

January 2012

The Lived Experience of Non-traditional Students in the Occupational Science Program at Eastern Kentucky University

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The Lived Experience of Non-traditional Students in the Occupational
Science Program at Eastern Kentucky University

By

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Thesis Approved:



Chair, Advisory Committee



Member, Advisory Committee



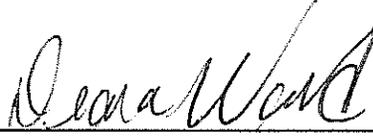
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Date 1-24-2012

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Science Program at Eastern Kentucky University

By

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Master of Science
Eastern Kentucky University
Richmond, Kentucky
2012

Submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of
Eastern Kentucky University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
MASTER OF SCIENCE
August, 2012

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my family that has emotionally supported me as I have spent countless hours working towards this goal. To my mother Rhonda, thank you for your inspiration and giving me the confidence to believe in myself and my abilities no matter what the hardships are. To my father Eddie, thank you for loving me unconditionally and never doubting me or who I would become. To my son Trey, thank you for doing your homework when mommy was doing hers and understanding that every now and then mommy just needed a break. Finally, thanks to my friend Jessica who kept me laughing and gave me encouraging words throughout this process.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First, I would like to thank the chair of my advisory committee, Dr. Peggy Wittman, for her guidance and understanding throughout this process and my time at this university. I am truly grateful for her encouragement and the nudging she has given me to become the student that I am and the professional that I will soon be. You have opened my eyes to a world of knowledge I had not intended to discover. I would also like to thank my other committee members, Dr. Mary Ellen Thompson and Professor Julie Baltisberger, for their support and encouragement and for being there when I was stressed and unsure if I have chosen the right path. I would like to thank the participants of this study for their time and willingness to participate in the project although time constraints sometimes made it difficult. Thanks also go out to my fellow thesis peers that offered support in a way that faculty and family could not. Finally, thanks goes out to my friends and family for understanding and supporting me throughout my entire, long college journey.

ABSTRACT

This research was conducted in the interest of the Occupational Therapy and Occupational Science fields. This study had 3 non-traditional student participants that were currently enrolled in or had recently graduated from the Occupational Science program at Eastern Kentucky University. Data collection consisted of semi-structured interviews and follow-up methods including email. The results of the research identified barriers and supports for non-traditional students in conjunction with their perception of strengths and weaknesses for non-traditional students within the program.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Background and Need

The number of non-traditional students is growing (Laing & Robinson, 2003). With the increase in this unique group of individuals, college settings and campuses need to acknowledge the needs and demands of this population. Research has been conducted in the UK about non-traditional students and the rates of drop-outs and withdrawals because of lack of support within the campus (Laing & Robinson, 2003). Non-traditional students have unique obligations, responsibilities, and situations from the typical college population. Most activities for on-campus interaction are designed for the typical student, which could leave the non-traditional student feeling isolated from the campus environment and unsupported.

According to the National Center for Educational Statistics, in fall 2010 a record 19.1 million students are expected to attend 2-year and 4-year colleges and universities in the U.S. That is an increase of about 3.8 million since fall 2000. Also, females are expected to comprise the majority of college students: 10.9 million females will attend in fall 2010, compared with 8.3 million males. The majority of students will attend full time (an estimated 11.9 million for fall 2010) and about 7.2 million are expected to attend part time. The median age of the American population was 36.0 years in 2004 and is expected to increase to 39.1 in 2035 (US Bureau of the Census, 2004). There is a

rising educational trend and characteristic with the American population (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). The U.S. Bureau of the Census (2000) reported that 83 percent of 25 to 34 year-olds has completed high school, compared to 65 percent of adults age 65 or older. With the demographics and educational trends changing in the US and adults now outnumbering youth, attention should be paid to this educated group of people that who become life-long learners (Merriam et al, 2007).

With the increase of non-traditional students, research can provide understanding and evaluate the motivation, strategy use, learning techniques, and life skills of adults resulting in information that can help universities in teaching, recruitment strategies, and student retention (Jacobson & Harris, 2008). Current research on non-traditional students examines their motivation for attending, which results in a variety of reasons for attending higher education (Jacobson & Harris, 2008). A primary reason for non-traditional students attending college is a focus on a job or career, whether it is to obtain or to continue job skills and knowledge (Merriam et al, 2007). Some of the additional reasons are to increase knowledge with technology, literacy, civic education, leisure, and community-based social-action initiatives (Merriam et al, 2007).

The definition of non-traditional students is not standard. At least three definitions can be found throughout international literature (Kim, 2007). The definitions fall into three categories: (1) age of admission (usually between 23-25 years old) (Metzner & Bean, 1987); (2) differing from the majority in terms of background, ethnicity, lower socioeconomic status, employment status, and first generation students

(Rendon, Jalomo, & Nora, 2000); (3) and those students who have multiple risk factors for dropping out (US Department of Education).

Contributing to the uniqueness of non-traditional students is the fact that they can experience financial strain from educational expenses along with a decrease in work and the lingering financial obligations of a family; lack of support from family, faculty, and peers; and also the time constraints of a non-traditional lifestyle coupled with the academic time requirements (Skowron, Wester, & Azen, 2004). These problems may be experienced by a variety of students in an individual sense, but non-traditional students usually have a combination of them. According to Taniguchi and Kaufman (2005), non-traditional students have additional economic and time demands that may hinder non-traditional students from completing their studies. Although non-traditional students have the potential to succeed in higher education, their economic and family obligations can be a barrier or limit their abilities to be successful (Davies, 2001).

Eastern Kentucky University has a unique Occupational Science program. The demands of the program can be challenging especially for students who have other commitments outside of their academic career. Research is lacking in the areas of how non-traditional students cope, are different from traditional students, and how the roles and obligations of these students can interfere with their academic requirements. The challenge for non-traditional students in the new learning community is creating a balance between their academic and external commitments that can enable them to reach a level of engagement sufficient to achieve academic success (Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011).

This study could be used to better assess the supports non-traditional students need, barriers they experience (if any), and how to use their diverse knowledge to assists in the academic environment. By studying the lived experience of these students, the university and Occupational Therapy Department can gain insight into ways they can enable and foster the education of these students by understanding how and if these students can achieve that balance.

Problem Statement

Based on the literature review, there appears to be limited research on the experience of non-traditional students in relation to specific academic programs such as Occupational Science. Multiple studies on motivation (Scanlon, 2008; Bye, Pushkar, & Conway, 2007; Pintrich, Smith, Garcia, & McKeachie, 1991) reveal that there are a variety of reasons that non-traditional students attend academic institutions, but little research exists about why students drop out or choose not to pursue higher education. There is also limited evidence on programs designed to assist non-traditional students with overcoming or coping with the various barriers that they encounter. Limited research is also available on the support or support system that non-traditional students utilize or have available.

Combining research on the motivational factors, barriers, supports, and looking at the social aspects involved within the college experience of non-traditional students could lead to a more comprehensive understanding of non-traditional students. This research may provide faculty, staff, and administrators of the

Occupational Therapy Department of Eastern Kentucky University with information to better serve the needs of non-traditional students.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to describe the lived experience of junior and senior year non-traditional students in the Occupational Science program at Eastern Kentucky University. At this stage in the research the lived experience of the Occupational Science students will be generally defined as their experience managing time, the role and expectations of being an Occupational Science student, and their non-traditional role.

Research Questions

The grand tour question for this research is what is the lived experience of 3-5 Non-Traditional students in the Occupational Science program at Eastern Kentucky University? In addition the research will attempt to answer:

- What sets non-traditional students apart from the other students in the OS program?
- What barriers would or do non-traditional students face?
- What supports do non-traditional students receive?
- What supports may non-traditional students need?
- How do non-traditional students experience the OS program differently?
- What are the roles of non-traditional students in the OS program?
- What is the contribution of non-traditional students to the OS program?
- How do non-traditional OS students manage their time?

- How does a non-traditional OS student prioritize/manage needs of the program and their life?
- What are the coping strategies of non-traditional OS students?

Definition of Terms

Non-Traditional Student: A student who meets one or more of the following criteria: over the age of 24 years, is the primary caregiver of a dependent child/children or adult, or has left school and re-enrolled after a period of 1 year.

Age: Chronological Age

Roles: A set of behaviors that have some socially agreed upon function and for which there is a code of norms (AOTA, 2002, p 633)

Barrier: Something material or immaterial that impedes or separates progress or continuation (Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary)

Support: To assist, help, or serve as a foundation (Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary)

Coping Strategies: Methods employed to deal with or attempt to overcome problems and difficulties (Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary)

Assumptions

The researcher assumed that there is a difference in experiences between traditional and non-traditional students. The following assumptions are based upon the researcher's experience as a non-traditional student in the Occupational Science program. The differences would include unique barriers such as family obligations in

caring for children or a home, financial obligations by being financially independent from their families or parents, and work obligations as a result of being financially independent and having added expenses.

The researcher also assumes that the non-traditional student experiences a variety of stressors resulting from their non-traditional status that traditional students do not. This would include issues of role conflict between being a student and the roles engaged in outside of academia including being a parent, being an employee (usually already in a career or field), and social relationship roles. The roles in relationships often change whether they are marital or friendship. The roles in marriages often need to shift with the partner taking on more home responsibilities or financial obligations and also offering more emotional support and understanding. Friendships can be strained also with less time for social interaction and misunderstanding of the demands of academic life.

Employers are sometimes unsympathetic or not understanding to the demands of academic life and expect employees to continue their work obligations in lieu of academic obligations. Some employers are also unwilling to work around scheduling difficulties. Non-traditional students can have a career prior to entering the university and so their work environment was not just a temporary placement as with many traditional students. This employment is also a means of supporting their family and so moving to another company or some form of less strenuous employment usually will not allow them to maintain their family's financial obligations.

The researcher assumes that the Occupational Science (OS) program offers unique opportunities and challenges from other undergraduate degree programs at Eastern Kentucky University. The OS program is the foundation for the Master's of Occupational Therapy Degree and therefore its curriculum can be difficult and the application of many assignments lays that foundation. The program curriculum is based upon multiple means of self-reflection and not just concrete material. In addition to an investigation of yourself as an occupational being in terms of how you participate in activities and how that relates to well-being, you must go out and reflect on the occupations of other groups of people. There is also a multitude of theory-based assignments and applications. These abstract concepts are difficult to grasp for many individuals, especially at an undergraduate level and at the age of 20 years old. Another unique aspect of the OS program is the mixture of abstract and concrete material. Coupled with the use of reflection of occupation and its meaning, is the application of biomechanical material such as anatomy and neuroanatomy.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Adult students are the fastest growing educational demographic (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002) and are becoming an increasing part of higher education and college campuses. The number of adult students over the age of 25 has increased from 28% in 1970 to 39% in 1999. Reed (2005) projected that the number of adult students may exceed to 50% in 2012. The adult learner possesses a wide variety of characteristics which are not common to a traditional student, including personal life barriers, financial responsibilities, and different learning styles (Milheim, 2005). This review of the literature will discuss studies done about these characteristics as well as motivational factors, support systems, student engagement, and goal orientation.

Chen, Kim, Moon, & Merriam (2008) reviewed and critiqued the literature on adult learners from 1980-2006. Through their search three themes emerged: older students are a homogenous group, students are viewed as capable and motivated learners with few physical or cognitive limitations, and programmatic responses have been driven by the life context of older adulthood. Research has portrayed adult students as similar in age, gender, socioeconomic status, race, and ethnicity disregarding the diversity and individuality of this population of students. The literature also neglects the idea that, as students age, especially older adult students, they face

cognitive or physical limitations. Daily routines and obligations are overlooked or not taken into consideration or researched. Programmatic responses focus mainly on older adult students and the educational programs they participate in. Thus, there are obvious gaps in the current and past research.

To conduct this search of the literature, multiple databases, journals, and search terms were used. The databases used at Eastern Kentucky University's library site included categories of Distance Learning, Education, Intelligence Studies, Occupational Therapy, and Women and Gender Studies. The journal searches included: Adult Education Quarterly, Australian Journal of Adult Learning, Career Development Quarterly, College Student Journal, Community College Journal of Research and Practice, Education Journal, Higher Education, Journal of College Counseling, Journal of Further and Higher Education, Journal of Higher Education, Research in Higher Education, and Studies in Continuing Education. Search terms that were used included: non-traditional students, adult students, adult learners, motivation, barriers, adult education, women learners, social supports, self-efficacy, higher education, social integration with adult students, mature-aged students, educational transitions, program supports, older adult learners, lifelong learning, intrinsic motivation, stress, role strain, classroom learning, and teaching adults. No dates were included within literature research to capture foundational articles if present.

Stress and Inter-role Conflicts

All college students are exposed or experience some type of stress, whether that involves academic issues, social strains, and financial concerns varies with the individual student (Skowron, Wester, & Azen 2004). Stress can also be a factor associated with problems with time management, overextended workloads, difficulty and strains with interpersonal relationships, and academic failure (Pierceceall & Keim, 2007). Dill and Henley (1998) found that non-traditional students viewed returning to school as desirable; however, students reported that they experienced much more responsibility and obligations from their home situations than traditional students. Dill and Henley (1998) conclude by stating that there are significant differences between traditional and non-traditional students about stressful events.

In a study by Pierceceall and Keim (2007), 212 students enrolled in psychology classes at two different community colleges were recruited to determine their degree of stress and different modes of handling stress. The Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) was used to determine the degree to which participants found their lives, uncontrollable, unpredictable, and overloading. Participants also completed a demographic survey asking information on age, sex, semester hours, current grade point average, confidence levels in reaching educational goals, how they coped with stress, and what their interest was in attending stress reduction workshops. Of the participants 154 (73%) were traditional students and 58 (27%) were non-traditional students. No significant differences were found between traditional and non-traditional students, but there was

statistically significant differences between men and women. In addition more than one-third of the students showed interest in stress reduction workshops.

Giancola, Grawitch, and Borchert (2009) conducted a study to test a comprehensive stress model that is proposed to be used by both researchers and institutions. This model used a transactional approach that viewed stress as a dynamic interaction between the individual and the environment with the emphasis placed on the cognitive appraisal process. The study examined the extent of perceived demands within work, school, and personal life along with the interrole conflict between work, family, and school. Focus was on inter-role conflict and used the categories of inter-role conflict involving family to school, school to family, work to school, and school to work to examine this further. The student responses were also paired with coping strategies to compare to the outcome variables of general life satisfaction and mental well-being.

The participants consisted of 159 students ranging in ages from 20 to 56 years. Appraisal styles (positive and negative appraisal styles) were measured by an appraisal scale. Coping was measured using the COPE, which is a self-assessment measure of problem-focused, emotion-focused, and dysfunctional dimensions of coping. The COPE measured the use of methods for positive reinterpretation and growth, focus on and venting emotions, use of instrumental social support, active coping, denial, behavioral disengagement, substance use, and planning. Satisfaction of life used a measure that was comprised of five items. General well-being was measured by the General Health Questionnaire.

The study was conducted with a large number of participants and not only examined the barriers and stressors, but also how non-traditional students deal with these issues. The study found that adult students reported the greatest stressors coming from the workplace and that the stressors related to their personal life were more significant than those from school. The greatest interrole conflict was reported from school to family meaning that school or school obligations were causing conflict at home (i.e. because of stress at school, I am irritable at home). Adult students were also found to rely on adaptive coping strategies (such as positive reinterpretation) and less on maladaptive strategies (such as substance abuse). Work stressors were also a direct predictor of general well-being.

Motivation

Motivation of non-traditional students has caught the attention of numerous researchers. Scanlon (2008) explored the adult motives for returning to higher education and the role of self-authorization. This research found that the school background in terms of past learning experiences of non-traditional students played an integral part in the reflection of their current life circumstance. The students were divided into three kinds of students: “Banana Heads”, “Dead Middle”, and “Full Bore Academics” based on the reflection of their previous academic experiences. When reflecting on past school experience “Banana Heads” were poor academic achievers because of low grades and family issues and were rebellious and easily influenced by peers. “Dead Middle” students had average grades, suffered some family crisis, and

were “picked on” by teachers. “Full Bore Academics” received good grades, liked school, and were well organized

The majority of the students of Scanlon’s study (2008) had motivation based upon making improvements within relationships. One theme was placating a parent for students who were being supported by a parent in one form or another. While being a positive role model for their children was a motivator for many single parents, school created problems within the home. Finding employment was another motivator for many students either from gaining employment in a new field or continuing education in the same field. Participants also referred to their past as a motivator in terms of having “unfinished business” whether to fulfill their dreams, to gain employment, or to renegotiate their learning identity.

In Bye, Purhkar, and Conway’s (2007) research, the affective and motivational components of academic life were compared between traditional and non-traditional students. The participants consisted of 300 undergraduate students ranging in age from 18-60 years old. The ratio of traditional to non-traditional students was 2:1. The participants completed the Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire, the Differential Emotions Scale IV-A, and the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule.

Traditional students reported slightly less motivation overall than non-traditional students and non-traditional students reporting higher mean levels of intrinsic motivation. The combination of interest and intrinsic motivation was a predictor of positive affect. Non-traditional students were found to maintain a higher threshold of intrinsic motivation to learn and an increased positive affect, while traditional students

did not report the need to enjoy the educational process in order to continue in higher education. Non-traditional students were shown to use intrinsic motivation to help them in their higher education pursuit, even when there was dissipation of positive affect because of deadlines, assignments, and evaluations. The researchers also stated that for non-traditional students positive affect was not an outcome from education, but was embedded in the motivational process. For traditional students positive affect is independent of intrinsic motivation to learn.

The study looked at intrinsic and extrinsic motivation to learn, interest, and positive affect. Results found that non-traditional students were more intrinsically motivated to learn meaning they are more likely to employ self-initiated exploratory strategies, display autonomy, and that students learning and participation in the tasks is an end in itself. Traditional students were found to be more extrinsically motivated meaning they see learning tasks as a means to an end, seeking approval from external sources. The area of interest, along with age, resulted in being a predictor of internal motivation. This research showed that there needs to be a balance of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. It is also suggested that this balance within the classroom along with the minimization of external pressure can increase curiosity, interest, and flow in the classroom leading to positive growth for the older, non-traditional student.

Development/Knowledge & Learning Goals

Kasworm (2003) explored the non-traditional student's belief of the construction of knowledge in the classroom and the relationship between knowledge of the adult

roles outside the classroom. The participants were 90 adult students. Three key influences were found to help construct the meaning for students in the classroom: the classroom as the defining collegiate context, learner views of knowledge in relationship to their adult life worlds, and instructor actions and related program design elements. The collegiate context had the view from adult students that the classroom was the main stage for the creation and negotiation of meanings of collegiate learning, of being a student, and for defining the college experience and its impact.

The nature of knowledge was divided into academic knowledge (within the classroom with a focus on concepts and memorization) and real world knowledge (relating directly to the adults' life experiences). The adult students made decisions about their learning approaches based on their beliefs of how the different types of knowledge would be more or less useful for learning goals. The researchers also found that for learning retention the adult student needed to have a representation of one of the following: the intent to relate course content to their life context, the attempt to relate and integrate new ideas with previous knowledge and experience, or the desire for intellectual mastery and understanding. Learning for short term recall was represented by one of the following: the intent to reproduce parts of the content to recall, concentration only on assessment requirements and not the learning objectives, or memorization of facts and procedures but a failure to distinguish guiding principles or concepts. The non-traditional students were also not concerned with the applied, practical, here and now impact of knowledge, but constructed new knowledge and meanings through experiences that challenged their current perspective.

To explain how adult students constructed meaning to their classroom learning, five belief structures were formulated representing an overarching *knowledge voice*. Knowledge voice is a term used to describe the nature of knowledge and learning in relationship to the classroom and their adult worlds of self, community, and work. Students with an *entry voice* put themselves in the college student role and were concerned with becoming successful at this new role. They were sometimes confused by the new culture of being a student. The main focus was being a successful student and these participants engaged in highly ritualistic note taking and study habits to assist in maximizing their learning recall and retention. *Outside voice* took the approach that college was a necessary step in goal completion, but their knowledge was primarily anchored in family, work, and their personal life. The college environment was seen as only being partially or fragmentally connected to their world and that knowledge obtained was valuable if it applied to and reflected their experiences. These students scanned content for its relevance and connection and made choices about whether it was relevant to learn on a short term or long term level.

For students with a *cynical voice* college was pursued with a skeptical attitude and they were attending for career advancement or to validate their expertise in their career field. They believed that valuable knowledge came from real-world experience and they thought of the classroom as place of incompetence and judged the faculty. The *straddling voice* students attempted to make connections among their academic and real-world knowledge. They valued both types of knowledge equally used knowledge from both environments to experience new understandings, perspectives, and skills.

The primary focus was on engaging in the classroom for academic intellectual involvement, to enhance their conceptual worldviews, and for meeting course objectives. Their second focus was on knowledge of their real-world involvement and they actively sought to make their own connections and applications between the two. *Inclusion voice* were predominately upper level coursework students and they actively sought in-depth immersion within the academic context and valued the impact this had on their real-world life. They saw knowledge as liberating and this gave them a new sense of possibilities and views of their world. Thought and actions of knowledge were applied in their life roles expanding their knowledge outside of the classroom.

The conclusion of this study found that adult learners negotiate the meaning of their undergraduate education in complex patterns using knowledge voices. This reflected their beliefs, characterization of knowledge, individual learning goals, and their sense of identity outside their student role. The instructors enhanced the learning experience by integrating adult-identified knowledge into the course content. This was accomplished by interpersonal classroom engagement or by using active applied learning activities such as case study projects.

Epper and Harju (1997) conducted a study with 262 undergraduate students with 50 of those students being defined as non-traditional. This study explored the relationship between goal orientation and academic performance. The study compared GPA, SAT scores, the Ellis Irrational Belief's Scale, and Roedel, Schraw, and Plake's Goal Inventory Scale which provides separate scores for learning and performance goals. The study found that traditional and non-traditional students both rated themselves higher

on learning goals than on performance goals. However, non-traditional students did endorse learning goals more strongly than traditional students and traditional students were shown to have higher scores on the importance of performance goals.

Goal orientation was a better predictor of academic success than simply student status (age, parent education, etc). Non-traditional students did not have significant correlations for irrational beliefs, meaning they were more resistant to learned helplessness in academia. Work hours proved to be a significant difference between traditional and non-traditional students with non-traditional students working on average three times more hours. During analysis, work hours were negatively correlated with study time and GPA. With this information teachers can help students in identifying their beliefs about academic achievement; whether it be learning or performance goals and how that related to their academic performance overall in terms of studying and GPA. It is also relevant to understand that non-traditional students do value learning goal orientation over performance goals and to encourage that in teaching and evaluation methods.

Characteristics

Gilardi & Guglielmetti (2011) researched two dimensions of student engagement. The first was the student-faculty interaction on a behavioral level in terms of attendance to classes, interaction with faculty and peers outside the classroom, and the degree of use of services offered by the university. The second dimension examined the perceived quality of the university experience including student expectations of

social integration and the meaningfulness of the learning experience. The study recruited 228 students with 42.7% being classified as non-traditional. Interviews were conducted using the Computer Assisted Telephone Interview (CATI) System.

The results found that the more interaction that the students participated in, the less like they were to withdrawal after the first year. However, the non-traditional students that fell into the higher interaction rates were only 46.8% as compared to traditional students at 80%. The lowest interaction level which is associated with a higher withdrawal rate was significantly higher for non-traditional students at 19% compared to 4.3% for traditional students. This study also found that non-traditional students had more meaningfulness to the learning experience, experience more difficulties, and use less services offered by the university than traditional students. The considerations for higher education is that employment is an occupation held by most adults, yet employment can significantly increase the chances of dropping out within the first year. The researchers also found that non-traditional students that continued in their pursuit of higher education used protective factors, such as putting more energy into informal contact outside the formal teaching classroom and finding meaning with the education context.

In a study that explored non-traditional students' perspectives on their college education (Chao & Good, 2004), 43 undergraduate students were interviewed about their reasons for pursuing higher education and how their education affects them, their support systems, and career goals. Results had a central core theme of hopefulness and hopefulness was found to be integrated within motivation, financial investment, career

development, life transition, and support systems. The reasons for pursuing education were dynamic interactions between several factors and that hopefulness motivated students to take active roles in managing education, employment, family, and relationships. Hopefulness provided self-efficacy and resilience so that they may overcome difficulties in employment, education, family, and relationships.

Non-traditional students were also hopeful that their return and completion of a college education would represent a financial investment and would improve their financial situation in the future. The education within the college environment was actively integrated into non-traditional students' career development. This applied in those students who felt they needed to change careers or those who wanted to advance in their current career fields. Support systems such as family, peers, and academic professors were crucial components to the student's commitment and motivation to complete and participate in higher education. Education could also be sought after a life transition such as divorce or disability. Both intrinsic and extrinsic factors influenced and enhanced the non-traditional student's learning and experience of being a student.

Summary

While there is a body of literature available about similarities and differences between non-traditional and traditional college students, most of the studies found were Level IV surveys that were done based on self-perceptions. No Level II or III studies using classic experimental designs were found. Additionally, no strong qualitative research studies were found dealing with this topic. Furthermore, no literature was

found on how students in specific programs, such as the Occupational Science (OS) program, experience the college context. Milheim (2005) stated “As the number of adult students enrolled within higher education programs increases, educational institutions must respond by addressing their needs on a continual basis” (p 119). Research can give insight and understanding into possible avenues or strategies that will assist non-traditional students in success for universities as a whole, individual departments, and educators. The purpose of this research is to capture the experience of non-traditional students and what they perceive as supports and barriers within the Occupational Science program along with strategies and coping mechanisms that they employ. This data may be used to assist with program implementation within the OS program or within EKU’s campus.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

To reach the research objectives a qualitative phenomenological approach was used to discover these students' lived experience while in the Occupational Science program at Eastern Kentucky University. The purpose of a phenomenological study is to "describe the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or phenomenon" (Creswell, 2007, p 57). The phenomenological study describes what the participants have in common as they go through an experience and forms the individual experiences into a universal essence of the concept (Creswell, 2007).

Data Collection

This study was approved by the Eastern Kentucky University Institutional Review Board on April 3, 2011. Informed consent was obtained from each participant. Prior to participation, the researcher met with each participant individually to discuss the research purpose, objectives, procedures, and to review the consent form. The form was thoroughly reviewed by the participant, any questions that the participant had were answered, and the form was signed by the participant and researcher. These forms were put in a locked file so that no identifying information was available. An additional copy of the consent form was given to the participant for their reference. Meetings

were scheduled for the interviews and contact information (phone number and email) were exchanged.

Data collection was conducted from May 2011 to September 2011. Inclusion criteria included being a non-traditional student and being enrolled in the Occupational Science Program or students who had graduate from the program in May 2010. A non-traditional student was defined as a student meeting one or more of the following criteria: over the age of 24 years, is the primary caregiver of a dependent child/children or adult, or has left school and re-enrolled after the period of 1 year. Individuals could withdrawal from the study at any time or point in the study. Only participants who completed both components of the study were included in the study.

The data was stored in a locked cabinet in advisor's office. The tapes of interviews and transcription were stored in a locked cabinet. Participants provided their name on materials until a pseudonym name was assigned to their information by the Investigator. All identifiable information will remain locked until completion of project and then will be shredded within three years after completion of the study. The Investigator and advisor were the only people with access to any identifiable information.

Procedure

Data collection consisted of semi-structured interviews lasting about one hour each. Participants were asked to agree to an interview in a place determined to be mutually convenient to both the participant and researcher. The participants were

asked prior to the interview to take approximately six photographs that best represented their experience while in the Occupational Science program prior to the interview process. The photographs were used as an ice-breaker and facilitator for the interview. The interviews were tape recorded and transcribed verbatim. Email was also used to ask follow-up questions for three of the participants.

Participants

Any non-traditional student meeting the inclusion criteria was invited to participate in the study. An email was sent to all Occupational Science and Occupational Therapy students to recruitment participants (See Appendix A for a copy of this recruitment email). There were a total of three participants for this study. Demographic information is in Table 3.1 Participant Demographics that follows.

Table 3.1 Participant Demographics

Participants	Age		
	19-23	24-28	29+
Female	1	1	1
Male	0	0	0

Source: Deana Ward “The Lived Experience of Non-traditional Students in the Occupational Science at Eastern Kentucky University”. Graduate thesis in Occupational Therapy, Eastern Kentucky University, Richmond, August 2012, p. 25.

The exclusion criteria were: students not currently enrolled in the Occupational Science program or that have not completed the Occupational Science program within the last year (2010-2011) and not enrolled full-time at Eastern Kentucky University.

Data Analysis

For data analysis Colaizzi's (1978) method for phenomenological study was used. Transcripts of the participant interviews were read several times and then significant statements, phrases, and sentences were identified. The significant phrases or sentences were examined and then had meanings formulated for them by the Investigator. This allows for the single statements to be grouped together into meaning units.

The formulated meanings were grouped or clustered into themes so that common themes or an essence could emerge from all the participant's interviews. All of the themes were integrated to provide an in-depth description of the phenomenon. After the data analysis was completed, the Investigator shared the results of the themes with the participants to validate the findings. Table 3.2 Sample Data Analysis on page 27 provides examples of the data analysis process.

Table 3.2 Sample Data Analysis

Significant Statement	Formulated Meaning	Theme
"I was kind of an outcast"	Being a non-traditional student can separate you from your peers, making you feel like you don't belong	<i>I was the Only One</i>
"Seems like they were in a much better situation"	Traditional students have advantages from their experience of being a student	<i>I was the Only One</i>
"It's just too hard to work full time and go to school full time and your grades get compromised"	The lifestyle of a non-traditional student is not conducive to higher education	<i>Adjusting to a New Role</i>
"I had to schedule my classes farther apart, with huge gaps and less hours."	School schedules are dependent on multiple factors and not just a preference	<i>Adjusting to a New Role</i>
"I learned a lot from it (classes), but I learned more from the students	Non-traditional students need extra support from peers to fill in gaps	<i>I Seek More Support</i>
"I hang out with non-traditional students more than traditional students, especially outside of school. We seem to understand and support each other the way that we need it."	Non-traditional students need support from others in situations like themselves to have a sense of belonging and support	<i>I Seek More Support</i>

Source: Deana Ward "The Lived Experience of Non-traditional Students in the Occupational Science at Eastern Kentucky University". Graduate thesis in Occupational Therapy, Eastern Kentucky University, Richmond, August 2012, p. 27.

Rigor

To establish trustworthiness, triangulation of data included comparing data analysis established themes to previous research and literature. Peer debriefing was also completed by meeting with the researcher's faculty advisor and discussing the

emergence of themes within the data analysis. Bracketing was completed by the researcher to try and limit bias within data analysis. For example, one assumption of the researcher was that non-traditional students spend less time on academic endeavors than their traditional peers. These participants expressed the same opinion, whether they were occupied with children, jobs, or learning extra skills needed to complete their academic work. The researcher also has an audit trail from throughout the research process including emails to participants, emails to and from the researcher's advisor, IRB related materials, notes from data analysis, and assumption journal.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative research was to describe the lived experience of non-traditional students while they were enrolled in the Occupational Science (OS) Program at Eastern Kentucky University. Through semi-structured interviews, the essence of their experience was explored. Data analysis consisted of taking the transcribed interviews, extracting statements, and then assigning a significant meaning statement to them. The significant meaning statements were grouped into clusters of meaning forming the three following themes: *“I was the Only One”*, *“Adjusting to a New Role”*, and *“I Seek More Support”*. These themes are presented in no particular order.

Identified Themes

“I was the Only One”

All three participants made references to being different from traditional students. This took the form of positive and negative differences. One participant, Cindy (pseudonym), stated that “...I was the only one. There were no other non-traditional students in my cycle (academic year) and they did not understand me.” Cindy is a single mother and also stated that “I did have to make some of the girls understand that my kids have this bedtime or I have to be home at this time to take care of them” and that

she had to "...try and schedule stuff around different things from everyone else." Cindy compared herself to other traditional students in the academic context. When asked about time management she stated, "I wish I had more time to study and feel like I am putting in as much effort into it as the traditional students" and that "I obviously don't study as much as everyone else does". This was an issue with her because she had the "feeling of not having enough time to get done what I need to get done."

In addition, Cindy also stated some advantages of being a non-traditional student. When the researcher asked how she felt unique from traditional students Cindy said, "Having kids and always having to figure out things and problem solve is really helpful and makes it easier when things don't go according to plan." She also felt that she was "...a lot more grounded than most of them." Cindy also reflected on her experience commenting that "occupations that we talk about with caretaking and mothers and kids made me feel useful. I was asked a lot of questions. It put it into a real life perspective and not just words from a book." This assisted her with her learning style. Cindy stated that "They (traditional students) are trying to learn the book. I have more of a broader perspective and can relate it to life better, I guess."

Amber (pseudonym) stated during the interview that "I was kind of an outcast." When discussing her experience of first entering the program she said "At first I didn't know anyone they (traditional students) all seemed connected." Amber lived within the campus environment and she was more involved in the college context than the other participants. When discussing the traditional students she stated, "Seems like they

were in a much better situation” and “they also knew rumors about teachers, how they were and what they wanted.”

When asked how she was unique to the program, Amber explained that she felt she was “..determined in a different way (than traditional students) and that non-traditional students are more on a trajectory and know that they will get there because of the motivation from other factors”. The Occupational Science Program can be challenging and Amber had this perspective about the program:

“I was like yeah I’m paying for this so I should be putting the effort in. You know I would like to have a more balanced life, but I don’t know of anyone that does. Being productive should be a big part of being in the OS program and I am assuming the OT program. I like to know the history (Occupational Science and Occupational Therapy history) as well as the future of our profession and I am excited about seeing what I could accomplish when I actually put effort in.”

Amber returned to college to change career paths and she attributed her life and work experience to giving her a different perspective on being a student and allowed her to be more calm or comfortable in various situations, including some of the pressures with being a non-traditional student in the OS program.

Lolita attended the university as a traditional student and then returned as a non-traditional student. She stated that “My focus and thinking is different now due to where I am in my life. School was not number one when I first attended, but it is has been since I returned”. She also felt different from traditional students in the context of the OS program because of what traditional students complained about. Lolita stated:

“I enjoyed all the basics I learned from the OS Program Instead of fighting all the basics which I believe was the majority of students’ opinions, you had to embrace and trust our teachers by embracing concepts for a reason. I believe all of my peers were much more frustrated than myself with OS because of how much of the basics the program seemed to be as opposed to hands on examples as in graduate school.”

“Adjusting to a New Role”

The three participants had different means of adjustment and coping strategies while they were in the Occupational Science Program. Lolita who did not have any financial support from her family, talked about having to cut her work hours and decrease her living expenses stating that “It’s just too hard to work full time and go to school full time and your grades get compromised.” She had also come to see the reality that she can “...have harmony, not balance” when it comes to her personal and academic life. She also learned strategies to help her cope with the stress of the OS program by employing the use of a planner and exercise. Lolita said that “My leisure time, I have to build into my schedule which includes my exercise at the gym. It helps tremendously reduce my stress.” She also relied on peers while they were going through the same assignments saying that “...it was nice to have someone to vent too.”

Amber’s biggest adjustment was “..being in education instead of working.” That included the “technology gap” she experienced. She did not understand the technology with computers and document programs, which really was difficult for her. Assignments took longer time to complete because she had to figure out the technology issues along

with doing the actual assignment. Amber stated she was “..not very good at gauging time in terms of how long projects would take and so it was a trial and error thing.

Writing a 15 page paper for the first time in 20 years, you are a little scared.”

Determination is what Amber attributed her success to saying, “I kept pushing and I got excited, I got really excited when I got good grades because that didn’t happen in the beginning.”

Amber’s coping strategies included her calendar, which was “a big deal.” When discussing strategies she stated that she “used the library as much as possible. I had to learn what environment would work for me. I also had to start setting an alarm on my phone for one hour at a time to work efficiently. I learned to do things in blocks.” In addition to these strategies, she did employ the help of peers often which she realized that “finding out what you can do to help them ‘cause it’s not a one way street” was valuable.

Cindy discussed numerous adjustments she had to make, revolving mostly around her children. Cindy has had children her entire college career and stated that from the beginning, “I had to schedule my classes farther apart, with huge gaps and less hours. That’s what has taken me so long to get where I am. I had to be able to take care of my child [she was nursing her] and find a way to attend school also.” When discussing how she manages her time, Cindy said that “The biggest thing with managing time is if one of them is sick or if the school calls. That’s just an interruption that can’t be helped or planned for.” In addition, Cindy needed complete silence to study and complete her schoolwork so the only time available for her was when the children were in bed. She

stated that “There are many nights that I fall asleep with the kids or just be so exhausted that I fall asleep on top of my books just cause I was so wore out.”

With Cindy being a mother and full-time student, she mentioned numerous amounts of occasions where she was experiencing role conflicts between the two. During the interview Cindy stated that “I want to be able to participate more in her stuff (child’s school activities) and my stuff, with school and work, gets in the way and interferes with her parties and plays. It bothers me. It is more of an emotional barrier more than anything and I just want to make them happy and make me happy.” When talking more about her family and adjusting she said “On weekends I had more restorative time. I could have been studying, but that’s the only time I could actually do stuff with kids and feel like they had my full attention.” Within the actual school environment and the amount of group work needed within the OS program Cindy realized, “I like to get stuff done myself, on my own time, my way, when I can work on it, but that’s just part of life.”

Cindy had multiple coping strategies that she used or had previously used, but stated she “...just took it day by day”. She likes to exercise, but had not been able to make it to the gym in a while and she also liked to study outside when possible. There were times she stated that “I just want to scream, but that really doesn’t help. So I remember also that this is a means for financial stability for me and my family.” Cindy had to return after sitting out for a year so when she came back into the OS program she had a different set of peers. However, she said that “This group seems like they fit

me a lot more. They were curious about me and some of them would do things to help me out.”

“I Seek More Support”

The participants in this research had commonalities when the subject of supports was mentioned. All three mentioned OS classes they had participated in that offered them motivation, support from peers, and supports from the teacher. Their families also offered supports in one form or another, along with peers, professors, and some university agencies.

Amber utilized multiple resources for support. She stated that “The teachers were supportive and even gave me suggestions as where to go for help with technology or studying and study habits.” To help with her study habits, a professor suggested she go to the counseling center and Amber said that “The counseling center helped me a lot with study habits, but also with meeting other non-traditional students.” In addition to the counseling center, she took other university classes to help with the technology gap she was experiencing. “I learned a lot from it (the classes), but I learned even more from the students” Amber stated. However, many of the traditional students were not willing to help her, especially when she first entered the program. Amber found a few students that would help her describing that as “They were willing to talk to me and figure out that I wasn’t just stupid (laughter). I then figured out what I could do to help them so that I wasn’t taking advantage.” Amber also has some medical issues and with being a non-traditional student, she doesn’t have access to health insurance. So in addition to emotional support, her family helps financially with her medical expenses.

Lolita did not receive any financial support from her family, but did talk about how they were a “huge emotional support” and made her realize that “It seems to me that the individuals who truly love and care about me understand this (the demands and busyness of the OS program) and encourage me all the same.” She also had support from traditional and non-traditional peers. She stated that “I hang out with non-traditional students more than traditional students, especially outside of school. We seem to understand and support each other the way that we need it.” For her traditional peers, help and support for assignments was needed saying that “Having someone you can exchange ideas with and that you can ask for help is a big stress reliever and help.” Lolita sought support from the professors also. For her “It was easy for me to talk to the professors and not be intimidated. My view of the professors was different from most of the traditional students because I saw them as a professor, educator, and mentor. They were there to help in any way they could.”

Cindy was fortunate enough to have a very supportive family. They live in the same town and are able to help with the children and the juggling schedules. Cindy discussed that her kids are a great support and motivator for her stating that “Having the kids have made me realize that I have to get it done and I have to be able to provide for them.” She also talked about how they are getting older and “becoming more independent, helping out, and are less demanding now.” Cindy said that “My mom is the biggest help. She really helps me out a lot. I can plan out my school schedule and my day, then I can schedule with my mom to fill in the gaps, thank goodness!” The weekend that the children were gone with their father was an opportunity for her to actually

concentrate on studying and completing homework. She also received child support, which she had to be careful with, and the rest of her financial situation was resolved by grants and what she made by working.

Cindy received support from within the Occupational Science department. She discussed how one faculty member in particular helped her throughout her first year in the program. She discussed how when she was upset or worried, she could go to this faculty member and she would give her realistic, but positive advice. She was very reassuring and helpful when putting things into perspective for Cindy. Her peers were also supportive in that they were inquisitive into her situation and how at times they could make it easier, or how they could be supportive at times. She also said "It was nice to be able to call them and talk to them. I like having that relationship outside of my home life."

Summary

The themes emerged from the interviews and data analysis were "*I was the Only One*", "*Adjusting to a New Role*", and "*I Seek More Support*". Semi-structured interviews were used for data collection. Data analysis consisted of extracting significant statements, assigning a formulated/significant meaning to those statements, and then the grouping the meanings into themes.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

Introduction

In Chapter 4 the themes of *I was the Only One*, *Adjustment to a New Role*, and *I Seek More Support* were discussed. These themes emerged as a result from the non-traditional students' perspectives about their experience in the Occupational Science Program. The above mentioned themes gave insight in the following objectives of the research study:

- What sets non-traditional students apart from the other students in the OS program?
- What barriers would or do non-traditional students face?
- What supports do non-traditional students receive?
- What supports may non-traditional students need?
- How do non-traditional students experience the OS program differently?
- What are the roles of non-traditional students in the OS program?
- What is the contribution of non-traditional students to the OS program?
- How do non-traditional OS students manage their time?
- How does a non-traditional OS student prioritize/manage needs of the program and their life?
- What are the coping strategies of non-traditional OS students?

This chapter will further develop the link between the themes and research objectives. Implications for practice in Occupational Therapy and within education will be discussed, as well as limitations and recommendations.

I was the Only One

In research from Dill & Henley (1998), non-traditional students were found to have much more responsibility and obligations at home or outside of the school environment when compared to their traditional counterparts. This was shown with all three participants. With Cindy being a single parent, she had multiple obligations outside of her school context. In addition to her obligations, she had to explain this to her traditional peers making her stand out even more. She felt different not only because of the fact she had to explain why she was not able to be as flexible within the individual classes, but she had to take a longer and more extensive journey through college because she was not able to carry a full class load like her traditional peers. Her outside obligations also affected what she perceived as her academic effort and ability. This was evident by the statements, "I wish I had more time to study" and "I obviously don't study as much as everyone else does".

For Lolita and Amber, their obligations took other forms. This included employment and negotiations. This is not to say that traditional students do not work while attending college; however, these participants were financially independent from their parents and had been for some time. Therefore, it was solely their obligation to find a means to pay for their education along with all of their other expenses. Amber for instance had medical issues. This required negotiation and persuasion on her part to convince her parents to assist her with this. This has involved Amber having to track the money for medical expenses and treating this money as a loan. Her parents and herself

have agreed that she will have to repay all of the money they have exchanged for her medical costs.

This research also found congruence with Dill & Henley (1998) in that social and peer events largely affected the traditional group, as opposed to the non-traditional group. "At first I didn't know anyone.....they (traditional students) all seemed connected." was a quote from Amber and assumed that this connection was a vital and necessary experience of the college environment for traditional students. Lolita also commented that school was her first priority, then her job, then her coping mechanisms such as exercise, and lastly people and social interactions when talking about the priorities in her life. She also stated, "A big part of their (traditional students) lives is social time outside of classes such as talking about being engaged, who's pregnant, and each other's boyfriends." Cindy also experienced the importance of social interaction for her traditional peers commenting about how all of her peers go out and do things together even though there are assignments due or other student obligations. She also mentioned that she did not "hang out" with students on a personal level and how she was not able to go out to places or placed a high priority on that aspect in her college career.

Intrinsic motivation indicates the student is interested in the process of learning for curiosity, mastery, and challenge (Pintrich, Smith, Garcia, & McKeachie, 1991). Non-traditional students have been found to have higher levels of intrinsic motivation in addition to having promotion of psychological well-being through feelings of personal accomplishment and self-esteem (Bye, Pushkar, & Conway, 2007). All three participants

made statements about how they felt they had a different motivation or drive and how their focus is or was different. Lolita, who once was a traditional student, reflected on her previous experience and stated that “My focus and thinking is much different now due to where I am in my life.” Cindy also expressed how she was more interested in the connection that she could make within the context of learning versus the grades that she was receiving. Amber stated that she was “excited about seeing what I could accomplish when I actually put effort in” and how she was more proud of her grades and the extrinsic motivators as she continued in the program because that was not easy for her in the beginning.

Bye et al (2007) also showed that non-traditional students maintained a higher threshold of intrinsic motivation to learn and that younger students do not report the same degree of need to enjoy the educational process to persist within the system as older students. There is a great deal of foundational groundwork laid within the Occupational Science program. This involves an extensive amount of history, learning various theories, and examining the motivation and values of individuals and yourself. Majority of traditional students are uninterested in these foundational components. Lolita commented that, “I believe all of my peers were much more frustrated than myself with OS because of the basics”. The participants all mentioned some aspect of enjoying learning about these concepts because they provided a connection for them. In their opinion, the traditional students needed more hands on activities to remain interested and commented on how much their peers complained. “The traditional students seemed that they were not concerned with learning while in the program for

its sake, but just looking at this as a necessity to do what they eventually wanted to. It seemed there was no absorbing of the material with them” Lolita commented.

There is an extensive amount of group work, collaboration, and discussion within the Occupational Science program with a focus on diversity. This is an area where all three participants felt they had an impact on the program. There is a lack of diversity within the program and they felt that any experiential commentary or viewpoints they could offer were beneficial. Jacobson & Harris, (2008) found that non-traditional students make connections and immediately apply information to real-life context. In addition, the authors stated that “The age and experience of non-traditional students allows them to draw on the previous knowledge, wisdom, and life experience to add meaning to the new material and understand it in a way that is personally meaningful.” The participants commented on how previous work experiences had allowed them to function successfully within a group and at times giving them the skills to be the “peacemaker”. Amber discussed how her work experience gave her a different perspective on being a student and prepared her for some of the pressures that she experienced, especially those associated with being a non-traditional student. Cindy explained that she grasped the concepts of occupations and care-giving because that is what she experienced as a mother. She also enjoyed that she could make the connection, offer insight to the class, and let her peers realize that this is valuable information and not “just words from a book”.

Research has shown that non-traditional student bring more complex and varied backgrounds of life experiences and prior knowledge skills; complex educational

histories; wide ranging maturity levels, motivations and attitudes, and limited time, resources, and access for collegiate engagement (Apps, 1981; Cross, 1981; Knowles 1969). This is shown within this research from the varied experiences of all three participants. In addition, all three participants fit into a different definition of a non-traditional student: one being a parent, one being non-traditional upon her age and change in career path, and one because of her age and also from the transition of being a traditional student and then returning as a non-traditional student.

Adjustment to a New Role

According to Pascarella & Terenzini (1991) and Tinto (1987), adults did not typically identify a peer group or the campus experience as significant influences for learning. However, this research found that while peers were not significant influences for learning, they were used for coping and adjustment. The participants agreed by making statements of how peers helped either in the transition into the student role or with confirmation in academic aspects. For example, Lolita talked about how it helped her in coping with the demands of the program by “venting” to her peers since they were experiencing the same thing. Amber discussed her technology gap and how peers helped her with some of these aspects so that she could more successfully participate in her student role. Cindy, who had returned to the program after sitting out a year, talked about how this group of students made her experience more welcoming and enjoyable by actually taking an interest in her. She felt like she belongs with this group of peers as opposed to the previous group.

Lidgard (2004) discovered that key issues for students with children were finding the time to juggle the two roles of student and parent successfully, balancing the workload of their studies with family life and responsibilities, clashing of college times with parenting times, children becoming ill and them needing the parent with them, childcare issues, and financial issues. This was evident with Cindy's experiences with most of her coping strategies and the adjustments she has made while being a student revolving around her children. For example, she had to adjust her class schedule, take a longer route through school because of not being able to take as many hours, and managing time around her children. This included if one of her children were sick or ill, having to study after the children went to bed because she needed silence, and at times falling asleep because she was so exhausted on top of books or with her kids after they begged her to lay down with them for a few minutes. She also felt a conflict between both roles because she wanted to be able to attend school functions and parties with her children, but had to be in class herself stating ".....I just want to make them happy and me happy." Cindy's ability to continue in this path is supported by research (Vaccaro & Lovell, 2010) discovering that women's drive to complete their education gave them motivation to juggle demands and renegotiate roles and commitments.

Non-traditional students can have a higher intensity of hurdles and difficulties in their academic life because of a higher load of external demands (Yorke, 1999). This likewise was not only for Cindy, but also for Amber and Lolita. Amber and Lolita had commitments to work especially since they were not receiving financial support (with the exception of loans for medical expenses) from their parents. Lolita discussed having

to cut her work hours and decrease her living expenses because “It’s just too hard to work full time and go to school full time and your grades get compromised.” With Amber having a gap with the technology, she had to take an extra class to attempt to catch up with her traditional peers. She also had to adjust to the fact that assignments took her longer because of the technological issues in addition to completing the assignment.

Career and job related issues are a motivational factor for non-traditional students to return to higher education (Klein, 1990; Yarbrough & Schaffer, 1990). Studies have shown that non-traditional students use the academic context to become more knowledgeable in their career field, concentrate on professional development, and can then better understand the connections between subject matter and theories to their practical implications and uses (Kasworm, 2003; Alberici, Catarsi, Colapietro, & Loidice, 2007). This also proves to be an adjustment, with the case of Amber, who was used to be employed and having financial security to attending school and concentrating on being a student. All three participants recognized the value of education to career path and placement and related that to financial stability for themselves.

Ramsay (2004) suggests a barrier to participation in higher education for adults may be the representation of their lack of previous educational success as an aspect of their personal learning identity. The participants that were researched in this study all had previous experiences within the college context that were not particularly positive. The experience was either so long ago that all the experiences they had changed, or

they experienced some negative connotation in the form of poor grades. The poor grades revolved around not being able to manage time effectively because of outside hindrances. This made the decision to come back to school difficult, but all three participants knew that it was necessary to achieve their goals.

I Seek More Support

According to Misra, McKean, West, & Russo (2000), students can use multiple means to help to control and reduce their stress including religion, avoidance, positive appraisal, and social support. The participants had different means and avenues for support that included their families, peers, teachers, and the university. Peer support was found to be in the form of both traditional and non-traditional students. Amber attended extra classes from the university, but commented that while she learned from the (computer) classes, her fellow traditional students taught her more because they knew the latest applications that could be done on the computer. Cindy also received support from traditional students by them helping her when available and said that she enjoyed the relationship outside of her home life. Lolita was fortunate to have multiple non-traditional students within her years in the OS program and they offered support to each other and that was the primary source of her social interaction.

Support from family for school has been shown to alleviate the negative conflict of role strain (Dyk, 1987) and family support has also been linked to retention in higher education (Chartrand, 1992). Amber had support from her parents because of her not having access to healthcare. They helped her by loaning the money for medical

expenses along with emotional support. Lolita did not receive any financial assistance from her family, but they were a “huge emotional support” and were understanding of her circumstances and that she may not always be available for family get-togethers or activities. Cindy also had a very supportive family, especially with them all living within the same town. Her mom was her biggest supporter and form of help. Her mother helped with juggling her schedule and taking care of her children. Cindy’s mother was able to help “...fill in the gaps, thank goodness!” In addition, the time that her children were with their father was helpful in terms of allowing some time for her to concentrate on assignments, homework, and studying.

Teachers’ attitudes with treating and approaching the non-traditional student with respect can make the transition from a non-successful to a successful adult learner (Scanlon, 2009). Donaldson and Graham (1999) found that the relationship the adult learners develop with faculty members and other students becomes the most powerful influence on their academic experiences. Amber received support from teachers by them offering suggestions on how to be more successful in academia. This included directing her to additional classes and other university services that could help her in areas she was struggling, including study skills classes and technology and computer courses. Lolita commented on how she saw the professors with respect and as mentors because of the attitude that they approached with her, giving her a different perception of the teachers from traditional students. Cindy also had support from professors, one in particular, that was realistic and positive when putting things in perspective for Cindy when she was worried about various academic factors.

It has been thought that children and family is a barrier to higher education. Vaccaro & Lovell (2010) found that children and family are not necessarily a barrier, but can serve as a support or motivation and that even though women may be absent their dedication doesn't diminish and family source of inspiration. Cindy found that her kids were a major source of support and motivation for her. Her kids give her a reason to continue in higher education, despite the difficulties and barriers she does experience. Her children have also supported her in being more independent and helping out when they can.

Implication for Occupational Therapy and Occupational Science

This research was useful in understanding some of the needs and what is beneficial for non-traditional students. The participants discussed their roles, habits, routines, and values; all of which are foundational for both disciplines. Taking this research and examining what is causing conflict between the roles outside of and within the school context can open doors for stress management courses, organization clinics, time management clinics, and helping students find resources or jobs that would benefit or compliment their lifestyle.

The field of occupational therapy is concerned with quality of life and having a sense of harmony between various aspects of life such as pleasurable, productive, and restorative occupations (Pierce, 2003). As with these participants, non-traditional students experiencing an imbalance can experience stress (Giancola et al, 2009). The effects of stress are both psychological and physical (Compas, Connor-Smith, Saltzmann,

Thomsen, & Wadsworth, 2001; Compas, Orosan, & Grant, 1993). An occupational therapist or occupational scientist could assist a student with reducing stress by figuring out a daily and weekly routine to try and manage time more effectively, recommending or implementing yoga classes, offering basic wellness education, or possibly helping the student with strategies or fun activities to complete with their family.

Implications for Educational Systems

Stress and Time Management Programs can be provided to those that need help with managing additional stress and interrole conflict (Kohler & Munz, 2006).

Universities can help alleviate interrole conflict by integrating families and employers into their services (Giancola et al, 2009). In addition, knowing who is in the class, why they are in the class, and the barriers inherent in the learning situation that must be overcome is essential to facilitate learning in the classroom (Merriam & Brockett, 1997). Research has found that meaning was enhanced by instructors who integrated adult-identified prior knowledge into the course content either by classroom interpersonal engagements or by active applied learning activities such as case study projects (Kasworm, 2003). Based on the importance of social context and familial expectations, counselors should consider involving family members and significant others in their work with non-traditional students (Chao & Good, 2004). Universities encourage enrollment of non-traditional student because of lifelong learning but do not seem to be concerned about understanding their needs and circumstances, therefore maintaining an environment suitable for a different type of student (Gilardi & Gugliometti, 2011).

Given the previous and this research together, Eastern Kentucky University and other universities alike have the foundation to start and implement programs that can be of assistance to non-traditional students and assist in their successful participation in higher education. The program could involve informative packets and seminars about childcare, university services, time management and study skills, along with financial services and job placement.

Limitations

The diversity within the Occupational Science program is limited. This research was conducted only with students that are currently in or have recently completed the Occupational Science program and the information obtained may not reflect the lived experience of non-tradition students within other programs or at other universities. In addition, only women participated in this study.

In addition, only one semi-structured interview was conducted with each participant. More information could have possibly been gathered and greater insight provided if more interviews would have been conducted. However, the time of non-traditional students is usually filled with school and outside commitments making scheduling more time difficult. This is evident by the fact that follow-up emails were sent out to each of the participants and there was a gap days to weeks for the participants to respond. In addition, the researcher triangulated the data with the semi-structured interviews from the participants and other literature, peer debriefing, and an audit trail. No other source of data analysis or collection was used (such as the

photographs taken, multiple interviews, or other artifacts). Additional data could have been collected using interviews with traditional students and their perception, interviews with faculty, interviews with family members, or activity logs.

Recommendations

Eastern Kentucky University has mandatory orientation classes for the freshman class. This allows them to orientate to campus, locate buildings, learn about services offered, and meet new people. The researcher recommends that the university makes more of an effort to offer the same orientation class or an equivalent for non-traditional students. They could complete campus tours, talk about help for studying and time management, services offered on campus, and policies that may be beneficial for non-traditional students. They could also inform students about the OWL Society (Older, Wiser, Learning) that is on campus, but very few students know about. This society allows non-traditional students to meet each other, discuss concerns and barriers, and an environment where they feel they belong.

Another recommendation of the researcher as a result of this research is that Department of Occupational Therapy could take some steps to better serve their non-traditional student population. This could include offering a meet and greet session for non-traditional students so that they may introduce themselves and form a connection of support for each other. This would give the students opportunities to feel that they belong, that they have someone to relate to, and can establish a network for them. The faculty could also do a needs assessment for the non-traditional student to see if there

are any areas that they may be of assistance in, whether that is technology or time management.

The professors and educators within the university system should also evaluate their standards of professional behaviors relating to non-traditional students. Topics for discussion could include the acceptance of children in the classroom and under which circumstances that would be allowed. Also, in the instance of absences and being tardy to class become an issue what protocol should be taken. It may be possible to make a provision for students that have to care for a sick child or spouse.

Summary

Through this research the themes of *I was the Only One*, *Adjustment to a New Role*, and *I Seek More Support* emerged. *I was the Only One* was a collection of how non-traditional students felt they were different from traditional students in both positive and negative forms. *Adjustment to a New Role* revolved around how the non-traditional student has adapted and learned to cope with being in higher education. *I Seek More Support* showed how the non-traditional student received support from peers, faculty, the university, and most importantly family. All three of these themes collectively describe the lived experience of these non-traditional students while in the Occupational Science Program at Eastern Kentucky University.

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APPENDIX A:
Recruitment Email

Dear OS Students,

Hello, my name is Deana Ward and I am a graduate student in the Occupational Therapy program. For my thesis project I am interested in the experience of non-traditional students in the Occupational Science program. Being a non-traditional student myself, I am very interested to engage in research on this topic. My objectives are to answer:

- What sets non-traditional students apart from other students in the OS program?
- What barriers would or do non-traditional students face?
- What supports do non-traditional students receive?
- What supports may non-traditional students need?
- How do non-traditional students experience the OS program differently?
- What are the roles of non-traditional students in the OS program?
- What is the contribution of non-traditional students to the OS program?
- How do non-traditional OS students manage their time?
- How does a non-traditional OS student prioritize/manage needs of the program and their life?

Non-traditional students are defined for my research purposes by meeting **one or more** of the following criteria: over the age of 24 years, is the primary caregiver of a dependent child/children or adult, or has left school and re-enrolled after a period of 1 year.

My research will only need you to participate in a semi-structured interview and to take six photographs. The information gathered from this research will expand the literature available on non-traditional students and their experiences. If you have any questions please feel free to contact me at 859-489-3283 or deana_ward33@mymail.eku.edu.

Thank you for your time,

Deana Ward, OTS

APPENDIX B:
Consent Form

Consent to Participate in a Research Study

The Lived Experience of Non-Traditional Students in the Occupational Science Program At Eastern Kentucky University

Why am I being asked to participate in this research?

You are being invited to take part in a research study about the lived experience of non-traditional students while in the Occupational Science program at Eastern Kentucky University. You are being invited to participate in this research study because of your unique circumstances and experience. If you take part in this study, you will be one of about four people to do so.

Who is doing the study?

The person in charge of this study is Deana Ward, OTS at Eastern Kentucky University. He/She is being guided in this research by Dr. Peggy Wittman, Ed.D, OTR/L, FAOTA. There may be other people on the research team assisting at different times during the study.

What is the purpose of the study?

By doing this study, we hope to learn about the lived experience of non-traditional students. This would include time management, the roles and expectations involved with being an Occupational Science student, and your non-traditional roles. We also hope to learn about any barriers or support that non-traditional students' experience or need. We also want to examine the students' perception on their contribution to the Occupational Science program and how they may experience the program differently.

Where is the study going to take place and how long will it last?

The research procedures will be conducted at Eastern Kentucky University. You will need to participate in a semi-structured interview during the study. Each interview will take about one hour. The total amount of time you will be asked to volunteer for this study is approximately one hour over the next two months.

What will I be asked to do?

You will be asked to complete an individual interview asking in-depth questions about your experience while in the Occupational Science program at Eastern Kentucky University.

Are there reasons why I should not take part in this study?

You should not take part in this study if you are not planning on completing the academic semester from January 2011 to May 2011. You also must meet the criteria for a non-traditional student and be enrolled full time during the academic semester in the Occupational Science program.

What are the possible risks and discomforts?

To the best of our knowledge, the things you will be doing have no more risk of harm than you would experience in everyday life.

Will I benefit from taking part in this study?

The results of this study may be of interest to you and you may get a copy of the results if you wish. The results of this study may be beneficial to future non-traditional students in academia.

Do I have to take part in this study?

If you decide to take part in the study, it should be because you really want to volunteer. You will not lose any benefits or rights you would normally have if you choose not to volunteer. You can stop at any time during the study and still keep the benefits and rights you had before volunteering.

If I don't take part in this study, are there other choices?

If you do not want to be in the study, there are no other choices except to not take part in the study.

What will it cost me to participate?

There are no costs associated with taking part in this study.

Who will see the information I give?

Your information will be combined with information from other people taking part in the study. When we write up the study to share it with other researchers, we will write about this combined information. You will not be identified in these written materials.

The results of this study will be anonymous. That means that no easily identifiable information will be given within the study or results published. Your informed consent letter will be stored separately in a locked file cabinet. Once you agree to participate a

number or different name will be used on your data sheets. Only the researchers will see this information until it is grouped with all responses. The results as a group with no identification may be presented or published.

Can my taking part in the study end early?

If you decide to take part in the study, you still have the right to decide at any time that you no longer want to participate. You will not be treated differently if you decide to stop taking part in the study.

The individuals conducting the study may need to end your participation in the study. They may do this if you are not able to follow the directions they give you, if they find that your being in the study is more risk than benefit to you, or if the agency funding the study decides to stop the study early for a variety of scientific reasons.

What happens if I get hurt or sick during the study?

If you believe you are hurt or if you get sick because of something that is done during the study, you should call Deana Ward at 859-489-3283 immediately. It is important for you to understand that Eastern Kentucky University will not pay for the cost of any care or treatment that might be necessary because you get hurt or sick while taking part in this study. That cost will be your responsibility. Also, Eastern Kentucky University will not pay for any wages you may lose if you are harmed by this study.

What if I have questions?

Before you decide whether to accept this invitation to take part in the study, please ask any questions that might come to mind now. Later, if you have questions about the study, you can contact the investigator, Deana Ward at 859-489-3283. If you have any questions about your rights as a research volunteer, contact the staff in the Division of Sponsored Programs at Eastern Kentucky University at 859-622-3636. We will give you a copy of this consent form to take with you.

What else do I need to know?

You will be told if any new information is learned which may affect your condition or influence your willingness to continue taking part in this study.

I have thoroughly read this document, understand its contents, have been given an opportunity to have my questions answered, and agree to participate in this research project.

Signature of person agreeing to take part in the study

Date

Printed name of person taking part in the study

Name of person providing information to subject

APPENDIX C:
Interview Protocol

Introduction

- 1) Greet participant
- 2) Reminder that they may stop participation/have the recording stopped at any time

Interviewing Questions

- 1) Review pictures (facilitator)
- 2) Interview Prompts
 - a. Tell me about yourself and what makes you a non-traditional student?
 - b. Tell me about some of your experiences in the OS program?
 - c. How do you manage your time? What was your reaction to the time log assignment?
 - d. How do you feel you are unique from traditional OS students?
 - e. What contributions do you think non-traditional students make to the OS program?
 - f. What kinds of supports, if any, did you experience while in the OS Program?
 - g. What kinds of barriers, if any, did you experience while in the OS program?
 - h. Any suggestions on how to better serve non-traditional students or supports that you would have liked to have?

Closing

- 1) Ask if there is anything else they would like to add
- 2) Show them out