibility that personal biases, both positive and negative, towards the students and the university may have affected my judgment of the data through the halo effect (OpenStax, 2020). The halo effect is when "is when one trait of a person or thing is used to make an overall judgment of that person or thing," (Nielson & Cardello, 2013, p. 1). As a nontraditional student myself, I may view nontraditional students more favorably than I would their traditional peers. I addressed this positive bias by labelling it and keeping it in the forefront as I coded my data.

Instruments

For this study, the survey (see Appendix C) and interview protocol (see Appendix D) were developed to capture key demographics and the criteria of nontraditional students with which participants identified. A standard informed consent form was utilized to ensure participants understood what their information was used for and that their participation was voluntary (see Appendix A). The email survey collected ethnographic data as well as which characteristics of a nontraditional student participants identified with. Lastly, the email survey collected information on participants access and use of technology.

The interview protocol first inquired why these nontraditional students chose to enroll in a traditional college path, attending school during the day and in-person. The

interview protocol then had three subcategories of questions related to role theory, feelings towards higher education, and future plans for higher education and hopes for the Fall 2020 semester (see Appendix D).

After the first interview, I determined it would be beneficial to know what the living situation of each participant looked like, and who they lived with. The question "Who do you live with, and what does your living situation look like?" was then added. The first subject did not need to be interviewed because they answered this question on their own. After one participant disclosed their age, I realized I had not collected the participants exact ages. This could be crucial information, especially in regards of feelings towards online education. The question "If you're comfortable, would you please tell me your age? You can also choose not to respond." was then added to the interview protocol. This question was then asked via email to the first ten participants. All participants disclosed their age.

Innovation

The research used critical role theory to examine the impact of COVID-19 on nontraditional students. The population of nontraditional students is often overlooked or grouped in with traditional undergraduates. The study *Suddenly Online: A National Survey of Undergraduates During the COVID-19 Pandemic* did study the pivot to online learning, but this study did not distinguish between traditional and nontraditional students in the results (Means et al., 2020). There is currently no existing research focused directly on the impact of courses moving online due to COVID-19 on nontraditional students. The intended impact of this study was to show the impact COVID-19 had on nontraditional

students. As discussed in chapter two nontraditional students have multiple roles to fill. This research was intended to better understand the impact these multiple roles had on nontraditional students.

Summary of Data Collection Procedures

The collection of nontraditional student data took place in the Fall 2020 semester. To collect the student data purposive and snowball sampling were used to find nontraditional students who were enrolled full-time during the Spring 2020 semester and had not withdrawn from all coursework when courses moved online due to COVID-19. Students took a preliminary email survey via Google Forms. Once this survey was completed, interviews via Zoom teleconferencing were scheduled with the chosen participants.

The transcribed interviews were then emailed to the participants for member checking. Member checking allows participants an opportunity to review their transcripts and verify that the data collected was correct; they were also allowed to make redactions or additions (Burkholder et al., 2020). Recordings of all interviews were submitted for transcription by Scribie, a cost-effective translation service completed by a live transcriber (Brewster, 2020). Upon completion of their member checking of transcripts participants were emailed a $20 Amazon gift card. All participants approved their transcripts without alteration.

Analytical Strategies for Data Analysis

Phenomenological reflection (Creswell, 2018) was used to understand the experience of nontraditional students during the forced migration to online learning in

Spring 2020 due to COVID-19. The goal was to find common themes in the experience of nontraditional students whose coursework was forced to move online due to COVID-19 in the Spring 2020 semester. Inductive reasoning was used to reach conclusions (Burkholder et al., 2020). The qualitative data responses were coded to look for emergent themes (Creswell, 2018).

The quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics to provide a deeper understanding of the ethnographic data in this study (Bennett, Briggs, & Triola, 2018). Descriptive statistics are used to describe raw data in the forms of percentages and averages, as well as tables and graphs (Bennett, Briggs, & Triola, 2018). The data participants provided in the emails survey is presented in chapter four using descriptive statistics.

Coding Methods for Qualitative Data

The coding process for the qualitative data coding began by initially reading each of the 12 transcripts twice. It was first sought to answer the secondary research questions, as the questions in the interview protocol were developed in part to answer the secondary research questions of this study. Each of the secondary research questions were coded individually. The 12 transcripts 12 were read through a complete time for each question. The students' responses were coded line by line as they related to each research question. The answers to these research questions were then aggregated and a summation of all responses is presented in chapter four.

To find emergent the methodology for coding phenomenological data presented in *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design* was utilized (Creswell, 2019, p. 201). Inductive coding was used for emergent themes because this was an iterative process, and this was

a new phenomenon being studied. Many researchers have used inductive coding for phenomenological research prior to this study (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006; McCormick, 2011; Neubauer et al., 2019). It is also the coding method recommended by Creswell (2018), the primary resource for qualitative research used in this dissertation. In seeking emergent themes each of the 12 transcripts was read through using line by line coding. The transcripts were divided into four parts following the division of questions by topic, found in Appendix D. The number of significant statements identified were 103, these statements were labeled with 33 codes, and then these codes were collapsed into 5 themes. These themes were: preference for in-person education, struggles with solo/independent learning, having less compartmentalization of time, feelings of overwhelm and stress, and experiencing differences in the online teaching styles of professors. These themes are discussed at length in chapter 4. A selection of significant statements and their coordinating codes that collapsed into the theme of preference for in-person education can be seen in Table 5.

Table 5

Example of Significant Statements, and Codes for the Emergent Theme Preference for In-Person Education

Significant Statements	Codes
"I feel like I thrive better by being in a physical place, I can pay attention more, I don't feel like my attention span wavers if I'm trying to do stuff at home where there can be some distractions, even though I've tried to make my office here as distraction proof as possible, being online, not really being monitored in class, it's easy to jump on YouTube [chuckle] and get sidetracked very easily."	Pay better attention in-person

Table 5

Example of Significant Statements, and Codes for the Emergent Theme Preference for

In-Person Education

Significant Statements	Codes
"My attention span is just not that long. I would get bored sitting at a computer screen all day."	Pay better attention in-person
"I feel that as I've gotten older and I've taken a lot of classes, I feel that being in-person suits me better, I'm able to learn more and kind of soak in the education that I needed better in-person."	Belief they learn better in person
"Online learning has never been my forte. It's never been something that I looked to try to do. It's never been something that I was good at."	Belief they learn better in person
"I believe that I learn better with interactions with people."	Lack of interaction
"I really thrive off that in-person setting and the dialogue that takes place in a classroom."	Lack of interaction
"I've lost a lot of that personalized attention that I used to get when we were in-person."	Professor feedback

Validity

To ensure the validity of this study three methods were used. First, participant's member checked their transcripts to make sure the collected data were correct (Creswell, 2018). Second, the transcripts from the participants were triangulated with each other (Creswell, 2018). Third, this researcher's biases have been disclosed regarding previous experiences as a nontraditional student, and previous employee at the university where this study took place (Creswell, 2018). These steps to improve validity add to the rigor of this study.

This study had minor threats and validity of the data. The first threat to validity was the possibility of the halo effect (Nielson & Cardello, 2013). I knew three of the participants prior to this study. One of these participants was enrolled in a course I was teaching during the Spring 2020 semester. This course moved to an online asynchronous format due to COVID-19.

Reliability

An interview protocol was used to ensure reliability. One possible threat to reliability had to do with the timeline on which the study was completed. Interviews were initially to be conducted close to, or before, the beginning of the Fall 2020 Semester so that the Spring 2020 semester would be fresh in the participant's minds. However, the first interview was conducted on October 8th, 2020 and the final interview was conducted in December 3rd, 2020. It is possible that the Fall 2020 semester might have blurred or altered the memories of the Spring 2020 semester.

Technical issues only occurred during one of the interviews. The recording froze in the middle of asking the final question which was "Is there anything else you would

like to share?" When the video reconnected, the participant said there was nothing else that they wanted to add.

As a graduate a student and previous adjunct faculty member at the university where this study took place, I knew three of the students involved in this study. I taught all three of these students for two semesters each. These students were sampled because it was both purposive and convenient. The students may have felt obligated to participate as I was previously their instructor. One of the students interviewed was enrolled in a course I taught during the Spring 2020 semester. This course migrated online and become asynchronous due to COVID-19. Finally, students may have given inaccurate responses to the questions "How were you supported to the transition to online education by your professors?" and "How were you supported to the transition to online education by your university?" because they did not want to portray their professors or university in a negative light. The results of this study could be altered if students did not answer the survey and interview questions honestly. Participants may have viewed me in a position of power as I am a doctoral student and an instructor, therefore they may have wanted to respond to questions about professors and their university more favorably than they truly feel (Burkholder et al., 2020). This may have been done to try and positively influence my perceptions of them.

Conclusion

Using the instruments and data collection procedures described, data regarding nontraditional students and their experiences during the Spring 2020 semester were collected. This data was then analyzed using qualitative and quantitative analysis

methods. In the following chapter I will present the data analysis and discuss implication

for future research and practice.

Chapter 4

Introduction

This chapter presents the results and analysis of the data collected in this phenomenological study. First, is an examination of the qualitative and quantitative data collected in the email surveys (see Appendix C). Next, participant pseudonym profiles give insight into the participant's lives and roles. These profiles are followed by an analysis of the qualitative data collected from the interviews (see Appendix D) addressing the research questions posed in chapter one including identification of additional emergent themes. This analysis and these themes are supported by quotes from the participants.

Data Analysis Results for Quantitative Data

Following is the analysis of the quantitative data collected from the 12 participant email surveys. All percentages have been rounded using standard rounding procedures.

Interview Length

Interviews ranged from 11 minutes and 46 seconds to 41 minutes and 55 seconds. Mean and Standard deviations were calculated using Excel, with the mean length of the interviews conducted being 20 minutes and 53 seconds with the standard deviation of 7 minutes and 34 seconds. One interview's length would be considered an outlier as this interview lasted 41 minutes and 55 seconds, which is 2.78 standard deviations above the mean interview time (Bennett, Briggs, & Triola, 2018). An outlier is a piece of data that

is two or more standard deviations above or below the mean (Bennett, Briggs, & Triola,

2018).

Demographics

Twelve nontraditional students participated in this study. A summative collection

of their data can be found in Appendix E. Of the students surveyed, one self-identified as

a sophomore, two as juniors, and nine as seniors, as displayed in Figure 4. There were no

freshman is this study due to the fact being enrolled in higher education during the Spring

2020 semester was part of the minimum inclusion criteria, and they majority of those

students would now have a sophomore class standing. Seventy-five percent (n=9) of the

students were female and 25% (n=3) were male. The higher proportion of female

participants reflects extant research documenting the majority of nontraditional students

identify as female (MacDonald, 2018). Seventy-five percent (n=9) of participants

identified as white, while 25% (n=3) identified as Black.

Figure 4.

Class Standing of Participants
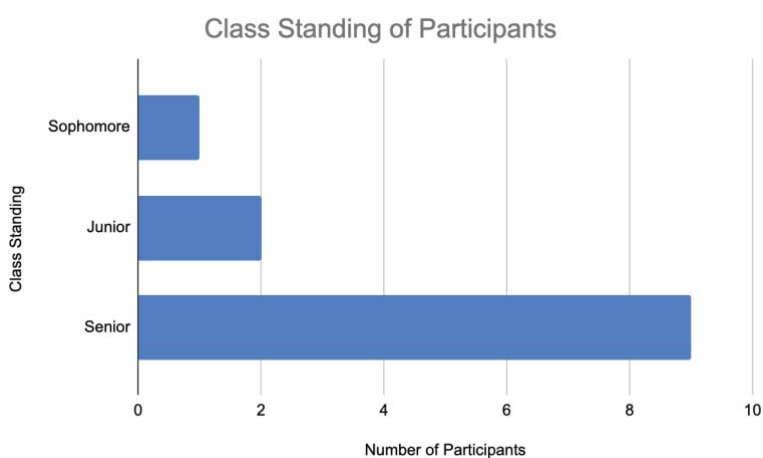
The mean number of years participants had spent in higher education as of Fall

2020 was 5.4 years. The mode for the amount of time students spent in higher education

was 7 years, and the median was 5.5. These data are left-skewed as the mean and median are less than the mode (Bennett, Briggs, & Triola, 2018). The standard deviation was 1.7 years, thus there were no outliers.

Participants represented six majors, with 50% (n=6) studying dietetics, 16.7% (n=2) studying social work, 8.3% (n=1) studying health education, 8.3% (n=1) studying speech-language pathology, 8.3% (n=1) studying history, and 8.3% (n=1) studying cyber security. The majors of participants can be seen in Figure 5. Half of the participants, six, were dietetics majors and two were social work majors, the remaining majors had one participant in each category.

Figure 5.

Majors of Participants

Majors of Participants

- Cyber Security 8.3%
- History 8.3%
- Speech-Language P... 8.3%
- Social Work 16.7%
- Health Education 8.3%
- Dietetics 50.0%
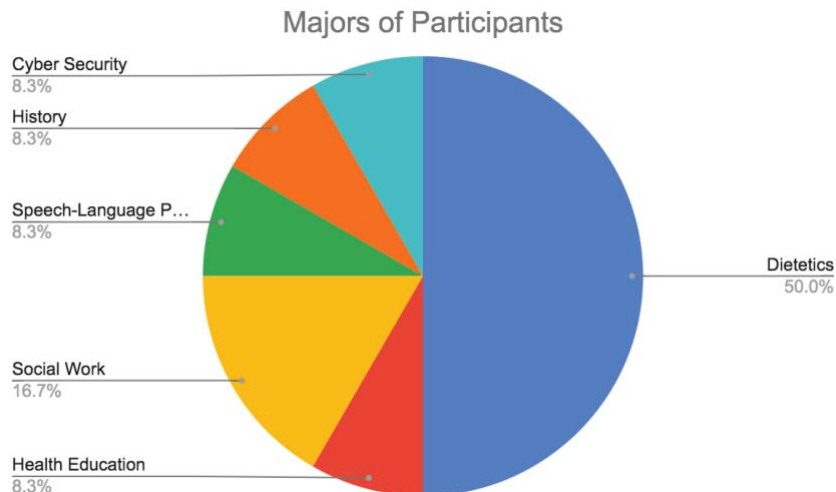
Characteristics of Nontraditional Students

Horn (1995) defined nontraditional students on a continuum. A student is minimally nontraditional if they have one characteristic of being a nontraditional student, moderately nontraditional if they have two or three characteristics, and highly

nontraditional if they have four or more characteristics (Horn, 1995). Participants fell into the following: no minimally nontraditional students in this study, five (42%) as moderately nontraditional students, and seven (68%) as highly nontraditional students.

There are 10 possible criteria to being a nontraditional student in the definition of nontraditional student that was used for this study. That definition is: a nontraditional student must identify with at least one of the following criteria: (1) are at least 25 years old, (2) attend school part-time, (3) work full-time, (4) are a veteran, (5) have children, (6) wait at least one year after high school before entering college, (7) have a GED instead of a high school diploma, (8) are a first-generation student (FGS), (9) are enrolled in non-degree programs, (10) have reentered a college program (MacDonald, 2018). The most criteria a participant in this study met was seven, and the least was two. The variation in number of characteristics of nontraditional student participants met can be seen in Figure 6.

Figure 6.

Number of Characteristics of Nontraditional Student Met by Participants
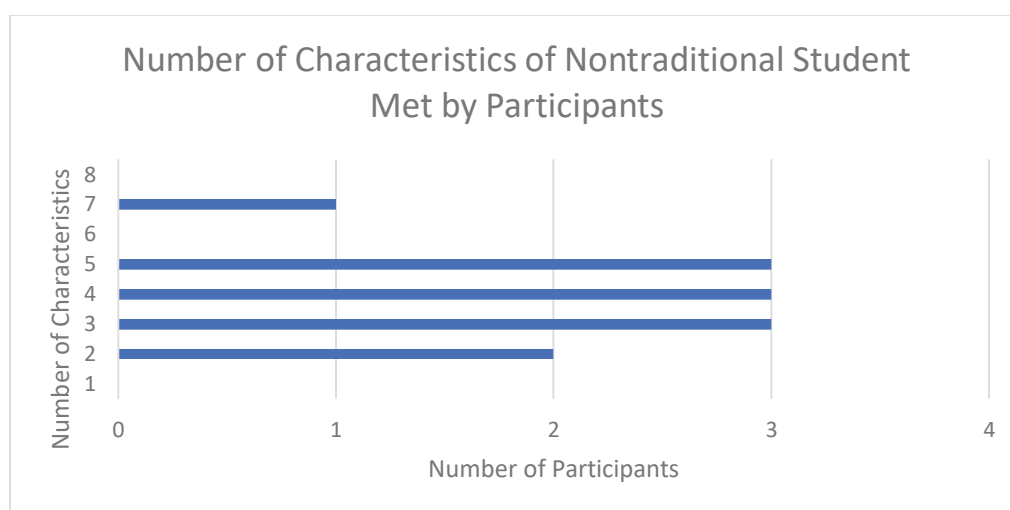
All of the participants (n=12) were at least 25 years old, this was part of the minimum requirement to participate in this study. The mean age of participants was 34.6 years old. The minimum age was 25 years old, and the maximum age was 41 years old. The mode was 41 years old, while the median is 35.5. These data were left-skewed because the mean and median are less than the mode (Bennett, Briggs, & Triola, 2018). The standard deviation was 5.4 years, there are no outliers.

Out of the 12 participants seven have reentered a college program, seven have children, six work full-time, five were first-generation students, five waited at least one year after high school before entering college, one had a GED, and one identified as a veteran. The individual criteria met by participants can be seen in Figure 7.

Figure 7.

Individual Criteria of Being a Nontraditional Student (N=12)
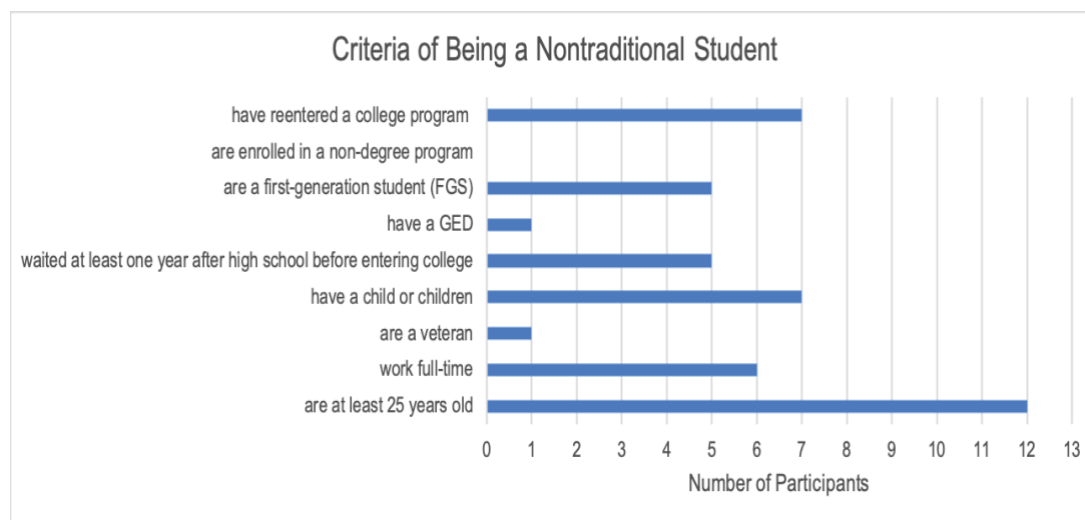
Internet Access and Technology

All of the participants indicated they had internet access and that their internet connection was fast enough for their needs. Fifty-eight percent (n=8) indicated their

internet always works, while 42% (n=4) indicated their internet usually works. None of the participants in this study identified internet accessibility as a barrier to engaging with their coursework.

All participants indicated possession of a smart phone. Three participants had home access to a desktop computer. All participants had home access to a laptop computer, but one participant said the laptop computer was shared and not personal. The participant with the shared laptop computer was not one of the participants with access to a desktop computer. Five participants had access to an electronic tablet (eg, iPad, Surface Pro, etc). Nine participants had access to a personal or shared printer and personal or shared scanner. When participants were asked if they accessed any additional technology one specified use of a Play Station 4 (PS4) and another identified use of a digital camera. One student identified access to fax machine but did not indicate if it was used for schoolwork. Figure 8 displays the technology participants used for schoolwork by technology type. Participants in this study were allowed to select multiple technologies.

Figure 8.

Technology Participants Use for Schoolwork
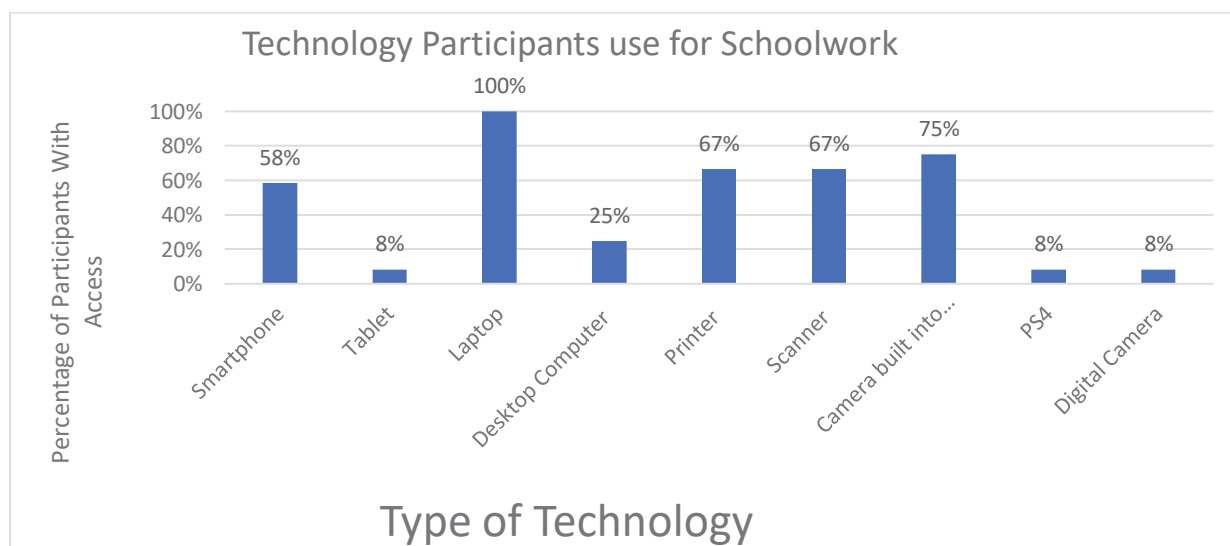
Data Analysis Procedures for Qualitative Data

The qualitative data were collected via Zoom interview using the interview protocol (Appendix D). These qualitative data were analyzed by coding line by line, in order to look for emergent themes, and address the research questions (Creswell, 2018). This study used inductive coding, meaning no codes were predetermined before the data were analyzed (Burkholder et al., 2020).

Participants

This study took a phenomenological approach. This lens allows the exploration of the perceptions of the phenomenon of COVID-19 by nontraditional students and understand their reactions to this experience. These data collected by this approach would benefit from a brief introduction to the 12 participants, their age, living situation, and motivations for enrolling in a traditional college path. All data have been de-identified to protect the anonymity of participants, thus these profiled are labeled with pseudonyms.

Cole. Cole is a 37-year-old cybersecurity major. He is also the only veteran who participated in the study. He was not working in Spring 2020 or Fall 2020 because he is attending school on the G.I. bill. He lives with wife and infant daughter, who was born right before the quarantine in March. He is the daughter's primary caretaker as his wife works full-time. His motivation for enrolling in school was that he "needed a more tangible marketable skill set." He also had access to the G.I. bill which covers his schooling and came with a small stipend to help support himself and his family

Brandon. Brandon was unique in the fact that he is working on his second bachelor's degree. This did not exclude him from this study as he still met the criteria for being a nontraditional student. He reenrolled in college because his original bachelor's

degree did not offer many job opportunities, he also had gaps in his resume due to some health issues. In Spring 2020 Brandon was a single dad and attending school during the day worked best with his son's schedule. "I needed to dedicate my day, or evening, to classes, so that I could handle those responsibilities (of being a student) to then hope for a better future for me and my son, while still being present for him as a single dad." He got married over the summer and now lives with his wife, son, and stepchildren.

Steve. Steve is 41 years old and enrolled full-time in school. He is also a full-time employee. The degree he is pursuing will lead to a career change. He switched to a night-work schedule in order to attend school during the day. "I just knew what I wanted, and I just have to make sacrifices to get that." He sold his home and moved in with his mother to afford to pay the school tuition.

Jenna. Jenna is the youngest participant in this study. She is 25 and transferred in Fall 2020 to the university where this study occurred. In Spring 2020 she was enrolled in a nearby state university. She is the only participant in this study was not enrolled at the university where this study was held in Spring 2020, when the forced migration to online education took place. She enrolled in a traditional college path due to her major, for which there are very few programs that are online. Jenna also feels that she learns better in person. She lives with her boyfriend and dog.

Amanda. Amanda is a 41-year-old single mom, and full-time employee. She enrolled in a traditional college path citing that online course work never worked for her when she was younger, "My attention span is just not that long. I would get bored sitting at a computer screen all day." She also believes that she learns best by interacting with others. She lives with her two teenage children.

Cathy. Cathy is going to be a teacher and enrolled in a traditional college path because it was the most logical in order for her to finish her degree quickly. She remarked most courses were offered in this format. She is 41 years old and holds three part-time jobs while attending school full-time. She lives with her grandmother "It's just us and cats, so it's pretty quiet and stable."

Jennifer. Jennifer had initially enrolled in college right after high school. She stopped when she got pregnant with her daughter. She is now 27 and had reenrolled full-time. "It was really important for me to just go full-time versus part-time so that I can get on the career path that I really wanted to get into." She lives with her school age daughter and husband.

Jan. Jan chose to enroll in a traditional college path because she feels being in-person worked better for her. "I'm able to learn more and kind of soak in the education that I needed better in person." She is 36, and lives with her fiancée, two daughters, and two pets. She was working two part-time jobs in the Spring of 2020 and attending school full-time.

Paula. Paula is a parent, full-time student, and part-time employee. She was 34 at the time of her interview. She too felt like she got more out of in-person learning. That and for her university "almost all of their classes are really only during the day, so that kind of narrowed the options that I had for the time I wanted to take it." She lives with her husband, young son, and two cats.

Cindy. Cindy is 36 and left her full-time job to be a full-time student in-person. When explaining why she chose to leave her job she said "I work best in a traditional college setting. She was not interested in night classes or online coursework. She has

attended five colleges since graduating from high school. She lives with her husband, who supports them both, and their dog.

Haley. Haley is 29 years old and a full-time college student. She enrolled in a traditional college path because she felt it would be the "quickest route" to complete her degree. This degree will be a career change for Haley. She works two part-time jobs and lives with her husband and two dogs.

Jamie. Jaime is a 33-year-old single mom. She chose to follow a traditional college path because "I have a toddler and would like to be at home with him more when it's time for him to go to bed." She does not work and lives with her mother, grandmother, and young son.

Data Analysis Results for Qualitative Data

The following sections address the study's research questions. The secondary questions will be answered first followed by the emergent themes. The primary research question will be answered by synthesizing the answers to the secondary research questions and emergent themes.

Primary Research Question: What was the impact of courses shifting modality from in-person to online instruction during the Spring 2020 semester due to COVID-19 on nontraditional students who had chosen a traditional path?

Secondary Research Questions:

Role Theory

1. How did moving to an online course format midsemester Spring 2020 due to COVID-19 impact nontraditional students' amount of time devoted to their various roles?

2. In what ways did moving to an online course format midsemester Spring 2020 due to COVID-19 impact nontraditional students' role priority?

3. How did moving to an online course format midsemester Spring 2020 due to COVID-19 impact nontraditional students' value of their roles?

Feelings Around Higher Education

1. Did moving to an online course format midsemester Spring 2020 due to COVID-19 impact nontraditional students' view of their pursuit of higher education?

2. Did moving to an online course format midsemester Spring 2020 due to COVID-19 impact nontraditional students' feelings towards their university?

3. Did moving to an online course format midsemester Spring 2020 due to COVID-19 impact nontraditional students' feelings towards their professors?

Once the research questions have been answered the emergent themes from the collected data will be identified.

Role Theory Questions

The following sections address the three research questions about role theory and seek to determine the impact that moving to an online course format midsemester Spring 2020 due to COVID-19 had on the participants' roles. The data collected to answer these research questions was collected using the open-ended interview questions (Appendix D). The following four interview questions were used to answer the research questions.

Time Devoted. The first research question was "How did moving to an online course format midsemester Spring 2020 due to COVID-19 impact nontraditional students' amount of time devoted to their various roles?"

The majority of students devoted less time to their schoolwork after courses moved online. Of the students devoted more time to coursework after coursed moved online 75% (n=3) did not work and 75% (n=3) did not have children. Of the 12 participants in this study, eight devoted less time to school after courses moved online. Two of the participants devoted more time to being an employee while the remaining six devoted more time to their home life, being a parent or a spouse. Cole's baby was born right before quarantine began. He said having a baby "It made me a lot more conscious of my time with school, and it went really, really quickly on the backburner."

Of those eight participants who spent less time on schoolwork, six devoted more time to their roles at home and two devoted more time to their role as an employee. The two participants who devoted more time to being an employee did not have children. They also saw an increase in the hours their employers offered them during the Spring 2020 semester. For example, Steve who is a student and full-time employee said, "I didn't have to physically leave [work] and go to class and then come back, I could just go into one of the offices there and then log on, do whatever I had to do for school, whether it'd be Zoom or whatever, and then go back to work."

Four participants expressed how courses moving online due to COVID-19 meant they spent more time in their role as a student. Haley and Jaime both felt that the workload was more difficult when course moved online. Jaime said "[school] kicked in overdrive because it was so much work that we had to do with courses moving online that you weren't prepared for it." "I almost felt like after we went online, my school workload was higher than it was when we were in person," Haley said. Amanda said, "I spent more time with my online courses than anything." Jenna had been laid off due to COVID-19

and was able to put all of her energy into being a student; she treated school like her full-time job. Three students who felt they spent more time as a student do not work. Only one of these participants also identified as a parent.

Role Priority. The second question this study set out to answer was in what ways did moving to an online course format midsemester Spring 2020 due to COVID-19 impact nontraditional students' role priority? .

Eight participants indicated they spent less time on their schoolwork in Spring 2020 than they had previously. Six of these participants indicated they shifted their primary role away from that of student toward that of caregiver in Spring 2020. The remaining two shifted their primary role to that of employee. Four participants indicated they spent more time in their role as a student during Spring 2020 than they had in previous semesters, shifting their roles away from being caregivers and employees. As education moved online four participants work hours were cut. Daycares and primary schools also closed. Paula spent more time on home life after moving online due to COVID-19 because her child's daycare closed, and her job moved online.

Another way the participants indicated they shifted their role priority is by their change in study habits. Participants indicated pushing their schoolwork later into the evening, spending less time studying and working on assignments, and having less time to focus or study during the day. Cole, Jamie, Jan, and Paula all pushed their schoolwork and homework later into the evening. All four of these participants were also parents. Jan stated, "it's too hard to work at home on school with kids running around." Three participants identified changes in study habits that impacted the quality of their schoolwork and the knowledge retained. Cathy spent less time on assignments than she

would have previously, while Haley expressed how "I felt like I studied for my exams much, much less, which really kept me from retaining the information I was learning. I used that ability to use notes as a crutch." Brandon identified the built-in role conflict that led to a change in role priority:

> I slowly started to pull more and more away from school, both because I was at home all the time, and then also because I lost childcare, so all of a sudden school took a backseat without even acknowledging, without even me being aware of it. And before I knew it, as I was spending all my time parenting, except for the nighttime, and by that time I was exhausted.

Some participants indicated that the changes in their course assignments and schedule aided in lowering their role priority as a student. Cindy and Haley both had instructors cancel final exams. Jennifer's school schedule relaxed so could finish assignments on her own schedule, set her own pace. Brandon and Jenna asked for extensions due to mental health reasons and were able to submit their work at a later date. Jaime expressed how her professors would lay out the bare minimum students needed to do to pass or achieve their desired grade.

Role Value. The final question related to role theory is the following: How did moving to an online course format midsemester Spring 2020 due to COVID-19 impact nontraditional students' value of their roles? There were no specific interview questions from Appendix D addressed the value of their roles. This question will be addressed in the discussion.

Feelings Around Higher Education

The following sections address the three research questions about students'

feelings towards their university and seek to determine the impact that moving to an online course format midsemester Spring 2020 due to COVID-19 had on the participants' roles. The following sections address the three research questions seeking to determine the impact on nontraditional students that courses moving to an online course format midsemester Spring 2020 due to COVID-19 had on their feeling towards higher education, their universities, and their professors. The data collected to answer these research questions was collected using the open-ended interview questions (Appendix D).

Higher Education. The first research question addressing higher education was: Did moving to an online course format midsemester Spring 2020 due to COVID-19 impact nontraditional students' view of their pursuit of higher education?

Of the 12 participants in this study no participants feelings towards higher education were negatively affected. Jenna, Cindy and Sara discuss how their feelings towards higher education had strengthened. Cindy said "[the forced migration to online education] actually strengthened my feelings towards higher education because of the adaptability that the school system had with being able to accommodate us." Jenna when asked "Did your experience of the spring 2020 semester change your plans for higher education" said:

> Not really, just because... I mean, if anything, it kind of motivated me to find ways to make it work and pursue it even more so, just because I was doing fine while I was... At the beginning of the semester, I was making enough to live and go to school, and I was even considering, I was like, "Do I need to do this? Is this something that I really want?" Because I'm doing fine, I make enough to live on and I'm happy with the work I'm doing. But then honestly, when COVID hit and all of my work kind of just

disappeared, I realized that it was something that was important to me and I thought could really make me happy, but also it offered a level of stability in my future that I didn't currently have.

One participant's degree completion date has been delayed which leaves him questioning whether or not he will pursue a graduate degree. They do still plan to complete their bachelor's degree. The other 11 participants had no changes in their plans for higher education. The majority of the participants are juniors and seniors; many of these seniors will be graduating shortly after this dissertation is presented. Paula when asked if her plans for higher education had changed said "Not necessarily, but that is probably because I'm so far along in my program." Haley expressed how "I gotta get it done. I have a timeline." Jan when asked this same question said:

No, not at all. This is something that I've been determined to do for a very long time, and now that I found something that I really love, [courses moving online] was not going to affect me, and just... You change your lifestyle a little bit and you might have to work harder than... 'cause you have to adapt to your new surroundings of how you're gonna be studying and incorporating, having my home life now around me while doing schoolwork, so... And no, I wasn't gonna let that affect me at all.

Cole expressed how having a child has made him "hyper focused" to complete his degree.

Brandon is the only participant whose plans reportedly may have changed. Brandon said that courses moving online due to COVID-19 "it definitely pushed my timeline back." His expected degree completion data has been pushed back. He also took less credit hours in Fall 2020 because he didn't want to set himself up for failure. He is

waiting to take certain classes until there is more normalcy in education and classes are back in person. Amanda also mentioned waiting to take certain classes until they could be taken in-person, but here degree completion date remains unchanged. Brandon has also been rethinking whether or not he wants to go for his masters, "because at this point in my life, I feel behind anyhow." Brandon went on to say that "higher education for me is surrounded with a lot of question marks during this period of time. It's still a passion of mine, it's still something I really want to pursue" and that "I think that higher education is essential. It's essential for me anyhow."

University. The second research question focused on student's feelings towards their university: Did moving to an online course format midsemester Spring 2020 due to COVID-19 impact nontraditional students' feelings towards their university?

Of the 12 participants no one reported their feelings having changed toward their university. One expressed concern with returning to campus and another expressed frustration with paying for online coursework as this is not what he had signed up for. These two did clarify that this did not change their feelings towards their university.

Jamie, whose view of higher education did not change said she always felt welcome at her university and is the only participant who expressed concern about returning to college due to COVID-19.

> It did make me think like, "Should I still be entertaining going to college?" I did
> think about that, because it's uncertain, you don't know what's going on. And
> being to add to the stress of having schoolwork, homework and assignments, and
> being wary about the outside world, so I was undecided if I should actually
> continue going to college.

She did eventually decide to return to campus even though "I really didn't want to."

Brandon expressed irritation "there was a little frustration there about, 'What am I paying for?' And that still kind of exists." He did go on to express his positive feelings towards the university. A selection of participants' feelings towards their university can be found in Table 6.

Table 6

Responses Regarding Feelings Towards University

Participant	Quote
Cole	"I have nothing by positive things to say about [the university where this study took place]."
	"They were there for me and really going online at the time they did I think was perfect, especially for people like me who had other things to concern about not just school."
Haley	"I didn't blame the institution, the university. I think everyone was really struggling, so I was pretty empathetic to everyone all through the process. And I'm like, I know it's not ideal for anyone, it's not ideal for the students, it's not ideal for the professors, but this is a really unique time and everyone's just figuring it out as we go."
Brandon	"I would say it was more of a positive response that I had, as far as feelings go about my university, because I did have so many teachers and student life individuals and different deans that were really stepping up for being able to make sure I was successful. And so it was really nice to see a smaller university like that really rally around its students to help them succeed. So I thought that was something that made me feel very fortunate about being at [this university]."
Cindy	"I wanted to stay with a school that reflected my values, especially in this time when everything is going kinda haywire."

Table 6

Responses Regarding Feelings Towards University

Participant	Quote
	"[Transitioning to online] actually strengthened my feelings for my school, seeing the transition from in classes to online when we had no other choice but to go online at that point."
Steve	"I feel like they're doing everything they can do and just have to be patient. And I feel as though maybe another reason why I chose [this university] over a larger school, because some of the feelings I had about having a connection with the school itself or having a smaller teaching staff is that I do feel a personal connection, whereas maybe at a bigger school like [another university in the region] , I would not."
Cathy	"Okay, well, you're trying. That's all I need; I appreciate that you're trying."

Jenna did identify that with all that was going on the world she never thought about her feelings towards her university. "I've been so overwhelmed with the response of the government and the response of my workplaces that I've been at that I haven't really honestly been able to think about how I feel about my university," she said.

Professors. The final sub question posed in this study was in regard to students' feelings towards their professors: Did moving to an online course format midsemester Spring 2020 due to COVID-19 impact nontraditional students' feelings towards their professors?

Students were well aware of what their professors were going through with the forced migration to online education. Participants sympathized with the hurdles their professors were facing with the forced migration to online instruction due to COVID-19. Quotes

pertaining to understandings towards professors can be found in Table 7.

Table 7

Responses Related to Understanding Of Professors

Participant	Quote
Jennifer	"I don't think that a lot of professors were quite ready to do a lot of things online, but for the term, how quickly it all happened, I think that the professors did the best that they could, and they did their best to get the work online and get us done with the class, if that makes sense, get us passed and just ready to go."
Jenna	"I do think I value a lot more understanding from professors than I have before, just with the different circumstances that we're all facing."
Haley	"I really felt bad for the professors being thrown into that type of environment."
	"Some professors really excelled at delivering in an online format compared to others, but I think everyone was under a lot of pressure and it's a new environment."
Jaime	"I looked at it from them suffering as well as us, so I don't know, that's just how I am. I was sympathetic for them, 'cause they're just presenting us with the work, they actually have to write up different lesson plans and stuff, so that was how I looked at it."
Steve	"I think that's the same thing that the professors were handed as well, like, 'Hey, you got X amount of time to try and make this work."

Participants identified the extra amount of work not only for them, but for their

professors. Brandon said "I really appreciate the people that dedicate their time to

teaching."

Amanda's department is very close so they did call to check on her and how she was feeling and ask if they could be of help. Jan also had her professors call to check on here not only academically but personally just to make sure her and her family were doing okay and had everything they needed. Brandon also had multiple professors reach out to him personally and felt comforted by professors working with him to find solutions. Cathy spoke of how she felt supported by her professors "All my professors were really good about it. They made sure that we had everything that we needed, always answered emails. So, nothing like that was an issue for me."

Several participants had professors give out their personal numbers. Paula had a teacher who gave out her cell number "which they have not done in the past, so that's been a neat experience." Steve also mentioned that some professors had given him their numbers as well, remarking "So even though there's a negative side to it not being physically on campus, that you start to see maybe more humanization of some of the teachers and not just, 'That's just my professor.' So that has been nice."

Email was the primary source of communication with professors. Jenna said "I value professors who communicate openly with their students"

Cindy and Haley both mentioned experiencing feelings of relief when professors canceled exams. Haley said "I also think that they were very understanding and empathetic to everyone's emotions during the time. It was a time of unknown, it was a time of stress, it was a time of fear." Jenna remembered a difficult time during her quarantine:

There was a point where I was feeling very sick and I had had a COVID exposure

scare, and I emailed my teacher and was like, "Listen, I can't write this paper, I'm just not there today." I was like, "I'll get it to you by the end of the week, but I just can't finish it today." And she was very understanding. She was like, "Hey, I hope you're healthy. I completely understand. As long as you get it to me by this time, I won't penalize you." And I think that that's the type of environment most teachers should be encouraging, because there's enough bad going on in the world, it's good to put out the good vibes.

Bianca also had teachers who would explain to her the options to complete the course with just a pass, B, or A grade. That way she could determine the amount of work she wanted to put in for a specific grade.

Additional Emergent Themes

As the data were reviewed to address the secondary research questions of this Study five additional emergent themes were identified. These themes were necessary to address the primary research question of this study. These themes included preference for in-person education, struggles with solo/independent learning, having less compartmentalization of time, feelings of overwhelm and stress, and experiencing differences in the online teaching styles of professors.

Preference for in-person education. Eleven participants in this study identified that they would prefer to be in-person, but understood that going remote, and staying mostly remote for the Fall 2020 and Spring 2021 semester was a necessity. Cathy said

Obviously, I did not like... I don't like online learning, it was not my favorite, but I understand that that was what we needed to do. I would have preferred in-person, I think a lot of people would have, but it is what it is. I can't make that any

different, but I definitely don't like the online learning, and I hope that we do get

plans to go back, and I hope they really look at that for people, 'cause I know it is

harder for some people to learn in an online environment.

Some reasons expressed for why the participants prefer in-person learning were the

ability to maintain attention, personalized attention, and interacting with others. These

quotes can be found in Table 8.

Table 8

Reasons for Preferring In-Person Education

Participant	Quote
Steve	"I feel like I thrive better by being in a physical place, I can pay attention more, I don't feel like my attention span wavers if I'm trying to do stuff at home where there can be some distractions, even though I've tried to make my office here as distraction proof as possible, being online, not really being monitored in class, it's easy to jump on YouTube [chuckle] and get sidetracked very easily."
Amanda	"My attention span is just not that long. I would get bored sitting at a computer screen all day, and I believe that I learn better with interactions with people. "

"Online there's no personalities, you can't see the expressions and what physicalities that the person is going through at that particular time. Granted, when other people are speaking sometimes the screen will bounce back in and out, but a lot of times people don't have their cameras on, so you don't see their facial expressions and it's totally different." |
| Paula | 'I've lost a lot of that personalized attention that I used to get when we were in-person." |
| Haley | "I would say that the online platform was not ideal, it's not my first choice in a learning format. So, I had to adapt to that type of format. I like the face-to-face conversations, I like the visual plus the audio, I like the socializing in the classroom, I think that really helps. |

Table 8

Reasons for Preferring In-Person Education

Participant	Quote
	And knowing that I wasn't going to experience that, it really worried me about how well I was gonna retain information, maybe the quality of the information being delivered, but I am a nontraditional student, I want to get done with my degree in the original plan time. So, we're just gonna move through it, even though it's not necessarily my favorite way of learning."
Jan	"I feel that as I've gotten older and I've taken a lot of classes, I feel that being in-person suits me better, I'm able to learn more and kind of soak in the education that I needed better in-person."
Brandon	"Online learning has never been my forte. It's never been something that I looked to try to do. It's never been something that I was good at. I was never very good at juggling even hybrid classes where there would be discussions in class and assignments and things weren't being really discussed 'cause they were all posted and therefore you'd kinda do on your own, and so that leads to a real disconnect to me, and I do really... Like I said, I really thrive off that in-person setting and the dialogue that takes place in a classroom."

Jaime who does prefer in-person learning was the only participant who said she 'would have actually been okay if all of my courses [in the Fall 2020 semester] were online, this go around, because of COVID." Cole was the only participant who did not explicitly state that they preferred in-person learning.

Struggles with solo/independent learning. Five of the twelve participants identified struggles adapting to independent learning outside of a physical classroom.

They were effectively teaching themselves under a time of great stress. Jenna said, "I had to really learn to solo learn things where I hadn't before." Steve discussed using outside resourced more as getting in touch with professors proved more difficult.

Paula and Amanda both had to spend more time trying to understand concepts after class moved online. Paula discussed that she felt online courses "made it harder for me to really, I guess, kind of grasp concepts the first time around, and I find myself having to go back and re-watch lectures to pick up all the information." Amanda remarked that:

> Even though class would last maybe an hour or two, just for the understanding of the class, I would spend more time trying to figure out, even if it was with another classmate, trying to make sure I had an understanding of what it was.

> Brandon felt disconnected from his schoolwork; "There would be discussions in class and assignments and things weren't being really discussed 'cause they were all posted and therefore you'd kinda do on your own, and so that leads to a real disconnect to me." Jennifer found learning from home more difficult because "being at home, it is hard as I could kind of teaching yourself in a way because, like I said, it's more relaxed. They just give you lectures and then we do the work, and we turn it in, versus being in-person where you get to ask questions"

Having less compartmentalization of time. With the forced online migration of course work due to COVID-19, roles were no longer physically separated. School, work and home lives blended as many were no longer leaving for school or work. Participants with children saw their childcare close. Brandon remarked that "I'm not used to everything in my life taking place at home." These quotes can be seen in Table 9.

Table 9

Responses Regarding Less Compartmentalization of Time

Participant	Quote
Brandon	"Wait a second, this isn't just I'm doing school from home, it's like I'm doing everything from home. And that became very, very heavy….I was like 'Oh, am I worried about school? Am I worried about cleaning? Am I worried about my kid? Am I'm worried about this, this or that?'"
Haley	"I felt consumed by [schoolwork] more by being at home then I was on campus, there was almost no separation between the two."
Paula	"I would say [my day] was a lot more compartmentalized before, like I have this chunk of time to do my schoolwork during the day, and then at the end of the day is when I was spending time with my family. Now, because we're all in the same... We were all in the same area, same living space trying to do stuff, it was just kind of like I would be in class, but my son might still be there with me while I'm in class. So it got a lot more, I guess, jumbled together, and I didn't really have huge blocks of time like I used to."

This also happened for nontraditional students still attending work in-person. "I feel like everything flowed together," remarked Haley. She was able to bring schoolwork to her job, which was slow due to COVID-19. Upon reflection she felt "that eliminated boundaries that I had set before and I constantly felt I was engulfed in schoolwork." When home she fell prey to a different issue, "I felt like it was much easier to get distracted and stay less on task when I was home, in that environment, because there's lots of external factors that would distract me from what I needed to do." Steve was also able to do his schoolwork at his job. At home, Steve arranged himself a workspace, "I could go in there and say 'This is a designated area'. I could focus on

schoolwork. I didn't have a bunch of distractions." he did go onto say that:

"I feel like I thrive better by being in a physical place, I can pay attention more, I don't feel like my attention span wavers if I'm trying to do stuff at home where there can be some distractions, even though I've tried to make my office here as distraction proof as possible, being online, not really being monitored in class, it's easy to jump on YouTube [chuckle] and get sidetracked very easily."

Experiencing differences in the online teaching practices of professors. One quarter of participants in this study remarked how each of their professors approached teaching online, and the use of the learning management systems (LMS) differently. The consensus between these participants is the wish for uniformity in how their professors organize the presentation of course information in their online classroom. These can be seen in Table 10. Participants reported that the lack of uniformity created more work for them.

Table 10

Responses Related to the Wish for Professors to Unify Presentation of course Information

Participant	Quote
Brandon	"Every teacher seemed to be doing online a little bit differently, and so I didn't feel that there was enough organized methods of putting that information online, and so that it was kind of the same across the board."
Haley	"I would say that maybe getting all the professors on the same page with how they deliver information through the online platform. Everyone has their own unique way, which makes it really challenging on the students to have to adapt and know like, "Okay. So, some days will be online, some days will be in-person. This class records these lectures and this one, they're live." So, it's just a lot to keep up with, especially how on the university academic

Table 10

*Responses Related to the Wish for Professors to Unify Presentation of course
Information*

Participant	Quote
	page. Now, we have Canvas. I wish professors would organize it the same way, it would be almost like a flat standard. Because every professor and every class, how things are set up and organized is different, so it took a good month to really figure out, 'Okay, so this is how this class is set up, and this is where I find these materials and Zoom is on here, but in some classes, I have to go to the inbox 'cause they send us a link.' So, it's just a lot to have to keep up with and memorize."
Paula	"I guess I would hope that there would be a little bit more of a structure to the online learning. I don't even really know how I would explain that. Because not every teacher does it the exact same way, they all have their different styles of teaching. Gosh, I don't know. [chuckle] But since it's not like a unified way that all the teachers do it, especially when I'm logging into the school portal or, I don't even know what to call that, like school login system with the Canvas or the Schoology, not every professor utilizes all the same tabs. And so I guess I wish that all teachers would just use the same ones and have the same base structure."

Feelings of overwhelm and stress. One quarter of participants also said they felt

stressed or overwhelmed during the time when courses moved online due to COVID-19.

This additional stress did not come from schoolwork alone. Brandon remarked "the

anxiety of COVID and all the things that have been taking place in 2020, were really

overwhelming me, and so my focus went from at first school to then just total confusion

to then self-care." Jaime talked about having trouble sleeping due to stress:

A lot of sleepless nights because of what was going on, it was very stressful

because you didn't know what to expect. It was like the world was paused. And it

was really different. I wouldn't sleep as much as I would, because I was wary of...

I'm still wary of the COVID.

Amanda, Jenna, and Haley discussed being overwhelmed by their schoolwork load after

courses moved online. The richest explanation of this feeling was Jenna who remembered

the quote "'You're juggling balls, but some of the balls are glass and some of them are

plastic, so you have to pick and choose which balls you're gonna drop 'cause something's

gonna get dropped.' So, you just have to figure out which balls are more important."

Primary Research Question

The main research question for this study was: What was the impact of courses

moving online during the Spring 2020 semester due to COVID-19 on nontraditional

students who had chosen a traditional path?

Based on the interviews conducted for this study the roles of nontraditional

students became less distinct. There was less distinction between work, school and

homelife. The themes expressed by students in their interviews indicated that the major

impact was not just to due courses moving online, but also to all of their roles moving

home. COVID-19 caused a shutdown of a resources that helped them as students and in

their additional roles. The online migration to online coursework due to COVID-19

fundamentally changed the role of being a student.

Conclusion

This chapter ends with a quote from Jenna, that fully expresses the experiences of nontraditional students during the Spring semester of 2020:

> It's really odd when you were in school, took some time off, and then went back because... It's almost like you forgot how to be a student, and then being thrown into what was COVID made that really difficult because you're already trying to re-adjust to being a student and balance being a student and a full work life, and then you have a global crisis put on top of it.

Chapter 5

I know that my experiences as a nontraditional student and a woman in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) have motivated me to advocate for others like myself. I do so in hopes that they will have a better support system and overall experience than I had in my undergraduate career. My hope is that this research can influence others in my field to do the same. In the previous chapter I analyzed the data collected from this study's participants. In the following sections I will examine how this information relates to the existing literature and the theoretical frameworks of this study. I will then discus opportunities for further research and lessons learned. Lastly, I will introduce my organizational improvement plan (OIP) that has been developed from research into my problem of practice (POP).

Outcomes Related to Previous Research and Theory

Many of the answers to this study's research questions, and the additional emergent themes identified in this study have also been present in earlier research. I will first discuss the quantitative data and its relation to extant literature; then I will discuss the qualitative data.

Internet Access and Technology

All of the participants (n=12) in this study identified that they had internet access at home and that the internet connection was fast enough for their needs. This is very similar to what Means et al. (2020) found in their research, which was 95% of students had internet at home. Means et al. (2020) found the 44% of students' internet issues affected their ability to "attend or participate" in their course (p. 8). In my study internet

issues were not mentioned by any of the participants, although one interview was briefly interrupted by internet connectivity issues. In this study 68 % (n=7) of participants said their internet always works, while 42% (n=5) of participants said their internet usually works.

One hundred percent of participants in this study had access to a laptop computer. In the study by Means et al. (2020) they found 79% of students used a laptop to participate in class, 15% used a desktop, 3% used a tablet and 2% used a smartphone. In the study by Means et al. (2020) students were not allowed to select multiple technologies, while in this study students could select multiple technologies.

Addressing Emergent Themes

The following sections will briefly address the additional emergent themes identified in this study. Some of these themes have extant research to support them. As the COVID-19 pandemic is still affecting the world, research is still being conducted and published. The emergent themes identified in this study are: preference for in-person education, struggles with solo/independent learning, having less compartmentalization of time, feelings of overwhelm and stress, and experiencing differences in the online teaching styles of professors.

Preference for in-person education. In this study 11 of the 12 participants preferred in-person learning. In the study *Suddenly Online,* Means et al. (2020) identified themes that could support the preference for in-person learning, those themes were: missing their instructor and classmates, and loss of hands-on experiences especially labs. In this study Cole was the only participant who did not explicitly state that they preferred in-person

learning. This could also be because Cole was a computer science major, he felt more comfortable with computers and working online.

Struggles with solo/independent learning. When learning independently and at home there are more distractions than when in a classroom at school. This was discussed by the participants in this study and agrees with what participants in Means et al.'s study said (2020). Means et al. (2020) found that 79% of students found staying motivated to do well in their course a problem.

Having less compartmentalization of time. With the forced online migration of coursework due to COVID-19, roles were no longer physically separated. "The impact of a global pandemic and economic crisis created a dramatic shift in how, when, and where student learning occurs." (Fox et al., 2020). School, work and home lives blended as many were no longer leaving for school or work. In this study one-third of participants discussed the lack of compartmentalization of roles. Haley remarked "I feel like everything flowed together." This lack of physical separation of roles seems to have led to less compartmentalization of time for the participants in this study. Fox et al. (2020) found that 61 % of faculty at four-year institutions thought that the top challenge to their students of courses going online would be fitting the course time in with home/family responsibilities. Fifty-four percent said it was difficult to work on coursework with the required home/family responsibilities (Means et al., 2020).

Feelings of overwhelm and stress. In this study one quarter (n=3) of participants also said they felt stressed or overwhelmed during the time when courses moved online due to COVID-19. This additional stress did not come from schoolwork alone; one participant discussed how trying to balance their duties as a parent and a student added to

their stress. Means et al. (2020) found that fifty-four percent of students in their study said it was difficult to work on coursework with the required home/family responsibilities (Means et al., 2020). This is higher than this study which could be because Means et al. (2020) asked questions directly related to stress and had a much larger sample size of 1,008 participants.

Experiencing differences in the online teaching practices of professors. This study identified students' frustration with the lack of consistency in how professors presented online coursework in their learning management systems. This theme was also identified in a study by Fox et al. where they interviewed university faculty and their experiences teaching online during the Spring semester of 2020. Their study identified that the great variation in online teaching practices impeded student learning (Fox et al., 2020). "My students have stated they've been most challenged by the inconsistency between courses" a faulty member said (Fox et al., 2020, p. 11).

Outcomes Related to Theoretical Frameworks

The theoretical frameworks of this study were role theory and andragogy, discussed in chapter two. In the student interview, a theme that emerged was having to balance work, life and school. When the roles that students fill both in and outside of school cannot seem to find a balance this can introduce stress caused by role strain and role conflict. This can lead to cycles of guilt, and self-conflict. Brandon identified the effects of role conflict leading him to pull away from school because he was home all of the time and spent more time as parent and caregiver. The change in study habits may also indicate a shift in role priority. It is difficult to determine if this priority change was

forced or by choice. Four participants with children all pushed their schoolwork and homework later into the evening. All four of these participants were also parents. Jan stated, "it's too hard to work at home on school with kids running around."

Seven of the 12 participants in this study had children, which can also be a motivating factor to pursue higher education (Chao, 2009). In a study by Means et al. (2020), they found that 54% of participants in their study said it was difficult to work on coursework with the required home/family responsibilities. Fifty-five percent found finding a quiet place to work to be a problem (Means et al., 2020). Fox et al. (2020) found that 61 % of faculty at four-year institutions thought that the top challenge to their students of courses going online would be fitting the course time in with home/family responsibilities. Many participants were forced to use role relations to alleviate role conflict. Jenna expressed this best saying, "You're juggling balls, but some of the balls are glass and some of them are plastic, so you have to pick and choose which balls you're gonna drop 'cause something's gonna get dropped. So, you just have to figure out which balls are more important."

Lessons Learned

This was the second IRB study I developed and executed. The first of which was a pilot study: *Perceived Barriers To Degree Completion And Characteristics Of Nontraditional Students* (Miller, 2020). In that study I learned a lesson about the benefits of conducting online surveys. An initial online survey to collect ethnographic quantitative data was used in this study. In future research I would also like to collect qualitative data

in the form of short answer questions. I believe this information could be used to guide the development of interview protocols.

If I were going to complete a phenomenological study like this again, I would want to make the following improvements. I would like to start the study closer to the phenomenological event whose effects were being studied. In this case as I was examining the impact of the forced migration to online coursework in Spring 2020 due to COVID-19, completing the interviews closer to the end of the Spring semester could have led to different results. As interviews were conducted in the middle of the Fall 2020 semester participants could have had difficulty compartmentalizing the Spring and Fall semesters.

This study focused on nontraditional students, however information on the impact on traditional students could have been used to compare to the participants in this study. Traditional students could have had similar of vastly different experiences. This could have shed light on the differing or unifying experiences of traditional and nontraditional students.

It may also have been beneficial to examine students grades in the semester before, during, and after the forced course migration. Their grades may have been affected as participants identified they were less motivated and able to spend less time on schoolwork. The difference in students' grades could have supported this data and identified if it was just a 'feeling' the students had or was truly the case that their grades were affected.

In the interview protocol (Appendix D) I asked:

1. Did your experience of the Spring 2020 semester change your plans for higher education?

2. Did your experience of the Spring 2020 semester change your feelings towards higher education?

3. Did your experience of the Spring 2020 semester change your feelings towards your university?

I would reword these questions to be open ended. This is necessary as a few participants had to be asked to expand upon their answers. I would change these questions to be of the form "Tell me about your university in Spring 2020,", "Tell me about your professors in the Spring of 2020," , and "Tell me about your plans for higher education in the Spring of 2020."

In contacting participants two scheduled interviews did not attend. I believe collecting phone numbers would have helped to maintain contact with potential participants, especially as not all persons prefer email communication.

Personal Lessons Learned

Through implementing this study I have learned several personal lessons that I will use in my future research. The two main lessons I learned were the strength of qualitative research and the richness of having socio-cultural factors in addition to theoretical frameworks.

Strength of Qualitative Research

I come from a mathematics background and have taught statistics for over two years. What surprised me most about not only my dissertation but my Ed.D. program was

how much I enjoyed qualitative research and learning from qualitative studies. It allows one to connect with the subjects and merge their experiences. It has more soul than a Likert scale rating of emotions or feelings. This study is mixed method, but the research questions were answered solely with the qualitative data.

Richness of Socio-cultural Factors

The theoretical frameworks of this study, andragogy and role theory, laid the groundwork for this study. However, keeping in mind the factors that lead to educational inequity, such as intersectionality and bias, allowed this researcher to identify more closely with the experiences of this studies participants.

Limitations of the Study

One limitation of this study is that it was conducted with a smaller sample size at a single university. Nontraditional students from this studies attitude's differ from those seen in existing research (Bohl, Haak, & Shrestha, 2017). Students at the university from this study felt very connected to their university and supported. Another limitation is that individual universities and regions had differing responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. This could have affected nontraditional students' feelings towards higher education and their university. This study also excluded students under 25, who met other criteria for being a nontraditional student. These excluded participants could have added a more well-rounded view of what the experience on nontraditional students was because of the forced migration to online coursework in the Spring 2020 semester.

The interview protocol could also have been a limitation. This interview protocol was developed by the researcher, and this was the first time it was used. It needs some

adaptations. Seven participants were slow to answer these two questions from the interview protocol (Appendix D):

1. You are a (List all that apply/parent/student/employee/caregiver) what percentage of your time was spent in each role before courses moved online?

2. You are a (List all that apply: parent/student/employee/caregiver). What percent of your time was spent in each role after courses moved online?

These questions had to be asked more than once or clarified in half of the interviews. Jan said "Gosh, well, to be honest I don't know if I can break it up in a 100% fractal. So, for parenting, that's an ongoing thing. I can't... That's just always gonna be 100%,". Steve who is a full-time employee and student said, "It feels like 100% in each category." This question could have been altered to not expect numerical responses. Another factor could be the lack of compartmentalization of roles. Someone can be a husband, student, parent and veteran all at the same time.

Lastly, no questions in the interview protocol looked to collect information regarding a change in role value. Role value is not defined in role theory, and could have been defined for participants to answer fully.

Implications for Future Research

Future research is necessary based on the lessons learned in this study. A retrospective study of both traditional and nontraditional students' feelings towards higher education could add to this research. Research into how professors could best present their online research on their learning management systems is also in order.

Incarcerated students were also forced to have their educations moved online and they have access to far fewer resources than un-incarcerated persons. Hearing about their experiences could add to research on COVID-19 in the United States prison system.

Implications for Practice

This study identified the following supports that were implemented due to online course migration due to COVID-19: less drive time, all courses online not just select ones, and more personal contact with professors via Zoom meeting and phone calls. These supports should be maintained and expanded to included university staff. The organizational improvement plan will provide details about the implications for future practice based on this study's findings.

Organizational Improvement Plan

This study aided in the development of an organizational improvement plan (OIP). The theory best supporting my organizational plan is that of role theory, keeping in mind the multiple roles and their related responsibilities of nontraditional students. The stakeholders in my OIP are the university faculty, deans, staff, and students. Chairs and deans can influence professors to guide them in support of their students. They learn from those in their fields. The students in this study did not ask for additional supports. The students in this study felt well supported by their university and faculty. This may not be the case at every university, so repeating this study in other higher education programs may yield different results.

I suggest universities create more opportunities to hear from nontraditional students. This could be a focus group or a panel of nontraditional students who can talk about their experiences who could share about their needs. This would serve as a resource to the university as a whole when developing or expanding programs. There should also be seats on the student government association (SGA) reserved for nontraditional students so they can be heard by the entire student body and make their presence known.

Universities could also create a community for nontraditional students, such as a nontraditional student lounge. This lounge could be a safe space for students to rest, eat, study and get to know other nontraditional students. These students should also have access to lockers, a fridge, and a microwave because these students do not have dorms to access during their time on campus.

Lastly universities should offer extended hours or virtual hours for on campus resources such as the registrar, advising, etc. After the deep impact of COVID-19 and need for immediate change at universities many resources have moved virtually but their hours of access remain unchanged. I believe universities are ready to make changes to support nontraditional students as this population continues to steadily rise.

Conclusion

This dissertation focused on the problem of practice (POP) which was that nontraditional students have a lower success rate of completing a college degree than their peers. With the forced migration to online coursework due to COVID-19 in the Spring of 2020 I wondered if this group of students might be under supported by their universities, and with the additional factors that come with being a nontraditional student

lead to role conflict. I was glad to discover in this study that these students did feel supported. The nontraditional students in this study took the abrupt change in their learning modality with stride. It was a pleasure getting to speak with each of these students about their experiences. In this study students identified the benefits of increased flexibility and understanding of their instructors. Their challenges, such as lack of motivation and turning away from their role as a student, were intrinsic. The year 2020 was difficult for humanity. Although the catalyst was the same all of their experiences were unique. It will take time to for higher education to return to functioning like it did before the COVID-19 pandemic. This study sheds light on the experiences of an often-overlooked student population. It is my hope that the information gained from this study will motivate those in higher education to continue to explore the impact of COVID-19 and additional challenges to supporting underrepresented members of the higher education community.

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Appendix A- Informed Consent Form

Informed Consent Form

You are invited to participate in a study investigating the effect that courses moving online during the spring 2020 semester due to COVID-19 had on nontraditional students. We hope to learn what impact the course migration to online had on your roles and how you were supported by your professors and university during this transition. You were selected as a possible participant in this study because you were identified as a nontraditional student who was enrolled full-time at Fontbonne University during the spring 2020 semester.

If you decide to participate, you will complete a brief survey followed by an interview using Zoom videoconferencing. It is estimated that the survey will take approximately 15 minutes. All data will be stored in secure cloud storage. The purpose of this survey is to gather basic demographic information to be used for data analysis. Following completion of the survey, you will be invited to participate in an interview with the primary investigator. It is estimated that the interview will take approximately 60 minutes. The purpose of the interview is to hear about your experiences during the spring 2020 semester, before and after courses moved online due to COVID-19. These interviews will be recorded and transcribed by a third party, in-person service. Following the transcription, you will receive a copy to review for accuracy. It is possible the interviewer may follow up through email or by phone to seek any clarification on the topics discussed in the interview.

The benefit to participating in this study is that you get to share the story of your experiences when courses migrated to online because of COVID-19. Your input could lead to improved support for nontraditional students in higher education. A possible risk for participating is that you may feel inconvenienced or may be uncomfortable recalling information from the spring 2020 semester.

Any information obtained in connection with this study that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission. In any written reports or publications, no participant information will be identified, no participants will be identifiable.

Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your future relationship with Fontbonne University in any way. If you decide to participate, you are free to discontinue participation at any time without affecting such relationships.

If you have any questions, please contact the primary investigator, R. Lauren Miller, or the Director of the EdD program, Dr. Jamie Doronkin. If you have any additional questions later R. Lauren Miller (rmiller@fontbonne.edu) or Dr. Jamie Doronkin (jdoronkin@fontbonne.edu) will be happy to answer them.

You will be offered a copy of this form to keep.

++

You are making a decision whether or not to participate. Your signature indicates that you have read the information provided above, have had your questions answered, and you have decided to participate. You may withdraw at any time without prejudice after signing this form should you choose to discontinue participation in this study.

_____   _____
Signature   Date

_____   _____
Signature of Parent or Legal Guardian   Date
(include this line if participants are <18 yrs of age)

_____   _____
Signature of Principal Investigator   Date

Revised May 2019

Appendix B- Recruitment Email

Dear [Insert Student Name],

My name is R. Lauren Miller, and I am a student in the Doctor of Education Program here at Fontbonne University. I worked as an adjunct instructor at Fontbonne from spring 2018 to spring 2020. I will be conducting research this fall in order to complete my dissertation.

I am currently conducting research on the impact that courses moving online during the spring semester of 2020 due to COVID-19 had on nontraditional students. The working title of this study is "Higher Education and COVID- 19: Impact on non-traditional students following a traditional path."

I am seeking adults who are at least 25 years old, enrolled at least 6 credits at Fontbonne, and were enrolled in at least 6 credits during the spring 2020 semester to participate in a virtual interview. You will be compensated for your time with a $20 Amazon gift card.

If you meet this criteria and are interested in participating, then please complete this online form:

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLScmmAsjxtIlG4640h5vHOMdDMH3NhO4azmEGvWKXigwEj4DEw/viewform?usp=sf_link

Or email rmiller@fontbonne.edu for more information.

This study will consist of an interview to be conducted via Zoom. I believe this interview will take about 60 minutes. Your interview responses will be kept fully confidential and used only for research purposes. Detailed information regarding the

study and confidentiality can be found in the first page of the online form (letter of consent).

Participation in this study is voluntary. After reviewing your interview transcript for accuracy, you will receive a digital $20 Amazon gift card. This study has been approved for human subject participation by the Institutional Review Board at Fontbonne University (FBUIRB09012021-RLM).

The information gained in this study may aid university faculty in better supporting the learning outcomes for nontraditional students. If you have any questions, please respond to this email or call (262)995-8347.

Thank you for your time,

Lauren Miller

Appendix C- Email Survey

<u>Email Pre-Interview Protocol</u>

1) Full name:_____

2) Major:_____

3) Minor (If applicable):_____

4) Age:_____

5) Please identify your class standing:

      a. Freshman (Fewer than 30 credit hours earned)
      b. Sophomore (30 to 59 credit hours earned)
      c. Junior (60 to 89 credit hours earned)
      d. Senior (90 or more credit hours earned)

6) I identify as:

      a. Female   c. Nonbinary
      b. Male   d. Other:_____

7) I am:

      a. White
      b. Hispanic or Latino
      c. Black or African American
      d. Native American or American Indian
      e. Asian / Pacific Islander
      f. Other:__

8) How many years have you spent in higher education total at Fontbonne or another university?

9) The definition of nontraditional student contains the characteristics below (MacDonald, 2018). Please identify all the characteristics which apply to you:

___are at least 25 years old

___attend school part-time

___ work full-time

___ are a veteran

___have a child or children

___waited at least one year after high school before entering college

___have a GED

___are a first-generation student (FGS)

___are enrolled in a non-degree program

___ have reentered a college program

10) Do you have internet access at your place of residence?

Yes_____   No_____ (If your answer is no skip to question 13.)

11) If you do have internet access, how would you describe your internet speed. Please mark one.

Fast enough for my needs: _____
Moderately slow: _____
Too slow, unproductive: _____

12) If you do have internet access, how would you describe your internet reliability. Please mark one.

Always works: _____

Usually works: _____
Spotty/intermittent service: _____
Rarely works: _____

13) If you do not have internet at home, how do you access the internet when needed?

14) Which of the following technology do you have access to? Please mark if they are personal or shared.

	Personal	Shared
Smart Phone		
Desktop computer		
Laptop		
Camera built into desktop or laptop		
Tablet		
Printer		
Scanner		
Other:_____		
Other:_____		

15) Which of the following technology do you use for schoolwork?

Smart Phone	
Desktop computer	
Laptop	
Camera built into desktop or laptop	
Tablet	
Printer	
Scanner	

| Other:_____ | |
| Other:_____ | |

Reference

MacDonald, K. (2018). A review of the literature: The needs of nontraditional students in

        postsecondary education. Strategic Enrollment Management Quarterly, 5(4), 159–
164

Appendix D- Interview Protocol

Interview Protocol

When new questions are added to this protocol, I will retrospectively email those questions to those who had been previously interviewed.

Introduction: "Thank you for taking the time to meet with me. Today I am going to ask you questions about yourself and your experiences during the spring 2020 semester when instruction had to move online due to COVID-19. This interview will take about one hour. At the end of the interview, I'll ask if there is anything else you would like to share. I have the questions in front of me and will be recording this for accuracy. Feel free to pass on a question or skip it and return to it. You are able to stop the interview at any time. Do you have any questions before we begin?"

General:

1. Why did you decide to enroll in a traditional college path, attending school during the day and in person?

Role Theory:

1. What did a typical day look like for you at the start of the spring 2020 semester?

2. You are a (List all that apply/parent/student/employee/caregiver) what percentage of your time was spent in each role before courses moved online?

3. How was your time divided between work, school, and your home life at the beginning of the spring 2020 semester?

4. After courses moved online on March 23, 2020 what did a typical day look like for you before the semester ended?

5. You are a (List all that apply: parent/student/employee/caregiver). What percent of your time was spent in each role after courses moved online?

6. Who do you live with, and what does your living situation look like?

7. Did your work/life/school balance change as a result of courses moving online in spring 2020 due to COVID-19?

8. Did your schoolwork habits change as a result of moving to online instruction in spring 2020 due to COVID-19?

9. What does your workspace at home look like? Is it a shared space?

10. If you're comfortable, would you please tell me your age? You can also choose not to respond.

Feelings towards higher education:

4. Did your experience of the spring 2020 semester change your plans for higher education?

5. Did your experience of the spring 2020 semester change your feelings towards higher education?

6. Did your experience of the spring 2020 semester change your feelings towards your university?

7. How were you supported to the transition to online education by your professors?

8. How were you supported to the transition to online education by your university?

9. Are there any additional supports you wish you could have had?

Future:

1. Are you enrolled in the upcoming semester?

2. What do you hope for the fall 2020 Semester?

Appendix E- Learning Management System Announcement

Attention Students: My name is Lauren Miller, and I am a student pursuing my Doctorate of Education here at [university name]. I am studying the impact that moving online during the Spring 2020 semester due to COVID-19 had on nontraditional students.

If you are over 25 years old and are a sophomore, junior, or a veteran I invite you to participate in the study "Higher Education and COVID-19: Impact on Nontraditional Students Following a Traditional Path. "If selected for this study, you will be compensated for your time. If you are interested, please click the link below: [link to google form with recruitment email, informed consent form, and email survey.] If you have any questions, please contact me at [email]."

This recruitment method did find two additional participants who met the desired criteria of identifying as a sophomore and a veteran.

Appendix E- Table of Summative Participant Data

Table 11

Summative Participant Data

Pseudonym	Major	Class Standing	Gender	Race	Age	Years spent in higher education	Number of characteristics of nontraditional student (out of 10):	Characteristics of nontraditional student
Steve	Dietetics	Junior	Male	White	41	7	5	are at least 25 years old, attend school part-time, work full-time, waited at least one year after high school before entering college, have reentered a college program
Haley	Dietetics	Senior	Female	White	29	7	2	are at least 25 years old, waited at least one year after high school before entering college
Jaime	Dietetics Nutrition	Senior	Female	Black	33	5	4	are at least 25 years old, have a child or children, waited at least one year after high school before entering college, have

Table 11

Summative Participant Data

Pseudonym	Major	Class Standing	Gender	Race	Age	Years spent in higher education	Number of characteristics of nontraditional student (out of 10):	Characteristics of nontraditional student
Cindy	Dietetics	Senior	Female	White	36	7	3	reentered a college program are at least 25 years old, are a first-generation student (FGS), have reentered a college program
Jan	Health Education	Senior	Female	White	36	4	7	are at least 25 years old, attend school part-time, work full-time, have a child or children, have a GED, are a first-generation student (FGS), have reentered a college program
Brandon	Social Work	Senior	Male	White	35	8	2	are at least 25 years old, have a child or children
Paula	Dietetics	Senior	Female	White	34	5.5	4	are at least 25 years old, attend school part-time, have

Table 11

Summative Participant Data

Pseudonym	Major	Class Standing	Gender	Race	Age	Years spent in higher education	Number of characteristics of nontraditional student (out of 10):	Characteristics of nontraditional student
								a child or children, waited at least one year after high school before entering college
Jennifer	Speech-Language Pathology	Senior	Female	Black	27	4	3	are at least 25 years old, work full-time, have a child or children
Cathy	History	Senior	Female	White	41	6	4	are at least 25 years old, work full-time, are a first-generation student (FGS), have reentered a college program
Amanda	Social Work	Senior	Female	Black	41	3	5	are at least 25 years old, work full-time, have a child or children, are a first-generation student (FGS), have reentered a college program

Table 11

Summative Participant Data

Pseudonym	Major	Class Standing	Gender	Race	Age	Years spent in higher education	Number of characteristics of nontraditional student (out of 10):	Characteristics of nontraditional student
Cole	Cyber Security	Junior	Male	White	37	3	5	are at least 25 years old, have a child or children, are a veteran, waited at least one year after high school before entering college, are a first-generation student (FGS)
Jenna	Dietetics	Sophomore	Female	White	25	5.5	3	are at least 25 years old, work full-time, have reentered a college program