Persisting to Graduation: A Grounded Theory Exploration of Nontraditional Undergraduate Women's Enrollment

Danielle Ferioli Sulick

University of Denver

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.du.edu/etd

Part of the Higher Education Commons

Recommended Citation

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate Studies at Digital Commons @ DU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Electronic Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ DU. For more information, please contact jennifer.cox@du.edu,dig-commons@du.edu.
PERSISTING TO GRADUATION: A GROUNDED THEORY EXPLORATION OF
NONTRADITIONAL UNDERGRADUATE WOMEN’S ENROLLMENT

A Dissertation
Presented to
the Faculty of the Morgridge College of Education
University of Denver

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy

by
Danielle Ferioli Sulick
March 2011
Advisor: Dr. Franklin A. Tuit
©Copyright by Danielle Ferioli Sulick 2011

All Rights Reserved
Abstract

While women maintain a numerical majority in undergraduate college enrollments and degrees earned, they also represent the numerical majority among students over 29 years old, students of color, students who are in the lowest income category, students who are single parents, and students who attend college part-time (Peter & Horn, 2005; Planty, et al., 2008). The National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) has identified seven characteristics that place students at risk of not completing an undergraduate degree; (a) delayed enrollment between high school and college, (b) part-time enrollment, (c) financial independence, (d) students with dependents, (e) students who are single parents, (f) students who work full-time while enrolled, and (g) students who completed a GED as opposed to earning a high school diploma (Choy, 2002; Dickerson & Stiefer, 2006; Horn & Premo, 1995). The above characteristics overlap with the categories where women have a numerical majority, thereby placing women in greater jeopardy of not completing a bachelor’s degree.

A review of the existing persistence literature demonstrates a lack of research devoted to understanding the persistence experiences, challenges, strategies, and decisions of nontraditional undergraduate in favor of the “traditional” undergraduate student (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Reason 2003). For this doctoral dissertation, I
have based the research on a critical race feminist framework, informed by my
experience working with the population of nontraditional undergraduate women at a
women’s college and employed a critique of the persistence literature as sensitizing
concepts. Using a modified grounded theory research design, I collected and analyzed
data which led to the development of a grounded theory of nontraditional undergraduate
women’s persistence. The emergent concepts of commitment, environment, and support
interact in a theory of academic momentum and I offer a critical race feminist reading of
the findings and theory to expose race neutrality, honor the voices of women of color,
and deconstruct the evidence presented. The implications of this research include
student, institutional, and inclusive excellence approaches to increasing the persistence of
nontraditional undergraduate women and contribute to the success of this unique
population of learners.
Acknowledgements

Paulo Freire’s (1970) vision of education as the practice of freedom “affirms men and women as beings in the process of becoming” (p. 84). I feel like a being in the process of becoming and am humbled to have the opportunity to learn from the people who have supported me as a student, a scholar, and as myself.

I am becoming an educator. To the women who participated in this research, you have taught me more than what resides in these pages.

I am becoming a student. To my committee members, I respect you and value the guidance of your words and actions, which will continue to encourage me to become a scholar long after these pages end. To Dr. Susan Manning, Dr. Lynn Gangone, and Dr. Lyndsay Agans, my sincerest gratitude.

I am becoming a critical scholar activist. Dr. Frank Tuitt, you serve as my model for how to unite passion, teaching, research, and action in the pursuit of educational transformation. You have taught me that sometimes the struggle is the reward.

I am becoming a daughter, sister, and friend. Thank you to my family, Nancy, Jesse, and Lindsey Ferioli and my Nan, Dolores Messinger. Ed and Pauline Sulick, Brandi Van Horn, Sheffield Johnson, and Allison Riola, thank you for your encouragement and support.

I am becoming a partner. Landon Sulick, you teach me more about myself than countless degrees and I am better because of your love.

I am becoming.
# Table of Contents

Abstract ...................................................................................................................... ii

Acknowledgements ................................................................................................... iv

Chapter 1: Introduction .............................................................................................. 1
  Introduction .............................................................................................................. 1
    Research questions ............................................................................................... 3
  Nontraditional Undergraduate Women ................................................................. 4
  Persistence ................................................................................................................ 8
  Theoretical Framework ......................................................................................... 11
    Critical race feminism ......................................................................................... 11
  Methodology ........................................................................................................... 13
  Conclusion ............................................................................................................. 14

Chapter 2: Review of the Literature ......................................................................... 17
  Introduction ............................................................................................................ 17
    Transition theory .................................................................................................. 18
  Persistence Literature ............................................................................................. 21
    Astin’s student involvement theory ..................................................................... 21
    Tinto’s theory of student departure ...................................................................... 24
    Bean’s industrial model of student attrition ......................................................... 27
  Summary ................................................................................................................. 29

A Critical Race Feminist Counter-narrative of College Persistence ....................... 30

Persistence Factors ................................................................................................. 34
  Self .......................................................................................................................... 34
    Demographic characteristics ............................................................................... 35
      Gender ............................................................................................................... 36
      Race and ethnicity ............................................................................................ 38
      Age .................................................................................................................... 41
    Pre-college characteristics .................................................................................. 43
    College assessment characteristics ..................................................................... 44
    Psychological characteristics .............................................................................. 44
  Self counter-narrative ............................................................................................. 45

Situation ....................................................................................................................... 48
  Internal to the institution ....................................................................................... 50
  External to the institution ..................................................................................... 52

Situation counter-narrative ....................................................................................... 52

Support ....................................................................................................................... 55
  Academic support .................................................................................................. 56
  Social support ....................................................................................................... 57

Support counter-narrative ......................................................................................... 57
References .................................................................................................................. 237
Appendix A: Definition of Nontraditional Undergraduate Women ................................. 253
Appendix B: Schlossberg’s Transition Theory ................................................................. 254
Appendix C: Tinto’s Theory of Student Departure (1975) .............................................. 255
Appendix D: Bean’s Model of Student Attrition (1983) ................................................ 256
Appendix E: Persistence Factors Matrix Organized by Transition Theory Variables ....... 257
Appendix F: A Transition Theory Model of Nontraditional Undergraduate Women’s Persistence Literature ................................................................................. 259
Appendix G: Line-by-line coding .................................................................................... 260
Appendix H: Criteria for Evaluating Grounded Theory Research ................................ 261
Appendix I: Typology of Strategies for Maintaining Competence ................................. 262
Appendix J: Cognitive Interview Recruitment Email ..................................................... 263
Appendix K: Informed Consent Form ............................................................................... 264
Appendix L: Focus Group Recruitment Email ................................................................. 265
Appendix M: Focus Group Protocol and Guiding Questions ......................................... 266
Appendix N: Participant Information Sheet ..................................................................... 269
Appendix O: Individual Interview Guide ......................................................................... 271
List of Tables

Table 1: Definition of Nontraditional Undergraduate Women .............................................. 4
Table 2: Self Variables ........................................................................................................ 36
Table 3: Situation Variables ............................................................................................... 49
Table 4: Support Variables ................................................................................................. 56
Table 5: Strategy Variables ................................................................................................. 60
Table 6: Focus Group Themes Organized by Theoretical Codes ...................................... 108
Table 7: Participant Demographic Overview .................................................................... 124
Table 8: Transformation of Momentum to Academic Momentum .................................. 190
Table 9: Comparison of Counter-narrative Themes to Theoretical Constructs .............. 212
List of Figures

Figure 1: Theoretical Code Tree ................................................................................ 110
Figure 2: A Theory of Academic Momentum ......................................................... 191
Figure 3: Increasing Commitment .......................................................................... 195
Figure 4: Improving Environment .......................................................................... 196
Figure 5: Increasing Support .................................................................................. 198
Chapter 1: Introduction

Introduction

Women continue to enroll as the numerical majority of undergraduate students with a predicted 57% of total undergraduate enrollments through 2017 (Planty, et al., 2008). Since 1982, women have outperformed men in degrees awarded, enrollment, and persistence (Buchman, 2000; Snyder, Tan, & Hoffman, 2006). From 1995 to 2005, overall college enrollment increased by 23%, most of which was due to an increase in women’s enrollment. During this time frame, women’s enrollment grew by 27% while men’s enrollment only grew by 18% (Snyder, Dillow, & Hoffman, 2009). Buchman noted “a striking reversal in the gender gap” (2009, p. 2321) as women outpace men in high school academic achievement, college enrollment, college academic achievement, and degree attainment. While women are 57% of the overall undergraduate college enrollment, they also outnumber men in full-time status students, 55%, and part-time status students, 59.9% (Snyder, Dillow, & Hoffman, 2009). Women who attend part-time and are over 25 years old actually comprised 12.7% of the total undergraduate student population in 2005 (Snyder, Dillow, & Hoffman, 2009). Additionally, Peter and Horn (2005) noted that from 1998 to 2008, the largest group among adult learners has been over 40 years old, single parenting, low-income, women of color.
Despite the apparent achievement in enrollment numbers, women are also the numerical majority among students over 29 years old, students of color, students who are in the lowest income category, students who are single parents, and students who attend college part-time (Peter & Horn, 2005; Planty, et al., 2008). The National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) identified seven characteristics that place students at risk of not completing an undergraduate degree; (a) delayed enrollment between high school and college, (b) part-time enrollment, (c) financial independence, (d) students with dependents, (e) students who are single parents, (f) students who work full-time while enrolled, and (g) students who completed a GED as opposed to earning a high school diploma (Choy, 2002; Dickerson & Stiefer, 2006; Horn & Premo, 1995). The above characteristics overlap with the categories where women have a numerical majority, thereby placing women in greater jeopardy of not completing a bachelor’s degree.

Given the feminization of poverty, which is the tendency for women to live in poverty at disproportionately higher frequencies than men (Thibos, Lavin-Loucks, & Martin, 2007), and the increased earnings potential of holding a bachelor’s degree (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006) colleges and universities have a social, political, and economic obligation (Gumport, 2001) to pursue new ways of supporting nontraditional women undergraduate students to successfully complete a bachelor’s degree (see Table 1 for the definition of nontraditional undergraduate women). By exploring the factors that positively influence persistence for this population of learners, institutions, faculty, and professionals may be able to work to increase the bachelor’s degrees earned by nontraditional undergraduate women. By promoting the persistence and degree
completion of nontraditional undergraduate women, colleges aid in the immediate advancement of women and influence future generations of students to pursue a bachelor’s degree through the web of women graduates.

**Research questions.**

In this doctoral dissertation, I focused on the following research questions:

1. How do nontraditional undergraduate women persist to graduation in a bachelor’s degree granting institution, a small women’s college within a private institution in the Rocky Mountain region of the United States?
   a. How do nontraditional undergraduate women students describe and understand the process of educational persistence?
   b. What strategies and barriers to persistence do nontraditional undergraduate women students identify?
   c. How do nontraditional undergraduate women students make persistence decisions?

The research utilized my experiential knowledge of working with nontraditional undergraduate women at the college, a literature review of the extant research on persistence, and a modified grounded theory method to derive a theory of nontraditional undergraduate women’s persistence in a bachelor’s degree program.
Throughout this research, nontraditional undergraduate women students will be defined as women enrolled in a bachelor’s granting institution who identify within any of the following characteristics:

- over 25 years of age,
- women of color,
- delayed enrollment,
- working full-time while enrolled,
- enrolled part-time,
- financially independent,
- have dependents other than a spouse,
- and/or single parents

(American Association of University Women, 1999; Choy, 2002; Dickerson & Stiefer, 2006; Horn & Premo, 1995; Peter & Horn, 2005).

To establish the foundation for the research, chapter one proceeds with a discussion about the definition of nontraditional undergraduate women and outlines how the population has been constructed for the purpose of this research. Then, I provide an overview of persistence definitions and implications of the existing persistence research. Finally, I describe critical race feminism which I utilize as a theoretical framework, informing the research as an analytical tool and situating the social and political influence of identity throughout this research.

**Nontraditional Undergraduate Women**

Defining nontraditional women undergraduates is tenuous and elusive. I provide a working description of the population generally; however, this difficulty specifying the population contributes to the lack of research conducted on the persistence of nontraditional undergraduate women (Choy, 2002; Horn & Carroll, 1996). In order to depict the factors that affect the persistence of nontraditional undergraduate women, the literature review explores four bodies of literature to inform the primary focus of
persistence and to serve as a reference point for the construction of the population; (a) literature on the persistence of bachelor’s seeking, traditional students; (b) literature on the persistence of adult students; (c) literature on the persistence of women; and (c) literature on the persistence of students of color.

While practitioners and educators in higher education tend to define nontraditional undergraduate women as over 24 years old and entering college for the first time, this is a limited definition given the possibilities in the persistence literature. While not providing one, concise definition of nontraditional undergraduate women, there are seemingly endless combinations of factors that have been explored in relation to the persistence of college students generally. A great deal of research literature identifies nontraditional undergraduate women in juxtaposition to the historical traditional student, which leaves an extensive variety of characteristics to choose from when defining nontraditional undergraduate women. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) claimed that research on college and university students from their previous edition (1991) was “strongly biased toward ‘traditional’ White undergraduates, ages 18 to 22, who attended four year institutions full-time, lived on campus, did not work, and had few, if any, family responsibilities” (2005, p. 2, also supported by Reason, 2003).

In a different definition, Rendón, Jaloma, and Nora (2000) stated that traditional students are those who “often come from upper- to middle-class backgrounds, are predominantly White, and come from families in which at least one parent has attended college” (p. 146). Identifying research participants, Bean (1980) set out to develop a pool of traditional students, and therefore selected only participants who met the following
criteria; under 22 years old, Caucasian, U.S. citizens, and were not married.

Subsequently, authors created similar participant pools as they replicated previous research (Cabrera, Casteneda, Nora, & Hengstler, 1992), thereby also replicating the dominance of the traditional student profile in the research literature; first-time, full-time freshmen, under 24 years old, Caucasian, U.S. citizens, who were not married. The popularity of these characteristics of the traditional student implies that every student who falls outside of this collection of characteristics is, by definition, nontraditional. Whether individually, sociologically, or economically situated, nontraditional undergraduate women have been designated as “other” through the linguistic negation of the traditional college student.

Horn and Premo (1995) reversed the idea of the “traditional” student and told us that “not since the 1970s has the typical student in postsecondary education been a recent high school graduate enrolled full-time in a four-year college or university, working toward a bachelor's degree” (p. 1). Choy (2002) stated that the popular image of a recent high school graduate who goes home on breaks, is financially dependent on his or her parents, and works part-time, if at all, is substantially different from the students who are actually attending college. In fact, Choy estimated that 73% of college students are nontraditional and Kinser and Deitchman (2007) cite that fewer than one in six college students fit the historical description of the traditional student.

Defining the nontraditional undergraduate woman in contrast to an historically traditional student results in a complex combination of characteristics such as being over 24 years old, being financially independent, having life priorities other than college, and
having been out of an educational setting for some time (Dickerson & Stiefer, 2006). Most generally, Dickerson and Stiefer (2006) defined a nontraditional student as “one who does not follow the typical path to or through higher education” (p. 181). Throughout this research, nontraditional undergraduate women students are defined as women enrolled in a bachelor’s granting institution who identify with any of the following characteristics; over 25 years of age, women of color, delayed enrollment between high school and college, working full-time while enrolled, enrolled part-time, financially independent, have dependents other than a spouse, and/or single parents (American Association of University Women, 1999; Choy, 2002; Dickerson & Stiefer, 2006; Horn & Premo, 1995; Peter & Horn, 2005).

Horn and Carroll (1996) clustered students by the number of risk characteristics (Choy, 2002; Dickerson & Stiefer, 2006; Horn & Premo, 1995) they possess as minimally, moderately, or highly nontraditional finding that minimally nontraditional students are more likely to attend four-year institutions and highly nontraditional students are more likely to attend two-year institutions. These findings illustrate the importance of investigating nontraditional women’s persistence in bachelor’s degree institutions which are predominantly comprised of traditional students, in order to determine how research might be relevant to the experiences of nontraditional women students. The research by the NCES on risk characteristics was conducted with community college students, and while it could be relevant for nontraditional women pursuing a bachelor’s degree, it has not yet been applied to this population. Existing literature that isolates and describes each of the characteristics comprising nontraditional undergraduate women in relation to
their persistence in a bachelor’s degree is of particular interest, however, it is difficult to find given that most research utilizes the traditional student as a participant, model, and benchmark (McGivney, 2004).

**Persistence**

Given the general assumptions about who goes to college, theory, research, and implications of college persistence have been modeled after the needs of the traditional student resulting in 6,000 to 7,000 studies biased towards this historical population (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005). Among the abundance of research conducted on persistence is also a collection of terms (McGivney, 2004), theories, factors, and critiques which will be outlined here along with the canonical literature on college student persistence.

Berger and Lyon (2005) outline the terminology of the persistence literature, with the most significant linguistic distinction being persistence as the student-initiated behaviors towards enrollment and retention as the institutionally-motivated responses towards the reduction of student departure (Mortenson, 2005).

- **Attrition** – refers to students who fail to reenroll at an institution in consecutive semesters
- **Dismissal** – refers to a student who is not permitted by the institution to continue enrollment
- **Dropout** – refers to a student whose initial educational goal was to complete at least a bachelor’s degree but who did not complete it
- **Persistence** – refers to the desire and action of a student to stay within the system of higher education from the beginning year through degree completion
- **Retention** – refers to the ability of an institution to successfully graduate the students that initially enroll at the institution
- **Stopout** – refers to a student who temporarily withdraws from an institution or system
- **Withdrawal** – refers to the departure of a student from a college or university campus (Berger & Lyon, 2005, p. 7)
Bean (1980) defined student attrition as “the cessation of individual student membership in an institution of higher education” (p. 157). Similarly, the National Center of Education Statistics defined persistence as “the students’ likelihood of remaining enrolled until they obtain a degree or other credential” (Horn & Nevill, 2006, p. 3) and measures enrollment over six years. In their collective review of three decades of college student literature, Pascarella and Terenzini (1991, 2005) articulated persistence as “the progressive reenrollment in college, whether continually from one term to the next or temporarily interrupted and then resumed” (2005, p. 374). Hagedorn (2005) identified persistence or retention and drop out as “two sides of the same coin, retention is staying in school until completion of a degree and dropping out is leaving school prematurely” (p. 91). However, Hagedorn went on to complicate the definition, as did Astin (1975), Tinto (1975, 1987, 1993), and Bean (1980) given that the label of “drop out” is itself flawed. Some students who drop out of one institution have actually transferred to a different institution while some “drop outs” have actually achieved their particular educational goals, even if they have left the institution or have not earned a degree.

While the intent of persistence literature is generally to quantify degree completion, the measurement of persistence varies depending on the research being conducted. Some researchers’ persistence measures included first year to second year persistence (Bean, 1980; Berger & Milem, 1999; DesJardins, Kim, & Rzonca, 2003), first year to third year persistence (Allen, Robbins, Casillas, & Oh, 2008), from entry to graduation over four years (Astin, 1970, 1975), from entry to graduation over five years
(Arredondo & Knight, 2005; DesJardins, Kim, & Rzonca, 2003; Horn & Carroll, 1996), from entry to graduation over six years (Arredondo & Knight, 2005; Horn & Nevill, 2006), and even 13 years after high school graduation (Adelman, 2000). There is also a distinction between institutional departure and system departure where institutional departure indicates that the student has left a specific college or university before graduation and system departure indicates that the student has left the system of higher education (Mortenson, 2005; Tinto, 1993). The demonstrated variety of persistence measures along with definitions of nontraditional undergraduate women, complicate the review of research on the persistence of nontraditional undergraduate women, however, this complexity and ambiguity will not serve as a deterrent to exploring the experiences of this long neglected population of students.

The texts and theories regarded as foundational to student persistence literature include Astin’s (1975, 1984) student involvement theory, Tinto’s (1975, 1987, 1993) work on integration, and Bean’s (1980, 1983) model of student attrition based on employee turnover in organizations (Braxton, 2000; Milem & Berger, 1997; Robbins, et al., 2004; Tierney, 1992). While these researchers have revised and expanded their theories over the years, informed by each other’s work, they have not specifically addressed the unique needs or concerns of nontraditional undergraduate women. However, their work is fundamental for locating persistence research that is conducted today (Arredondo & Knight, 2005; Braxton, 1999; Braxton, Sullivan, & Johnson, 1997; Berger & Milem, 1999; Flowers, 2004; Metz, 2004; Milem & Berger, 1997).
Theoretical Framework

Nontraditional undergraduate women are balancing multiple roles as students, parents, and employees, along with many other roles that a diverse population will manifest (Fairchild, 2003). Nontraditional undergraduate women also possess multiple social and personal identities, some of which are socially and politically marginalized. I use critical race feminism as a theoretical framework in order to understand and honor the importance of the multiple identities that nontraditional undergraduate women hold and to distinguish the similarities and differences of individual students’ experiences in higher education. Critical race feminism serves as an epistemological framework as well as an analytical tool to critique the predominant persistence literature.

Critical race feminism.

Critical race theory grew out of the economically driven critical legal studies in order to center issues of race. Subsequently, critical race theory neglected the specific experiences of women of color highlighting instead seemingly gender-neutral persons of color. Simultaneously, feminist legal theory was primarily based on the experiences of middle- and upper-class White women (Wing, 1997). Critical race feminism is a response to the implicit assumptions in critical race theory that all people of color are men and in feminist jurisprudence that all women are White (Grillo & Wildman, 1997). Informed by critical legal studies, critical race studies, and feminist jurisprudence, I have outlined three prominent goals that critical race feminism seeks to accomplish as an epistemological framework for this research. First, critical race feminism exposes assumptions of neutrality, objectivity, and White supremacy in educational research.
Second, critical race feminism seeks to bring women’s voices together, honoring intersectionality without essentializing feminist identity politics specific to the middle-class White woman (Crenshaw, 1995; Harris, 2003; Wing, 2003). Third, critical race feminism uses deconstruction methodologies and counter-narrative to demonstrate the perpetuation of dominant paradigms and re-construct alternative realities (Montoya, 2003; Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000; Wing, 2003).

As a theoretical framework, critical race feminism serves as an analytical tool acting from the three epistemological tenets outlined; first, to expose race neutrality, critical race feminism is a framework to critique the dominant persistence literature which centers the experience and reality of the traditional college student neglecting the nontraditional undergraduate women and relegating her to an “othered” status among her college peers. Second, in order to honor intersectionality and the voices of women of color, critical race feminism facilitates the address of racism and exclusion as factors influencing persistence, as well as the attempt to situate the individual and group differences of nontraditional undergraduate women’s multiple identities and race specifically. Women of color are not excluded, forgotten, or essentialized as I remain guided by critical race feminism. Third, critical race feminism uses deconstruction methodologies and provides a structure for the continual critique of my own research assumptions, analyses, and conclusions in order to guide my actions and responses as a researcher. As Romany (1997) stated, “the feminism I see myself associated with… aims at eradicating the various forms of oppression that affect all women, the feminism that I
want to recover is that which redefines subjectivity in light of the key variables of subject formation; race, ethnicity, class, and gender” (p. 20). In addition, critical race feminism in education “recognize(s) students of color as holders and creators of knowledge” (Delgado Bernal, 2002, p. 105), which I also employ throughout this research.

Methodology

The research is based on a grounded theory methodology, which pursues the “enterprise of how the discovery of theory from data – systematically obtained and analyzed in social research – can be furthered” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 1). Strauss and Corbin (1994) define grounded theory as “a general methodology for developing theory that is grounded in the data systematically gathered and analyzed. Theory evolves during actual research, and it does this through continuous interplay between analysis and data collection” (p. 273). After over 40 years of research contribution to grounded theory method, the essential components are identified as simultaneous data collection and analysis, theoretical sampling, the constant comparative method, and theoretical saturation (Charmaz, 2000; Hood, 2007).

Grounded theory methodology suits the research question addressed here because of the absence of an existing theory of nontraditional undergraduate women’s persistence. While there are theories that have been applied and verified with traditional populations, the literature review has revealed that the factors relevant for traditional populations of college students will not likely address the concerns of nontraditional undergraduate women. Given that my interest is in honoring the knowledge of nontraditional undergraduate women through hearing their voices and developing a theory directly from
their experiences, grounded theory methodology with qualitative data collection and analysis methods is an appropriate design.

**Conclusion**

For this doctoral dissertation, I have based this research on a critical race feminist framework, informed by my experience working with a population of nontraditional undergraduate women and a review of the persistence literature as sensitizing concepts.

The research progressed to the development a grounded theory of nontraditional undergraduate women’s persistence to ultimately benefit the increased educational success of this unique population of learners.

In the literature review in chapter two, I define persistence and outline the foundational theories of persistence. Providing an overview of the prevailing persistence literature, I utilize critical race feminism to critique the existing persistence literature. Then I categorize the persistence factors for traditional students based on Schlossberg’s transition theory (Schlossberg, 1984; Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 1995; Goodman, Schlossberg, & Anderson, 2006). Each transition theory variable is described in terms of persistence, followed by a review of the literature on traditional students. Then, I employ critical race feminism to deconstruct the assumptions about persistence embedded in the volumes of research on traditional students in order to develop a description that focuses on the literature about adult students, women students, and students of color. Finally, using the re-construction of persistence factors, I develop a model for supporting nontraditional undergraduate women to complete a bachelor’s degree.
In chapter three, I provide an overview of grounded theory methodology (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007; Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and its critical components including; simultaneous data collection and analysis, theoretical sampling, the constant comparative method, and theoretical saturation. Then I overview some of the common critiques of grounded theory to raise the awareness of the reader and myself so as to avoid many of the hazards of conducting grounded theory research. I also offer some examples of grounded theory research to demonstrate the strengths and weaknesses of grounded theory. Finally, I detail the research design and methods that I utilize within my dissertation research.

Chapter four begins with a description of the participants who I interviewed and their unique contribution to the co-construction of the research. I present the three primary concepts that emerged from the data, which are commitment, environment, and support, as well as the description in the form of participant quotes to fortify the development of each concept.

Chapter five is a critical race feminist reading of the findings in order to honor the voices of women of color and depict the racial dynamics and differences that were evident in the data. While the findings and theory are generally derived from the students I spoke to, a critical race feminist reading of the findings focuses on the contributions of women of color to the research and their unique view of college persistence.

In chapter six, I describe the theory of academic momentum which unites the concepts of commitment, environment, and support and describes the interaction between them. I also present a praxis of momentum that specifies action to accompany the theory
of academic momentum. I also offer a comparison of the findings to Tinto’s (1975, 1987, 1993) theory of student departure on the longitudinal, interactional, and contextual nature of both Tinto’s theory and the theory of academic momentum. I revisit the conclusions derived from the literature review in chapter two.

Finally, in chapter seven, I postulate implications, limitations, and opportunities for future research to determine how this research can contribute to the improvement of higher education as a field and persistence specifically. I also revisit my role as the researcher to reflect on how this research has supported my own education as a scholar.
Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

Introduction

The existing literature of college persistence offers very little information regarding nontraditional undergraduate women as a population. However, the absence of commentary about this population of learners also informs the research question and has led me to aspire to the development of a theory of nontraditional undergraduate women’s persistence. The literature review uses Schlossberg’s transition theory (Schlossberg, 1984; Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 1995; Goodman, Schlossberg, & Anderson, 2006) as an organizing framework to categorize the multitude of persistence factors available in the traditional literature. I provide a brief overview of the major theories of persistence and then a critical race feminist response to these theories. In concert with transition theory, critical race feminism will serve as an analytical framework to deconstruct the dominant persistence narrative and reconstruct a counter-narrative of persistence literature. The counter-narrative approximates the nontraditional undergraduate women’s population by compiling the persistence literature about adult students, women students, and students of color. Finally, I use the counter-narrative literature on persistence to develop a model of nontraditional undergraduate women’s persistence which highlights the themes of motivation, self-efficacy, biculturation, multiple roles, validation, and sense of belonging. The literature review exposes a dearth
of strategies for the persistence of nontraditional undergraduate women, which is another motivating factor for me to pursue this research, contribute to the literature, and support the graduation of nontraditional undergraduate women.

**Transition theory.**

Transition theory allows me to identify the multiple responsibilities of nontraditional undergraduate women while also providing a structure to analyze the literature and develop a model. Schlossberg’s transition theory (Schlossberg, 1984; Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 1995; Goodman, Schlossberg, & Anderson, 2006) begins with the imperative for individuals to be able to adjust and adapt in a society where the constant nature of change could otherwise leave them paralyzed. Schlossberg and her colleagues developed transition theory as an adult development theory incorporating aspects of other theories which include developmental, contextual, life-span, and constructivist meanings. Seeking to provide a model that has structure and allows for individual variance, the primary audience is counselors “and other helpers” (Goodman, Schlossberg, & Anderson, 2006, p. 32) who are working to guide adults moving in, moving through, and moving out of various life events and non-events.

“A transition, broadly, is any event or non-event that results in changes in relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles” (Goodman, Schlossberg, & Anderson, 2006, p. 33). A non-event is an expected change that does not actually take place, like an anticipated college admission that results in a waitlist or rejection. Further, for Schlossberg, a transition must be specifically perceived and defined as such by the individual, thereby allowing for two individuals to mark the same occurrence differently,
or the same individual to mark a repeated occurrence differently over time. An individual’s labeling of the transition as positive, negative, or neutral determines the response protocol that she will see as appropriate. An individual’s appraisal of a transition includes the following assessment categories: (a) the type of transition, which includes anticipated, un-anticipated, or non-event; (b) the context of the transition, which includes the relationship to the transition and the setting of the transition, and; (c) the impact of the transition on an individual’s relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles (Schlossberg, 1984; Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 1995; Goodman, Schlossberg, & Anderson, 2006).

When an individual has assessed her state of transition given the type, context, and impact of the transition, she then moves into assessing the factors that could help her to cope with the transition process. The foundation of Schlossberg’s transition theory (Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998) is the organization of potential variables and resources into four sets; the Self, the Situation, the Support, and the Strategies (see Appendix B). To further honor the variability of individuals in coping with transition, the four sets of variables and resources are assessed in terms of assets and liabilities within each and may change over time as an individual’s situation changes. Goodman, Schlossberg, and Anderson (2006) also built on Sussman’s (1972) philosophy and structure attributing an individual’s perception of successfully navigating a transition to the number of options she believes she has at her disposal; options which may be actual, perceived, utilized, or created.
Cooke (1994) critiqued the application of transition theory from a multicultural perspective stating that while the theory allows for the acknowledgement of sociopolitical restraints resulting from oppression, the privileged reader could easily overlook the external influences exerted on a marginalized person’s options. As a result of this critique, I am mindful of the potential exclusion of issues of power and oppression within transition theory. Similarly, the traditional persistence literature fails to acknowledge the influence of social and political factors of oppression, such as the influence of individual and institutional racism on persistence. One of the purposes of this research is to explicitly address the influence of oppression on the persistence of nontraditional undergraduate women, especially women of color.

Schlossberg’s (Schlossberg, 1984; Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 1995; Goodman, Schlossberg, & Anderson, 2006) transition theory serves as an organizational tool for understanding nontraditional women’s undergraduate persistence. Epistemologically, transition theory aligns with the purposes of this research by recognizing the influence that changes in relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles have on one’s life while simultaneously offering a way to organize and assist in an individual’s transition process. With regard to college persistence, transition theory introduces an understanding of an individual’s return to college, struggles in college, and departure from college. While a student’s introduction to college, or re-introduction after some absence, may be the most obvious example of a transition, there are several milestones and resulting transitions that happen over a student’s college career. New classes and instructors, challenging academic assignments, formal and informal change in
employment, and family structures all present student transitions throughout her enrollment in college depending on how the student interprets each occurrence. Also, because transition theory regards each individual as unique and variable over time, it suits the diverse population of nontraditional undergraduate women while acknowledging the assets and liabilities they differentially have at their disposal. Finally, transition theory provides a framework for organizing the literature on the persistence factors for nontraditional undergraduate women through the application of the literature review findings to the four sets of variables; Self, Situation, Support, and Strategies.

**Persistence Literature**

**Astin’s student involvement theory.**

Astin’s student involvement theory (1984) developed out of his earlier research, *Preventing Students from Dropping Out* (1975), in which he identified 52 student characteristics that influence college persistence. Astin then applied the student involvement theory to begin to explain the relationship between factors and student behavior. Specifically, Astin defined involvement as “the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience” (1984, p. 297).

Modeled after the Freudian concept of *cathexis* that articulates an individual’s ability to invest psychological energy in a task, person, or situation, student involvement theory was a progression from Astin’s earlier career as a clinical psychologist. Astin outlined five postulates of student involvement theory.

1. Involvement refers to the investment of physical and psychological energy in various objects.
2. Regardless of its object, involvement occurs along a continuum.
3. Involvement has both quantitative and qualitative features.
4. The amount of student learning and personal development associated with any educational program is directly proportional to the quality and quantity of student involvement in that program.
5. The effectiveness of any educational policy or practice is directly related to the capacity of that policy or practice to increase student involvement. (1984, p. 299)

Student involvement theory proposed that “the greater a student’s involvement on campus, the greater the amount of student learning and development” (Astin, 1984, p. 307). Applied to student persistence and drop out, Astin (1984) utilized student involvement theory to construct the spaces between student factors or characteristics and student outcomes of persistence. Generally, he hypothesized that every factor that positively affected persistence was likely to positively affect student involvement thereby situating student involvement as an opportunity for institutions to act to support student persistence. Likewise, each negative factor of student persistence was likely to negatively affect student involvement. For example, having a part-time job on campus was positively related to persistence however, having a full-time job off campus was negatively related to persistence (Astin, 1975). In light of student involvement theory, a part-time job on campus keeps the student physically on campus for more hours, cognitively committed to campus happenings, interacting with institutional officials, and invested in the institution that is signing her paycheck. A full-time job off campus, however, requires more time and energy that is divested from the institutional environment and climate, competing with institutional involvement for limited student resources.

There are also two underlying assumptions in student involvement theory that are relevant to a discussion of nontraditional undergraduate women. The first is the
acknowledgement that a student’s time and energy is finite, meaning that when that time and energy is invested in activities outside of the college environment involvement and, therefore, persistence can suffer. Astin’s (1975) second assumption is a call for institutional actors to allot greater focus to student activities and outcomes, as opposed to focusing on institutional action regarding programming, academics, policy. According to Astin, institutions will learn more about persistence by attending to the student and assessing her behavior as outcomes, rather than concentrating on what programs are offered to support persistence.

Astin (1984) conflated psychological investment with hours spent on campus and, in combination, both are expected to influence student persistence. Astin even applied the language of competing interests where time at work detracts from and competes with time in school. However, considering a population of nontraditional undergraduate women students who often maintain careers and families outside of college, Astin’s assumptions of investment diminish a woman’s obligations that likely existed before going to college and, as a result, he clearly normalized the full-time, residential student who has no additional responsibilities. Nontraditional undergraduate women do juggle many roles and responsibilities, however, the tendency of the institution to share Astin’s widely accepted assumptions contributes to organizational practice, beliefs, culture, and the climate on campus for a nontraditional undergraduate woman making her an outsider in an established culture. Her success is dependent on her ability to complete college requirements and on the ability of the institution to accommodate the challenges she
brings as a student. Astin’s model fails to take institutional account of the oppositional, marginal, nontraditional student.

**Tinto’s theory of student departure.**

Tinto’s (1975, 1987, 1993) theory of student departure is the most often cited model of student persistence (Berger & Braxton, 1998; Berger & Lyon, 2005; Braxton 2000; Braxton, Sullivan, & Johnson, 1997; Hagedorn, 2005). While Astin (1984) utilized student persistence as an example of student involvement theory in practice, Tinto developed a specific model of student departure that is similar to Astin’s student involvement theory but more elaborate (Milem & Berger, 1997; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Academic integration and social integration are at the center of Tinto’s (1975, 1987, 1993) theory of student departure, literally and figuratively (see Appendix C). Tinto’s model was inspired by Spady’s (1970) interpretation of Durkheim’s (1961, as cited in Spady, 1970) theory of suicide to formulate a description of college dropout, however, Tinto added to the theory to create a predictive model. Durkheim offered that suicide is more likely when the individual is insufficiently integrated into the social world. For Tinto, as for Spady, Durkheim’s theory offered a parallel to the student who is more likely to drop out of college when she is insufficiently integrated into the college environment, socially and academically.

In order to bring the model empirical and predictive clout, Tinto (1975, 1987, 1993) expanded the model, keeping academic and social integration at the center. In Tinto’s model, student characteristics before attending college influence the student’s
initial levels of goal commitment and institutional commitment. Goal commitment and institutional commitment are then impacted by the student’s academic and social integration. Ultimately, a student’s goal commitment and institutional commitment will determine the student’s dropout decisions. In summary, all other things being equal, the greater the student’s academic and social integration, the greater her goal and institutional commitment, and therefore, the more likely it is that she will persist.

For Tinto (1975, 1987, 1993), student pre-college characteristics were a composite of three categories; family background (including social status attributes, value climates, expectations), individual attributes (including gender, race, ability), and pre-college schooling (including grade point averages, academic and social attainments). Goal commitment identifies the student’s initial and evolving educational aspirations in both level and intensity. Tinto’s model is institution-specific, meaning he is addressing a student’s departure from a particular institution, not from the system of higher education itself. Institutional commitment is defined as the student’s initial predisposition to the selected college or university, for example, the difference in the financial decision making process and the commitment to attend a private or public college. Goal commitment and institutional commitment are influenced throughout the college career by a student’s academic integration and social integration. The academic and social spheres are separate to distinguish the differences between the two, to suppose that a student could be integrated in one but not the other, and to contrast that hyper-integration in one sphere will likely detract from the other creating an imbalance. Inadequate integration in either the academic or the social sphere can lead to institutional departure.
Appropriate academic and social integration, however, can increase goal and institutional commitment, thereby increasing a student’s chances at persistence.

Overall, Tinto’s (1975, 1987, 1993) model of student departure centers academic and social integration, is predictive, is longitudinal, is institution-specific, is concerned with variables external to the college, and highlights the cost-benefit analysis of departure decision making. Tinto’s (1970, 1987, 1993) model, similar to Astin’s (1984), conflates educational commitment, integration to campus life, and persistence, thereby generating similar concerns for its application to the population of nontraditional undergraduate women. In addition, two important implications of Tinto’s model for nontraditional undergraduate women are related to the inclusion and consideration of student entry characteristics. First, the inclusion of college entry characteristics and the assumption that variations in characteristics will equate to variations in initial levels of goal commitment and institutional commitment mean that in so far as nontraditional undergraduate women differ from traditional students, so will their predicted levels of persistence differ. Given that nontraditional undergraduate women are substantially different than the traditional first-time college student, as was established in defining nontraditional undergraduate women, their entry characteristics will also be substantially different. Which brings me to the second implication of Tinto’s model; the entry characteristics that are accounted for, including gender, race, grade point averages, and family financial situation fail to offer insight into the nontraditional student’s college entry positionality. Grade point averages from high school and parents’ income offer
little insight into the academic success of a 34 year old woman with an associate’s degree, who owns her own business and has two children (Donaldson & Graham, 1999).

**Bean’s industrial model of student attrition.**

Bean (1980, 1983) patterned his model of student attrition after the work of Price (1977; Price & Mueller, 1981) on employee turnover in work organizations operating under the assumption that the reasons that students leave institutions of higher education are similar to the reasons that employees leave work organizations. Bean’s model is, like Tinto’s (1975, 1987, 1993), institution-specific and does not address the results of a student dropping out from the system of higher education, but only from a particular institution. The most significant portion of Bean’s model identifies organizational determinants (see Appendix D), justifying its title as an “industrial” model of student attrition (1983). A student’s background characteristics interact with the organizational environment which leads to student satisfaction with the institution. Bean labels satisfaction and institutional commitment as intervening variables, which then influence a student’s intent to stay or intent to leave as a proxy for a student’s dropout decision.

While Price’s (1977, Price & Mueller, 1981) and Bean’s (1980, 1983) models are almost identical, there are several important substitutions required in order to adapt Price’s model of employee turnover to Bean’s industrial model of student attrition. The first is a substitution for Price’s variable of pay. Bean identifies grades, practical value, and development as analogous to pay for employees. Grades are similar to employee pay because they are extrinsic rewards for work, the practical value of a student’s education represents future opportunity for work and income, and self-development is the
attainment of a set of skills which will be valuable to future employers and represents the intrinsic rewards of hard work as a student. Also, for Bean’s student attrition adaptation, Price’s variable of work tasks is replaced with a variable called courses and Price’s professionalism variable is replaced with memberships in campus organizations. Finally, there are two variables that fall external to the work organization, but can influence intent to leave college or a work organization. Promotional opportunity is regarded as the student’s opportunity to transfer to another institution and kinship responsibilities were replaced with marriage. Given that Bean’s participants were first-year, first-time college students, very few were married and they were excluded from the final results; however, for the remaining sample, marriage presented an external opportunity for change in the student’s college status.

Overall, Bean’s (1980, 1983) model of student attrition assumes that students’ pre-college characteristics interact with the organizational environment to influence student satisfaction, positively and/or negatively, which influences the student’s satisfaction with the institution, thereby determining whether the student intends to leave the institution. With regard to nontraditional undergraduate women students, Bean’s model attempts to consider variables external to the university environment, however, many nontraditional students are balancing more responsibilities than the opportunity to transfer and getting married, which Bean notes. Bean’s model assumes that getting married is a deterrent to persistence, which again implicates those students who perform adult lives outside of the college setting in addition to their student lives, placing the nontraditional undergraduate woman student on the periphery of college life.
Summary.

Astin (1975, 1984), Tinto (1975, 1987, 1993), and Bean (1980, 1983), while canonical persistence texts and models, do not offer insight into the experiences of nontraditional undergraduate women. Each of the studies examines the traditional, first-year, first-time college student and his or her experiences and perceptions of campus interactions. Astin’s insistence on the strength of residential housing for students alone would seem to deny the likelihood of nontraditional undergraduate women persisting to graduation, as they tend not to live on campus because they have living arrangements before going to college. Tinto offers academic and social integration, assuming that nontraditional students could partake in each collegiate sphere; however, the operationalization of integration as time on campus limits the opportunities for participation for nontraditional undergraduate women. Bean’s model has been utilized with adult students (Bean & Metzner, 1985), given its proximity to work and career life, however, his model and the participants identified for exhibition of the model excluded those students who are defined here as nontraditional undergraduate women.

In their extensive review of persistence literature, Braxton, Sullivan, and Johnson (1997) note two reasons that scholars are interested in persistence and college student departure.

First, institutional rates of student departure constitute a puzzle...the student departure puzzle. It is puzzling that almost one-half of students entering two-year colleges and more than one-fourth (28.5%) of students entering four-year collegiate institutions depart these institutions at the end of their first year (Tinto, 1993). Even more perplexing, highly selective colleges and universities experience an average first-year departure rate of 8.0% (Tinto, 1993)... The phenomenon of student departure also provides a window on the academic and social communities within colleges and universities...through which our
understanding of college choice and student growth and development are enhanced. Such is the second reason for scholarly interest in college student departure. (Braxton, Sullivan, & Johnson, 1997, p. 107)

However Braxton, Sullivan, and Johnson (1997) fail to designate my purpose for research as a scholarly interest in college student retention, which is to understand the college experiences of nontraditional undergraduate women in order to better support their degree attainment thereby improving their situation based on whatever reasons each woman elected to enroll in college. The Social Science Research Council (SSRC) noted the need “for a more conceptual and reflective approach to notions of access, retention, success, and opportunity that takes into account the multiple pathways that individuals take to postsecondary attainment and acknowledges the variability of how these terms are defined by different consumers, communities, and policymakers” (2005, p. 21). Based on Braxton, Sullivan, and Johnson’s assessment of scholarly purpose, this research falls outside of the standard persistence literature, further identifying the distance between the existing persistence paradigm and persistence research with nontraditional undergraduate women.

A Critical Race Feminist Counter-narrative of College Persistence

Given that persistence research predominantly favors the traditional student in theories, research, and replication (Astin, 1975; Bean, 1980; Cabrera, Casteneda, Nora, & Hengstler, 1992; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Reason, 2003; Rendón, Jaloma, & Nora, 2000; Tinto, 1975) an alternative is called for that acknowledges the differential experiences of diverse student populations. For example, Laura Rendón (2002), in “From the Barrio to the Academy: Revelations of a Mexican American Scholarship Girl,”
shares her experiences as an undergraduate and graduate student. She discusses the negotiation of academic shock, entering higher education through the windows as opposed to the doors, and the academic push to disconnect from her cultural past. Rendón’s persistence is not described in terms of academic and social integration or institutional commitment but instead she states “I began to think about how the rewards of academic success were in stark contrast with most of my past” (2002, p. 316). Rendón’s comments indicate that her persistence was not likely due to her academic or social integration, rather she worked against the academic environment in order to persist. Her experiences and perceptions were not in line with the culture of the academy, therefore her differential experiences were not valued by the academy. Rendón’s persistence decisions in higher education evidently are very different than the depictions sketched by the predominant persistence literature.

In order to seek out the differences between traditional students and nontraditional undergraduate women, critical race feminism will serve as a theoretical framework for analyzing and responding to the traditional literature on college student persistence thus constructing a research-based counter-narrative from the nontraditional student literature. I am relying on persistence literature regarding students of color, women students, and adult students to develop the counter-narrative, however, I am not conflating or comparing the experiences of these very different collections of individual students. Although, I have identified these specific student groups as sharing identities that are parallel in that they are currently and historically marginalized within the academy and the persistence literature. Also, since there is no body of literature addressing
nontraditional undergraduate women, these student groups serve to approximate the
diverse population of nontraditional undergraduate women.

There are three primary critiques to the existing persistence literature framed by
critical race feminism. First, critical race feminism exposes assumptions of neutrality,
objectivity, and White supremacy in educational research (Parker & Lynn, 2002; Wing,
2003). With regard to persistence literature, the traditional undergraduate student who
has served as the center of research has been historically 18 to 22 years old, White,
middle- to upper-class, attending school full-time, with limited or no additional
responsibilities (Bean, 1980; Cabrera, Casteneda, Nora, & Hengstler, 1992; Pascarella &
Terenzini, 2005; Reason, 2003; Rendón, Jaloma, & Nora, 2000). While there have been
periods in history when this composite described the majority of bachelor’s seeking
students, without acknowledging the historical exclusion, current practices of
meritocracy, and racial inequality of the educational pipeline (Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso,
2000), large scale college student data sets continue to marginalize populations, favoring
the traditional student, whether by research design or assumptions of objectivity.

Second, critical race feminism seeks to center the voices of women of color and
bring all women’s voices together, honoring intersectionality without the essentializing
identity politics of middle-class White feminism (Crenshaw, 1995; Harris, 2003; Wing,
2003). Like Rendón (2002) who sees few Mexican American or Black students on
campus, critical race feminism inquires as to the location of women of color in the
existing literature. Further, this critique of the existing literature also inquires as to the
location of all women, adult students, and students of color. There is a story to tell of the
persistence of nontraditional undergraduate women, however, it is not solely a story of middle-class White women’s gendered college experiences. Rather, the intersectionality of multiple identities is honored, creating “multivocal theories of women’s experience and feminism” (Harris, 2003, p. 34) and “spaces where women come together for support and protection” (Scales-Trent, 2003, p. 43). Hernández-Truyol (2003) and Delgado Bernal (2002) also add culture and sexuality to the collection of women’s intersecting identities. A critical race feminist lens recognizes the nature of essentialism in the literature where all college students are painted in broad brush strokes and begin to resemble the traditional student as individual differences are left unaccounted for. In a critical race feminist review of the literature, students’ experiences are individual with attention to the contextual, historical, and political setting and a greater focus on the descriptive results of qualitative research.

Third, critical race feminism uses deconstruction methodologies and counter-narratives to demonstrate the perpetuation of dominant paradigms while re-constructing alternative realities (Howard-Hamilton, 2003; Montoya, 2003; Wing, 2003). Solorzano, Ceja, and Yosso (2000) note that critical race theory and critical race feminism “challenge the traditional paradigms, methods, texts, and separate discourse on race, gender, and class by showing how these social constructs intersect to impact communities of color” (p. 63). Delgado Bernal (2002) encourages the use of raced-gendered epistemologies “that counter a dominant Eurocentric epistemology” and position the “experiential knowledge of communities of color to be viewed as a strength and an asset” (p. 115-116). What follows is a review of the existing persistence literature and the
juxtaposition of a re-construction of the persistence literature. If the literature could present its counter-narrative, it would display the voices of women, adult students, and students of color, highlighting the differences between the mainstream paradigm of persistence research and the lived experiences of nontraditional undergraduate women in the academy (see Appendix E for a comparison of persistence factors).

**Persistence Factors**

What follows is a review of the literature on persistence which is organized by the variables for assessment in Schlossberg’s transition theory; Self, Situation, Support, and Strategies (Schlossberg, 1984; Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 1995; Goodman, Schlossberg, & Anderson, 2006). I began with the prevailing persistence literature for the bachelor’s seeking students as the foundational research. Then, to characterize the population of nontraditional women undergraduates, I respond to the traditional persistence literature with a critical race feminist counter-narrative of the persistence literature comprised of the research literature on adult students, women students, and students of color in order to understand the persistence literature related to the factors for nontraditional undergraduate women.

**Self.**

In transition theory, the Self variable refers to those characteristics, resources, and values that an individual brings to the transition. Regarding specific transition events and non-events, Goodman, Schlossberg, and Anderson (2006) describe the assessment of the Self variable as including questions of identity and meaning making. Who am I? What
stories comprise my life? Where do I want to go now? Goodman, Schlossberg, and Anderson provide a list of the composites of the Self variable.

- Personal and demographic characteristics
- Socioeconomic status
- Gender
- Age and stage of life
- State of health
- Ethnicity and culture
- Psychological resources
- Ego development
- Self-efficacy
- Commitment and values
- Spirituality and resiliency (2006, p. 65)

In terms of persistence research, the Self variable identifies those attributes that the student brings to the institution. There are four categories of persistence factors from the literature that are organized under the Self variable; demographic characteristics, pre-college characteristics, college assessment characteristics, and psychological characteristics. In fact, most studies have investigated at least some Self variables with regard to student persistence (see Table 2).

Demographic characteristics. In particular, measures of gender, race and ethnicity, and age appear in the literature. Given that I have identified the sub-populations of women students, students of color, and adult students as significant to the review of persistence literature, I will also devote more detail to the discussion of gender, race and ethnicity, and age as persistence factors.
Table 2: Self Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Traditional Literature</th>
<th>Counter-narrative Literature</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Gender</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race and ethnicity</td>
<td>Age (negative)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age (negative)</td>
<td>Parental immigrant status</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent's education</td>
<td>Parenthood/single parenthood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family income</td>
<td>Financially restricted, financially supported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concern about financing (negative)</td>
<td>Financial independence (negative)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school GPA</td>
<td>High school GPA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school class rank</td>
<td>Positive early educational experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SAT and ACT scores</td>
<td>GED attainment (negative)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advanced placement or college credits</td>
<td>Delayed enrollment (negative)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College preparatory or honors curriculum</td>
<td>Institutional commitment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years of foreign language</td>
<td>Motivation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years of physical science</td>
<td>Intent to persist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College GPA</td>
<td>Self-efficacy and self-esteem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remedial courses (negative)</td>
<td>Personal and family valuing of the degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional commitment</td>
<td>Personal and emotional health</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commitment to the goal of graduation</td>
<td>Self-assessment of skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intent to persist or leave</td>
<td>Personal growth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Feeling challenged and overwhelmed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Life challenger</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ability to juggle roles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Success in study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Love of learning</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Gender.* For many studies, gender is a dichotomous variable with results that demonstrate higher persistence rates for women than for men (Arrendondo & Knight, 2005; Astin, 2005; Berger & Milem, 1999; Campbell & Fuqua, 2008; DeBerard, Spielsman, & Julka, 2004; DesJardins, Ahlburg, & McCall, 2002; Dey, 1990; Horn & Carroll, 1996; Milem & Berger, 1997). Arredondo and Knight (2005) based their institution specific research on the Astin and Oseguera (2002) model of predicting graduation rates using the variables high school grades, test scores, race and ethnicity,
and gender which accounts for 32% to 35% of the variation in graduation rates. Each variable is prolific in the literature on persistence, closely followed by the statement that some of the difference in institutional graduation or persistence rates can be attributed to the characteristics of the students admitted (Arredondo & Knight, 2005; Astin, 2005; Astin & Oseguera, 2002; Dey, 1990; Kinser & Deitchman, 2007; Tinto, 1993).

In the Berger and Milem model (1999), being female has positive direct effects on several variables that affect persistence with social integration demonstrating the strongest relationship. In their earlier research (Milem & Berger, 1997), they also found strong correlations between being a woman and social integration, early involvement with peers, perceived support, and organized activities, each of which influences social integration and institutional commitment in their modified model that combines aspects of Astin’s (1984) and Tinto’s (1975, 1987, 1993) work. Several authors offer reasons for the higher persistence rates for women relative to men’s, such as women devote more time to studying than men (Nolden & Sedlacek, 1998 as cited by Campbell & Fuqua, 2008), the higher use of counseling and academic advising by freshmen women (DeBerard, Spielsman, & Julka, 2004), or men enrolling in greater numbers in programs like engineering and architecture and subsequently taking longer than four years to graduate (Dey, 1990).

With regard to a population of nontraditional undergraduate women, gender is an important variable not only because of its implications in the persistence literature, but also in social-political contexts where women have occupied an oppressed position. Even though women are achieving a numerical majority in the population (U.S. Census
Bureau, 2006), in higher education enrollment, and in bachelor’s (57% in 2006) and master’s (59% in 2006) degrees earned (Planty, et al., 2008), there are still gapping distances in women’s pay compared to men’s, which are more dismal when examined through the intersection of gender and race (Eagly & Carli, 2007). Catalyst, an organization with a mission to promote the advancement of women in business, calculates that in “Fortune 500” companies women hold 16% of executive level positions with only 2% held by women of color (Catalyst, 2006). While women are achieving educationally, men still occupy greater authority in earnings and positional leadership (Eagly and Carli, 2007). If education stands to decrease the gender disparities in the United States, than gender must also remain an important Self variable under review in the persistence literature.

Race and ethnicity. A second major Self variable and demographic characteristic in the literature is a student’s race and ethnicity. The research that addressed gender differences in persistence also tended to address racial differences and the results are inconsistent (Arrendondo & Knight, 2005; Astin 1975, 2005; Berger & Milem, 1998; DesJardins, Ahlburg, & McCall, 2002; Horn & Carroll, 1996; Milem & Berger, 1997). Applying Astin and Oseguera’s (2002) graduation rate formula of high school GPA, SAT scores, gender, and race and ethnicity, Arredondo and Knight (2005) found that African American students were more likely to persist than any other racial and ethnic group, including White, Asian American/Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, and Hispanic/Latino students. Simultaneously, Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander students had the lowest likelihood of persistence. In 1975, Astin identified White
students and Asian American students as having the highest probability of persistence, while Native American and Chicano students had the lowest probability of persistence. In 2005, Astin noted that “students are... more likely to complete the degree if they are Jewish, female, or White. No other racial variables proved to be significant” (2005, p. 9).

Berger and Milem (1999) note the “most troubling finding” (p. 657) of their research involved the persistence of African American students, such that being Black was the only statistically significant student entry characteristic predictor and was the third largest negative predictor of persistence. The only two variables that more strongly negatively predicted persistence were factors measuring non-involvement, a key to Tinto’s (1975, 1987, 1993) model as well as Berger and Milem’s adaptation. And yet, in an earlier study, Milem and Berger (1997) found that dichotomous racial groups, White and African American, both demonstrated high institutional commitment at entry, which is another important component of the Tinto model, and they found a weak negative relationship between being White and a student’s intent to persist. Milem and Berger also reported that African American students were less likely than White students to perceive the institution as supportive. DesJardins, Ahlburg, and McCall (2002) found that stopout students were more likely to be from underrepresented minority groups.

In addition, Jenkins, Harburg, Weissberg, and Donnelly (2004) investigated the differential effects of parental immigrant status for Black students making a distinction between voluntary and involuntary immigrant minorities. They found that Black students whose fathers were voluntary immigrants to the United States were more likely to be successful in college than those Black students whose parents were born in the United States.
States and therefore had an involuntary immigrant history based on Ogbu’s (1991, as cited in Jenkins, Harburg, Weissburg, & Donnelly, 2004) explanation of cultural models that are influenced both by the means of incorporation into a society and their responses to discriminatory forces enacted in their daily lives. Important notes accompanying the research of Jenkins, Harburg, Weissburg, and Donnelly (2004) include a caution against essentialization, as any group is composed of individuals with unique experiences. And second, the differences observed between the two groups are small, however, descriptive of the effects that generations of oppression and marginalization can have on students.

Some researchers did not mention race and ethnicity except as participant descriptors (See, for example, Cabrera, Castaneda, Nora, & Hengstler, 1992; Cabrera, Nora, & Castaneda, 1993; DeBerard, Spielsman, & Julka, 2004), and some did not find significant results with regard to race and ethnicity (See, for example, Campbell & Fuqua, 2008; DesJardins, Kim, & Rzonca, 2002; Titus, 2004; Titus, 2006). Further, recent research that has begun to explore groups of students by race and ethnicity often honors a student’s identity by focusing on one group of students, such as Native American students (Gloria & Robinson Kurpius, 2001; Guillory & Wolverton, 2008; Shotton, Oosahwe, & Cintrón, 2007), African American students (Flowers, 2004; Gloria, Robinson Kurpius, Hamilton, & Willson, 1999; Hagedorn, Maxwell, & Hampton, 2001), Chicano/a and Latino/a students (Gloria, 1997; Gloria, Castellanos, Lopez, & Rosales, 2005; Hernandez & Lopez, 2004), and Asian and Asian Pacific American students (Yeh, 2004).
For a population of nontraditional undergraduate women students, the literature discussing race and ethnicity is important to explore because of the similar position that nontraditional undergraduate women and students of color occupy on college campuses. While the two groups face very different forces of discrimination, they are each marginalized on campus and regarded as outsiders to campus operations and the persistence literature. In addition, for many nontraditional undergraduate women students, race is a significant aspect of their identities and requires researchers’ attention in this and future endeavors. Informed by critical race feminism, the experiences of nontraditional women of color should have different contributions to the literature and population overall given that the experiences of women of color are qualitatively different from White women or men of color both within and outside the academy.

Age. Research results regarding students’ age and likelihood of persistence are consistent with the definition of nontraditional students in that older students are less likely to persist (Choy, 2002; Hagedorn, Maxwell, & Hampton, 2002; Horn & Carroll, 1996). Choy (2002) and Horn and Carroll (1996), while not addressing age specifically, demonstrated that delayed enrollment and being financially independent each had a significant negative relationship with persistence and degree attainment. While they do not specify a student’s age, delayed enrollment is equivalent to a student waiting more than one year after high school graduation to enroll in college, making the nontraditional student at least slightly older by Choy’s and Horn and Carroll’s definitions. Further, financial independence is federally defined when a student turns 24 years old or becomes emancipated from her parents or guardians, also making it likely that students who are
financially independent are 24 years of age or older. Hagedorn, Maxwell, and Hampton (2001), in a study of African American men enrolled at a community college, found that a student’s chances of dropping out in their second and third semester increased by 9% and 16% respectively with every additional year in age. “Being younger was a significant predictor of retention” (Hagedorn, Maxwell, & Hampton, 2001, p. 257).

Similar to age, however, contrary to the previous findings, Kinser & Deitchman (2008) noted in their research on “tenacious persisters” that these returning students reported that their first attempt at college was unsuccessful because of their own immaturity and their adult status made them more committed college students.

Age is an important factor for analyzing the persistence of nontraditional undergraduate women, however, it is not the only demographic variable that weighs on student experience. As demonstrated in the research above, age is not mutually exclusive to other variables such as working full-time and being a single parent at the age of 24 years. There is the possibility that other factors, like employment and parental status, could influence a student’s persistence more heavily than simply her age.

There are other demographic characteristics mentioned in the traditional persistence literature such as parent’s education (Astin, 2005; Carter, 2006; Dixon Rayle, Arredondo, & Robinson Kurpius, 2005) and family income (Berger & Milem, 1998; Carter, 2006; DesJardins, Ahlburg, & McCall, 2002; Milem & Berger, 1997). The more financial support a student has at her disposal, the more likely she is to persist. Related to financial support, several authors noted that students’ concern about financing education
was negatively associated with persistence (Astin, 2005; Cabrera, Casteneda, Nora, & Hengstler, 1992; Cabrera, Nora, & Casteneda, 1993).

In summary, focusing on gender, race and ethnicity, and age as Self variables in student persistence highlights the groups of student sub-populations that have been specifically explored within this research. With respect to gender, women are generally more likely to persist than men. Race and ethnicity indicators are mixed, however, students of color are generally less likely to persist than White students. With regard to age, older students are less likely to persist.

**Pre-college characteristics.** The pre-college characteristics in the traditional persistence literature include previous academic performance measurements, such as high school GPA (Arrendondo & Knight, 2005; Bean, 1980; Berger & Milem, 1998; Campbell & Fuqua, 2008; DeBerard, Spielmans, & Julka, 2004; DesJardins, Ahlborg, & McCall, 2002; Dey, 1990; Dixon Rayle, Arredondo, & Robinson Kurpius, 2005; Hagedorn, Maxwell, & Hampton, 2002; Milem & Berger, 1997), high school class rank (Campbell & Fuqua, 2008; DesJardins, Ahlborg, & McCall, 2002), SAT and ACT scores (Arrendondo & Knight, 2005; DeBerard, Spielsman, & Julka, 2004; DesJardins, Ahlborg, McCall, 2002; Dey, 1990), Advanced Placement and college credits completed while in high school (DesJardins, Kim, & Rzonca, 2003), college preparatory or honors curriculum in high school (Carter, 2006), and years of foreign language and physical science (Astin, 2005). As composite measures for academic preparedness, each of these variables demonstrate that the higher a student’s academic achievement before attending college, the more likely she is to persist.
College assessment characteristics. Expanding on the assumption that greater academic achievement in high school leads to a greater likelihood of persistence, GPA is also utilized as a measure of academic achievement in college (Allen, Robbins, Casillas, & Oh, 2008; Bean, 1980, 1983; Berger & Milem, 1999; Cabrera, Casteneda, Nora, & Hengstler, 1992; Cabrera, Nora, & Casteneda, 1993; Campbell & Fuqua, 2008; Carter, 2006; DeBerard, Spielmans, & Julka, 2004; DesJardins, Ahlburg, & McCall, 2002; DesJardins, Kim, & Rzonca, 2003; Milem & Berger, 1997; Robbins et al., 2004; Robbins et al., 2006; Sorrey & Duggan, 2008). Also referenced is the completion of remedial courses, where DesJardins, Kim, and Rzonca (2003) found that students taking remedial courses were less likely to complete a degree and less likely to graduate in four years.

Psychological characteristics. Within the traditional student literature and based on Tinto’s (1975, 1987, 1993) model, institutional commitment is often cited in the literature as positively related to student persistence (Bean, 1980; Berger & Milem, 1998; Cabrera, Casteneda, Nora, & Hengstler, 1992; Cabrera, Nora, & Casteneda, 1993; Milem & Berger, 1997; Robbins et al., 2004; Robbins et al., 2006; Sorrey & Duggan, 2008; Titus, 2004), along with commitment to the goal of graduation (Bean, 1980; Cabrera, Casteneda, Nora, & Hengstler, 1992; Cabrera, Nora, & Casteneda, 1993; Robbins et al., 2004), intent to persist and intent to leave (Cabrera, Casteneda, Nora, & Hengstler, 1992; Cabrera, Nora, & Casteneda, 1993; Sorrey & Duggan, 2008), and physical and emotional health (Astin, 2005; Castles, 2004; DeBerard, Spielman, & Julka, 2004; Muller, 2008). With the exception of physical and emotional health, institutional commitment, goal commitment, and intent to leave are each distinct measures in Tinto’s model of student
departure and, therefore, operationalized and assessed in relation to departure. It is important to note that the theoretical framework of Tinto’s model and the resulting instruments employed to evaluate the model determine the extent of the questions that researchers can ask of their data (Zuberi & Bonilla-Silva, 2008), suggesting that the exploration of institutional commitment, goal commitment, and intent to leave are under-theorized to the extent that they remain uncritiqued (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) in the dominant persistence literature.

**Self counter-narrative.**

While the persistence factors above are prevalent in persistence research and helpful to keep in mind, there are several examples where the measured factors would not relate to the experiences of nontraditional undergraduate women. For example, high school grade point average is not likely to carry the same meaning for traditional students just leaving high school as for the nontraditional student who has been out of high school, perhaps for 10 years. Similarly, the above studies have not compared traditional students to nontraditional students to determine how the predominant persistence models respond differently to different populations. Since the majority of persistence literature has been conducted with traditional college participants, I have turned to the literature on women, adult students, and students of color to offer alternative perspectives to understanding the Self variable in persistence literature.

In a review of the literature that seeks the critical race feminist counter-narrative, gender, race and ethnicity, and age are relevant in their relation to persistence. Horn and Carroll (1996) investigate nontraditional students’ characteristics and the effect on
persistence. Using two national databases, Horn and Carroll isolated the characteristics of nontraditional students as delayed enrollment into college, part-time enrollment, financial independence, working full-time while enrolled, having dependents other than a spouse, being a single parent, or having earned a GED. After controlling for all other variables women, in this case nontraditional women, were significantly more likely to persist or have attained a degree after four years than were nontraditional men; 66.8% compared to 63.4%. Even though these statistics are too low to suggest satisfactory persistence for either group, this finding especially may throw into question my decision to limit the focus of this research to nontraditional undergraduate women. However, my justification for highlighting nontraditional undergraduate women is their increasing enrollment numbers and the relative lack of existing research on the population. With regard to race and ethnicity, Horn and Carroll (1996) found that Asian/Pacific Islander students were most likely to persist compared to White students, Hispanic students, Black students, and American Indian/Alaskan Native students. (See the initial discussion of demographic characteristics for information on age, as the stated research was only conducted with counter-populations)

The literature review of non-traditional populations cites Self variables that resemble those extracted from the traditional literature base, such as financial constraints (Carter, 2006; Dixon Rayle, Arredondo, & Robinson Kurpius, 2005; Horn & Carroll, 1996; Gillory & Wolverton, 2008; Kinser & Deitchman, 2008; McGivney, 2004; Sorrey & Duggan, 2008) and academic performance indicators (Carter, 2006; Castles, 2004; Choy, 2002; Dixon Rayle, Arredondo, & Robinson Kurpius, 2005; Hagedorn, Maxwell,
& Hampton, 2002; Horn & Carroll, 1996; Sorrey & Duggan, 2008). In a study of women online learners, Muller (2008) found that key facilitators of persistence included perceptions of feeling challenged and personal growth. Muller’s findings noted emotional hurdles as key barriers to persistence, such as feelings of anxiety, feeling overwhelmed by the coursework, and frustration trying to balance conflicting demands on their time. Castles (2004) investigated persistence factors for adult students in the Open University in the United Kingdom and found that being a life challenger, the ability to juggle roles, perceived success in study, and love of learning were reported as factors positively affecting persistence. Castles’ description of the personality type, life-challenger, is someone who possesses the confidence and coherence to mobilize resources and respond to the external environment in such a way that regards the demands of life as worthy challenges to be overcome (2006, p. 171). Additional Self variables include self-efficacy and self-esteem (Dixon Rayle, Arredondo, & Robinson Kurpius, 2005; Gloria & Robinson Kurpius, 2001; Holder, 2007), personal and family valuing of education (Dixon Rayle, Arredondo, & Robinson Kurpius, 2005; Hagedorn, Maxwell, & Hampton, 2002), personal and emotional health (Castles, 2006), self-assessment of academic skills (Hagedorn, Maxwell, & Hampton, 2002), and personal motivation (McGivney, 2004).

The overarching themes of the research counter-narrative for the Self variable include motivation and self-efficacy. Many of the studies that contributed to the counter-narrative discussed variables that can be subsumed under the larger themes of motivation and self-efficacy, which are positive influences on persistence. Research conducted by
Dixson Rayle, Arredondo, and Robinson Kurpius (2005), explores issues of academic self-efficacy related to undergraduate women. In the rationale for their research, the authors state that

Despite women’s advances in higher education during the past 30 years, women still face psychosocial disadvantages in educational pursuits when compared with men. For instance, women report lower educational self-efficacy, have lower self-esteem, experience higher academic stress, and often perceive less support for education. For women of color (who remain underrepresented on campuses), these factors are barriers to educational success (Gloria, 1997). (Dixson Rayle, Arredondo, & Robinson Kurpius, 2005, p. 361)

Self-efficacy is described by Bandura (1977) as a student’s belief in her ability to obtain a desired outcome successfully. Specifically, Bandura hypothesizes “that expectations of personal efficacy determine whether coping behavior will be initiated, how much effort will be expended, and how long it will be sustained in the face of obstacles and aversive experiences” (1977, p. 191). In relation to students’ decisions about remaining in school, self-efficacy influences how the student navigates difficulty and obstacles in the education process, and for nontraditional undergraduate women, obstacles are numerous and rarely recognized by the institution.

Situation.

Schlossberg’s (Goodman, Schlossberg, & Anderson, 2006) Situation variable includes ways of assessing the environment relative to the transition, including changes in the urgency of a transition and changes in how one views herself in the transition. Descriptors for assessing the Situation variable include

- Trigger – What set off the transition?
- Timing – How does the transition relate to one’s social clock?
- Control – what aspects of the transition can one control?
- Role change – Does the transition involve role change?
• Duration – Is the transition seen as permanent or temporary?
• Previous experience with the transition – How has the individual met similar transitions?
• Concurrent stress – What and how great are the stresses facing the individual now, if any?
• Assessment – Does the individual view the situation positively, negatively, or as benign? (Schlossberg, Goodman, & Anderson, 2006, p. 60)

Applying transition theory to student persistence, the Situation variable incorporates those contextual characteristics of the college-going environment. For organizational purposes, I have divided the Situation variables from the literature into two groups: internal to the higher education institution and external to the institution (see Table 3).

Table 3: Situation Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Traditional Literature</th>
<th>Counter-narrative Literature</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Institutional selectivity, type, prestige</td>
<td>Part-time enrollment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional size (negative)</td>
<td>Course and institutional related issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bureaucracy(negative)</td>
<td>Institution is not &quot;adult friendly&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collegial organizational behavior</td>
<td>Perception of university environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Symbolic organizational behavior</td>
<td>Comfort in the university environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political organizational behavior (negative)</td>
<td>No personal or family crises</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational communication</td>
<td>No new stressors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational fairness</td>
<td>Distractions and demands on time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational participation</td>
<td>Multiple responsibilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional revenue, expenditure</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>behaviors</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Campus housing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In-state vs. Out-of-state residency</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working for pay, off campus (negative)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working at home, childcare (negative)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practical value and utility of a degree</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marriage (negative)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunity to transfer (negative)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Internal to the institution.** One of the most debated institutional factors is institutional selectivity (Allen, Robbins, Casillas, & Oh, 2008; Astin, 2005; Robbins, et al., 2004; Titus, 2004), such that the greater the institutional selectivity, the greater the student persistence. The debate concerning the use of institutional selectivity as a predictor of persistence is related to the characteristics of the incoming students as predictors of persistence, as these two measures are closely related (Arredondo & Knight, 2005; Astin, 2005; Astin & Oseguera, 2002; Dey, 1990; Kinser & Deitchman, 2007; Tinto, 1993). More selective institutions admit more academically competitive students according to high school GPA and standardized test scores which are positive predictors of persistence. By assessing institutional selectivity as a persistence factor, the researcher is conflating the Self characteristics that students bring to an institution and the Situation characteristic of institutional selectivity so that it is impossible to determine whether the students are more likely to persist on their own or if the institution is specifically more suited to encourage student persistence based on institutional actions, setting, and policy.

Measuring institutional selectivity implies that as an institutional variable, it is the institution itself that impacts student persistence, however, given that selective institutions admit students with a higher likelihood of persistence, one cannot judge whether it is the institutional or student characteristics that determine persistence. Similarly, institutional type (Astin, 2005; Carter, 2006; Dey, 1990; Horn & Carroll, 1996), institutional size (Berger, 2001; Kamens, 1971, 1974; Titus, 2004), and prestige (Berger, 2001; Kamens, 1971, 1974; Meyer, 1970) are also correlated with persistence.
Some studies also research the subtle aspects of organizational behavior and organizational culture that influence student persistence (Astin & Scherrei, 1980; Berger, 2001; Blau, 1973; Berger & Braxton, 1998; Berger & Milem, 1999). Berger (2001) bases his extensive investigation of organizational factors and student persistence on the assumption that organizational behavior and organizational culture influence student perceptions, behavior, outcomes. By influencing student perceptions, organizational culture thereby influences student persistence. Citing the literature on organizational behavior, Berger suggests that collegial (Berger & Milem, 1999), symbolic, and systemic aspects of organizational behavior positively influence persistence, while bureaucratic and political forms of organizational behavior are related to lower persistence. Specifically, those institutions that demonstrate cultures more inclined to collegial, symbolic, and systemic aspects of organizational behavior will have higher rates of student persistence. Those institutions whose culture is more representative of bureaucratic and political styles will have lower student persistence.

Organizational communication (Berger & Braxton, 1998), fairness towards students (Bean, 1980; Berger & Braxton, 1998; Braxton & Brier, 1989), and participation of students in organizational culture and decision making (Bean, 1983; Berger & Braxton, 1998) significantly influence student social integration and effect student persistence. Titus (2006) found correlations between institutional revenue and expenditure patterns and student persistence. Specifically, institutions with higher percentages of revenue from tuition and total expenditures designated per full-time
equivalent student were both positively related to student persistence, making an argument for mission driven and student-centered budgetary considerations.

Researchers have related on campus housing to increased student persistence (Astin, 2005; Bean, 1980; Campbell & Fuqua, 2008; Titus, 2006), while out-of-state residency is related to lower persistence (Arrendondo & Knight, 2005; DesJardins, Ahlburg, & McCall, 2002; DesJardins, Kim, & Rzonca, 2003).

*External to the institution.* Astin (2005) cited three different areas of employment that negatively affected students’ persistence; working for pay, work at home and providing childcare, and working off campus. Utilizing a model based on employee turnover in work organizations, Bean (1980, 1983) found that the practical value and utility of a degree (Sorrey & Dugan, 2008), marriage, and opportunity other than college, including opportunity to transfer to another institution, were all related to student persistence. Practical value and degree utility positively predicted persistence, while marriage and opportunity were negatively related to persistence such that the greater the opportunity to leave the institution, the lower the likelihood of persistence. These conclusions support the image of a traditional college student as one who does not work or have strenuous obligations off campus, thereby placing the nontraditional undergraduate woman, with her multiple obligations outside of college, at an increased risk for institutional departure.

*Situation counter-narrative.*

The above literature discussing the experiences of traditional students in college, while briefly considering variables external to the institution, hardly addresses the depth
of external factors relevant for nontraditional undergraduate women. In addition, the internal institutional variables that are likely to be most significant to nontraditional undergraduate women include accessibility of services and availability of helpful institutional actors (Tones, Fraser, Elder, & White, 2009), which are not addressed in the traditional literature.

The literature on non-traditional populations references the influence of institutional factors and factors external to the institution; however, the tenor of the factors is significantly different than for traditional students. The counter-narrative describes campus climate (Gloria, Castellanos, Lopez, & Rosales, 2005; Gloria & Robinson Kurpius, 2001; Gloria, Robinson Kurpius, Hamilton, & Willson, 1999; McGivney, 2004) and competing demands (Castles, 2004; Choy, 2002; Horn & Carroll, 1996; Kinser & Deitchman, 2008; Muller, 2008) as the most pressing Situation variables for nontraditional populations. The unifying themes for the literature under the Situation variable are students’ multiple roles and sense of biculturation.

Tones, Fraser, Elder, and White (2009) examined the experiences of mature students and found that responsibility conflicts were the most cited barrier to persistence in focus group interviews. Specifically, students noted family and financial obligations as taking time away from academic demands. Kinser and Deitchman (2007) also emphasize that not only do competing demands for attention inhibit nontraditional undergraduate women while they are enrolled in school, but competing demands due to students’ multiple roles also constitute reasons for current and previous periods of non-
enrollment. Muller (2004) identified similar competing demands as “fact of life reasons” (p. 37) for adult student stop out.

With regard to biculturation, Rodgers and Summers (2008) identify biculturation as relevant to the persistence of African American students. The authors utilize Birman’s (1998, as cited in Rodgers & Summers, 2008) definition of biculturalism as the ability of an individual to function in two distinct cultures, a main culture and a sub-culture. For Rodgers and Summers, the main culture is the dominant culture of society and the university setting and the sub-culture is the various communities of African Americans that students will seek out in order to feel comfortable. The authors also liken biculturalism to W. E. B. Du Bois’ (1903) double consciousness. While biculturalism is likely more pronounced for students of color, for nontraditional undergraduate women, the process of biculturation may also apply broadly to women of color and White women, with regard to their academic identities in addition to the context of racial identity salience. Nontraditional undergraduate women may find a disconnect between their lives at school and their lives outside of school because it is unlikely that their lived experiences are going to be invited into the classroom or that their academic experiences are going to get much attention at home or at work. Thus, creating two worlds, two cultures where nontraditional undergraduate women operate, both requiring proficiency.

A factor mentioned only briefly by the literature and related to the concept of biculturation and Situation variables is critical mass. Hagedorn, Chi, Cepeda, and McLain (2007) note the scientific definition of critical mass as “the amount of substance necessary for a reaction to begin” and “within the field of education, the term has been
adapted to indicate a level of representation that brings comfort or familiarity within the education environment” (p. 74). The authors explore critical mass as it influences the academic success of Latino students and find a positive relationship between critical mass and academic success, encouraging institutions to consider the effects that a critical mass of students of color, as well as nontraditional undergraduate women, might have on persistence.

Support.

The Support variable categorizes what kind of help is available for students to navigate their transition usually in the form of family and friends, work relationships, community groups, and opportunities to utilize counseling services. Waters and Samson (1993, as cited by Goodman, Schlossberg, & Anderson, 2006) developed nine areas of support needs, including:

- Acceptance
- Self-esteem
- Love and physical intimacy
- Personal and work connections
- Peers (people in a particular arena, e.g., other parents of adolescents)
- Stimulation and challenge
- Role models
- Guidance (mentors or sponsors), and
- Comfort and assistance (p. 106)

Relating the Support variable to student persistence, it is fairly evident in the literature that students need to be able to identify areas of academic and social support to be successful in college (see Table 4).
Table 4: Support Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Traditional Literature</th>
<th>Counter-narrative Literature</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Academic integration</td>
<td>Smooth interaction with the university</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student-faculty interaction</td>
<td>Integrating into the institution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developing relationships with faculty</td>
<td>Supportive learner group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction within a student’s chosen major</td>
<td>Prompt follow up for services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participating in campus organizations</td>
<td>Academic stress (negative)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling supported by the institution</td>
<td>Engagement in learning community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A sense of distributive justice</td>
<td>Faculty support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling accepted by the institution</td>
<td>Perceived mentorship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social support and social integration</td>
<td>Sense of belonging</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social connectedness</td>
<td>Validation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social involvement</td>
<td>Social support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support from peers</td>
<td>Social integration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support from friends</td>
<td>Support from friends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support from parents and family</td>
<td>Emotional support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attending religious services</td>
<td>Family support</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Academic support.** One of the primary opportunities for academic support for students is the concept of academic integration (Berger & Milem, 1999; Cabrera, Casteneda, Nora, & Hengstler, 1992; Cabrera, Nora, & Casteneda, 1993; McGivney, 2004; Milem & Berger, 1997; Sorrey & Duggan, 2008), central to Tinto’s (1975, 1987, 1993) theory of student departure. Other academic support variables include student-faculty interaction and developing faculty relationships (Bean, 1980; Berger & Braxton, 1998; Berger & Milem, 1999; Milem & Berger, 1997), interaction within a student’s chosen major (Arrendondo & Knight, 2005; Astin, 2005), participating in campus organizations (Bean, 1980), feeling supported by the institution as a whole (Berger & Milem, 1999; Milem & Berger, 1997), a sense of distributive justice (Bean, 1980), and feeling accepted by the institution (Nora, 2004).
**Social support.** In some research, support was measured broadly as a predictor of student persistence (DeBerard, Spielsman, & Julka, 2004; Castles, 2004, McGivney, 2004; Robbins, et al., 2004; Sorrey & Duggan, 2008). In addition, there are measurements of social integration (Berger & Milem, 1999; Cabrera, Casteneda, Nora, & Hengstler, 1992; Cabrera, Nora, & Casteneda, 1993; Milem & Berger, 1997), social connectedness (Allen, Robbins, Casillas, & Oh, 2008; Berger & Braxton, 1998), and social involvement (Robbins, et al., 2004; Titus, 2006) which all relate positively to student persistence. There are also several factors related to support from peers (Berger & Braxton, 1998; Berger & Milem, 1999; Milem & Berger, 1997), friends (Cabrera, Casteneda, Nora, & Hengstler, 1992; Cabrera, Nora, & Casteneda, 1993), and parents and family (Cabrera, Casteneda, Nora, & Hengstler, 1992; Cabrera, Nora, & Casteneda, 1993). Astin (2005) also cites that attending religious services positively predicts persistence.

**Support counter-narrative.**

In some similarity to the traditional literature, the counter-narrative literature notes the importance effects of involvement (Castles, 2004; McGivney, 2004; Muller, 2008), stress (Dixon Rayle, Arredondo, & Robinson Kurpius, 2005; Gloria, Castellanos, Lopez, & Rosales, 2005; Gloria & Robinson Kurpius, 2001; Gloria, Robinson Kurpius, Hamilton, & Willson, 1999), and social integration (Castles, 2004; Holder, 2007; McGivney, 2008; Sorrey & Duggan, 2008). However, beyond the traditional literature Support variables, the unifying themes of the counter-narrative literature are a sense of belonging and validation.
Grier-Reed, Madyun, and Buckley (2008) developed a weekly program designed to support African American students at a predominantly White institution and they report that students described the program as providing a safe space, connectedness, empowerment, and a home base. One student participant stated “I think lots of times retention has something to do with whether or not you feel you belong at the college or university you are attending and I feel that AFAM gives you, gives me that sense of belonging” (Grier-Reed, Madyun, & Buckley, 2008, p. 483). Hausman, Ye, Schofield, and Woods (2009) found that sense of belonging had a direct effect on institutional commitment and indirect effects on intent to persist and persistence behavior for both White and African American students. Walton and Cohen (2007) demonstrated the ability to protect a student’s sense of belonging with African American computer science students. By telling an experimental group of students that it is normal to have doubts about whether they belong in the institution, students’ sense of belonging did not decline over time compared to a peer control group. There were additional academic effects, including spending more time studying, communicating with professors more frequently, expressing greater academic confidence, and a greater improvement in GPA over time.

The importance of sense of belonging for nontraditional undergraduate women arises when there are only a few nontraditional undergraduate women on a campus and they begin to feel isolated due to their different educational and life experiences. Institutional culture can also have an effect on sense of belonging for nontraditional undergraduate women especially in service delivery, campus images, and institutional goals.
Rendón’s (1994) theory of student validation recognizes and responds to the lack of sense of belonging and increased feelings of doubt that students of color often feel when they are pursuing a bachelor’s degree. In Rendón’s research, she identifies the characteristics of validation as

1. Validation is an enabling, confirming, and supportive process initiated by in- and out-of-class agents that foster academic and interpersonal development.
2. When validation is present, students feel capable of learning; they experience a feeling of self-worth and feel that they, and everything that they bring to the college experience, are accepted and recognized as valuable. Lacking validation, students feel crippled, silenced, subordinate, and/or mistrusted.
3. Like involvement, validation is a prerequisite to student development.
4. Validation can occur both in- and out-of-class. In-class validating agents include faculty, classmates, lab instructors, and teaching assistants…
5. Validation suggests a developmental process. It is not an end in itself. The more students get validated, the richer the academic and interpersonal experience.
6. Validation is most effective when offered early in the student’s college experience, during the first year of college and during the first few weeks of class. (p. 44-45)

The value of validation cannot be underestimated for nontraditional undergraduate women and, like sense of belonging, its absence can result in students stopping out of school in favor of other life activities that do provide validation. In addition, Rendón (1994) notes that validation should be given early in a student’s career, and it is very possible that nontraditional undergraduate women have not received validation in their previous educational histories, which could lead to periods of nonenrollment. Therefore the intentional validation of nontraditional undergraduate women at any point in their college career is critical to their persistence.
Strategy.

In Schlossberg’s (Schlossberg, 1984; Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 1995; Goodman, Schlossberg, & Anderson, 2006) transition theory, the Strategy variable mainly represents coping strategies that an individual has at her disposal, primarily changing the environment or changing the individual’s response to the environment. For researching student persistence, the Strategy variable may present the greatest opportunity for future research and implications because it includes the direct responses and maneuvers by students and institutions to mitigate stress and transition. The Strategy variables are organized by student Strategy statements and supported by the persistence factors as they are described in the literature. The student Strategy statements, while limited by the literature and not exhaustive, can also provide insight to college administrators and faculty who are interested in supporting student persistence (see Table 5).

Table 5: Strategy Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Traditional Literature</th>
<th>Counter-narrative Literature</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Develop study, time management strategies</td>
<td>Strategic approach to learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manage the course work plan</td>
<td>Time and study management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Know coping skills, preferences, resources</td>
<td>Good pre-entry information and advice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communicate</td>
<td>High quality course content and delivery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Utilize financial aid</td>
<td>Effective tutors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Schedule convenience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Disappointment in faculty (negative)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Major selection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Remedial courses in language or math</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Giving back to the community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Certainty of major</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Develop study and time management strategies. Researchers have reported on the positive persistence effects of hours spent studying (Astin, 2005), academic self-discipline (Allen, Robbins, Casillas, & Oh, 2008; Robbins, et al., 2006), and academic skills (Robbins, et al., 2004).

Manage the course work plan. There is empirical support for the effectiveness of course selection (Cabrera, Casteneda, Nora, & Hengstler, 1992) and number of credits taken (DesJardins, Kim, & Rzonca, 2003) in supporting persistence.

Know your coping skills, preferences, and resources. The research demonstrates that smoking and drinking behaviors utilized as coping behaviors for college stressors has a negative relationship to student persistence (Astin, 2005; DeBerard, Spielsman, & Julka, 2004). Conversely, knowing what coping strategies are available and effective has a positive relationship with student persistence (DeBerard, Spielsman, & Julka, 2004). Also, Robbins, et al., (2006) related emotional control to increased likelihood of persistence.

Communicate. Hermanowicz (2004) and Robbins, et al. (2006) show that effectively communicating with college faculty and staff is positively related to student persistence.

Utilize financial aid. While there are mixed results about the effectiveness of financial aid in promoting persistence (DesJardins, Ahlburg, & McCall, 2002; Paulsen & St. John, 2002), Carter (2006) reports that affordability of college increased the persistence of students to graduation.
Strategy counter-narrative.

While nontraditional undergraduate women will likely benefit from the Strategy variables listed for traditional students, different factors appear in the nontraditional persistence literature.

**Adopt a strategic approach to learning.** In Castles’ (2004) research, adult students reported that “adopting a strategic approach to learning which involved working towards assessment and reflective study” (p. 176) increased their likelihood of persisting to degree completion.

**Seek good entry information and advising.** McGivney (2004) notes that high quality information and advising early in a student’s return to college effectively increases student persistence.

**Give back to the community.** Guillroy and Wolverton (2008) found that persisting to graduation was greatly influenced by the degree to which students were able to give back to their communities while enrolled and saw their degree allowing them to make a difference in the community after graduation.

In concluding the assessment of the nontraditional persistence literature for Strategy variables, I need to note the very limited information available to help nontraditional undergraduate women improve their own possibilities for persistence based on the existing literature. Coupled with the lack of information on the population as a student body overall, the lack of research that addresses the Strategy variable communicates a lack of interest or a lack of understanding on the part of the higher education community to fully support nontraditional undergraduate women in their
academic pursuits. In addition to exploring the experiences of nontraditional undergraduate women as related to their persistence decisions, future research should also address the particular strategies that have helped other nontraditional undergraduate women achieve their educational goals and earn a bachelor’s degree.

**Transition Theory Model of Nontraditional Undergraduate Women’s Persistence**

Williams (1997) states that counter-story telling is “mostly about learning to listen to other people’s stories and then finding ways to make those stories matter in the legal system” (p. 765), or in this case, the educational system. Considering the vast list of persistence factors and then constructing a persistence counter-narrative has helped me to identify several conclusions that I believe are relevant to the persistence of nontraditional undergraduate women specifically. First, traditional models of student persistence, Astin (1975, 1984), Tinto (1975, 1987, 1993), and Bean (1980, 1983), were not designed with nontraditional undergraduate women in mind, therefore, they do not appear to resonate with the issues raised by this community of learners. Second, because of the early research trend towards explaining college students as a large, seemingly homogeneous group, little empirical attention has been given to nontraditional undergraduate women. Third, the counter-narrative themes that arise from a review of the persistence literature, motivation and self-efficacy, multiple roles and biculturation, and sense of belonging and validation, are substantively different than the corresponding themes illuminated through the traditional persistence literature. And fourth, while the list of persistence factors generated in this research is a start, there is a need to fill this gap in the persistence research by investigating the educational experiences of nontraditional undergraduate
women specifically. Future research should evaluate the legitimacy of the counter-narrative themes for nontraditional undergraduate women based upon students’ direct experiences and understandings of their experiences.

Combining the above conclusions with the existing literature, critical race feminism, and Schlossberg’s (Schlossberg, 1984; Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 1995; Goodman, Schlossberg, & Anderson, 2006) transition theory yields a fledgling model of nontraditional undergraduate women’s persistence for institutional understanding and application. The model (see Appendix F) applies the transition theory classification of persistence factors to a format that can be used by college professionals who are working with nontraditional undergraduate women to assess assets and liabilities with regard to their college persistence.

In the model, the four variables of Self, Situation, Support, and Strategies fall under the control of either the student or the institution. Self and Strategy are variables that are within the realm of the student. Situation and Support are variables within the institutional context and control. The 2x2 design also categorizes variables as relatively dynamic or static, such that Self and Situation are largely static variables and Strategy and Support are relatively dynamic variables. Beginning with the Strategy variables, these are primarily within the student’s control and are relatively dynamic giving the student opportunities to seek out and apply strategies for their persistence to graduation. The Support variable has been transformed to offer institutional accountability where institutional actors can offer changes to academic and institutional practices in order to encourage the persistence path for nontraditional undergraduate women. The Self
variable is relatively static such that high school GPA, for example, cannot be adjusted after the fact, however, the psychological characteristics are available to the student to make changes and improve persistence, albeit not without difficulty. The Situation variable is also relatively difficult to change under the institution’s leverage, however, it is not fixed. For example, many institutions are seeking to improve campus climate (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pedersen, & Allen, 1999; Steele, 2003), especially to improve racial and ethnic intergroup relations, identify systematic power and oppression, and become more inclusive.

The primary counter-narrative themes within each category serve as opportunities for persistence, and by assessing the student’s perceived obstacles and then working with the student to improve the themes, institutional actors can help nontraditional undergraduate women understand and overcome their barriers to persistence. For example, within the Self category, there are factors in the literature that students may identify as barriers to their continued enrollment and by assessing and addressing a student’s motivation and self-efficacy an institutional actor may be able to help a student prolong her persistence and progress towards educational goals.

An academic advisor working with a nontraditional undergraduate student might discuss her limited financial resources that restrict her from going to school full-time, her obligations to home, family, and career, and her difficulty adjusting to doing homework and writing papers having been out of school for some time. First, examining the Self variable, financial barriers are one of the most cited reasons for nontraditional undergraduate women to stop out of college. This discussion with the student should
focus on motivation and self-efficacy in terms of the goals that she has for herself – why did she enroll in college? What are her career and post-graduation goals? (Grier-Reed, Madyun, & Buckley, 2008). She is making sacrifices for a reason and those reasons need to remain paramount when other obstacles arise. The most obvious opportunity for the advisor in this situation is to pursue scholarship and funding possibilities with the student so that additional financial resources can be employed towards her educational goals.

Then, discussing a student’s obligations outside of school, which for nontraditional undergraduate women are numerous, would suggest that the advisor look into the Situation category and begin to facilitate a conversation with the student about her multiple roles and biculturation, acknowledging the expected difficulty in making changes in her already established life, similar to what Tones, Fraser, Elder, and White (2009) describe. Also, in validating the student’s concern with juggling multiple roles at home, work, and school, the advisor can then work with the student to understand the opportunities and motivation she does have for making the difficult juggling act work.

The student’s difficulty writing papers and being a student again after some time away from school illustrates the Support variable where her sense of belonging and academic validation are important aspects of student persistence. Reassuring the student of tutoring opportunities or writing assistance is valuable, as long as these services are readily available to the nontraditional student’s schedule. But more importantly, encouraging the student to meet with her faculty members so they can get to know each other not only provides academic assistance to the student, but facilitates a validating relationship with a faculty member and teaches the student to employ this tactic in future
classes. Faculty members are the primary providers of validation experiences for nontraditional students (Rendón, 1994) especially given that the majority of their college experiences happen within the classroom context.

Conclusion

For this literature review, I have explored the existing literature for illustrations of persistence factors for nontraditional undergraduate women seeking a bachelor’s degree. I employ critical race feminism as an epistemological and analytical framework, along with Schlossberg’s transition theory (Schlossberg, 1984; Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 1995; Goodman, Schlossberg, & Anderson, 2006) as a tool to organize the literature review. I began examining the persistence literature with an overview of Astin’s (1975, 1984), Tinto’s (1970, 1987, 1993), and Bean’s (1980, 1983) prominently utilized persistence models and the implications of each for nontraditional undergraduate women. Then I constructed a critical race feminist critique of the popular persistence literature and the seeming neglect of nontraditional undergraduate women’s voices and experiences. Realizing the lack of persistence research on nontraditional undergraduate women, I used Schlossberg’s transition theory to organize both the traditional persistence literature and the counter-narrative nontraditional persistence literature, which is comprised of research on women students, adult students, and students of color. Based on the traditional and nontraditional literature, I constructed a transition theory model of nontraditional undergraduate women’s persistence that can be used by institutions and practitioners to understand and support the continued persistence of this important population.
The literature on persistence experiences will have to keep pace while nontraditional women undergraduates continue to seek bachelor’s degrees in greater numbers and institutions make decisions to recruit this diverse demographic of students. Assembling the bodies of persistence literature and noted factors and developing a critical race feminism counter-narrative of persistence has established a foundation for the doctoral dissertation and provided a structure for investigating the lived academic experiences of nontraditional undergraduate women. Reviewing and critiquing the literature has illustrated for me the research gap regarding the factors, variables, and influences relevant to nontraditional undergraduate women’s persistence experiences, which served as a sensitizing concept (Glaser, 1978) throughout this research. To gain a rich understanding of this complex body of students, my dissertation research built on the foundational persistence literature and the critical race feminist counter-narrative presented here to explore the specific educational experiences of nontraditional undergraduate women, their strategies and barriers to graduation, and their suggestions for improving institutional practices relative to the specific persistence concerns of nontraditional undergraduate women.
Chapter 3: Research Methodology and Design

Introduction

Based on the review of the prominent persistence literature, there is no theory currently available to portray and explain the persistence behaviors, attitudes, and decisions of nontraditional undergraduate women enrolled in a bachelor’s program. While there are models to describe the patterns of persistence and attrition for different populations of students, the unique single-gendered, weekend, and bachelor’s degree combination available at the small single-gendered college provides not only a population of nontraditional undergraduate women, but also an environment designed with the population at the center. This research utilized my experiential knowledge of advising nontraditional undergraduate women, the previous review of the extant literature, and a modified grounded theory method to derive a theory of nontraditional undergraduate women’s persistence in a bachelor’s degree program. The current chapter describes the critical components of grounded theory methodology, how the method will be modified within this research, and the specific parameters of data collection and analysis employed for this research.

Grounded Theory Methodology

Glaser and Strauss first introduced grounded theory and grounded theory method in *Awareness of Dying* (1965) and *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (1967), the latter is considered the “central reference point” (Bryant, 2002, p. 27), the “pioneering book”
(Bryant & Charmaz, 2007b, p. 31; Charmaz, 2000, p. 511), the “key canonical text” (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007a, p. 1), the “original text” (Dey, 1999, p. 2), and “cutting edge technique” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 5). While *Discovery* remains the central and original grounded theory text, there has been considerable application and adaptation of the method from its early presentation, and even a divergence between Glaser’s and Strauss’ approaches to the method as each refined its specifications (Charmaz, 2000; Stern, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Despite the divergence in practice of grounded theory, there remains some consensus among the primary grounded theorists as to the critical components of grounded theory that set it apart as a methodology, including

- The purpose of grounded theory is the express development of theory from data, not from preconceived, literature-deduced hypotheses (Charmaz, 2006; Dey, 1999; Hood, 2007; Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

- Data collection and data analysis are conducted simultaneously whereby analysis follows the first document review, observation, or interview which is further supported by the constant comparative method and theoretical sampling (Charmaz, 2006; Dey, 1999; Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

- The constant comparative method is employed to continuously compare incident to incident, incident to categories, categories to categories, and categories to the emerging theory. Writing memos is an important component of the constant comparative method so that the patterns, variations, and analytical depth are empirically recorded (Charmaz, 2006; Dey, 1999; Hood, 2007; Strauss & Corbin, 1990).
Theoretical sampling is used to focus data collection and analysis in order to elaborate on the conceptual categories, making them dense and relationally oriented. Theoretical saturation refers to the point at which a data target no longer adds new information to a category, the category is fully developed, and the researcher changes direction to evaluate another category or concept in the emerging theory (Charmaz, 2006; Dey, 1999; Hood, 2007; Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

There are differences that exist as the method is applied by various researchers, several of which will be elaborated in the sections that follow regarding the main components of grounded theory including, theory generated from data, data collection and analysis, constant comparison, and theoretical sampling. Dey (1999) noted that

given the uncertainties that afflict social science research... there is something undeniably reassuring in the identification and repetition of key points setting out a methodological perspective. However, I suggest that a conventional summary of this kind provides only a very partial answer to the question: what is grounded theory? (p. 2)

**Theory generated from data.**

Writing about grounded theory, Glaser and Strauss (1967) were largely responding to the tendency of sociological research to focus on verifying existing theories, which had been developed by the “great men” of sociology. “Currently, students are trained to master great-man theories and to test them in small ways, but hardly to question the theory as a whole in terms of its position or manner of generation” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 10). Throughout the original text (1967) and subsequent works (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), Glaser and Strauss contested the typical forcing of data gleaned from new research settings into pre-determined hypotheses that had been mined...
from the literature of the great-man theories. Charmaz (2000) also noted that Glaser’s and Strauss’ (1967) work was revolutionary because they not only challenged conceptions of theory, but also perceptions that qualitative research was not rigorous and could not lead to theory development like the more popular quantitative methods.

The most popular aspect of grounded theory, possibly to a fault (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007a, 2007b), has been the adoption of the grounded theory mantra; theory grounded in the data. Bryant and Charmaz (2007a, 2007b) point out that while grounded theory has become the most prevalent qualitative research method applied, few researchers reference any works beyond the original Glaser and Strauss (1967) or expound on any of the critical components beyond the mantra. Although, a short scan of Glaser and Strauss (1967) reveals how the mantra developed.

In this book, we address ourselves to the... important enterprise of *how the discovery of theory from data – systematically obtained and analyzed in social research – can be furthered*. We believe that the discovery of theory from data – which we call *grounded theory* – is a major task confronting sociology today... (p. 1)

The basic theme in our book is the discovery of theory from data systematically obtained from social research. (p. 2)

Generating a theory from data means that most hypotheses and concept not only come from the data, but are systematically worked out in relation to the data during the course of research. (p. 6)

Several authors respond to the popular adoption of grounded theory in qualitative research and the resulting criticisms by identifying three strands of grounded theory and the similarities and differences in each (Charmaz, 2000), distinguishing grounded theory methods from the generic inductive qualitative model (Hood, 2007), and clarifying each of the critical components of grounded theory (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007; Charmaz, 2006;
Dey, 1999). Bryant (2002) goes so far as to state that “one of the reasons that grounded theory continues to be held at arm’s length in some research communities is that all too often it is an excuse for evading methodological issues” (p. 32). In a concerted effort to avoid this pitfall, I detail the aspects of grounded theory that apply to my research, as well as those that do not apply, thereby qualifying this project as a modified grounded theory method.

**Data collection and analysis.**

Due to the generative and emerging nature of theory development, grounded theory data collection and analysis are conducted simultaneously. The connected nature of data collection and analysis is also related to the constant comparative method of analysis and theoretical sampling. Charmaz (2000) notes that one of the major controversies of Glaser’s and Strauss’ (1967) work was the cooperation of data collection and analysis given that the research paradigm they were contesting was deemed rigorous in part due to the pre-determined nature of the design.

When data collection and analysis occur simultaneously, one determines the other as the research progresses. The early data collected and analyzed promptly informs and influences the next observation or interview such that the participants, questions, and goals themselves change as the theory develops from previous cases. Determining the focus and questions of data collection as one proceeds throughout research is contradictory to and discourages forcing data into existing categories allowing theory to more reliably emerge from the fluctuating data collection process. Additionally, because data collection and analysis becomes increasingly focused throughout the research, the
first pieces of data gathered are often driven by a research topic and not a specifically
defined research question. Glaser (1992) is critical of specifying research questions at the
outset of a study and even interview protocol or questions which could limit the data
available to the researcher. However Strauss and Corbin (1998) guide grounded theorists
to begin with a research question. Charmaz (2006) supports the initial recommendation
of Glaser and Strauss (1967) to delay a literature review but she also notes that while
Glaser would be critical of her stance, she believes that she “generate(s) data by
investigating aspects of life that the research participant takes for granted” (p. 340)
through the use of organized interview questions.

With regard to analysis and coding, authors vary greatly. Charmaz (2006)
promotes line-by-line coding as the initial review of the data and then moves on to
focused coding (see Appendix G for an example of line-by-line coding). Concepts,
properties, and categories can be generated through either coding strategy, however, the
line-by-line coding helps researchers to remain open to the details in the data. As
categories and their properties become more definitive, line-by-line coding becomes less
necessary to the process because the researcher is looking to illustrate and contrast
properties and categories. “The most basic challenge in grounded category building is to
reconcile the need of letting categories emerge from the material of research (instead of
forcing preconceived theoretical terms on the data) with the impossibility of abandoning
previous theoretical knowledge” (Kelle, 2007, p. 192). Initial coding helps the researcher
to remain open to what the data pronounces while focused coding becomes more
conceptual utilizing the most significant codes from earlier analysis. Charmaz (2006)
also advises that as the researcher develops focused codes, she also returns to data
collected earlier to review for the explicit or implicit presence of the focused codes.

**Constant comparative method.**

“The purpose of the constant comparative method of joint coding and analysis is
to generate theory more systematically, by using explicit coding and analytic procedures”
(Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 102). Glaser and Strauss split the constant comparative
method into four segments; comparing incidents to each category, integrating categories
and their properties, delimiting the theory, and writing the theory. To compare incidents
to categories, they note “while coding an incident for a category, compare it with the
previous incidents in the same and different groups coded in the same category” (Glaser
& Strauss, 1967, p. 106), essentially comparing data to data and data to emerging
categories (Charmaz, 2006). In addition, Glaser and Strauss stress that the analyst “stop
coding and record a memo” (1967, p. 107) to ensure that ideas that surface during
comparison are captured. As the research continues and categories become more defined,
the comparisons shift to conceptual properties and categories which have been developed
from the earlier comparison of incidents. Delimiting occurs on two levels, the theory and
the categories are both reduced through the process of identifying redundant properties,
consolidating categories, and the solidification of the theory.

An important aspect of data analysis and the constant comparative method is
writing memos (Charmaz, 2006). For analysis, memos capture the nature and content of
the researcher’s musings and ideas about the data and emerging theory. Memos also
track the process and progress of constant comparison throughout the research, providing
a record of researcher decisions as well as generating additional data to be considered in
the analysis in the form of the researcher’s assumptions and impressions.

Within the context of generating a theory of persistence for nontraditional
undergraduate women, the constant comparative method could lead to comparisons
between students with similar and divergent experiences, between students of different
degree statuses, or between similar incidents across students. Without knowing the
categories that will arise or the participant characteristics that will be relevant to the
research, it is difficult to predict what possible comparisons will result.

**Theoretical sampling and theoretical saturation.**

“Theoretical sampling is the process of data collection for generating theory
whereby the analyst jointly collects, codes, and analyzes his data and decides
what data to collect next in order to develop his theory as it emerges. This
process of data collection is *controlled* by the emerging theory, whether
substantive or formal.” (Glaser and Strauss, 1967, p. 45)

Theoretical sampling may be the most unique aspect of grounded theory precisely
because it stands in such contrast to the general conceptions of conducting empirical
research in two ways, research design planning and representativeness. Typically,
researchers establish a target population in advance of data collection and seek to ensure
representativeness of the sample they select from the population. Whereas in theoretical
sampling, the target populations are determined in multiple rounds of data collection and
representativeness is not a goal. Instead, the researcher strives for a sample that will
inform the current stage of theory development, for example establishing the parameters
of a category or hypotheses relating categories. “The sociologist trying to discover
theory cannot state at the outset of his research how many groups he will sample during
the entire study; he can only count up the groups at the end” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 61).

Theoretical saturation refers to the process by which a researcher determines that additional data collection will no longer yield new information in the development of a theory effectively concluding theory development for that concept, property, or category. “The criterion for judging when to stop sampling the different groups pertinent to a category is the category’s theoretical saturation. Saturation means that no additional data are being found whereby the sociologist can develop properties of the category” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 61). It is also explicit that theoretical saturation operates in regard to generating theory, not to verifying theory (Dey, 2007; Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

The data sought for theory generation are not of the same type or extent as those data necessary for theory verification. In addition, Charmaz (2006) states that saturation is not the same as repetition of statements, sentiments, or actions in the data. Rather, saturation refers to the abstraction of the data to the conceptual level of properties and categories and the lack of new information surfacing is actually a lack of new theoretical insights and conceptual elaboration. Several grounded theorists acknowledge the importance of taking time away from data collection, even a month suggested by Glaser and Strauss (1967), in order to thoroughly contemplate the data, comparisons, and categories in relation to the emerging theory. Researchers also have to weigh the approaching saturation with the possibility of a category or emerging theory being “exploded” by additional data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 73) casting the researcher back into analysis and comparison of existing data for an extended time.
Dey (199) presents a critique of the concept of theoretical saturation such that if verification is left to future research while the purpose of the research at hand is grounded theory development, can a researcher attain saturation of a category such that there is no new information? Saturation is a metaphor for a category being unable to absorb any additional information which would seem to make future research or verification unnecessary, however, Glaser and Strauss do not state that future research is unnecessary for grounded theory even though saturation is exhaustive. Dey suggests instead, that grounded theorists consider theoretical “sufficiency” (1999, p. 117). Theoretical sufficiency for Dey implies that categories and the emerging theory accommodate new data and conceptualizations without additionally modifying the categories and theory.

For the current research developing a theory of persistence for nontraditional undergraduate women, theoretical sampling will allow me to identify topics relevant to the students and pursue the abstraction of data to create categories. In addition, theoretical sampling will direct data collection towards those students whose experiences and attitudes can most fully complicate the emerging theory. The hindrance of theoretical sampling is the inability to specifically define a sample at the outset of the research given that the directions of the emerging theory are not yet revealed.

Theoretical saturation seems like an analyst’s guide to concluding theory development and yet it is vague and difficult to define. As a novice researcher, theoretical saturation was a challenge and I consulted with my committee and grounded theory texts to further illuminate this process. The narrow focus of this research has led to the development of a complex theory that was resolved within the timeframe of the
dissertation process, however, the grounded theory method, data, and theory generation required more time than I initially anticipated.

**Evaluation and critique of grounded theory research.**

Glaser and Strauss (1967) originally identified four interrelated properties critical to the development of a grounded theory; fit, understandability, generality, and control. Glaser (1978) later edited the evaluative criteria to fit, work, relevance, and modifiability. Charmaz (2005, 2006) also refines the evaluative criteria to credibility, originality, resonance, and usefulness. Credibility includes questions directed towards research intimacy, data sufficiency, empirical categories, connections, and supplied evidence. Originality directs the researcher to assess not only the originality of the resulting categories and theory, but also the social significance of the work and the level of critique and extension of existing ideas. Resonance seeks approval of the communities concerned with the theory itself, the implicit and explicit meanings, and the sociological links between individuals, systems, and contexts. Usefulness is a consideration of the concrete applicability of the theory generated by the research and the contribution to the discipline (For the full list of Charmaz’s (2006) criteria questions, see Appendix H).

Since Glaser and Strauss (1967) outlined the first evaluation criteria, grounded theory has expanded and been applied by many researchers. Several grounded theorists (Bryant, 2002; Bryant & Charmaz, 2007; Emerson, 1984; Stern, 1994) assert that the increasing popularity of grounded theory has compromised the rigor of the method. The critiques of grounded theory reviewed here include the initial philosophical
contradictions, the development of imprecise and lax methods, and the absence of a generated theory in practice.

Some authors (Bryant, 2000; Bryant & Charmaz, 2007; Emerson, 1984) challenge the philosophical contradictions of grounded theory in which the original intentions to counteract positivist research practices were also reinforced by the uncritical emphasis on data and the use of quantitative language to explain what is primarily a qualitative approach to inquiry. While Glaser and Strauss (1967) promote grounded theory as suitable to both quantitative and qualitative practices, the leaning in the original text and through the adoption of the method over time is towards qualitative research. However, this dichotomy represents an epistemological identity crisis to Bryant (2002) which he encourages researchers to address explicitly in their research intentions. Is the grounded theory methodology being employed in a positivist, post-positivist, or constructivist tradition? A more significant epistemological question arises from Bryant’s argument; can research be objective?

Urquhart (2002) however, responds indicating that Bryant (2002) “points out that grounded theory method needs to be retrieved from its apparently positivistic origins” (2002, p. 44) when in fact, grounded theory can be applied to any variety of epistemological assumptions, positivistic or otherwise. Urquhart does agree with Bryant that the researcher’s own epistemological tendencies should be made obvious to the reader, but Bryant calls researchers away from positivism, while Urquhart does not. Charmaz (2000) also encourages researchers to adapt the grounded theory method as the original objectivist and positivist language does not preclude grounded theory from being
flexibly applied to constructivist research or utilized in conjunction with symbolic interactionism. Simultaneously, Charmaz calls for researchers to respond to and resolve the epistemological contradictions in their own grounded theory research.

Urquhart (2002) and others (Charmaz, 2006; Cutcliffe, 2004; Hood, 2007) address the fact that many researchers using grounded theory method fail to develop a grounded theory from the research. For some (Bryant, 2002), the correct application of the method does not have to include theory generation, leading to some confusion as to whether grounded theory method does require the generation of a theory or if it can operate as a method for data collection and analysis. In Glaser and Strauss’ (1967) original work, the development of a theory was the purpose of grounded theory method as a response to the prevailing occurrence of verification and deductive research forcing a priori assumptions on collected data. Charmaz (2001, 2005) and Urquhart (2002) support this stance by elaborating on the purpose of grounded theory research as being tied to a theory. According to Cutcliffe (2004), “a lack of evidence of conceptualization” (p. 427) is among the transgressions that violate grounded theory to the point of unrecognizability. Here, Cutcliffe (2004) advises that the research be labeled modified grounded theory.

Finally, there is criticism surrounding grounded theory that the application of methods is only loosely related to the primary concepts of grounded theory and not conducted rigorously, which Bryant (2002) explains concisely.

One of the reasons that grounded theory method continues to be held at arm’s length in some research communities is that all too often it is an excuse for evading methodological issues. People who claim to be using grounded theory method often use this as a way of disguising their methodological incompetence or frailty – particularly if they lack clear objectives or have poorly developed research ideas… (p. 32) To date, GTM has been widely misused; often as a
catch-all that can be evoked as justification for methodological inadequacies, or a qualitative loin-cloth to fool the gatekeepers of the academies. (Bryant, 2002, p. 37)

The methodological confusion and diffusion that Bryant describes references a lack of specification of the methods employed as well as more blatant divergence from the guiding premises of grounded theory; theory development, theoretical sampling, and even the fundamental emergence of theory from data rather than a priori categories.

In a detailed comparison of grounded theory and the generic inductive qualitative model, Hood (2007) outlines the extent of confusion around the particulars of grounded theory. The example of the generic inductive qualitative model fails to center a social process to theorize around, misunderstands theoretical sampling to be purposeful sampling, neglects the theoretical development of concepts that emerged from the data in favor of describing the interview data, and does not employ theoretical saturation. The methods that ultimately result from the generic inductive qualitative model are not grounded theory but are muddled and confusing to audiences who are referred to these methods as grounded theory.

Based on the literature regarding grounded theory method, the primary critiques of grounded theory in application are the unresolved philosophical contradictions, the absence of a generated theory, and deviant methods.

**Grounded theory research.**

To demonstrate the application of grounded theory and distinguish between common mistakes and respected practices, I have selected three published research studies to review and employ as examples of grounded theory from different disciplines.
Qualitative research in general, and grounded theory in particular, have a distinct place in health care and nursing research (Morse, 1994) notably because of the presence of Glaser and Strauss at the School of Nursing of the University of California, San Francisco while they were discovering and writing about grounded theory (Stern, 1994). Hood (2007) identifies only two studies as examples of the correct application of the three primary principles of grounded theory according to her; theoretical sampling, constant comparison of data to categories, and theory development through saturation. One of the studies she notes is Schreiber’s (1996, 1998) work on women recovering from depression. Schreiber (1996) states that “examination of the data and the categories generated led to formulation of hypotheses that were compared to the data, to the emerging categories, and to further, focused data collection” (p. 472) indicating her attention to the constant comparative method as well as simultaneous data analysis and collection. Theoretical sampling was addressed by varying the ages of the women and their social identity groups, their occupations, and the length of time since facing their depression. In addition, Schreiber refined the interview questions as she completed interviews and developed categories in order to facilitate theoretical saturation.

Those aspects of grounded theory that Hood (2007) did not specify as critical components, she asserts are the areas where grounded theory can be modified to suit the researcher and the research, including the literature review and epistemological orientation. Based on the published research by Schreiber (1996, 1998), I am not able to discern the nature of her epistemological or ontological orientation as the researcher, however, this disclosure is most typical of constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz,
2000) and it appears that Schreiber was employing more of a Glaserian approach to grounded theory. Schreiber does have a literature review in her published research, both to inform the reader of the context surrounding depression and at the conclusion of the piece as a discussion of the theoretical implications. The initial literature review is focused on depression as a problem facing women with a growing need for research, while the concluding literature review references some previously published research which is relevant to the categories developed in Schreiber’s research.

Overall, Schreiber’s (1996, 1998) research serves as a depiction of the critical principles of grounded theory, as outlined by Hood (2007), which include theoretical sampling, constant comparison of data to categories, and theory development through saturation. Schreiber’s research also demonstrates how grounded theory could be utilized with interview data and with a Glaserian grounded theory literature review.

There are also several notable grounded theorists in the information systems discipline, including Bryant (2002; Bryant & Charmaz, 2007; Smit & Bryant, 2000) and Urquhart (2001, 2002, 2007). Urquhart (2002, 2007) and Bryant (2002) cite Orlikowski’s (1993) research as prominent in the information systems field and she won a best paper award from Management Information Systems Quarterly where the research was published. Urquhart (2007) notes in relation to Orlikowski’s research that “those researchers that made full use of the method… produced a theory covering a substantive area. Concepts were linked, building the theory, and this generally led to stronger papers” (p. 347). An exemplar of grounded theory applied in the information systems discipline, Orlikowski states that she utilizes grounded theory because it is “inductive,
contextual, and processual” (1993, p. 310). The purposes of the research that informed selecting a grounded theory method include identifying a theory of organizational adaptation to CASE (computer-aided software engineering) program utilization, grounded theory’s allowance for organizational context to be considered in theory development, and the relevance of grounded theory to researching processes.

Methodologically, Orlikowski (1993) describes theoretical sampling, the constant comparative method, and theoretical saturation. Regarding theoretical sampling, Orlikowski identified two organizations that had recently adopted CASE tools and also varied substantially from each other so that the central characteristic of the CASE usage was the same but varied data could be collected regarding the context and processes within each organization. Orlikowski also states that she gathered all the data at one site, coded it, and then entered the second site so as to allow for comparison between the two locations. The categories emerging from the first location were elaborated and expanded to the specifications of the second site. She continued to collect data at the second site until the emerging categories were saturated. Like Schreiber’s (1996, 1998) research, Orlikowski is not explicit about the epistemological origins of her research, although she appears to favor a Glaserian approach in her methods.

Bryant (2002) criticizes Orlikowski’s (1993) research on the basis of her emphasis on the inductive attributes of the method. Bryant highlights the split between the philosophical orientation of grounded theory as a response to detached theorizing with its positivistic assumptions and the uncritical perpetuation of the neutral researcher.
Bryant’s commentary, however, is not about Orikowski’s research design or methods, but about her presupposed orientation as a neutral observer and theorist.

I also identified a grounded theory study in education by Gregory and Jones (2009), however, this study was not recommended by the extant literature on grounded theory. In the absence of a recommendation, I conducted a search for an article and evaluated its grounded theory merits in relation to the previous two studies and the overview of grounded theory method provided in this chapter. Gregory and Jones (2009) investigate the teaching approaches of faculty members in Australia to determine a contingency theory of teaching which accounts for structural and agency tensions in university settings with heterogeneous student populations. Gregory and Jones conducted 25 interviews with faculty members at five institutions in Australia and then observed eight of those professors in their classes. Gregory and Jones describe their grounded theory methods as orthodox and rely on Glaser’s various writings for direction.

The generation of theory, simultaneous data collection and analysis, the constant comparative method, theoretical sampling, and theoretical saturation are all accounted for in Gregory and Jones’ (2009) research. Interestingly, the authors note that they had significant theoretical moments during their sixth and eleventh interviews. During the sixth interview, the faculty member exhibited some primary differences from the previous participants and altered the emerging theoretical categories by exposing the researchers’ own Anglo-Australian view of teaching. The sixth interview faculty member was Asian and his responses sensitized the researchers to the importance of “background and values and led to one of the early hypotheses: that differences in the
background of the lecturer would affect their approach” (Gregory & Jones, 2009, p. 775). Following the eleventh interview, the researchers decided it was time to solicit interview data from another institution, making a theoretical sampling decision based on the emerging categories. Interviews proceeded with four additional institutions and then the researchers added observations of classes to determine the extent to which participant faculty members were responding to the social norms of the interview team or accurately describing the decisions they make in the classroom.

Through interviews 12 to 17 and the accompanying observations, Gregory and Jones (2009) determined that the primary social process influencing faculty members was maintaining competence. “Maintaining competence does not mean staying with the status quo or standing still. It implicitly recognizes that in order to maintain competence, particularly in times of change, people need to improve and develop their skills to continue performing their work effectively” (Gregory & Jones, 2009, p. 776-777). To explain the process of maintaining competence, Gregory and Jones also elaborate on two intersecting continuums that determine the four strategies faculty members employ to maintain competence; distancing, adapting, clarifying, or relating (see Appendix I). Interviews 18 to 25, plus additional observations, were then an example of theoretical sampling as they only explored the issues that were relevant to the emerging theory and strategies. At this point in the article, the researchers describe the conceptual categories and theory that developed from the research, including the influences and forces that act on the participants and their decision making relevant to the theory.
Each study, Schreiber (1996, 1998), Orlikowski (1993), and Gregory and Jones (2009), meets Hood’s (2007) standards by using theoretical sampling, the constant comparative method, and theoretical saturation. In addition, each piece of research expressly states the relevance of grounded theory due to a lack of theory available in the area of investigation. Schreiber (1996, 1998) notes that while depression is prevalent, the understanding of depression is incomplete. According to Orlikowski (1993), “to date, there has been no systematic examination or formulation of the organizational changes surrounding CASE tools” (p. 309). Gregory and Jones (2009) intend to move their research away from the normative dialogue of teaching to explore what is actually happening from the lecturers’ perspectives. In each of the three pieces, the methods are clearly described and elaborated on in depth to ensure that the reader can determine the process and logic the researchers followed throughout the grounded theory method. Finally, all three studies concluded with the development of a theory. As far as serving as examples of grounded theory research, each piece models an intention to develop theory, clarity in the explanation of methods, utilization of theoretical sampling, constant comparison, theoretical saturation, and the evolution of a concise theory.

**Constructivist grounded theory.**

There have been significant changes, derivations, and adaptations to grounded theory since its inception (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007b; Charmaz, 2000, 2006). Researchers adhere rigidly to the original outline, loosely interpret subsequent research, or muddle methods (Stern, 1994) in the name of grounded theory research. One variation of grounded theory discussed in depth by Kathy Charmaz (2000, 2006, 2008) is
constructivist grounded theory. Charmaz professes to espouse a constructivist grounded theory approach which she has developed through her own research endeavors. I elaborate on Charmaz’s constructivist grounded theory here because it has resonated with my own understandings of myself as a researcher and serves as a guide throughout this research project.

Charmaz (2008) outlines the assumptions of constructivist grounded theory as follows

1. reality is multiple, processual, and constructed – but constructed under particular conditions;
2. the research process emerges from interaction;
3. it takes into account the researcher’s positionality, as well as that of the participants;
4. the researcher and the researched co-construct the data – data are a product of the research process, not simply observed objects of it. (p. 402)

Charmaz orients her notion of multiple realities between the positivist notion of one absolute truth and the postmodernist conception that there is only interpretation of reality and nothing common between actors’ interpretations. For Charmaz, and myself, reality is interpreted and understood uniquely by each participant, however, there are also concrete social forces that act upon individuals influencing experiences and interpretations.

In contrast to objectivist applications of grounded theory, the research process is not fixed and unbiased, but instead is informed and developed by the researcher through interactions with participants, advising committees, colleagues, and any number of social relationships (Charmaz, 2006, 2008). Therefore, the research process cannot be neutral or unbiased or strictly observational because it is created by the researcher with implicit knowledge, biases, and interpretive lenses already in place that cannot, or should not, be
suspended. The research process is explicitly composed of the actions of the researcher and the participants and implicitly, an understanding between the researcher and participants of research goals, questions, and phenomena.

The researcher who realizes the level of interaction in the research process then also recognizes that the data collected are not a passive deliverance of information, but instead are a function of the research process, participant interpretation, researcher interpretation, and the shared understanding resulting from the interaction. Specifically, my embarking on this research project is imbued with my experiences as a student, a community member, and a researcher which each exert influence on my knowledges and beliefs. I appreciate the constructivist grounded theory approach because it allows me to bring to this research my histories while recognizing the participants' role as co-creators of new knowledge and requiring that I address macro-social constructivist issues that will arise in the research area. Because the constructivist grounded theorist brings her positionalities and preconceptions with her, she must also work to identify and be reflexive about their overall effect on the research process.

Based on the assumptions of constructivist grounded theory and the inclusion of reflexivity and relativity to grounded theory, Charmaz (2008) states that researchers using this approach should

- treat the research process *itself* as a social construction
- scrutinize research decisions and directions
- improvise methodological and analytic strategies throughout the research process
- collect sufficient data to discern and document how research participants construct their lives and worlds. (p. 403)
Throughout her work, Charmaz (2006, 2008) requires the constructivist grounded theorist to consider social construction on four inter-related levels; the researcher, the research process, the participants, and the resulting theory. Regarding the researcher, this means acknowledging preconceptions and privileges and being intentional about vetting the influence of researcher values on the research process, the participants, and the emergent theory. The research process as a social construction honors the contributions of the researcher and participants as crucial components of the process itself as opposed to sterilizing the research process in hopes of objectivity or neutrality. Considering social constructivism relative to the participants infers that not all of the communication will be explicitly understood by the researcher, that there are social forces inherent in participants’ interpretations of meaning, and that the researcher and participants are co-constructing the data. As the theory emerges from the co-constructed data, the researcher should be intentional about identifying the context of the theory and attending to the social, structural, and institutional forces that shape our lives.

Thus far in chapter three, I have provided an overview of grounded theory methodology outlining the critical components including simultaneous data collection and analysis, theoretical sampling, the constant comparative method, and theoretical saturation. Additionally, I demonstrated the common critiques of grounded theory and three published examples to serve as guideposts for conducting and evaluating grounded theory. I will now detail the methods that have been employed in this research to explore the persistence of nontraditional undergraduate women.
Modified Grounded Theory Method

The persistence of nontraditional undergraduate women is under-explored in the persistence literature especially regarding description and theory development. As the express purpose of this research is to generate a theory of nontraditional undergraduate women’s persistence, grounded theory is an appropriate methodological choice. While there are general persistence models that have been previously tested with populations of traditional college students which could be applied to a new population of learners, my experience advising nontraditional undergraduate women has demonstrated the characteristic differences between the traditional student and the students at a small, single-gendered college for nontraditional undergraduate women. The literature on adult learners, women students, and students of color also bore out these differences leading me to conclude that the variables available in the existing persistence models would be only mildly relevant to students at the college in general and insufficient to explain their college persistence. The application of a textbook model to a given population to verify a small portion of existing theory is precisely what Glaser and Strauss (1967) were responding to as a weakness in sociology research. Instead of a pre-determined model of persistence, it would be more theoretically and morally appropriate to generate a theory of nontraditional undergraduate women’s persistence from the accounts of the students themselves as opposed to ascribing a universal persistence model to a community of learners.

While grounded theory is a fitting methodological choice for this research, I have also conducted the research within the guidelines of a doctoral dissertation. Therefore,
the research design I utilized is modified grounded theory in order to meet the expectations and requirements of the dissertation. Theoretical sampling, the constant comparative method, theoretical saturation, and theory development remain the foundation of this research design; however, appropriate modifications have been included to accommodate the realities of the dissertation research process. Specifically, I utilize a review of the literature as a sensitizing concept throughout the research, which is a contested decision in grounded theory methodology. I also adapt theoretical sampling and theoretical saturation to meet the requirements of employing grounded theory within the timeline of a doctoral dissertation. In order to adapt theoretical sampling, I have recruited from the population of the college broadly, and then following focus groups, I isolate individuals to interview for further theory development. With regard to theoretical saturation, there are areas within the resulting theory that could have been more widely explored through this research, however, given the timeline of the dissertation, I have chosen to identify some aspects of the theory as opportunities for future research.

With the research at hand, I have developed a theory of nontraditional undergraduate women’s persistence in a bachelor’s degree granting program. As this is a modified grounded theory method design, I have employed a review of the literature, as well as my professional experience with nontraditional undergraduate women to investigate the following research questions
1. How do nontraditional undergraduate women persist to graduation in a bachelor’s degree granting institution, a small women’s college within a private institution in the Rocky Mountain region of the United States?
   a. How do nontraditional undergraduate women students describe and understand the process of educational persistence?
   b. What strategies and barriers to persistence do nontraditional undergraduate women students identify?
   c. How do nontraditional undergraduate women students make persistence decisions?

Setting.

The single-gendered college, where I conducted this research is one of 12 colleges housed within a mid-sized undergraduate and graduate serving institution in the western United States. The college has a legacy of women’s education over 100 years long, beginning in 1909 and celebrating its centennial anniversary in 2009. The college “educates women to boldly lead in the communities where they live, work, and engage” (Strategic Plan, 2009). As an institution historically and currently committed to the education of women, the college is a natural setting for the conduct of the present research. Additionally, the college has articulated a strategic goal of improved retention efforts (Strategic Plan, 2009).

The college itself offers four majors, a bachelor of arts (BA) in law and society, communication, and information technology studies and a bachelor’s of business administration degree (BBA). All degrees are offered to women in an alternative format.
with classes offered on the weekends and evenings. The format of each class is different from a traditional class in that each class is offered seven times over a 10 week quarter for four hours each time, creating greater responsibility and opportunity for the student to direct her learning and manage her reading and assignment load outside of the classroom. Approximately 300-320 women enroll in classes each quarter with an average class size of 15. Most of the students at the college are taking two classes each quarter over four quarters each year, which is comparable to a part-time class load since most of the students are working and attending to family roles in addition to completing a college degree.

Referring back to the definition of nontraditional undergraduate women, the population at the college is primarily enrolled part-time and working full-time in additional to college. The students range in age from 17 to 63 with an average age of 37 and 34% of the students identify as women of color (Fact Sheet, 2009-2010).

One important aspect of the organization of the college that is unlike the composition of most other colleges is the utilization of adjunct faculty and the opportunities for a faculty to influence the overall culture of the college. The college was originally adopted by the larger institution as a night and weekend extension program of the business school to serve working women, many of whom had employer reimbursement. Under this arrangement, the only major offered was business, which is still the most popular major in enrollment currently. As an extension program of the business school and even with the addition of additional majors and minors, the college relies heavily on adjunct faculty and faculty from other departments at the university to
teach their courses. In fact, there were no appointed faculty at the college at the time of this study, rather faculty were appointed by other departments and supplemented with a large pool of adjunct faculty (Dean of the college, personal communication, February 26, 2011).

The adjunct and borrowed faculty arrangement created a transitory feeling regarding faculty members who are not housed within the college itself, but instead, have loyalties elsewhere. Even the faculty members who teach regularly with the college and are well-known by the students do not necessarily have any formal relationship with the college itself. Without formal articulations with faculty and the intervention of faculty appointments by other departments at the university, the college has not been able to fully promote the development of its own culture uniquely positioned to support its nontraditional and compositionally diverse student body (Dean of the college, personal communication, February 26, 2011). In 2005, an external advisory board made a strong recommendation to the university and to the college that significant efforts be undertaken to build a “committed core faculty” (Strategic Plan, 2009, p. 5) for the college. In 2010, the university approved appointments of the college’s first faculty, with the exception of faculty in the business program who will remain, as per accreditation requirements, appointed by the college of business and continue to rely heavily on adjunct faculty (Dean of the college, personal communication, February 28, 2011).
**Research design.**

Developing a theory of persistence for nontraditional undergraduate women, I have utilized the literature itself, along with the critical race feminist critique as a sensitizing concept (Glaser, 1978). Lempert (2007) states that

> In order to participate in the current theoretical conversation, I need to understand it... A literature review provides me with the current parameters of the conversation that I hope to enter. Utilizing comparisons from the literature alerts me to gaps in theorizing, as well as ways that my data tells a different, or more nuanced story (p. 254)

In contrast to Glaser (1992; Glaser & Strauss, 1967), I have preceded the research with a literature review of college persistence and subsequently discovered the research failure regarding both the population and their likely college concerns as justification for my research. In addition, while I did not begin data collection with categories deduced from the existing literature, I instead endeavored to explore the topics that arose from the data as relevant to nontraditional undergraduate women. Specifically, I have allowed for topics generated by participants as well as inquiring as to the relevance of motivation, self-efficacy, multiple roles, biculturation, sense of belonging, and validation. My familiarity with the extant literature is a departure from classical grounded theory casting this research as modified grounded theory, however I also allowed the data to construct the emerging theory and did not force the data into categories suggested by the literature review.

**Cognitive interviews.**

I began data collection with a set of topical cognitive interviews with three current students at the college to capture their initial ideas regarding the research topic and
general questions. For these interviews, I used purposeful sampling (Creswell, 2007) and selected three students who I have an existing relationship with: a business major, a communication major, and a law and society major to account for three of the four majors offered at the college. Each of the students has been at the college for two years, three years, and over seven years respectively. One woman is Black, one woman is White, and one woman is multi-racial. One student has been enrolled at the college for consecutive quarters, one woman has stopped out for a brief period of time, and one woman has stopped out more than once for an extended period of time. Two of the students are scholarship recipients and each of the students has been involved with a student organization at some point in her tenure with the college.

I interviewed each student ranging from one to two hours in order to generate some similarities and divergence in their opinions of the research project itself. In particular, I wanted to discuss the research questions, focus group protocol, and interview protocol as an opportunity to explore the language that students use around the concept of college persistence. The term persistence is an academic, researcher-driven term and I needed to clarify if this term would also resonate with the student population. For the cognitive interviews, I recruited the three students through a personal email invitation (see Appendix J for email, and Appendix K for informed consent). Following each interview and before conducting the next interview, I transcribed the audio taped interview and conducted line-by-line open coding paying special attention to the language that each student used to describe her experience and perceptions of college
persistence. Additionally, I considered how I could incorporate the students’ suggestions for the research project in the upcoming data collection and analysis.

**Focus group interviews.**

Following the discussion with these students, I organized a set of six focus groups with current students at the college yielding 16 participants overall. I utilized the student email list and community network to solicit participants for one of the six focus groups. Each focus group consisted of two to six participants, although, I attempted to recruit nine to each group under the advice of Stewart, Shamdasani, and Rook (2007) who note that focus group arrangements should overestimate the ideal number of participants assuming that two will not show up (see Appendix L for the focus group recruitment email). I established criteria in the event that I had to narrow the participants for focus groups because the response was too great to accommodate everyone. This was not the case, and instead I decided to spend time at the college on evenings and weekends when classes were being held to try to recruit additional students. I had the chance during these recruitment periods to catch up with students who I had a relationship with as well as meeting new students and I talked with many students about the research I was planning to conduct. The response via email was not overwhelming and the additional scheduling conflicts further limited those students who were interested in participating. As I added more focus groups, increasing the groups from my initial goal of three groups to six, I was able to re-schedule with some of those students who were interested but unable to attend a previous group.
The focus groups were conducted on campus during the weekend and evening class schedule for the college which allowed me to maximize the time and comfort of the students. Stewart, Shamdasani, and Rook (2007) recommend holding focus groups in familiar locations to prevent participants from travel discouragement and discomfort. Three focus groups were scheduled for weekend days and three were scheduled for a week night. For the third and fifth focus groups, I recruited women of color specifically to address persistence issues that would likely differ from the concerns of White students. Stewart, Shamdasani, and Rook (2007) also suggest that homogeneous groups will more readily discuss information than heterogeneous groups and given that I wanted students to share their racialized college experiences, a group of women of color was appropriate. For the focus groups addressing the persistence of women of color, I relied on my relationships with women of color at the college and requested their assistance identifying and recruiting participants. One of the women with whom I had cognitive interviews and another who attended a focus group assisted in spreading the word that I was looking for women of color to share their experiences of the college with me.

For the focus groups with women of color, I was especially mindful of the power structures operating from my place as a researcher driving the process and my social identities as a White graduate student asking for the participation of nontraditional undergraduate women of color. During the cognitive interviews, I asked the key informant students to help me determine the most appropriate way to acknowledge my vulnerability and respect for the women of color as experts on their persistence. While this practice of acknowledgement and rapport building is important for any research
endeavor (Patton, 2002), I was particularly concerned about communicating authenticity as a researcher amidst the power structures in the focus groups with women of color. The advice I received from the key informants was instructive in that they suggested that I acknowledge the power structures I perceive upfront and express my feelings to the group. I shared my appreciation for their willingness to be vulnerable, my own reluctance and fear of reproducing power structures, and my reliance on their expertise to fully inform the research I was conducting.

Each focus group was scheduled for two hours and was digitally audio recorded. Specifically, I wanted to explore the students’ attitudes, behaviors, and strategies that have helped them to persist and to begin to design a theory of how students persist to graduation. The focus group guide contained an introductory script and a collection of possible questions. Based on the advice of Patton (2002), I prepared the guide with those questions I could anticipate asking, although not all questions were asked in each focus group (see Appendix M for focus group guide). Stewart, Shamdasani, and Rook (2007) note that one of the contributing factors to decreasing the depth of focus groups has been the increasing amount of questions asked during the group interview. The authors also note that asking too many questions turns the in-depth group process into a face-to-face survey and they advise restricting the number of questions per group to 10 to 12. I outlined more than 10 to 12 questions to have some flexibility to follow where the group discussion lead while remaining on the topic of student persistence. For some groups, I asked many questions and made my own contributions to the discussion while for others,
I asked very few questions and contributed very little to the discussion. Each group’s distinctive level of sharing determined my level of participation and questioning.

Additionally, each student participant completed an informational sheet along with their informed consent (see Appendix N for information sheet). The information sheets asked students to choose a pseudonym of someone in their life who has had a significant influence on their educational journey, which we shared as a group during the discussion. The informational sheet also captured the demographic characteristics that were important to describing my sample including; age, race and ethnicity, length of time in college, enrollment patterns, major and minor, financial aid usage, employment status, and parental/guardian status. The information survey also served as a tool to be able to compare the research sample with the general population of students at the college.

Immediately following each focus group, I wrote a research memo on my feeling of the group, the initial impressions that I had, and any moments that stood out for me. Then I transcribed the dialogue and conducted line-by-line coding. For any concepts that began to emerge, I directed the next focus group questions to ensure additional data collection related to the emerging category and compared student responses across groups as I progressed through data collection. To be accountable to the data, each focus group participant received via email a copy of the transcription for their group and a description of the topics and categories that had emerged from their group. Participants were invited to respond to both, and while some participants did respond with comments on the transcripts and emerging themes, many did not even with a reminder email.
Individual interviews.

The purpose of the focus groups was to generate initial categories of nontraditional undergraduate women’s persistence that then could be further elaborated via individual in-depth interviews. Guided by theoretical sampling, the individual interviews served to verify and expand on the focus group data, conceptualized categories, and emerging hypotheses (see Appendix O for interview guide). For example, one participant, Kay, elaborated on the idea of her maintaining educational momentum in order to persist. Her language around momentum and her thoughtfulness on how her momentum supported her educational success was relevant to my exploration, definition, and expansion on the idea of momentum which I eventually began applying to other students’ language about their persistence. By interviewing Kay further, I was able to use her description to expand my understanding of momentum and then consider other students’ participation in educational momentum.

I recruited six students for individual interviews from the focus group participants based on the dialogue as it unfolded, paying attention to representation of the students recruited to interview individually. Recruiting from the focus group participants allowed me to select students who had made theoretical contributions to the data during their focus group and those students who had divergent views to test the emerging theory. An additional one-on-one interview allowed us to generate a deeper rapport as research partners. Each interview lasted from one hour to 90 minutes and was scheduled at the student’s convenience, hosted on or near campus to allow for familiarity, and digitally audio recorded. I again emailed a transcript of each interview to each participant for
feedback and amendment. I intended that each interview be transcribed and coded before attending the next interview so as to maximize the value of each interview should I need to further focus the interview questions. However, I scheduled three interviews on the same day, the last weekend of the quarter, so I was not able to conduct a full transcription and initial coding before going to another interview. In these cases, I primarily focused on the emerging concept of commitment in each and was able to compare their responses as the questions and emerging concept were similar for these participants.

Once I started individual interviews, I also began the development of theoretical categories and utilized the interview data for confirming and disconfirming support of existing categories and hypotheses (Charmaz, 2006). Once all the interviews were completed and I had further developed the categories and theory of nontraditional undergraduate women’s persistence, each participant from the focus groups and interviews received a copy of their relevant quotations I was directly employing in theory development and their own demographic description to ensure their confidentiality in the written dissertation. Most of the participants responded with either changes to their information or approval that they were confident they could not be identified by the presented information.

**Data analysis.**

“Grounded theory coding generates the bones of your analysis. Theoretical integration will assemble these bones into a working skeleton. Thus, coding is more than a beginning, it shapes an analytic frame from which you build the analysis… Coding is the pivotal link between collecting data and developing an emergent theory to explain these data” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 46).
Throughout this research, data collection and coding was conducted simultaneously. At its conclusion, this research has generated over 23 hours of transcribed data. Once I conducted the first focus group, I wrote a memo on my impressions from the group, bracketing my biases, and then I transcribed the group interview. Each group interview proceeded with immediate memo-ing and transcription. Once I transcribed the group interview, I began initial coding while also remaining open to any theoretical possibilities that could have arisen from the data (Charmaz, 2006). As initial coding proceeded from each successive data collection point, concepts became more evident across the data.

For the initial coding, I employed a line-by-line descriptive coding process to thoroughly examine the data. While engaged in line-by-line coding and reflecting on it as the groups progressed, I considered the following questions of my data:

- What process is at issue here? How can I define it?
- How does this process develop?
- How does the research participant(s) act while involved in this process?
- What does the research participant(s) profess to think and feel while involved in this process? What might... her observed behavior indicate?
- When, why, and how does the process change?
- What are the consequences of the process? (Charmaz, 2006, p. 51)

I also used the constant comparative method to analyze data and develop codes in the initial coding phase by comparing incident to incident and participant to participant. I did not develop defined concepts or categories during initial coding, instead, I continued to investigate and question what the descriptive coding was alluding to in terms of possible larger concepts, which helped me to determine the subsequent methods of coding.
While grounded theory proceeds through coding with no preconceived codes or categories, I did have the literature as a sensitizing concept (Glaser, 1978) for the purposes of this research. As my focus group and interview guides suggest, I did explore the data for indications of the primary themes that evolved from the literature review; motivation and self-efficacy, biculturation and multiple roles, and validation and sense of belonging. I did not apply these themes directly to the data as codes, but I was looking for confirming and disconfirming evidence regarding each literature theme.

Once I completed the transcription and initial coding for the focus group interviews, I decided to conduct a second round of process coding. The first round of initial coding, which was descriptive and used several in vivo codes, did not yield much continuity of concepts in the data. I felt like there were too many codes to consolidate and was overwhelmed with the detail in the coding. Charmaz (2006) recommends that researchers identify initial codes as actions which will help to keep the codes close to the data and discourage conceptualizing too soon. Specifically, Glaser and Strauss (1967), Charmaz (2006), and Hood (2007) note that researchers should use gerunds in their coding to strengthen the action component of initial coding, which I have done in this analysis. I applied this process coding as the second round of coding the focus groups to try to gain more familiarity with the data and identify concepts and categories for the next round of coding. At this point, I realized that the process coding was also producing too many codes for the cluster and narrowing process I intended to pursue. For my first focus group, for example, I had over 480 distinct “codes” that were actually descriptions more than codes. This volume of codes was unmanageable.
At this point, I returned to the constant comparison method and my focus group memos for guidance. I compared group to group based on the two rounds of coding and the intimacy with the details of the data that I had developed. From the codes, the comparison, and the research memos I had written thus far, I generated a list of 22 group themes that I explored as possible categories and concepts. I defined and described the ideas and elaborated on them with representative participant quotes. After much reflection and writing on the ideas and code possibilities in the data, I realized that commitment was the central process appearing in the data and conducted individual interviews to explore commitment in relation to persistence.

Once I began investigating commitment as the central process, I began to ask questions of the data about how commitment was supported and discouraged by other concepts in the data. What issues were influencing commitment? How did commitment look different for different students? What subcategories existed within commitment? Table 6 depicts the consolidation of the group themes into the emerging theoretical concepts of commitment, environment, and support along with a brief description of how each group theme manifested in the data.
Table 6: Focus Group Themes Organized by Theoretical Codes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Commitment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Valuing education = commitment, passion, worth the sacrifice, academic achievement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Quitting is not an option” = internal motivation, commitment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal goal and career change as personal goal = personal fulfillment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High-achieving students = you want to succeed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commitment (gr. 3) = doing it for them, resolve, determination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commitment (gr. 4) = life-long dream, always knew you were going to go, wanting to finish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reward = learning, finish something, connected, build community, friendships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Success in spite of sacrifices = difficulty, money, energy, family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivation = money, countdown, I’m in too deep</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commitment (gr. 6) = I had this goal, native language, learning, success</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Environment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Classes = w/in the classroom, classmates, class to work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environment (gr. 1) = The college in general, feels like home, synchronicity, sense of fit, quiet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Timing = enrollment, balance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom and college environment (gr. 3) = inclusive or not, classroom and institution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comments (microaggressions) = racism that wears a suit and a tie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environment (gr. 4) = positive, negative, support, professors, means something, fit, close knit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant anxiety</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barriers = I don’t think I’d enroll, college transition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expectations = intimidating, employers, resistance to my experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anxiety</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difference and Diversity in the classroom = racial, generational, SES, interpersonal</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Support</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relationships = classmates’ contribution, respect, faculty, camaraderie, family, advisors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role modeling = for daughters, sisters, friends, larger than yourself, outside of school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support = family, friends, employers, and the college</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comments (microaggressions) = racism that wears a suit and a tie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community (support, women of color) = encouragement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant anxiety</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As I added more memos and interview data to the focus group data, I began to see clear connections between commitment and environment. A student’s commitment and her environment were interacting for many students and I sought to describe the nature of the interaction using the interviews I had conducted. Here, I began theoretical coding, a third round of coding, using far fewer codes and selectively coding those data that were going to further my knowledge of commitment and the relationships surrounding commitment. The collection of codes expanded and shrank and I revised codes based on data while I continued coding and interviewing. I compared codes to codes, groups to groups, and participants to participants to try to define commitment and solidify the surrounding codes.

The data analysis, construction of codes and categories, and theory generation continued throughout the research process and I decided to utilize the software program ATLAS/ti as an auxiliary tool. Creswell (2007) acknowledges the reluctance of some researchers to “put a machine between the researcher and the actual data,” which I share in part. I conducted each round of coding by hand with hard copies of the transcripts. I enjoyed having the data in front of me on the page and jotting notes, codes, and questions in the margins. As I was concluding theoretical coding, I employed ATLAS/ti as a tool for data organization and cataloging the themes that I had already identified in the data. I loaded the data to ATLAS/ti and re-coded it using the theoretical codes I had established along the way. ATLAS/ti allowed me to revisit and re-code data easily. I was also able to generate a code tree noting the relationships between codes, collapse and expand codes, and keep code notes (see Figure 1). By this point, the volume of data necessitated
an organizational method that was more flexible than the cumbersome white paper pages of transcription.

Figure 1: Theoretical Code Tree

Coding for grounded theory is not a linear process. As I explored concepts more deeply in regular review of the transcripts, I practiced the constant comparative method to see what confirmation and divergence were evident from earlier interviews as compared to later interviews. Coding and analysis illuminated relationships and theoretical
connections between concepts, such that I was able to construct a theory that is informed by the data along with several rounds of coding.

**Role of the researcher.**

Charmaz’s (2000, 2006, 2008) constructivist approach to the researcher, the research process, the participants, and the emergent theory has been preserved throughout this research as it aligns with my own philosophy as a researcher and it honors the population of nontraditional undergraduate women who are the participants in this research. First, as a researcher, I agree with Charmaz that my own preconceptions, privileges, and assumptions need to be addressed within the research process. I believe that research carries with it the values of the researcher, and I often reflected on the research and bracketed (Creswell, 2007) my assumptions in order to account for them and make them explicit to the research. However, bracketing in a constructivist grounded theory method does not presume to separate my beliefs and values but instead increased my awareness and reflexivity of the relevant issues. Several of my research memos read like a journal about the emotional responses I was having to the process of research, including conducting interviews, transcribing, coding, and analyzing data. These journal-like memos captured and allowed me to explore my feelings about the process and, in many ways, to identify my emotional responses so that I could name them and move past them in order to continue with the research tasks that were imminent.

Second, the research process was designed with the participants in mind regarding scheduling and methods that would suit the population generally. Additionally, I believe that the success of the research process depends on fostering positive interactions with
participants and stakeholders throughout. I knew many of the students when they arrived for focus groups, however, I was also mindful to continue establishing trust during and after the groups with follow-up communication.

Third, the participants are students at the college who I have worked with and admired. It is the determination of the students that I have witnessed in my experiences at the college that has attracted me to this research question. The participants and I have co-created new knowledge based on their experiences and understandings. I believe that I have engaged participant experts who have generated data, collaborated on the emerging theory, and responded to the relevance of the research on their own lives.

Finally, with regard to the emerging theory, as the researcher I believe I have an obligation to identify the social constructs within nontraditional undergraduate women’s persistence. I also feel that I have a responsibility to preserve and depict the participants’ knowledge in a theory that will serve to benefit the educational ends of the population: to support their continued persistence and graduation from college. Charmaz’s (2000, 2006, 2008) constructivist grounded theory provides not only a framework for contemplating and communicating who I am as a researcher, but also a measure of accountability to the responsible research that I have co-produced.

The college has drawn my research attention as a setting because I had the opportunity to work as an academic advisor for the college for five years before pursuing my doctorate degree full-time. I learned about myself, about the potential of a college community, and about college administration from the women who were students. My preconceived ideas about college and about adult learners were grossly apparent to me
almost immediately as I had to earn the trust and respect of the students who were going
to rely on me for advising assistance. I also realized the vast diversity and richness
possible among a population of students who make sacrifices to attend school, who do
not take classes for granted, who challenge the legitimacy of a policy against the reality
of their own lives, who bring a history of life and work to the classroom. My personal
and professional experiences at the college were rewarding and I hope that this work
ultimately benefits the women who have inspired my own study for the past several
years.

A final anomaly that it is important to acknowledge with regard to the participant
sample and my role as a researcher is my relationship with the participants as an
academic advisor. I had worked with 14 out of the 16 participants previously as an
academic advisor and this existing relationship may have influenced our dialogue, the
stories they shared with me, and even their initial willingness to respond to my request
for participation. Of the 16 participants, only Serena and Annamaria had not been
advised by me prior to the call for participation. Each of the other student participants, I
had worked with in their advising, admission, graduation, and academic success generally
while I was an advisor for the college. Without a comparative sample of students who I
did not advise, I cannot speak with assurance to the extent that my position at the college
influenced the data that we have co-constructed as researchers and participants exploring
nontraditional undergraduate women’s persistence.

In order to respect the research relationships that I established with students at the
college, I will elaborate on my intentionality to recognize trustworthiness and authenticity
throughout this dissertation research. Lincoln and Guba (1986; Schwandt, 2007) state that trustworthiness in a naturalistic sense, is parallel to rigor in the conventional, scientific sense. They also advise that the criteria for judging research and building in checks of validity and credibility should match the foundational paradigm of the research. Creswell (2007) uses the term validation to address an ongoing process within qualitative research, rather than the outcome of “verification” of results. Lincoln and Guba establish trustworthiness and authenticity as the validity measures and processes for naturalistic inquiry along with the components and strategies that support trustworthiness and authenticity. The following sections on trustworthiness and authenticity combine Creswell’s notion of process-based validation and Lincoln and Guba’s advice to align credibility measures with the overall research paradigm.

Trustworthiness. As a researcher, I have addressed my own assumptions, preconceptions, and biases throughout the research process by journaling my impressions and experiences of data collection and analysis. According to Creswell (2007) and Patton (2002), a research journal guides the researcher to self-reflection and supports the validation of qualitative research. Additionally, triangulation, member-checking, and rich description ensure that the emerging theoretical interpretations are accurate reflections of participants’ persistence experiences.

Weis and Fine (2000) describe triangulation as “adding one layer of evidence to another to build a confirmatory edifice” (p. 51). Creswell (2007) notes triangulation is a type of validity for qualitative research via the comparison of data sources, methods, and researchers. Gibson (2007), however, resists the language of triangulation stating that “it
is a technical form of mastery and in scientific discourse the claim is often made that the outcome is presumably a more objective and therefore more ‘correct’ position” (p. 443). Eisner (1991) uses the term structural corroboration to describe the relating of multiple sources of data to sustain or oppose the emerging interpretations. For the purposes of this research, triangulation or structural corroboration refers to the comparison of focus group and interview data for confirming and disconfirming evidence as well as the comparison of the literature review to the collected data to illuminate similarities and differences.

I also employed member checking to determine if the interpretations, categories, descriptions, and emerging theory that I was developing were in alignment with the participants’ constructions of persistence. Creswell (2007) defines member checking as action on the part of the researcher that “solicits participants’ views of the credibility of the findings and interpretations” (p. 208). By returning transcripts, theoretical summaries, and descriptions throughout the theory development process, I gave participants the opportunity to contradict my interpretations and/or build on the theory as it progressed.

In representing the theory emerging from the data, I utilized participant quotes to support the description of theoretical categories. The grounded theory research exemplars presented earlier in this chapter do not publish participant quotes in developing the grounded theory and I think this is a mistake. By displaying the participants’ quotes as part of the categories and theory, I am able to better demonstrate the process of data analysis and theory development that has arisen from the data. According to Creswell (2007) and Merriam (1998), rich description also allows the transferability of the theory
to other situations by giving the reader sufficient information to understand both the
generation of the theory and its original application derivation.

**Authenticity.** While Lincoln and Guba (1986; Schwandt, 2007) identify
triangulation, member checking, and thick description as strategies to systematically
develop trustworthiness, they also offer the validity procedure of authenticity as a
complement to trustworthiness. Authenticity is unique to naturalistic inquiry for Lincoln
and Guba, and is based on the ontological, epistemological, and methodological
paradigms affiliated with qualitative research. Authenticity consists of several
subsequent criteria; fairness, ontological authenticity, educative authenticity, catalytic
authenticity, and tactical authenticity. Respectively, these criteria address the
participatory development of recommendations, the improvement of individual and group
consciousness, the increased understandings of stakeholders, the facilitation and
stimulation of action, and empowerment via the exercise of control in the research
process (Lincoln & Guba, 1986; Schwandt, 2007). In summary, authenticity is created
through the intentional actions of the researcher to share power and develop mutual
respect with research participants and stakeholders. Lincoln and Guba (1986) do not
offer specific strategies to support authenticity; however, some of the above actions for
trustworthiness also ensure authenticity, especially the reflexive research journal and
member checking.

Weis and Fine (2000) build on the concept of authenticity by imploring the
researcher to recognize the social responsibility inherent in producing research both
within the community and within the discipline. “We seek not necessarily to engage in
simple reflexivity about how our many selves… coproduce the empirical materials on which we report… instead, we gather here a set of self-reflective points of critical consciousness around the question of how to represent responsibility” (Weis & Fine, 2000, p. 33).

The concept of social responsibility and responsibility to participants was especially salient as I conducted the focus group for women of color and then individually interviewed women of color participants. The researcher role carries some power in educational status and control over the research situation. Additionally, I am a White researcher asking women of color to feel comfortable sharing their experiences of racism and persistence with me. The several interwoven power structures during these interviews required that I acknowledge my vulnerability, inexperience, and reliance on the expertise of the women of color who participated in this research. Specifically, I introduced the focus group with women of color differently as I publically acknowledged my own vulnerability and trust in the women of color to share their honest experiences around race and racism. I exercised caution in this declaration under the advice of Weis and Fine (2000). “In the hands of relatively privileged researchers studying those who experiences have been marginalized, the reflexive mode’s potential to silence subjects is of particular concern” (Weis & Fine, 2000, p. 34). I explored the appropriate communication with the women of color who served as key informants when I sought their feedback on the research purpose, process, and my role as the researcher.

Weis and Fine (2000) also provide a series of questions the researcher should ask herself surrounding social and personal responsibility in research.
• Have I connected the “voices” and “stories” of individuals back to the set of historic, structural, and economic relations in which they are situated?
• Have I deployed multiple methods so that very different kinds of analyses can be constructed?
• Have I described the mundane?
• Have some informants/constituents/participants reviewed the material with me, interpreted, dissented, challenged my interpretations?
• How far do I want to go with respect to theorizing the words of informants?
• Have I considered how these data could be used for progressive, conservative, repressive, social politics?
• Where have I backed into the passive voice and decoupled my responsibility for my interpretations?
• Who am I afraid will see these analyses?
• What dreams am I having about the material presented?
• To what extent has this analysis offered an alternative to the “common sense” or dominant discourse? (Weis & Fine, 2000, p. 63-65)

I utilized these questions as I moved through my research and my research journal in order to honor the contribution of the research participants, their stories, and their goals implicitly and explicitly demonstrated in the data that we generated.

Conclusion

Thus far, I have outlined the relevant literature, the research methodology, and the research design employed to address the question of nontraditional undergraduate women’s college persistence. In conducting this research, I have developed a theory of academic momentum regarding nontraditional undergraduate women’s college persistence that can be applied to the college community and adapted to other institutions, in order to support the increased graduation of nontraditional undergraduate women.

Chapter four describes the participants who gave up their valuable time to contribute to this research along with the major themes that emerged: commitment, environment, and support. Chapter five reads the data and findings with a critical race
feminism lens, centering the voices of women of color and re-presenting the findings. Chapter six describes the theory of academic momentum which unites the concepts of commitment, environment, and support, while also providing a praxis of momentum. Finally, chapter seven enters into a dialogue with Tinto about the findings, revisits the literature review, presents implications for the research, and suggests possibilities for future research.

My commitment to working with this population of learners stems from my professional involvement and learning as a member of the college community as well as my interest in encouraging the achievement of a group of learners marginalized by concepts of the traditional college student. Additionally, my process throughout this dissertation research has contributed to my own continued learning as a researcher and an advocate.
Chapter 4: Findings

Introduction

The persistence experiences of the nontraditional undergraduate women I spoke to are varied and unique, however, there are distinct elements that are also congruent and harmonious. Some elements of their diverse experiences are similar, allowing me to recognize themes and theory through their shared experiences. The overarching themes that have emerged as major contributors for nontraditional undergraduate women’s persistence are commitment, environment, and support unified in a theory of academic momentum. While the themes are relevant across the participants, there are significant variations in the application and identification of the themes for women of color and White women in the study. In many ways, the data suggests that there are two distinct groups of students in the study with relatively little overlap between women of color and White women who share this small college environment. Employing critical race feminism as the theoretical framework allows me to focus on the experiences of women of color not simply as divergent from White women’s college experiences, but as valuable, unique, and diverse contributions to the research.

In this chapter, I begin by describing the sample of students who I interviewed as high-achieving students in order to illustrate the context for the findings in terms of the students and the data they generated. Then, I will review the findings in terms of student
commitment, the college environment, and support as an interaction of commitment and the environment. As I mentioned, there are threads throughout the findings where the testimonies from women of color and White women are divergent and in order to fully address differences by race and racial dynamics, the next chapter will focus on a critical race feminist reading of the data, and the findings.

**High-achieving Students**

It is relevant to construct a description of the student participants because their identity as a group influences the data that they shared with me and, therefore, the development of the findings and theory from the data. However, the composite description does not imply that the students who I interviewed are particularly similar to each other or comprise a homogenous group. Rather, to align with the critical race feminist framework recognizing the intersectionality of identities, I provide only a broad description here as an introduction to the students who I had the honor to interview. I also cannot ensure that the characteristics that I outline here are particularly similar or different to other students at the college or to other nontraditional undergraduate women, however, I believe that the admission of these characteristics is important to the conclusions drawn from this research as well as future research opportunities for theory development.

The participants are generally representative of the population of the college and of nontraditional undergraduate women in several ways (see Table 7). While there is a range of ages, from 28 to 57 years old, they are slightly older than the reported population at the college, which has an average age of 37 years old. Of the students who I spoke to,
38% identified as women of color and the college reports that the larger population identifies as 40% women of color (The college, 2009-2010). There is a variety of majors and minors in the sample, although amongst the students I spoke to 10 out of the 16 participants are communication majors. Most of the students who I spoke to work full-time (11 of 16), attend school part-time (9 of 16), and have parental responsibilities (12 of 16).

Despite some demographic information that resembles the general student population of the college, there are three marked differences that might serve to make this sample of students unique from their peers of nontraditional undergraduate women overall; they are persisters; they are student leaders; and they are high-achieving. Most notably, these students have already demonstrated their ability to persist. The students who I spoke to are juniors and seniors, which means that they have spent an extended period of time accumulating academic credits. Their status as juniors and seniors, as well as persisters, also gives them a unique perspective on academic persistence, which is different than a student enrolled in her first quarter with few transfer credits. As Katie described it, “I could see that light at the end of the tunnel now and it’s not a train!” As students who have survived obstacles to continue on their educational path, the students I spoke to may have found strategies to support their educational goals that other students may not be aware of. As a group, they exhibit a strong commitment to complete their degrees and have demonstrated their ability to achieve their educational goals as they progress through coursework. One way to examine and discuss academic persistence is
through the stories of those students who have been successful, as the participants have been.

Another substantial characteristic of the students who I spoke with is their involvement as student leaders and their engagement in student groups. Of the students who I interviewed, 9 of 16 indicated their student leadership status and student group involvement during our interview. Their level of involvement with extracurricular activities at the college is significant for two reasons. First, these students are very busy juggling full lives, and yet, they have found additional time to participate in student group activities, in several cases as group leaders. Second, I am not aware of the ratio of student group participation at the college, therefore, I cannot determine whether this is typical of the rest of the student body at the college or for other nontraditional undergraduate women, rather, it appears that I may be working with a specific group of students from the college; its student leaders.
Table 7: Participant Demographic Overview

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Race and Ethnicity</th>
<th>First generation</th>
<th>Years at TWC</th>
<th>Standing</th>
<th>GPA</th>
<th>Enrollment</th>
<th>Work</th>
<th>Parent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kay</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>part time</td>
<td>part time</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julie C.</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>part time</td>
<td>full time</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Katie</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>3.94</td>
<td>full time</td>
<td>full time</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Susie</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>White, French, Irish, Indian</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>3.25</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>3.90</td>
<td>part time</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Venus</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>3.86</td>
<td>part time</td>
<td>part time</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grateful Lady</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>3.60</td>
<td>full time</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skye</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>Black, Latina</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>3.68</td>
<td>full time</td>
<td>full time</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neets</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>American Indian</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>3.75</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>3.60</td>
<td>part time</td>
<td>full time</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kathy</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Grad</td>
<td>3.98</td>
<td>part time</td>
<td>part time</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colleague</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>3.88</td>
<td>part time</td>
<td>full time</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bertha</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>3.75</td>
<td>Grad</td>
<td>3.97</td>
<td>part time</td>
<td>full time</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beverly</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Multiracial</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>4.75</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>3.75</td>
<td>part time</td>
<td>part time</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serena</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>White Latina</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>1.75</td>
<td>Soph</td>
<td>3.20</td>
<td>full time</td>
<td>full time</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Madeline</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>White, Italian</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>3.95</td>
<td>part time</td>
<td>part time</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edie</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>Grad</td>
<td>3.83</td>
<td>full time</td>
<td>full time</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AnnaMaria</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>Soph</td>
<td></td>
<td>part time</td>
<td>full time</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Average GPA: 4.05
Average Years at TWC: 3.81

*8 single parents
Participating in student activities and being able to prioritize activities in addition to work, family, and school suggests that these students have an intense relationship with the college, strong relationships with other students, and increased access to the resources that college offers. Just by virtue of their extended time invested in campus activities, they are likely to have stronger ties to the college and a greater likelihood of persisting (Astin, 1975). There may be a likely relationship between persisting and being involved, such that the more adept a student is at managing her responsibilities, the more likely she is able to find time to participate extracurricularly as well as juggle her academic obligations. Some students may arrive at the college with the skills, knowledge, or support to navigate a very full schedule successfully. Or conversely, the more involved a student becomes in her college environment, the more her commitment to graduation is strengthened, the more support she finds, and the more likely she is to persist. In this case, it is the bonds to the college that enable a student to persist. In either situation, the students who I interviewed tended to be involved with student activities.

Finally, the students and I have discussed the high-achieving nature of this group of student participants. In some cases, the students described all students at the college as high-achieving and particularly driven to get good grades. Several students shared their desire to graduate with honors, which requires having a GPA of 3.75 or higher on a 4.0 scale. The average GPA of the students who I interviewed is 3.81. Some students shared their reactions when they received a grade less than an “A” for the first time. Some students had not yet received a grade less than an “A.” The importance of their academic achievement was not only manifested by getting good grades, but there was a general
regard for the investment that students are making in their coursework. They were proud that students at the college come to class prepared, have done the reading and homework, participate during class, and respect academic challenge. Students expressed a desire to learn from each other because they believe that their classmates have important contributions to make in class. They acknowledge the increased learning of working in groups and being proud of the work that their groups have produced. They help tutor other students who are not as successful academically in a particular class. They have accepted tutoring from other students and dedicated many precious hours to their own learning so that they can perform to their fullest. Many of the students who I interviewed expressed an interest in continuing their education to graduate school, suggesting that they embrace their identity as successful students.

For the successful and high-achieving students who I had the honor to interview, continuing their education, participating in student activities, and getting high grades were hallmarks of their dedication and regard for the work they are doing as students. They maintain a reputation as successful students, which is reflected back to them by successful sister students and in the high expectations of their faculty members.

**Commitment**

Commitment emerged as the central process (Glaser, 1978) early in the data analysis as it is prominent for all of the participants as a factor to their educational success, albeit in multiple forms. By answering the question “what is this a study of?” (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser, 1978) early in data analysis, I was able to utilize subsequent focus groups and individual interviews to address commitment more deeply with
students. In many ways, environment and support influence commitment, which in turn affects student persistence.

As I have seen in this research, commitment is the dedication, the drive, the physical and emotional stamina that students have to continue in their education in spite of obstacles that arise. The psychological nature of commitment manifests as the desire to earn a degree, levying self-talk and self-encouragement against the multiple challenges to enrollment. The students who I interviewed are emotionally and intellectually bound to the goal of graduation, the benefits of their education, and the individual rewards of their own progress towards graduation. Students talked about commitment as their “life-long dream,” their “personal goal,” their motivation to make sacrifices. They talked about “always knowing I was going to go to college” and as “wanting the degree and wanting to finish.” Commitment was evident in our dialogue through the importance that students placed on education and their dedication to their high academic performance and the priority it receives.

The nature and reality of commitment leaves room for prioritizing education within the rest of a busy life, lending greater value to the choices a student makes to prioritize her educational commitment and remain enrolled. Being engaged, driven, and high-achieving was a result of a fundamental value for education, educational tenacity, and ultimately, a student’s commitment to earning her degree. The nontraditional undergraduate women I spoke to are not here to just “get through” college; they are not here because someone else told them to go to college; they are not here because they just need “B.A. typed on a piece of paper.” Students have a personal commitment to their
own success as students, as role models, as responsible agents, and they reap the benefits of their personal success most fully when they know that they have invested in each class.

Commitment surfaces as students face obstacles and as they would share with me why they are in college, what their daily activities are like, and how they interpret the college experience itself. At several points, Susie said “quitting is not an option… I just can’t even conceive of it.”

The other reason that quitting is not an option, I mean, it’s just the, it’s the time and the effort and the work that you’ve put in. Um, to me it would be, it would be just leaving such a big part of your life. I mean if you came here and you’ve gone this far and, and, you know, you’ve made this decision, to quit would be leaving something very big undone. And you just can’t leave it. To me, you can’t just leave it undone.

While uncritical in some ways, Susie’s mantra of “quitting is not an option” describes how many participants thought about their persistence. Persistence is inevitable because they have a goal that they will not deviate from. Madeline expresses a similar sentiment on commitment, where quitting is not an option.

I don’t even think about it because I made the one commitment, and I had a sense that it was going to take about six years, and I don’t think about it, I just do it. But I know because I have that goal in sight that I just kept doing it. It’s really important to be committed to it and not even get off the tracks. Not even say “oh, I’m going to take a semester off and then come back.” Why? What’s the point? Might as well just get it done now.

Even with their strong commitments, students could be dissatisfied and discouraged with their college experiences. Individual participants’ commitment did not preclude them from being critical of their experiences. In fact, Beverly expressed her commitment, which resonated with others in the group, as discontentment with her college experience. However, her commitment is clearly evident in the fact that she is still enrolled and determined to graduate.
But it sounds like the more people you talk to at [the college] the more that have the same story. Like almost all of the people who actually get to their senior year, it seems, have that story of “well, I continued to go to school but I lost my job and I lost this and I lost this.” And it seems like there is so much loss why do we keep coming here? Like, if I was enrolling now and I heard everybody’s stories – or even my own story because I have the same exact story. I couldn’t keep my job and go to school and I couldn’t, you know, do this and the school and the baby – I don’t think I’d enroll. If that’s what it takes to make it to senior year…

While Beverly is expressing her frustration and outlining the serious sacrifices that many students make in order to stay in school, these are not presented as reasons for her to withdrawal. She will continue in school, in part, because she has already made the sacrifices but also because, like Susie, quitting is not an option. While it has been more difficult than she thought it would be and while she has had to make sacrifices that she never anticipated, Beverly has persisted because she is committed to graduating. But Beverly also entertains the fact that she may not have enrolled, she may not have made the commitment, if she fully knew how much sacrifice it was going to take.

In a similar statement, Katie says that going to school is “irritating. I wanna go skiing, I don’t wanna go to class. And like Susie said, the balance. It’s really difficult to find a balance between home work and school work.” The other students in the group, Susie included, agreed with Katie that finding balance was difficult and many students admitted that they gave up trying to have balance. There are times when various other obligations suffer in order to prioritize school obligations. While the struggle to balance is not as severe as the stories Beverly has heard, they are only different by degrees. Giving up what you enjoy doing and asking the people in your life to give up what they enjoy in order to earn a bachelor’s degree is a demonstration of commitment shared by every student I talked to.
Discussing commitment with students reveals two contributing sub-categories; reward and sacrifice. Reward directly influences commitment in that accruing rewards and feeling the benefit of rewards validates students’ commitment to their education. The rewards of going to college affirm commitment. The rewards of going to college are part of what make the sacrifices worth it. Sacrifice, as it relates to commitment, creates a dichotomy and serves as a counter-weight to reward. Commitment is best demonstrated when it is in spite of the sacrifices students have made in order to pursue their goal, where the fullest depiction of commitment is not idealistic, rather it is more expressive because it was not an easy choice to make. In much the same way that rewards contribute to the explanation of commitment, sacrifices elaborate on commitment because something valuable has been surrendered in order to reach one’s goal and the priority is explicit.

**Reward.**

Interacting with students’ commitment to their education is the feeling of being rewarded. Recognizing rewards likely supports commitment in some ways because students are validated and affirmed in their commitment, their decisions, their choices about going to school. Rewards that stem from being in school include academic validation in terms of GPA performance and feedback, interactions with faculty and peers, and the learning that happens throughout the educational journey. Generally speaking, the reward may be intrinsic, where students feel positive about their own experiences, their classes, and even their sacrifices. The reward is also tangible, in the
sense that they are making visible, accumulated progress towards a very real goal of graduating in the form of academic credits.

Students discussed rewards in various ways, including learning, achievement, meeting a personal goal, role modeling, and creating career options for themselves. Students’ love of learning and the reward of learning experiences was the most frequently referenced reward with regard to their educational commitment. Commitment appeared in students’ love of learning and how the powerful process of learning could influence commitment, as if as a student’s desire for learning grows, so does her commitment to her education. One student, Julie, talked about how much she values the experiences in the classroom that keep her motivated to come to school.

You know for students our age, it’s passion way more than persistence. I’m desperate at the thought of missing even one class out of a quarter, because it just feels like I would miss so much because it is compressed. And I want to learn everything that I can.

Julie conflates her commitment to her education and wanting to do well in school with her passion for what she is learning in the classroom, linking her commitment to the reward of learning. Once she has made the sacrifice of enrolling in school, the reward of learning makes the sacrifice worth it for her.

Madeline’s college mantra demonstrates the central role of students’ love of learning in their commitment and educational persistence.

As I’m learning more and more and more, I just love learning. One of the books I read for pleasure before I started school was Clarissa Pinkola Estes, Women Who Run with the Wolves, and in there she says the reason why we’re here is to learn. And people have come up with all kinds of reasons why we’re here, on earth, and that always stuck with me. So, you know, I started school and that’s been my mantra. We’re here to learn.
For Madeline, learning is a rewarding experience that she values and it motivates her in her commitment and persistence. As Madeline was sharing this motivation, she also talked about her desire to impress upon some other students the importance of learning, giving me the impression that she believes that not everyone shares in her mantra. Madeline’s comments added to my realization about the sample of students in my study being highly successful students and not necessarily representative of all students enrolled at the college.

Related to learning as a reward, students often cited the reward they receive from recognition and achievement in their educational pursuits. Many students talked about grades as a demonstration of their commitment, in that they would not be working hard to earn high grades if they were not committed to their education. In many ways, commitment and engagement resemble academic achievement, and even over-achievement, for students at the college. Students talked about the high grade point averages, writing more than required of an assignment, working above professors’ expectations, resenting lecture without the opportunity for contribution, and doing additional coursework in order to incorporate their identities into the classroom. When I asked Bertha to tell me about how I would know that she was committed to her education, her response included grades as well as her involvement outside of class activities with the college.

I think for me, like the easy answer would be I graduated (A), or you could look at my GPA (B). But I think, for me just getting involved in different activities here at [the college], like different student groups and trying to challenge myself in those ways, and using what I was learning in the classroom to just, improve public speaking. Like working on weekend announcements, even though nobody watched them. It really was helpful for me to just, in 30 seconds, to look at the
paper and just rattle off some stuff. And that has helped me in interviews and stuff. So I think, little things like that, just trying to get involved and stay connected and build community has been the most rewarding part of my education. And I think one way that I could show that I was committed to it.

Bertha’s response adds breadth to the typical achievement that students mention, which is grades and GPA. However, GPA was clearly one element of achievement. Several students talked about their high grades while we talked about persistence, where the grades serve as both a motivator to persist and an indicator that they were committed to their education. Katie discusses her grades as a reward and a motivator.

I, I just never thought I would ever challenge myself that way, so that’s kind of been a, it sounds so silly but…it really, it’s a huge reward. Even taking like three classes and still getting all A’s was just really fun, and then it was a challenge to make sure that I kept getting A’s… And it, the motivation, too, which is just, I can do this. And the first time you got a good grade, mark on a paper or…you know, people were like looking at you when you did a presentation, that just kept feeding on itself, too, which is a really positive reinforcement, for me… it was. And it helped keep me motivated. And moving forward.

Katie also expressed a dual goal of graduating, and graduating magna cum laude, which other students also shared. Julie and Kay talked about the culture of achievement at the college.

Julie: It’s funny, I’ve heard more than one professor complain because [the college] students, we’re not OK with just doing OK. We want A’s, we want A plus, plus, pluses. We’re driven and they can see it. And I think instead of asking us to do more, they’re constantly asking us to narrow it down and do a little less…
Kay: There’s definitely a mentality of people who are driven to excel.
Julie: We really do want to excel and really be wonderful, not just get through.

Students related learning and achievement as both reward and motivation, where not only does a reward influence their commitment because they feel successful in their educational endeavors, but they also receive intrinsic rewards from learning and motivation. Similarly, students talked about the importance of meeting a personal goal of
earning their degree, where the reward of working towards their goal both motivated them to continue and strengthened their commitment to their education. Many students mentioned that going to college was a life-long goal, or a dream, or something they had always wanted to do, establishing the foundation for the reward of working towards a personal goal. Julie shares the tension around wanting to go to college, and being uncertain of how to achieve this goal, delaying her college enrollment.

I knew it was the right time because it was something I always had in the back of my mind, but I thought, “oh I can’t afford that because I can’t go to college and work.”

While Julie was trying to determine how to balance her life responsibilities and enroll in college, Katie faced a situation where she recently had to stop out for a few quarters. She is now re-enrolled and reflected on that experience in our group dialogue.

I thought, “you know what, I can’t do this.” And it was really hard to come back, I’ll be honest, but then I thought “you idiot, you have already worked and paid for this, worked so hard, and you just have four classes left!” [One of my professors] has been really helpful to encourage me to come to get this finished up. I’m taking my last [class]. And it’s a personal goal… and that’s, sort of, what’s making me persevere, persist. Because I’m doing it strictly for a personal goal, I don’t need it professionally. But I just wanna do it for me.

Katie shares that coming back after time away was difficult. Her life was changing, she had different demands on her time because of her absence, and she was reconciling the family health issues that necessitated her stop out initially. For Katie, through the investment she had already made, the attention of a faculty member, and her proximity to completing a long-time goal facilitated her commitment to return. Unlike some other students, Katie states that she does not need the degree for career advancement, she is content with her current career and does not plan to pursue a new job. For Katie, the
personal goal is particularly significant because she is one of the few students who I spoke to whose personal goal was, perhaps, the strongest motivator of her persistence.

For me it’s because I’ve had so many like ups and downs, well, we all have. I mean, everyone has. But it’s been just, I have to get this done and I want to accomplish this life goal. I have no need of a degree at this stage of my career, but it’s really just been, I want to do it for me. And I want to do it with a University of Denver education, and I want to graduate magna cum laude.

Grateful Lady has a different expression of her personal goal and motivating rewards. She shares the importance of her education to her family and her sense of community.

So, this is not only me living my dream, but my mom and my grandmom, they just think this is fantastic. They are really proud of me. So, I'm doing it for me, I'm doing it for them, and I'm doing it for those who are gonna come behind me. And like she said, we bring these experiences to the table, that's why we have that persistence.

Grateful Lady’s statement about those who are going to come after her is in strong relation to statements that she made about being tokenized for the purpose of improving the environment of the college for other women of color. Grateful Lady’s sense of personal goal is different than Katie’s because it includes her sense of obligation to communities of color.

I am the first generation in my family to be able to take advantage of the civil rights movement. So, it would be disrespectful for me not to do it. So it means more to me than just - you know, I'm getting this education, but I know what my people went through for me to be sittin here. So, it means a lot to us. It really does.

Grateful Lady also shares her respect for civil rights actions changing the opportunities that her family and other people of color have had, which is in contrast to White women who I interviewed who did not express appreciation for the right to go to college. Both groups have been denied the right to education historically, and yet this was salient for
Grateful Lady, and other women of color agreed with her, however, it was not salient for the White women in this study.

Elaborating on the reward of pursuing a personal goal, Bertha talks about her personal goal and reward of persisting in college as well as the career options her graduation will provide. Unlike Katie, having more career options is a significant reward for Bertha.

I think it’s just wanting to have a degree and to finish and knowing that all of my effort and energy and money is going to pay off in the end. And that investment will be worth it. And knowing that if I don’t, A) I’ll regret it personally, and B) I could potentially be an administrative assistant for the rest of my life. And I really don’t want that for my life. I want something bigger.

Beverly has a different view of the career options that earning her degree will make a possibility.

I kinda wonder, too, when we were talking about why do you want your degree. I have a whole bunch of different theories. One of my theories is just that I want that feeling, you know, like, I got a degree. And another one is, yeah, I want to learn as much as I can, but then I have that backlash because I feel the exact way - that I have conversations now with some of my old friends and we’re not getting each other at all. But then part of me, as I go on more job interviews and meet more people with their degree wonders how much I’m just getting this degree just so other people will know that I can stick with something for a couple years. Because I know, like the guy in IT has his degree in psychology - he does IT. You know? And so part of me just wonders if you’re applying for a job, like, do I need this degree just so they can see that I can stick with something?

While Beverly notes the importance of earning her degree and the rewards of personal achievement and learning, she also reveals her perceptions of the over-inflation of the social characterization of a bachelor’s degree. Beverly wants the degree and will persist to graduation, she will value the degree that represents her academic success and she will take her love of learning with her. However, she also casts doubt upon the commonly accepted view that the bachelor’s degree is required or recommended for her future
career possibilities. Implicit to her realization that the degree proves she can stick with something is the struggle of persistence. If it were not difficult to stick with it, it would not have external value to employers or society. In this statement, she shares her understanding of the challenge of persisting while ascribing value in the marketplace to the overcoming of that challenge.

Like Bertha and Beverly, Kay also wants additional career opportunities, which provides a new level of motivation for her enrollment and persistence in college.

And what I found, researching the job market in Colorado, was that women who were administrative or executive assistants, more than 50% of ‘em had gone to college but not completed that degree. And so for me the writing was on the wall. I was like, this is my future. If I don’t go now, I will be that 50 year old administrative assistant. And that was just the clincher, I was not going to let that happen.

Kay, as a single participant case, discusses the rewards of learning, achievement, meeting a personal goal, having career options, and being a role model for her son. Most of the participants refer to rewards generally, as well as specifically referring to the prominent instances I explain here. Skye’s comments highlight the rewards and sacrifices of her commitment to her education.

Skye recognizes the positive and negative aspects of her commitment and pursuance of her degree. She celebrates the strengthening, affirming, encouraging moments. She also substantiates that there are costs to going to college. Finally, Skye confirms her
commitment and her agreement with the fact that quitting is not an option in the face of her commitment and her sacrifices to stay in school. “You can’t turn back now.”

**Sacrifices.**

Important to conceptualizing commitment is the recognition that students are committed to their education in spite of the obstacles they face and the sacrifices they make to go to school. Like Skye communicates, committing to her education has clear positive and negative aspects, rewards and sacrifices. The most specifically referenced sacrifices are around the financial costs of attending the college, both in tuition costs and taking on student loans. Students made comparisons to other colleges, like community colleges, state universities, and online college options, which would have been cheaper in the long run. However, there was also recognition from the students that they were at the college for a reason; that the environment was more supportive, that the coursework was more rigorous, that the faculty members were more qualified. Even though students are taking on debt to go to the college and it is a sacrifice, it is a sacrifice they are willing to make even though they feel the strain financially. Several students note the financial sacrifices as a deterrent, but it is their commitment that helps them to manage the sacrifices, like Susie.

I’m racking up, I have a huge bill right now. And it’s frightening. It’s so frightening that there have been moments when I thought “I have to stop. This is costing too much. I have to stop.” And the other part of it is I’m too far into it to stop. And I don’t want to stop. I don’t want to stop. I’m going to finish. It’s just the cost - it’s scary. Scary huge.

AnnaMaria agrees with Susie in the emotional stress associated with the financial burden of going to college. “…Paying for it is, like, whoa. You know, sometimes you don’t know if you’re gonna sleep at night because those loans keep piling up. But you live day
by day.” Kathy provides an example of how students also apply the financial sacrifice as a type of motivation to persist.

When I felt myself starting to run out of steam, I just thought, I could either quit again - but I’m still gonna be in the same situation, I’m still gonna wanna go to grad school and not have an undergraduate degree. I’m still gonna be frustrated for all of the same reasons that I’m frustrated now. So I decided to up it, and in order to do that I had to borrow money, and as soon as I borrowed money I knew that as soon as I stopped going to school I had to start paying for the money I borrowed.

Almost all of the students explained how their stop out would incur additional financial responsibilities on two counts; the first is the repayment of student loans, and the second is the inability to change careers and earn more money without having earned a bachelor’s degree.

Not all of the sacrifices mentioned were in a financial context, students also referred to sacrifices generally. Kathy notes several sacrifices that she has made while trying to maintain her commitment to her graduation. Her willingness to volunteer the important aspects of her life as a sacrifice to her education demonstrates the priority she has given to school at this point in her life.

…for me at least, is the sacrifice. Because I can think about the quarters where I didn’t make it to one of my daughter’s soccer games. Or the quarters where I feel like I miss – or the quarters where I feel like I don’t see anyone, you know. And the whole weekend – it feels like my weeks just bleed into each other, you know, where it just never stops. And that, to me, is a sense of being committed to my education just because it’s so difficult, you know. And there’s so much of the rest of your life that suffers as a result of your commitment to be here.

Bertha agrees with Kathy’s assessment of the sacrifices involved with going to school and builds on Kathy’s ideas. Bertha’s sentiments also echo other students’ comments regarding the intellectual sacrifices of going to school. When students are
emotionally and intellectually managing their school commitment, they are sacrificing the time and attention other aspects of their lives have previously occupied.

Trying to be there for family during hard times and then feeling guilty when you can’t be. And not being really present at work, just going through the motions to get your work done, but really not being there. And then, I think that and yeah, just trying to make ends meet have been barriers.

Bertha talks about being present at work, and many students talk about the importance of being present at school. Implicit in these comments is the difficulty of leaving school at school or leaving home at home. Many students discussed their process of homework consisting of thinking about their homework, formulating responses and papers in their heads while they are going about the rest of their out-of-school lives. Students’ lives are not neatly compartmentalized allowing school to intrude at work and home, not only when a student has dedicated time to coursework, but also intellectual and emotional time and energy. There are costs and benefits for nontraditional undergraduate women whose lives are not neatly compartmentalized. As a cost, it makes it difficult for students to focus on just one responsibility at a time. However, bringing personal experiences into the classroom allows students to better relate content learning to their lives, which is a clear benefit. Also, it is more realistic to acknowledge that students’ experiences, histories, and socialization are always present in the classroom regardless of the content and subject matter. Students cannot separate who they are as students from who they are as people. For AnnaMaria, recognizing her life history in the context of her classroom has demonstrated simultaneous benefits and costs.

And I learned in that class that I had to learn to not think in my native language. That if I wanted to be able to go ahead and pursue what I wanted and persist in an education and continue to do what I did, for me, for my daughter, for whatever reason, that I had to start thinking in a different language.
While AnnaMaria is learning to expose herself, through classroom learning, to worldviews beyond what she grew up with, there is also a clear cultural demarcation in her words. AnnaMaria is Latina and can relate to what she read in class.

And so when I read in that book, *House on Mango Street*, and she has that introduction, in it she says “if I continue to think in my father’s language I was never going to leave my dad’s house.” Well if I’m still thinking in my dad’s house, how am I going to move on? Nobody’s telling me how do I move on? I’m still there. I’m living by myself, I’m trying to raise my daughter, but I don’t know how to move on from there. That hat’s still on. And when I read that it just clicked. I said “I’m doing what I have to do,” I just wasn’t recognizing what I was doing. And it just, it just clicked.

For AnnaMaria, she found guidance in Sandra Cisneros to validate her own experiences, her independent life, and her desire to continue her learning. The cost, though, is leaving her father’s house and navigating through multiple worlds.

Finally, for many students the sacrifice moves beyond giving up time. We talked about the stress of going to school and the price that students pay as they add more responsibilities to already busy lives. Many students I interviewed cried as we spoke. Not always in sadness, but in a way that released some of the stress that they carry with them and try to manage. As they revealed the difficult aspects of going to school, they let go of some of the control they have over their anxiety. We talked about the “constant anxiety” that seems ever-present and does not subside with coursework, tests, presentations, or the end of the quarter. Talking about the high expectations and pressure students feel when they’re enrolled, Beverly shares her awareness of the constant anxiety.

Which causes the constant anxiety, which I never thought about until I went to [another student’s] graduation party. And in her toast she said “here’s to the loss of that constant anxiety that you can’t quite figure out where it came from that transfers over to your work like and to your home life and now I realize where it came from because I’m officially done and it’s gone.” And I get anxiety before a
test. I get anxiety before maybe a final, or the first day of class, or something, but the fact is that it never goes away until we’re done.

Students found comfort in the fact that their peers were experiencing similar anxiety and that once you graduate the anxiety dissipates. The anxiety is a sacrifice and directly related to students’ commitment to their education because they could eliminate the stress of college work by stopping out, yet they persist and try to manage the stress knowing that it will be worth the sacrifices when they graduate.

**Environment**

Environment emerged as a theme interacting with students’ commitment. The environment both internal to the college and external to the college strongly influences students’ experiences in positive and negative ways. I will organize the discussion of environment by issues internal to the college and external to the college. Some aspects of the environment support students’ success and other aspects of the environment could be hindering students’ success. Obviously, the students that I spoke to were all persisting and even though they shared negative aspects of the environment, these were not enough to deter these students from their educational goals. This phenomenon is one of the reasons that commitment remains the central process of the data under study here, because if the successful students I interviewed were more vulnerable to the negative aspects of the environment, than they would credit the environment with the cause of their stop out. I primarily heard about positive aspects of the environment that support students’ persistence, however, I also heard about negative aspects, which, while distracting and disappointing, did not lead to student stop out.
One important point to make with the effects of the environment is that even though there were areas that were not positive, and had the potential to interfere with the students’ commitment to their education, these did not ultimately force students out of school. Similarly, I do not want to imply that the positive aspects of the environment are responsible for students’ persistence and success. The interaction between the student and her environment is complex and there are several factors that come together working for and against a student’s own success and in this collection of factors, each component only marginally adds to or subtracts from her persistence. The overall outcome remains a composite of influences and experiences which I will connect through a theory of academic momentum.

**Internal to the college.**

There were several aspects of the environment at the college that students discussed. The most frequent comments were about the faculty members and students’ positive and negative interactions with faculty. The primacy of faculty is reasonable considering that nontraditional undergraduate women spend their time on campus in the classroom and not in residence halls or student groups like their traditional peers might. Students also speak positively of their experiences with sister students in the classroom. While not all of their experiences with classmates are encouraging, there is a general appreciation for the shared understanding and compassion shown by and towards their sister students. Finally, there is an ongoing discussion of diversity in the classroom. For some students, the diversity of students by race, age, and background is enriching to the
classroom learning. Other students, primarily but not exclusively women of color, feel the weight of racism and exclusion in the classroom from faculty and students.

The successful students who I spoke with have a positive feeling about the college overall. Some students describe the atmosphere more positively than others. Some see only the best attributes, while others are feeling abandoned by the college and see primarily the worst attributes. Kay, especially, feels validated by the environment and shares a positive impression.

I think there’s just a level of love and acceptance that you cannot fathom when you walk in the door. You’re probably thinking about the academics and your schedule and your finances and all these things, and those are the tangibles. The intangible is the connections that you’ll make with the faculty as well as fellow students and staff and, you know, where that support can take you. It’s almost like invisible hands holding you up and helping you reach further for yourself. And when you find people that believe in you more than you believe in yourself, that is life changing. And it helps you to see yourself through other people’s eyes.

Kay receives affirmation of her student self from the college environment, therefore these positive affirmations are reflected in her sentiments about the college. Kay has explored other college environments as a student and a prospective student through her educational career, and contrasts these with the college where “you feel like you’re home.” Many of the students who I spoke to described the college as “feeling like home,” “supportive,” “nurturing and accepting,” “challenging,” and “affirming.” Similar to Kay, Madeline also has a positive view of the college that is widely accepted among the students who I spoke with.

And then the other thing that has led to my success and staying at school, just feeling the nurturing atmosphere and feeling like that’s where I want to be. Not dreading going to school, but really enjoying it and feeling like a part of something. And that sense that it gives me that I could be something greater and add to the greater good.
I think Kay and Madeline offer a reliable account of the college as the place where they will succeed and graduate from, which generates affectionate feelings, and they appropriately credit the environment with a role in their success as did many of the students I spoke with. Serena also talks about her initial impressions of the college, crediting the environment as feeling different than other colleges.

I’ve looked at going back to different programs for years. This is the only one that stuck. I never actually started any other program, I just looked at them. And this is the only one that actually made me feel like I can be successful. And I think a lot of it had to do with the diversity and the people who I met when I first walked in.

While students’ general feelings about the college are positive, this is not to say that students did not also share some negative experiences and impressions. Skye talked about a general feeling she shares with some other students.

It’s really too bad because I’ve been talking to a lot of people lately who now the attitude if just like, “god, I just can’t wait to be done. Just let me get out of here.” You know, and that’s sad because I know initially one of the things that motivated me to come here was because I wanted that degree that said DU. But that shouldn’t be, you know, the biggest motivating factor and it’s just like “well, I’m gonna overlook all this other stuff because at least I can say I have this.” It shouldn’t be that way. It should be great memories, great friends, it should be life-long friends.

While Skye’s comments here express a general dissatisfaction with the college environment, there are also examples of specific impressions students have about the environment. There are positive and negative attributes through each of the specific environment topics; including faculty and staff, camaraderie, and diversity and racism.

Faculty play an important role for the students I spoke to regarding the academic feedback, opportunities for relationships, and the facilitation of the interpersonal and content learning in the classroom. Most of the instances where students talk about
faculty members are to share a positive experience or an affirming practice. However, there are also examples of faculty who lost the respect of the students or were not meeting the expectations that students had developed through their previous coursework. Kathy, who has high academic expectations of herself and plans to pursue graduate education, shares her impression of the best faculty members at the college.

I think that the professors who are really special here have a way of meeting students where they are. And that they can see what that student is capable of and push them to achieve what their best is, rather than like a standardized sense of “you’re a junior, you should be here.” And “you’re a freshman, you should be here.” There’s this huge variance in terms of experience and what sort of, cultural capital a student brings to their experience here. You know, like what kind of family life, what sort of professional life, what has your life looked like outside of these walls. And that is one of the things I think really makes a faculty member succeed here and makes the students feel engaged here, is the fact that when you really connect with a faculty member you feel like they see you for who, for who you are, for where you are, and it just makes a huge difference to be spoken to and engaged with a faculty member like that as opposed to based on looking at your transcript and seeing what classes you’ve taken and what clubs you’re a member of.

Kathy articulates the requirements of a good faculty member, where the faculty member knows a student for who she is as an individual contributor and not only as transcript data. Part of Kathy’s holistic view of students is consistent with the language of the college appreciating the experiences that a student brings with her to the classroom. In line with her desire for faculty to “meet students where they are,” Kathy also notes several professors she has had who are “patronizing” or “miss the fact that everyone, including myself, are drawing” while the faculty member drones on in a lecture.

Students have high expectations for their own academic achievement, therefore, they expect that their faculty member shares in their high expectations and provides the
context for their best academic selves to flourish. Julie’s comments elaborate on Kathy’s distinctions between professors.

There have been professors who have made it obvious that – OK, you can’t get here any time but Wednesday night at 9:00, and not during the assigned hours, I’ll meet you in my office Wednesday night at 9:00. And then there’s been other teachers who say “look, I have another job outside of here, it keeps me really busy. I’ll post the assignment Monday night, it’s due on Saturday. And, no, if you can’t be here Wednesday night at 5:00pm, well that’s the only time I’m available.” And that’s a big difference between the professors that are available and the ones that say “I’m busy, you can show up for class, but don’t bother me.”

Bertha shares a class experience where the faculty member was disappointed that students submitted research papers as their final assignments, where the faculty member wanted some “fluff” assignment. Bertha set out to explain to the faculty member “that’s not how we do things here, the expectation is a research-based paper.” This faculty member also introduced the college to a guest speaker as a “college for single mothers.”

Bertha was offended not only by the low academic expectations, but also by this professor’s lack of interest in students; what Kathy terms “meeting students where they are.”

AnnaMaria’s experience in one particular classroom was formative for her as a student and as a member of the college community.

And she was so lively about everything; the conversations that went on in the class, the way she took control over it, the poems that just kind of went to reinvent yourself, to read something that you could really identify with, was amazing. And I can say that I – I don’t like poems. And whenever we had conversations, topics of conversation in reference to the problems that we had or the books that we had to read for that class, were just really really good. And the bonds that were in there. I mean, I kid you not, we’re hosting a baby shower for one of the girls that was in that class. And everyone’s going.

AnnaMaria’s comments synthesize the powerful connection between the faculty member’s actions, curriculum, student learning, and community building in the
classroom. The faculty member created the context where AnnaMaria not only read the poetry that she does not usually like, but she was able to connect to the curriculum. In addition, the classroom culture allowed her to connect with her classmates not only on the content learning, but also in creating relationships that will sustain the students through their educational careers. Grateful Lady also believes that the faculty member is accountable in the classroom, and like AnnaMaria, credits the faculty member with creating classroom culture.

Well, you know, I think that the instructor lays the foundation for how you're treated within her class. I've been the only Black in the majority of my classes, so it, it, you know - like [two other professors] they're not gonna tolerate any disrespect in their classes. I’ve seen [one professor] call people down for being disrespectful in her class.

For Grateful Lady, and several other women of color, there is a defining moment in the classroom when a faculty member can establish himself- or herself as either actively involved in the interpersonal dynamics of the classroom or passive towards the interpersonal dynamics. Women of color shared several examples of faculty members who were able to navigate the sensitive interpersonal aspects of their classrooms along with examples of those faculty members who neglected the interpersonal interactions that were happening to the detriment of the classroom culture.

Students have high expectations for themselves and for their faculty members. When they were reflecting on experiences where they created relationships with faculty members, felt affirmed by faculty members, and appreciated the collaborative nature of a classroom, it was as if they could not imagine a more powerful educational experience. Simultaneously, the experiences with faculty that were negative often became for the student simply a matter of meeting the designated requirements even when the class was
boring or unchallenging. However, more often than not, when students share experiences of faculty members not meeting their expectations, they feel offended, demeaned, insignificant, and disrespected. In a case of low faculty expectations, for example, students feel like their character and integrity as students is questioned and undervalued.

Another powerful aspect of the environment of the college is the camaraderie between students. Students value the experiences of their sister students as friends, partners in an educational journey, mentors, and teachers in the classroom. Most students talked about the importance of dialogue in the classroom because it provides the opportunity for students to learn from each other and hear each others’ perspectives. There were several students who I spoke to who had tutored other students at times to help a classmate along who was struggling with course content. Julie described the camaraderie as one of the most valuable features of the college, to the point where she felt that her job responsibilities prevented her from growing the relationships that are just beginning.

The camaraderie is wonderful and I’m being inspired and I’m learning about different women and I’m finding that there’s people out there who I really love, but it’s balanced with this frustration that I can’t take advantage of it because we are so spread out and working.

Venus notes some of the tangible aspects of being friends with your classmates.

I think also the friendships, and the sisterhood, which it took awhile to get there, you know what I mean? You don’t always start off right off the bat making friends, but you start to have the same classes and they help you along. And when you don’t really wanna go you know that you have your friend there to be in class with you, or to go through the process with you. ‘cause we’re all on the same journey, kind of. Which is good. That’s why I like going to [the college].

What is important about Venus’ idea of camaraderie is that it is partially born out of being “on the same journey.” There were several instances of students feeling like they
were not alone in their experiences as nontraditional students. They noted their appreciation for students who had it harder than they did, like those students who have young children or are single parents, for example. They also expressed commonality around working, regardless of the specific jobs they had held. The camaraderie for many students applied to both friends and acquaintances. While Katie speaks about her friendships, specifically, she also says that there is a community that comes together.

And just the new friends I’ve made and the people that I never would have encountered in my everyday life that I’ve met here that I just, you know, think the world of that aren’t people that I would have had the opportunity in my regular life to have met. Let alone get to, to love. As dear friends. You know, you hear the alumni say that you will be friends with these people for life but you don’t really, it doesn’t really register until it happens to you I think. And it’s very true. And it’s a very caring community that comes together.

Grateful Lady adds to the comments about the student sisterhood at the college, with one important distinction. Grateful Lady identifies the sisterhood of women of color at the college, and not a general feeling of “we’re all in this together” as Venus mentions.

I couldn’t have gotten my education anywhere but here because [the college], all in all, it has a few problems, but the support network I’ve gotten from just the women that go here – [several women of color] – I mean, we just have this camaraderie amongst each other that… it just pushes you to excel. It does.

The college is a small community and students often know each other. For each focus group that I conducted, almost all of the students participating knew each other. Many of the participants had classes together in past and current quarters and many of them had relationships that extended beyond the classroom.

Not all interactions between students are uplifting, however. Students also shared instances where some students “hijack” the classroom discussion and content learning. Several students talked about checking the registration for a course to see who else was
taking it before they would commit to a quarter with a particular student dominating the classroom discussion or using the discussion as therapy. I also heard about insensitive comments that students make in the classroom, which endorses the importance of having a faculty member who will confront disrespectful behavior, as Grateful Lady, and others shared.

Finally, students talked about diverse classroom settings. Many students appreciated diversity of race, ethnicity, age, and experience in the classroom environment. The cost of diversity in the classroom, however, is the racism and exclusion that often accompanies learning about diversity. Some of the White women I spoke with mentioned the value of different racial and ethnic perspectives in a classroom dialogue, noting a stated commitment to social justice issues or their own limited interactions with women of color previously as reasons they prefer racially diverse classrooms. Several White women did not comment about diversity in the classroom, at all. And I also spoke with at least one White woman who spoke of her discomfort with race and raced dialogue in the classroom environment. The women of color who I spoke with were familiar with each of these reactions from their White classmates. The women of color knew of White women who “got it” and White women who were disrespectful, insensitive, and racist. Grateful Lady shares moments when she has called her classmates to be accountable for their White privilege, as well as moments when she has not.

I mean, [the college] has… evolved a little bit but you still have women that have this attitude of tolerance rather than inclusion. And don’t tolerate me. Include me because I have ideas that I bring to the table that are important, too… And a lot of times, I’m in situations in meetings and in groups, and I have to bite my tongue. Because I can not get banned from campus because – I know I’m a token a lot of
times. But, you know what, I gotta get that degree. So I bite my tongue, and I’ve done very well since I’ve been going to this college in biting my tongue.

Many women of color feel similar to Grateful Lady. There is a dichotomy of appreciating the efforts the college makes to support Inclusive Excellence and the realization that the effort is not making a difference in the classroom. Several women of color feel like the college is recruiting women of color and publicizing their percentages of racial diversity without supporting women of color once they join the environment. Several of the White women who I spoke with shared this same concern, have witnessed racism in their classrooms, and attributed their awareness to a woman of color with whom they had discussed a raced classroom incident.

Neets was in a class that she believed was a good representation of the college making a multicultural effort, including a good faculty member, a varied curriculum, and a diverse student body.

But in that class she picked something – “Dakota Diaspora,” which was about Jewish homesteaders moving and what they had to deal with. And she picked – which I thought was good because I like when they incorporate my – Indian stuff because I don’t see it a lot – and she incorporated “Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee.” And I was like “oh!” And we ended up seeing the movie that was shown on HBO. Granted this scene, I was getting all jacked up, was right before they were doing the killing and I was like “I can’t watch this. I can’t watch this.” Because every time I watch it I have tears that come down... But I almost wanted them to see that, the class to see that ‘cause that way they could see how emotional that made me. Like right now. But I don’t think they do that enough, representing all cultures.

Neets liked the multicultural nature of the class readings and dialogue. She also liked seeing her identity and her story reflected back to her in her academic life. However, there is also the tension of Neets’ emotion and her vulnerability in the classroom. She did not want to watch the massacre with her classmates, yet she knew that her presence in
the classroom and her intimate reaction to the film would be an educational opportunity for her classmates.

Overall, students value the environment at the college, even while most of the participants were quick to say that it is not a perfect environment. Strong, committed faculty members, camaraderie with sister students, and diversity in the classroom have contributed to students’ persistence and satisfaction with their educational environment. Kay’s comments convey for her the general student sentiment of the college environment.

There’s such a synchronicity here that when it’s right, you know it. And you just feel like you’re home. And, I mean, I didn’t even talk to other colleges before I came here. And I think about that – maybe I should have, but then I think, you know what, it would be a totally different experience. I would’ve been a totally different student. I would’ve had to have dealt with the anxieties of just being a nontraditional student returning to school in a coed environment. And it’s just all those things that [the college] allowed you to circumvent, while still finding your voice, while still getting a quality education that’s respected in the community. And you know, I think it’s the value of the education that matters in the long run and how it meshes with your life.

External to the college.

It is evident that nontraditional undergraduate women have significant influences from their lives outside of the college. The areas most often cited related to the persistence of the women I interviewed were family, friends, and work.

Students are very conscious of their family obligations and the sacrifices they are asking of their families as they prioritize their education. However, families also serve as a great source of encouragement, inspiration, and strength to persist for the women I spoke with. Kay notes the flexibility of her family in supporting her education and her own feeling of guilt for asking them to support her.
So, at the end of the day it’s resources, you have to manage that. And I don’t feel that I always do that. I feel that sometimes I give more to school than I do to my family and I’m just grateful that they don’t call me on that because I know it’s happening and I know that, you know, these are years I’ll never get back. So, it’s a constant process of trying to evaluate how can I do better, how can I plan because it seems that no matter how much I plan to do things in advance, it still falls on that, you know, that 11th hour.

There are two sides to how friends influence persistence, just as with family. Students feel that they may be neglecting their friends to focus on their education, but they also receive support to persist from their friends. Several students also shared their experiences of losing friendships because of pursuing their education. Some students talked about having less in common with previous friends as they move further through their education and some students suspected that their friends were not comfortable with their pursuance of education and ended the friendship, like Susie and Katie’s exchange.

Susie: Yeah, but you lose friends, too. I mean, I don’t know about anybody else, but for me it’s been a double-edged sword. Katie: because you don’t have time for them… Susie: It’s not the time thing, no, it’s the changes that happen within yourself. It’s the changes that happen within you that start to… literally, it became a lifestyle difference. And at one point in time I realized when I was talking to her that she had – she was very upset – she had a huge chip on her shoulder. And there was nothing I could do to change that. I couldn’t change that. I couldn’t fix it, I couldn’t do anything.

Because the students who I interviewed have been successful persisting in their education, they reflected on these situations with me, but these situations have not caused them to stop out or withdrawal. Susie could have stopped out to rectify her friendship, however, that was not a possibility for Susie. Her education was important to her and her friend’s disapproval was an indicator of the friendship, not of Susie’s decision to earn a degree.
Finally, students cited the role of their employment and employers in their persistence. Julie identifies a sense of pride with the diversity of work experiences at the college and the fact that students talk about their work lives at the college and in classes.

Then when you start talking to other women you start realizing that, ok, this one has an international import business. And this one can’t do homework on her computer at work because she has a high position in a high security firm, and that’s why she didn’t turn in the paper that was only given to us at the last minute. And this woman has her own company. And, yeah, there are amazing people here.

Some students receive tuition reimbursement and have very appreciative feelings for employers, while other students have not had the support of their employers and have had to circumvent their work environment in order to stay enrolled in school. Madeline cited her job as one of the first reasons for her success in school. “Stability in my job – I’m not making a lot of money, but I haven’t had any real setback where I feel like I wouldn’t be able to eat if I went to school, so that’s been good.” While Katie notes how her job was interfering with school.

In trying to figure out scheduling they weren’t very empathetic. “well, if you’re going to school doing something that’s not going to benefit us…” well, you’re not paying for it either! And so – my new boss was not very supportive at all, this winter, so it was kind of – that’s the hardest part for me is working fulltime and having the job part not be flexible. Not willing to work with you. Especially when you’ve worked really hard and been there a long time like I have at [my company]. And they were just not very – cooperative.

The external factors influencing student persistence including family, friends, and work were similar for White women and women of color. The perception and experience of the environment overall, however, affords some important distinctions for women of color and White women, primarily around racism and exclusion. While not a common topic for White women, women of color described their experiences in the college.
environment in terms of endemic racism, which I will describe in greater detail in chapter five.

**Support**

Students use the word support to refer to many different factors in their educational experience, including the approval, understanding, and care of faculty, family, and friends. In this study, support is a result of the interaction between the environment and the student’s commitment with four possible outcomes: confidence, discouragement, involvement, and independence. Of the four possible outcomes, confidence and involvement have the potential to improve persistence while discouragement and independence potentially decrease persistence. The negative outcomes are actually the absence of support and a result of the negative aspects of the environment disturbing the student’s commitment or the student reaching out, being vulnerable in the academic environment and not finding the support she was looking for.

**Confidence.**

Confidence is the result of the environment acting positively on a student’s commitment. For example, when a student gets a good grade or does well on a presentation, the environment, in the form of a faculty member or student feedback, encourages her commitment. The student believes more adamantly that she can be successful in school, thereby strengthening her commitment to her education. Edie speaks to the synergy of the intrinsic reward of earning a degree and the external affirmation from the college environment.

I think that, it’s that gain of what we’re – it’s the gain. Like what you said earlier about how people look at you differently. I don’t necessarily feel like people look
at me differently, I think I just feel differently about myself. And so I’ve gained that confidence, where it’s not like – I just know I have it. And I don’t have to tell anybody I have it, I don’t have to. I know I have it.

Julie shares her early experiences at the college which helped to build her confidence, which strengthens her commitment, and thereby improves her persistence.

I think encouragement has helped a lot, you know, from professors and other students. And also early successes, saying “oh, I get an A? I thought I was lost completely and she gave me in an A? Maybe I can do this!” And the constant positive feedback in the beginning, “you can do this, you can do this, you can do this. See, you did well on that paper.” And even as things toughen up as you go along, that early encouragement sticks and you say, “I got an A in that class, I can get through this class somehow.”

The effect of the environment on Julie’s commitment is obvious because she describes how even though it gets harder as she moves through the degree, she can still hold on to the earlier successes as evidence that she is making the right decision. She belongs at the college because of the early validation she received from the environment. Julie’s example is common to many of the students I interviewed. Positive classroom feedback was the most referenced catalyst of confidence.

A different opportunity for the environment to increase a student’s commitment and build confidence is through staff interactions. Madeline’s confidence does not come from a grade, but from a conversation.

See, but the experiences I had with staff, like when [she] interviewed me, and it still sticks with me. [She] said “so Madeline, do you think you would be getting all A’s?” And I went “I don’t know, I never thought about that.” But, you know, it said something to me. That maybe [she] saw something that maybe I didn’t even know I had. So, but just because [she wasn’t] here doesn’t mean that I didn’t still remember that experience.
Madeline did not need even the formal feedback of a grade. Rather the challenge that she could earn high grades and the demonstration of a staff member believing in her was enough action from the environment to give her confidence.

For Skye, a woman of color, the environment did not often confirm for her that she belonged at the college. However, one example of affirmation that she shares is in reference to a class on race and the race dialogue during the class.

I think for a lot of people in that class, it was a very healing experience, especially to have an environment where you could talk about, maybe not even those personal experiences, but read about other people and be like, “oh my god, I’m not the only one.” You know? And then it was funny, too, because then you have the people that have no clue going like, “well, why is this important?”

Skye, like many women of color, felt validation when her story and her experiences were centered in the classroom. Unfortunately, many women of color discussed finding alienation in classrooms more often than affirmation, especially, as referenced by Skye, when White students wonder why conversations about race and racism are important in academic content. The environment also acted to strengthen the commitment of women of color and offer confidence within the community of women of color. The community of women of color, as an aspect of the environment of the college, offered affirmation, validation, and understanding for women of color which they rarely found in other spaces within the college environment.

**Discouragement.**

Discouragement is the converse of confidence. Where confidence is the environment acting to strengthen a student’s commitment, discouragement is the environment acting to decrease a student’s commitment. When a faculty member discredits a student’s experience, the environment, via a faculty member, is chipping
away a student’s commitment to her education in much the same way that positive feedback strengthens a student’s commitment. Discouragement decreases a student’s commitment by questioning whether she belongs at the college or whether she can be academically successful. In Skye’s example, the environment is very general to the college.

If you're gonna talk, and tell me, and recruit, and get your percentages up to 38, whatever percent that it is, you'd better start making some changes. ’Cause when I walk in here and I see nothing but White faculty and White staff – for the most part – and all I see are diverse students, that doesn't tell me a lot. So that means when I come into class and we have situations, altercations, which is gonna happen, you know what I mean? …and something gets out of control, that person in front who's getting paid who’s supposed to be in charge, better know how to handle the situation. And acknowledge it. But when they're just as naïve as the students who just said it, where is your diversity? Where's your inclusion? Where is your excellence?

Skye’s discouragement in this case arises from a lack of integrity on the part of the college. As the college promotes and heralds diversity in its student body, but then does not appear to follow through with faculty of color or inclusive classroom situations, she feels a disconnect. There is also a feeling of being insignificant in Skye’s words, as if diversity is only regarded superficially, then she is only regarded superficially by the college.

Kay shares an instance of discouragement from her employer, an environmental aspect external to the college.

Yeah I actually had a boss who encouraged me to go back to school, on the one hand and then on the other said “do you really think you should go back to school at your age and then compete with people half your age for jobs?” And I was like, “uuuuh, I don’t intend to compete with them because I have something they don’t. I have experience. So I’m leapfrogging ahead of them.”
A comment from a boss, or a family member, can be just as destructive to a student’s commitment as an experience in the classroom.

One necessary clarification on discouragement arises from the sample of students who I interviewed. It is possible that discouragement could lead to stop out and drop out for students, however, since the students who I interviewed were all educationally successful, they did not stop out. For Skye and Kay, their discouragement was palpable, even though they have both found constructive ways to discuss it. They communicated the extent of their discouragement through our interviews, but this did not lead to their stop out.

**Involvement.**

Involvement occurs when the student’s commitment to her education makes her vulnerable to the environment and calls her to action in the environment leading to a successful interaction with the environment in favor of her commitment. Both the environment and the student’s commitment are strengthened by her successful outreach. In a very traditional manner, many of the students who I spoke to are actively engaged with student groups at the college. Susie even encourages new students to participate in student groups.

I try to tell women and it, sometimes it sinks in and sometimes it doesn’t. I really think you need to be involved with the activities at the school here. I think it connects you to the college. I think it lends to your success because it connects you. You know, it’s those ties that bind and support and push and, and that is one thing that I did do that I wouldn’t change.

Susie found an increased commitment when she contributed to the environment by participating in student groups, and as her commitment increases, so does her likelihood
of persistence. She is affirmed by the environment, more connected to it, as she says.

With similar benefits, Kathy has a different way of being involved.

As I opened up more and engaged more it became a lot easier. I wasn’t as frustrated. I wasn’t as focused on all the sacrifices I was making or focused on how much I was thinking about how difficult it is to feel like I’m not connecting with the students, because as I opened up more I started connecting more. And really connecting because it wasn’t – you know, I would try to act like I was connecting, and I was connecting to a certain extent as much as you can connect with someone in a 4 hour class but then as I started to be open to it, relationships started evolving that weren’t simply based on just sitting next to someone in a class. And that I’m really grateful for and it’s wonderful, I kind of wish it had happened before my last four quarters, but, you know, oh well. But that as a strategy, I can see if I had employed that earlier in terms of like, really tapping the strength of the other women who were in the class, that it would have made some rough quarters much easier.

By opening herself up to her classmates and the range of possible experiences, Kathy models involvement in the classroom and involvement in relationships. Kathy even feels the effects of her involvement as it could have benefitted her earlier in her educational career, making the “rough quarters much easier.”

**Independence.**

Independence is the negative interaction of commitment and environment. Independence occurs when, like involvement, a student’s commitment leads her to reach out to the environment, become vulnerable, and look for ways to become active in the environment. However, unlike involvement, independence occurs when the environment rejects the student’s attempt to reach out and connect. Beverly’s experience, which is reflective of several classes that she has taken, demonstrates the process and severity of independence.

If you tell me to write about my experience in a subject and I write about it, if the grammar and the paragraphs and everything are together, don’t write me off because my experience wasn’t like yours. That drives me nuts here and I feel like
if we can’t put all the professors in a class and say that people have experienced different, you know. And I feel like if you write about your experience in some of these professors’ classes, you’re written off because that’s not what they’re looking for. It’s like “well, you said write about MY experience, relating to this subject. This is what it is.” And so I really wish that a lot of them would just run with it, like we don’t – we had to scrub floors, you know. This is what we had to do. This is how I relate to it so why can’t I run with it?

Beverly makes herself vulnerable by sharing her experiences in the classroom context and instead of being validated, she is discredited and antagonized because her experiences are not sufficient for an instructor. Had Beverly succumbed to the rejection of her story, her experience, her self in the classroom setting, she may not have persisted. Her commitment could have been damaged by the disregard of a faculty member.

Instead of withdrawing, Beverly stands by her commitment to her education and seeks independence. Independence is a strategy where a student separates herself from the environment in order to preserve her commitment to her education and persist. Similarly, Edie shares her experience with independence.

I think that’s part of your commitment. Your commitment is I’m here to learn. I’m gonna take away whatever I can from this class, I don’t care if this person over here wants to go off. Whatever. And you just, and you do get through it.

While Beverly’s independence arises from interactions with the environment through faculty members, Edie’s arises through student interaction. Perhaps becoming independent of other students seems an easier task than becoming independent of your faculty member, but keep in mind that the college has a culture of perceived camaraderie and having to remain independent of this formative aspect of the culture would be difficult for students. For both Beverly and Edie, independence is a survival strategy. Independence allows a student to create distance between herself and the environment in
order to protect her commitment to her education and, therefore, persist. Skye has the strongest demonstration of independence when she says

I think the women that persist and make it through is because you decide right then and there that “I’m getting this. I’m doing this. And I don’t care about you. You’re not going to stand in my way. I’m not gonna let you stop me. I’m doing this.” And you resolve at that point that you’re gonna do it on your own if you have to. You’re gonna do it with the friends and the women of color that you relate to, that you make friendships with, and the non-women of color who show you their true colors that you know they’re really there for you.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have outlined the major themes that evolved through the analysis of the focus group and interview data. The overarching themes that have emerged from this research as major factors for nontraditional undergraduate women’s persistence are commitment, environment, and support. Critical race feminism allows for a distinct view of the data relevant to each theme resulting in additional descriptions and explanations for the variations in themes between women of color and White women, which I will elaborate on in chapter five.
Chapter 5: A Critical Race Feminist Dialogue with the Data

Introduction

The dedication of a chapter to a critical race feminist reading of the data, findings, and theory in this research allows me to identify race as a unique and differentiating filter through which students experience the college. Race is also a critical component to understanding all students’ experiences and persistence, therefore warranting particular consideration and dialogic attention. While critical race feminism is an epistemological and ontological foundation throughout the research design and analysis, I rely on a critical race feminist framework once again to provide additional depth of analysis to the assumptions I made based on the data. Specifically, critical race feminism informs the research co-created and analyzed within this dissertation thus far, and additionally, I apply critical race feminism explicitly in this chapter to illuminate another perspective offered by devoting attention to the experiences of women of color and the differentiation within the participants by race and ethnicity.

At the outset of this research, I established critical race feminism as providing the following epistemological foundations: first, critical race feminism exposes assumptions of neutrality, objectivity, and White supremacy in educational research (Parker & Lynn, 2002; Wing, 2003). Second, critical race feminism seeks to bring women’s voices together, honoring intersectionality without essentializing feminist identity politics.
specific to the middle-class White woman (Crenshaw, 1995; Harris, 2003; Wing, 2003).

Third, critical race feminism uses deconstruction methodologies and counter-narrative to demonstrate the perpetuation of dominant paradigms and re-construct alternative realities (Montoya, 2003; Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000; Wing, 2003).

Each of these assumptions can now be applied to the data and findings in order to provide a critical read of the data and findings. Specifically, each epistemological foundation is applied uniquely to the research. In order to expose assumptions of neutrality, objectivity, and White supremacy in the findings and data, I will reflect on my positionality as researcher and instrument. I will honor intersectionality and the experiences of women of color by giving distinct attention to the location of women of color in the research as co-constructors of data. And, finally, I will use deconstruction methodologies to further critique the themes of commitment, environment, and support and (re)present the voices of women of color in contrast to the general findings I have previously outlined.

**Researcher Positionality**

Throughout the research I have considered my own positionality as the researcher and particularly as a White, middle-class woman, working towards a PhD, interviewing women of color about their experiences with race and racism in their educational journey. I agree with Milner (2007) that

“because race and racism exist in society, they also are present and prevalent in education and in the research and practice of education. People in society make up the education system and thus education research and practice are also infiltrated with matters of race and racism.” (p. 391)
Racism is prevalent in society and, therefore, racism is prevalent in similar ways in my research practice, interpretations, and presentation. I have been intentional about considering how my interactions and interpretations are influenced by racism and could be perpetuating racism. In order to reduce the oppressive and exclusive tendencies in this research, I have continually reflected on the critical race feminist tenets laid out to guide the research. My social identities accompany my research and the power and oppression affiliated with my social identities come into the classroom and research arena with me. I represent an expression of race, class, and educational privilege, however, I have tried to minimize the power and oppression in, and through, this research.

Important to my positionality and relationships with the participants, and with the women of color particularly, is the fact that I advised all but two of them when I worked at the college. We shared a history of positive interactions and mutual respect, which I suspect, encouraged them to meet with me regarding this research. My existing relationship with the college and with the women I interviewed likely allowed me some advantages conducting interviews with students, especially where our existing relationship may have engendered a level of trust for them to share racist experiences with me. Perhaps our relationship lent additional credibility to my inquiries. It also frames the data in an important way, however, without comparing the data to that of students who I did not advise it is difficult to determine the specificity of this interaction. I believe that the relationships that I have sustained with the women of color whom I interviewed allowed us to engage in a more deep and rich conversation than if we did not have an existing relationship. I do not think that the testimonies of racism; personal and
institutional; were guarded or modified for my benefit as a White woman or as a previous college representative. I also realize that the women of color who I spoke with appreciated the opportunity to share their concerns about the racism in the college environment and I believe they would be comfortable sharing their experiences with other investigators suggesting that this data is not exclusively dependent on our relationship, but would be revealed to other investigators as well.

My presuppositions regarding race when I began this research included the pervasiveness of racism in the college, as in all social institutions (Milner, 2007; Parker & Lynn, 2002); the reality that racism influences students’ experiences at the college (Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pederson, & Allen, 1999); and that women of color and White women experience the same raced spaces differently because of their own racial and ethnic identities and racial awareness (Harris, 2003; Wing, 2003). Even given these premises, even though I was seeking dialogues about race, I was not fully prepared for what I heard. My surprise or naiveté regarding the extent of racism at the college is a “seen danger” (Milner, 2007) of my White privilege in a racialized social system. I expected that my White privilege was shielding me from knowing the extent of racism at the college, both as an advisor and as a researcher. However, I was still surprised by the racism and microaggressions faced by the women of color who I spoke to which were regularly perpetuated by students, faculty, and staff at the college. I was also surprised at the cases of mistaken racial and ethnic identity, where women of color were mis-identified as White by White peers and the subsequent comparison of how they were treated when their ethnicity was known and unknown to their White peers. And to some
extent, I was surprised at students’ willingness to share these experiences with me given my social identities and clear marks of privilege.

While I acknowledged my position of power with each of the focus groups I conducted with women of color, I considered my privilege in greater depth as I began data analysis and theory construction. I wanted to ensure a balance between the experiences of participants of color and White participants while I developed the theoretical constructs. I considered intentionally and often whether the phenomenon I thought I was observing was holding true for White women and women of color and in what ways concepts diverged by race and ethnicity. I compared the experiences, quotes, categories, and theory development of women of color and White women. For some time, I thought I might have two distinctly separate student experiences to theorize because as I immersed myself in the details of the transcripts, I saw little overlap for two populations interacting in the same environment. However, as I began to abstract the details to categories and theory, I began to see where the themes were similar, however, enacted differently by different participants; varying by race at some points and converging across race at other points.

Designating a chapter to the specific racial differences in this data, it is not my intention to segregate or essentialize the experiences of women of color into one chapter, but instead, I seek to create additional space where the differing experiences of students by race can be further explored and considered. There are similarities and broad strokes by which I can describe the experiences of the nontraditional undergraduate women who I interviewed; however, students’ varying experiences with race and racism cannot be
subsumed by generalities. By exposing myself as a researcher, I hope to expose the race
neutrality and White supremacy that is often unspoken in educational research, while also
drawing my own critical attention to my research in an attempt to minimize the race
neutrality and White supremacy in my own analysis and writing.

Women of Color

In describing the women of color who participated in this research, just as I
described the group as a whole previously, I do not mean to imply that the women who I
interviewed are extremely similar. In fact they are not, and this is also the case for the six
women of color who identified their race and ethnicity in various ways. I describe the
women of color as a group of participants here specifically because they share
experiences of racism at the college that are not experienced by their White classmates.
Even on this detail, the women of color I spoke to have not all experienced racism the
same way and, in fact, there seem to be some similarities and differences across races and
ethnicities. Further, critical race feminism necessitates that I understand and honor the
importance of the multiple identities that nontraditional undergraduate women hold and
the importance of intersectionality, therefore, I am not trying to write an essentializing
description as if all the facets of the women of color who I interviewed could be captured
in broad brush strokes. While I want to give attention to the distinct identities of each
participant, the small number of participants and variation in their identities does not
afford me the opportunity. I do not intend to imply that the six women of color who I
spoke to are a monolithic group, nor that they represent all other variations among
women of color in their descriptions of their persistence. With a limited a group, I will
refer to each of the participants of color in a collective group united by the similarity of experiencing racism in an educational environment, however, I acknowledge the limitation of clustering diverse women of color in one collective and of the resulting implication that all women of color persist in a similar fashion.

The women of color are similar to the general demographic information I presented on the participant group as a whole, in terms of age, majors, years at the college, and GPA. The most notable difference and what distinguishes the women of color I interviewed from the White women is the contribution that women of color offered to the data on the pervasiveness of racism. Women of color illuminated interactions and emotions that were not present for the White women I spoke to because of the groups’ differing experiences with and awareness of race. The dialogue with and amongst women of color was not just a recounting of the racist incidents they had encountered as students, but included their reflection on two additional conclusions. First, that the college is certainly not free of racist, White privileged interactions, just as no other institution is exempt from racism. Women of color sensitized me to the reality that not only do racist situations and structures negatively affect the success of students of color, which is widely evidenced in the research literature (Altbach, Lomotey, & Rivers, 2002; Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pederson, & Allen, 1999; Washington, 1996), but there are also issues of accountability. The second conclusion unique to the insight of women of color is that without accountability, the racial dynamics at the college will not improve. Accountability is required to promote White students’ multicultural learning in the college environment, which is both an outcome of an inclusively excellent
environment and a contributing factor to a positive environment. The women of color I spoke to call the college to fully realize the institutional obligation to women of color and White women as an educational institution that professes to work towards Inclusive Excellence. Women of color want to see evidence of Inclusive Excellence in the classroom and throughout college culture manifesting in the success of women of color as well as in the increasing social justice consciousness of White women.

Our interviews did not address persistence and racism directly, in that we did not answer the explicit question “how does racism influence your educational persistence?” However, it is clear from our conversations that racism influences the climate at the college as well as the daily life experiences of women of color outside the college, both of which affect a student’s ability to be academically successful. As two specific examples of the racial dynamics and raced experiences at the college, I will relay examples of overt and covert racism that women of color experience, and second, I will describe a racist and exclusionary situation that arose during a focus group.

First, there were several examples of overtly and covertly racist comments and racial microaggressions that permeate the collegiate experiences for women of color. These incidents themselves may not be unique accounts of racism in that there may be recognizable threads across settings, however, the commonality and familiarity of these events speaks to the endemic nature of racism. I want to give space to some of these experiences to demonstrate that the college is not exempt from the racist society in which it operates and to give voice to the issues and concerns that the women of color shared.
To protect the confidentiality of only a few women of color in a small college community, the incidents and descriptions I present here are highly generalized.

Students shared several times when their classmates made racist comments in classes, like a White student asking Grateful Lady if she could say “the N-word” in a presentation and another student telling Neets “you don’t look like a [Smith]” presumably because Neets is not White. A few of the students of color I spoke to had their academic integrity questioned because they submitted work that a professor supposed was beyond their ability. Students of color have been ignored in class when they are asking faculty and other students for help. White students roll their eyes and question why students of color have to bring up race, again. Faculty challenge class presentations that depict cultural messages and norms when the assignment was not “cultural” in nature. The abbreviation of these events here does not do justice to the time we devoted to discussing them; however, to go into great detail would compromise the confidentiality of the participants.

The impact and prevalence of racism was obvious through my group conversations by the numerous events that were hurtful to the students describing them. Several students mentioned the positive efforts of a particular faculty member who they believe is creating increasingly safe spaces for students of color and racial learning opportunities for White students. Students also noted allies among the staff and faculty that they felt they could rely on for support as well as those staff and faculty they avoided. There was some consensus and shared awareness around who was safe and who was to be circumvented when possible. The community of women of color is also a
network of support and information, transmitting stories and solidarity around racist incidents and experiences.

Second, I observed the beginning development of a normative, exclusionary conversation in one of the focus groups. In a focus group where all of the participants identified as White, we were talking about classroom dynamics and the responsibility of the instructor to keep interactions respectful and appropriate. The first example shared was regarding students who “hijack” the classroom conversation and “run roughshod” all over the place. Then one White participant, Bo¹ offered her take on classroom management.

I think race, too, is a big thing. Because there are some that will really get away with a lot. You know, I just think there are certain professors that are really good at toning that down and then there are professors that let it run wild. And if you are a Black woman that is over 50, or a Hispanic person that is – you know, they need to assimilate into and realize there is race and we are White. But there’s this other part, too, where you have to come to the middle ground. And I think some of that is uncomfortable sometimes.

Here Bo paused² however, the exclusion in her comments had already been revealed along with her own discomfort with race and race dialogue. Bo is uncomfortable, even angry, when women of color talk about race and racism in class. More generally, Bo might be uncomfortable when women of color talk at length in class on any subject if she has determined that they are “running wild.” Bo was secure enough, however, in a focus group of White women, to name her response. Perhaps there was a safety in the all-White group and a suspicion that we would collude in her anger. I do not know if Bo has

¹ I changed Bo’s pseudonym to further disguise her identity.
² Following this comment during the group, I made a decision that identified my researcher positionality according to the assumptions that I hold and attempt to honor in this research. I interjected and my comments changed the path that Bo was pursuing. I believe that I facilitated the end of this line of racist comments while not alienating Bo. The group continued and none of us returned to Bo’s comments cited here.
shared these concerns in the classroom, but I will suggest that her discomfort could easily be evident to other students even if she is not explicit or vocal about it as women of color often referred to the non-verbal responses of White classmates.

I offer Bo’s comments here not to single her out, but to presume that she is not alone in her sentiments; not to re-center her Whiteness, but to deconstruct it. Bo is an example of a student who is confusing or disguising racism with classroom management. Bo subscribes to the dominant social paradigm about race which normalizes her experiences as a White woman and distances any people and interpretations that are not White, othering people of color. Bo’s Whiteness serves as a dominant narrative where women of color talk about race too often and “run wild” in classroom discussion. The counter-narrative at the college is presented by women of color, exposing the dominant paradigm as racist. Several of the women of color I interviewed stated that the college has an obligation to educate White women on race and racism if they are going to promote Inclusive Excellence and create a safe environment for students of color. I agree with their assessment and wonder in what ways the college will have failed Bo in her education if she is not able to identify the exclusion and racism in her own comments.

**CRF (Re)Presentation**

The third theoretical tenet that I outline for this research is that critical race feminism uses deconstruction methodologies and counter-narrative to demonstrate the perpetuation of dominant paradigms and to re-construct alternative realities (Montoya, 2003; Solozano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000; Wing, 2003). To perform this tenet in the research, I re-present the themes of commitment, environment, and support with a
specific lens to the narrative offered by women of color which contributes new observations and conclusions to the categories.

**Commitment.**

Critical race feminism leads to a closer look at how I am defining commitment with specific attention to the role that racial identity and socialization play in a student’s commitment to her education. A critical race feminist epistemology allows me to state that race and gender matter in our lived experiences, and race and gender matter in women’s commitment to their education. What was most striking to me as I listened to women of color describe the same physical environment as White women students was the material differences in the environment and students’ experiences based on race. Not only are women of color working against obstacles to achieve their education, but women of color are working against the obstacles that White women are facing plus the racialized obstacles that White women, society, and the institution inflict on women of color. Not only are women of color working towards their degree, but many of them also talk about working to end racism in the college and the communities where we live and work. Skye talks about what her father taught her about commitment.

And I kept saying, what is it that kept me, you know, kept me going and I think, I think the majority of it is just because it’s engrained in me not to quit. But that goes back to it being engrained in me from my dad saying “you have to try harder, you have to be better, you can’t give up. If you give up, you know, you’re a quitter. It’s gonna be like, ‘um hmm, we knew it,’” you know what I mean. It would never be excusable.

For Skye, in addition to the implications for her own success and fulfillment as a student, her commitment is also a statement against the stereotypes and statistics that the dominant, White culture automatically applies to her because she is a woman of color.
Skye’s racial identity salience makes her aware that her persistence is also resistance to the assumptions people make about her based on her race. Her success in college, graduation, earned bachelor’s degree are an important opportunity for Skye to resist the racist discourse and belief that women of color do not go to college and do not earn degrees. In her comments, Skye’s father warns her about quitting. His lived experiences as a man of color inform Skye from a young age about how White people are waiting for her to fail. They/we will not be surprised by her failure, that is what the stereotypes already predict. They/we will be surprised by her successes.

Grateful Lady shares in Skye’s belief in persistence as resistance. She talks about one aspect of her commitment to her education as honoring the civil rights that people of color have had to fight for and the importance she places on her education as the first generation in her family to be able to take full advantage of educational opportunities gained through the Civil Rights Movement. She also offers an interpretation of her place in the academy as a woman of color.

It’s kind of like, there’s this book called “The Spook Who Sat Beside the Door.” And they made a movie out of it. There was this guy, he was the butler. He waited on the president, and he was just – just the kind of Black person – “good n, just a good n.” He’d do anything you’d tell ‘im to do, but you know what he was doing? He was standing in the president’s meetings, gaining in all his knowledge, gaining all their techniques, and he was able to overthrow the government. So, I’m the spook who sat beside the door.

Grateful Lady shares this analogy with the group in the context of having to “bite her tongue” in order to stay focused on the larger goal of getting her degree. Several students talk about “picking your battles” and “biting your tongue” through their educational careers in order to persist, like Grateful Lady. While Grateful Lady communicates her commitment through her value of the educational opportunities that were not available to
her mother, and the opportunity to make a difference with her degree, she also faces a
great challenge to her commitment – biting her tongue. With a resolute commitment to
her education, Grateful Lady also faces the daily attacks on her person which cause her to
have to bite her tongue and not respond where she otherwise would. This regular erosion
and indication of racial microaggressions is like friction in the theory of academic
momentum and will be further discussed in chapter six.

Another example of resistance supporting persistence and very similar to Grateful
Lady’s analogy to “The Spook,” is Beverly’s realization that being enrolled in school
pays off beyond her career opportunities or self-satisfaction. For Beverly, the college is
providing a valuable insight to dominant, White culture norms. Beverly experiences the
reward of learning on a different level than her White peers.

Part of it, too, has to do with how you’ve been socialized, I think, too. Because
it’s – I feel like for some people it’s easier for them to say “I took from this class
and I can apply it to my real life.” Because I often feel like, I took from this class
to learn how to be like you. And that’s how I’m going to apply it in my life. If I
want this job, or to do this activity, or do this, because that’s not how I was
socialized but that’s how the masses – and by that I mean, just basically, in
general, White men, do it. So I think it’s a positive and a negative as well… For
me, it’s a learning experience because I’m like “oh, OK, that’s what I need to do
if I want to – quote unquote – make it.”

Beverly sees the college culture as access to dominant culture and practice for her career.

Madeline, a White student, asked Beverly more about what she was saying. Beverly
elaborated, saying “if I’m going on a job interview, I have to be White. In my talk, in my
dress, in my style.” Madeline was disappointed that the dominant, White society
wouldn’t allow Beverly to be herself in a job interview. Beverly’s description of learning
about how White people have been socialized extends to Madeline in this setting as she
considered how Beverly perceives the college in terms of her identity and socialization.
I also want to point out that the women of color who I spoke with have persisted and are educationally successful. While Skye, Grateful Lady, Beverly, and others have been successful and maintained their commitment to their education, they also shared with me that many women of color do not overcome the racial obstacles that they have been able to maneuver. Even in the focus group setting where Beverly was informing Madeline about her on-the-job self, the students knew each other for the most part and Madeline had stated her allegiance to social justice earlier. However, the dynamic still presented itself where a woman of color was educating White women about her racialized experiences at the college, an implicit sacrifice unique to women of color attending a predominantly White college. Similar to “picking your battles” and “biting your tongue,” women of color are navigating racial obstacles to their commitment and education, in addition to the obstacles that White women are facing, creating more friction against their momentum.

Environment.

Turning a critical race feminist lens on the environment at the college allows me to focus more specifically on the experiences of women of color separate from their White classmates and consider the differences between the perceptions of women of color and White women more critically. While there were differences in how White women and women of color perceived diversity in the classroom, there are other issues that were primary for women of color in the environment such as their identity in the classroom and a community of women of color.
Women of color cited several instances where their identity was part of the classroom experience. On one hand, there were classes where race was a content topic and women of color felt their experiences validated in an academic, intellectual manner.

Neets says

An interesting point is all three of us took [one professor’s] class. All three of us sat in all of his classes. So I’m grateful that I sat in those classes because, you know he brought in my perspective. Especially in [one] class, it helped bring a lot out of me. Way more than I would have ever thought that it would have. And then just learning about other races in general, even my own, because I’m still learning about my race.

In contrast, there are the times when women of color felt the absence of their identity in the classroom, either in the course material or in the student body. There was also the reality that women of color were always aware of their racial identity in the classroom space and the myriad ways in which it was affirmed and disrespected at the hands of their classmates and faculty members. Skye explains why students’ and faculty members’ behavior feels racist, regardless of their intentions.

And so even if that wasn’t the reason that they did that – just because you cannot separate the woman from who you are, and your life, and your color. That is just what it feels like. And because, most of the time you won’t get an explanation as to why or they don’t ever warm up to you, or whatever, you just, you carry that with you to your next class. And especially if you have professor or instructor who won’t take the lead or won’t, you know, reach out themselves. Or if the situation occurs and needs to be stopped and they won’t interceded, that makes it twice as bad because that’s giving us one message and it’s giving them another message.

Given the environment for women of color, where they are often excluded from the classroom content even to the point of students and faculty who ignore racism when it appears in a classroom, women of color who strive to honor their commitment to their education have a distinct coping strategy. While all of the women in the focus groups
talked about the camaraderie of the college, women of color reach beyond camaraderie to a community of women of color. All of the women of color who I interviewed acknowledged the importance of the network of other women of color who they rely on. There is a sisterhood and a community amongst women of color at the college that inherently incorporates their multiple identities and their college experiences.

You don’t have to say everything. ‘Cause I already know what you’re gonna go through. I already know what I’ve been through. I ain’t even gotta hear – same story different day, different situation. But the bottom line is there’s gonna be a lot of the factors – it’s all gonna be the same. It’s all gonna be the same. And, yet, it don’t matter if I have one class with Grateful Lady or Neets and then didn’t have a class with them for 3 quarters – it wouldn’t matter because I could see you in the hall and say “this is what happened.” And they’re gonna stop, they’re gonna listen, they’re gonna encourage. And we may not see each other again for a whole ‘nother quarter.

Serena, talking to Skye in a focus group, shares the sentiment.

Because we only had one class together, but I felt comfortable saying something to you, and now when we see each other we have this, almost this sisterhood.

The important distinction between the general camaraderie at the college and the community of women of color is that women of color include their multiple identities in the community. There are racial norms and understandings, like Skye says, where they don’t have to say everything. The consideration of race, and in some cases, even respect, is absent from many interactions with and between White women. The perceived race neutrality hinders the possibilities for camaraderie, community, and sisterhood between women of color and White women if White women neglect race as a factor in people’s lives.
Support.

A critical race feminist approach to the support components of confidence, discouragement, involvement, and independence asserts that race and gender are relevant to the outcomes for support. Additionally, critical race feminism seeks to expose race neutrality, honors identity and intersectionality, and employs deconstruction methodologies. In order to apply critical race feminism to the support assumptions, I will respond to the stated tenets of critical race feminism.

Exposing race neutrality in the context of support at the college entails recognizing that the women of color I interviewed experience discouragement and independence more often than the White women. The emergent data is not race neutral, and the categories of discouragement and independence were more frequent and more distinct for women of color than they were for White women. Recognizing race neutrality also requires a closer look at the environment of the college, which fosters different types of support for different students.

It bothers me that because they are not familiar with the experiences that I’ve had, when I speak on these experiences I can see the eyes rollin’ and the – you know, my problem is that just because you’re not familiar with my experience, don’t discredit it. Just acknowledge that it happened. Grateful Lady, in this comment, conveys the reality of being discredited in the classroom and having her testimonies disregarded. None of the White women said that they had ever been discredited in the classroom or had other students roll their eyes while they were talking. Instead, the White women’s evidence towards discouragement was around employers, clients, friends questioning their decision to go back to school or faculty members who made assumptions about their work, home, and academic lives as distinctly
un-academic. Race was not a component of White women’s examples of discouragement.

Women of color shared that they felt invisible, neglected, and unvalued in the environment at times, and while White women shared some similar sentiments, it was not related to their racial identities. In order to make race neutrality explicit, I want to clarify that while White women and women of color do share experiences and perceptions of the environment at the college, their shared experiences are not necessarily the same. For women of color, experiencing discouragement or independence was often related to their racial identities, while this was not the case for White women.

Serena questions why she feels the burden of expectations, positive and negative, from her professors.

I don’t know does that come from being outspoken? Does it come from being a student, a woman of color? Or does it come from us being a high profile student? (or a combination) That there’s this expectation – maybe it is a combination. ‘Cause I’m starting to feel it now. I never thought I would, but I’m, like – just now I’m leaving class and the professor says “well thank you so much for being here nice and early this morning.” And I said “you know what, I’m always on time to class. I’m never late. I was late one time, winter quarter, to your class at 11:00 AM because my dad was in the hospital. I’ve never been late other than that so don’t hold the one time against me. I’m never late.” And I walked away. So, it’s that expectation and that pressure – I’m just like any other student.

For Serena, there is a question of why a professor expected her to be late and was surprised when she was on time. Was the professor responding to Serena’s family emergency from months previous? Does the professor have low expectations of Serena because of her race or her high profile status? Serena’s line of questioning suggests that each of these could play a role in their interaction, but the reality of the situation is that
Serena feels the expectation and the pressure from faculty in response to each of her identities that she carries with her as a student.

Critical race feminism also seeks to bring women’s voices together while respecting intersectionality and not essentializing women. Even though women of color and White women have differing experiences by race, not all student experience is defined by race. There is variation in students’ experiences amongst and between White women and women of color. Some White women encountered more discouragement than others, and shared more experiences with women of color. There were also women of color who did not experience as much discouragement as some of their peers of color and, therefore, many of their experiences mirrored their White peers. Race was a factor in how students experienced and interacted with their environment and the resulting support they found, or did not find. However, there was also variation within each case even where students shared racial and ethnic identities.

Finally, critical race feminism applies deconstruction methodologies and counter-narrative to unveil dominant paradigms. In this research, several women of color had already applied the methodology of their experience to reveal the dominant paradigms present in their environment and its effect on support. Women of color noted the discomfort of some students and faculty members to talk about race or acknowledge their experiences related to race. Several students even called for action on the part of the college to do more to improve the persistence of women of color. They noted the publicity efforts of the college focusing on women of color and the numbers of new students who are women of color. Then women of color pointed out that the numbers of
women of color in upper level classes decreases, indicating to students that women of color are not persisting at the same rate as White women. Beverly has concern over this situation because of the unfairness to new students of color who are being taken advantage of, but also for herself as an upper-class student.

They go ahead and target these ethnicities and bring in all these women and they’re more interested in getting that new revenue then keeping us here… Once you pay, and you’re here for a little while, they can bring in some more revenue and maybe one day you’ll come back.

This argument arose each time I spoke with women of color and even though they may not be intentionally interpreting their experience with a critical race feminist lens, they have made a powerful argument for uncovering the dominant paradigm with the methodology of their lived experiences.

An important, albeit under-theorized, concept is that of the racial tax. Willie (1979) referenced the racial tax when referring to the significant discrepancies between the annual income of Black and White men when controlling for age, gender, and occupation, among other characteristics. He states “I call this income discrepancy an unfair tax that qualified minorities pay for not being White. It is a racist tax that is withheld from their annual earnings and, consequently, a form of institutionalized racism” (p. 71). Willie’s racial tax has also been applied to health discrepancies (Brown, Powell, & Earls, 1989) and the psychology of well-being (Hughes & Thomas, 1998) asserting that people of color have higher costs to their health and well-being than White people when multiple relevant variables are controlled. Extending the racial tax to education, students of color experience decreased access (Astin & Oseguera, 2004), increased withdrawal (Swail, Redd, & Perna, 2003), and hostile environments (Hurtado,
Milem, Clayton-Pederson, & Allen, 1999) in college compared to their White classmates even when other relevant variables are controlled.

This research is in alignment with the racial tax people of color pay by combining the concepts of a psychological and educational tax. The support variable captures interactions between the student’s commitment and her environment and women of color demonstrated increased occurrences of discouragement and independence. Navigating the persistent racial microagressions and covert racism is an obstacle to educational success faced by women of color that White women do not face, thereby constituting the racial tax of the college environment.

**Conclusion**

This research is a starting place to examine the racism, racial dynamics, and racial differences at the college, but it is by no means exhaustive. Based on the beginnings of this research, there are specific questions to further examine related to the racial differences in college experiences and persistence. Women of color navigate the college environment differently to persist and survive in spite of racism, individual and institutional. By applying the critical race feminist tenets of exposing race neutrality, honoring the voices of women of color, and deconstructing dominant paradigms, I have attempted to convey not only the racial differences inherent in this research, but also the social justice imperative to work towards creating inclusively excellent colleges in research and practice.
Chapter 6: A Theory of Academic Momentum

Introduction

The preceding themes of commitment, environment, and support are united in a theory of academic momentum for nontraditional undergraduate women to determine students’ persistence. In this chapter, I will outline the theory as it encompasses commitment, environment, and support as well as the praxis of momentum where the theory is specified by actions also grounded in the data collected. I will demonstrate how the themes interact and relate to each other in a theory of academic momentum for nontraditional undergraduate women as a congruent student experience. This chapter then compares the theory of academic momentum to Tinto’s (1975, 1987, 1993) theory of student departure and to the counter-narrative themes that emerged from the review of the persistence literature.

Defining Momentum

In physics, momentum is a measurement of an object’s motion expressed as the product of the object’s mass and velocity. Also, momentum “is a measure of how much force is required to stop a moving mass or put it into motion” (Axelrod, 1999, p. 51). The equation for momentum is $p = m*v$, where $p$ equals momentum. Therefore, the amount of momentum that an object has is directly proportional to the object’s mass and directly proportional to the object’s velocity. Mass and velocity are equally important in
determining momentum. An object at rest has no momentum as both velocity and momentum will be equal to zero. Increasing mass or velocity increases an object’s momentum, making the object harder to stop.

Commonly, we use the term momentum to refer to an impetus or inclination towards action or direction. We describe gaining and losing momentum with a particular task or activity. This is how Kay used the term momentum when she was describing her persistence. For Kay, in order to persist she has to “maintain momentum,” such that she has not taken a quarter off from school since she has started. Kay references momentum again, when she is describing the effects of positive instances and interactions at the college.

I think sometimes we’re surprised. You know, you may make a connection with a faculty member or somebody who turns out to be really key in your life, in terms of, you know, helping you see things in a new way or think about the assignments differently, or things like that. And those are like unexpected little surprises that happen. And you just don’t know where, when and where they’re going to happen. But I think for a lot of people that’s, those types of incidents probably help foster that, that momentum.

After Kay told me about her momentum the first time we spoke, I started thinking about where I might have heard other students discussing their momentum using different language. Students often spoke of their educational progress as motion towards a goal.

Neets, for example, says

Persistence for me is just – I haven’t taken a break since we first met. I just kept plugging along because I wanna get this done. And then, just to see other people, I know you two are graduating, and I’m like “Oh, I gotta keep going! I gotta keep going!”

Neets’ language about “plugging along” and “I gotta keep going” connotes a process of motion, and like many students, Neets sees her educational progress with an allusion of
endurance. “I have just got to keep going.” Susie says “there comes a point now where I really want to step it up. And move a little quicker,” also giving her educational journey a forward movement. Beverly says “I literally can’t stop” and Madeline says that she will “not even get off the tracks” as the comparison of education and movement was present for most students.

In addition to describing their educational progress with motion, students talked about counting down their classes and the energy generated by the countdown. When Venus talks about what keeps her coming back to school every quarter, she says “it’s eight classes left! Five classes left! Two classes left!” Katie also says “that feeling of ‘I’m finally a junior! I’m finally a senior!’ and it’s just, and it goes by so fast.” Madeline even adds

I wish I could take more credits, like some of the folks ‘cause I’ve seen people go on and graduate and I’m like “wait for me!” But I think I’m doing pretty good with eight credits, and trying to run a household, and work, and all that. So yeah, commitment is a big part of it, definitely.

Madeline sees the motion of other students moving past her with more momentum based on their greater accumulation of credits. She also demonstrates the interconnectedness of commitment, environment, support, and momentum. Her commitment keeps her moving forward, even when other students seem to be accomplishing more, casting her educational efforts in a shadow, while the environment provides the camaraderie of Madeline’s inspiration by sister students.

The allusion of the educational countdown creates a situation where it feels like students are gaining momentum as they near their educational goal, which makes it likely that momentum is most noticeable for those students who are approaching graduation.
There may even be an exponential increase in momentum as credit and course accumulation build for each student, such that as a student approaches her goal of graduation, she may increase her momentum by pursuing the goal even more vigorously. The approaching success and realization of the likelihood of graduation fuels academic momentum.

**Academic Momentum and Theory Development**

Momentum is the measure of an object’s motion, expressed as the product of mass and velocity. Academic momentum, then, is the measure of a student’s movement through her education and towards graduation. Mass is an attribute specific to the object. Comparatively, commitment is an alterable attribute specific to the student, such that the student arrives with a determined amount of commitment, like an object’s mass. Velocity is the speed that the object travels, dynamic, differential, and a measure of the relationship between the object and the environment. Comparatively, the environment is critical to understanding the student’s academic momentum and is a relative function of the relationship between the student and her environment.

Beginning with the equation for momentum, $p = m \cdot v$, there is a transformed, but comparable equation for persistence where $p$ is persistence, or a measure of a student’s motion towards her educational goal, $m$ is a student’s commitment, and $v$ is the student’s environment. Finally, in a theory of academic momentum, support is represented in the equation by the $*$ and symbolizes the interaction between commitment and environment to either produce reduce support (see Table 8).
Table 8: Transformation of Momentum to Academic Momentum

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Momentum</th>
<th>Theory of Academic Momentum</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>$p = m \cdot v$</td>
<td>$p = m \cdot v$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Momentum</td>
<td>Persistence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$p = \text{momentum}$</td>
<td>$p = \text{persistence}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$m = \text{mass}$</td>
<td>$m = \text{commitment}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$v = \text{velocity}$</td>
<td>$v = \text{environment}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$* = \text{support}$</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fries-Britt and Turner (2002) discuss the idea of academic momentum as it relates to the differences between Black students at a traditionally White institution and Black students at historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs). They found evidence of energy cultivation or energy diversion for Black students, which affects their academic momentum. For students whose energy is diverted from academics due to racism on campus, particularly by managing stereotypes in the classroom and educating White peers, their academic momentum is decreased. By diverting energy away from academic pursuits in order to navigate racist institutions, Black students are losing momentum and, thus, facing a decreased likelihood of persistence. Conversely, for Black students at HBCUs, their energies are cultivated primarily through confidence building in their academic environments. As students gain confidence in their academic abilities through the support available in the college setting, they cultivate academic energy and gain momentum. While Fries-Britt and Turner’s research examples are specific to increasing confidence and thereby increasing momentum, the converse can also be assumed, which is that decreases in confidence will decrease academic momentum. Fries-Britt and
Turner implicitly underscore the importance of the affect of college environment on confidence, which then influences academic momentum.

The account of momentum presented here as well as Fries-Britt and Turner’s (2002) depiction, similarly address commitment and environment. Fries-Britt and Turner’s description of student confidence is captured here as student commitment, and the availability of confidence building interactions is comparable to the assessment of environment in this research.

Figure 2: A Theory of Academic Momentum

The following are postulates of a theory of academic momentum.

1. Commitment and environment are proportional and equally important in determining a student’s academic persistence. Increasing commitment or environment increases a student’s academic momentum making her harder to stop, thereby increasing her persistence. Decreasing commitment or environment decreases a student’s academic momentum, and decreases her likelihood of persistence.

2. Commitment and environment are independent forces. The interaction of commitment and environment determines support, even though their
independence is maintained. Therefore, a student who stops out has no academic momentum or academic persistence because the academic environment has been removed from the equation. However, her commitment could still encourage her return to an academic environment and the active pursuit of her educational aspirations because the student is an agent of her own commitment. Upon return to an academic environment, her persistence can be further encouraged by positive interactions and the production of support as a result of the environment interacting with her commitment to her education.

3. A student’s persistence is equivalent to the product of her commitment and her environment as they interact to produce or reduce support. Increasing or decreasing support as a function of commitment and environment affects a student’s persistence and momentum.

Given a theory of academic momentum and the above postulates, a student’s persistence can be increased or decreased by increasing or decreasing, respectively, a student’s commitment, the effectiveness of the environment, or the support features manifesting from the interaction between the student, her commitment, and the environment.

If a student experiences an increase in her commitment, like for Bertha and Kay who sought a career change which increased their commitment to their education, there is a resulting increase in persistence. A student can experience a more effective educational environment, like for Kathy who transferred between several institutions that did not meet her educational needs before coming to the college, resulting in an increase in persistence. A student can also experience a decrease in her commitment because of an
interaction with the environment in which her integrity is called into question when she is accused of plagiarism on a research paper, resulting in discouragement and possible stop out as a result of the decrease in her commitment to her education and a realization of a lack of support.

There is also the theoretical possibility of friction in the model of momentum. Typically, we consider obvious and life-changing events as factors in a student’s lack of persistence, however, the concept of friction also acknowledges the possibility of the constant application of small amounts of force working to decrease momentum. While commitment, environment, and support all exert force on the object developing momentum, friction is also a force in the model.

The most concrete example of friction I was able to observe is in parallel with the racial tax experienced by women of color. The constant, micro, material forces of racism circulating through the college differentially affect the persistence experiences of women of color to steadily decrease momentum and persistence. A comparable example that arose for White women and women of color is the bureaucracy of college attendance in the form of procedures, changing policies, and navigating institutional hoops. Several students shared examples of their difficulty getting responses from staff and faculty or the lack of clear curricular information, like course selection, that would otherwise facilitate their persistence. The students who I spoke to, as high-achievers, were clear that they had discovered how to successfully navigate the institutional obstacles by contacting people often, getting information in writing, and learning their coursework plans as thoroughly as possible. These institutional navigational requirements and hidden
obstacles can produce regular wear-and-tear on a students’ momentum that could theoretically diminish persistence entirely.

**Praxis of Momentum**

Freire (1970) describes praxis as “the action and reflection of men and women upon their world in order to transform it” (p. 79). In critical race feminism, praxis also involves “encouraging change through putting theory into practice” (Wing & Weselmann, 1999, p. 275). Praxis is important to critical race feminism because it brings the theory to bear on actual situations and provides opportunities for action. As the researcher, I cannot remain in theory but must create action in order to give the theory of academic momentum greater relevance to the lives of the nontraditional undergraduate women whose education I aim to support. For the context of this research, a praxis of momentum seeks to make explicit possible actions to increase academic momentum and persistence. The action opportunities within a praxis of momentum revolve around the three postulates of the theory; commitment and environment can affect persistence, commitment and environment are independent, and support can affect persistence.

The first opportunity for a praxis of momentum resides in the postulate that commitment and environment are equally important in creating momentum, therefore increasing commitment and increasing the effectiveness of the environment can each increase persistence. There were several instances in the data where students experienced an increase in momentum due to an increase in their commitment to their education (see Figure 3). For example, Bertha and Kay both sought a career change, which lead them back to school. They increased their commitment to education through their motivation
for a different career and the sustained gratification that they believe their future careers can offer them. Similarly, Kathy and Beverly were increasing their commitment to their education through the use and threat of student loans. Both of them borrowed loans in order to pursue their degree and knew that they were bound to repay those loans, which would not be possible without securing greater employment by virtue of having earned a degree. A rewarding career change and the obligation to student loans served as motivation for these students to persist. For Katie and Venus, their credit accumulation and the graduation countdown kept them going, accumulating momentum along with credits. The closer they got to their goal, the more committed they were to it.

Figure 3: Increasing Commitment

The environment can also increase a student’s persistence based on the students’ interactions within and perceptions of the college environment (see Figure 4). With regard to environment, Serena and Julie had considered other institutions previous to their enrollment at the college, however, no other institution “felt right” for them. The atmosphere and help available at the college encouraged them to enroll at the college.
Because the environment acts on a student’s commitment to her education and to the college, I might also say that the atmosphere and staff at the college helped to increase Serena’s and Julie’s commitment to their education, thereby increasing their persistence. By attributing their persistence to the environment at the college, Serena and Julie demonstrate that there is a difference between commitment that originates with the student herself and commitment that is facilitated by the college environment establishing a distinction between the two factors.

Figure 4: Improving Environment

\[ p = m \times V \]

Environment

The second opportunity for a praxis of momentum arises from the independence of commitment and environment. As described above with Serena and Julie, environment can serve to increase a student’s commitment portraying the interaction of commitment and environment. The distinction of independence is significant, however, in that even though environment can act on a student’s commitment, environment is a force distinct from the student’s self-efficacious commitment. Commitment can accrue through two forces, the student herself and her presence in the college environment. This
postulate allows for persistence intervention to occur at the hand of the student and the institution simultaneously and separately working towards a common goal of graduation. The praxis statement with regard to the postulate of independence focuses on the student and the institution as agents of persistence such that either and both can affect persistence. There are strong implications for the institution around the opportunity for praxis from the theory of academic momentum including the support of students by faculty and staff, the analysis of policy affects on persistence, and the assessment of college climate as well as the ability to bring each in alignment with positive persistence practices.

The third opportunity for praxis arises from support, which happens with the interaction of commitment and environment. Within support, confidence and involvement can increase persistence (see Figure 5). Confidence occurs when, like for Madeline, a faculty or staff member shares their faith in her academic abilities. Madeline’s confidence in herself increases, which also increases her commitment to her education. Neets and Grateful Lady discussed the importance of exploring their own racial and ethnic identities in course curriculum and how that makes them feel more included in the classroom while giving them an opportunity for introspection. Skye and Kathy talk about the importance of having an instructor who “meets you where you are” and can honor and manage the interpersonal dynamics in the classroom. Each of these examples demonstrates that students feel more included and more confident in classrooms with effective faculty members. A faculty member’s particular interest in a
student’s work and classroom contribution can increase confidence in an example of the environment acting to increase commitment, thereby increasing persistence.

Figure 5: Increasing Support

Another opportunity to increase persistence by employing support is through involvement. To increase confidence, the environment initiates the interaction between commitment and support through the efforts of faculty, staff, and students at the college. For involvement, the student initiates interaction with the environment and seeks opportunities to connect with the college based on her commitment to her education. Bertha shares that her involvement in the college community is the most direct way for someone to realize how committed she is to her education. For Bertha, she wanted to connect with the community and when she sought the opportunities to connect, she found them in student activities, relationships with faculty and staff, and student leadership. Being positively received by the college environment increases Bertha’s commitment through an external validation that also increases her persistence.

In summary, a praxis of momentum centers on students. The student emphasizes her own commitments to her education in meaningful ways. The institution and the
environment validate and support her commitment through interaction. However, there are also significant ways for commitment, environment, and support to decrease persistence. For example, Katie had to stop out for her health and her family’s health at different points in her educational career. Her priorities changed and her commitment to her education had to be disregarded temporarily. Her own commitment and realization of how close she was to achieving a life goal along with the encouragement of a faculty member for her to return acted in concert to rekindle her commitment and return to the college.

**In Response to Tinto**

Tinto’s (1975, 1987, 1993) is the most prominent theory of student departure and because of its regard and popularity in the field, it warrants a comparison to the theory of academic momentum. In particular, there are three differences between the research summarized here and the findings and applications of Tinto’s theory of student departure. First, the derivation of the two theories is critically important to recognize. While Tinto extrapolated a theory from existing quantitative studies about departure, I have co-constructed data with nontraditional undergraduate women who are the experts on their own experiences with persistence. Not only are the student participants different in the two theories, but the epistemological foundation of critical race feminism lends to this research a critical lens, a focus on women, and a centering of voices that is not present in Tinto’s theory or resulting research. Second, the operationalization of Tinto’s commitment has been primarily through the tallying of hours spent by traditional undergraduate students in class, on campus, or in activities. While Tinto does not direct
the operationalization of his theory, the broad application of a definition of commitment as time is detrimental to the construction of a similar theory of persistence for nontraditional undergraduate women whose hours are substantially more diverted in the pursuit of meeting adult responsibilities. The comparison of a theory of academic momentum and Tinto’s student departure challenges the operationalization of commitment as tallied hours. Third, and finally, the definition and description of commitment in this research proposes that nontraditional undergraduate women’s commitment is complex, dynamic, influential, and emotional (Agans, 2010; Vaccaro, 2005) rather than a static measure of hours spent studying. The known sacrifice nontraditional undergraduate women make in order to devote an hour to studying purports an opportunity cost that is a direct function of her commitment to her education and categorically than an hour spent studying with different or less significant opportunity costs.

Tinto describes the theory of student departure as longitudinal, interactional, and contextual. With each of these assertions, there is a comparison and a response that arises from the theory of academic momentum outlined here for nontraditional undergraduate women’s persistence.

In many respects departure is a highly idiosyncratic event, one that can be fully understood only by referring to the understandings and experiences of each and every person who departs. Nevertheless, there does emerge among the diversity of behaviors reported in research on this question a number of pertinent common themes. These pertain to the dispositions of individuals who enter higher education, to the character of their interactional experiences within the institution following entry, and to the external forces which sometimes influence their behavior within the institution. (Tinto, 1993, p. 37)
This brief description given by Tinto seems to align the two theories, student departure and academic momentum, very closely. Both honor the individualized experiences of each student rather than homogenizing all students towards one typical experience, but are also able to identify some broad themes of student experience. Tinto identifies three primary aspects of the theory of student departure, which are similar to the three primary themes outlined in this research. Tinto’s student dispositions is similar to commitment outlined here; Tinto’s interactional experiences are similar to the interaction of environment and commitment outlined here as support; and Tinto’s external forces are encompassed here within the scope of the environment. At first glance, the two theories are very similar; however, as the comparison deepens significant differences emerge with regard to the longitudinal, interactional, and contextual aspects of the two theories.

**Longitudinal.**

Tinto (1975, 1987, 1993) developed his theory of student departure based on the existing literature regarding student attrition and persistence. One of his primary concerns was that the research had a tendency to use cross-sectional data as opposed to gathering data on the same students over time in a longitudinal design. While not all of the studies that Tinto uses in his synthesis are a longitudinal design, he does recommend that future research be longitudinal and subsequently, creates a model that is longitudinal in nature. Tinto reasons that the experiences of students on campus are best understood as an accumulation of separate events that build exponentially on each other constructing the student’s impressions of college as the student progresses. Therefore, measuring the student’s perceptions of her environment at one point in time would lead to the most
complete picture of her experience. The theory of academic momentum for nontraditional undergraduate women is not much different in its assertions. I also agree that student’s experiences are an accumulation of her experiences and the more experiences she has in the college environment, the more rich her impressions and decision become. The theory of academic momentum, and the nature of momentum while it can be a measure at a specific point in time, also connotes motion and the change in motion over time, again concurring with Tinto on the relevance of a longitudinal perspective for analyzing student persistence.

Where the theories diverge, however, is around the methodological derivations of each conjured up by Tinto’s supposition of the ideal departure research which he himself does not conduct. Tinto supports the longitudinal design, but he does not execute the research design and even relies on other researchers who have not employed longitudinal designs to develop his theory of student departure. Researchers who have applied Tinto’s theory since its delivery have employed a variety of measures, including quantitative longitudinal designs and qualitative designs that honor students’ voices (). To construct a theory of academic momentum for nontraditional undergraduate women, I used a modified grounded theory approach to build a theory from the words, experiences, and perceptions of students. Where Tinto’s data is a compilation of researcher results, the data in this research have been collected directly from students and the theory derived from the data. Charmaz reminds the grounded theory researcher that “throughout the journey, we will climb up analytic levels and raise the theoretical import of your ideas while keeping a taut rope tied to your data on solid ground” (2006, p. 1).
While each theory walked a different path through development and arrived at comparable destinations, I believe that the diverse experiences of nontraditional undergraduate women deserved the honored place they received through a critical race feminist theoretical framework and a theory that emerged from their own words.

**Interactional.**

Tinto (1975, 1987, 1993) describes his theory of student departure as interactional because it accounts for the student’s experiences in and with the college environment. Not unlike Lewin’s person-environment theory (1936, as cited in Evans, Forney, Guido-DiBrito, 1998) and in line with most student development theories (Evans, Forney, Guido-DiBrito, 1998), Tinto asserts that the student’s characteristics will influence her perceptions of the environment, and her perceptions of the environment will alternately serve to influence her character. Another foundational component of interactionalist theories, Tinto’s included, is that every student will experience, perceive, and respond to her environment differently because of the variety of individual characteristics that determine her interaction with the environment. Tinto says specifically of his model that

…student departure, like departure from human communities generally, necessarily reflects both the attributes and actions of the individual and those of the other members of the community in which that person resides. Decisions to withdraw are more a function of what occurs after entry than of what precedes it. They are reflections of the dynamic nature of the institution, in particular of the daily interaction which occurs among its members. (Tinto, 1993, p. 5)

Tinto describes the processes of integration or incongruency with the campus community and their effects on a student’s departure decision. Not only is the interaction between the student and the environment important, but the interaction itself is not directly responsible for a student’s resulting departure decision. Rather, the interaction and
integration or incongruency influences the student’s commitment, and it is commitment that ultimately directs a student’s departure decision.

Once again, I am in agreement with Tinto regarding the generalities of his theory of student departure. In the theory of academic momentum, interaction between the student and her environment is also critically important to her persistence. In addition, her interactions within the college environment influence her commitment, which ultimately directs her persistence. However, where the theories diverge is on the specifics of student interaction with the environment, the effects of interaction on commitment, and the operationalization of student commitment.

Tinto (1975) segments the campus community and the resulting interactions into the well known possibilities for social and academic integration. In 1975, Tinto measures academic integration by a student’s grade point average and her intellectual development describing a distinction in the structural and normative aspects of the academic system, respectively. In 1993, Tinto revises the separation and indicators of the academic and social systems slightly whereby the academic system includes academic performance and faculty interactions while the social system includes extracurricular activities and peer group interactions. The nontraditional undergraduate women who I spoke to certainly distinguished between camaraderie with their sister students and interactions with faculty members, which does seem to agree with Tinto’s separation of academic and social interactions. However, the nature of student camaraderie and student interaction is clearly focused on academic endeavors, making the distinction between social and academic systems seem artificial for nontraditional undergraduate women.
Nontraditional undergraduate women are more likely to categorize their social system as outside of the institution, while their academic integration includes interactions with students around coursework and academic support, creating a clear divide from Tinto’s theory of student departure where the social and academic systems are both firmly rooted on campus.

Additionally, nontraditional undergraduate women are not as likely as Tinto’s (1975, 1993) first time, full-time, 18 year-old, residential student to engage in formal extracurricular activities. However, I do not believe that this means that students at the college are not integrated into the college system, assuming that the distinction between academic and social systems is less noticeable. The students I spoke with are certainly engaged with their college environment in multiple ways, especially considering the ways in which their investment in their education manifests as engagement (Vacarro, 2007).

Given Tinto’s assessment of academic and social integration, I believe that nontraditional undergraduate women may appear to be less integrated than a first time, fulltime, 18 year-old, residential student by the measures that he suggests, even though many women I spoke to would assert that they “feel at home” and value the environment of the college.

With regard to the effects of interaction and integration on student commitment, Tinto (1993) says

…the interactive model described above posits that individual integrative experiences in the formal and informal academic and social communities of the college and the interplay between them, as conditioned by external events, are central to the process of departure, especially that which takes place voluntarily. Such experiences continually act upon individuals’ evaluation of their educational and occupational goals and their commitments both to the attainment of those goals and to the institution into which initial entry has been gained. (Tinto, 1993, p. 120)
The theory of academic momentum also asserts that the interaction of student and environment is continually acting upon a student’s commitment to her education, however, with some notable differences. First, many of the women who I spoke to were having negative interactions with the college environment, in terms of faculty, students, and staff members, however, they also exhibited a powerful commitment to graduate. Their academic momentum was such that they were going to keep moving through their degree regardless of the fact that they had to exhibit increased independence and in many ways, become withdrawn while remaining within the college environment. In the theory of academic momentum, the interaction of environment and commitment resulting in various forms of support and lack of support does influence the student’s commitment, which could affect her persistence. However, there are also provisions for the student whose commitment is not significantly reduced by her environmental interactions. When a student’s commitment to her educational goal of graduation is powerful, she can become independent of the environment as a survival strategy to preserve her commitment in spite of negative interactions.

Tinto’s (1975, 1987, 1993) theory may fail to account for women who persist in spite of frustrating interactions with the college environment because his operationalization of commitment is similarly narrow. Tinto allows for goal commitment and institutional commitment where goal commitment is includes a student’s educational intentions and the intensity with which she holds those intentions while institutional commitment is a predisposition towards attending one institution over another. Goal commitment is directly related to a student’s occupational goals. Institutional
commitment may develop for a student as a result of their family legacy status with an institution, peer pressure to attend, or prestige leading to the impression that a degree from this institution will incur better occupational opportunities. Tinto’s model is one of institutional departure, not departure from the system of higher education, making the inclusion of institutional commitment relevant. Also, positive interactions with the college could strengthen a student’s institutional commitment based on their lived experiences within the college. However, for the students who I interviewed, there was no indication that institutional commitment was determined by legacy status or peer pressure. There were some students who noted that the prestige of a degree from the University of Denver offered some initial incentive to apply, but the reasons that students persisted at the college I investigated were not directly related to the prestige of the university. In this instance, institutional commitment may have influenced application, but is not likely to have influenced persistence.

The specification of goal commitment is lacking the regard that nontraditional undergraduate women place on the earning of their bachelor’s degree. Some women do not intend to change careers, making goal commitment irrelevant to their persistence. Many women mentioned the importance of role modeling education in their families, which is also not accounted for by occupational intentions. Several women shared the personal importance of completing their degree as it had been a life-long dream and every step closer to their goal added self-esteem and validation in a way that was previously missing for them. Most of the ways that nontraditional undergraduate women spoke of
their commitment is not captured by Tinto’s (1975, 1987, 1993) definition except in the most broad strokes of dedication, willingness, and hard work.

While Tinto’s theory of student departure and the theory of academic momentum agree on the importance of interaction as influencing student persistence, there are significant differences in how students interact with the environment, the effects of interaction on commitment, and the definitions and descriptions of student commitment.

**Contextual.**

Tinto (1975, 1987, 1993) states that his model of student departure is institution specific. The interactions that a student has in the college environment are specific to that environment, and similarly, to that student. The theory of academic momentum is also institution specific, perhaps even limited by its institutional context because the data supporting the theory are only from one institution. Perhaps with future research, the theory of academic momentum can be verified with nontraditional undergraduate women at other institutions. Tinto also generates his recommendations for improving student retention within the purview of each institution, noting that

…institutional departure is as much a reflection on the attributes of those communities, therefore of the institution, as it is of the attributes of the students who enter that institution. Though the intentions and commitments with which individuals enter college matter, what goes on after entry matters more. (Tinto, 1993, p. 133).

I agree with Tinto’s application of the responsibility and management of persistence with the institution. I also believe, with Tinto, that the recommendations and implications of persistence research, then, also focus on the institution.

Comparably, there is also a recognition from Tinto (1993) that each student experiences the college environment differently, therefore the student cannot be forgotten.
in persistence research and practice. However, as Tinto’s theory of student departure is derived from previous research on retention, his model is also limited by the information available in the previous research. One serious limitation of the research preceding Tinto’s theory that was not accounted for in theory development and description is the foundation of the first-time, full-time, 18 year-old, residential student experience. This is especially noticeable in the student experience descriptions that Tinto offers. Providing examples of integration into the college fabric, Tinto says

Some institutions, especially residential ones, do provide a variety of formal and informal mechanisms for that purpose. Fraternities, sororities, student dormitory associations, student unions, frequent faculty and visiting-scholar lectures, extracurricular programs, and intramural sports, for example, may all serve to provide individuals with opportunities to establish repetitive contact with one another in circumstances which lead to the possibility of incorporation into the life of the college. (Tinto, 1993, p. 99)

One aspect of conducting persistence research with nontraditional undergraduate women is to fill in the gaps in the literature where important cohorts of students are excluded, and the absence of their voices and experiences is blatantly obvious in Tinto’s examples of college life. For the women I spoke with, some did mention the value of participating in college activities and student groups, I do not want to imply that none of the nontraditional undergraduate women population engages with the college in this way. However, a much more inclusive example of students’ participation and integration into the college atmosphere surfaces around group projects, tutoring students in classes, and bringing aspects of their lived experiences to the classroom.

Finally, one of the most difficult aspects to find common ground between the two theories is on the topic of the environments external to the college. Tinto’s (1993) model does allow for the influence of those communities external to the college, however, it is
peripheral to the student’s experiences and commitment with regard to college persistence. “…the model posits the view that experiences on campus are, for most students, paramount to the process of persistence. External experiences, though critical for a number of students, condition but do not determine the character of experience on campus” (Tinto, 1993, p. 129). With this statement, Tinto concerns himself primarily with what happens on campus, however, for nontraditional undergraduate women, it is unlikely that they leave their family, work, and home responsibilities entirely at home or that they are leaving school on campus when they leave. Regarding nontraditional undergraduate women as having significant lives external to the operations of the college is very important to how the college environment interacts with and supports students. Tinto does not negate the value of the external environment for some students, but he does quarantine that experience from campus life and, largely, from the theory of student departure.

Tinto (1975, 1987, 1993) narrowly allows for student persistence in spite of negative interactions, which I heard evidenced by the women I spoke to and especially for women of color. His theory of student departure also defines commitment too strictly for nontraditional undergraduate women, and therefore, lacks examples of nontraditional undergraduate women’s experiences as they might relate to the theory. There is also a missing element of Tinto’s (1993) definitions of possible departures. Tinto discusses students leaving in their first year of college, leaving one institution to transfer to another in acts of both “trading up” and “cooling out,” dropouts, stop outs, and leaving the system of higher education entirely. What is missing from Tinto’s discussion of the different
patterns of student persistence and departure is the situation that occurred for many of the students who I spoke to. For Tinto, stop out is a form of “quitting” college and the only reason students transition from dropouts to stop outs is because they have returned to their education at some later date. However, I heard about several instances where students did not plan on quitting and did not consider themselves quitters. Rather, they knew that they had to take time off from school and from the outset of their decision, they knew they would be returning to the same school, to the same degree program. Tinto’s model needs a planned stop out, or a temporary stop out description, where students have not abandoned their commitment to their education, but rather, they have had to prioritize something in their life above attending school with the distinct intention of being able to return to school in the future.

Tinto’s (1975, 1983, 1993) theory of student departure, or longitudinal model of institutional departure, is describing students leaving institutions of higher education. The research conducted here and the resulting theory of academic momentum for nontraditional undergraduate women describes students persisting in college, being successful, and, hopefully celebrating their graduation. In many ways, the language and explanations of the two theories are similar; however, our epistemological vantage points are very different.

A Critical Race Feminist Counter-narrative of College Persistence

In chapter two, I constructed a critical race feminist counter-narrative of college persistence from the literature on adult students, students of color, and women students. The resulting counter-narrative describes the themes of self-efficacy and motivation,
biculturation and multiple roles, and validation and sense of belonging as relevant to the persistence of nontraditional undergraduate women. I want to revisit these themes in terms of the data, theory, and conclusions derived from this research and draw a parallel between the themes from the literature and the theory elements of commitment, environment, and support (See Table 9).

Table 9: Comparison of Counter-narrative Themes to Theoretical Constructs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Counter-narrative Themes Derived from Persistence Literature</th>
<th>Theoretical Concepts Derived from Data</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Motivation and Self-Efficacy</td>
<td>Commitment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biculturation and Multiple Roles</td>
<td>Environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Validation and Sense of Belonging</td>
<td>Support</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Self-efficacy and motivation arose as the prominent themes under the transition theory Self variable categorization as important factors for the persistence of nontraditional undergraduate women. Self-efficacy is described as the belief that one can achieve a desired goal and motivation is described as the drive or incentive to pursue a desired goal. Self-efficacy and motivation are similar to the components of commitment outlined in the theory of academic momentum. Each is a reaction or emotion on the part of the student and each moves the student towards the attainment of her educational goals. Each is also affected by external factors as well as individual, internal factors. Self-efficacy can be encouraged by seeing others succeed at the task or by receiving encouragement from other people. Motivation can falter or be buoyed by external events, like a successful class assignment or the re-prioritization of responsibilities. Commitment can also be affected by internal, individual forces as well as forces external...
to the student. Commitment is a broader category that can encompass self-efficacy and motivation, and self-efficacy and motivation can, in turn, fortify a student’s commitment.

Biculturation and multiple roles occur as relevant persistence factors within the Situation variable from the literature review. Biculturation is the ability or tension for a person who is negotiating two different cultures and trying to maintain their own identity in each. Having multiple roles refers to the myriad obligations that many nontraditional undergraduate women are balancing in order to go to school. Biculturation and multiple roles both reference the environments within which nontraditional undergraduate women operate, captured here by the environment component of the theory of academic momentum. The literature of biculturation and persistence describes different elements than the data collected here; however, there are implications in the students’ descriptions of environment that liken to biculturation. For example, Neets, Grateful Lady, and Beverly all shared the affirmation they feel when their racialized life experiences are valued in the classroom, compared to when they are dismissed as insignificant. Students discussed their multiple roles in terms of their obligations to family, friends, and employment, however, in our interviews, students discussed the details of their academic life in greater detail than their other priorities. Even though environment in this research is more heavily focused on the college environment, due to the nature of my research interests, there are clear moments where biculturation and multiple roles appeared in the data.

Validation and sense of belonging were the themes derived from the literature around the Support variable and very closely resemble the themes of support that were
generated from the data. Confidence and involvement, as the positive pathways towards increased persistence, are similar to validation and sense of belonging respectively. Validation describes the increased confidence that students receive from positive interactions and affirmations from faculty and staff at the college, just as the confidence factor describes in the data. Sense of belonging describes the same premise as involvement, where a student feels part of the community of the college and fits into the college environment. Support includes the themes of validation and sense of belonging in the more detailed descriptions of confidence and involvement, again sustaining the literature while the literature confirms the conclusions discovered through this research.

In several ways, the data collected and analyzed within this research is in alignment with the critical race feminist literature review themes and has united them in a more expansive theory of academic momentum.

**Conclusion**

Kay acknowledges the synergy of commitment, environment, support, and the theory of academic momentum and the potential that abounds in the students at the college.

It’s all been connected. And as I’ve met each of those women I’m standing on the shoulders or someone’s standing on my shoulders. We’re all helping each other reach up and above and so, it’s just like there’s no limit.

In this chapter, I have outlined a theory of academic momentum based on the major findings of commitment, environment, and support along with a praxis of momentum which begins to describe the details of increasing student persistence by putting theory into practice. The theory of academic momentum allows for the possibility of intervention on the part of the institution or the student in order to increase student
persistence. Critical race feminism requires that the research move beyond theory and consider the praxis resulting from the theory. There are also important similarities and differences between Tinto’s (1975, 1987, 1993) student departure and the theory of academic momentum which I have elaborated on within this chapter. Finally, I also drew a comparison between the counter-narrative themes emerging from the persistence literature and the primary concepts of commitment, environment, and support as they are constructed in a theory of academic momentum.
Chapter 7: Implications and Future Research

Introduction

In this research, I have sought to develop a better understanding of nontraditional undergraduate women’s persistence in a bachelor’s degree program. In chapter one, I outlined the purpose and context of the research along with the research question. In chapter two, I provided an overview of the prominent persistence literature within a critical race feminist theoretical framework which allowed me to create a counter-narrative of the persistence literature using the documented experiences of students of color, women, and adult students in order to approximate the experiences of nontraditional undergraduate women. In chapter three, I described the foundations of constructivist grounded theory and the specific elements that I employed to create a modified grounded theory design; including focus group and interview data collection and data analysis strategies. Chapter four illustrates the major findings around the importance of commitment, environment, and support to a student’s persistence. Chapter five re-presented the findings of commitment, environment, and support through a critical race feminist reading. In chapter six, the elements of commitment, environment, and support were then organized into a theory of academic momentum that described their relationships to one another and to student persistence with an overview of a praxis of momentum and a comparison to existing persistence literature. Finally, chapter seven
outlines implications of the research for higher education, the limitations inherent in the research, suggests opportunities for future research, and provides a brief reflection of my own journey as a researcher.

Implications

Based on the theory of academic momentum, commitment is the central aspect of persistence for nontraditional undergraduate women. Commitment is influenced by environment and then influences momentum and persistence, in turn. The implications for this research, therefore, center on how to increase persistence by increasing commitment through positive interactions delivered by environment and support. For the women who I interviewed, they were able to persist in spite of obstacles, in spite of racism, in spite of external forces, in spite of a lack of support because they were committed to their own educational success in the form of graduation. They were not especially fortunate in their finances, employment, or family obligations as to eliminate all barriers from their educational pursuits. They struggled in the face of difficulty and persisted because of their commitment to their education.

The following implications are informed by the theory of academic momentum postulates which include; (a) that commitment and environment affect persistence; (b) that commitment and environment are independent; and (c) that support affects persistence. There are three primary opportunities to intervene to encourage increased persistence derived from the postulates of the theory of academic momentum; student opportunities, institutional opportunities, and inclusive excellence opportunities.
Student opportunities.

The theory of academic momentum is institution-specific and even though the student exercises the greatest control over her commitment to her education, the institution stands to be able to encourage commitment on behalf of the student. Therefore, the implications for the student level can be promoted by the institution as a way to help each student support herself through her education.

One recommendation for students to support their own commitment to their educational goals is to make their commitment explicit and well-known. The students who I spoke to did not hesitate or question why they were in school. There were moments when they stopped out and there were moments when they thought they might not graduate, but overall, they knew why they were making the sacrifices to preserve their commitment. I believe that the self-awareness and shared awareness of a student’s commitment makes the sacrifices easier to bear because they are in the pursuit of a specific goal – graduation. Students’ commitment to their education should be at the forefront of their experience and the more they can make their own commitment known, the stronger it will become. The students who I spoke to had various reasons for going to college; there is not one single reason to enroll. It was having the reason and allowing it to be central to their educational journey that mattered in their persistence.

Demonstrating your commitment to yourself and others can also take the form of academic work. Almost all of the students who I interviewed mentioned the importance of academic success. Working hard and communicating the importance of your degree through your academic work strengthens your commitment by the explicit expression of
academic improvement and success. It was clear that the successful students who I spoke to regarded their academic achievements as significant to their student identities and I believe that their value of academic achievement is a factor in their success. Being committed and working towards academic achievement will bolster each other and students’ likelihood of persistence. Castles (2004) specifically mentions that love of learning is a high level factor of persistence, and many students who I spoke to professed a love of learning. By embracing the opportunities that being in college presents, students are building their commitment by taking advantage of something they enjoy participating in. Perhaps education becomes less of an obligation and more of a privilege when students can proclaim their love of learning through working towards academic achievement. Muller’s (2008) research uncovered similar findings where women felt affirmed by overcoming the challenges of coursework and seeing their academic success.

I am not suggesting that earning high grades will equate to greater persistence, but rather that the investment to achieve on the part of the student will strengthen her commitment. I am also not suggesting that the benefit of earning high grades is in opposition to failing grades, which could cost a student her persistence for different reasons. Academic achievement is not simply preventative to keep a student from being suspended for academic performance, but instead, is a proactive demonstration of commitment to herself, her professors, and her classmates.

Students can also seek supportive networks within the college to support their commitment and persistence. By aligning with students, staff, and faculty who will affirm a student’s commitment to her own education, she will strengthen her commitment
and begin to insulate it from distraction and damage. Because academic study is often viewed as an independent experience and the traditional student is more likely to join organized campus clubs, we can disregard the contribution that involvement, camaraderie, and community with peers can hold for nontraditional undergraduate women. While students are already consumed with trying to juggle responsibilities and maintain academic commitments, seeking a supportive network will further benefit her academic pursuits. Researching adult students, Holder (2007) notes that “having the experience of a supportive group of friends and family and the comfort of knowing that they are not alone in this learning process was a significant factor related to students’ persistence” (p. 255). Accessing a community of support may not be easy for students; rather, many students described the difficulty of finding understanding and supportive people in the college environment. However, the effort of seeking a community will be invaluable in the moments when stop out threatens to derail persistence. Community was critical to many students who I spoke to, and the value of having a sympathetic ally should not be underestimated.

Students are responsible for their own commitment and that commitment could benefit from regular maintenance like other aspects of their academic achievement. Being explicit about their commitment to their educational goals, prioritizing academic success, and seeking supportive communities could each serve to strengthen students’ commitment and foster persistence.
Institutional opportunities.

While students are ultimately responsible for their own commitment, the theory of academic momentum suggests that the institution can influence students’ commitment, both positively and negatively, through the college environment.

Students cited their interactions with faculty and sister students as important to their feelings of validation and success in the college environment. Some students were inspired and encouraged by the success of their peers in a way that made the success of others a model for their own success, whereby seeing other students overcome obstacles and graduate gives them a sense that they can do it, too. Facilitating positive student interactions and role modeling for new students would serve to increase new students’ commitment by seeing similar barriers surpassed and successes achieved by other students. While students should seek supportive communities, the institution should work to develop the creation of varied and supportive communities of students. Supportive communities include staff and faculty as well as students through formal and informal involvement in college decision-making and procedural opportunities. The camaraderie between the students at the college is a powerful opportunity for encouraging commitment.

Another avenue for increasing students’ commitment is by encouraging positive interactions between students and faculty. Many students shared their respect for faculty and how faculty members have helped them to believe in their academic potential and ability to succeed. However, there are also instances of students having negative faculty interactions. Faculty members are likely aware of the unique and significant opportunity
they have to build confidence or discouragement in their students. There were also examples where students shared the influence that staff members and administrators had on their college experiences. While faculty may have the most direct opportunity to influence a student’s academic self-efficacy, staff and administration are not exempt from the opportunity. Neither are faculty members free of the responsibility of persistence which is often left to student affairs staff members (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005).

The appreciation for the special relationship that faculty, staff, and administrators have with their students should be a priority for the institution, both in encouraging positive relationships and managing negative relationships. As a key to student success, Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh and Whitt (2005) state that “substantive, educationally meaningful student-faculty interaction just doesn’t happen; it is expected, nurtured, and supported” (p. 281).

Creating a faculty and staff team that will strive for positive interactions with all students is a significant opportunity to increase student persistence.

The most important aspect of faculty and staff interaction with students is the promotion of Rendón’s (1994) validation, which asserts that “even the most vulnerable nontraditional students can be transformed into powerful learners through in- and out-of-class academic and/or interpersonal validation” (p. 37). Rendón notes the importance of faculty members validating students in the classroom through their personable approach and genuine concern for students. As Kathy said, “meeting students where they are.” Creating a caring cadre of faculty members who will seek opportunities for intervention with all students is an important facilitator of persistence. The students in this study, similar to Rendón’s counsel to create validating classrooms, also stated that the
classroom dynamics are as important as the content learning, both of which are managed by the professor.

**Inclusive Excellence opportunities.**

While there are significant opportunities for the student and the institution to increase persistence, perhaps the greatest opportunity is regarding the creation of a culture of Inclusive Excellence within the college. Women of color are well-represented within the student body of the college. Classes are offered that center the experiences of people of color. It is a priority that the faculty and staff at the college are as diverse as the student body. The college is working to establish itself as a multi-cultural organization on the way to Inclusive Excellence. However, the college is also residing in a difficult moment in time where they risk “talking the talk without walking the walk” in the perceptions of some women of color, like Skye. The language and the support for Inclusive Excellence is part of the college mission and message, however, there are still experiences where women of color encounter racism and the response from the college is very important. Women of color, and the White women who also value social justice, are looking for the next step that takes the college beyond representational diversity into a culture of Inclusive Excellence.

The greater commitment of the college to Inclusive Excellence could also lead to the alienation of some White women. The students who I spoke to, women of color and White women alike, pointed out the White students who they knew who were not comfortable in a diverse classroom hearing experiences that are different from their own, like Bo. This suggests that there could be a persistence cost to the increasing adoption of
Inclusive Excellence for the college. However, in order to move forward in the retention of women of color and the realization of their mission, the college will have to continue to build a culture of Inclusive Excellence.

The Inclusive Excellence scorecard serves as a practical model built on theory and research that bridges some institutional gaps between critical race feminism and praxis. The scorecard outlines four areas for institutions to consider as they work towards becoming more inclusive; access and equity, diversity in the formal and informal curriculum, campus climate, and student learning and development (Williams, Berger, McClendon, 2005). Promoting Inclusive Excellence and the use of the scorecard is not a measure and response that would only benefit the women of color at the college. The fundamental premise of Inclusive Excellence is that institutions should transform their efforts “from diversity as an isolated initiative to diversity as a catalyst for educational excellence” (p. v) such that intentionality towards diversity and inclusion improves the college environment for all students. The scorecard is intended to allow the institution to design the specifics strategies and goal attainment within each area. While campus climate assessment is a large project for a small college to undertake, it could also have a great impact on the overall college culture and student persistence within the college.

The implications that I have offered from this research are specifically geared towards the research question: How do nontraditional undergraduate women persist in a bachelor’s degree-granting institution, a small women’s college within a private institution in the Rocky Mountain region of the United States? Even within the narrow context of the college, this research has attempted to take the large and diverse group of
nontraditional undergraduate women and derive similarities of experience from a sample of participants. The context of the research, and especially the implications, is important for two reasons.

First, the women who I spoke to are all high-achieving students. They earn high grades. They prioritize their education. They persist. Several of them have graduated over the course of this research project. Their achievement expectations may or may not be the standard for many nontraditional undergraduate women. The students who I spoke to certainly felt like there was a culture of achievement at the college, suggesting that many students work harder to get perfect grades and maintain the high-achiever identity. It may also be the case that the high-achiever status impression in the culture of the college is detrimental to those students who are nervous about their academic ability when they enter the college. The high-achievers may create an affiliation that some students participate in and others become discouraged by. Without knowing the dimensions and extent of the success of the students who I spoke to compared with the general student body of the college, I hesitate to suggest that the following implications are relevant to all students at the college, let alone to all nontraditional undergraduate women.

The second important aspect of the context of the research and implications is the specific setting of the college. Not many nontraditional undergraduate women nationally have the opportunity to step into a college, into admissions and graduation processes, and into the majority of their classes and hear that those experiences have been designed with them in mind. The first class students take at the college is a college navigation class that
is aimed at the issues that they will face in their unique educational experience at the college, which they take with other nontraditional undergraduate women. Several students talked about the camaraderie, bonding, modeling, and long-lasting friendships that have evolved from that one class. Environment is a significant element of the theory of academic momentum, and therefore it is considerably important to the implications I derive.

There is great variety in the characteristics, histories, identities, and experiences of nontraditional undergraduate women and I am not presuming to explain all of their variety with these research implications. I agree with Kember (1989), that “the attrition process is undoubtedly a complex one. A theory that could fully explain every aspect of the attrition process would contain so many constructs that it would become unwieldy if not unmanageable” (p. 279). This research describes a complicated human response to myriad issues, individual and dynamic. I present this research and its implications as a guide to considering each student’s persistence experiences through individual attention and specification. However, the successful women who I spoke to and the college could certainly serve as models to other students and to other institutions serving nontraditional undergraduate women.

Limitations

The limitations of the research are primarily related to issues of scope and generalization, along with limitations that arose as a result of the complexity of describing a theory of nontraditional undergraduate women’s persistence. Regarding scope, this research is restricted to a particular small, single-gendered college context
within a university context in the Rocky Mountain region of the United States. While the population of nontraditional undergraduate women is dispersed through various institutions, I had a commitment to, access to, and familiarity with students at the college which provided an intentional and rewarding setting in which to situate research. By describing the student participants in this dissertation research, I have attempted to explain the extent to which the students interviewed may represent or offer contrast to other nontraditional undergraduate women. However, this specific context is not likely generalizable to many other educational institutions that serve nontraditional undergraduate women.

Qualitative research usually challenges ideas of generalizability as it is described for quantitative studies. Patton (2002) cites Cronbach’s (1975) response to generalizability as “when we give proper weight to local conditions, any generalization is a working hypothesis, not a conclusion” (Cronbach, 1975 as cited in Patton, 2002, p. 582). Similarly, grounded theory as a method articulates the connections between local and global contexts, as well as between theory development and theory verification. Grounded theory takes account of the specific context as a cite of theory generation and, as the theory is tested in divergent settings over time and further verified, it begins to transform into formal grounded theory, which applies across settings and contexts. Future research will be able to apply the theory generated through this research project to different populations of nontraditional undergraduate women attending college in different institutional settings. The dissertation research undertaken here, however, is in
regard to a specific context, the college and the students who attend here, thereby appropriately limiting the generalizability available to this research.

Additionally, there are three process aspects of this research that are limitations and need to be addressed in opportunities for future research. These are specifically in regard to the description of the environment external to the college, the absence of explicit issues of socio-economic status in the research, and the address of the racial identities of women of color. First, the description and theorizing around the external environment is too abbreviated for its impact on the persistence of nontraditional undergraduate women. As a novice researcher, I began to notice through data collection, analysis, and theory development that I was under-specifying the external environment and its potential relationship to persistence and a theory of academic momentum. Admittedly, I believe that I was more interested in learning about the experiences of nontraditional undergraduate women’s experiences in the college environment and therefore, inadvertently shifted focus away from the external environment in favor of the internal environment. This is a clear limitation in consideration of the influence that the external environment has on nontraditional undergraduate women’s persistence experiences (Castles, 2004; Choy, 2002; Horn & Carroll, 1996; Kinser & Deitchman, 2008; Muller, 2008).

Second, I under-theorize socioeconomic status in this dissertation research. I did not design to explore issues of socio-economic status and I believe that was a mistake, in large part because of the body of literature exploring the importance of socio-economic status on student success (Paulsen & St. John, 2002; St. John, Paulsen, & Carter, 2005) as
well as the fact that the majority of the participants who I spoke to are utilizing student loans, grants, and scholarships to finance their education. Also, the increasing role of the feminization of poverty and its effects on socio-economic status of nontraditional undergraduate women will be important for institutions to consider in funding students to pursue their bachelor’s degrees.

Third, by virtue of a small sample of nontraditional undergraduate women students and an even smaller subset of women of color, while I have begun to address the differences between women of color and White women as two large collectives, there is much neglected in this research with regard to racial identity. By grouping students together as women of color, I may have created a monolithic, generic non-White racial identity group. The significant limitation here is the identity specific benefits of persistence research that can strengthen academic success through identity affinity and commonality of specific racial experiences such as that offered by Gloria (Gloria, 1997; Gloria, Castellanos, Lopez, & Rosales, 2005; Gloria & Robinson Kurpius, 2001; Gloria, Robinson Kurpius, Hamilton, & Willson, 1999). There are opportunities for racial identity groups to be explored further especially the distinctions between the experiences and manifestations of the theory of academic momentum as described by African American and Black women, Native American women, and Latina and Hispanic women.

**Future Research**

The theory of academic momentum and resulting implications lead to a series of research possibilities regarding the persistence of nontraditional undergraduate women’s persistence. In many ways, the future research could maintain the foundations of
grounded theory methodology and consider additional data collection an extension of theoretical sampling and the constant comparative method. The opportunities for future research include a more in depth assessment of individual students’ commitment, different institutional environments, and the theory overall.

First, the above implications raise the question of comparing successful students with students who are stopped out from the college along dimensions of commitment, their perceptions of the environment, and instances of support and lack of support. Having established a basis for comparison with successful students in this research, it would be valuable to pursue similar focus groups and interviews with students who have stopped out. Defining the body of stopped out students would not be without difficulty, however, because of the nature of stop out for many nontraditional undergraduate women. Many of the successful students who I spoke to have stopped out for some period of time even though their commitment did not suffer and they believed they would return which each of them did. One suggestion would be to collect interview data from students who have been stopped out from the college for one year or more, extending the reach of grounded theory theoretical sampling and constant comparative data analysis. Within this group, there are likely different levels of commitment and perceptions of the environment which will add variability and detail to the theory of academic momentum.

There is also an opportunity to explore different groups of students, not only along indicators of academic success, as suggested, but class and gender as well. Solorzano, Ceja, and Yosso (2000) note that critical race theory and critical race feminism “challenges the traditional paradigms, methods, texts, and separate discourses
on race, gender, and class by showing how these social constructs intersect to impact communities of color” (p. 63). I have not addressed the differences by class or socioeconomic status that could exist within commitment, environment, support, and the theory of academic momentum in this research. Given the important effects that first-generation status has a student’s socioeconomic status, social and cultural capital, and on college choice and persistence (Paulsen & St. John, 2002; Perna & Titus, 2005; St. John, Paulsen, & Carter, 2005), I suspect that exploring socioeconomic differences among students could lead to valuable information for the findings presented here. As I mentioned within the limitations of this research, there is also a great opportunity to more profoundly explore the nuances of persistence experiences by racial identity and affinity groups. While I have only distinguished between two groups, racially, women of color and White women, there are continuing opportunities to compare students across racial and ethnic identities.

Also with regard to investigating student level difference and adding variability to the findings, it is important to consider the experiences of nontraditional undergraduate men. I suspect that there will be overlap with much of the detail already presented in commitment, environment, support, and the theory of academic momentum, along with additional variability and competing differences. Muller (2008) notes the continuing differences in the effects of traditional conceptions of divisions of labor by gender and its effect on the college decisions, including persistence, of women compared to men. Several studies also note the differences in social integration for men and women (Berger
& Milem, 1999; DeBerard, Spielsman, & Julka, 2004), which would contribute new information to this model regarding commitment, environment, and support.

The second opportunity for future research is the comparison of successful nontraditional undergraduate women across different environments. Like any institution, there are unique aspects of the culture and environment at the particular college where I conducted this research. The elements that foster or inhibit student persistence could be better illuminated by comparing the students’ commitment and perceptions of environment with similarly successful nontraditional undergraduate women, and men, at other institutions. One possibility for this research would be adding to the dataset students from a bachelor’s completion program, students from a community college who plan to transfer for their bachelor’s degree, and nontraditional undergraduate students from a state institution under the assumption that these are sufficiently different institutional environments (Allen, Robbins, Casilla, & Oh, 2008; Surrey & Duggan, 2008; Titus, 2004). Collecting additional student data from multiple institutions would allow for the comparison of environmental factors specifically and their differential influence on students’ commitment and by employing theoretical sampling of different institutions and the constant comparison of multiple groups of data, the research can continue to build from its grounded theory foundations.

Third, there is a research opportunity to develop the theory of academic momentum more concretely and with greater applicability. As the theory elements are developed more fully by the comparison of students to students and environments to environments, there may be the possibility of operationalizing the concepts within the
theory. If the theory stands up to comparison and operationalization, then an instrument could be designed to assess nontraditional undergraduate women’s persistence on a larger scale with quantitative data. Glaser and Strauss (1967), in their initial conceptualization of grounded theory advocated that the methodology could lead to the creation of formal theory, which requires transitioning to theory verification. Grounded theory is explicitly intended for theory generation and the processes and data required for theory validation are categorically different. The design of an instrument to assess nontraditional undergraduate women’s persistence and evaluate separate and specific environments would allow for the comparison of more institutional settings as well as creating a tool for institutions to use to further support the persistence of nontraditional undergraduate women within their institutional environment.

**Role of the Researcher Revisited**

As a novice researcher, I was guided by Charmaz’s (2005, 2006, 2008) conceptions of the co-construction of knowledge between researcher and participants, location of the researcher in the research process, and the identification of the social constructs relevant to the research. She goes on to say that “constructivist grounded theorists take a reflexive stance on modes of knowing and representing studied life. That means giving close attention to empirical realities and our collected renderings of them – *and* locating oneself in these realities” (2005, p. 509). While I memo-ed my biases as a research and worked to bracket my presuppositions, I also kept a journal about becoming a researcher and the journey I was on through this research. I want to share two reflections that are relevant to the data and findings I have reported here as an
opportunity to consider my experiences and provide a window into my growth as a researcher.

First, I want to respond to the possible reactions regarding a White woman using critical race feminism as a theoretical framework to inform research with women of color and White women in education. As a cultural worker (Leistyna, Woodrum, & Sherblom, 1996) and advocate of social justice, I have been drawn to critical race theory and critical race feminism because of the transparency with which the theories foreground racial disparities, difference, power, and oppression in an employable praxis. Critical race feminism aligns with the convictions I brought with me to the study of education and I appreciate having researchers, theorists, and activists articulate and affirm the prominent points I seek to make with my own contributions to the research collective. While there are still many voices in critical race theory and critical race feminism in education, there is also the foundation throughout critical race theory that racism is endemic to the social constructions of education in the United States (Lynn & Parker, 2006). I do not assume to be a critical race theorist or a theory expert, but rather a supporter and student of critical race theory employing the political, historical, and theoretical conceptions of the theory honestly in my research. I also believe that the work of ending racial oppression with the hope and goal of ending all oppression (Lynn & Parker, 2006) is not only the responsibility of scholars of color working on behalf of themselves and their colleagues and students of color. I believe that White researchers must also take up the charge of working to dismantle racial power and oppression in education. I believe that as a White
researcher, I can also contribute to the deconstruction of oppression and have a responsibility to do so, albeit in different ways than scholars of color.

From the research process and learning from the students who I spoke to, not only did I learn about myself as a White researcher using critical race feminism, but I also learned about the process of research. I lived the complexities in data collection and ambiguity in analysis. I saw my own educational challenges reflected back to me in the words of students and had to revisit those challenges to appreciate the insight of the students who shared their educational lives with me. I negotiated the dynamic experience of conducting research as a partial insider and a partial outsider to the setting. I had relationships with some students as an advisor at the college. I had a relationship with others that extended beyond the confines of college advising. I developed relationships with some through the research itself. But in every way, the research I have conducted is about the majesty of real women and their educational aspirations. Negotiating the existing and developing relationships in the research was exciting and intimidating. As students confessed their struggles or shed tears, I also struggled with my role as an advisor, a counselor, an educator, and a researcher. With some interviews, I broke away from the researcher identity and counseled students on what I thought was a detour from my line of interview questioning. However, what I learned about myself and about living constructivist research was that there was no deviation from the interview script. “Everything is data” (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007, p. 14) and the pathways that I took with participants to construct data were uncharted and animated. My varying relationships with the participants are, in many ways, the foundation on which this research is built and
I believe that we strengthened and created connections that have built new knowledge for each of us.

As a researcher, I appreciate the opportunity to have conducted research within a setting where I have a commitment and some familiarity as the college has served as a stable yet challenging platform from which I can explore future research projects. The participants afforded me the opportunity to begin with some insider and outsider relationships. I am more comfortable with ambiguity, more aware of myself as an interviewer, more assured in my decisions as an instrument of data analysis, and more practiced at navigating the cloudy waters of research. I am also more conscious of the power, responsibility, and uncertainty inherent in each unique research undertaking.

**Conclusion**

The greater question remains for each nontraditional undergraduate woman who decides to earn her bachelor’s degree: How do you persist in spite of the myriad obstacles you will face on your educational journey? Your personal commitment to your education, the environments that you will navigate both within the college and outside the college, and different manifestations of support can all contribute to your persistence. However, there is no question that earning your bachelor’s degree comes with both great personal reward and sacrifice. I would like to leave you with Skye’s words about her own persistence and what she has taught me as our educational paths have crossed. “You decide right then and there that I’m getting this. I’m doing this. And I don’t care about you. You’re not going to stand in my way. I’m not gonna let you stop me. I’m doing this.”
References


Thomas (Eds.), *Critical race theory: The key writings that formed the movement.* (pp. 357-383). New York, NY: The New Press.


Parker, L., & Lynn, M. (2002). What’s race got to do with it? Critical race theory’s conflicts with and connections to qualitative research methodology and epistemology. *Qualitative Inquiry, 8*(1), 7-22.


Appendix A: Definition of Nontraditional Undergraduate Women

Throughout this research, nontraditional undergraduate women students will be defined as women enrolled in a bachelor’s granting institution who identify within any of the following characteristics:

- over 25 years of age,
- women of color,
- delayed enrollment,
- working full-time while enrolled,
- enrolled part-time,
- financially independent,
- have dependents other than a spouse,
- and/or single parents

(American Association of University Women, 1999; Choy, 2002; Dickerson & Stiefer, 2006; Horn & Premo, 1995; Peter & Horn, 2005).
Appendix B: Schlossberg’s Transition Theory

The Individual Transition Process
Changing reactions over time

Potential Coping Resources:
Assets/Liabilities

Approaching Transitions:
Events or non-events resulting in change
Type
Context
Impact

SITUATION
Event or non-event?
Characteristics; trigger, timing, control, role change, duration, previous experience, concurrent stress, assessment

SUPPORT
Social support; intimate relationships, family, friends, networks, institutions, or communities

SELF
Personal characteristics or psychological resources

STRATEGIES
For coping: information seeking, direct action, inhibition of action, or intrapsychic behavior

Source: Adapted from Goodman, Schlossberg, & Anderson, 2006
Appendix C: Tinto’s Theory of Student Departure (1975)

Academic System

Goals |
| Commitments |
| Institution Commitment |
| Goal Commitment |

Grade Performance |
| Intellectual Development |

Peer Group Interactions |
| Faculty Interactions |

Academic Integration

Social System

Goal Commitment |
| Institutional Commitment |

Social Integration

Dropout Decision

Family Background |
| Individual Attributes |

Pre-College Schooling
Appendix D: Bean’s Model of Student Attrition (1983)

Grades
Practical Value
Development
Routinization (-)
Instrumental Communication
Participation
Integration
Courses
Distributive Justice
Campus Organizations
Opportunity
Marriage

Satisfaction -> Intent to Leave -> Dropout
Appendix E: Persistence Factors Matrix Organized by Transition Theory Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Traditional Literature</th>
<th>Counter-narrative Literature</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Gender</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race and ethnicity</td>
<td>Age (negative)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age (negative)</td>
<td>Parental immigrant status</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent’s education</td>
<td>Parenthood/single parenthood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family income</td>
<td>Financially restricted, financially supported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concern about financing (negative)</td>
<td>Financial independence (negative)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school GPA</td>
<td>High school GPA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school class rank</td>
<td>Positive early educational experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SAT and ACT scores</td>
<td>GED attainment (negative)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advanced placement or college credits</td>
<td>Delayed enrollment (negative)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College preparatory or honors curriculum</td>
<td>Institutional commitment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years of foreign language</td>
<td>Motivation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years of physical science</td>
<td>Intent to persist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College GPA</td>
<td>Self-efficacy and self-esteem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remedial courses (negative)</td>
<td>Personal and family valuing of the degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional commitment</td>
<td>Personal and emotional health</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commitment to the goal of graduation</td>
<td>Self-assessment of skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intent to persist or leave</td>
<td>Personal growth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Feeling challenged and overwhelmed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Life challenger</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ability to juggle roles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Success in study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Love of learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional selectivity, type, prestige</td>
<td>Part-time enrollment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional size (negative)</td>
<td>Course and institutional related issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bureaucracy(negative)</td>
<td>Institution is not &quot;adult friendly&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collegial organizational behavior</td>
<td>Perception of university environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Symbolic organizational behavior</td>
<td>Comfort in the university environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political organizational behavior (negative)</td>
<td>No personal or family crises</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational communication</td>
<td>No new stressors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational fairness</td>
<td>Distractions and demands on time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational participation</td>
<td>Multiple responsibilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional revenue, expenditure behaviors</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Campus housing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In-state vs. Out-of-state residency</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working for pay, off campus (negative)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working at home, childcare (negative)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practical value and utility of a degree</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marriage (negative)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunity to transfer (negative)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

257
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Traditional Literature</th>
<th>Counter-narrative Literature</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Academic integration</td>
<td>Smooth interaction with the university</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student-faculty interaction</td>
<td>Integrating into the institution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developing relationships with faculty</td>
<td>Supportive learner group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction within a student's chosen major</td>
<td>Prompt follow up for services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participating in campus organizations</td>
<td>Academic stress (negative)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling supported by the institution</td>
<td>Engagement in learning community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A sense of distributive justice</td>
<td>Faculty support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling accepted by the institution</td>
<td>Perceived mentorship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social support and social integration</td>
<td>Sense of belonging</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social connectedness</td>
<td>Validation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social involvement</td>
<td>Social support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support from peers</td>
<td>Social integration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support from friends</td>
<td>Support from friends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support from parents and family</td>
<td>Emotional support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attending religious services</td>
<td>Family support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Develop study, time management strategies</td>
<td>Strategic approach to learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manage the course work plan</td>
<td>Time and study management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Know coping skills, preferences, resources</td>
<td>Good pre-entry information and advice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communicate</td>
<td>High quality course content and delivery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Utilize financial aid</td>
<td>Effective tutors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategies</td>
<td>Schedule convenience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Disappointment in faculty (negative)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Major selection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Remedial courses in language or math</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Giving back to the community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Certainty of major</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix F: A Transition Theory Model of Nontraditional Undergraduate Women's Persistence Literature

![Diagram of a transition theory model with categories in Student and Institution columns. The categories are divided into Dynamic and Static sections. Dynamic categories include Strategy, Support (Sense of Belonging, Validation). Static categories include Self (Motivation, Self-efficacy) and Situation (Multiple Roles, Biculturation).]
### Appendix G: Line-by-line coding

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grounded Theory Coding Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Receiving second-hand news</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being left out; Accusing mother of repeated not telling; (questioning ethical stance?) Being confronted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facing self and identity questions; Demanding self-disclosure and information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experience escalating pain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expecting to manage pain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inability to control pain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rapid worsening of pain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having excruciating pain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Becoming frightened; Foreseeing breathing crisis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Breaking the news; Informing daughter of plan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explaining projected treatment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having access for making contact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leaving follow-up contact open-ended</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No follow-up</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ascertaining the time between contacts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explaining lack of disclosure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accusing daughter of not caring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expressing hurt; Assuming lack of caring; Making negative inferences (of a moral lapse?)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accounting for not telling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sounding fine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questioning daughter’s expectations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explaining need for emotional control</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seeing life-threatening risk of losing control</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching that mode of telling does not reflect state of being</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sounding like a ‘normal’ mom</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

She found out from Linda that I was, had been in bed for days and she called me up, ‘You never tell me, and I have to find out from Linda,’ and ‘Why don’t you tell me who you are and what’s going on and...’

Well, I don’t know how long after that, but that Saturday the pain started right here ad it, throughout the day it got worse and worse and worse. And she – I kept thinking that, well, I can deal with this, so I took some kind of a pain pill and nothing helped. And that was about one in the afternoon. Well, it got worse and worse so that every time I took a breath the pain was horrible, so by seven, eight o’clock that night, I was scared because I knew that if it got any worse I wasn’t going to be able to breathe. So I called her and then I told her what was going on, that I was going to be driven to the doctor because they were going to try giving me shots of zylocain or something to try to locate a point to where maybe it would go in there and numb the pain for me so that I could breathe. Well, I called her and I told her this. And I have a car phone. She says, ‘Well, Mom I’ll call you later or you call me.’

Well, I didn’t call her; she didn’t call me. That was Saturday night. She didn’t call me until – she called me about noon on Monday, and I finally said, ‘Well look, this is why I don’t tell you, because when I told you Saturday night, you never called, you didn’t care or anything and it really hurt my feelings. So that’s why I don’t tell you when I have this going on.’ And she said to me ‘Well, Mom, you sounded perfectly fine.’ And I said, ‘Well, what do you expect me to do, become and emotional wreck or something?’ I said, ‘I have to keep everything still and quiet in me in order to control, because if I went into emotional frenzy, I would not have been able to breathe,’ you know. So she started really trying to understand that just because I was scared to death, I was in horrible pain, but when I called her, I guess I was just a normal mom.

(Charmaz, 2006, p. 44)
Appendix H: Criteria for Evaluating Grounded Theory Research

Credibility
- Has your research achieved intimate familiarity with the setting or topic?
- Are the data sufficient to merit your claims? Consider the range, number, and depth of observations contained in the data.
- Have you made systematic comparisons between observations and between categories?
- Do the categories cover a wide range of empirical observations?
- Are there strong logical links between the gathered data and your argument and analysis?
- Has your research provided enough evidence for your claims to allow the reader to for an independent assessment – and agree with your claims?

Originality
- Are your categories fresh? Do they offer new insights?
- Does your analysis provide a new conceptual rendering of the data?
- What is the social and theoretical significance of this work?
- How does your grounded theory challenge, extend, or refine current ideas, concepts, and practices?

Resonance
- Do the categories portray the fullness of the studies experience?
- Have you revealed both luminal and unstable taken-for-granted meanings?
- Have you drawn links between larger collectivities or institutions and individual lives, when the data so indicate?
- Does your grounded theory make sense to your participants or people who share their circumstances? Does your analysis offer them deeper insights about their lives and worlds?

Usefulness
- Does your analysis offer interpretations that people can use in their everyday worlds?
- Do your analytic categories suggest any generic processes?
- If so, have you examined these generic processes for tacit implications?
- Can the analysis spark further research in other substantive areas?
- How does your work contribute to knowledge? How does it contribute to making a better world?

(Charmaz, 2006, pp. 182-183).
Appendix I: Typology of Strategies for Maintaining Competence

(Gregory & Jones, 2009, p. 779).
Dear Student,

I hope your quarter is going well! I have begun the research for my dissertation and I am hoping that you are interested and available to participate.

As you may remember, my dissertation will explore the college persistence of students at the college. I enjoyed my time working at the college and learned so much. Now, I am hoping to continue my learning about the amazing students who go to the college and give something back to the college which will help to further support women’s educational goals.

Would you be willing to meet me for an interview? I have the research project outlined and would like to get your thoughts about the questions I have prepared for focus groups and individual interviews. The interview will last about an hour at a time and location convenient for you. You will be serving as an expert consultant to my research as a student at the college. I will bring my research questions and the questions for the focus groups and interviews. I would like us to discuss the questions to see what you think is missing from the list and what might work best.

I appreciate you considering helping me move forward with my research. I know that your time is valuable. If you have any questions, please let me know.

Danielle
Danielle Ferioli Sulick
PhD Candidate
Graduate Assistant
Higher Education Program
Morgridge College of Education
University of Denver
303.949.6984
Appendix K: Informed Consent Form

Persisting to Graduation: A Grounded Theory of Nontraditional Undergraduate Women’s Enrollment

You are invited to participate in a study that will examine the college persistence decisions, strategies, and barriers for nontraditional undergraduate women. In addition, this study is being conducted to fulfill the requirements of doctoral dissertation research conducted by Danielle Ferioli Sulick. Results will be used to inform the education discipline and college administrators of the ways to best support the graduation of nontraditional undergraduate women and to complete a doctoral dissertation. Danielle Sulick can be reached at 303-949-6984 or dsulick@du.edu. This project is supervised by the course instructor, Dr. Frank Tuitt, Higher Education Program in the Morgridge College of Education, University of Denver, Denver, CO 80208, 303-871-4573, ftuitt@du.edu.

Participation in this study should take about 60 minutes of your time. Participation will involve responding to questions about college enrollment and stop out. Participation in this project is strictly voluntary. The risks associated with this project are minimal. If, however, you experience discomfort you may discontinue the interview at any time. We respect your right to choose not to answer any questions that may make you feel uncomfortable. Refusal to participate or withdrawal from participation will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

Your responses will be identified by pseudonym only and will be kept separate from information that could identify you. This is done to protect the confidentiality of your responses. Only the researcher will have access to your individual data and any reports generated as a result of this study will use only group averages, paraphrased wording, or textual excerpts. However, should any information contained in this study be the subject of a court order or lawful subpoena, the University of Denver might not be able to avoid compliance with the order or subpoena. Although no questions in this interview address it, we are required by law to tell you that if information is revealed concerning suicide, homicide, or child abuse and neglect, it is required by law that this be reported to the proper authorities.

If you have any concerns or complaints about how you were treated during the interview, please contact Susan Sadler, Chair, Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects, at 303-871-3454, or Sylk Sotto-Santiago, Office of Research and Sponsored Programs at 303-871-4052 or write to either at the University of Denver, Office of Research and Sponsored Programs, 2199 S. University Blvd., Denver, CO 80208-2121.

You may keep this page for your records. Please sign the next page if you understand and agree to the above. If you do not understand any part of the above statement, please ask the researcher any questions you have.

I have read and understood the foregoing descriptions of the study called Persisting to Graduation. I have asked for and received a satisfactory explanation of any language that I did not fully understand. I agree to participate in this study, and I understand that I may withdraw my consent at any time. I have received a copy of this consent form.

Signature _____________________ Date ___________________
___ I agree to be audiotaped.
___ I do not agree to be audiotaped.

Signature _____________________ Date ___________________
___ I would like a summary of the results of this study to be mailed to me at the following postal or e-mail address:
Appendix L: Focus Group Recruitment Email

To be distributed via the college student list containing email addresses for all currently enrolled students and students who have attended within one year.

Dear students,

My name is Danielle Ferioli Sulick and I am a current doctoral candidate who worked as an academic advisor at the college for 5 years before moving on to complete my degree. I enjoyed my time at the college and learned so much. Now, I am hoping to continue my learning about the amazing students who go to the college and give something back to the college which will help to further support women’s educational goals.

I am doing research on how to support the persistence of students at the college and am asking for your help.

I would like to host three focus groups:
Saturday, March 27 from 10:30 to 11:30am in the College Center
Or
Wednesday, March 31 from 6:00 to 7:00pm in the College Center

The third focus group will be for women of color specifically and will be held on Saturday, April 3 from 10:30 to 11:30am in the College Center.

The discussion for each group will explore your ideas about college persistence, your own experiences continuing your education, and strategies and barriers to student success and persistence.

I appreciate you considering my request. I know that your time is valuable. If you are interested and available, or if you would like more information, please let me know.

Danielle
Danielle Ferioli Sulick
PhD Candidate
Graduate Assistant
Higher Education Program
Morgridge College of Education
University of Denver
303.949.6984
Appendix M: Focus Group Protocol and Guiding Questions

Distribute informed consent form, collect one signed copy from each participant. Turn on audio recorder.

I’m Danielle Sulick, it is (time and date) and this is focus group (#). Thank you so much for coming today. As most of you already know, I am doing my dissertation research on the persistence of students at the college.

Would you choose a pseudonym that represents someone who has supported you through your educational journey? When you have selected a pseudonym, please write it on the name tent and set it in front of you. Throughout the interview, I will refer to you by your pseudonym to maintain the confidentiality of the group. Even though most of you know each other, please try to utilize pseudonyms throughout the interview. I will also use your pseudonym when I am writing the results of my study.

Please complete the information sheet – with your pseudonym – and return it to me. This information will allow me to look across focus group participants and make sure that I have included various perspectives and experiences based on the information collected on this form. I will only be reporting averages and generalities from this information. There will be nothing to identify you in my written dissertation.

The consent form that you signed and have a copy of gives me your permission to record our discussion so that I can consult it later for my dissertation research. I will be the only one to listen to the recording and you and I will be the only people who know who was here today. Once my research is complete, I will write my dissertation, which is maintained by the university and give a copy to the college for their use. Your names and any identifying information will not appear in the dissertation – only your pseudonyms. Since you will not be able to be identified after today, you can be as honest as you like in our discussion. This is a dialogue, so feel free to agree and disagree with each other to give your point of view. After the discussion today, please respect the confidentiality of your sister participants and do not disclose the details of our discussion.

I will primarily be listening and will not be as active a participant as you all.

Within a week, I will email each of you a full transcript of our discussion today. If you have any feedback or additional comments to add, I encourage you to email me.

For the second portion of my research, I will be following up with about half of the focus group participants to conduct a follow up interview. So you will probably get another email from me asking if you are available to schedule an interview.

Any questions?
Let’s get started.
Guiding questions continued

Would you each introduce yourselves with your pseudonym and how this person has supported you in your educational journey?

**Guiding Questions:**

1. What does it take for you to come back to school every quarter?
   a. How do you know you’re going to go back?

2. Think about a time when you took a quarter, or more, off from school.
   a. Why did you stop out?
   b. What issues went into your decision to stop out?
   c. How did you know it was time to return?
   d. Did you have a goal for your return when you stopped out?

3. What motivates you to register for classes every quarter?

4. In the world of college professionals and academics, we use the term “persistence” to describe the act of students sticking with their education.
   a. How would you define college persistence?
   b. What words describe your process of sticking with your education?

5. What keeps you coming back?

6. If you transferred from another college – why is the college different for you?

7. What sacrifices have you made to stay in school?
   a. What have been the rewards of staying in school?

8. What strategies have helped you to persist in school?
   a. What barriers have you encountered?

9. How do you balance your life?

10. How do you prioritize school? Is it a high priority some days and lower other days?
    a. What makes the difference?

11. How do you feel about being a college student?

12. How would I know that you are committed to your education?

13. What has helped you to become a successful student?

14. What is your graduation plan?

15. What advice would you give to a new student to help her keep going?

16. What advice would you give to the college to help them support students to keep going?

17. How did you decide to enroll at the college?
    a. How long had you been out of school?

18. Tell me about your educational journey

19. What are your educational goals?
    a. How do you work towards achieving those goals?

20. What makes a difference in whether you register for classes this quarter or not?

21. How has race or racism impacted your college persistence?

22. How do you define college success?
23. What factors contribute to your college success?
   a. What factors detract from your college success?

24. What variables affect your college persistence?
   a. Positive and negative examples?

Motivation and self-efficacy
1. How do you judge your success as a student?
2. How do you know you’re successful?
3. Are you going to graduate? How do you know?
4. Does your motivation affect your persistence?
   a. How?
5. Do you believe that you can be successful in college? Do you believe you have what it takes?
   a. How do you know?
   b. Does this belief affect your college persistence? How?

Biculturation and Multiple Roles
1. How do you transition between school, work, and home?
2. How are you different when you’re at school versus when you’re at home, at work, or with friends?
3. If you are better at the transition between school, work, and home, are you more likely to persist to graduation?
   a. Why or why not?
4. How do your multiple roles affect college persistence?
   a. Negative instances?
   b. Positive instances?
5. Does having support from your employer make a difference in your persistence?
   a. How?
6. Does having support from your family and friends make a difference in your persistence?
   a. How?

Validation and Sense of Belonging
1. How has your college made a difference in your college persistence?
2. Does it matter where you go to college?
   a. Why or why not?
3. Do you feel like you are a part of the college community?
   a. Does this feeling affect your persistence? How?
Appendix N: Participant Information Sheet

To be completed and collected at focus group discussions.

Pseudonym

What is your age?

How do you identify racially and ethnically?

When did you start at the college? (year and quarter)

About how many credits did you transfer to the college?

What is your major?

What is your minor?

What is your current standing?  Freshman,  Sophomore,  Junior,  or Senior?

What is your current GPA?

How many credits do you take in an average quarter?
Have you stopped out since you’ve been attending the college? Yes or No
About how many times have you stopped out?

On average, how many quarters did you take off each time?

Please list one reason that you stopped out in the past. ________________________________

Do you use student loans? Yes or No

Do you have a scholarship? Yes or No

Do you have reimbursement from your employer? Yes or No

Do you work for pay? Yes or No Full-time or part-time?

Are your responsibilities to home and family your full-time job? Yes or No

Are you a parent or guardian? Yes or No

Are you a single parent or guardian? Yes or No
Guiding Questions:

1. What does it take for you to come back to school every quarter?
   a. How do you know you’re going to go back?
2. Think about a time when you took a quarter, or more, off from school.
   a. Why did you stop out?
   b. How did you know it was time to return?
3. What motivates you to register for classes every quarter?
4. In the world of college professionals and academics, we use the term “persistence” to describe the act of students sticking with their education.
   a. How would you define college persistence?
   b. What words describe your process of sticking with your education?
5. What keeps you coming back?
6. If you transferred from another college – why is the college different for you?
7. What sacrifices have you made to stay in school?
   a. What have been the rewards of staying in school?
8. What strategies have helped you to persist in school?
   a. What barriers have you encountered?
9. How do you balance your life?
10. How do you prioritize school? Is it a high priority some days and lower other days?
   a. What makes the difference?
11. How do you feel about being a college student?
12. How would I know that you are committed to your education?
13. What has helped you to become a successful student?
14. What is your graduation plan?
15. What advice would you give to a new student to help her keep going?
16. What advice would you give to the college to help them support students to keep going?
17. How did you decide to enroll at the college?
   a. How long had you been out of school?
18. Tell me about your educational journey
19. What are your educational goals?
   a. How do you work towards achieving those goals?
20. What makes a difference in whether you register for classes this quarter or not?
21. How has race or racism impacted your college persistence?
22. How do you define college success?
23. What factors contribute to your college success?
   a. What factors detract from your college success?
24. What variables affect your college persistence?
   a. Positive and negative examples?
Motivation and self-efficacy
6. How do you judge your success as a student?
7. How do you know you’re successful?
8. Are you going to graduate? How do you know?
9. Does your motivation affect your persistence?
   a. How?
10. Do you believe that you can be successful in college? Do you believe you have what it takes?
    a. How do you know?
    b. Does this belief affect your college persistence? How?

Biculturation and Multiple Roles
7. How do you transition between school, work, and home?
8. How are you different when you’re at school versus when you’re at home, at work, or with friends?
9. If you are better at the transition between school, work, and home, are you more likely to persist to graduation?
   a. Why or why not?
10. How do your multiple roles affect college persistence?
    a. Negative instances?
    b. Positive instances?
11. Does having support from your employer make a difference in your persistence?
    a. How?
12. Does having support from your family and friends make a difference in your persistence?
    a. How?

Validation and Sense of Belonging
4. How has your college made a difference in your college persistence?
5. Does it matter where you go to college?
   a. Why or why not?
6. Do you feel like you are a part of the college community?
   a. Does this feeling affect your persistence? How?