GOING TO GRADUATE SCHOOL: MOTIVATIONS, CHALLENGES, AND SUPPORTS

A Thesis

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by

Brenda Fudge Ranzenbach

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Graduate and Professional Studies in Education
Abstract

of

GOING TO GRADUATE SCHOOL: MOTIVATIONS, CHALLENGES, AND SUPPORTS

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Brief Literature Review

The researcher reviewed Maslow’s (1943, 1970) motivation theory, Schlossberg’s (1989) transition theory, and Knowles’s (1990) adult learning theory. Adults seek self-actualization through education, and education is cause for transition. Adults will endure transition when education allows for a self-directed learning environment relevant to the students’ employment.

Statement of the Problem

The purpose of this study was to determine the motivations, challenges, and supports of adults pursuing graduate degrees. By understanding the adult learner and their necessities, the researcher hopes that identification of challenges, barriers, and conflicts along with supports can lead to proactive planning and resource development by educators for the adult graduate student.

Methodology

An online questionnaire was distributed to the past and present students of the Freedom University higher education leadership graduate degree program. There were
49 respondents, with 35 females and 14 males. Three participants were aged 18-24 and the remainder were aged 25-64.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The research presented in this study indicated motivations such as upward mobility, an increase in salary and responsibility, and love of learning. Respondents were seeking a graduate degree to be qualified for a position of greater responsibility and greater salary. The study identified challenges such as lack of childcare support, time management issues, and trouble keeping up with the homework/reading. Supports included employers, significant others, and fellow students. This information should lead to proactive planning and resource development for the adult graduate student.


, Committee Chair
Geni Cowan, Ph.D.

Date
DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my family. I am a first-generation re-entry student, and I want my daughters and niece and nephew to realize the challenges faced by an adult returning to college late in life. I want them to take advantage of their youth and get an education early in life. I want to thank my parents for always loving me and supporting me no matter what was going on. I am proud to be the first Fudge to get a master’s degree.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First, I would like to thank my fellow students. Maria Zaidi and Sally Brewer are special people and I appreciate their support and kindness. Rory Gillingham deserves a special appreciation for always feeding us. The cohort system really works, and we are proof of that. Thank you, Dr. Cowan, for selecting this fine group of people and for pushing us along together.

Secondly, I would like to thank Timo Rico for agreeing to be my second reader. Timo is very supportive of students in all of their academic endeavors.

I would like to thank Edward Ranzenbach for agreeing to pay for my education. I appreciate your contribution.

Finally, I must express my sincere gratitude to Kendall Mancebo for always being available when I needed someone to listen. She was very supportive throughout my educational process.
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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Overview

The United States is falling behind in educating its citizenry (Pusser et al., 2007). Globalization, economic competition and technological advances are leaving the uneducated behind. Adults are an important demographic, as they are already in the workforce. However, their jobs are changing and being eliminated. Jobs are changing due to the increased use of technology. Technology increases efficiency and displaces workers. Undergraduate institutions are seeing an increase in adult students for undergraduate degrees; and adult students are returning to graduate school determined to remain competitive in this new environment. Adult students are diverse; they are not always coming to college directly out of high school. Their needs differ from the traditional undergraduate. They have varying life circumstances and must juggle to balance work and family. The addition of graduate school to this juggling may put some at risk for failure. There needs to be a thorough understanding of their motivations, challenges, and supports. There is very little research about the adult student returning to college.

According to Maslow (1943), before a person can seek a graduate degree, their lower level needs must be met, the lowest being physiological and the highest being self-actualization. Humans are motivated by their needs, and as each is met, they strive to
satisfy the next. A hungry person seeks sustenance. After sustenance, there is a need for safety then love. When these needs are met, an individual seeks self-esteem. Finally, seeking an education, or in the interest of this study – a degree – is part of self-actualization, which Maslow (1970) identified as the pinnacle in the hierarchy of needs.

A graduate degree comprises a change in circumstances for most adults. According to Schlossberg (1989), a change involves transition. A planned transition can be met with success when a person takes stock by assessing the situation, examining one’s self, and finding supports. Adults can learn (Knowles, 1990). Their learning differs from the child, in that they bring past experiences into the learning environment. Collaborative work and flexibility are appreciated by the adult learner, who is self-directed and eager when exposed to the reason behind what is learned.

Statement of the Problem

The purpose of this study was to determine the motivations, challenges, barriers, conflicts, and supports of adults pursuing graduate degrees. By understanding the adult learners and their necessities, the researcher hoped identification of challenges, barriers, and conflicts along with supports could lead to proactive planning and resource development for the adult graduate student.

This study has two purposes: 1) to contribute to the limited qualitative research on adults in graduate degree programs and 2) to identify factors adult graduate students at a Northern California Public institution perceive as having contributed to their academic
success. For the purpose of this study, success is defined as attainment of a graduate level degree.

The goal of the study is to understand the reasons adults pursue graduate degrees, the obstacles, and complications they face, and the supports that allow completion of their academic aspirations. Specifically, this study addressed the following research questions:

1. What motivates an adult to pursue a master’s degree in higher education leadership?

2. What challenges, obstacles, and complications do students in the higher education leadership master’s program face?

3. From what social, economic, and familial supports did the students in the master’s degree program benefit in order to achieve success?

The answers to these questions are varied because the students who seek a master’s degree in education come to the program with diverse circumstances and needs.

Definition of Terms

The following terms and definitions apply to this study:

Adult

Students over the age of 24

Andragogy

Art and science of helping adults learn
Graduate Degree

Degree awarded for advanced study after having received a bachelor’s degree

Graduate Student

Student who has enrolled in a graduate degree program after having received their bachelor’s degree

Nontraditional Student

Student who did not enroll in college directly after high school

Post-secondary Education

Education after high school

Traditional Student

Student who enrolled in college directly after high school

Significance of the Study

There has been a great deal of research examining the needs and development of the traditional undergraduate student. However, there has been very little research on the adult student in both undergraduate and graduate education. In Europe, it was proven adults could learn. Early adult education programs were designed much like those offered to children. This approach proved to be insufficient and had to be redesigned with the idea that adults come to education with life experiences that must be taken into account. Adults also experience stressors when attempting to balance familial responsibilities and careers with education. Conflicts arise from time constraints and
outside responsibilities. Despite the multiple challenges, adults are successfully completing graduate degrees. The reasons for success have not been documented in the research. Adults motivated to pursue graduate degrees face challenges and ultimately succeed. Adults are self-motivated and persevere through great challenge. Instead of focusing on the challenges, attention needs to be placed on the supports leading to success. It was the aim of this study to mitigate the paucity of research in this area. Discovering motivations, challenges, and supports will invariably provide valuable information for recruitment strategists at universities across the country. The findings of this research will be used to benefit educational leaders taking steps to help prepare students for graduate degree programs. This study aimed to contribute to the limited research.

Organization of the Remainder of the Thesis

The study is organized into five chapters. Chapter 2 provides a review of the existing research and related literature. Chapter 3 describes the research methodology used in collecting and analyzing the data. Chapter 4 presents the data collected from the questionnaire. Chapter 5 provides a summary of the study along with a conclusion, recommendations, and implications for future research.
Chapter 2

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Introduction

This chapter provides a review of the literature focusing on adults in graduate degree programs. Specifically, this chapter presents and discusses the motivations for higher education degrees, the challenges faced, and the supports provided. The purpose of this study was to understand the reasons adults pursue graduate degrees, the obstacles and complications they face, and the supports that allow completion of their academic aspirations. By understanding adult learners and their needs, the researcher hoped identification of challenges, barriers, and conflicts along with supports can lead to proactive planning and resource development for the adult graduate student.

This study had two purposes: 1) to contribute to the limited research on adults in graduate degree programs and 2) to identify factors adult graduate students at a Northern California Public Institution perceive as having contributed to their academic success. For the purpose of this study, success was defined as completion of a graduate level degree.

The researcher reviewed Maslow’s (1943, 1970) motivation theory, Schlossberg’s (1989) transition theory, and Knowles’s (1990) adult learning theory. Additionally, the researcher provided research regarding adults returning to college. Upon doing so, they face challenges, barriers, and conflicts and ultimately take advantage of supports.
Motivation Theory

For an individual to be motivated to go to graduate school, she must first have her basic needs met. Maslow (1943) arranged human needs in a hierarchy in the following order of importance: a) physiological, b) safety, c) love, d) self-esteem, and e) self-actualization. The physiological needs involve the body’s attempt to maintain a constant normal state. Food, water, and sleep are paramount to sustaining a persistent regular state. A person who is starving can think of little else. Food would be the number one need, with a preoccupation so great that the need for safety would be ignored. According to Maslow (1943), if a person’s hunger is satisfied, their next need is for safety. An individual who is in no danger of physical harm, poor health, or unemployment would feel safe. A person who has access to resources will enjoy less fear and improved safety. Resources could include a savings account, a retirement fund and health benefits. When these needs are met, a person will seek to give and to get love and affection. Maslow (1943) posited that a person who has reached this need may forget they were ever hungry. Finding a place to belong, intimate relationships, and love will become the primary needs. At the next level, is self-esteem. There are two areas for this need: a) strength, achievement, and adequacy and b) desire for reputation, prestige, and recognition from others. Maslow (1943) submitted that almost every human being in our society experiences this need. Once mastery has been acknowledged by self and others, the final need is self-actualization. Satiating the aforementioned needs, according to Maslow (1943), may to lead to a feeling of discontent or restlessness. This need is the reason
individuals search for fulfillment. Maslow (1943) saw humans as always wanting something; the need for self-actualization often leads to the pursuit of an education.

Maslow (1970) arranged the basic needs hierarchically with physiological needs as the most important. Safety is more important than love, and so on. He also differentiated between higher and lower needs. Higher needs are less important and not necessary for survival. Lower needs have to be met for the human being to survive. Sustenance and hydration are the basic lower needs. An individual is able to survive without self-esteem. For the same reason, higher needs are not pressing. The same individual will expend a great deal more energy and time seeking food and safety than they will for love. Self-actualization may finally be achieved gradually and not urgently as a person ages. Higher needs, as Maslow (1970) explained, bring the individual a sense of satisfaction, the ability to make a difference to participate in the larger social context. A person seeking this sense of satisfaction is searching for their calling, and education can be such a calling. According to Maslow (1971), the goal of education is self-actualization. Those who seek self-actualization tend to strive for more, in that they want to transcend the mundane and do good for others. Having their basic needs met motivates them to seek more.

Cavalier (2000) believed Maslow saw human beings as always wanting. Instead of self-actualization, Cavalier (2000) posited self-actuation, which he explained as being motivated in doing, creating, and using one’s talents. He believed the hierarchy of needs had humans behaving in a reactive manner and instead believed humans actually behave
in a proactive manner. Additionally, Cavalier believed not all humans will reach the pillar of self-actualization, but anyone could reach self-actuation. A self-actuated person is living life to its fullest, a life lived for others. To be self-actuated is to be altruistic. Altruistic humans make contributions for the benefit of others. His examples included those who volunteer or care for children and the elderly.

For some, a career in education is a calling. Maslow (1971) posited that those who seek self-actualization often pursue a career that allows them to help others. Moreover, Cavalier (2000) offered the self-actuated individual has altruistic motivation for the betterment of others. Educators are often seen as serving others for less pay than would be received outside education in industry positions. As evidenced by Brown (as cited in Roszkowski, 2013), who left a career in business for another in education, working with children would improve his community. Helping a student realize a dream meant realizing his own dream. Regardless of an individual’s motivation, the decision to seek a graduate degree is cause for great change.

Transition Theory

A return to college, a change of circumstance, is an event that brings about transition. Transitions, as examined by Miller (2010), are normal to human existence. Changes can be seen as positive or negative, are unsettling, and take some adjusting to over time. Schlossberg (1989) posited that transitions have three components: a) anticipated, b) unanticipated, and c) the nonevent. Motivations differ for each adult
returning to higher education, but what each individual anticipates is very similar in that it is easily predicted. A return to education is what Schlossberg (1989) labels as an elected change. It is initiated by the individual, and is, therefore, an anticipated change. Newness can be expected with environments, professors, and responsibilities. There will be many new happenings; a student returning to higher education understands this. What he may not understand is the unanticipated because unpredictability can be quite challenging. Students may not anticipate changes caused by a return to school as well as changes not caused by school. According to Miller (2010), unexpected changes bring about vulnerability. These changes, for example, could include a family illness, a relationship change or a job change. Another situation is the nonevent, which occurs when an adult student expects something to occur and it does not. This too can be just as challenging.

To plan for a transition, a person should first take stock. Schlossberg (1989) described taking stock with three aspects: a) situation, b) self, and c) support and strategies. Taking charge involves moving in, moving through, and moving out. Adults returning to college will require a new network of relationships and a new identity (Schlossberg, 1981). Taking stock of the situation involves a critical evaluation of the situation. Timing, level of control, and previous experiences with similar situations should be taken into account. Miller (2010) agreed people use past experiences to deal with future events. The past always has an effect on the future situation. The timing of a return to education may never be ideal. Adults vary in age, life experiences, and
responsibilities. An adult who elects the return to education has control of the transition.
However, there may be other factors not under a person’s control that affect the
transition. Being cognizant of these factors removes the element of surprise and allows
for planning. A comparison of previous experiences with the new also enables
forethought. Schlossberg (1989) equated this to the process of an athlete taking on an
event. An athlete approaches the event by taking stock, examining personal strengths and
weakness then develops a strategy to win.

Self-knowledge, the response to the transition and a sense of mastery are the next
step in Schlossberg’s (1989) theory. An elected transition, such as pursuing a graduate
degree should be met with optimism. A returning student may not have a sense of
mastery; however, an optimistic approach and a self-inventory should allow an individual
to strategize for an optimal experience. Miller (2010) agreed that optimism and positivity
benefit the individual. Needs can be determined and supports can be sought. As the
transition occurs, a person learns more about the self and assumptions change.

An individual cannot make a transition as great as returning to education for a
graduate degree without support. Taking stock of supports is an integral part of the
transition process. Schlossberg (1989) warned that needing support is common, but
support comes in many forms. Support can come from family members, friends,
strangers, and even institutions. Although, not all support is helpful. Family members
can be supportive or a hindrance to the new transition. An aging parent can move into
the home to help or can move in and need a great deal of help from the one who has
returned to education. Small children can be verbally supportive but clingy and insecure when left by the student. Support from friends negates feelings of loneliness and isolation. Friends can lend an ear and buffer uncomfortable situations with family. Support from strangers is most often unexpected and a pleasant surprise. Institutional support for the returning student may be as simple as night class offerings, an online environment, or a cohort model that offers emotional sustenance. Olien (1996) also found it imperative an individual take inventory of supports before a life-altering transition. Development of a checklist that includes paid-for-support, unpaid natural support, and personal attributes for the specific situation is recommended by Olien (1996). Completion of this thorough checklist allows the individual to assess areas of need. Schlossberg (1989) posited that supports needed often change as an individual moves through the transition. Additionally, supports necessary for success differ for men and women. To plan a successful transition, an individual needs to take stock of supporters and reach out for support where necessary.

Finally, once an individual has taken stock of situation, self, and supports strategizing can begin. Schlossberg (1989) offered many strategies and warned there is no magic way to cope. To successfully transition, an individual must use all available supports. An individual returning to education may have to negotiate at work to change a schedule that allows for class attendance. Negotiations at home may also be necessary. Knowing when to seek advice is an important strategy. Attending office hours of professors and asking for help or guidance is often suggested for this exact reason.
graduate degree is a considerable commitment and may require rearranging priorities. Schlossberg (1989) offered that transitions do not last forever and individuals need to prepare, which will diminish and assuage the inevitable stress.

   Janis and Mann (1977) offered a similar five-step approach for individuals making life-changing decisions: a) appraising the challenge, b) surveying the alternatives, c) weighing the alternatives, d) deliberating about commitment, and e) adhering despite negative feedback. Appraisal is similar to taking stock, and deliberating is looking into self. Decisions as important as graduate school force an internal inventory and ultimately result in a fundamental personal change.

   Adult students in higher education are reaching record numbers (Schaefer, 2010). Because they are non-traditional students and colleges predominantly serve the younger student, they can be considered underserved. Hardin (2008) supported the notion that adult students in higher education are increasing. Some are there seeking their first degree while others are seeking a graduate degree. Their decision to seek a degree often comes from a change in their circumstances. Unemployment, downsizing, divorce, or a differing childcare situation are all causes of transition. Many adult students are in the state of transition when they decide to return to higher education. Schlossberg’s (1989) transition model and change for adults was the theoretical framework examined for the barriers faced by adult students. These include extensive responsibilities outside the educational environment. Overcoming these barriers is paramount to the success of the
adult student. Colleges need to recognize the transitions of the adult students, their needs and their challenges in order to offer successful programs that eliminate barriers.

Adult Learning Theory

Knowles (1990), an American authority on adult education, discussed two streams of inquiry regarding adult education as presented by the American Association of Adult Education in 1926. The two are scientific and artistic. The scientific approach involves detailed investigation for the sake of knowledge. The first such scientific research was presented by Edward Thorndike in 1928 his book, Adult Learning. He proved adults could learn and again presented his findings in the 1935 book, Adult Interests. Herbert Sorenson (1938) also found adults could learn. Additionally, he found adults had interests and abilities different than those of children, which he presented in his book, Adult Abilities: A Study of University Extension Students. The artistic approach involves intuition and analysis to determine how adults learn. Eduard Lindeman presented his findings in 1926 in his book, The Meaning of Adult Education. He found adults were consistently adjusting to situations. They do so because they bring their past experiences into each situation. Adult students work collaboratively in order to learn. They do not benefit or enjoy a rigid pedagogical approach. He found adult learners to be self-motivated and life-centered. Adults synthesized their past experiences with current learning. Self-directing adults appreciated a facilitating teacher over a depositor of information. He suggested educators adjust to the individual learning styles of the adults
instead of having the adult learner adjust to their teaching style. Knowles (1990) agreed and suggested the approach could also work when educating youth.

According to Knowles (1990), the term *andragogy* was first introduced by the educational community in Europe before he presented the term to America in his 1968 article titled “Andragogy, Not Pedagogy” published in the April issue of *Adult Leadership*. His spelling was later corrected. Knowles defines andragogy as “the art and science of helping adults learn” (Merriam, 2001, p. 5).

“And adults learn best in informal, comfortable, flexible, nonthreatening settings,” (Knowles, 1990, p. 54). He believes an adult can be defined in four ways: a) biological – a person becomes an adult when they are able to reproduce which happens in early adolescence; b) legal – a person becomes an adult when they can vote, drive or marry without consent; c) social – a person becomes an adult when they work full-time, have a spouse, or become a parent; and d) psychological – a person becomes an adult then they arrive at a self-concept of being responsible for their own life, become self-directing. Knowles (1990) believed the psychological is the most important to learning.

His andragogical model includes the following. Adults have a need to know. They need to know why they need to learn something before they learn it. They will determine the pros and cons of learning what is offered to them. An educator who acts as facilitator can help adults understand why they need to know what is being taught. Knowles (1990) equated this to Paolo Freire’s consciousness-raising in his 1970 book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Adult Learners have a self-concept, and they want others to
recognize they are capable and they understand their responsibilities. They do not wish to be pushed into believing what others believe and do not wish to be dependent upon the educator. Adults have lived longer and have acquired life experiences. These experiences make each adult a unique individual, and allow group work, which involves discussion and problem-solving, to happen. Adults come with a readiness to learn. Throughout their lives, they have demonstrated such readiness in order to cope with real-life situations. They want to be offered material that is relevant, something that is right now. Adults are life-centered, and if they need something, they will learn it, allowing for task-orientated instruction. Adults, for the most part, are intrinsically motivated. Learning is more than just a grade or some units toward a degree. They learn for the sake of self-improvement. Hegarty (2011) agreed with Knowles in that teaching adult graduate students should be done in an environment that differs from the standard classroom. Adult motivations differ from that of children and teaching methods should also differ.

Kenner and Weinerman (2011) reinforced the four principles characterizing adult learners. Adult learners tend to be self-directed, bring with them complex experience, come ready to learn, and be internally motivated. Many adults come to higher education with life experiences and employment situations in which they have been successful and have proven themselves. Their previous success and practical knowledge represent wisdom. Harris (2003) agreed that allowing adults to bring their real-life experiences into the classroom helps them make connections to coursework. In the new higher
education environment, this wisdom may not translate when an adult finds him/herself introduced to new subject matter. Kenner and Weinerman (2011) warned that adults can be set in their ways, having successfully used learning strategies in their previous situations. Adult students may struggle with change when asked to utilize new learning strategies.

Motivations for Seeking a Graduate Degree

When adults seek a graduate degree, the motivations are few but differ for each individual. Motivations include, but are not limited to, job promotion, salary increase, and the love of learning. Often, students graduate with their undergraduate degree and move right into a graduate program. These students, according to Scepansky and Bjornsen (2003), were found to have enjoyed learning at the undergraduate level. This was supported by Haley and Jaeger (2012) who found undergraduate students often developed a taste for learning, and when encouraged by faculty, looked for graduate programs. High levels of engagement regularly led to undergraduate students seeking graduate programs. Universities offer research opportunities and honors programs that allow undergraduate students to work closely with faculty. These symbiotic relationships can be very positive and informative. Additionally, universities often employ student workers in various student services departments, which can lead to permanent employment after graduation. Student affairs personnel, those who work in higher education as admissions officers, degree evaluators, or academic advisers, are often
motivated to attend graduate school. For some, a graduate degree has led to an entry-level position in education or a promotion with greater responsibility. At the same time, personal improvement was woven into the need for professional qualifications (Hegarty, 2011). Working in academia provides convenient access to any number of degree program opportunities. Increased salary is most often a benefit of job promotion. According to Rovaris (2008), a graduate degree allowed for career flexibility and greater opportunity. Some seek professional degrees to make a career change. Rovaris (2008) believed some professions, including academia, require graduate level degrees for entry-level positions. Additionally, persons may become aware of new opportunities while in the process of obtaining a graduate degree. Whelan (2005) agreed that graduate school is beneficial for those seeking leadership positions. Research on motivations of adult learners returning to and choosing graduate school has been limited (Hegarty, 2011; Lei & Chuang, 2010). The majority of research involves undergraduate education. According to Hegarty (2011), the enrollment process was proof enough that an adult is motivated to return to graduate school. The decision to attend graduate school is the first step in the process to find a program meeting the needs of the returning adult.

Numerous programs differ in enrollment requirements, price, and location. As found by Lei and Chuang (2010), prospective graduate students must take into account factors that undergraduate students did not need to consider. These include expenses, family and peer influence, and employment opportunities. Program offerings are diverse in areas of price and financial aid packages. Financial considerations are often the
deciding factor for students. Packages offered could determine whether a student attended their second choice instead of their first choice, a higher-priced option. In some instances, students may be offered a stipend for work as part of a program package (Lei & Chuang, 2010). Younger students often opt for such programs. Working adults often choose to remain in their existing job full-time while attending school part-time. There are other factors students must contemplate. Lei and Chuang (2010) found seekers taking into consideration their spouse or significant other before choosing a program.

Men and women consider program benefits differently, but agree upon the advantages of part-time programs. Females were especially cognizant of social aspects of a program, where men were cognizant of a program’s academic offerings. Both genders considered programs that were close enough to allow for full-time work and evening and weekend class offerings (Lei & Chuang, 2010). Many opted for online programs, which allow coursework to be done away from the traditional classroom environment (Braun, 2008). A flexible program is attractive to both men and women. Women have a tendency to place the needs of their children above their own. Braun (2008) found that female students were concerned about time spent away from family. Dinner needs to be made, homework needs to be checked and the children need to be driven to athletic practice or music lessons. Women sought terminal master’s degrees and always took into consideration the impact of their education on the significant people in their lives (Berg & Ferber, 1983). A female student would need to have the assurance that the children’s needs would be met in order to focus on school. Conversely, men
were primarily focused on academics, program offerings, and benefits to their careers. Once enrolled and attending, adults tended to be more interested in what they learned than a grade for the learning (Scepansky & Bjornsen, 2003).

Student needs differ due to personal circumstances and motivations. Fortunately, there are at least 33 Leadership programs in the United States offering a Master’s Degree or a Doctorate of Education according to NASPA (2008). A small few of these offer the traditional Doctorate of Philosophy. The learning environment is varied; some are offered as full daytime programs, while others are offered at night or even online. It seems that whatever the adult student returning to college finds necessary can be found.

Adults Returning to College

According to the U.S. Department of Education (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2011), post-secondary education enrollment has increased overall. Pertinent to this research, the greatest increase has been seen in students over age 25. Lynch, Doyle and Chickering (1985) found the Baby Boomers are the cause for educational expansion for adults. Baby Boomers are retiring in record numbers and find themselves searching for something more – fulfillment. The NCES (2011) expected this trend to continue.

An adult student, as defined by Jinkens (2009), is one who is 24 years or older who can also be identified as nontraditional. Traditional students graduate high school then move on to college. They depend largely upon their parents and have very few
responsibilities except going to school. A nontraditional student differs in that they did not go to college straight out of high school. They will have work experience and may have responsibilities other than school. Bundy (2004) explained they may have children and/or a job that has caused each to make critical decisions. Like the nontraditional student, adults seeking graduate degrees may have been away from academia for several years or have work experience and other responsibilities outside of school. Hermon and Davis (2004) posited that adult students age 24 and above are self-motivated and seek higher education for personal fulfillment and career advancement.

Adults are returning to college and with their outside obligations, they may experience challenges. O’Donnell and Tobbell (2007) warned that adults may be vulnerable because they are without current college experience. There have been a great many advances with regard to technology being used in education today. This coupled with the additional obligations may be burdensome. Obligations may include employment, children, or ailing parents. The Lumina Foundation (Pusser et al., 2007) described adults as a diverse group; no two adults have the same challenges or resources. In this demographic, there are a great many part-time students. Individuals are interested in convenience so they can balance their many commitments. Their resources, as explained by Bundy (2004), are just as diverse. They may lean upon family, friends, and teachers to cope while attending school. Adults find the need for flexibility paramount to successfully negotiate their many challenges.
Challenges, Barriers, and Conflicts Faced

Challenges, barriers, or conflicts, no matter what they are called, are as diverse as the graduate students who experience them. According to Fairchild (2003), adults contended with multiple role demands, including full-time employment, children, aging parents, being community leaders, being volunteers and being only on campus for classes. Barrier is the word used by Fairchild (2003) who identified situational, dispositional, and institutional barriers. Situational barriers involve guilt, finances, and job responsibilities. Adults may experience guilt about being unavailable for their children and families. Feelings of guilt about younger children can interrupt or halt educational pursuits. Finances encompass housing expenses, groceries, and tuition. Financial aid packages are not always offered for part-time students. This can be problematic for adults working full-time and attending school part-time. These full-time job responsibilities can include long hours forcing career, family, and school compromises. Role conflict, overload, and contagion make up Fairchild’s (2003) dispositional barriers. Each can lead to stress, anxiety, and depression. School and family demands coupled with time conflicts can overwhelm. This pressure leads to guilt, which Fairchild (2003) equated to role contagion. Institutional barriers occur when programs are not structured to accommodate adult students.

Barriers identified by Ritt (2008) included similar circumstances identified as personal, professional, and institutional. Personal barriers, as expected, involve a lack of childcare, financial restrictions, and geographic limitations. The balance of work and
school and students not being able to arrange release time from work for school or tuition reimbursement make up the professional barriers. Ritt (2008) believed there are institutional barriers when not all students have access because of higher tuition rates. This is a barrier that prevents enrollment or slows progress, causing students to take fewer classes. Such students may never finish.

Giancola, Grawitch, and Borchert (2009) agreed adult students encounter conflicts while attending graduate school. Conflicts occur when students work and have very little control over their work situations. Working to provide for oneself is compulsory, and choosing between making a living and school can cause a great deal of stress. Graduate school is time consuming and requires sacrifice (Scepansky & Bjornsen, 2003).

Another challenge, as identified by Hall and Edonick (2013), involves feelings of isolation. Graduate students often work full-time and attend school part-time. They are on campus very little, sometimes only to attend classes. They feel marginalized and isolated, because their institution fails to offer dedicated physical space or extracurricular activities specifically for them. Graduate students are often older than the undergraduate student and find little to engage them on college campuses. Clubs, extracurricular activities, and student employment are most often geared toward the younger demographic. Stress and feelings of isolation can lead to a student leaving the institution without completion of a degree. To be successful, students need to find ways to alleviate stress and cope with the demands of college.
Supports

There is very little research on the supports utilized by successful graduate students. What little research there is suggests graduate school will be demanding, as found by Scepansky and Bjornsen (2003). Graduate students experience conflicts with family and finances; educators must understand this demographic as it differs from the traditional undergraduate student who moves from home into the college environment. It is most common for the undergraduate student to be supported by parents and have only school to focus on. Conversely, graduate students are likely to have jobs, families, with financial and time constraints. Dyk (1987) found these students managing multiple roles and experiencing a great deal of role overlap, which led to increased stress and pressure.

An example of role overlap would be a husband with children going to graduate school. The spousal and parental roles might overlap with the student role, leaving the student feeling overwhelmed. Multiple roles, as discussed by Kirby, Biever, Martinez and Gomez (2004) were not always a negative. Some students, specifically women, flourished with the multiple roles and developed feelings of confidence. It was suggested by Dyk (1987) that when a student could redefine roles, stress could be alleviated. A student who is also a parent could reduce the number of school activities to attend for both their child and self. Roles could also be changed such that delivering children to extracurricular activities could be shared or redistributed to the spouse or significant other who is not attending graduate school. Older children could be allowed to assist with household chores and cooking. Dyk (1987) also suggested reprioritizing tasks related to
graduate school, home life, and childcare. Setting priorities allows for less overlap. Parents who compartmentalized each area, could do graduate schoolwork away from their children and set aside the same work when spending time with children. Graduate students should reduce their standards while in school (Dyk, 1987). The house can be unorganized, meals can be quick and there will be times when the reading for class might not get done.

For the hectic graduate student, time management is imperative (Dyk, 1987). A to-do list coupled with a calendar allows for planning. Schlossberg (1989) proposed taking stock as a proactive approach, which supports the use of the calendar and to-do list. A good sense of self allows a student to work during their peak performance periods. A morning person should schedule intense reading and writing early in the day, when feeling at their best. Conversely, a night owl could do the same late into the night. Taking stock also identifies a student’s resources. The use of these resources, asking family for help, hiring a babysitter, and ordering take-out for dinner decreases pressure for the graduate student. Family involvement in the planning process was suggested as a positive (Kirby et al., 2004). Involved family members can be additional resources. Berg and Ferber (1983) identified professors and teaching assistants as mentors, another resource.

Men and women differ in their approaches and responses to graduate school stressors. Berg and Ferber (1983) found women to be more timid and more proactive when planning for graduate school, only seeking a graduate degree after having sufficient
supports firmly in place. Kirby et al. (2004) found that women received less support from male professors and peers than did their male counterparts. They did, however, receive a great deal of support from their female peers. Men were more confident and more reactive as they sought graduate degrees while arranging supports as they proceeded. Support for male students was offered by family, peers, and professors. Supports and resources are imperative for both women and men. The cohort model was found by Kirby et al. (2004) to offer better support for all students regardless of gender. This was supported by O’Connor and Cordova (2010) who posited that group projects were appreciated by all students. Although time constraints were great, peer learning was beneficial. Like-minded students enjoyed classroom discussions and peer support. Graduate students rarely spent time on campus outside of class time, but the cohort model and a close circle of classmates created a sense of community (O’Connor & Cordova, 2010).

While there is very little research about graduate students, O’Connor and Cordova (2010) found students expect to come to classes offering practical information that is relevant and can be utilized in their day-to-day environments. Susko (2000) reported graduate students made excellent use of the telephone and email when communicating about readings and class assignments. Employers of these students saw benefits in their team meetings and an improvement in leadership. Rawlins (1979) agreed that programs designed with this in mind can meet needs and enhance the graduate student experience. Study groups and peer interaction reduced stress for students and employers reaped the
benefits. For students, Kirby et al. (2004) equated higher program satisfaction with less stress. Miller (2010) remarked that a return to college is a planned change and adults need to take responsibility for their decisions. It is normal to experience fear and anxiety and best to examine those feelings in order to move through them and look forward to the future with hope.

Rationale for the Study

Adults, persons older than 24 as defined by Jinkens (2009), motivated to pursue graduate degrees face challenges and ultimately succeed. The literature has demonstrated some common elements. Maslow (1970) believed that after all other needs had been met, adults were left feeling unfulfilled and would seek self-actualization. Education is often an avenue to fulfillment. Cavalier (2000) saw adults seek education as a need for self-actuation, an altruistic goal as education can be used to benefit others. Adults can learn, and they bring with them a plethora of experiences that enhance such learning (Knowles, 1990). Adults are self-motivated and persevere through great challenges. Pursuing a master’s degree is a positive in an adult’s life. However, with this decision comes a great deal of transition. Schlossberg (1981, 1989) suggested taking stock of the situation, self, and supports. Preparation can be used to identify areas of strength and areas of need. Supports can be developed and focus can be placed on the strategies leading to success. The adult is a non-traditional student, and the population is relatively new and rarely studied. It was the aim of this study to mitigate the paucity of research in this area.
Research findings can then be utilized by practitioners for program development to maximize the educational process.
Chapter 3

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative study was to determine the motivations, challenges, barriers, conflicts, and supports of adults pursuing graduate degrees at a Northern California University. By understanding the adult learner and their necessities, the researcher identified challenges, barriers, and conflicts along with supports that lead to proactive planning and resource development for the adult graduate student.

Research on motivations of adult learners returning to and choosing graduate school has been limited (Hegarty, 2011; Lei & Chuang, 2010). Moreover, the amount of research involving challenges and coping for the adult graduate student is stark. This study was designed to provide information about the perceptions of graduate students’ motivations, challenges, and supports. A survey questionnaire was developed to gather information from each individual respondent. An analysis of questionnaire data from the respondents provided the data. This chapter includes information about the case study, the design of the study, data collection, instrumentation, and data analysis procedures.
Research Design

Setting of the Study

The site for this study was a Northern California Public University (from here forward it will be referred to as Freedom University). Freedom University is located on over 300 acres in a large metropolitan area and is one of 23 campuses in its system. Freedom University plays an integral role in the economic life of the city. With over 28,000 students, this university has a reputation for being a welcoming environment that encourages civic engagement and offers over 53 undergraduate majors and 41 master’s degrees.

Freedom University’s eight colleges offer teaching credentials, nursing credentials, and master’s and doctoral degrees. In fall 2012, there were 3,139 newly enrolled graduate students. Of this group, 78% were over the age of 24 with 69% identifying as female (Northern California Public University [NCPU], 2012). The enrollment numbers for 2010 and 2011 are closely comparable.

Population and Sample

A case study was conducted to describe the experiences of past and present students who have or, at the time of the study, were attending graduate school at Freedom University. The case study involved a singular unit of multiple individuals. The researcher used a purposeful sampling approach. The purposeful sample chosen for this study was 49 former and current students of Freedom University’s Education higher education leadership graduate degree program. Respondents were recruited with the
assistance of professors in the program who provided the survey questionnaire to past and present students via email. The purposeful sample evolved into a snowball sample as respondents shared the questionnaire with those they knew were also enrolled in the Freedom University Education graduate degree program. Students self-selected to participate in the case study. There were 49 respondents, with 35 females and 14 males; three were aged 18-24 and the remainder were aged 25-64.

Respondent selection began with the researcher contacting professors from graduate degree programs and asking for distribution of the online link to the survey questionnaire. The online link, which included a consent letter, was distributed through email and social networking sites to students in the beginning of their program, students in the second year of their program, and students who had completed their program.

Data Collection

An online questionnaire was distributed to the past and present students of the Freedom University graduate degree program. The survey questionnaire was provided to the respondents through email and through social networking sites (see Appendix A). Informed consent was obtained from all respondents who were assured of anonymity prior to their completion of the questionnaire (see Appendix B). To preserve the confidentiality of the respondents, no identifying information was collected. Questions allowed for closed-ended responses, with data being interpreted quantitatively and
expressed using percentages. Descriptive statistics are used to provide a simple summary of the sample and the observations made.

**Instrumentation**

The questionnaire was field-tested to determine the effectiveness and proper sequence of the inquiries. Several classmates of the researcher were involved in the primary testing of the questionnaire instrument. The questionnaire focused on the following areas of inquiry:

1. Demographic Information
2. Motivations
3. Challenges and Supports

Fifty-three questions based on the three areas of inquiry were developed. The researcher did include some open-ended questions inviting respondents to share additional information that would help to clarify responses. To ensure participation was fully consensual, an answer of yes was required for Question 1. Questions 2-12 sought to gather demographic information from each respondent. Question 13 asked the researcher to provide additional demographic information that may be helpful to the researcher. Questions 14-20 sought to gather information from the respondents about motivations for attending graduate school. Question 21 asked the respondents to provide additional information regarding motivations that may be helpful to the researcher. Questions 22-51 sought to gather information from the respondents about challenges and coping strategies. Questions 52 asked the respondents to provide additional information regarding
challenges or coping strategies that may be helpful to the researcher. Question 53 asked respondents who have not completed and have taken time away from the program to provide an explanation as to why.

*Data Analysis Procedures*

The intent of this study was to gather and analyze data to determine the motivations, challenges, barriers, conflicts, and supports of adults pursuing graduate degrees. The researcher attempted to gather personal perspectives from the respondents. The information was analyzed statistically and synthesized to identify commonalities and develop coherent descriptions of the quality of situations of the respondents. Percentages were used to provide a simple summary of the sample and the observations made.
Chapter 4

RESULTS AND DATA ANALYSIS

Introduction

This chapter presents the data collected, findings and interpretation of the data, and a summary. For the purposes of this study, the results of the questionnaire are presented with the information for the total group of respondents (n=49). The analysis methods used included descriptive statistics and percentages. Some respondents provided additional information in several open-ended questions.

The questionnaire focused on the following areas of inquiry:

1. Demographic Information
2. Motivations
3. Challenges and Supports

Fifty-three questions based on the three areas of inquiry were developed. Potential responses were narrowly defined using a closed-ended format. The researcher did include some open-ended questions inviting respondents to share additional information to clarify responses.

Presentation of Data

The results are presented in the following order: 1) demographics, 2) motivations, and 3) challenges and supports.
Findings

Demographics

Table 1 details respondent gender and age. A large percentage of the respondents were female. Almost all the respondents were over age 25.

Table 1
Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>29%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>18-24 years</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>25+ years</td>
<td>94%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Motivations

Table 2 details the reasons respondents opted to enroll in graduate school. Respondents were allowed to provide more than one reason. Upward mobility, at 59%, was the greatest motivation followed by increased salary and love of learning. Only 30% of those responding were looking for a career change.
Table 2

Motivations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Motivation</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Upward Mobility</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased Salary</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Love of Learning</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career Change</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3 indicates the changes anticipated by the respondents. Respondents were allowed to provide more than one reason. The majority of the respondents anticipated looking for a position of greater responsibility and greater salary when they received their graduate degree.

Table 3

Anticipated Changes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Change</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Looking for Position of Greater Responsibility</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Looking for Position of Greater Salary</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The numbers in Tables 2 and 3 demonstrate the respondents’ desires for upward mobility and career flexibility. One respondent reported, “I wanted to increase hireability and open opportunities to apply to other positions.” Another stated, “I knew I
wanted to work in the higher education field and a master's degree is highly valued in the
field.”

Adults motivated to pursue graduate degrees face challenges and ultimately
succeed. The literature has demonstrated some common elements. Adults are self-
motivated and persevere through great challenge. Motivations for graduate school
include, but are not limited to, job promotion, salary increase, and the love of learning.
Often, students graduate with their undergraduate degrees and move right into a graduate
program. Such students, according to Scepansky and Bjornsen (2003), were found to
have enjoyed learning at the undergraduate level. This was supported by Haley and
Jaeger (2012) who found that undergraduate students often developed a taste for learning
and when encouraged by faculty, looked for graduate programs. High levels of
engagement regularly led to undergraduate students seeking graduate programs.
Additionally, increased salary is most often a benefit of job promotion. According to
Rovaris (2006), a graduate degree allowed for career flexibility and greater opportunity.
Some seek professional degrees in order to make a career change.

Challenges and Supports

Challenges, barriers, or conflicts, no matter what they are called, are as diverse as
the graduate students experiencing them. According to Fairchild (2003), adults contend
with multiple role demands including full-time employment, children, aging parents,
being community leaders, being volunteers, and are only on campus for classes. School
and family demands coupled with time conflicts can overwhelm. This pressure leads to
guilt. Graduate school is time consuming and requires sacrifice (Scepansky & Bjornsen, 2003).

Table 4 details the relationship status of the respondents and whether those cohabitating/married had a supportive significant other. More than half were married or reported cohabitating, and 76% of those reported a supportive significant other.

Table 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relationships</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relationship Status</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single/Dating</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cohabitating/Married</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supportive Significant Other</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5 details the number of respondents with children and whether those with children had sufficient childcare support. Just over half, 51%, reported having children and 75% of those with children reported not having sufficient childcare support.
Table 5

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Children</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>With Children</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1+</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sufficient Childcare Support</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6 details the employment status of the respondents and employer support, including a flexible schedule and tuition assistance. The majority of the respondents reported being employed. Of those employed, a great number reported having employer support. Employer support included a flexible work schedule. Almost half took advantage of employer tuition assistance. One respondent reported, “I was incredibly lucky to have a very flexible supervisor at that time I was enrolled in the program.”
Table 6

Employment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Employed</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employer Supportive</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flexible Schedule Offered</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tuition Assistance Offered</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7 details student difficulties with time management, homework/reading, learning the writing format, and commuting. Time management difficulties were only experienced by fewer than half the respondents. The majority of respondents did not experience difficulties with learning the writing format and being a commuter, although one student did commute more than two hours from Merced to Sacramento for the program.
Table 7

Difficulties

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Difficulty</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Time Management</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homework/Reading</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning Writing Format</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commute</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 8 details the student-to-student experiences of the respondents. Support for each other was high for the majority of the respondents. The same was said about an ease of getting to know other students. The number of respondents who reported being close to at least one other student was also high.

Table 8

Student-to-Student Activity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student-to-Student Support</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ease of Getting to Know Students</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Close to at least One other Student</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In graduate school, supports and resources are imperative for both women and men. The cohort model was found by Kirby et al. (2004) to offer better coping for all
students, regardless of gender. This was supported by O’Connor and Cordova (2010) who posited that all students appreciated group projects. Although time constraints were great, peer learning was beneficial. Like-minded students enjoyed classroom discussions and peer support. Graduate students rarely spent time on campus outside of class time, but the cohort model and a close circle of classmates created a sense of community (O’Connor & Cordova, 2010).

Interpretation of the Findings

The goal of the study was to understand the reasons adults pursue graduate degrees, the obstacles, the complications they face, and the supports that allow for completion of their academic aspirations. The data addressed the research questions and each question is stated with an interpretation of the findings regarding that question.

Research Question 1

What motivates an adult to pursue a master’s degree in higher education leadership? Respondents were motivated by upward mobility, an increase in salary and responsibility, and love of learning. The majority was seeking a graduate degree in order to be qualified for a position of greater responsibility and greater salary. Graduate degrees allow for career flexibility and greater opportunity (Rovaris, 2006). Professional credentials allow adults to apply for and accept positions of greater responsibility and increased salary (Hegarty, 2000). Those studied were enrolled in a leadership program. Their enrollment in such a program aligns with the research that stated graduate school is
beneficial for those seeking leadership programs (Whelan, 2000). Leadership positions involve greater responsibility and often require graduate degrees. Upward mobility being the number one motivator and greater salary being the second, leads the researcher to believe that respondents aspired to positions of leadership within their organizations and expected their salary to increase as a benefit of this mobility.

*Research Question 2*

What challenges, obstacles, and complications do students in the higher education leadership master’s program face? Challenges identified in the research included multiple role demands such as full-time employment and children (Fairchild, 2003). Almost all the students were employed. However, the majority reported supportive employers who offered flexible schedules and tuition assistance. Full-time employment was not a seen as a significant challenge for those studied, perhaps the demands of their employment were tempered by the support of their employers. The balance of work and school, as reported by Ritt (2008), was not a barrier to success. The researcher must then summarize that a flexible employer can be categorized as a supportive employer.

Children were a challenge for the majority of those respondents who reported having children. A large percentage of the respondents complained they were not receiving sufficient childcare support. The data collected was not clear as to what specific childcare support was lacking. This, as reported by Fairchild (2003), was a considerable barrier for adults attending graduate school. Feelings of guilt about younger children can interrupt or halt educational pursuits (Fairchild, 2003). The lack of childcare support was
a considerable issue for the respondents. It is peculiar that many respondents reported a supportive spouse/significant other. It was not clear how the spouse/significant other offered support. The discrepancy between having a supportive spouse/significant other and childcare support raises the question of how the respondents may have defined support. Consequently, not one individual reported having to leave the program because of the lack of childcare support. Additional questions regarding challenges such as time management issues, homework/reading struggles, learning the writing format, and commuting were posed. The returning adult student may be vulnerable, because they are without current college experience (O’Donnell, 2007). The ability to manage time and keep up with assignments may be skills that a returning adult student finds challenging. Adults who have been away from college often found new technologies to be difficult to learn (O’Donnell, 2007). For the respondents of this study, time management, learning the writing format, and commuting were less of a challenge than keeping up with the homework/reading. Graduate school is time consuming and requires sacrifice (Scepansky & Bjornsen, 2003). Having to divide available time between responsibilities at home and reading for school was challenging for the respondents. This suggests that time management is a valuable skill that returning adults could benefit from learning.

Research Question 3

From what social, economic, and familial supports did the students in the master’s degree program benefit in order to achieve success? Resources for adult students, as reported by Bundy (2004) are as diverse as the students themselves. Adult students may
rely upon family, friends and teachers. Respondents reported support received from several sources. Adults need flexibility in order to succeed in graduate school. The majority of the respondents reported full-time employment and supportive employers. Employers offered flexible schedules and tuition assistance. Significant others, for those who were married or cohabitating, were reported as supportive. The highest level of support, and the most remarkable finding, came from fellow students. Student-to-student support was rated higher than any other. This matched research provided by O’Connor & Cordova (2010, who stated that group projects, classroom discussion ad peer support was greatly appreciated by the adult student. Respondents found it easy to get to know fellow students and reported being close to at least on other student. The cohort nature of the students’ graduate program facilitated supportive peer relationships. This was evidenced by the high number of responses to the question regarding student-to-student support. This significant finding leads to the conclusion that graduate programs could further benefit students by offering opportunities to develop supportive social relationships that may transcend their programs and become supportive professional networks following program completion.

Conclusion

There were 49 graduate students who completed the questionnaire. The majority of the respondents were motivated, looking to use their professional degree to obtain a positions of greater responsibility that may include increases in salary. The greatest
challenge for all was keeping up with the homework/reading. For those with children, lack of childcare support was critical. The most remarkable finding from those questioned was the high degree of student-to-student support.
Chapter 5

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary

Adults are returning to higher education. According to the U.S. Department of Education (NCES, 2011), post-secondary educational enrollment has increased overall. The greatest increase has been seen in students over age 25. Understanding the motivations of these individuals is paramount to recruitment efforts for institutions of higher education. Adults over the age of 25 bring with them a plethora of outside responsibilities, which can cause challenges and conflicts. Understanding these challenges and supports allows educators and individuals to be proactive when planning a transition into graduate school.

The purpose of this study was to understand the reasons adults pursue graduate degrees, the obstacles and complications they face, and the support mechanisms that allow completion of their academic aspirations. Specifically, this study addressed the following research questions:

1. What motivates an adult to pursue a master’s degree in higher education leadership?

2. What challenges, obstacles, and complications do students in the higher education leadership master’s program face?
3. From what social, economic, and familial supports did the students in the master’s degree program benefit in order to achieve success?

Conclusions

The literature detailed the following motivations for graduate program enrollment: a) self-actualization (Maslow, 1970), b) self-improvement (Knowles, 1990), and c) personal improvement and professional qualification (Hegarty, 2011). The study findings supported all three. Respondents were motivated by upward mobility, an increase in salary and responsibility, and love of learning. The majority was seeking a graduate degree in order to be qualified for a position of greater responsibility and greater salary.

Challenges for graduate program students, as reported by Fairchild (2003), Ritt (2008), and Hall and Edonick (2013), include full-time employment, lack of support from a significant other and lack of support for childcare. Respondents experienced similar challenges with some exceptions. Almost all the students were employed. However, the majority reported supportive employers who offered flexible schedules and tuition assistance. Most reported having sufficient support from a significant other. This was relevant to over half the respondents. A large percentage of the respondents complained they were not receiving sufficient childcare support. Additional questions regarding challenges such as time management issues, homework/reading struggles, learning the writing format, and commuting were posed. Very few students commuted long distance,
as most lived in the surrounding areas. Of the remaining three challenges, keeping up with the homework/reading was the most pressing.

Kirby et al. (2004) identified the cohort model as a positive offering for students. The most remarkable finding of this study was the number of respondents who cited support from fellow students as very strong. Students met and worked with other students, and each reported being close to at least one other student. Overall, the findings of this study were not remarkably different from what the literature reported.

Recommendations for Further Study

As previously identified, this case study focused on 49 graduate students attending a Northern California Public University. The sample was made up of 34 females and 25 males. Almost all were working and half had children. Questions were based on the three areas of inquiry, and potential responses were narrowly defined using a closed-ended format. The researcher did include some open-ended questions inviting respondents to share additional information to clarify responses. Motivations, challenges, and supports backed up by the literature were identified. Further research should be done allowing respondents to share personal experiences and details in a broader format. An interview setting would facilitate this.

Another area of study should include the use of Schlossberg’s (1989) transition model. Respondents would benefit by being asked, before beginning a graduate program, to approach the change and take a look at the impact on their present situation. The next
step would include taking stock of the situation, the self, supports, and strategies. This would allow each student to determine personal areas of strength and their areas of need.

As this is completed, students would be expected to develop a plan for success. Respondents should be followed through the program and evaluated at the end. An analysis of each individual would provide valuable information for educators to use with future students. By understanding the adult learner and their necessities, educators can develop programs that lead to proactive planning and resource development for the adult graduate student.
APPENDICES
APPENDIX A

Survey Questionnaire

Survey Questions
1. After reading the Consent Form, do you agree to participate?
   o Yes
   o No

2. What is your gender?
   o Female
   o Male

3. What is your age?
   o 18 to 24
   o 25 to 34
   o 35 to 44
   o 45 to 54
   o 55 to 64
   o 65 to 74
   o 75 or older

4. Which of the following categories best describes your relationship status?
   o Single
   o Dating
   o Cohabitating
   o Married
   o Divorced

5. Number of children?

6. How many children, by age, currently live in your household?
   Less than 1 year old __________
   Toddler __________
   Pre-School Age __________
   Grammar School Age __________
   Middle School Age __________
   High School Age __________
   18 and Over __________
7. Which of the following categories best describes your employment status at the beginning of your graduate program?
   - Employed, working 1-39 hours per week
   - Employed, working 40 or more hours per week
   - Not employed, looking for work
   - Not employed, NOT looking for work
   - Retired
   - Disabled, not able to work
   - Other

8. What was your undergraduate major?
   ____________________________________________________________

9. In what city do you live?
   ____________________________________________________________

10. What is your undergraduate degree in?
    ____________________________________________________________

11. What is your current standing in your graduate degree program?
    - Program Completed-Degree Obtained
    - Program Incomplete-Degree not Obtained
    - Currently in Program-Working towards Degree
    - New to Program-Working towards Degree

12. Why did you opt to enroll in a graduate degree program? (check all that apply)
    - Career Change
    - Wanted to Increase Salary
    - Wanted to Increase Upward Mobility with My Present Employer
    - Love of Learning
    - Unemployed out of College and Thought Graduate School was the Only Alternative
    - Other – Explain below in the Text Box

13. Please provide any additional information that you feel would be helpful for the researcher.
    ____________________________________________________________
14. What reason did you choose this specific program? (check all that apply)
   - Convenience
   - Close to Home
   - Evening and Saturday Classes work with My Job
   - Low Cost
   - Online Classes work with My Job/Responsibilities
   - Other – Explain in the Text Box

15. Please provide any additional information that you feel would be helpful for the researcher.

______________________________________________________________

16. Did/Do you anticipate a career change after completing your graduate degree?
   - Yes
   - No
   - Not Sure

17. Did/Do you anticipate an increase in your salary in your present position after completing your graduate degree?
   - Yes
   - No
   - Not Sure

18. Did/Do you anticipate a promotion in your present position after completing your graduate degree?
   - Yes
   - No
   - Not Sure

19. Did/Do you anticipate looking for a position of greater salary after completing your graduate degree?
   - Yes
   - No
   - Not Sure

20. Did/Do you anticipate looking for a position of greater responsibility after completing your graduate degree?
   - Yes
   - No
   - Not Sure
21. Please provide any additional information that you feel would be helpful for the researcher.

______________________________________________________________________________

22. Did/Does your spouse or significant other support your pursuing your graduate degree?
   o Yes, he or she does
   o No, he or she does not
   o Not applicable

23. My spouse or significant other did take/has taken on more responsibility at home.
   o Yes
   o No
   o Not applicable

24. My relationship was/is strained because I enrolled in graduate school.
   o Yes
   o No
   o Not applicable

25. My relationship has ended because I chose to attend graduate school.
   o Yes
   o No
   o Not applicable

26. My relationship has improved because I chose to attend graduate school.
   o Yes
   o No
   o Not applicable

27. Class sessions were/are scheduled when I have available childcare.
   o Yes
   o No
   o Not applicable

28. Family members had/have stepped up to assist with childcare.
   o Yes
   o No
   o Not applicable
29. I felt/feel guilty when I am away from my children.
   o Yes
   o No
   o Not applicable

30. Class sessions were/are scheduled opposite of my work schedule.
   o Yes
   o No
   o Not applicable

31. My employer was/is supportive of my going to school.
   o Yes
   o No
   o Not applicable

32. My employer allowed/allows a flexible work schedule for school needs.
   o Yes
   o No
   o Not applicable

33. My employer offered/offers tuition assistance for my graduate program.
   o Yes
   o No
   o Not applicable

34. I had to change jobs in order to attend school.
   o Yes
   o No
   o Not applicable

35. I had to take out student loans to finance my graduate program.
   o Yes
   o No

36. Student loans were not sufficient for me. I had to use credit cards and borrow money to attend school.
   o Yes
   o No

37. I am having trouble making ends meet financially because of school.
   o Yes
   o No
38. Navigating online course registration was/is difficult for me.
   - Yes
   - No

39. Keeping up with the reading/homework was/is difficult for me.
   - Yes
   - No

40. Time management was/is difficult for me.
   - Yes
   - No

41. Getting to know other students was/is difficult for me.
   - Yes
   - No

42. Using the course website was/is difficult for me.
   - Yes
   - No

43. Learning the wiring format was/is difficult for me.
   - Yes
   - No

44. Getting to and from school was/is difficult for me.
   - Yes
   - No

45. My commute took/takes a great deal of time for me.
   - Yes
   - No

46. After driving to and from school, I was/am exhausted.
   - Yes
   - No
   - Not applicable

47. I receive (d) support from my fellow students.
   - Yes
   - No
48. I often met/meet with my fellow students to discuss readings and work on assignments.
   o Yes
   o No

49. I have become close with at least one of my fellow students.
   o Yes
   o No

50. I would like or would have liked to receive more emotional support from:
   o Significant Other/Spouse
   o Friend
   o Parent
   o Sibling
   o Child
   o Coworker
   o Fellow Student
   o Not applicable
   o I receive significant emotional support

51. I would like or would have liked to receive more childcare support from:
   o Significant Other/Spouse
   o Friend
   o Parent
   o Sibling
   o Child
   o Coworker
   o Fellow Student
   o Not applicable
   o I receive significant emotional support

52. Please provide any additional information that you feel would be helpful for the researcher.
   _____________________________________________________________

53. I have not yet completed my program degree and have had to take time off. If this statement is true for you, please tell the researcher why and what happened. If it is not applicable to you, please leave it blank.
   _____________________________________________________________
APPENDIX B

Consent to Participate in Research

Dear Possible Participant:

You are being asked to participate in research, which will be conducted by Brenda Ranzenbach, a student in Higher Education Leadership and Policy Studies at California State University, Sacramento.

The study will investigate factors related to motivation, challenges and supports among past, present and new students from the graduate programs at California State University, Sacramento.

You will be asked to complete a questionnaire about your demographic information, your motivation, your challenges and your supports. The questionnaire may require up to twenty minutes of your time.

Some of the items in the questionnaire may seem personal, but you don’t have to answer any question if you don’t want to. You may participate as much or as little in the discussion as you wish.

You may gain additional insight into factors that affect success in graduate programs, or you may not personally benefit from participating in this research. It is hoped that the results of the study will be beneficial for prospective students and educators of graduate degree programs.

Your responses on the questionnaire will be anonymous. You will never be asked to identify yourself by name.

You will not receive any compensation for participating in this study.

If you have any questions about this research, you may contact me at (530) 592-6870 or by e-mail at branzenbach@gmail.com. My thesis advisor, Dr. Geni Cowan, can be reached at (916) 278-5388 or by email at gcowan@csus.edu.

Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary. Your participation indicates that you have read this page and agree to participate in the research. If you do not wish to participate, I appreciate your taking the time to consider it.

Thank you.

Brenda Fudge Ranzenbach
REFERENCES


Hall, M. T., & Edonick, J. L. (2013). Weaving a system of support: Services for graduate and first-professional students. Leadership Exchange, 10(Winter), 16-21.


