

## Creating a bridge to post-traditional male student success at a community college

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### ***Abstract***

*Post-traditional students appear to be the highest growing population of students on American college campuses. Post-traditional students are 24 years of age and older. Frequently referred to as adult students or nontraditional students. About 1/3 of the people, who are working and learning in the U.S., are over the age of 30, which is a very substantial increase over what we saw in the 1980s and 1990s. Carnevale (2015). Since the enrollment in colleges has been favoring females since the 1970's (Borzelleca, 2012), this paper is solely focused on the post-traditional male students as they attempt college level learning. This research paper investigates what supports and services are necessary for male post-traditional students to attain success. During the fall of 2022 a comprehensive qualitative research study was conducted involving 8 post-traditional male students at a community college in a suburban New York location.*

**Keywords:** *Post-traditional students; male students; adult students; transformation.*

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## **1. Introduction**

This paper is the result of a qualitative research project which took place fall 2022 through spring 2023. A total of 8 Post-traditional male students over the age of 24 were interviewed to learn about their community college experience. For this research we classified post-traditional students as students over the age of 24 and any age beyond 24. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, non-traditional students are usually 24 and older (2002). A post-traditional student who returns to college is accepting a very real challenge. These students understand their life will be changed as they enter a new phase of their educational journey. This research study examined the supports and barriers post-traditional males, in particular, experience after they decide to attend higher education. The post-traditional students involved in this study are working to transform their careers through their educational journeys. Though all were very busy they generously participated in this research project.

A review of the current landscape of higher education across the United States reveals a changed demographic that has been increasing in number. (Stone, et al., 2016). Ellis (2019) states this demographic of adult learners displays characteristics unlike traditional students, and correspondingly this group is called nontraditional (post-traditional) students. The conceptual framework of this research was guided by Transformative Theory. Creswell and Poth, (2018) describe the basic principle of Transformative Theory as knowledge not being neutral and mirrors the power and injustice in society. This research study examined the transformation process for post-traditional male students. The researcher looked to discover what this population of male post-traditional students is experiencing at a community college. In addition, this research study has the potential to develop supportive measures from an institutional lens.

Considering all the life responsibilities of post-traditional students it becomes important to examine what are post-traditional male students facing. Goncalves and Trunk (2014) begin their article *Obstacles to Success for the Nontraditional Student in Higher Education* addressing the importance of engagement activities to support college retention. They specifically focus on the ability or lack of ability of nontraditional students to become an active part of the college campus. Yet with their schedules how is college engagement even a consideration? In general, according to Goncalves and Trunk (2014) post-traditional students are highly motivated by their desire to acquire an education. They suggest their motivation is intrinsic in nature (Goncalves & Trunk, 2014). Overall, post-traditional students are motivated by their desire for self-improvement. They compare traditional age students who feel forced to attend college by their parents and suggest post-traditional students are more intrinsically driven for many reasons (Goncalves & Trunk, 2014). Post-traditional students, in particular, are motivated by the ideas of enhancing their self-image and heightening their self-esteem. This motivation to improve aligns closely with the

Transformative Learning Theory described by Mezirow (1991) as a critical assessment of oneself and recognizing a change that needs to occur. This feeling of wanting to achieve more, steered Goncalves and Trunk (2014) to ascertain post-traditional students appreciate communication with their faculty members and would highly benefit from this type of interaction. However, based on scheduling and hectic lives post-traditional students do not engage frequently outside of the classroom, (Goncalves & Trunk, 2014). Post-traditional students are described as exhausted learners who are stretching work -life boundaries and enduring economic struggles (Arnold, et al 2021).

## **2. Theoretical Framework**

Transformative theory speaks to the change that is possible while examining what needs to occur to make the change possible Creswell and Poth (2018). During these 8 interviews the researcher looked to discover what supports need to be in place for a post-traditional male to be successful attending college. Creswell and Poth (2018) continue stating, qualitative research should have an action-based agenda that has the propensity to change the lives of the participants and others like them. The males involved in this research were all hoping their educational experience would transform their lives in one way or another.

The Transformative Theoretical framework, outlined by Creswell and Poth (2018), and Transformative Learning described by Mezirow (1991) align with the transformative process and action needed by post-traditional students to achieve success. This transformative process worked well with this research project to examine the self-reported experiences of post-traditional male respondents. The goal of this research was to discover ways in which institutions can have a positive or negative effect on post-traditional male students. Fleener and Barcinas (2021) suggest a transformation occurs when adult educators explore how individuals and groups of individuals come together to engage and enact reasonable, possible, probable and emerging futures. They continue this thought; where a person's passions are unveiled, especially as it relates to personal transformation and lifelong learning that includes openness to new and diverse ideas. (Fleener & Barcinas, 2021). This transformation allows the individual post traditional student to envision their own future and to create the life they want. Creswell and Poth (2018) describe the transformative framework to research as a method for educators to allow the participant to embrace the process while taking an active role.

## **3. Methodology**

In his section the researcher describes the methodology and research process. The research study was IRB approved and conducted over the fall and winter semesters. Eight Post-traditional male students volunteered to participate.

### **3.1 The Process**

The researcher spent the semester investigating the barriers and bridges that are in place for male students involved in this research. We look to understand what the experience was like as they returned to college as adult students with life experiences and obligations. The experience for a male as he attempts to balance work, school and other responsibilities can be complicated. There are significant financial implications to attending classes. Zaft, (2008) described the financial constraints adult students feel as they return to college, as difficult. Congruent with Zaft, Hittepole (2016) notes males often cite finances as impacting their decision to withdraw. In addition, she notes the lack of support within higher education is having a significant impact on the success of these male nontraditional students possibly hindering the transformation to a successful more lucrative career (Hittepole, 2016). Also, Goncalves and Trunk (2014) described the many responsibilities of older students, that may hinder success. This research examined the perspective of the nontraditional males as the researcher intently listened to their stories.

This study's theoretical framework looks through the lens of a higher education leader to assess the policies and resources that support or interfere with the successful completion the higher educational pursuits of these nontraditional male students. The goal of this research project is to understand the extent to which institutional supports may bring about transformative change and a heightened awareness of a population that may be overlooked (Creswell and Poth, 2018).

### **3.2 Research Questions**

Three research questions were used for the research study. These questions framed the study and act as a guide as we investigated the personal histories and experiences of the study's eight participants. Examining these questions helped the researcher to understand the reasons post-traditional males return to college. In addition, we looked to see what supports they consider important and what they feel is needed to be successful.

RQ1 What was your motivation for post-traditional male students (at the case-study community college) to return to college level studies? What are the factors that encouraged their return?

RQ2 How do participants perceive their decision to return college as being supported by the university (case study community college)?

RQ3 What barriers do post-traditional male students at the community college in this case study identify as hindering their achievement of academic? Describe the journey and your ability to persist regardless of the barriers.

These open-ended questions offered insight into the experience in higher education of the post-traditional male participants by creating a narrative dialog between the researcher and each participant.

### 3.3 Participants

The students who participated in the study met the criteria of the post-traditional male student, which is beneficial for quality assurance (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In addition to address the diversity of student populations on the campus the researcher applied maximum variation sampling method (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Maximum variation sampling occurs when the sample participants are taken from a large diverse body of possible participants. An intentional effort was made to select the participants from a diverse group of students. We used male gender, age, minimum of 12 credits completed, race and ethnicity as parameters when selecting participants. The researcher made an intentional effort to ensure the sample accurately reflected the diversity of the campus involved in the study. Maxwell (2013) suggests defining the dimension of the variation of the population which is most relevant to the study and selecting individuals that represent the most important and relevant variations. This method allows for the differentiation of the participants, as each person is an individual and may come from a completely different geographic area and socioeconomic background (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The cohort of students interviewed was a remarkably diverse group, which accurately reflects the surrounding community. In total there were 8 participants- 3 Caucasian, 2 Black/African American, 2 Hispanic/Latinx, 1 Asian/Pacific Islander.

**Table 1. Participant Demographics**

<b>Demographic Information</b>				
<b>Name</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Race</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Ethnicity</b>
Andy	49	White/Hispanic	Male	Hispanic
Chuck	56	White	Male	Caucasian
Jose	42	Hispanic	Male	Hispanic
Nicki	31	Black	Male	African American
Santa	30	Black	Male	African American
Sky	48	White	Male	Caucasian
Steve	38	White	Male	Caucasian

**Table 2. Demographics at Case Study Community College.**

<b>Student Body</b>	
All College	Approximately 21,000 students
Gender	Female: 56%; male: 44%
Age	18-24: 80%; 25 and over: 20%
Ethnicity	White 51.3%
	Black/African American: 8.1%
	Hispanic: 29.3%
	Asian/Pacific Islander: 4.6%
	International: 0.4%
	American Indian/Alaskan Native: 0.3%
	Two or more: 2.0%
	Native Hawaiian: 0.1%
Other/Unknown: 3.9%	

The case study community college is located in a suburban north eastern area of the United States within a richly diverse community. Data from the college’s website indicate twenty percent of the entire student body are age 25 and above.

Through interactive interviews we examined the self-reported experiences of 8 post traditional male students enrolled full time at the case-study community college. The individual interviews allowed for open communication in which the participants felt comfortable sharing their personal story. The community college involved is a large tri-campus institution. The participants involved in the research were all registered as fulltime students on one single campus. The campus used in the study is in a densely populated suburban/urban setting. The surrounding area is ethnically diverse and primarily working class. The study included interviewing 8 individual students who met the required demographics. All students interviewed were self-identified males over the age of 24 and had completed a minimum of 12 credits prior to the fall 2022 semester. In addition, most of the students were working fulltime and had family obligations.

The interviews all took place in zoom, and most were in the early evenings to accommodate the participants' scheduling needs. Each interview took between 40 and 60 minutes. All interviewees filled out an informed consent prior to the meeting and agreed to the conditions.

The interviewees were primarily completed during and directly after the fall 2022 semester. Students interviewed were all in good standing academically.

#### **4. Findings**

The major areas of study of the participants varied from pre-Nursing, History, Business, Liberal Studies and HVAC. All students' interviews had very precise goals. They shared similar aspirations of self-improvement and enhanced career opportunities. Only one student interviewed was not interested in a career change or professional advancement. Most were motivated by financial empowerment and greater opportunities that a college degree would provide. A consensus among the group was the feeling of limited opportunities without a degree.

Another commonality was the "missed opportunity" in their younger years. The interviewees spoke of their recognition of the need for good time management skills. Many spoke of their lack of this time management skill in their youth but have learned to adapt now as they attend college as adults. "I didn't have the time management skills I needed in my younger days". At this point in their lives when they have so many things to manage, collectively they appear to have realized the importance or prioritizing and managing their time wisely.

"Really my biggest issue is time,"

In addition, financial resources and the need to increase their earning power was a common thread. It is important to note the need to increase earnings to match their personal needs as well as their family's needs was also a significant factor triggering the student's return to college. Three students mentioned the feeling of plateauing in their industry and not being able to advance in way that would adequately support the needs of the family. "I was applying for promotion and my boss told not to think of it because of my lack of a degree." One student was going through a divorce and wanted to ensure a better life for his child.

Time management and the lack of availability of college resources was a major finding regardless of the degree path or goal of the students interviewed. In addition, all students were looking to enhance their sense of self-fulfillment. Six of the eight were genuinely concerned with their financial security. Most students interviewed felt supported by the college to some extent, but noted the lack of evening, weekend or online support.

#### **5. Conclusion**

This narrative case study research project offered insight into the experiences of the eight students who participated. The knowledge gained is not generalizable due to the small sample size and the singular campus, however it is meaningful to gain a greater understanding of the

needs of the post-traditional male student. This type of research can assist college administrators as they look to recruit more post-traditional males and support their retention.

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