EXPLORING ADULT LEARNERS’ EXPERIENCES TRANSITIONING TO HIGHER EDUCATION

A Dissertation in Adult Education

by

Courtney E. Karmelita

© 2016 Courtney E. Karmelita

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Education

May 2016
The dissertation of Courtney Karmelita was reviewed and approved* by the following:

Adnan Qayyum
Assistant Professor of Adult Education
Dissertation Advisor
Chair of Committee

Melody Thompson
Associate Professor of Adult Education

David Post
Professor of Educational Theory and Policy

Margaret Lorah
Director of the Center for Women’s Studies
Affiliate Assistant Professor of Counselor Education

Roy B. Clariana
Director of Graduate Studies
Learning and Performance Systems

*Signatures are on file in the Graduate School
Abstract

Research Topic

With increasing adult learner enrollments in colleges and universities, adult learners more than ever require supports and services to help them successfully transition into student life. Transition programs have gained popularity for this reason. These programs are intended to help adult learners enroll in postsecondary education (Alamprese, 2005). The state of the literature on these programs demonstrates a need for more research about the outcomes associated with participation. Previous research on adult learner participation in transition programs is limited in its scope and depth (Valentine, Hirschy, Bremer, Novillo, Castellano, & Banister, 2009). To add to the literature, this study is designed to capture and explore the stories of adult learners enrolled in a transition program to examine their experiences and perceptions.

When researching adult learner transition to higher education, I came across numerous studies reporting the challenges and barriers that hinder adult learner success. I also found that the challenges and barriers discussed in recent literature are the same as those described over three decades ago by Patricia Cross (1981). Therefore, this research also aims to explore to what extent these barrier types identified in Cross’s (1981) survey research adequately reflect the experiences of adult learners entering higher education today and to provide an updated account of the obstacles that adult learners face.

Theoretical Framework and Method

This study is a narrative inquiry shaped by the theoretical framework of Schlossberg’s Transition Theory (Anderson, Schlossberg, & Goodman, 2012) and Cross’s (1991) categories of adult learner barriers. For data analysis, I used the hermeneutic approach as described by Patterson and Williams (2002). I followed this
approach to analyze each participant’s narrative. I also engaged in cross-case narrative analysis, determining the similarities and differences between the participants’ narratives.

**Findings**

The findings suggest that the connections the participants formed during enrollment in “Transitions Prep” attributed to an overall positive experience for all. The narratives of this study also indicate that the participants’ perspectives of the transition to higher education changed through participation in “Transitions Prep.” Although one participated reported a loss of confidence in her ability to be successful in higher education, the majority of the participants described themselves as having gained confidence. Additionally, the findings of this study imply that adult learners may face challenges not fully addressed by Cross’s (1991) account of adult learner barriers to higher education. Lastly, I found that the stages to self-actualization from Maslow’s (1943) Hierarchy of Needs explain the participant motivations more precisely than the theories used to inform the theoretical framework of this study.

**Recommendations**

Based on the findings, I recommend that research on the outcomes of participation in a transition program be conducted. I also recommend that Schlossberg’s Transition Theory and Cross’s (1991) categorizations of student barriers be reconceptualized to give more emphasis on the influence of identity and be reconsidered within the current social context. Additionally, I encourage researchers to contemplate how elements of self-actualization may help to explain adult learner motivations for entering higher education. Furthermore, I suggest additional research to uncover the true
impact of funding on transition program development and determine appropriate requirements for program design.

For future practice, I suggest that universities and colleges implement research-based supports, including transition programs, to aid adult learners as they attempt to earn postsecondary degrees. In addition, I suggest that higher education institutions be mindful of how aging poses physical limitations for adult learners and consider how to best provide appropriate accommodations for aging adult students.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Figures.................................................................................................................... ix

Acknowledgments............................................................................................................... x

Chapter One: Introduction ................................................................................................. 1
  Chapter Overview ............................................................................................................... 1
  Introduction......................................................................................................................... 1
  Statement of the Problem and Purpose ........................................................................... 2
  Coming to the Problem ....................................................................................................... 3
  Research Questions............................................................................................................ 4
  Significance......................................................................................................................... 5
  Guiding Assumptions.......................................................................................................... 9
  Theoretical Framework..................................................................................................... 10
  Methodological Overview .............................................................................................. 11
    Participant and Site Selection .................................................................................... 11
    Data Collection ........................................................................................................... 12
    Data Analysis ............................................................................................................. 13
  Definition of Terms ........................................................................................................ 14
    Adult Learners ........................................................................................................... 14
    Transition ................................................................................................................... 15
    Transition Program ..................................................................................................... 15

Chapter 2: Literature Review ............................................................................................ 17
  Chapter Overview ............................................................................................................. 17
  Transition .......................................................................................................................... 17
    Identity and Identity Development ............................................................................ 18
  Schlossberg’s Transition Theory ...................................................................................... 19
    Stages of Transition ................................................................................................... 21
    4 “S” System .............................................................................................................. 22
    Transition Types ........................................................................................................ 24
    Context and Impact .................................................................................................... 26
    Perception .................................................................................................................. 27
  Barriers.............................................................................................................................. 28
    Situational Barriers .................................................................................................... 29
    Institutional Barriers ................................................................................................. 30
    Dispositional Barriers .............................................................................................. 31
    Alternative Perspectives ............................................................................................ 32
  Transition Programs........................................................................................................ 32
    Transition Program Models ....................................................................................... 33
    State and Federal Initiatives ...................................................................................... 34
    Funding ....................................................................................................................... 36
    Conclusion ................................................................................................................. 37
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self and Dispositional Barriers</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Context</td>
<td>141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Five: Discussion of the Findings and Recommendations</td>
<td>145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Overview</td>
<td>145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Questions</td>
<td>145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Question One</td>
<td>145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Question Two</td>
<td>152</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Question Three</td>
<td>156</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Statement</td>
<td>161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limitations of the Study</td>
<td>162</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recommendations for Future Research</td>
<td>165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recommendations for Practice</td>
<td>168</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>171</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix A</td>
<td>193</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview Questions</td>
<td>193</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Round One Interview Questions</td>
<td>193</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Round Two Interview Questions: All</td>
<td>195</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Round Two Interview Questions: Karen</td>
<td>196</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Round Two Interview Questions: Norman</td>
<td>197</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Round Two Interview Questions: Lucy</td>
<td>197</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Round Two Interview Questions: Diane</td>
<td>197</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Round Two Interview Questions: Kate</td>
<td>198</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix B</td>
<td>199</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visual Organizing Systems</td>
<td>199</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karen</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norman</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lucy</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diane</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kate</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# List of Figures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Figure 2.1</td>
<td>Schlossberg’s Phases of Transition</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 2.2</td>
<td>Schlossberg’s 4 “S” System</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 2.3</td>
<td>Event Types that Prompt Transition</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 3.1</td>
<td>Hermeneutic Process of this Study</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 3.2</td>
<td>Example of a Visual Organizing System</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 3.3</td>
<td>Example of Themes in Context</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 3.4</td>
<td>4 “S” System Chart</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 3.5</td>
<td>Example of Cross-Case Themes in Context</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 4.1</td>
<td>Schlossberg’s Transition Theory (2012) and Cross’s (1991) Barrier Types</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 4.2</td>
<td>4 “S” System Chart: Karen</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 4.3</td>
<td>4 “S” System Chart: Norman</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 4.4</td>
<td>4 “S” System Chart: Lucy</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 4.5</td>
<td>4 “S” System Chart: Diane</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 4.6</td>
<td>4 “S” System Chart: Kate</td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 4.7</td>
<td>Cross-Case Analysis Findings for Situation and Situational Barriers</td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 4.8</td>
<td>Cross-Case Analysis Findings for Supports</td>
<td>134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 4.9</td>
<td>Cross-Case Analysis Findings for Strategies</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 4.10</td>
<td>Cross-Case Analysis Findings for Self and Disposition</td>
<td>141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 4.11</td>
<td>Cross-Case Themes in Relationship to Context</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Acknowledgments

Earning this D.Ed. has been a roller coaster of emotions. Throughout this process, I realized how fortunate I am to have such a wonderful support system of colleagues, committee members, friends and family. You are the ones who helped me through, even on my worst days, and who deserve my many thanks. Without you, I would not be here today.

I extend much gratitude and appreciation to my Dissertation Committee Chair and adviser, Dr. Adnan Qayyum. When first starting this journey, I was a lost soul. I am thankful that he took me on as an advisee. His faith in me helped me to feel as if I belonged. In times of doubt, his assurance encouraged me to keep going. I am thankful for Dr. Qayyum’s guidance, which helped me to develop as a writer and researcher. With his support, I grew in my confidence and ability.

I must also thank my other committee members. Dr. Lorah was my constant source of calm and caring. She provided much needed perspective during this process. Dr. Lorah’s compassion speaks to her commitment to students and ability as a counselor. Dr. Thompson’s constructive feedback pushed me to reach my potential. Her high standards and wealth of knowledge were at times intimidating, but encouraged me to be a better scholar. I am also thankful for Dr. Posts’s thought provoking questions and his enthusiasm for learning. Prior to entering this program, I was fortunate to have a class with Dr. Post. His engaging dialogue, expertise, and student-centered approach gave me the motivation that I needed to pursue this D.Ed.

I would like to thank the instructors and supervisor of “Transitions: College and Career Prep” for inviting me into their classroom and allowing me to conduct this study. I am also incredibly thankful to the participants of this study. This research would not have been possible without them. Words cannot express my gratitude for the time that they took to share their stories with me.

I am forever grateful to my husband. It is me and you against the world. You are my rock, my voice of reason. You are my home. There’s so much else that I could say, but I will leave it at that. And to my son, no degree could give me the sense of pride that I get from being your mother. My only regret of completing this degree is any time that I missed with you. I look forward to watching you fulfill your goals and dreams someday.
Chapter One: Introduction
Chapter Overview

This chapter introduces the topic of this research study. In this chapter, I will discuss the problems that I identified in the literature that prompted my questions for this study and the significance of this research. This chapter also includes discussion of the guiding assumptions on which this study is based. The theoretical framework and methodology of this research are introduced as well. Lastly, this chapter provides the definition of terms used throughout this study.

Introduction

The transition to higher education is experienced by increasing numbers of adult learners as adult student enrollments in college continue to rise (Compton, Cox, & Laanan, 2006; Hardin, 2008; O’Donnell & Tobbell, 2007; Sandman, 2010). In the last twenty years, colleges and universities have seen “massive expansion in adult enrollment, far beyond demographic growth” (Eduventures, Inc., p.5, 2012). The National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (2012) found that 38% of all undergraduate students are adult learners. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), the trend of increased adult learner enrollments in higher education is expected to continue. In 2012, the NCES predicted that from 2010 to 2020, there will be a 20% rise in adult learner enrollments in colleges and universities. Most recently, the NCES (2015) reported that adult learner enrollments increased by 35% from 2000 to 2012.

Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner (2007) attribute the rise in adult learner enrollments to employment related reasons. Accordingly, adult learners cite career development and career change as the leading reason to pursue a postsecondary degree
(Compton et al., 2006; Kasworm, 2003; Kim, Collins, Williamson, & Chapman, 2004). However, career motivations are not the only reason for adult learner enrollment. Adult learners often “enroll in college because of major life transitions and changes” (Kasworm, Polson, & Fishback, 2002, p. 23). Common life transitions that may prompt enrollment include: relocation, changes in family roles, divorce and retirement. Additionally, personal fulfillment is another reason cited by adult learners for entering higher education (Genco, 2007).

Statement of the Problem and Purpose

With more adult learners seeking to enter higher education than ever before, there is a growing need to provide appropriate supports to help them be successful in their transitions to colleges and universities. The entering process is not simple and often can deter adult learners from the start (Compton et al., 2006; Genco, 2007; Hardin, 2008; Kasworm et al., 2002). Even when able to overcome barriers to enrollment, adult learners are more likely to leave higher education without a degree than traditional-aged students (NCES, 2002). The challenges adult learners encounter during the entering process emphasize the need for adult educators, colleges, and universities to develop a better understanding of how adult learners experience the transition to higher education.

Additionally, there is a need to further explore the hurdles to higher education for adult learners. Cross’s (1981) survey research on adult learners in higher education highlighted the barrier types that adult learners encountered at the time. Over the past 30 years, adult learners have continued to note similar situational and institutional barriers, such as time constraints, lack of childcare, need for transportation, and cost (Compton et al., 2006; Genco, 2007; Hardin, 2008; Kasworm et al., 2002), as well as dispositional
barriers that stem from poor previous experiences in education (Cross, 1991; O’Donnell & Tobbell, 2007). The prevalence of literature regarding these barriers indicates a need to further understand obstacles that adult learners face. This study investigates to what extent adult learners in a transition program encountered the barrier types described by Cross (1991), and seeks to identify possible barriers not previously specified.

The abundance of literature on adult learner barriers also implies a need to research the existing supports intended to limit such barriers. This study calls attention to the need for examination of one support in particular—transition programs. In recent years, transition programs have grown in popularity as a means to aid adult learners in the transition to postsecondary education (Alamprese, 2005; Office of Vocational and Adult Education, 2010a; Valentine, Hirschy, Bremer, Novillo, Castellano, & Banister, 2009). Valentine et al. (2009) report that the literature on the topic of adult learners in transition and their participation in transition programs is limited and subpar. Consequently, there are “serious gaps in our understanding of the effectiveness of specific program elements to support transitions” (Valentine et al., 2009, p. 54). Therefore, this study seeks to better understand the adult learner transition to higher education and the experiences of adult learners participating in a transition program.

**Coming to the Problem**

Coming to the problem of this study was multifaceted. I drew from my personal experience, professional experience, and knowledge of the literature on the topic. From a personal perspective, my transition from undergraduate to graduate education was difficult. I did not anticipate the challenges that I would encounter as an adult student returning to school. I felt unsupported, isolated, and questioned my ability to
succeed. During my graduate studies, I also worked full-time as an academic adviser for adult students. It was my responsibility to support students during their attempt to earn a degree and provide accurate guidance to help them meet their goals. From a professional perspective, I found that my advisees often mirrored the concerns that I had when transitioning back into student life. They regularly shared concerns and frustrations related to transition and the enrollment process, which motivated me to investigate available supports. In my efforts, I reviewed resources on the university website and came across a program called “Transitions: College and Career Prep” aimed at helping adult learners transition to higher education. The discovery of this program prompted me to further research transition programs, the supports offered to transitioning adult learners, and how adult learners experience the transition to higher education. From an academic perspective, I found there to be limited literature on transition programs. I also came across much literature indicating a need for the development and assessment of supports to help adult learners overcome the challenges of transitioning to higher education.

**Research Questions**

The research questions of this study inquire about various aspects of the adult learner transition to higher education. The research questions emphasize the barriers adult learners face as they seek to enter higher education and the influence of participation in a transition program. The questions for this study are:

- How do adult learners participating in a transition program describe their experiences as they contemplate enrollment to higher education?
• What is the impact of a transition program on participants’ perceptions of self and their ability to transition to higher education?

• To what extent do earlier categorizations of barriers and challenges of participation in higher education reflect the experiences of adult learners enrolled in a transition program?

**Significance**

Adult learners in higher education are often “institutionally invisible, marginalized, and taken for granted” (Sissel, Hansman & Kasworm, 2001, p. 18). As an adviser who works with adult learners, I often find limitations in the existing resources for these students. As such, there is a need for more adequate supports tailored to the needs of adult learners. Specifically, there is a need for universities to develop “a comprehensive entry course designed to empower older students to succeed in overcoming the feelings of marginality, inadequacy, and incompetence to achieve a sense of belonging in the college community, thus facilitating a useful transition” (Craig, 1997, p. 2). The Office of Vocational and Adult Education (OVAE) under the U.S. Department of Education also recognizes the need for this type of course. The OVAE has urged states and colleges to provide transition programming in an attempt to encourage adult learner participation in higher education. According to the OVAE website, “promising practices must be pursued and challenges must be addressed to make transition services available and effective” (2010b, para.1).

In order to develop useful supports, such as transition programs, there must be more theoretically-based research to explore and better understand the transition for adult students entering or reentering higher education. Although the need for more
understanding of the transition process to higher education has been raised (Risquez, Moore, & Morely, 2007), there are few studies about how to help students in adult education coursework successfully make the transition to college (Humphreys & Acker-Hocevar, 2012). This study can help to contribute to a research-based understanding of the adult learner transition to postsecondary so that adult educators, colleges, and universities can develop appropriate supports for these students.

In addition to the development of new supports for adult learners pursuing postsecondary education, there is a need to evaluate existing resources. This study focuses on the examination of a transition program aimed at preparing adult learners for college coursework and demands. Through a comprehensive review of the literature on transition programs, I found limited research reporting the outcomes associated with participation in a transition program. I also found that there is a need for more research to measure the influence of different transition models and strategies, to determine if students are persisting in higher education after completing transition programs, and to identify specific components of transition programs that impact student outcomes (Zafft, Kallenbach, & Spohn, 2006). Moreover, I determined that many of the current studies regarding adult learner transition to postsecondary education do not detail the specifics of the transition intervention (OVAE, 201a; Valentine et al., 2009). Furthermore, it has been reported that existing studies are often weak in design (Valentine et al., 2009). Following participants throughout their time in a transition program, this study will help to give specific information about the program design, including the specific components of the program, as well as provide adult learner perspectives on the curriculum and content.
Regarding the design of transition programs, the literature also indicates that there is a lack of theory in the development of these programs. Although there is a strong body of research describing transition as a psychologically disruptive and turbulent experience (Fiske & Chiriboga, 1990; Folkman, 1992; Levinson, 1996; Parkes, 1971; Schlossberg, Lynch, & Chickering, 1989), there is no evidence to suggest that theory on transition was used to inform the design or curriculum of the transition programs that I reviewed in the literature. There is also no evidence indicating that adult development theory, which is especially pertinent to the discussion of transition due to the critical period of development that transition presents, was in anyway considered during the design of these programs. As Cross (1991) emphasizes, “theory without practice is empty, and practice without theory is blind” (p. 110). This study helps to address the need for theory-based research and design of transition programs by being grounded in theoretically informed methods. Consideration for theory is essential as it helps researchers to refine and expand current methods, to ultimately improve practice (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010), and to establish legitimacy (Kasworm, Rose, & Ross-Gordon, 2010).

Another weakness in the literature regarding transition programs, is the narrowly focused approach on economic development and job opportunities. The economic need for an educated workforce is often cited as a primary reason for aiding adult learners in the transition to higher education (Alamprese, 2005; New England Literacy Resource Center, 2009; OVAE, 2010a; Valentine et al., 2009; Zaffè et al., 2006). It is nearly impossible to find any literature about adult student services that is not dedicated to arguments for skills development, literacy training or technical preparation (Quinnan,
Likewise, the literature on transition programs also emphasizes that adult learners must transition to higher education in order to advance employment opportunities and contribute to economic growth (see Alamprese, 2005; OVAEa, 2010; Valentine et al., 2009; Zafft et al., 2006). The New England Literacy Resource Center (NELRC) notes the need to attend postsecondary education for “improved earnings, economic growth and productivity, civic participation and voting, and intergenerational and economic social mobility” (2009, “College Transitions”). Additionally, the OVAE (2010a) explains that “postsecondary education provides individuals with opportunities throughout their lifetimes to develop the knowledge and skills needed to keep the United States competitive” (p. 1). While job potential is often a reason for adults to enter higher education (Merriam et al., 2007), other factors such as personal fulfillment, or changes in family roles are not discussed. Working as an adviser has taught me that there is a need to consider the whole individual when attempting to provide guidance and support. The narratives of this study can help to provide a more holistic image of the adult learner and their motivations for seeking a postsecondary degree.

One critical missing aspect from transition program literature is the adult learner perspective. It is important to study the experiences of adult learners in transition programs to determine their influence on the overall transition experience for adults entering or re-entering postsecondary education (Compton et al, 2006; Genco, 2007; Hardin, 2008; O’Donnell & Tobbell, 2007; Valentine et al., 2009; OVAE, 2010a; Zafft et al., 2006). Without understanding the student experience, it is difficult to adequately assess, design, and implement any program. The narratives of this research can also help
to provide a more comprehensive view of adult learner experiences in a transition program and the influence of such a program on their perception of transition.

In the interest of preventing adult learner barriers to higher education, it is also necessary to have a better understanding of the challenges that adult learners face. Having an awareness of the barriers that are encountered and how they are perceived “can help [adult educators] to create more supportive educational environments” (Malhotra, Shapero, Sizoo, & Munro, 2007, p. 87). In addition to the investigation of adult learner experiences in a transition program, this study seeks to provide an updated account of Cross’s (1991) categorization of adult learner barriers. Limiting institutional, situational, and dispositional barriers may facilitate a more positive cognitive appraisal of the transition (Anderson et al., 2012; Parkes, 1971; Schlossberg et al., 1989). A better understanding and awareness of adult learner barriers can help adult educators, colleges, and universities to implement appropriate supports; avoid the creation of new barriers; and lessen the impact of current barriers. Furthermore, research on the challenges of entering higher education can help adult learners to be more aware of the potential obstacles they may encounter, which may ease the impact of such barriers. Being able to predict potential barriers can help adult learners to be prepared for and adapt to challenges (Bandura, 1997, p. 2).

**Guiding Assumptions**

Before commencing this study, I reflected on my philosophical assumptions, which are embodied in the theoretical framework and serve as a guide to inform the research questions and study design (Miles & Huberman, 1994). As part of my reflection, I had to determine my epistemological and ontological viewpoints (Arminio &
Hultgren, 2002, Fossey, Harvey, McDermott, & Davidson, 2002). I realized that my ideals can be viewed through the constructivist paradigm. The assumptions of the constructivist paradigm suggest that knowledge is interpretive, based on one’s context, and co-constructed (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Although constructivist assumptions provide a broad basis for this research study, the theoretical framework provides a narrowed lens through which to view the topic and method.

**Theoretical Framework**


Schlossberg’s Transition Theory serves as a framework for investigating and organizing the perceptions of transition (Evans et al., 2010). This framework suggests that one’s perception of a transition is largely tied to their ability to adapt, and that transition is a period of development. Emphasizing context, Cross’s (1991) discussion of barriers depicts the challenges of transitioning adult learners embedded in their lived experiences. These barrier categorizations highlight the multiple contextual influences on how transition is perceived. They also highlight the contrasting supports and obstacles of transition, which inform how adult learners come to experience and make meaning of the transition.
Methodological Overview

Staying true to the purpose of this study, the constructivist paradigm, and the intent of the theoretical framework, I employed a qualitative approach for this research. Qualitative researchers question the how, what, or why of an experience in order to develop a deeper understanding of the different perspectives and meanings associated with that experience (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2010). As such, I sought to gather the stories of the participants embedded in the context of their transitions to higher education. I also sought to make meaning of the participants’ storied experiences to better understand them.

Participant and Site Selection

Seeking the narratives of adult learners enrolled in a transition program and contemplating enrollment in higher education, I focused my participant selection on obtaining a purposeful sample of adult learners currently participating in a transition program. The particular transition program identified for this study was the “Transitions: College and Career Prep” program offered in partnership with the local university, a state funded agency, and the area school district. “Transitions: College and Career Prep” is a free, eight week course that meets for two nights a week for 2.5 hours (Penn State Continuing Education, 2014). The location of this program is in rural central Pennsylvania within approximately an hour drive of multiple postsecondary institutions. The delivery of the program is face-to-face, incorporating online components, such as discussion board posts and class email (Ramsey & Osborn, 2013). I selected this program because of my relationship with the instructors and the partnering university, but most importantly because this context provides a window into the design
and curriculum of a transition program whose funding structure and reporting measures reflect what is most commonly described in the literature.

To identify the participants of this study, I used criterion sampling, which is aimed at identifying participants who will provide rich data and information about the topic of study (Patton, 2002). “Criterion sampling involves selecting cases that meet some predetermined criterion of importance” (Patton, 2002, p. 238). “Transitions: College and Career Prep” requires that students have a high school diploma or equivalent and are contemplating enrollment in higher education. Based on the criteria for participation in the program and the definition of adult learners for this study, all students in the program are well suited to answer the questions of this research. All of the students meet the predetermined criterion of being adult learners contemplating entrance to higher education while participating in a transition program.

Data Collection

While conducting this narrative study, I sought to gather the narratives of the participants to arrive at a better understanding of their experiences and perspectives related to transition and the transition program. Narrative inquiry accounts for the many influences on the experience of transition by emphasizing the role of context in the construction of narratives and the meaning they hold. Narrative inquiry helped me to access the participants’ experiences in the transition program, as well as the social influences that factored into their perception of the transition. Narrative research “begins with the experiences as expressed in lived and told stories of individuals” (Creswell, 2007, p. 54). During the participant interviews, I had to consider “For whom was this story constructed, how was it made and for what purpose? What cultural discourses does

I also had to contemplate my own potential bias that could influence the types of questions that I asked. My work as an adviser and my personal experience has shaped my perspective of the transition to higher education. My reflection on and awareness of my presuppositions helped me to avoid forming an undue prejudice or preference when listening to the participants’ stories. To gain a comprehensive perspective of the participants’ narratives, I gathered multiple sources of data including: observations, interviews of the instructors and participants, participant journals, class discussion posts, and class artifacts. Having a multiplistic representation of participants’ narratives provided a more accurate and holistic view of their stories (Patton, 2002).

**Data Analysis**

To best interpret the narratives of this study, I used hermeneutics, which is described as most appropriate for analyzing narratives of experience (Squire, 2013). Through hermeneutics, researchers “are constructing the reality on the basis of their interpretations of data with the help of participants who provided the data in the study” (Patton, 2002, p. 115). Using this method, I developed my understanding of the meanings of the participants’ narratives. I also came to recognize that although unintentional, my unique experiences influenced how I acquired the participants’ narratives, as well as how I interpreted those narratives (Polkinghorne, 2005).

I was acutely aware that my work as an academic adviser, as well as my personal experiences shaped my overall understanding. However, I also found that my experience as an adviser made me well suited for this type of analysis. It is my job to interpret the
stories that my students present so that I can better understand their needs. The interpretation of an experience to come to the intended meaning of a narrative is an act in which I engage on a daily basis. This is also the fundamental task of hermeneutic analysis.

**Definition of Terms**

**Adult Learners**

Though definitions widely vary, scholars in the field agree that adult learners are not a homogeneous group (Sandman, 2010). Adult learners are a heterogeneous group of varying ages, abilities, characteristics, and circumstances. The literature indicates that “adults become increasingly difficult and complex as individuals. Adult students do not have one set of common characteristics” (Kasworm et al., 2002, p.3). To define adult learners based on age or participation in a specific program type overlooks the complexities of that population. Such complexities create challenges when trying to define adult learners. The more narrow the definition, the more exclusive and limiting.

Ross-Gordon (2011) suggests that adult learners can also be defined based on particular characteristics. Ross-Gordon (2011) defines adult learners as meeting at least one of the following characteristics:

- entry to college delayed by at least one year following high school
- having dependents,
- being a single parent,
- being employed full time,
- being financially independent,
- attending part time,
- and not having a high school diploma.
This definition exemplifies that age does not determine adult status. Individuals are adults when they have taken on the role of being an adult, including “the social, psychological, and or economic roles typically expected of adults in their cultures and collective societies” (Hansman & Mott, 2010, p. 14). Ross-Gordon’s (2011) view of the adult learner addresses the concerns of being too limiting or narrowing, as it accounts for multiple life circumstances that adults typically demonstrate. However, this definition of adult learners is also not overly encompassing, so to not lose sight of the particulars of this population.

**Transition**

Transition is “any event or nonevent that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions and roles” (Anderson et al., 2012, p. 39). Levinson (1996) describes that “a transition... carries the imagery of a turning point, a shift in course, a process of cutting, sifting, separating, and an attempt to resolve contradictions, a time of transformation rather than stability” (p. 28). The notion of transition grows out of crisis theory, evolving from Parke’s (1971) suggestion to use psychosocial transition in place of the term crisis to avoid the negative connotation of being in crisis (Schlossberg, 1984).

**Transition Program**

Transition programs are meant to serve as preparation for entry into higher education (Alamprese, 2004, 2005; OVAE, 2010a; Valentine et al., 2009; Zafft et al., 2006). Transition programs share the goal of removing barriers for adult learners as they pursue higher education (Jenkins, 2004). Due to the preparatory nature of transition programs, participation in a transition program should take place before the first semester of classes (Valentine et al., 2009). In aiding adult students for the preparation of higher
education expectations, students should leave transition programs with a better understanding of their role and responsibilities as students, and should be prepared with enough information to make a decision about whether or not higher education is truly a good fit for their needs (Alamprese, 2005). The ultimate purpose of transition programs is to prepare adult students to enter or re-enter higher education to promote postsecondary completion and persistence (Valentine et al., 2009; Zafft, 2008; Zaff et al., 2006).
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Chapter Overview

This chapter gives a detailed account of the literature on transition, the theories used to inform this study, and transition programs. Attention is given to defining transition, as well as explaining Schlossberg’s Transition Theory (Anderson et al., 2012) and Cross’s (1991) barrier categorizations. As part of the discussion on transition, the relationship between transition and identity are explored. Additionally, the current state of transition programs, including the literature, research and development of such programs is reviewed.

Transition

All individuals experience multiple transitions throughout their lives (Anderson et al., 2012). Transition is part of the life cycle. It is a naturally occurring phenomenon that stems from changes related to time, place, relationships, and our mental state of being. It is transition that moves us from one point of time to another, from one phase to another. When sharing the narratives of our lives, it is usually the transitions that we emphasize: the birth of a child, a promotion, the loss of a loved, a vacation, the purchase of a new home. All of these experiences are changes. Transition marks a time of change in one’s life. It is a period of instability and unknown, which is often stressful (Levinson, 1996). In the literature, crisis is noted as being related to or even being an effect of transition (Levinson, 1996; Parkes, 1971). To experience a crisis means to experience unbalance in one’s world (Parkes, 1971). Transition can be considered a period of crisis, which “is about being suspended in transit- caught between the ending of one life structure and the beginning of another” (Levinson, 1996, p. 35).
Being in crisis suggests an individual is facing “disruptions in significant relationships, challenges to [his/her] basic values and beliefs, role changes, and new demands. Identity development is often a result of resolving crises (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). The process of confronting these experiences can promote cognitive differentiation, self-confidence, and a more mature approach to life” (Schaefer & Moos, 1992, p. 150). Thus, transition often represents a time for growth. It is a time for the reevaluation of one’s previously held beliefs. As we transition, individuals begin to leave their old versions of self behind so that a new self can emerge (Kegan, 1982). Adult learners in transition are reconfiguring their identities, their self-perspectives, and their values (Bamber & Tett, 2000; Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Merriam, 2005; Schlossberg et al., 1989).

Identity and Identity Development

When contemplating identity development in the context of transition, I reviewed the body of literature on the topic including Pearlin and Schooler (1978), Fiske and Chiriboga (1990), Carpenter (1992), Folkman (1992), Kegan (1994), Levinson (1996), Baxter-Magolda (2008) and several others. Through my exploration, I found that the theory of self-authorship as described by Kegan (1994) and later Baxter-Magolda (2008) best exemplifies the relationship between transition, context, and identity development. Self-authorship highlights elements of transition by suggesting that individuals develop over time, especially in situations that cause dissonance (Baxter-Magolda, 2008; Kegan, 1994). Kegan (1994) coined the term “self-authorship” when describing how individuals shift from an externally influenced meaning of the world to an internally influenced meaning of the world. Self-authorship is “the internal capacity to define one’s beliefs,
identity, and social relations” (Baxter-Magolda, 2008, p. 269). The self-authored
ingividual no longer relies on others to define who they are, but rather they define
themselves. The opportunity to develop a self-authored view typically arises when one
faces a challenge that is “accompanied by sufficient support” (Baxter-Magolda, 2008, p.
271), which can facilitate a shift to an internalized way of meaning making. Transition
often challenges individuals to internalize their meaning of the world, prompting
reflection of one’s previously held assumptions and an evaluation of current supports
(Anderson et al., 2012).

For this study, I view identity development through the lens of self-authorship.
However, there are other ways of thinking about identity and identity development. Not
all adult learners in transition will experience personal growth or self-authorship. It is
certainly possible that an individual may experience transition without reflecting on
previous experiences or without calling into question their beliefs and values.
Additionally, personal growth does not necessarily indicate that one changes their
previous ways of viewing the world. Furthermore, there are varying ways to consider
adult and identity development. There are also lifespan development theories suggesting
patterns and projections of development which everyone goes through during their life
cycle (Evans et al., 2010). Other theories give focus on gender, learning, and
spirituality. For as many different ways as there are to view the world, there are
theories.

**Schlossberg’s Transition Theory**

Although mainly categorized under the transition perspective of adult
development, Schlossberg’s Transition Theory is “an eclectic theory that looks at context,
development, life span, and the construction of meaning” (Anderson et al., 2012, p. 36). It includes aspects of identity development as the challenges, decisions, and adjustment present in a time of transition provide opportunity for growth. Schlossberg’s Transition Theory originated from Schlossberg’s (1981) human adaptation theory, which was meant to serve as a means to explain the variance in coping abilities among adults. Through this work Schlossberg (1981) develops the idea that transition can lead to psychological change either with positive or negative implications for the individual. Schlossberg’s (1981) initial conceptual model has undergone several revisions. In its current form, Schlossberg’s Transition Theory is a proposed model of how to support individuals in transition, and “facilitates an understanding of adults in transition and aid[s] them in connecting to the help they need to cope with [change]” (Evans et al., 2010, p. 213).

Due to its applicability, Schlossberg’s Transition Theory has been used in multiple studies regarding individuals in transition and the college environment. Powers (2010) investigated non-traditional male drop-out through the lens of this transition framework. Berner (2012) conducted a phenomenological study examining how community college students transfer to a 4-year institution. Even more recently, DeVilbiss (2014) used Schlossberg’s Transition Theory to better understand the transition from high school to college for conditionally-accepted students. Schlossberg’s Transition Theory is particularly well suited to this study as it was developed to focus on adult transitions, such as moving between careers, relationships, and education.

The components of Schlossberg’s Transition Theory include: stages of the transition, transition type, the 4 “S” System, and the context and impact of the transition
These components are all factors that indicate how an individual is able to cope with a transition. The theory also emphasizes the role of perception in one’s ability to cope, which can be “defined as the changing thoughts and acts that an individual uses to manage the external and/or internal demands of a specific person-environment transaction that is appraised as stressful” (Folkman, 1992, p. 34).

Stages of Transition

The first aspect of Schlossberg’s Transition Theory are the stages of transition. Transition is not a moment in time, but rather a process (Anderson et al., 2012). There are events leading to the transition, and the effects felt after the transition. In Schlossberg’s Transition Theory, the transition process occurs over a period of time and over a series of three phases: moving into, moving through and moving on (Anderson et al., 2012; Schlossberg et al., 1989).

- **Moving into** is the stage in which an individual familiarizes himself with the standards and norms of his new environment.
- **Moving through** describes the stage that occurs once the individual is aware of norms and begins to adapt to the transition. In this phase, the individual begins the adaption to their new role, environment and self.
- **Moving out** is ultimately the end of a transition or multiple transitions that lead an individual to contemplate future changes. As one moves out of a transition, they are moving into another. In this phase, a separation from one’s prior role begins and they start to move into another.

Figure 2.1 is a diagram demonstrating these phases of transition and their relationship to each other. The arrows demonstrate the cyclical flow of transition. From
the moment an individual begins to experience a new role they experience separation from their previous role, thus *moving out* of one phase and *moving into* another. The phase of most stability is the *moving through* phase, which is when the individual has adapted to their circumstances. However, this adaptation is not permanent. Eventually, there will be a change in one’s situation. Transitions can take years, but they are always in motion.

![Schlossberg’s Phases of Transition](image)

**Figure 2.1. Schlossberg’s Phases of Transition**

**4 “S” System**

A main component of the transition framework is the 4 “S” System (Anderson et al., 2012). The four “S”’s are situation, self, support, and strategies. Together, the 4 “S” System identifies factors that can be deemed assets or liabilities as one tries to cope through change (see Figure 2.2).

- *Situation* is the factor that takes into account the events and circumstances of one’s life that impact or are impacted by the transition. These events and circumstances include: the trigger, timing, control, role change, duration,
previous experience, concurrent stress, and assessment of the transition. The situation also includes consideration for multiple transitions occurring at once.

- **Self** is to whom the transition is happening including the characteristics of the individual’s personality. Self also includes the personal and demographic characteristics as well as the psychological resources of the individual.

- **Support** is the variable that recognizes the external help that is available. This includes social support types such as family and friendships, as well as institutional supports.

- **Strategies** are ways in which a person copes and reflects the coping resources the individual may use. Strategies may include asking for more information, taking action, or the inhibition of action.

Figure 2.2 depicts how the components of the 4 “S” System work together. The smaller arrow coming from the left, points toward these components to indicate the prompting event for the transition: the *moving into* phase. As transition is always in motion, the 4 “S” System is represented in the larger arrow suggesting movement. Once having assessed the transition using the 4 “S” System individuals will begin to move through the initial onset, and eventually will move out of that transition all together. The use of the circular arrow in the depiction of the 4 “S” System demonstrates that situation, self, support, and strategies are all fluid categories acting upon one another. For example, one’s situation may very well influence the available supports or the strategies that they use.
Transition Types

In addition to the 4 “S” System, the type of transition also influences how an individual responds and copes with change (Anderson et al., 2012). The transition type is determined by the specific event that prompted that transition. Events are occurrences within one’s lifespan that create change and nonevents are those events that are supposed to occur, but do not (Evans et al., 2010). There are two types of events, lifespan and unpredictable. These event types correlate to anticipated and unanticipated transitions.

- *Anticipated transitions* are prompted by lifespan events, which are those that can be generally predicted or assumed. These types of transitions include marriage, childbirth, relocation, employment and retirement.

- *Unanticipated transitions* are the unpredictable events that inevitably occur during one’s life that are not the result of changes related to the typical life-cycle. These types of transitions include loss of employment, divorce,
premature death, and illness. Unanticipated transitions often pose more challenge because they are unplanned leaving less opportunity for preparation (Fouad & Bynner, 2008).

Events are classified as nonevents if it is probable they will occur and do not. If one is expecting an event that does not occur, they must deal with the transition that comes as they change courses. Nonevents have four classifications, which are: personal, ripple, resultant, and delayed.

- **Personal nonevents** are “related to individual aspirations” (Evans et al., 2010, p. 215). For example, an expected promotion that does not come to fruition.

- **Ripple nonevents** are nonevents that happen to someone else, but indirectly impact the individual. An example of a ripple nonevent is the canceled wedding of one’s child.

- **Resultant nonevents** are caused by the occurrence of an event. For example, as a result of being unexpectedly relocated, a family may be unable to purchase the home they had been planning to buy.

- **Delayed nonevents** are the result of an event that did not happen but still might. Women experiencing fertility issues may be experiencing a delayed nonevent, as they have not been able to have a child as planned, but it is still possible that it will occur at a later time.

Figure 2.3 is a depiction of the different events and nonevents that prompt transitions. As previously discussed and demonstrated in Figure 2.3, events are categorized as either lifespan or unpredictable. The nonevent category types are also depicted and include: personal, ripple, resultant and delayed.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Events</th>
<th>Nonevents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Lifespan</strong></td>
<td><strong>Unpredictable</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Predictable events. i.e. childbirth or relocation</td>
<td>Events not typical to the lifespan. i.e. divorce, job loss, or illness</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2.3. Event Types that Prompt Transition

**Context and Impact**

Context and impact are other factors in Schlossberg’s Transition Theory (Anderson et al., 2012). These factors are also related to one’s ability to cope. Context is the setting in which the transition is taking place and one’s relationship to that transition (Evans et al., 2010). Social and environmental factors contribute to the context of the transition. Since transition is located in a particular moment in time based on a specific series of events or nonevents, it cannot be separated from the larger social context (Folkman, 1992).

Impact is the extent to which one’s daily life will be impacted by the transition (Anderson et al., 2012). The impact of the transition may be thought of as the logistics, such as the need for additional childcare, but it may also be thought of as the mental toll that it takes on the individual. The greater the impact that a transition has on one’s life, the more difficult it may be to cope with that transition. Impact is related to the individual’s perception of the transition. The pre and post environment of the transition, as well as available resources, only impact the ability to adapt to the transition as much as
they impact one’s assumption about one’s self and the world- their perception (Schlossberg, 1981).

**Perception**

Perception is perhaps the single most important factor in how an individual copes with transition (Anderson et al., 2012). One’s perception of the transition is related to an intake of their assets and abilities, as highlighted by the 4 “S” System. Perception is “the individual’s appraisal of the transition” (p.43). It is necessary to understand adult learners’ perceptions, their reactions to transition, and the available coping resources to understand their transition experience (Arthur & Hiebert, 2011). Adults who perceive the transition with a positive outlook are more able to cope and adjust to change (Anderson et al., 2012). Successful coping is related to one’s appraisal of available resources and the reality of the situation causing stress (Carpenter, 1992; Folkman, 1992). This cognitive appraisal influences one’s perception of the transition (Anderson, et al., 2012), which largely depends the available resources that can help them to cope (Fiske & Chiriboga, 1990).

In addition to the cognitive appraisal of the situation, perception is also based on one’s previous experiences, which were embedded in a particular environment and social context. Experience and the meaning we make from experience informs our identities. The relationship between identity and context is reciprocal. People live in the context of experiences that influence who we as human beings are and who we become. Yet, individuals are not blank canvases. We have our own identities which shape how context is viewed suggesting that “the human being is an ‘individual’ and ‘embeddual’” (Kegan, 1982, p. 116). Appiah (2005) explains the relationship of identity and context when
expressing that “an identity is always articulated through concepts (and practices) made available to you by religion, society, school and state mediated by family, peers, and friends” (p. 20). Without consideration for context when reflecting upon aspects related to identity and perception, one “conceals, distorts, or devalues, the human reality of individuals who achieve identity and meaning from the cultures, traditions, communities, and roles in which they are embedded” (Appiah, 2005, p. 190).

**Barriers**

Although Schlossberg’s Transition Theory provides a guide for investigating the internal and external factors that influence transition, it does not fully define or categorize those factors in relation to the context of higher education. For a more comprehensive view of the internal and external circumstances of the transition to postsecondary education, I turn to Cross’s (1991) explanation of barriers to participation in higher education. These barriers shape the circumstances that influence one’s perception of a particular situation (Anderson et al., 2012) and “help to explain part of the complexity and the dynamics” of participation in higher education on adult lives (Kasworm et al., 2002, p. 25).

Cross (1981) identified these barrier types in her original survey research of deterrents to adult learner participation in higher education. These barrier types were revisited in Cross’s (1991) updated account of obstacles adult students encounter in higher education. The barrier types Cross (1991) identified include: institutional, situational, and dispositional barriers.
• **Situational barriers** include lack of time, financial issues, child care, job responsibilities, familial responsibilities, and issues related to transportation (Genco, 2007; Hardin, 2008; Harris & Brooks, 1998; Malhotra et al., 2007).

• **Institutional barriers** are those imposed by a college, university, or other formalized program (Cross, 1991).

• **Dispositional barriers** are those related to one’s self-perception or attitude, such as lack of self-confidence, lack of commitment, fear of change, or feelings of guilt because of being in school (Harris & Brooks, 1998).

While institutional, situational, and dispositional barriers may seem to have clear cut divisions, “in fact it is often difficult to categorize potential barriers into one and only one category” (Harris & Brooks, 1998, p. 226). As such the classifications of dispositional, institutional, and situational barriers are for heuristic purposes.

**Situational Barriers**

Situational barriers are the most cited in survey research (Cross, 1991). The situational barriers most frequently cited are time and money, which also relate to institutional barriers (Harris & Brooks, 1998). Financial issues especially plague adult students due to the increasing costs of higher education (Sandmann, 2010). Students must not only fund their education, but they must also be able to provide for their families (Hardin, 2008; Harris & Brooks, 1998). It is often the case that those who have the time to go back to school are those who do not have the money, while those who do not have the time do have the money (Cross, 1991).

Situational barriers also take shape in the lack of resources available to adult learners. Adult learners often do not have the same resources and networks when
transitioning to higher education as traditional-aged students (Zafft, 2008). Most adults do not report a lack of information as an issue (Cross, 1991). However, one does not know what one does not know. Adult learners have often been away from the school environment for prolonged periods of time (Hardin, 2008; Kasworm et al., 2002) and their knowledge of processes and procedures may be outdated. This combination of limited resources and lack of knowledge about current higher education practices is a disadvantage for adult learners and indicates a lack of cultural capital (Alamprese, 2005; Bowl, 2001; Hardin, 2008; Reay, 2002).

In this context, cultural capital reflects the support systems and networks that individuals have that allow them to more readily access higher education. Merton (1972) aptly explains a lack of cultural capital in his discussion of insiders and outsiders by stating evidence for “the problem of patterned differentials among social groups and strata in access to certain types of knowledge….Particular groups in each moment of history have monopolistic access to particular kinds of knowledge” (p.11). Unfortunately for adult learners, they are often the outsiders in Merton’s (1972) discussion: the group that does not have access to “social and cultural truth” because they “have not engaged in the run of experiences that makes up [higher education]” (p. 15).

**Institutional Barriers**

Institutional barriers come in second to situational barriers on surveys (Cross, 1991). Institutional barriers stem from issues posed by colleges and universities, such as “restricted class schedules, inadequate laboratories, too few hours for the library, procedural red tape, inappropriate entry requirements, [and] unavailability of advisers” (p. 28). Institutional barriers often are results of policies and procedures that cause
hardships for adult students (Sandmann, 2010). The most commonly discussed institutional barriers are those related to location and schedule (Cross, 1991).

When coming back to school, adult learners are often confronted with “a different set of rules, regulations, norms and expectations” (Kasworm et al., 2002, p. 63). Unfortunately, colleges and universities typically do not offer high levels of transition support to returning or entering adult students (Zafft, 2008; Zafft et al., 2006). Inadequate supports pose institutional barriers for adult learners, often leaving them feeling marginalized and detached from the institution (Sandmann, 2010). This feeling of marginalization lends itself to negative thoughts about the transition to higher education (Schlossberg et al., 1989), which can hinder the ability to cope (Carpenter, 1992; Fiske & Chiriboga, 1990; Folkman, 1992).

**Dispositional Barriers**

Dispositional barriers were the least frequently reported barrier type in Cross’s (1991) findings. Dispositional barriers are those related to the individual’s perception of self and their perception of their prior experiences (Hardin, 2008; Harris & Brooks, 1998; Kasworm, 2008; Malhotra et al., 2007). Dispositional barriers are also influenced by one’s perception of their academic abilities, which are commonly based on poor previous experiences that generally lead to low self-esteem (Genco, 2007; Hardin, 2008; Harris & Brooks, 1998; Kasworm, 2008; O’Donnell & Tobbell, 2007). Due to past negative educational experiences, adult learners tend to alienate themselves and often do not seek out the help that is available (Kasworm et al., 2002; Schlossberg et al., 1989). Carpenter and Scott (1992) explain, “Even when social support is available, effective use of that resource may be moderated by characteristics of the individual” (p. 102).
Due to social norms, “the ‘real’ importance of dispositional barriers is probably underestimated” (Cross, 1991, p. 106). Generally, it is considered more socially acceptable to blame external forces for a lack of success or difficulty rather than internal ones. For example, it is more socially acceptable to blame time constraints for poor performance rather than admitting to low self-esteem. Additionally, blaming external forces allows the individual to self-preserve. Researching the reasons behind educational disinterest would likely bring up dispositional barriers (Cross, 1991).

**Alternative Perspectives**

Although adult learners face many challenges in higher education, their institutional, situational, and dispositional circumstances may not pose barriers. These categories also highlight potential areas of support. Depending on the institution, there may be robust adult learner resources that could positively influence the transition experience. Employers may also provide institutional support, such as allowing for flexible hours or even tuition reimbursement. The family and friends may also provide situational support instead of barriers. It may be that one’s situation provides an opportunity for enrolling in college rather than a hindrance. Additionally, one’s dispositional qualities “can be formidable barriers to the stressful consequences of social strains” (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978, p. 5). A positive self-perception can actually help to remove barriers and promote academic success (Chemers, Hu, & Garcia, 2001).

**Transition Programs**

In addition to the theoretical basis, this research is informed by the literature on transition programs. Dating back to 1993, the U.S Department of Education funded programs to support English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) students before
their transition to college in an effort to save financial aid money (Zafft et al., 2006). These transition programs provided the “development of Individual Educational Plans, small group workshops with a bilingual program counselor to address academic goals and overcome barriers, and support with the college admission and financial aid processes” (Zafft et al., 2006, p. 10). Since that time, transition programs have been implemented to help prepare low-skilled or underprepared students for postsecondary coursework (Alamprese 2005; Valentine et al., 2009).

To address the needs of adult learners in transition, different models for transition programs have emerged over the years (Valentine et al., 2009). The target populations for these programs ranges from adult learners with a GED certificate to those with some college-level coursework. Transition programs vary from intensive academic advising and tutoring to comprehensive approaches that combine multiple services (Jenkins, 2004). Key differences in these programs include target populations, preparatory or supportive purposes, and intended outcomes for students (Valentine et al., 2009). The core elements of transition programs include addressing gaps in academic preparation, career exploration, academic counseling and appropriate assessments to determine college readiness.

**Transition Program Models**

Due to the limited information on transition program curriculum, design or development, the New England Literacy Resource Center (NELRC) surveyed adult education centers with emphasis on adult learner transition to college to identify the various transition program models (Zafft et al., 2006). To date, this survey research provides the most detail on various transition programs across the United States. Of the
transition programs that were surveyed, five transition models were identified. These models include: advising, GED-Plus, English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), Career Pathways, and College Preparatory focuses. The advising model generally operates through colleges and universities. This model offers advising on academics, admission processes and financial aid for prospective students. The GED-Plus model offers GED instruction specifically for students interested in entering postsecondary education. This model goes beyond the typical GED curriculum to incorporate study skills and college counseling. The ESOL model is targeted for adult learners whose first language is not English. This model focuses on the advancement of language skills to help students meet admission standards for entrance to college. The Career Pathways model places the most emphasis on entering higher education for improved employment prospects. The curriculum of the Career Pathways model focuses on skill development related to those needed for a particular job. Lastly, the College Preparatory model gives the most emphasis to creating a college-like environment and structure to accurately depict college expectations and demands. This model also includes academic counseling and learning communities.

State and Federal Initiatives

The development of transition programs has been encouraged on both the state and federal levels. One example of a state-level initiative is the Adult Basic Education (ABE) to College Transition Project. This project was launched in 2000 by the National College Transition Network (NCTN) to further develop the transition curriculum for ABE programs. The project was funded through the Nellie Mae Education Foundation in collaboration with the New England Literacy Resource Center (NELRC). The ABE to
College Transition Project provided transition services to adult students pursuing higher education and supported ABE programs in the development of transition services to increase adult student readiness for college (Almprese, 2004). The ABE to College Transition project followed the College Preparatory model and offered cost free programs to provide instruction in reading, writing, math, technology use, and study skills. The programs also collaborated with local colleges and universities to provide general information about the terminology, policies and procedures in such settings. Additionally, students were given instruction on how to navigate the college application and financial aid processes (Zafft et al., 2006). Educational and career counseling were also provided. Between 2000 and 2007, the ABE to College Transition Project provided funding to 25 ABE programs located in six New England states and partnered with over 40 postsecondary institutions in New England (Zafft et al., 2006). Most of the 25 programs obtained additional private funding in order to provide transition services. Four states- Maine, Connecticut, Rhode Island and New Hampshire- institutionalized their transition programs with public funding.

Another example of a state-level initiative is the College Connection Program offered through the Colorado Community College System. The College Connection program was an eight week accelerated bridge course developed to “create innovative transition programs and practices to promote… successful transition… to community colleges” (Bragg, 2010, p. ii). Starting with five sites, the program expanded in the second year to include seven community colleges of the Colorado Community College System. The College Connection Program was state-run, but federally funded. Funding
An example on the federal level is the Adult Basic Education Career Connections (ABECC) project. In 2007, the OVAE, in collaboration with the federal agencies of Labor, Education, and Health and Human Services, defined the role and objectives of the ABECC project (OVAE, 2013). The objective of the project was to aid adults in their return to postsecondary education in order to be employable in competitive fields (OVAE, 2009). From 2007 to 2009, the ABECC project funded $75,000 to five ABE sites across the country. The ABECC project was implemented through the partnership of local institutions and agencies ranging from community and technical colleges to vocational offices and 4-year institutions.

**Funding**

As demonstrated by the previous examples, transition program curriculum and offerings are frequently tied to funding and grant requirements (Bragg, 2010; Zafft, 2008; Zafft et al., 2006). Funding impacts course design, including program curriculum, testing, evaluation, and target audience (Bragg, 2010). The type of transition program employed is often related to state initiatives (Zafft et al., 2006), which are tied to the funding provided on the federal level. Under the OVAE branch of the U.S. Department of Education, the Division of Adult Education and Literacy (DAEL) provides funds to states for adult education and literacy programs, including transition programs (OVAE, 2014). It is then up to the state to distribute funds to local agencies. Each state is able to set its own requirements regarding funding, however, those requirements must comply with the National Reporting System (NRS) (Zafft, 2008).
In August, 1998, the NRS was implemented in an attempt to hold states accountable for performance measures of adult education programs, including the postsecondary enrollment and educational attainment of transition program participants (Office of Career, Technical and Adult Education, n.d.). The NRS collects data on postsecondary enrollment after participation in adult education programs, as well as data on employment status (Zafft, 2008). As a result of these reporting measures, states often select transition program models that will best advance the initiatives of worker placement (Zafft et al., 2006). Maine, Connecticut, Oregon and Kentucky all emphasize the role of transition programs to enhance economic growth. Each state has opted for a transition program model thought to best meet workforce needs. The OVAE recognizes the efforts of these states, highlighting them as having noteworthy practices (2010b).

Conclusion

Even with knowledge of common goals, funding practices, and reporting mechanisms, there is still much unknown about the influence of participation in transition programs on the experiences of adult learners attempting to enter higher education. As described in this chapter, Schlossberg’s Transition Theory (2012) and Cross’s (1991) categorization of student barriers provide a theoretical basis for further investigation into the narratives of adult learners enrolled in a transition program. When exploring narratives regarding transition, it is important to give special consideration to the influence of identity and the context of the transition. Detailed in the next chapter is the methodology that was used to ensure attention be given to the contextual nature of transition and the role of identity.
Chapter 3: Methodology

Chapter Overview

This chapter begins by revisiting the research questions of this study. This chapter also outlines the methods of this study, including the approaches to data collection (narrative inquiry) and analysis (hermeneutics). In addition, my reasons for selecting this particular approach, as well as the specific actions I took to execute the data collection and analysis are discussed in this chapter. Throughout my description of the research process, I explore my role and potential biases. Lastly, evaluative criteria for qualitative research is used to explore the “goodness” (Armino & Hultgren, 2002, p. 449) of this study.

Research Questions

Through my review of the literature regarding transition programs, I found there was a lack of the adult learner perspective in the research. Therefore, one goal of this study is to account for how adult learners experience and perceive participation in a transition program. I also found that there was little information on the outcomes associated with participation in transition programs. As such, another goal of this study is to determine if transition programs have any influence on the participants’ self-perceptions in relation to the experience of transition. Moreover, the literature on adult learner barriers to participation in higher education predominantly references Cross’s (1981) survey research, which is now thirty years old. Thus, the last goal of this study is to give an updated account of the barriers that adult learners face when seeking entrance to higher education. To address the gaps in the literature and achieve these goals, this study seeks to answer the following research questions:
• How do adult learners participating in a transition program describe their experiences as they contemplate enrollment to higher education?

• What is the impact of a transition program on participants’ perceptions of self and their ability to transition to higher education?

• To what extent do earlier categorizations of barriers and challenges of participation in higher education reflect the experiences of adult learners enrolled in a transition program?

Qualitative Research

Understanding of transition and the response to it requires that it “be viewed within a social context and as part of a dynamic social process” (Folkman, 1992, p. 44). To better understand transition as it is lived, I turn to qualitative research whose, “primary purpose” according to Polkinghorne (2005) “is to describe and clarify experience as it is lived and constituted in awareness” (p. 138). Anzaldúa (1987) emphasizes that “it is not enough to stand on the opposite river bank, shouting questions” (p. 78). In order to gain an authentic understanding of experiences, the qualitative researcher must position himself to see those experiences unfold in a natural state (Schram, 2005). Qualitative research methods emphasize that knowledge is situated within a particular context (Flick, 2009). This emphasis on context is best suited for the study of transition, but also aligns well with my views as a researcher, which fall under the constructivist paradigm. Constructivism emphasizes the need to investigate phenomena embedded in reality and the interpretation of that reality (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011). According to Schwandt (1998) constructivist assumptions “share the
goal of understanding the complex world of lived experience from the point of view of those who live it” (p. 221).

There are multiple perspectives and positions on qualitative research based on researcher preferences, philosophies and ideals. It is a “bricolage” between the pragmatic, strategic and self-reflective” (Nelson, Treichler, & Grossberg, 1992, p. 2, as cited in Erickson, 2011). Qualitative inquiry “aims to address questions concerned with developing an understanding of the meaning and experience dimensions of humans’ lives and social worlds” (Fossey et al., 2002, p. 717). Qualitative researchers attempt to gain a deeper understanding of an experience, and to know what something means to an individual (Patton, 2002).

**Coming to the Method**

Falling under the qualitative research umbrella, I initially considered this study to be an intrinsic, multiple-case study using narrative inquiry for data collection. Intrinsic case studies have a similar focus as narrative research (Creswell, 2007) because they rely on the narrative descriptions of participants (Sake, 1995). Riessman (2008) finds that narrative inquiry is case-centered because it requires the close investigation of individual cases. The narratives of this study are like cases: they are their own unique account of experiences and events related to participation in a transition program. However, unlike a case, each narrative is unbounded. Case studies are bounded: they are intended to remain within the confines of a predetermined setting.

For this study, I thought that “Transitions Prep” would serve as the bounded setting for a case study. Yet, one’s perspective of their transition and their experiences in a transition program is informed by their specific context, which stems beyond the doors
of the classroom. I sought to know the participants’ stories and lived experiences. My goal was to gain an all-encompassing view of the transition experience by taking participants’ environments and contexts, including the transition program, into account. Throughout the study, I came to realize that the transition program did not provide a bounded setting, it was part of the multiple factors that influence how the transition was experienced. Thus, I concluded that this study was not focused on bounded cases, but the stories of individuals and is therefore a narrative study.

**Narrative Inquiry**

Connelly and Clandinin (1990, 2006) find that the development of narrative inquiry is founded in the view that humans lead storied lives. In narrative inquiry, researchers seek the narratives of participants to gain insight and knowledge into a particular topic through the experiences of others. There is no other way to represent “lived time” (Bruner, 2004, p. 692) than through narrative as it is “central to human experience and existence, providing opportunity to share the nature and order of events at particular times in history” (Bold, 2012, pp. 17-18). I selected narrative inquiry because it is a vehicle to a deeper understanding about lived experiences, and provides the ability to investigate the past, present, and future. For narrative researchers, “the central concern is not how narrative as text is constructed, but rather how it operates as an instrument of mind in the construction of reality” (Bold, 2012, pp. 5-6).

I also selected narrative inquiry because of its relationship to transition. Both transition and narrative are temporal (Anderson et al., 2012; Clandinin & Rosiek, 2006). The temporality of narrative is the notion that “narratives structure our subjective experience of time. They thereby condition our sense and understanding of time”
Narrative and transition are positioned within time and are related to the particular context of that situation. As context changes or one’s view of a situation is reflected upon, their narrative or perspective of transition may evolve (Anderson et al., 2012). Additionally, perception is given critical consideration in narrative inquiry because “narrativization tells not only about past actions but how individuals understand those actions, that is, meaning” (Riessman, 1993, p. 9). Likewise, perception of the transition is how one makes meaning of the experience (Anderson et al., 2012; Schlossberg et al., 1989). Narrative and transition may also influence one’s construction of their identity. Narrative, or narrative ways of knowing, indicates that individuals come to understand their experiences through narrative (Rossiter, 2002). Narrative inquiry provides insight into growth and identity development (Clark & Rossiter, 2006). The experience of transition also provides an opportunity for growth, and often facilitates new meaning making (Anderson et al., 2012; Kegan, 1982).

Role of the Researcher

In narrative inquiry, the researcher plays an active and essential role in the formation of participants’ stories. Researchers may inadvertently misrepresent the intentions of participants’ narratives if they do not consider their own belief systems and the cultural norms that influence their interpretations. Researchers must be culturally aware, to avoid colonialism, white washing, hegemony, imperialism, etc. (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007). To achieve this, the researcher must approach narrative inquiry with a sense of “negotiation, respect, mutuality and openness to multiple voices” (Clandinin, 2006, p. 52). There is a need for a balance between the researcher's intentions and the final product of the narrative (Schram, 2005). Narrative researchers “need to find ways
to inquire into participants’ experiences, their own experiences as well as the co-
constructed experiences developed through the relational inquiry process” (Clandinin, 2006, p. 47).

Although unintentional, through my questions and responses I helped to shape the stories that the participants shared. When asking questions, I had to respect the boundaries of the participants, while also seeking a full account of their experiences. I also had to be careful not influence the participant to tell a particular version of their narrative. Throughout this study, I’ve viewed my primary role as the caretaker of the participants’ stories. It is my responsibility to portray each narrative in the way the narrator intended (Schram, 2005).

**Researcher Bias**

It is essential that narrative researchers explore and disclose presuppositions and biases (Clandinin, 2006). Researcher bias can influence the collection and analysis of data. I have come to categorize my biases as personal and professional. On a personal level, my transition to higher education as a graduate student has given me a negative connotation of the experience. On a professional level, I work at the university partnered with the program being explored. I have also come to know and respect the instructors in a professional capacity. Thus, I went into this study with a positive view of the investigated transition program. I addressed my personal biases by heightening my awareness of them through continual reflection and journaling.

Additionally, my work as academic adviser has given me a very specific sense of what adult learners need as they transition to higher education. The participants of this study frequently used my expertise as an adviser to gain more information about
academic policies, major choices, and other advising related topics. I quickly realized that being an academic adviser greatly influenced my perception of adult learner experiences. I used language from my profession in my reflections. I witnessed university strengths and weaknesses from the point of view of an adviser. I had expectations for how the university should handle the enrollment of the participants. Furthermore, my familiarity with the university gives me unique knowledge about the complexities of the transition to higher education.

In order to address my bias as an adviser, I began to record when my role as a researcher and my role as an adviser came in conflict. I also began to note when I found myself changing between researcher and adviser. In some ways, this is like code switching, which occurs when individuals change their use of language to best suit the environment. For myself, I began changing my language and behaviors to reflect the role that was most appropriate for that particular situation. This “switching” of roles felt very similar to putting on a performance. I was aware that I was portraying a particular character and knowledge of that helped me to step outside of that character to see the larger picture.

**Research Setting**

I came to determine the research setting of this study during my exploration of available resources for my advisees. As part of my advising role, and before this study was even conceptualized, the instructors of the “Transitions: College and Career Prep” program allowed me to observe the class. My role as an adviser initiated my relationship with the instructors, and admittedly presented me with an advantageous opportunity to research the program. However, the “Transitions: College and Career Prep” program
was selected for reasons beyond my rapport with the instructors or role as an adviser. The program’s goals and objectives to facilitate a successful transition to higher education for adult learners address the research questions of this study. Additionally, this context provides a window into the design and curriculum of a transition program whose funding structure and reporting measures reflect what has been noted in the literature. Moreover, “Transitions: College and Career Prep” is an example of the College Preparatory transition program model, which has been identified in the literature as one of the five main model types. Lastly, all students in the program are adult learners in transition — the target population of this study.

The “Transitions: College and Career Prep” program, hereby called, “Transitions Prep” originated from an idea had by Marissa, one of the instructors. For the purposes of this research, all participants have been given pseudonyms, including the instructors. After several years of teaching adult education courses, the funding for Marissa’s programs stopped. The loss of funding coincided with her participation at a conference that had a session on programs to help adult learners prepare to enter higher education. Having been an adult learner herself, Marissa felt strongly about the need to provide services for adults contemplating postsecondary enrollment. Marissa decided to write a proposal for a transition program.

At that time, the area school district also lost funding for some of its adult education programs. Marissa reached out to a contact at the local university and “one thing led to another and the university and the school district really liked the idea” (Marissa, Interview). Coincidentally, Sarah, the other “Transitions Prep” instructor, taught for one of the programs that was cut at the school district. Sarah explained “at the
same time that we lost our program at [the local school district], the local intermediate unit was trying to put together...this transitions class and the reason they asked me to do it was the last classes that I was teaching -ESL for state funded purposes-I was teaching on a grant for transitioning adults into secondary education” (Sarah, Interview).

In order to obtain funding for “Transitions Prep,” Sarah, representing the school district, also taught additional GED and ABE courses. Marissa, representing Central Intermediate Unit 10, a state-run center, taught an additional basic math course. The additional ABE and GED components are what allowed for state funds to partially pay for the instructors of the course (Esposito, 2014). Students in the transition program do not need to participate in all three courses- ABE/GED instruction, basic math instruction, and “Transitions Prep”- but they are able to do so. The partnering university provides the space for the instruction and all marketing materials.

Although the transition program is offered in partnership with the local university, students are able to explore any postsecondary option of interest (Esposito, 2014). The instructors use a co-teaching model (Ramsey & Osborn, 2013). Throughout the eight-week course, students learn research, writing, and presentation skills that culminate in a final paper and presentation of one’s desired career path and future plans to achieve their goals (Ramsey & Osmond, 2013). This project also incorporates basic computer skills and study skills while promoting exploration of postsecondary options that will meet students’ career goals. The curriculum is aimed at:

- “improving study skills, including time management, test-taking, note-taking, and general organization;
- improving reading comprehension;
• developing basic research, college-level writing, and presentation skills;
• developing a personal educational plan through career exploration;
• increasing basic computer skills, including Word, PowerPoint, Internet, and email;
• and helping [students] understand available resources to help finance [their] educational plan[s]” (Penn State Continuing Education, 2014).

The advertisement for “Transitions Prep” is largely referral based, although newspaper ads are also used as a method of recruitment. Advertising for the course has been scaled down, which Marissa attributes to a smaller university budget. Previously, there were also television and radio ads, along with information sessions. Prior to enrollment in “Transitions Prep,” interested students must speak with one of the instructors. The instructors use this intake process to make sure that students are appropriate for the course and are willing to make the time commitment. Students in “Transitions Prep” span a vast spectrum in regard to previous education and preparedness for postsecondary enrollment. Minimally, students in the program must have earned their high school diploma or GED (Penn State Continuing Education, 2014). Students are usually returning adult learners contemplating enrollment at a college, university, or vocational school (Esposito, 2014). However, participants may also be young adults who delayed college entrance.

**Sample Population**

The students in “Transitions Prep” served as the sample population for this study. In qualitative research, considerations for sampling are quite practical: appropriateness and adequacy (Morse & Field, 1995). These two considerations suggest “that the
researcher should be pragmatic and flexible in their approach to sampling and that an adequate sample size is one that sufficiently answers the research question” (O’Reilly & Parker, 2012, p. 192). I used criterion sampling (Creswell, 2007), which ensures that “cases that are likely to be information rich” (Patton, 2002, p. 238). The criteria for this study included all of the following:

- has adult learner status
- currently enrolled in a transition program
- considering enrollment in postsecondary education.

“Transitions Prep had the same requirements for participation in the program as I had for this research- adult learners considering entrance to postsecondary education while enrolled in a transition program. Therefore, all students in the program met the criteria to participate in the study.

The participants of this study volunteered during the second “Transitions Prep” class. At this time, I provided an overview of the study including the purpose and intended outcomes. I also outlined participant requirements such as, time commitment, length of the study, and required activities. All six of the students in “Transitions Prep” volunteered for the study. Of those six volunteers, five were able to participate in some capacity and four were able to complete the study in its entirety. The participants ranged from 25 to 64 years old. All participants had some experience with postsecondary education, but the extent of their experiences ranged from having taken a few courses, to completing a technical program, to having earned a college degree.
Data Collection

To gain a comprehensive view of participants’ and their experiences, I collected several different types of data. Having multiple data sources allows for a deeper understanding of participants’ narratives (Yin, 2009). Multiple sources of data also increase the “‘goodness’... [of a qualitative study, which] allows for the language of situatedness, trustworthiness, and authenticity, as well as the idea of being strong in spirit, which is the aim of human science research” (Arminio & Hultgren, 2002, p. 449). The use of multiple data sources is referred as “data triangulation” (Patton, 2002, p.247). The aim of triangulation is to test for consistency (Patton, 2002), which is a criterion for evaluating qualitative research (Leininger, 1994). Holding true to this principle, data collection for this study captured five data sources: observations of the class, interviews of the instructors and participants, participant journals, class discussions posts, and class artifacts. These data sources give multiple views of the participants’ narratives. All of these sources work together to output one comprehensive narrative for each participant.

Observation

The first data source of this study was participant observation. Participant observation is a research approach “characterized by a prolonged period of contact with subjects in the place in which they normally spend their time” (Bogdan, 1973, p. 303). I used unstructured observation, which “is used to understand and interpret cultural behavior. It is based within the interpretivist/constructivist paradigm that acknowledges the importance of context and the construction of knowledge between the researcher and the researched” (Mulhall, 2003, p. 306). The word “unstructured” is not to insinuate
unplanned or “unsystematic” (p. 307). It simply suggests that I did not enter the observation with an agenda or specific behaviors to observe. I attempted to become part of the classroom environment to avoid disruption to the typical dynamics: to be “unobtrusive” (Bodgan, 1973, p. 305).

Throughout the program, there were three observations of participants in the classroom setting. The first observation of the participants occurred during the second week of the program, and after participant recruitment. The second observation occurred at the midway point of the program, and the third observation was of the last class during which time participants’ presented their final papers for the program. These observations gave context to the participants’ narratives and allowed for first hand observations of the experiences the participants discussed in their interviews. These observations also allowed for exploration of naturally occurring talk (Chase, 2011), which gave me insight into the authentic participant interactions with each other and the instructors.

During these observations, I sat in the back of the room behind all of the participants. Although it was my goal to remain inconspicuous, there were several instances when the instructors or participants directed questions at me, asking for my expertise related to academic advising. Being invited to participate in the class was not my goal or intent, but I find that it allowed me to develop trusting relationships with participants. I find that their view of me as part of the class, and not an outsider observing it, gave me a more genuine perspective of classroom environment and participants’ personalities.

One challenge that stemmed from my inclusion in the course was the need for me to engage in active listening and be sure to observe behaviors, which are just as important
to note as verbal communication (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). I had to actively separate what I was observing from what I was being asked to contribute. Sitting in the back of the room helped me to see participants’ body language and demeanor, which may have been lost on me if I were only focused on listening instead of fully observing. I also had to balance between taking notes and actively observing. To achieve this balance, I recorded information that I found to be instrumental in furthering my understanding of the participants’ transitions, but I did not seek to record every interaction.

**Interviews**

I decided to use semi-structured interviews to encourage the participants to “attend to and tell about important moments in their lives” (Riessman, 1993, p. 54). I wanted participants to feel at ease and conversational. I sought to allow for flexibility by using a list of general topics and open-ended questions to explore (Galletta, 2013). To create a conversational flow, I used “a set of questions that guide[d] the interview rather than dictate its direction” (Bold, 2012, p. 95). The questions for these interviews are included in Appendix A. The first interview questions were based on my initial observation, as well as findings in the literature to elucidate new information about participants’ experiences in the transition program. The second set of interview questions included follow-up questions from the first interview. During the interviews, it was necessary to minimize interruptions (Riessman, 1997), to help “[transform] the interviewee-interviewer relationship into one of narrator and listener” (Chase, 2011, p. 423). I minimized interruptions by conducting the interviews in private, quiet places such as my office or the “Transitions Prep” classroom.
With the exception of one participant who was only able to be interviewed once, participants gave two interviews. The first interview took place during the beginning two weeks of the transition program and the second interview took place during the last two weeks of the program. Participants were given their transcriptions within two weeks after each interview. They were provided the hard copy of the transcriptions of the first interview before the second occurred to allow them the opportunity to clarify meaning. The transcriptions of the second interview were emailed to each participant. The interviews were recorded so I was able to revisit and fully investigate the participants’ responses. After the interviews, I took the recommendation of Savin-Baden and Van Niekerk (2007) and wrote summaries of the interaction to gauge my perspective.

I also conducted interviews of the two instructors to get a full sense of the participants and how they engaged in the transition program. The interviews with the instructors took place about midway through the program. By this point, the instructors had developed a rapport with the participants and could speak to the class dynamics. The instructors provided information regarding the structure and development of the program, as well as their backgrounds. The instructor interviews helped to give a holistic picture of the participants’ experiences and a deeper understanding about the program curriculum, funding, and purpose.

**Journals**

In addition to interviews and observation, participants were asked to write at least one journal entry every-other week during the program for a minimum of four entries. I sought to gather journal entries because journaling provokes thought and self-reflection
(Bold, 2012). It also promotes critical reflection of one’s experiences through narration. This is particularly important for narrative analysis and the exploration of the transition experience because it facilitates meaning making, growth and development (Clark, 2010; Elliot, 2005). Growth and development are also characteristics of transition (Anderson et al., 2012). Through the journal entries, I gained a glimpse of the meaning making and growth that occurred throughout the participants’ transitions and their experiences in the transition program. The following prompts were given as a guide to help promote the participants’ reflection on their perspectives and experiences:

1) Based on your recent experiences, how are you feeling about your decision to contemplate furthering your education?
2) How would you describe your experience in the transition course this week?
3) How would you describe your perception of the transition process to higher education?

The journals were collected at the end of the “Transitions Prep” at the time of the second interview or after.

In addition to the journal entries of the participants, I also engaged in journaling to encourage ongoing self-reflection. As I immersed myself in the narratives of others, I wanted to keep track of my thoughts and my story. I also continually reflected on how my experiences may have caused bias. I continued journaling throughout the data collection and analysis process to help myself make meaning of my experiences, just as the journal entries for the participants served as a tool for reflection.
**Discussion Posts**

An unanticipated data source for this study were the online class discussion posts. At the start of the class, the instructors suggested that I access these posts to keep up with classroom discussion. Each discussion had a predetermined topic and guiding questions selected by the instructors. The discussion forums supplemented the course material. For this study, the discussions provided a unique view of participants’ interactions with and attitudes towards each other. These online discussions also helped to further my knowledge of class dynamics and to catch glimpses of the participants reflecting on the course curriculum. Adding these posts as a data source required that I make an amendment to my original Institutional Review Board (IRB) proposal. I also had to gain permission of the participants before using them. I was able to do so for all but one participant, who had to leave the program and study for health related reasons.

**Documents and Artifacts**

The last source of data was the final papers detailing the participants’ career exploration and personal growth. These final papers provided information about the participants’ occupational goals related to personal and familial needs. Many of the final papers echoed what was shared during the interview and journaling process. These papers also shed light on the participants’ decision making as they researched different occupations. The final paper was submitted on the last day of class. The participants also gave a presentation of their papers at this time. After the class, the instructors shared the papers and accompanying presentations with me.
Data Analysis

Hermeneutics was selected to analyze the data sources for this study and to interpret the participants’ narratives. Hermeneutics is the study of text for meaning (Schwandt, 1998): it analyses “narrative both in its construction and in its interpretation” (Bruner, 1991, p. 8). Hermeneutic researchers seek to extract meaning from a text or narrative, which “implies that there is a difference between what is expressed in the text and what the text might mean, and furthermore that there is no unique solution to the task of determining the meaning for this expression” (Bruner, 1991, p. 7). The main objective of hermeneutics is to provide insight into the intended meaning of a narrative.

Additionally, hermeneutics accounts for the cultural and social influences on the meaning of a story. Phoenix (2013) explains that “narratives are simultaneously situated in both the local context of talk and the wider social context, including speaker’s (implicit or explicit) understandings of, and orientation to, these contexts” (p. 75). The interpretive and contextual nature of hermeneutics encouraged that I pay attention to the cultural and social context, as well as the particular, context of each narrative. This emphasis on context is not only relevant to the understanding of the participants’ narratives, but also the theoretical framework of this study. Both Schlossberg’s Transition Theory and Cross’s (1991) barrier types examine the context of experience.

Although hermeneutics “include[s] interpreting interviews and observed actions” (Patton, 2002, p. 497), it is fundamentally a method of interpreting texts. Accordingly, the majority of data sources for this study are in text form. The journal entries, discussion posts, and final papers of the participants are written texts. Even the interviews and observations are transcribed. Moreover, for each interview and
observation, I wrote a summary of my experiences and thoughts. All of these texts formed the narratives of the participants.

The process of interpretation through hermeneutics is not straightforward. Kafle (2011) describes that “hermeneutics avoids method for method's sake and does not have a step by step method or analytic requirements” (p. 191). To gain a more concrete understanding of hermeneutic analysis, I developed an organizing system “to identify predominant themes through which narrative accounts (interviews) can be meaningfully organized, interpreted, and presented” (Patterson & Williams, 2002, p. 45). The development of an organizing system “promotes a more holistic understanding of the phenomenon by showing the interrelationships among themes and by retaining a rich characterization of individual themes” (p.46). My organizing system is based on the recommendations of Patterson and Williams (2002), but also upholds the central tenets of hermeneutics: to seek understanding of a narrative and to situate my interpretation (Kinsella, 2006). I have listed my process in the six steps below.

1. Data immersion and development of an indexing system
2. Identification of meaning units and supporting evidence
3. Creation of a “visual organizing system” (Patterson & Williams, 2002, p. 48)
4. Conceptualization of thematic labels
5. Contextualization of themes
6. Cross-case analysis

Although presented as ordered stages, my process did not follow a clear progression of moving from one step to the next. The hermeneutic process is not linear and is not intended to be (Kafle, 2011). To reduce the process to a series of phases would
take away from its “conceptually elusive nature” (Kinsella, 2006, p.6) and would dismantle the founding notion that "hermeneutics is a protection against abuse of method” (Gadamer, 1992, p.70). Therefore, instead of moving step by step through the process of creating an organizing system for analysis, I applied the steps by moving through the hermeneutic circle. The hermeneutic circle is a process of “reading, reflective writing, and interpretation in a rigorous fashion” (Kafle, 2011, p. 187) to better understand the narratives and their intentions. It is “a combination of topic-down and bottom-up interpretive procedures” (Squire, 2013, p. 57). Engaging in the hermeneutic circle facilitates understanding of the whole narrative through understanding its parts (Bruner, 1991).

I may have read about the hermeneutic circle before conducting this research, but I did not come to fully understand it until I found myself caught in a cycle of focusing in, zooming out, reinterpreting, and narrowing. During data analysis, I continually referenced the whole narrative to determine the relationships between the parts the narrative. I progressively became more focused by spiraling down through rounds of the hermeneutic circle. Yet, at times, spiraling up and out was needed to gain perspective. I needed to give myself room to think outside of the narrative. There were times when I needed to spend a few days away from data analysis to create space for thought.

My process is exemplified in Figure 3.1. In the image, there are two arrows that border the steps in my process. The arrow on the left represents the more narrowed and focused understanding that I developed while making my way through the outlined process. The arrow on the right represents the need to broaden my reference point in order to situate my more narrowed interpretation in the context of the whole narrative.
Figuratively speaking, I went through six rounds of the hermeneutic circle to achieve an authentic interpretation of the participants’ narratives. My rounds through the hermeneutic circle are depicted by the circular arrows, which demonstrate a constant cycle of circling to a more narrowed understanding, and then back out again to better understand the whole story. In each circle, a step of my organizing system is listed.

Under the headings of each round are the parts of the narratives that I referenced and how I situated these parts in the whole narrative.

Figure 3.1. Hermeneutic Process of this Study
Round One: Data Immersion and Development of an Indexing System

There is no set starting point for hermeneutics (Patton, 2002). Data analysis was an ongoing process, which began during data collection. After each interview and observation, I contemplated what the participants meant and what could be learned. I also drew from the first interviews, observations and discussion posts to help form the second interview questions. This required that I investigate the initial data to look for questions that I wanted to answer and ideas that I wanted to clarify during the second interviews.

After data collection, I immersed myself in the participants’ narratives by synthesizing the interviews, interview notes, observation notes, journal entries, discussion posts, and final papers into one document. Full immersion in the data is the only way to gain a trustworthy view (Schram, 2005). It is essential the researcher do “an exhaustive exploration of whatever phenomenon is being studied” (Leininger, 1994, p. 106). Although Patterson and Williams (2002) suggest that recording and transcribing interviews is its own step, I included this as part of the data immersion process because by revisiting the transcriptions, I found myself immersed in the data. I also began to develop my indexing system at this point. I began to color code each type of data so that I would have a reference point for later identification.

I started the process of data immersion by listening to the interviews of the participants and instructors while following along with the transcriptions for a total of three times each. I did not transcribe the interviews myself, but rather had a professional do the transcription. As suggested by Patterson and Williams (2002), “Often it is most efficient to have a professional typist transcribe the data. However, if this approach is
used, the data analyst should proof each transcript while listening to the original tape” (p. 46). While I listened to the interviews, I proof read the transcriptions for accuracy as well as content. I read and re-read the final papers, journal entries, and discussion posts. I also revisited my observation notes and re-read my written account of each interview. It was at this point that the data began to shift from gathered information into deeper meaning. Figuratively speaking, this served as my first round through the hermeneutic circle. Through this thorough reading and investigation, I familiarized myself with every aspect of the data sources, which formed the parts of the narrative. I also came to know the entirety of the participants’ stories or the whole narrative, which is an indicator of credibility (Arminio & Hultgren, 2002).

**Round Two: Identification of Meaning Units and Supporting Evidence**

Throughout my review of the data, I began to identify meaning units. “Meaning units are segments of the interview that are comprehensible on their own… [which] is not meant to imply that they can be fully understood independent of the context in which they are embedded” (Patterson & Williams, 2002, p. 47). To organize the meaning units, I created an outline organized by: background, previous education, transition to college, transition program, and the combined 4 “S” System and barrier categorizations.

I combined the 4 “S” System and barrier categorizations by pairing elements that shared similar meaning. The self and strategies components of the 4 “S” System were paired with dispositional barriers because all of these elements refer to the individual’s self-concept and how they adapt to transition. One’s situation as defined by the 4 “S” System includes situational barriers because those barrier types help to form the circumstances of the transition. The 4 “S” System component of support pairs with
institutional barriers because these barriers highlight which support systems are unavailable.

As I identified meaning units and placed them within the organizing system, I included excerpts and supporting evidence of those meanings. I also organized the supporting evidence chronologically. This process of organizing participants’ narratives as a more cohesive text is referred to as restorying in narrative research (Creswell, 2007). I titled these restoried or re-organized versions of participants’ narratives “timelines.” Identifying meaning units and situating them in the restoried narratives was my second round through the hermeneutic circle. The meaning units served as the parts of the narrative that I was able to reflect upon in relationship to the restoried whole. To ensure my understanding of the meaning units, I regularly went back to the initial data sources and contemplated my understanding within the greater context. My goal was to represent the intention of the participants as expressed within their narratives.

**Round Three: Creation of a Visual Organizing System**

After having created the “timelines” or restoried accounts of participants’ narratives, I made an outline of all the different meaning units of each narrative. I also quantified the number of occurrences that each meaning unit had throughout the restoried narratives. I did not and do not equate prevalence to importance, but it was helpful to recognize the most frequently mentioned topics in the participants’ narratives and to contemplate why they were so frequently mentioned. I then used these meaning units and created a visual organizing system as suggested by Patterson and Williams (2002). My visual organizing system took the shape of a web that demonstrated the relationships between meaning units and within the context of the whole narrative. I used the 4 “S”
System, Cross’s (1991) categorization of barriers, and elements of the transition to help organize the webs. Creating these webs helped me to contextualize the meaning units within the entire story: it helped me to recognize the interconnectedness of each meaning unit and ultimately helped me to more narrowly focus my understanding. I began to make sense of each participant’s narrative and explored the meaning units in relation to each other and the context of the stories. The intention of these webs is not to imply scientific correlation between the meaning units. It is merely a visual that prompted my thought about the context of the narratives and the many influences acting on and within the participants’ stories. During this process, I engaged in meaningful reflection, recognizing significant details throughout the participants’ narratives (Riessman, 1993).

Depicted below is an example of the web I used to contextualize participants’ narratives. The teal circles provide the organizing structure. The blue circles represent the meaning units. The size and corresponding number in each circle represents the prevalence of a meaning unit in the restorying process. The relationships between the meaning units are represented by the rays (pink), vectors (purple), and lines (green) connecting the circles. A ray indicates a reciprocal relationship between the meaning units. A vector suggests that a meaning unit may have influenced the emergence of another meaning unit, but only in one direction. The lines represent a relationship that is oppositional. All participant visual organizations can be found in Appendix B.
Figure 3.2. Example of a Visual Organizing System.

Round Four: Conceptualization of Thematic Labels

The creation of the visual organizing systems, as well as the restorying of participants’ narratives began to illuminate themes. In my fourth round through the hermeneutic circle I reconceptualized the meaning units into the narrowed themes that I began to recognize when contemplating the thematic relationships of the individual narratives depicted in the webs. During my analysis of the webs, I found that some of the meaning units represented a similar overarching idea. I then nested those similar meaning units together under a more comprehensive label. Patterson and Williams (2002) explain that “as the analyst starts to get a feeling for the nature of the meaning
units, she/he begins to develop thematic labels under which the individual meaning units can be grouped” (p. 47). For example, in the web above, I depicted the two meaning units of “preparation” and “skill building,” which both represent an effort to be more prepared. Having developed more comprehensive thematic labels in this stage, I nested both “preparation” and “skill building” under the overall theme of “preparing.”

When developing the thematic labels, I used a combination of my own language with the language of the participants. If a participant regularly used a phrase or particular word to describe a topic that I identified as a theme, I kept their language. In one instance, a participant expressed “keeping mum” about her return to higher education. I used this wording as part of the meaning units to reflect her desire to withhold information from her parents, but later nested “keeping mum” under the more encompassing final theme of “insecurity.” If the participant did not give their own wording for a theme that emerged, I used my own. When using my own language, I used my knowledge of the participants’ and their narratives to keep the intention of their meaning.

**Round Five: Contextualization of Themes**

My fifth round through the hermeneutic circle began with thematic labels and zoomed out to view themes within the entire narrative. During this round, I revisited all of the initial data. With these themes in mind, I listened to the interviews yet again. I re-read journal entries, discussion posts, and final papers. I reviewed my own observation and interview notes. I read the themes as part of the whole story to ensure that they were truly reflective of the intent and most significant aspects of each participant’s narrative.
To further develop my understanding, I created another visual organizing system to reflect on the layers of context in which the themes were embedded. This contextualization of the themes is a critical aspect of hermeneutics (Kinsella, 2006), as well as the theoretical framework. When creating this contextual visual organizing system, I started with the external factors and narrowed to the internal factors; placing them at the core of the context. In the example provided in Figure 3.3, the outer-most themes are those that are not specific to participation in the transition program, but rather reflective of the context for the overall transition. Those themes include *aging*, the *need to care for family*, a *lack of capital*, and *family support*. The next layer of themes move toward the internal and fall within the context of the transition program. Those themes are *time management*, *connections*, and *preparation*. The themes most related to perception and identity were *insecurity*, being *motivated*, and *seeking fulfillment*.
As part of my fifth round through the hermeneutic circle, I also situated the thematic labels within the 4 “S” System and categorizations of student barriers to explore their relationship to the whole narrative and the theoretical framework. Theory should be used as the researcher “integrates the data into an explanatory framework” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 91). The themes represented the parts of the narratives and the framework provided a means to contemplate these themes within the whole story. However, I did not seek to make themes “fit” into the framework. I also considered how the themes may not fit or not be entirely represented within this theoretical framework to identify “deviant cases” (Patton, 2002, p. 466) and their significance to the study.

Figure 3.4 illustrates the themes from the example in Figure 3.3 as related to the 4 “S” System and barrier categorizations. In the image, the 4 “S” System components were paired with the corresponding barrier types based on their meaning. The component of self encompasses one’s dispositional barriers (or strengths), as does the component of strategies, which is also related to one’s dispositional characteristics. The component of support includes potential institutional supports or a lack thereof (barriers). The component of situation also reflects potential situational barriers (or supports).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Situation (includes Situation)</th>
<th>Self (includes Disposition)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aging</td>
<td>Seeking fulfillment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Need to care for family</td>
<td>Insecurity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time Management</td>
<td>Motivated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of Capital</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategies (includes Disposition)</th>
<th>Support (includes Institution)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Connections</td>
<td>Connections</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preparation</td>
<td>Preparation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Family Support</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 3.4. 4 “S” System Chart
Round Six: Cross-Case Analysis

Once I felt that I had exhausted my investigation and understanding of the individual cases, I then moved to analyzing the themes across narratives. To start the process of cross-case narrative analysis and my final round through the hermeneutic circle, I began by reviewing the outlines of the meaning units that I had created for each participant. These meaning units represented the parts of the individual narratives. Starting with the meaning units gave me a broad overview. To only compare the themes would limit me from contemplating meaning units that were not identified as themes for the individual, but may be shared meaning units across cases to serve as a theme for the group. From the outlines, I identified differences and similarities between the narratives. As themes arose, I referenced each participant’s narrative to once again ensure that themes represented the intent of the narrative. This served as a way to check my interpretation.

As I did with the individual narratives, I contextualized the cross-narrative themes starting with the external and moving to the internal. In Figure 3.5, the outer-most layer of themes were those related to external factors and include money and family. Another theme for all participants was the experience of a catalyst event prompting enrollment in “Transitions Prep.” This occurred outside of the transition program and is depicted as such. The next layer of themes falls under the context of the transition program. Through participation in the transition program, participants described the themes of changing perception, a need for more out of the program, deficit building, forming connections, and use of technology. The inner-most circle represents the internal cross-
narrative themes that emerged. Those themes are *self-doubt, seeking self-actualization,* and *balancing multiple roles and identities.*

**Figure 3.5. Example of Cross-Case Themes in Context**

**“Goodness” of the Study**

Throughout the data collection and analysis, I regularly contemplated the quality of this study. Quality narrative research can be difficult to assess because “all verificationist criteria turn slippery, and we surely cannot judge rightness by narrative adequacy alone” (Brunner, 2004, p. 694). When judging a narrative, one should examine “its verisimilitude rather than its verifiability” (Bruner, 1991, p. 14). Verisimilitude is the truth that a narrative means to an individual. Yet, an individual’s truth may change and “story elements can be reasonably expected to change from telling to telling, [making]
the idea of empirically validating them for consistency or stability completely alien to the
concept of narrative truth” (Sandelowski, 1991, p. 165). Nevertheless, it is necessary to

According to Arminio and Hultgren (2002) the qualities of a good qualitative study include:

- having a theoretical foundation to inform the study design,
- a clearly stated methodology,
- explanation of methods used to gather data,
- reflections of researchers’ presuppositions,
- interpretation of data,
- and an effort to inform practice.

In an attempt to address these qualities of “goodness,” I used the theoretical framework of Schlossberg’s Transition Theory and Cross’s (1991) barrier types to inform the design of this study. I also expressed my ontological and epistemological views as falling within the constructivist paradigm, locating the methodology and theoretical framework in my contextual way of knowing. In addition, this entire chapter provides descriptions of the methods used and a detailed account of how I gathered (narrative inquiry) and interpreted (hermeneutics) data.

To address the needed for researcher reflection, I journaled throughout the study to reflect on my presuppositions to avoid the unintentional misinterpretation or misrepresentation of the participants’ narratives. I was cognizant of how my perspective may have influenced my interpretation. Through my journaling, I also attempted to uncover hidden meanings that are not easily determined at first glance. To uncover such
meanings and come to a comprehensive interpretation of the participants’ narratives is a goal of narrative inquiry and another measure of credibility (Leininger, 1994). Throughout the analysis process, I sought to understand the narratives in the way that the authors wanted and not in the way that I could most relate. I also made sure to refrain from criticism and judgment of the narratives.

Moreover, I explicitly stated my own biases based on my previous experiences transitioning to higher education. I noted the potential conflict between my role as an academic adviser and my role as a researcher. I attempted to address this conflict through my journaling and reflection on my different roles. I also used multiple data sources to triangulate the data (Patton, 2002) and engaged in exhaustive or at least extensive view of the phenomenon (Leininger, 1994). Lastly, Chapter Five includes discussion about the implications of this study on transitions programs and adult educator practices.

In addition to the criteria listed, the “goodness” of a qualitative study requires that the researcher seek to give the participants a voice (Arminio & Hultgren, 2002). Through this study, I provided a platform for participants to express their views of the transition to higher education and their experiences in the transition program. To ensure that the participants’ voices were not muffled or distorted, I provided each participant a copy of the interview transcripts and followed-up with the participants to see if there was any clarification they would like to provide. This helped to ensure that my interpretations reflected an authentic and trustworthy account of participants’ narratives. Authenticity and trustworthiness are the founding evaluative criteria for qualitative studies (Arminio & Hultgren, 2002). By sharing the participants’ narratives about transition, I am also giving others an opportunity to share their own stories.
Chapter 4: Findings and Analysis

Chapter Overview

In this chapter, I review the theoretical framework and how it was used for data analysis. I also present the five participants’ narratives: Karen, Norman, Lucy, Diane, and Kate. The narratives are told in a chronological order, emphasizing the emergent themes. Each theme is bolded within my interpretation. To develop a more comprehensive view of participants’ experiences, I discuss the themes in relation to the theoretical framework for this study. I also provide a visual for how these themes are situated within the framework. In addition to my own interpretation, excerpts from the narratives are included to give insight into the participants’ experiences. The excerpts will come from all data sources including: interviews, discussion posts, journals, observations, and final papers. These excerpts are centered and italicized for easy recognition.

After discussing the narrative analysis on the individual level, I also explore the shared themes across narratives. As I did with the individual narratives, I explore the cross-case themes within the context of the theoretical framework and use the theoretical framework to organize the themes. I also include my musings from my reflective journal, which are italicized and centered just as the excerpts from the participants. Lastly, I include a visual for how these shared themes are situated in larger social and cultural context, as context greatly influences how transition is experienced (Anderson et al., 2012). This visual representation depicts the elements of the theoretical framework and the corresponding themes.
Theoretical Framework

The combination of Schlossberg’s Transition Theory (Anderson et al., 2012) and adult learner barriers to participation in higher education (Cross, 1991) form the theoretical framework for this study. This framework was selected for several reasons. First, this framework gives a holistic view of the transition experience, including characteristics of the individual and the environment. Second, both frameworks recognize that perspective has the largest impact on how an individual approaches a situation. This emphasis on perspective is especially important, as this study seeks to explore how adult learners view their experiences in the transition program and during their transition to higher education. Third, both Schlossberg’s Transition Theory and the discussion of adult learner barriers (Cross, 1991) address a critical aspect of transition; the potential for growth and the role of identity (Baxter-Magolda, 2008; Kegan, 1982). Lastly, these perspectives provide a gateway to practical implications on how to best support adult learners in transition (Cross, 1991; Evans et al., 2010).

Figure 4.1 is an image demonstrating the integration of Schlossberg’s Transition Theory and barrier categorizations (Cross, 1991). At the core of the image is the element of perception, as that is the most influential aspect on how a transition is experienced. Perception also unifies the individual components of this theoretical framework. The arrows from the element of perception point out to the 4 “S” System, barrier types, and transition types because one’s perception of the transition influences how these components are experienced. Similarly, the 4 “S” System, barriers types, and transition types influence one’s perception of the transition, which is why they are represented in arrows pointing towards the element of perception. The arrows between the elements of
the 4 “S” System, barriers types, and transition types demonstrates their reciprocal relationships. Each component has an influence on the other, which also influences perception. All of the components of this framework are situated in the different phases of transition. The larger circular arrows surrounding the components of the framework exemplify the cycling through the phases of transition, which are: moving into, moving through, and moving out.

Figure 4.1. Schlossberg’s Transition Theory (2012) and Cross’s (1991) Barrier Types

Karen

Karen is a woman from rural Pennsylvania. At the time of the interviews, she was 53-years old. Karen lives with her mother and her youngest daughter. Her eldest daughter is in college. Karen is also the mother to a son, who lives in Germany with his
father. Due to a series of life transitions, Karen recently moved back to Pennsylvania as discussed later in her story. During my observations, Karen always sat at the front of the class. She exhibited a strong interest in learning. For Karen, several themes emerge. Those themes are: **adaptability, life transitions, family support, updating her education, struggles with technology, forming connections, and self-efficacy.**

First I will discuss the theme of **adaptability.** Adaptability suggests that one is able to cope well with transition (Fiske & Chiriboga, 1990). Having grown up in a military family, Karen reported that she is used to change.

*If nothing else, I can adapt* (1st interview).

During her childhood, she moved many times for her father’s career. As a teenager, she moved to Germany to live with her sister whose husband was in the military. Karen explained that she moved to Germany because of her desire to leave rural Pennsylvania. As related to the theoretical framework, her desire to leave Pennsylvania propelled her to move out of one phase of her life and move into another (Anderson et al., 2012). In Germany, Karen completed her high school degree and then continued to work *economy* (1st Interview). She met her first husband in Germany and had a child with him. The couple later divorced. Divorce can be viewed as a situational barrier (Malhotra et al., 2007). After the marriage ended, Karen returned to the United States and found herself having to adapt back to life stateside with her son. Karen’s divorce prompted a role change, which is reflected of the factor of self in the 4 “S” System (Anderson et al., 2012). Her move back to the United States was a drastic change in her surroundings, which is represented in the factor of situation.

“And I had a son in tow so I found myself not married and…I had to establish everything. And thank goodness my sister helped me with one of these – you got to get a
car, to get a job. So I was – I went through all of that with a young boy.”

Upon getting settled back in the United States, Karen completed her Associate degree in respiratory therapy. To get a job in respiratory therapy, she moved to Oklahoma where she met her second husband. Karen noted that she and her second husband moved several times. They had two daughters together. Karen’s son eventually moved back to Germany to live with his father. All of these moves and changes in status-divorced, to married, to mother of three- prompted Karen to continually evolve and adapt to her new situation and surroundings (Anderson et al., 2012). She was in a continual cycle of moving into, through and out of the various transitions of her life. After a bad car accident, Karen’s husband lost his ability to work. He went from working as a doctor to not working at all. Karen had to adapt to her husband’s change in physical ability. Eventually, the pair split forcing Karen to adapt to life as a single mother yet again prompting a change in role and self (Anderson et al., 2012).

And so it's like I'm starting all over again (1st interview).

The second theme in Karen’s story is the multiple life transitions that she had recently encountered. Commonly, adult learners seeking to enter higher education have recently experienced or are currently experiencing a life transition (Kasworm et al., 2002). These life transitions highlighted her adaptability. She had to adapt to new roles and new limitations of her health. After her second divorce, Karen moved back to rural Pennsylvania to be with her family. Due to her divorce and subsequent relocation, Karen explained that she felt the need to get a job to provide for her daughters. Her role had shifted from stay-at-home-mom to provider. For Karen, this change in the factor of self resulted in a mental transition. She had moved out of her previous mode of thought about
who she was. Karen had begun to contemplate who she needed to be for the sake of her daughters. She reflected that although she enjoyed being a stay-at-home-mom, not having worked for over 20 years put her at a disadvantage in the job market. The transition to caretaker and provider was something that Karen was still trying to adapt to throughout the study. Women often must balance the demands associated with changes in their multiple roles (Fairchild, 2003).

Having been a stay-at-home-mom the last 20 years, now puts me in a scary new world I need to navigate through, with a young teenage daughter alongside me (Journal Entry).

“So now here I am 20 years later and I do not recommend it to anyone, not to give up your job” (1st interview).

Another life transition was prompted by yet another change in family role and the factor of self. Karen came to the realization that with her oldest entering college and her youngest just a few years away, she would soon be an empty nester. During the study, Karen had already begun the mental transition of having both daughters away from home. With the impending graduation of her youngest daughter, Karen did an intake of her situation, as is common for adults in transition (Anderson et al., 2012). She had begun to prepare herself for future transitions. Transition is not just events or nonevents, it is the contemplation of those events (Anderson et al., 2012).

In spite of the good job I have done, it will be eventually downsized and my position will be phased out, as my youngest leaves the nest in a few short years. I have, from now until then, to blaze a new trail for myself (Final Paper).

In addition to her personal role changes, Karen was also dealing with health issues related to a cancer diagnosis. Karen’s health issues could be viewed as situational barriers (Malhotra et al., 2007), but I argue that they are more significant. One’s health is not just a situation to reckon with, it is their life. Her cancer diagnosis was more closely
related to the factor of self. Although now cancer free, Karen described experiencing physical limitations that she has not previously endured. She was reconfiguring who she and her capabilities, which is often related to significant life transitions (Baxter-Magolda, 2007; 2008; Kegan, 1982). Karen saw herself as a cancer survivor. She had taken on a new identity. In relation to the phases of transition, Karen was moving out of being a cancer patient (Anderson et al., 2012). She was moving into a phase of remission. Moving into this phase of remission required that Karen adjust to the changes in her health and physical ability. Health transitions, especially for women, often can deter individuals from participating in higher education (Malhotra et al., 2007), but actually seemed to motivate Karen.

*And this was out of the blue. So I’ve never been sickly or weak or compromised in anyway and then this and so it wasn’t just, it’s like losing an arm for me because I don’t have, I can’t, I don’t have the strength anymore. Or the stamina or I mean I can’t do respiratory, I can’t stand on my feet 12 hours, or 10 hours or 8 hours, I can’t lift patients anymore, I can’t, there’s side effects from chemo, radiation, I’m trying to get out of. And I’m not the same…* (1st interview).

Another theme for Karen was family support. Karen’s family—especially her mother, daughters, and sister—all helped her as they were able. The family support that Karen received alleviated her situational barriers. Her family’s help relates to the factor of support in the 4 “S” system (Anderson et al., 2012), which is indicative of adult learners’ persistence and motivation in higher education (Fairchild, 2003; Kasworm et al., 2002). Karen and her youngest daughter lived with her mother while Karen continued to regain her health. It was with her mother’s encouragement, she that enrolled in

*“Transitions Prep.”*

*Okay so my mom’s always been a great resource. And then she found out about Penn State. “It has some kind of- go, just go there and see what they have”- again prompted by good old moms. So listen to your mother (1st interview).*
Karen’s sister attended the final “Transitions Prep” class to support Karen as she gave her final presentation. Even Karen’s daughters gave her encouragement to go back to school. Her eldest daughter in college encouraged Karen to get a Bachelor’s degree. Her youngest daughter also helped Karen by showing her how to navigate the computer to complete assignments for “Transitions Prep.”

*Well, she’s had to help me already on the computers* (1st interview).

The desire to **update her education** was another theme for Karen. Karen wanted to continue her education to build skills and improve job prospects. The desire to earn a degree for improved employment opportunities is a common reason for adult learners to return to higher education (Kasworm et al., 2002). Karen was active in adult education classes in addition to participation in “Transitions Prep.”

*And I knew I had to update my education. I knew that. So I'm thinking where do I start and they had adult education classes...*(1st Interview).*

Karen was mostly focused on improving her math and computer skills. This emphasis on improvement was a strategy for Karen. Strategies are methods that individuals use to help them cope with a situation (Anderson et al., 2012). Karen sought to better her skills so that she could better handle the transition back to higher education.

During her participation in “Transitions Prep,” Karen frequently expressed frustration related to technology. When describing the use of a computer, she expressed, *That’s a big handicap for me* (2nd Interview). Her **struggles with technology** also presented as a theme. This theme is not unique to Karen. With the proliferation of technology in higher education institutions, adult learners often find that their technological savvy is not adequate (Hansman & Mott, 2010).
My biggest problems lay in the use of the computer, and the difficulties in maneuvering in the tech. world. Where most people are computer literature- have worked at least with one, it is almost a foreign language to me. It makes doing homework and projects frustrating and time consuming for me (2nd Interview).

Need more computer skills. I am too frustrated. Also can’t sit for very long at a computer- (pain/fatigue set in) (Journal Entry).

Throughout “Transitions Prep,” students were asked to contribute to online discussion posts. In reviewing these posts, I noticed that Karen posted less than her classmates. While this could also be attributed to her challenge of balancing other roles and responsibilities, Karen’s frequent discussion of her struggles with technology suggest that, in part, her less frequent posting was related to her frustrations with the computer.

When observing in class, I also noticed that Karen was the only student who required help from the instructors to access the course website. During our interview together, Marissa expressed that she provided additional technology help to Karen. Marissa also expressed that she wanted to impress on [Karen that] nobody is going to take the time with [her] in the classroom (Marissa, Interview). She wanted Karen to know that the level of support she received in “Transitions Prep” would not be the same level of support that she received as a college student.

Karen’s description of “Transitions Prep,” her classmates, and the instructors suggested a positive regard for the program. She describes the program as providing support. Karen’s description of support includes both the factor of support in the 4 “S” System as well as institutional supports (Anderson et al., 2012; Cross, 1991). Through the class, Karen did an intake of her strengths and weaknesses. This intake of one’s abilities and surroundings is part of the transition process (Anderson et al., 2012). Karen described herself as a people person and enjoying the interaction provided by the class.
This suggests that her assessment of the class stemmed from her assessment of self. Karen also indicated that she liked the pace and curriculum of the course. She found that it was helping her to slowly transition into the role of being a student. In relationship to the theoretical framework, “Transitions Prep” was a factor of support that helped her move into the identity of a student (Anderson et al., 2012).

Transitions provides a safe, secure and caring atmosphere at a critical and vital phase in my life...This Transitions program is giving me an opportunity to start a fresh chapter in my life and for that I am excited and grateful (Journal Entry).

You sit in on the class there, it's a gentle push- keep going- but you don't feel the pressure of the due date, so it's a great transition. It really is (1st Interview).

Karen especially emphasized the relationship to university resources and staff provided by the program. Her desire to make connections to supports was also a theme. The theme of connections encompasses both connections to people and connections to resources. For adult learners, having supportive relationships often promotes participation in higher education (Malhotra et al., 2007). Karen’s discussion of connections implies that they can be viewed as situational and institutional supports, in contrast to barriers (Cross, 1991). When supports outweigh barriers, individuals are more likely to be able to adapt and cope with transition (Anderson et al., 2012). In regard to connections and relationships with university staff, Karen identified me as belonging to this group. After our interviews, Karen often stayed to ask me questions regarding university enrollment and major choices. For Karen, making connections was a strategy to help her gain knowledge about university life.

I'm learning new things. I like the small class. The teachers...Everybody: that you come in and (other staff member) and all the guest speakers that come to us and...yeah. And then we can actually go out and see it and go to library and get online. I can't believe how much information they have given us (1st interview).
Yeah so I didn’t realize that the resources available will be able to help me. So I’m not afraid as much to go back because I could get help with the computer that weren’t offered before when I was younger (2nd Interview).

I loved all our guest speakers, you included. It was that I’m a people person so that I would relate to instead of just here’s all this information (2nd Interview).

The special guest speakers have been an added bonus- to the already full and diverse syllabus (Journal Entry).

Although Karen noted skill building as her goal for participation in “Transitions Prep,” on multiple occasions she expressed the need to explore career options and to figure out where she was going. She gave many indications that this class also prompted exploration: another theme. Karen’s main criteria for her future occupation was that it needed to be something she was passionate about. Karen expressed that she had always felt passionate about healthcare, but because of her own health problems could not work with patients in the way that she previously had as a respiratory therapist. Karen was searching for a fulfilling career. She was focused on self. This desire for fulfillment is often a reason for adult learners to seek higher education (Genco, 2007).

At a divergence. At a choice to be made. On a self-discovery journey. The transitions class has been like a map for me with different tour guides (Observation #3).

Even though I may not know exactly where I will be, I am more confident and prepared to continue my exploration. I may change my direction as I wander, but I also know this path of self-discovery is one of giving back. My quest is to find out what I do best, what gives me a sense of emotional and spiritual fulfillment, as well as provide basic financial stability for me and my teenage daughter (Final Paper).

The last theme for Karen was a developed, more positive sense of self-efficacy. Self-efficacy reflects one’s confidence in their ability to control their motivation, behavior, and social environment (Bandura, 1997). A positive sense of self-efficacy is related to self-concept, which, in addition to circumstances of the self and the individual, impact how one responds transition (Fiske & Chiriboga, 1990). Generally, individuals
with high levels of self-efficacy are able to better adapt (Bandura, 1997), which may be related to Karen’s discussion of her adaptability. Self-efficacy is related self-authorship and identity because both notions focus on the internal self. This emphasis on self is also reflected in the theoretical framework of this study. One’s dispositional barriers are related to their self-view (Cross, 1991), and self is a factor that impacts how one copes with transition (Anderson et al., 2012). Karen’s improved sense of self-efficacy should help her to better take on the student role (Bandura, 1997).

*It’s just a matter of maybe a couple more steps before I get there so I don’t feel that it’s not out of the picture. That it’s a good possibility for me to go back to school (2nd Interview).*

*Being in the Transitions Program has opened up the possibility of further my education whereas before this program, I was considering full time employment, as my only course of action…. I am feeling more equipt (sic) to tackle college with each passing week. The homework assignments help me practice the concepts, ideas, and …that we are leaning in class (Journal Entry).*

In many ways, this improved view of her capabilities seems to evolve from need. More so than the other participants, Karen needs to be able to provide for her family. She needs to be self-efficacious to help her cope with the demands of her life transitions. Karen also has a goal of being a role-model for her daughters. She wants them to see her as she had grown to see herself- as capable. This goal may help her to cope with the transitions in her life. Commonly, having a goal and objective in mind can help individuals to feel a sense of stability during periods of change (Fiske & Chiriboga, 1990).

**Summary**

The themes from Karen’s narrative expose the story of someone who has been through many recent transitions, and of someone who has grown in her belief in her
ability to handle those transitions. Karen’s narrative depicts that she has grown in her self-efficacy and wants to further develop her skills to care for herself and her family. Stemming from Karen’s recent life transitions, is an uncertainty of the future and potential career paths. This uncertainty, along with her mother’s encouragement, prompted her enrollment in “Transitions Prep” and exploration about potential occupations.

The themes of Karen’s narrative are reflected in the main components of the theoretical framework for this study. Life transitions such as changes in health, changes in family role, and relocation speak to her current situation and situational barriers. Karen’s focus on updating her education demonstrates the strategies that she employed to help her cope with the changes in her circumstances. This also is demonstrative of her disposition to improve her self-efficacy: she had a desire to feel more equipped to handle the challenges in her life. The help offered to Karen through her family and the connections that she made through participation in “Transitions Prep” highlight the factor of support. Karen’s use of those connections was also a strategy (Anderson et al., 2012). Karen’s goal to be self-efficacious, her exploratory state of mind, and her belief in her ability to adapt relate to her self-view and disposition (Anderson et al., 2012; Cross, 1991). Karen’s health issues also related to her identity.
All of these themes are depicted in Figure 4.2, which shows how they relate to the theoretical framework. This visual shows that the majority of Karen’s themes relate to the components of self and dispositional barriers. This visual also demonstrates the complexity of transition. Every aspect of the theoretical framework is accounted for in the different themes that Karen presented. There is not one factor, but rather a multitude of influences on the experiences of transition.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Situation - Situation</th>
<th>Self - Disposition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Life Transitions</td>
<td>Seeking Self-efficacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Exploratory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Adaptability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategies - Disposition</td>
<td>Support - Institution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Updating my education” Connections</td>
<td>Connections</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Family support</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 4.2. 4 “S” System Chart: Karen

Norman

Norman was a 64-year-old male and recent retiree who grew up in a small, steel mill town near Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Norman was the youngest of four boys and grew up without a father figure in his life. After a failed attempt at college, Norman transferred to the main campus of a large university and completed his degree. Norman’s difficulty in college contributed to dispositional barriers. Since transferring, he has established residency in the town of his alma mater and his lived there since his graduation. For Norman, eight themes emerge. All of Norman’s themes focus on his internal feelings regarding transition. In order of this discussion, Norman’s themes are:

- **being before you can do**, having a **negative perception of past educational experiences**, **insecurity**, **advocacy**, the **decision to retire**, seeking **self-actualization**,
feelings of frustration with “Transitions Prep,” and an overall positive perception of the program.

In Norman’s childhood, he experienced some difficult times that posed situational barriers. One time in particular, he came home to find out that his mother’s boyfriend had kicked his family out of the house. Norman and his family had to live in public housing, which had a negative stigma where he grew up. Although he experienced situational barriers, he had a strong sense of self that guided his decisions. In this case, Norman described dispositional strengths that helped him to cope with his time living in the projects. A positive self-view relates to an ability to navigate challenges with more ease (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978). The factor of self is related to Norman’s mantra that one must be before they can do. Norman emphasized being before doing to suggest that an individual needs to be aware of who they are before they can start making progress towards doing what they want and then eventually becoming who they want to be.

You have to be before you can do. Then you have to do before you can become (1st Interview).

For Norman, being before you can do meant knowing where he came from, knowing who he is, and knowing what he needs to do to achieve his goals. Having a good sense of self helped Norman to overcome thoughts of negativity.

Anyway we ended up living in the projects. So that was significant. It was significant in the sense that what made me stronger in dealing with negative things in my life was that my mother managed through that without showing me any fears, without showing me any tears or sadness or even talking about the man that we lived with for six years or whatever, however many, nine years I guess. That was significant. It taught me to be humble and not speak bad about others (1st Interview).
You don't know if things are bad for you and just to focus and keep moving on and you know the old saying is we are not what we were, but we are in a heck better place (1st Interview).

In many ways, the theme **being before you can do** reflects the notion of becoming self-authored and is related to the factor of self in the theoretical framework. Being self-authored implies that an individual has developed their own view of the world through their lived experiences, values and beliefs instead of uncritically adopting the views of others (Baxter-Magolda, 1998). Norman formed his views of life’s challenges based on his own values, not those imposed upon him. He did not readily accept that living in the projects made him or those around him a bad influence. Norman focused on being who he wanted to be instead of focusing on other people’s opinions- he was being before he could do. His focus on his values and what he wanted to achieve highlights the component of self in the 4 “S” System (Anderson et al., 2012).

From an early age, Norman had poor experiences with education and strongly disliked speaking in front of others. Much of Norman’s narrative is influenced by his experiences in education and his more inhibited nature, which present in the themes of **negative perception of past educational experiences** and **insecurity**. These themes imply that Norman dealt with dispositional barriers (Cross, 1991). He needed to overcome his previous negative experiences to be able to successfully transition, which is commonly the case for adult learners (O’Donnell & Tobbell, 2007). Norman described himself as very unprepared to enter college. He did not think that high school gave him the skills to be successful in college. Norman is not alone in his assessment of being underprepared. Adult learners frequently face the challenge of returning to higher education without the necessary academic foundation (Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2010).
Dispositional barriers stem from past experiences and situational barriers that cause individuals to question themselves (Cross, 1991).

*I always kept my mouth shut and I was a little shy person, still am. So here we are all through high school, I'm avoiding any type of classes or time periods that we have to do something or project. I didn't have the skills and knowledge and abilities, the aptitude to do projects and so when I was forced into a little project I got the minimum amount of work in terms of contribution* (1st Interview).

Although he thought himself underprepared, Norman enrolled in college.

*My focus in high school is well – in the day it was graduate and go to college. What college I don't know. Was I prepared at the time for the SATs and all that. ACTs – no* (1st Interview).

Shortly after enrollment, Norman dropped out to work at a steel mill. He expressed that his experiences at the steel mill are what made him realize that he wanted to complete his degree. He described being covered in filth upon getting home and discontent working rotating shifts.

*I dropped out of school to go to work in the steel mill and I found that that was the best thing for me. So it was good that I dropped out and went to the steel mill and so I said hey I'm going back to school. And so eventually it took me about oh I don't know... six years graduate* (1st Interview).

Norman explained that his brother was angry with his decision to return to school. In his hometown and during that time it was not common to go to college. His brother thought that Norman was making a mistake. The reaction of Norman’s brother emphasizes the limited support that he had going into college. The lack of family support was a situational barrier for Norman. Adult learners without high levels of family support are less likely to persist in higher education (Cross, 1991).

After re-enrolling in college, Norman completed two years at the local campus and then transferred to the larger, main campus. At the main campus, Norman encountered many struggles. Norman explained that he felt he did not fit in and was not
prepared for the more rigorous coursework. His struggle to belong and complete his degree added to his **negative perception of past educational experiences**, which manifested as dispositional barriers (Cross, 1991). His **insecurity** was heightened when pushed out of his comfort zone, especially when asked to do presentations. In an attempt to avoid public speaking, Norman spoke to his instructors and asked to write papers instead. He found that they often agreed. Norman acknowledged that avoiding assignments was not good for him. For Norman, avoiding papers was a strategy to cope with the more challenging demands of college-level work. Individuals employ strategies based on their personal preference and the availability of resources (Anderson et al., 2012). It was Norman’s preference to avoid what he thought he could not do, indicating that his dispositional barriers were in factor in what led him to use this avoidance strategy.

*I didn’t last and so I said I can't do this. He said okay well talk to me after class and I did. I said I can't do this. He said well what's the problem….I said what if – talk about advocating for yourself. What if I just do a paper? ..... He said okay, well, this is what we'll do. Write a paper. As long as it's clear and concise.... All right so I did my paper.... And so progressively we run into these classes and what do I do from day one. I go right to the professor and tell him I can't stand up in front of the group. Guess what they said. Do a paper.... So I got through all that just by doing a paper. Was that good for me? Absolutely not (1st Interview).*

Although avoiding assignments was not beneficial to him, through these experiences with his instructors, Norman became a self-advocate. He learned to ask for what he needed to succeed. **Advocacy** is another theme in Norman’s story. Self-advocacy refers to “an individual’s ability to effectively communicate, convey, negotiate or assert his or her own interests, desires, needs, and rights. It involves making informed decisions and taking responsibility for those decisions” (Van Reusen, Bos, Schumaker, & Deshler, 1994, p. 1). For Norman, self-advocacy was related to the factor of self, but also
to the strategies that he used when facing transitions (Anderson et al., 2012). One example of Norman’s self-advocacy skills is when he asked the supervisor of the dining commons for a job while he completed his final course for graduation. Norman had failed the course once and was unable to graduate. He needed a job to continue in school. The supervisor agreed and Norman was able to re-take the course and finally graduate.

So I put in my application, interviewed and they hired me. I said wow. But I will still need that one course (1st Interview).

That taught me something. You know when you need don't be afraid to ask (1st Interview).

Upon graduation, Norman began to work for the state petitionary. He started as a cafeteria worker, and moved up to be a counselor for the inmates. It took him awhile to be comfortable with his counselor role. Norman expressed being insecure about his lack of a Master’s degree. He noted that most of his colleagues had Master’s degrees for counseling. One again, his insecurity created dispositional barriers that he had to overcome (Cross, 1991; O’Donnell & Tobbell, 2007). Fortunately, Norman’s supervisor provided high levels of support and encouragement, which can help individuals to counter negative views of self (Cross, 1991).

They got masters, they got – and what I was afraid of is to hear myself talk and whether or not it's going be clear and concise so they can understand because a lot of times I speak differently and I couldn’t relate to them, scared to death, they are smarter than I am, they got masters, they’ve been doing this a long time. So I went to my boss and I said look I can't do this…. Now you know why I am over it. Everybody has masters and I don't have any of that.... He says man don't even worry about this when you talk. He says you have more skills and background experience than any one of those folks. I said what do you mean (1st Interview).

After working for over twenty years, Norman decided to retire. The decision to retire is another theme for Norman. It was a decision that he reflected upon and grappled with throughout our interviews. Norman wished that he could have worked for
a few more years. He did not want to retire, but thought that it was time because the stress and pressures of working with inmates began to take a toll on him and his performance at work suffered. Norman’s transition to retirement was driven by the factor of self. The mental and physical strain of his job encouraged Norman to reflect on what he wanted for the future. He began to transition out of his job before actually being retired, but he struggled to find what was next. Norman still had goals to achieve, but hadn’t fully defined those goals.

With the type of people that I was working with for all those years, and I call them knuckleheads, over a period of time it just becomes disgusting that day after day time after time year after year, they still are not focused on themselves and their family and they return to jail again. As much as we extend ourselves, so that caught up with me and then part of internal, I was becoming overly stressed. Years ago things wouldn’t affect me and today they do and I knew that was bad because it was showing up in the classroom (1st Interview).

Retiring before he was ready left Norman with a desire to feel fulfilled by his next endeavor. He began to pursue other jobs, including driving a bus and being a security guard, but he found that none of those roles satisfied him. His transition into retirement prompted Norman to question his values and ideals, which is often related to or an effect of being in transition (Anderson et al., 2012; Kegan, 1982).

I will say, this journey, post employment, began months prior to stepping away from my long term counseling position at the local state correctional facility. Prior to retirement, I expressed a few new career options to my co-workers. I always believed counseling or motivational counseling would follow, because, I felt, counseling is what I do best. After reviewing various positions of employment, I applied for several because I had the skills and ability to perform well in each one. I acquired three of the positions, therefore meeting my goal. The first job, I started much too soon after retirement to be fulfilled or appreciate. The second was too rudimentary. The most recent, I resigned after six months. Each paid well, but did not fit who am or what I enjoy doing, and neither offered the rewards I was seeking, even though I could perform either one successfully (Discussion Post).
Norman’s quest to be satisfied put him in an exploratory state, which prompted him to enroll in “Transitions Prep.” He wanted to learn about his options. He wanted to find a path that was meaningful to him.

Still searching, yet contemplating furthering my education, a few weeks ago I read a classified about a Transitions program, being offered free of charge... for returning adult students. I thought the group would allow me the opportunity to weigh my post-retirement options, and create some resolution for my future. After a few days of contemplation, I called and spoke to (a staff member), who was very encouraging and excited to hear I wanted to participate in the program. So, I enrolled and seven weeks later I am still here learning new skills and sharing ideas (Final Presentation).

It offers alternatives, it offers insights as to – the skills or tools that I may need and it becomes like a step towards maybe returning to school. And so if nothing else it's like okay is this me – is it really what I want to do. So it gives me the opportunity to look inside again (1st Interview).

Norman’s search for fulfilment and satisfaction over money or security indicated that he was seeking self-actualization; another theme in his story. Self-actualization “refers to the desire for self-fulfillment… to become more and more what one is, to become everything that one is capable of becoming” (Maslow, 1970, p. 46). Seeking self-actualization suggests progressing towards achieving one’s internal needs. This aligns with the idea of becoming self-authored. To achieve self-actualization requires that one is in tune with their internal voice. As previously discussed, self-authorship is achieved when individuals negotiate their own values and identity through their internal-self instead of adopting the beliefs that are placed upon them (Baxter-Magolda, 2008). Both self-actualization and self-authorship demonstrate the importance of self and dispositional barriers as related to the theoretical framework (Anderson et al., 2012; Cross, 1991).

And at my age should I just retire and do nothing? (1st Interview).
But then as always there is that extra part of me that I need. And so I can do the gardening, I can kick back and enjoy that, wait a second what else can I do? (2nd Interview).

Why go back? Why change? It is productive (give back what he has learned through life; pay it forward). To be able to say that he did something. It is rewarding. To add value and quality to his life and others’ lives. To improve his lifestyle by being able to do what he dreams about doing (Observation of Final Class).

Norman’s search for meaning sometimes left him feeling frustrated with the structure of “Transitions Prep.” His frustration became another theme. It stemmed from his desire to further explore his options, but also from his wish for meaningful interactions with his classmates. Not knowing what he wanted to do next, Norman was disappointed that “Transitions Prep” did not provide more guidance about his options for further schooling. He thought that the program focused too heavily on career and not enough on education. Part of Norman’s frustration relates to the lack of available supports tailored to meet his needs. This lack of needed support, also presents as an institutional barrier (Cross, 1991).

Norman also expressed that he wanted more dialogue and class discussion. He wanted to hear about his classmates’ plans and their challenges. For Norman, connections to others were very important to him and were a consistent theme in his narrative. Norman’s work as a counselor for over twenty years speaks to his enjoyment of human interaction and building relationships. Based on the theoretical framework, Norman’s attempt to build relationships with his classmates was a strategy. He used his relationships with others to gain information and develop a sense of belonging. Having a sense of belonging generally leads to feeling more capable (Maslow, 1970; Schlossberg et al., 1989). Therefore, this strategy aligned with Norman’s personality and identity as a counselor, but also helped him to cope with his lack of confidence.
Interaction and discussion amongst the five of us has been missing. There is hardly any heartbeat as to who we are, what we think, how we feel, what we know. To find out about us is what I expected as a returning adult, classroom interaction is the key. Finally today, I felt we had a very good class because we has the opportunity to share thoughts with each other, enabling all to get to know each other better (Journal Entry).

You find out about the individual, what is it that he wants? Which way is he going? How can I best help him? So we had those two sessions. There were moments within the class time that there could have been more (2nd Interview).

In “Transitions Prep,” Norman’s want for connection was evidenced by his very active engagement in the online discussion forums. Norman frequently posted and commented on his classmates posts. He sought out dialogue with his classmates, even outside the classroom. Norman used his connections as a form of support, but he also offered support in return. During his final presentation, Norman became teary-eyed when mentioning his classmates, instructors, and anyone else with whom he had made a connection. He was equally as proud of his classmates as he was of himself.

Although frustrated at times with the structure of “Transitions Prep,” Norman explained that his overall perception of the experience was positive. He noted that he would recommend the program to a friend and that he had a high regard for the instructors.

Just for the little things. It's worth it, yes (1st Interview).

Norman was happy to learn more about technology, which was another reason why he wanted to participate in the course. He was aware that his computer skills were lacking and he wanted to improve upon them. As noted for Karen, adult learners often encounter barriers related to technology (Hansman & Mott, 2010). Additionally, Norman’s attempt to improve his computer skills, specifically with PowerPoint, was a strategy (Anderson et
al., 2012). He was building on deficits. He knew that if he were to return to higher education, he would need to be more fluent in his ability to use technology.

*I don’t know where this is going but the transitions class has been a treat. I have enjoyed my fellow students and staff can’t be beat* (Journal Entry).

When asked to give speeches, Norman advocated for himself by asking if it could be in poem form. Writing poems came naturally to Norman. He enjoyed the creative process.

*I discovered once again so to speak, there is another way to do something. Someone mentioned to me some time ago, think outside of the box. And I wasn’t thinking outside of the box. So thinking outside of the box so when we had our speech, so I’m usually writing little poems about this or that and I’ve done that over the years and nothing great it’s just me..., it’s easier for me to write a poem, I could I have did that paper that we had- the final paper- I could have did that in a poetic way, it would have been a lot easier than me sitting down doing paragraph* (2nd Interview).

*He also expressed that he found that he really enjoys writing poetry. It has always been an interest of his, but he began to write speeches in poem form and found that he enjoyed it and that it came easily to him* (2nd Interview Notes).

Although being a self-advocate presented as a theme earlier in Norman’s narrative, he shifted from advocating to avoid public speeches- as he had previously done- to advocating for an approach that better suited his style and needs. This demonstrates a shift in Norman’s strategy for coping with barriers. Instead of avoiding the barrier all-together, Norman adapted it. Norman’s previous strategy of avoidance seemed to be related to his dispositional barriers. It is possible that “Transitions: Prep” helped Norman to gain more confidence, resulting in a more constructive coping strategy.

Throughout Norman’s narrative, there were several instances of conflicting ideas. Norman expressed a fear of failure and insecurity about his abilities. However, he also expressed that he was not worried about what others thought of him and that he just needed to be himself. These conflicting ideas suggest that Norman was experiencing a
struggle with his identity. Often people must negotiate between internal and external forces (Baxter-Magolda, 1998): they must juggle their multiple roles and identities (Fairchild, 2003). Norman was taking on the identity of student, a role that he associated with past negative experiences, while living the identity of an accomplished retiree. There was also the need to negotiate between the identity that he wanted to project—self-confident and knowing—which at times, seemed to differ from how he really felt.

In the quote below, Norman explained that he does not care what other people think about him, but at the same time he expressed that he did not want to stand out, which suggests a level of insecurity.

Would I care about what they think? Absolutely not, I would find myself focus on which I only did a little bit in the class, why because I don’t really want to stand out in the class (Interview 2).

When journaling about doing the class presentation, he indicated that he has a fear of disappointing others.

I don’t want to do it because of lack of confidence and fear of not meeting someone’s expectation (Journal Entry).

Yet, previously Norman indicated that he realized through his job to be confident with his ability to give presentations.

I don’t have to be like you. All I need to do is be me (1st Interview).

All it is, is they are doing it their way and I do it my way and evidently the populist enjoys what I do. So why am I kicking myself (1st Interview).

Summary

At the time of the study, Norman had already achieved what he considered to be an accomplished career. Deciding to retire was a difficult decision for him, and was a re-occurring theme in his narrative. His decision to retire framed the situational
circumstances of his participation in “Transitions Prep.” He was on a journey to find meaning, which is reflected in the theme of seeking self-actualization. Seeking self-actualization emphasizes identity development, and is encompassed in the aspects of self and disposition in the theoretical framework. Also included in self and disposition was Norman’s exploratory mentality. He still wanted to feel as if he was contributing to something, but wasn’t sure what to contribute to or how.

To help with his exploration, Norman used strategies that he had developed throughout his life: making connections with others and advocating for himself. Norman sought to develop relationships in the “Transitions Prep” and with university staff, the instructors, and his classmates. He, at times, found the program to be frustrating due to his want for more connection. Norman also used his self-advocacy skills to adapt assignments to his needs. Despite Norman’s realization of needing to be before you can do, he struggled to adopt the identity of student, which made it difficult for him to take the necessary steps to become a student. Throughout his narrative, when taking on new roles, Norman made statements of insecurity. He doubted himself when changing campuses, when changing roles at work, and when contemplating his possible future as a student.

Overall, Norman would recommend participation in “Transitions Prep” to a friend. He found value in the program. Norman came into “Transitions Prep” with a negative perspective of his past educational experiences. These perceptions of his previous education and his positive perception of “Transitions Prep” relate to the role that support plays during transition. “Transitions Prep” offered much support, which ultimately, helped Norman form a positive view of the program, even if it did not fully
meet his expectations. The support from “Transitions Prep” also helped him to reconsider his negative perception of his past experiences in education, which he described as stemming from a lack of supports and feeling that he did not belong.

Figure 4.3 demonstrates how these themes take shape within the theoretical framework. Just as for Karen, the majority of the themes that Norman’s narrative presented are related to the components of self and dispositional barriers. However, themes related to supports and institutional barriers are also heavily reflected. These themes categorized under support and institutional barriers largely seem to stem from Norman’s previous negative experiences in education.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Situation - Situation</th>
<th>Self - Disposition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Deciding to retire</td>
<td>Exploratory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Insecurity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Seeking Self-actualization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Be Before You Can Do</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Connections</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategies - Disposition</th>
<th>Support - Institution</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Connections</td>
<td>Connections</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advocate</td>
<td>Positive perception of Transition Program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Frustration with Transition Program structure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Negative perception of past educational experience</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 4.3. “S” System Chart: Norman

Lucy

At age 23, Lucy was the youngest participant in the study and in “Transitions Prep.” Lucy lived with her boyfriend and worked as the caretaker for her boyfriend’s brother who had developmental delays. Lucy described herself as a busybody and regularly worked more than one job. She was very close to her family, which was very
important to her. Throughout the study, nine themes emerged for Lucy. These themes include: being mature for her age, the state of her finances, her desire to go back to school, uncertainty, seeking self-fulfillment, having an awareness of her learning needs, having gained confidence throughout the transition program, having a positive outlook, and her family.

Although she was the youngest participant, Lucy explained that she has always viewed herself as mature and did not relate well to her same-age peers.

*I started working when I was 15 on the farm. So everyone is like oh during our summer vacation we play the new Donkey Kong game or whatever and I was like, I was mucking horse stalls like that's not me. But it's okay. I get along with people decades above me* (1st Interview).

Being mature for her age was a theme for Lucy, who in high school opted to be a teacher’s aide for students with special needs instead of having study halls or elective courses.

*And I was always attracted to older people, not in like a weird way but people like other 23 year olds go out every night and party* (1st Interview).

At age 17, Lucy was involved with a man who already had kids. She helped to care for the kids and explained that she continues to be a mother figure in their lives. Lucy’s sense of maturity seems to stem from having taken on more adult roles at a young age. This emphasizes the notion that adult learner status is not determined by age, but more so by characteristics common to being an adult (Ross-Gordon, 2011). It is often these characteristics that lead to situational and dispositional barriers (Cross, 1991).

Part of Lucy’s maturity seems to come from being adopted as a child. Growing up in a small town, Lucy was regularly asked about her adoption.

*So in a small town I was asked questions like why were you adopted?* (1st Interview).
She expressed that she was aware of how fortunate she was to be adopted, of the cost of adoption, and of her parents’ struggles to conceive on their own. These sensitive topics were something that she had to learn to deal with at a young age. Lucy’s early awareness of her adoption, paired with having to handle her emotions, as well as the emotions of others about her adoption suggest that Lucy took on some of the psychological concerns of being an adult at a younger age than most. The psychological role of being an adult is more indicative of being an adult learner, than age (Hansman & Mott, 2010).

Oh no it was crazy you know 13 years old, being asked why my biological family didn't want me.

And it’s traumatic but I don't want people to feel bad for me ... (1st Interview).

Lucy’s maturity is also reflected in to her desire to be independent. Her maturity and independence can be categorized as the factor of self in the 4 “S” System. Self reflects an individual’s personality, as well as their psychological resources (Anderson et al., 2012). Lucy relied on her maturity and independence to adjust to challenges. Lucy explained that she prefers to take care of herself. She left the ultrasound program that she entered after high school graduation because she did not want to ask her parents to help with the tuition.

And I didn't want to ask my parents like I was a very independent person and I still am and I just didn't feel right going to my parents and being like “hey do you have $2000 so I can go to school’ (1st Interview).

And I was only there a semester. I – if that, I – they asked me for money and I said I don't have it and you know I just what... (1st Interview).

**Finances** are another reoccurring theme in Lucy’s narrative. Finances are typically a concern for adult learners and represent a situational barrier (Cross, 1991; Kasworm et al., 2002; Malhotra et al., 2007). During our first interview, Lucy confided that she had recently lost her job. After submitting her two weeks’ notice, she was told to
vacate her position. At the time, she was very worried about being unemployed. She expressed that she will need to work at least part-time when she goes back to school. She also noted that she needs to pay off student loans from her time in the ultrasound program before taking classes again. Having to take out loans to pay for her technical program is related to the high cost associated with postsecondary education, which is an institutional barrier for many adult learners (Cross, 1991).

*I'm not back in yet and I do have past school loans that I need to like figure out before I get more school loans and all that other stuff (1st Interview).*

Although Lucy enjoys her financial independence, she stated that she wished she did not need to work while attending school. The need to work depicts a situational barrier that Lucy will face as she attempts to enroll in college (Cross, 1991). Another common characteristic of adult learners is the need to work at least part-time while taking classes (Ross-Gordon, 2011). Having to balance the responsibilities of school and work also poses challenges and barriers for adult learners (Cross, 1991).

*I think I would like if I had the ability to go back without working (2nd Interview).*

*Going to school without needing to work that would be great but I wouldn’t necessarily change it because I know it’s unrealistic (2nd Interview).*

Although college is costly, Lucy stated that she has always wanted to go back to school. Her motivation to enroll in a degree program can also be categorized as the factor of self (Anderson et al., 2012). Her motivation also was a dispositional strength, which opposes dispositional barriers (Cross, 1991; Pearlin & Schooler, 1978). When Lucy left the ultrasound technician program she knew that she wanted to earn her college degree.

*I'm taking this transitions class because I want to go back to school (1st Interview).*
Lucy knew that she wanted to go back to school before the Transitions program (2nd Interview Notes).

She also knew that a degree from the technical program was not what she wanted.

Lucy’s goal of going back to school was deepened when her mother graduated with her Bachelor’s degree as an adult learner.

Lucy’s desire to return to school is for self-fulfillment; a common reason adult learners seek higher education (Genco, 2007). She is seeking self-fulfillment in her career and how she gets there. At first, I conceptualized this theme as helping others because Lucy was so incredibly passionate about helping others, especially those with special needs. However, helping others gave Lucy a feeling of fulfillment. It is the reason why she wanted to continue helping others. Lucy expressed wanting to make her family feel proud and to be proud of herself.

So I want to walk across that stage and I want them to be proud of me and I know they will (1st Interview).

She also expressed wanting to have options in her career. If helping others was her sole aim and not a quest for fulfillment, she could accomplish her goal without earning a degree. It is her desire to feel good about her accomplishments and to feel meaning in her work that indicates that she was seeking self-fulfillment. As it did for Norman, Lucy’s search for fulfillment reflects the notions of self-actualization and self-authorship, which both imply the motivation to become the best version of one’s self (Baxter-Magolda, 2008; Maslow, 1970).

Although Lucy has a goal of earning a degree, she expressed that she is nervous about going back to school. The theme of uncertainty is present throughout Lucy’s interviews and journals. Uncertainty is a theme for many adult learners who are typically
unsure of their ability and exhibit signs of self-doubt when entering higher education (Harris & Brooks, 1998; O’Donnell & Tobbell, 2007).

*I was afraid of starting over, change, and failure* (Final Essay).

Lucy was very uncertain about whether or not she will be accepted to her university of choice and questioned her ability to do well as a student. This self-doubt is a dispositional barrier (Cross, 1991).

*I'm terrified of failure, not in just a school setting but like in life in general. I enjoy being happy. When you fail at something you are not happy* (1st Interview).

*The entire idea of going back to school makes me nervous* (1st Interview).

*I said to my mom, I said mom, I haven't been in school in 10 years like I can't go back to college. She looked at me and she goes– I haven't been in school in 30 years and I finished, I was like…true, true. So like you had a head start though. She’s like don't make excuses. And I don't think I am. I think it's more. I didn't have enough confidence in myself* (1st Interview).

“Like I haven't told a lot of my friends because…because I'm afraid like – I applied to Penn State when I was at high school and they denied me and so I'm terrified that they are going to just deny me again and I'm terrified that I'm not going to get into school or that I can't fulfill my dream. And it's one of those things where I write my dreams down you know making it so that children can take regular classes and special ed (sic) classes and certain things like that. But I'm afraid that I'm never going to finish that and it's scary” (1st Interview).

Lucy was also uncertain of what she wanted to study. Many of our conversations after our interviews revolved around degree options and Lucy’s interests. Lucy knew that she wanted a major that would put her on a career path to help others, but was not aware of the options available to her. A lack of information can be categorized as a situational barrier (Cross, 1991). It demonstrates Lucy’s lack of cultural capital (Merton, 1972).

*I don't know where I am going to go from here* (3rd Observation).

However, even after I presented the varying degree programs that could meet her interests, Lucy continued to feel uncertainty about which major would be a better fit.
I need to narrow down what degree I want to go after (Discussion Post).

Because I didn't necessarily know what I want to do as a major (1st Interview).

Well I still want to; I absolutely want to go back. And I think that it helped me maybe not necessarily choose to go but better decipher what exactly I want to back for. It’s looking at the degree part has all been working with you (2nd Interview).

In addition to situational and dispositional barriers, Lucy’s questioning of her ability and her uncertainty of her future path are also related to the factors of self and situation (Anderson et al., 2012; Cross, 1991). For the factor of self, Lucy’s self-doubt stems from her own self-view. For the factor of situation, Lucy’s uncertainty seems to stem from a lack of experience with or knowledge of higher education.

In high school, Lucy was diagnosed with dyslexia and has always struggled with reading. She expressed that having dyslexia did not contribute to her uncertainty or cause her concern for returning to college. She explained that was glad to have a learning disability because she thought that she could better relate to the population of people that she would like to work with in the future. Although her disability could be viewed as a barrier, Lucy does not view it that way and so I do not categorize it as so. Lucy’s determination that her disability would not be a hindrance reflects the psychological resources she used to cope with her disability, which is demonstrated by the factor of self (Anderson et al., 2012). This also reflects a dispositional strength. Her ability to overcome the challenge of her disability is related to her positive perspective of her ability and a high level of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997; Chemers, Hu, & Garcia, 2001).

While Lucy was not worried about her disability, her sense of her learning style was heightened. In fact, her participation in “Transitions Prep” made her more aware of her learning needs. This may prove to be beneficial for Lucy as an awareness of
challenges and obstacles often facilitates success adapting to those challenges (Bandura, 1997).

*I need to hear things and I always knew that but it became very obvious with this class. It wasn’t just a second thought, it was like in my face obvious that I needed some kind of listening* (2nd Interview).

*I think I learned that I have to take notes for everything* (2nd Interview). *I think that I learned interacting with people a better learner for... Because you could sit me in a classroom for five hours and could learn nothing and then I could talk to someone for half an hour and learn everything that was taught* (2nd Interview).

Lucy’s continual evaluation of her learning needs could be viewed as a strategy. In situations where new information was presented, Lucy reflected on how she could best learn.

Through her participation in “Transitions Prep,” Lucy described herself as having gained confidence. A desire for improved self-esteem is a factor for many adult learners who participate in preparation classes (Hansman & Mott, 2010).

*I need this class just as much as everyone else because I need to feel yes I can do this* (1st Interview).

*So for me its confidence is what I’m getting out of this – out of the class. You know it's not necessarily learning new things because so far I know everything they've taught us* (1st Interview).

*After talking to the experts, they confirmed and gave me confidence that I could and would succeed in this field* (Final Presentation).

Lucy thought that the curriculum was a review of what she had previously learned in high school, but she did not mind. She found herself thinking about grammar rules when writing emails and remembering pieces of information that she had not used since high school. Lucy described that her success in the course and the support of the instructors made her feel more prepared and more capable of returning to school.
Lucy suggested that for future “Transitions Prep” classes there should be different levels to meet the varying preparatory needs of the students. Lucy’s observation is noted in the literature. Adult learners usually have a wide variety of backgrounds and varying levels of preparedness (Kasworm et al., 2002; Hansman & Mott, 2010). Lucy found that there was a need to have a class that addressed more advanced topics. Even Marissa, an instructor, expressed that Lucy was more advanced with her knowledge of technology. Lucy described being able to complete the homework assignments within minutes while still in class. The ease of the course caused her to question the rigor of “Transitions Prep” and whether or not the course gave her a false sense of security.

Lucy’s concern about having a false sense of security is sometimes a concern of adult learners due to their initial lack of confidence (Cross, 1991; Ross-Gordon, 2003).

*Unfortunately I feel it was too easy. I can only hope that is what real classes are like, but I'm guessing they aren't* (Journal Entry).

This questioning and uncertainty contrast with Lucy’s self-described improved confidence.

Lucy described having connections to resources as one of the main benefits of participating in “Transitions Prep.” For Lucy, resources included support services, helpful tools, and university staff. When asked about our sessions together Lucy expressed that *It was the best thing the class gave me because now I have a connection* (2nd Interview). Lucy also referenced connections to other staff, including a career counselor and the instructors, who provided help while she explored her future options.

When discussing her learning style, Lucy indicated that she *finds it more helpful to talk to people than to read things* (Discussion Post). This may have influenced why she enjoyed the guest speakers at “Transitions Prep” and followed-up with these speakers to
form stronger connections. These connections with university staff helped to give Lucy a sense of belonging. Mattering helps individuals to develop confidence (Maslow, 1970) and successfully take on the demands of being a student (Schlossberg et al., 1989).

*I now have a pool of resources (3rd Observation).*

*I thought about going back to school a couple of years ago and I didn’t really have like I had my mom and dad were supporting me but that was like it. And now this time around I have you and I have Marissa and Sarah (2nd Interview).*

Lucy also formed connections with her classmates. She described future plans that she and her classmates had made together. Lucy sought to form connections as a strategy to help her transition to college (Anderson et al., 2012). She expressed that she preferred talking to others for information. Lucy hoped to keep in touch with her classmates. She explained they were all very close (2nd Interview). Lucy’s bond with her classmates left her feeling disappointed with the lack of discussion during class. She wished there was more opportunity to share ideas and hear about her classmates strategies, struggles, and stories. This desire for more dialogue was also discussed by Norman. Both Lucy and Norman were regular participants on the discussion forum, which provided a supplemental tool for continued class conversation.

Regardless of Lucy’s disappointment with the lack of discussion, she had a very positive regard for “Transitions Prep.” Generally, Lucy has a positive outlook. Her positivity or her want to be positive was another theme. Starting in childhood, Lucy learned not to let negativity impact her.

*No, not really. I enjoy other’s opinions and I take their like, ‘Oh it’s hard to go back to school because it’s so time consuming,’ well that isn’t going to make me not want to go to school, it’s just going to make me realize I need to make sure I have good time management to go back. So their opinions I take into consideration but they don’t influence my outcome (2nd Interview).*
Lucy’s positivity can be situated in the theoretical framework as relating to her disposition, her identity and her strategies for coping (Anderson et al., 2012). She views herself as happy and seeks to be happy, which influences how she handles change and challenge.

*Because no matter what kind of life you have, no matter what upbringing you have, for me, life needs to be happy. I'm a very happy person* (1st Interview).

Typically, individuals with a more positive outlook have a better transition experience (Fiske & Chiriboga, 1990; Folkman, 1992; Schlossberg et al., 1989).

**Family** was another theme for Lucy. Family plays a large role for adult learners (Fairchild, 2003) and it also did for Lucy. Throughout our time together Lucy referenced the support that her family, her boyfriend and his family provided. Lucy noted that she lives close to her mother, father, and brother and regularly spends time with them. Her mother was the one who prompted her enrollment in “*Transitions Prep.*”

*[My mom] went back and she started with the transitions class. She told me she said you need to take this class* (1st Interview).

In fact, Lucy’s mother actually participated in the program. Lucy looked to her mother as a role model and had regular encouragement from her family to go back to school.

*And I know that I always have support with family. But to me it’s an honor for them to like instead of me going to them and asking...Them coming to me and offering is more of a like support system to me. I know that I can go to them and ask anything but it just means so much more that they are like we are not going to give you the chance to ask, we are just going to do it* (1st Interview).

*But I have a really good support system. I thought about going back to school a couple of years ago and I didn’t really have like I had my mom and dad were supporting me but that was like it. And now this time around I have you and I have Mary and Sonia, and I have mom and my dad and Nate and like his family. His father is a doctorate in speech pathology and he’s like, 'I look at your papers for you,' I have this huge support system* (2nd Interview).
Summary

Lucy was the youngest participant in the study. Being the youngest did not intimidate her. Lucy reported that she relates well to more mature adults and described herself as mature for her age. Part of her maturity seems to have stemmed from needing to handle the emotions surrounding her adoption. The people in Lucy’s town knew of her adoption and she often felt judged because of it. However, Lucy decided to be positive in face of the judgment. She explains that she is a positive person; that she likes being happy. This positive attitude and her maturity are embodied in the components of self and disposition of the theoretical framework (Anderson et al, 2012; Cross, 1991).

Her mother’s encouragement prompted her to enroll in “Transitions Prep,” but Lucy had always planned to earn a college degree. Having worked multiple jobs since graduating from high school, Lucy was seeking a career that was rewarding. Her passion for helping people, especially those with special needs, also was a driving force in her goal to return to school. Lucy felt that to help others in the way that she found most fulfilling, she would need a degree. Unfortunately, she struggled to identify what degree she wanted to pursue. She was unaware of the options available to her and was not sure which majors would best meet her needs and interests. Major exploration was often a topic of conversation after our interviews and in passing during the observations. To help with her exploration, Lucy took advantage of the connections she made to university supports and staff. Lucy also felt connected to her classmates and instructors though she wished to have more time to collaborate and have class discussions.

Lucy had high levels of family support upon entering “Transitions Prep.” This support made her more confident about her ability to succeed as a student. Support is also
an aspect of the theoretical framework that determines how well one is able to cope (Anderson et al., 2012). For Lucy, her support system helped her to overcome feelings of uncertainty. “Transitions Prep” also helped Lucy to gain confidence by helping her to review what she had learned in high school. Additionally, Lucy gained awareness about her learning needs and discussed strategies that helped her to best learn. She grew in her understanding of her strengths and weaknesses.

Lucy’s improved sense of self did not come without some questioning. Lucy found “Transitions Prep” to be too easy and wondered whether the course gave her an accurate view of life as a college student. During our interviews Lucy discussed the ease of the curriculum and her savvy with technology. She suggested that it would be helpful to have different “Transitions Prep” courses to address varying levels of readiness. Despite her criticisms, Lucy found the program to be worthwhile.

Although she had much support and felt prepared, Lucy hesitated to apply to the college of her choice. This hesitation was rooted in her want to be financially independent. Lucy lamented the costs of college and the loans that she was still paying from her brief enrollment in a technical program. Lucy did not want to enroll in another program until after paying off her loans. Lucy planned to continue working part-time while attending school part-time to maintain her financial independence. The theme of finances relates to Lucy’s situational barriers as she prepares to transition to college (Cross, 1991). Finances are also related to institutional barriers because of the high cost of tuition.

All of the themes that Lucy displayed can be contemplated within the theoretical framework as displayed in Figure 4.4. As with Karen and Norman, this visual shows that
the majority of Lucy’s themes are reflected in the components of self and dispositional barriers. The themes from Lucy’s narratives can be incorporated into all of the components of the theoretical framework, not just one. Once again, this demonstrates that the complex and contextual nature of transition. It cannot be pinned to one particular influence or experience.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Situation - Situation</th>
<th>Self - Disposition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Finances</td>
<td>Seeking fulfillment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aware of learning needs</td>
<td>Uncertainty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Maturity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Gained confidence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Positive outlook</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategies - Disposition</th>
<th>Support - Institution</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive outlook</td>
<td>Family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connections to resources</td>
<td>Connections to resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finances</td>
<td>Finances</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 4.4. 4 “S” System Chart: Lucy

Diane

Diane was a 54-year-old woman who prioritized caring for her family. Diane is very involved in the Boy Scouts and enjoys camping. Diane’s two children are both grown up and have begun their own lives. Diane helps to look after her one grandson, which she says is both exhausting and gratifying. Ten significant themes emerged for Diane. Those theme are: the need to care for her family, time management, aging, insecurity, preparation for her goals, lacking capital, making connections, being motivated, a want to be fulfilled, and family support.

Diane expressed that ever since she was a young girl she wanted to be a nurse, but opted to go to a technical school because it was the faster route. Diane chose to go to a technical school in Florida because it was far from rural Pennsylvania where she grew up.
She wanted to expand her experiences. Her move to Florida was a life transition, which can often result in growth and changes in identity (Kegan, 1982) as it did for Diane. Diane expressed that her time in Florida helped her to grow. After she earned her degree, she returned to Pennsylvania and had difficulty getting a job. Diane eventually landed a job in a medical lab, met her husband and was soon married. Diane didn’t pursue nursing school after earning her technical degree because she felt the need to care for her family. Caring for her family was a theme that Diane noted throughout the study.

Family responsibilities often taken priority for adult learners, especially women, and may be a deterrent for participation in higher education (Cross, 1991; Malhotra et al., 2007).

And I you know had fallen in love, had children and then everything took the backburner (1st Interview).

Even now that her children are adults, Diane described needing to balance work, “Transitions Prep,” and caring for her mother and her grandson. She voiced having difficulty preparing dinner and making it to class on time. The need to balance multiple roles is also a reason for nonparticipation for adult learners (Fairchild, 2003; Malhotra et al. 2007). Additionally, having to manage different roles and responsibilities can lead to situational barriers (Cross, 1991).

It was hard for me to get there at six because I tried to get dinner prepared (2nd Interview).

My mother’s getting old and older and I’m considering bringing her to live with us (2nd Interview).

Thinking about challenges to going back to school. I can feel some... stress? Maybe now and I am only taking transitions. I find on class days, I am pressed for time, especially cause I watch my grandson on Mondays and Wednesdays- class days. He wears me out! But I wouldn’t change a thing (Journal Entry).
Diane found that her need to care for her family resulted in difficulty with time management, another theme for her.

"Just juggling everything, time management and just I still like this past weekend when we were camping I felt like I’m not going to be able just like pick up and go. I have commitments, I’m going to have assignments but for the most part for now, I can do online and work while I’m camping. Not that that worked (2nd Interview)."

At times she missed assignment deadlines for “Transitions Prep” due to poor time management. Diane’s difficulty managing her time was an effect of the struggle to manage her various roles: mother, wife, grandmother, full-time worker, and student.

Again, this need to balance multiple responsibilities can be categorized as a situational barrier (Cross, 1991), but also relate to the factors of self and situation (Anderson et al., 2012). Having multiple roles relates to how Diane views herself and how she is viewed by others.

Diane also attributed her lack of time management skills to being disorganized. Diane posted about her struggles with time management on the class discussion forum, during our interviews, and in her journal.

"This is a subject important to me as I am very disorganized and mismanage my time at home, while at work I am the complete opposite (Discussion Post)."

"So- I missed a couple of homework assignments. Don’t feel good about that at all! I will start my catch up session after [my grandson] goes home (Journal Entry)."

Although she continued to worry about her time management, Diane found that “Transitions Prep” helped her to develop strategies to better manage her time.

"So this is another way Transitions is helping my endeavor- time management/organization. I know my schedule, what needs done, what needs to take place, etc. Now is the time to implement a plan to better organize my life/house/school/family/meals so on. Pre Planning is vital- I am glad the class introduce this topic (time management/organization) to get me thinking and to get suggestions from classmates on how to achieve better skills (Journal Entry)."
Diane also talked with me after our interviews to discuss strategies for time management. I suggested that Diane write her obligations down in a calendar and keep a list of assignments due. At our second interview, Diane shared that she used my ideas and created a calendar to help her stay on track for the second half of “Transitions Prep.”

Another barrier that Diane encountered was the impact of aging. Her worries related to aging emerged as a theme. She indicated concern that she did not have the same stamina, recall, and physical ability as she did when she was younger. This was especially troubling for Diane because her goal was to become a nurse, which is a physically demanding profession. Even the classes for nursing school are physically demanding as they require one to stand for long periods of time.

*I’ll be I mean I’ll be in the fifties and I don’t know how in my essay, I had a line that at this age I don’t know well I can how I’ll complete and compete in this field. Complete the studies, because I have trouble standing for long periods of time and I have some health issues and back problems and stuff and it’s like ok. But it’s more my body than my…mind* (2nd Interview).

*I already have moments when I think, “Can I really do this?” “Do I have the physical and mental capacity at this age to complete and compete in the nursing field?” (Final Paper).*

In addition to her concerns about her physical ability, Diane expressed on numerous occasions that she did not think she had the same capabilities of retaining information as when she was younger. Her concern about her ability to retain information is a dispositional barrier (Cross, 1991) and implies a level of self-doubt.

*I just don’t think I can – I absorb and retain like I used to and that kind of concerns me because you know I’m older* (1st Interview).

*I – because of my age I want to do something so fast track that I can get the degree and get working* (1st Interview).
Insecurity in her ability was also a theme for Diane. Diane questioned whether or not she would be able to handle the demands of going back to school. This questioning is not uncommon for adult learners (Cross, 1991; O’Donnell & Tobbell, 2007) and is a dispositional barrier (Cross, 1991), which can be categorized as the factor of self in the 4 “S” System (Anderson et al., 2012)

I know there are challenges and obstacles ahead of me, none more powerful though, than my own mind (Final Paper).

As far as going to school, I don’t know that I can retain as much but I’ll be okay. I keep telling myself you’ll be okay (2nd Interview).

But I have put off being an adult learner for 30 years and I regret that. I think if I, I sit and imagine where I would be today if I wouldn’t have let fear and excuses get in my way (2nd Interview).

Diane’s fear of failure and her insecurity about her capability to complete a degree were demonstrated by her effort to hide her enrollment from her parents. Diane did not want to face criticism from her parents because she already had her own self-doubt. There were times when she would tell her mother that she was busy or doing something else, when she was actually going to class. About her enrollment, Diane explained I've kind of kept it mum (1st Interview).

At the time of the study, Diane had already applied to nursing school and needed to take some preparatory courses before beginning the nursing curriculum. Her participation in “Transitions Prep” stemmed from her focus on preparation. Preparation was a theme and strategy for Diane (Anderson et al., 2012). Diane recognized that she needed to improve her academic foundation. She attributed her need for skill building to her poor performance in high school. Previous higher education experiences often frame how adult learners view their ability to do well in higher
education (Anderson et al., 2012; Cross, 1991; O’Donnell & Tobbell, 2007). Diane described herself as a *social butterfly* who did not do well academically. One of Diane’s biggest areas of weakness was math. She expressed much anxiety surrounding the need to take Algebra. She chronicled her struggles with the subject expressing, *I had tutoring and everything. D was a waahoo. I didn't flunk* (1st Interview). Before enrolling in “Transitions Prep,” she began an online course to build her math skills. In addition to “Transitions Prep” and math preparation, Diane was looking to take some online courses to fulfill general education requirements to better prepare herself for nursing school. This reiterates the idea that Diane used preparation as a strategy.

> So with their assistance at the nursing school I found an online course, it's called nursing ABC to get my algebra. And my chemistry so I'm working on that process and then I – me to take some gen-ed classes and so I requested information from the World Campus about you know what do they have to offer and what is there (1st Interview).

While Diane was working to remediate her academic skills and prepare for nursing school, she encountered obstacles trying to register for classes. Out of all the participants, Diane was one of the furthest along in the enrollment process. Although ready to enroll, Diane portrayed a general unawareness of the processes and procedures required to begin taking classes. This lack of knowledge can be categorized as both institutional and situational barriers (Cross, 1991). Diane made phone calls that were not returned, she was given varying information about which forms she needed to complete, and she did not know which classes she should take. After our sessions, I spent time reviewing the courses needed to fulfill the nursing program requirements and how to register for them. Diane had many questions about the university structure; questions such as, *Do you need transcripts and stuff this? How many weeks is the regular semester?* (2nd Interview).
Aside from myself and the staff that she met through “Transitions Prep,” Diane did not have the social or cultural capital to navigate institutional policies, which is not uncommon for adult learners (Cross, 1991; Kasworm et al., 2002). Social capital refers to the trust, reciprocity, information, and cooperation associated with social networks (Harvard Kennedy School, n.d., para. 2). Cultural capital refers to cultural knowledge convertible into social and economic advantage (Light, 2005, para. 1). Diane did not have social networks to pass along information about the university and she did not have knowledge about the institutional culture or norms. The theme of lacking capital (both social and cultural) presented more fully as Diane progressed in readiness to begin taking classes.

*I don’t know, I guess that’s one of my problems. I just like okay here I am, I’m in limbo right now I don’t know* (2nd Interview).

Given Diane’s lack of capital, she found the most beneficial aspect of “Transitions Prep” to be the connection to resources, including university staff. In this sense, “Transitions Prep” helped to bridge Diane’s lack of capital.

*I would not have found the resources given to me if I were not here* (3rd Observation).

*Since coming to Transitions class, I have learned so many wonderful resources and contacts that I would never have found on my own* (Final Paper).

In addition to university staff, Diane also felt connected to her classmates and the support that they provided through the program. For Diane, the theme of connection extended beyond the relationships that she developed and also emerged as a desire for more connection. She expressed wanting mentorship and to have guidance from adult learners.
who successfully made the transition to higher education. Mentoring can be an effective means to help adult learners gain confidence (Hansman & Mott, 2010).

*I think if there was a venue where people like us could sit and talk and say, “You know this is, I’m at this point, he’s at this point and she’s at this point and look at what we’ve done and we’re over 50, we’re over 40, we’re over 30. This is what we have done and it all started here, with this phone call, with this Transitions program. And you can do it too* (2nd Interview).

This want for connection and for a social network, further highlights Diane’s need for cultural and social capital.

Throughout the study, Diane described herself as very motivated. She declared that she had a drive to do well. Her motivation emerged as another theme. Coming into “Transitions Prep,” Diane was confident about her return to school. She may have lacked confidence about her ability, but she was not uncertain about her desire to earn a nursing degree.

*I feel more determined and more confident in my choice even though I haven’t told my mom, dad, brothers, sisters* (2nd Interview).

*I now feel very excited about my choice to go to school. After [the researcher] showed me the class schedules and we scanned around for a bit- it made everything come together and now it is SO REAL- I’m really going to do this! It is within my grasp* (Journal Entry).

Much of her motivation was related to her want to be fulfilled in her career, which was also a theme. The desire to achieve one’s goals and be fulfilled is encompassed in the factor of self (Anderson et al., 2012) and speaks to her motivation (Genco, 2007; Maslow, 1970). Diane’s goal to earn a nursing degree stemmed from a childhood dream. It is something she had always wanted to accomplish. After working many years in her current profession, she began to feel dissatisfied with her potential to grow. She felt that she could contribute more and that she wanted more out of her career.
I become uninspired when I reached the limit of the job’s offering and there is no more growth. Then the search begins to find what else is out there for me to use the talents I possess (Final Paper).

I'm like a goal driven person. And I think I get bored or dissatisfied with you know like even though they are good jobs unfortunately I think I have more to offer or fortunately I think I have more to offer (1st Interview).

As for myself. I did not ask the right questions, nor did I research the career field thoroughly enough. I ended up with "jobs" rather than, what I consider, a career. I took the quick and easy way and in the end I have had gainful employment, made good money and have enjoyed what I do/have done. Therefore, I cannot say it wasn't a successful choice, but rather an incomplete fulfillment of my dream or intention of what I wanted to accomplish. You know, they always say go with your first choice... I should have done that many years ago, then I would hopefully feel the satisfaction I hope to gain in my new journey. I too had chosen a career path that no longer fulfills me. It's not that I don't enjoy what I do, coincidently, I love what I do, I just need more growth (Discussion Post).

When Diane was passed over for a promotion at work, she decided that it was time to pursue her goal. Not earning the promotion was a nonevent for Diane and prompted her exploration of returning to school (Anderson et al., 2012). It gave her the extra motivation to fulfill her dream of being a nurse.

Family support was complicated for Diane and was also a reoccurring theme. The support that she did and did not receive from her family can be described as both the factor of support (Anderson et al., 2012) and a situational barrier (Cross, 1991). She thought that she had her family’s support, yet she did not tell all of her family about her participation in “Transitions Prep” for fear that they would not be supportive.

So my family is my biggest support. My son, daughter and husband and daughter in law are my bigger you know supporters because I haven’t...haven’t even told my parents you know (1st Interview).

I think my mother would because she always was supportive but at this point I don’t know. I just don’t want to answer questions (2nd Interview).

Based on Diane’s descriptions, she had her family’s emotional and financial support, but did not get additional help with household responsibilities. Diane explained that her
husband and daughter were encouraging about her return to school, but she still found herself doing the cooking and cleaning while enrolled in “Transitions Prep.” Her aim to care for her family in the same capacity as she had before participating in “Transitions Prep” caused stress and time management issues for Diane. This comes back to the need to balance multiple roles, which creates situational barriers for adult learners (Cross, 1991). Diane shared that she was pleased that her husband and daughter came to see her final presentation for “Transitions Prep” because they were finally able to see all of the work that she had been doing. After seeing her final presentation, Diane’s daughter commented that she was proud of Diane. Diane said that after seeing her presentation, both her husband and daughter expressed increased levels of support.

And like the Mother’s Day card I received from my daughter, even she found one that said how she was and I forget how but I’m very proud of you. And I said, “Well I’m so glad you’re proud,” and she goes, “I’m always proud of you about the fact that you’re going back to school and you want to do something more” (2nd Interview).

I may want to give up but my support system will not allow that to happen (Journal Entry).

Summary

Many of the themes that emerged for Diane were in conflict. Although she was highly motivated, Diane experienced dispositional barriers as she questioned her ability to be successful. Diane had concerns about her age. Additionally, her fear of failure and criticism from others prevented her from sharing her goal with her parents, which also limited her available family support. Perhaps Diane’s parents would not have supported her, but without knowing about her goal, they did not have the option to offer any. While Diane did have the support of her immediate family, she also encountered situational barriers as she struggled to manage her multiple responsibilities. She wanted to care for
her family, and in doing so, prioritized their needs over hers. Diane was ready to enroll in her entry requirements for her nursing program, yet she was confronted with institutional barriers compounded by her lack of capital as she tried to register for classes. She developed connections to university staff and resources through “Transitions Prep,” but found herself wishing for more mentorship and connection to other adult learners.

Despite this push and pull of support met with obstacles, Diane expressed motivation and excitement about pursuing her dreams. Earning a nursing degree meant fulfilling her lifelong goal. She enrolled in “Transitions Prep” and remedial math coursework to help prepare her to meet this goal. Diane used preparation as a strategy to successfully transition into the student role. Through “Transitions Prep,” her family began to realize the commitment that school would require. They began to understand the time and effort Diane would need to put forth as a student. Her husband and daughter encouraged Diane and conveyed their pride after her final presentation. After “Transitions Prep,” Diane was hopeful that her family would give additional help around the house as she took courses. Her next step was to complete the remedial math and begin taking courses towards her nursing degree.

The varying themes described by Diane are demonstrated in Figure 4.5. Unlike the other participants, the majority of Diane’s themes relate to her situation and the situational barriers that she encountered. Yet, the themes relating to self and dispositional barriers, as well as supports, still play a significant role. It is possible that Diane’s emphasis on supports is because of the situational barriers that she experienced. Even her themes related to strategies and disposition reflect her attempt to overcome the challenges of her situation.
Situation
- Situation
  Aging
  Need to care for family
  Time Management
  Lack of Capital

Self
- Disposition
  Seeking fulfillment
  Insecurity
  Motivated

Strategies
- Disposition
  Connections
  Preparation

Support
- Institution
  Connections
  Preparation
  Family Support

Figure 4.5. 4 “S” System Chart: Diane

Kate

Kate, a 45-year-old, single mother to a college student, grew up in rural Pennsylvania and never left. Her family also remained in the area. In previous years, Kate had divorced and she now lived on her own. Kate was one of the few in her family to graduate from high school and go on to postsecondary education. During our interview, seven themes emerged. The themes of her son, health issues, a perceived need for a degree, seeking fulfillment, finances, institutional barriers, and self-doubt all presented in our time together. Kate’s participation in “Transitions Prep” and this study was limited because of health issues. Unfortunately, due to her poor health she was only able to complete one interview.

During our interview, Kate proudly talked about her son and he quickly emerged as a theme. Kate expressed that her son was her sole support as she attempted to go back to school. Her son’s encouragement can be categorized as a factor of support. Family support can influence how a transition is experienced (Anderson et al., 2012) and is a factor in adult learner persistence in higher education (Cross, 1991; Malhotra et al., 2007). Kate described her son as being a motivating force in her life.
Basically my son is the only support I have (1st Interview).

I didn't really discuss it with anybody. I might have mentioned it to my son and he's my rock. He keeps me going. So and he's like mom that would be good (1st Interview).

She also noted that she relied on her son for information about university life: she frequently turned to him with questions. Turning to her son with questions was a strategy for Kate because it was the way that she sought information (Anderson et al., 2012).

I certainly consult with my son (1st Interview).

And he's very smart. I ask him a lot of questions (1st Interview).

Kate shared that she severely injured her back at work and subsequently needed surgery which drastically limited her physically ability. Kate’s surgery required that several of her vertebrae be fused together. Kate could no longer turn her neck or sit for long periods of time. She was frequently in pain. Her health issues were a recurring theme as Kate described her injury and how that impacted her life. These health issues can be viewed as situational barriers that hindered Kate’s ability (Malhotra et al., 2007).

I've had – recently had surgery and I can't do my job that I normally do (1st Interview).

Since I've always been like on the go, busy, busy, busy you know and then since my surgery I haven't been able to do the things I could do before. So it's been a big setback and like I do a lot of procrastinating these days and I just – it's hard for me to get motivated because I just you know I don't have that... (1st Interview).

Due to her health complications, Kate had to drop out of “Transitions Prep” and the study. Marissa, one of the “Transitions Prep” instructors, expressed concern about Kate’s ability to work and return to school. Health issues are one of the primary reasons that adult learners discontinue their participation in school (Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2010).

Her back and her neck and she just can’t do it. She said she’s in so much pain and she just can’t concentrate on what she needs to do here... She was a good student, but we’re
more worried about her because she’s out on disability, she works here at the university and she can’t work (Marissa, Interview).

Kate’s new physical limitations prevented her from being able to perform her job. She had worked in the university dining commons for years, which required long hours on her feet, lifting food, and reaching for items overhead. Unable to return to her previous job, Kate also faced financial difficulty.

Kate’s return to school was prompted by her health issues. Kate remarked that she felt she needed a degree to be able to get a job that was less physically demanding. She planned to get a degree related to management so that she could return to her previous employer as a manager. Many adult learners return to higher education for career development and to improve their job prospects (Compton et al., 2006; Kasworm, 2003; Kim et al., 2004). Kate no longer could carry out duties of her old job, but thought that she could manage those who did. When asked if a degree was required to be a manager, Kate explained that it was not. She had witnessed co-workers be promoted to manager based on their experience. Although Kate had many years of experience, she felt that she also needed the degree.

I need, I feel I need now is the time to do it because I need it now (1st Interview).

Although health issues were the catalyst that prompted Kate to enroll in “Transitions Prep” and seek a degree, she has always wanted to return to school. Kate took classes multiple times post high school. Kate enrolled at a beauty school, but lacked the finances to keep going. Her need to “stop out” or drop out for an undetermined period of time (Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2010, p. 28) was due the institutional barrier of cost (Cross, 1991). Eventually Kate earned her certificate to cut hair, but she found that
she made more money working as a waitress. This is how she got her start in the hospitality industry.

At times, Kate thought about going back to school. Unfortunately, she did not have the time or the resources to continue—emphasizing once more, her situational barriers (Cross, 1991).

*I've actually wanted, I've been wanting to do this for a very long time* (1st Interview).

*I wanted to do this for a long time. And you know my children were little and I was working full time and trying to fit school and just wasn't—and my husband worked different schedules back then, son...* (1st Interview).

Kate explained that earning a degree would help with employment opportunities, but it would also be fulfilling. **Seeking personal fulfillment** was also a theme for Kate. As it did for the other participants, seeking fulfillment demonstrated Kate’s motivation. Motivation is related to the factor of self and can be a dispositional strength (Anderson et al., 2012; Cross, 1991; Pearlin & Schooler, 1978).

Concern about **finances** and the cost of higher education was another theme for Kate. Kate’s inability to work because of her injury greatly limited her income. The cost of higher education is an institutional barrier for many adult learners (Cross, 1991).

*But I didn't have the funds to complete the course so because I mean came—our family doesn't have a lot of money and I was pretty much taking care of myself trying to get myself there and pay my way through and I just didn't make it through...* (1st Interview).

In relation to cost, Kate indicated an unawareness about financial aid prior to enrolling in “Transitions Prep.” A lack of information about university practices is another form an institutional barrier (Cross, 1991). It also is related to a lack of cultural capital which manifests in the form of situational barriers.

*For me, I always wanted to go, but the finances weren't there and...that's the way my parents made me feel like—they just didn't have the finances. But I mean I didn't know*
that there was financial aid available that was never something that... I don't know if they knew that or not. But I mean now I know that there is financial aid available and...

(1st Interview).

Kate explained that tuition was only part of the cost. There were also the other additional costs of going back to school, such as gas and parking.

**Institutional barriers** are another theme for Kate. Kate experienced varying obstacles based on the general university structure. Kate did not indicate one particular barrier posed by the institution, but rather multiple barriers that all culminated under the larger, more general category of institutional barriers. A follow-up interview with Kate would have helped to further clarify the institutional barriers that she initially discussed, but unfortunately her poor health prevented that. Many of the institutional barriers Kate mentioned overlap with her situational and dispositional barriers, but all stemmed from university demands.

Kate was seeking enrollment at university focused on traditional-aged students, and expressed concerns about being in class with younger students. Kate’s concern being with younger students is a dispositional barrier as it highlights her self-doubt (Cross, 1991). She indicated that she felt her only option was to take classes online because of the lack of residential adult learner course offerings. The limited availability of courses for adult learners reflects yet another institutional barrier (Cross, 1991).

*I just – I don't want to be in a class with the – I know the classes are usually huge. My son’s a college student. He takes courses every year and I'm just, I wouldn't feel comfortable being in that situation and they – I don't think they had evening classes for adults in that course so I opted for the online courses (1st Interview).*

Taking online courses requires much time sitting at a computer, which also concerned Kate. Additionally, Kate confronted institutional barriers related to the rigorous curriculum. She felt underprepared for math and writing, and was not aware of
resources—aside from “Transitions Prep”—to help improve her skills. Adult learners often require remedial coursework and seek preparation classes to build their self-esteem (Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2010; Hansman & Mott, 2010; O’Donnell and Tobbell, 2007).

Moreover, Kate noted a lack of knowledge about available degree options. Her lack of knowledge about required courses for her degree, scheduling classes, and available majors can be categorized as institutional and situational barrier (Cross, 1991). After our interview, I spent time reviewing different majors with Kate. At the time, she was enrolled in a business program, which required calculus. I suggested other options that were business focused but did not have the math requirement that she dreaded. She left our interview considering a change of major. Had we not discussed major options, Kate would have been unaware that there were other degrees that could lead to her goal.

Kate’s concern with her academic ability was also a dispositional barrier, which presented in the theme of self-doubt. Her self-doubt is encompassed in the factor of self as a reflection of her self-esteem, self-view, and identity (Anderson et al., 2012). Kate acknowledged that she questioned if returning to school was the right decision. She was fearful of failing. She did not know if she had the drive to complete a degree.

*Am I really going to be able to get through this? Right now that's what I was thinking, I'm thinking...* (1st Interview).

*I'm nervous.*

Interviewer: *Yeah. What would you say you are most nervous about?*

Additionally, she was worried about other people’s perceptions of her, although she wished that she was not.

*Failing. I don’t like to fail. That's – and what people – I hate to say I care about what people think about me because I really don't* (1st Interview).
Summary

Kate’s health issues resulting from a work related injury changed the course of her career. She could no longer complete the job that she had done for over twenty years. Her physical limitations left her feeling ostracized because she could not take part in social events as she once had. Her finances were also limited due to her change in physical ability. Kate’s struggles with her health and the challenges that arose because of her health could be framed as situational barriers, but their impact stemmed beyond just the situation of Kate’s transition. Kate’s situational barriers were exacerbated by the institutional barriers that she described. Kate had limited knowledge of degree options. She felt that she had limited options for adult learner courses. Kate also felt overwhelmed by the idea of college-level math and writing.

To help deal with the barriers that she encountered, Kate turned to her son. She used her son’s knowledge of student life and his support to help her transition to higher education. Kate felt that by earning her degree, she would have better employment opportunities. For Kate, earning a degree was a strategy to have a better career. Degree completion was also a long-time goal of Kate’s. She wanted to complete a degree for her own sense of pride. Kate’s health issues brought to light her want to feel fulfilled by her job and her accomplishments. Thus, another theme for Kate was seeking fulfillment. Seeking fulfillment can be categorized as the factor of self (Anderson et al, 2012). Although Kate wanted to return to school, she also had feelings of self-doubt. She questioned her decision to enroll in classes and her ability to succeed as a student. This self-doubt was a dispositional barrier (Cross, 1991).
Similar to the other participants, Kate’s themes are represented below in relationship to the theoretical framework. The themes of Kate’s narrative also emphasize her situational barriers and the circumstances of the transition. Kate’s discussion of challenges suggested that these situational barriers were on the forefront of her mind. This speaks to the struggles that she encountered related to her health and perhaps foreshadowed her need to leave “Transitions Prep” and the study. Even without having completed the study, Kate’s narrative is still complex, multifaceted and presented themes relating to all aspects of the theoretical framework as depicted in Figure 4.6.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Situation - Situation</th>
<th>Self - Disposition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Health issues</td>
<td>Seeking fulfillment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finances</td>
<td>Self-doubt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Need for a degree</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategies - Disposition</td>
<td>Support - Institution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Son</td>
<td>Son</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Need for a degree</td>
<td>Institutional barriers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 4.6. 4 “S” System Chart: Kate

Cross-Case Analysis

Although each participant had a very unique narrative, there were shared themes among their stories. Just as the themes for the individual narratives, these themes can be situated within the framework of the 4 “S” System of Anderson et al. (2012) and Cross’s (1991) student barriers. As such, I continue to use the framework to guide this discussion. I address how themes may be categorized as multiple factors of the framework. Remaining consistent with the individual narrative analysis, I also depict the themes in a chart organized by the theoretical framework. The components of the framework are shaded and in the cells below are the corresponding themes. Throughout
my discussion of the cross-case themes, I progressively build the themes into the theoretical framework, going section by section until the entire chart is complete.

**Situation and Situational Barriers**

Starting with situation and situational barriers are the themes of **money**, experiencing a prompting **catalyst**, and difficulties with **technology**. All participants noted the high cost of pursuing a degree and their related financial situations. Money is a theme that relates to both situational and institutional barriers (Cross, 1991). Although the expense of college was a concern for the participants, the theme of money also presented as a reason to earn a degree. For Diane, Lucy, Karen, and Kate, money was a motivating factor for postsecondary enrollment because they attributed a college degree to a higher salary. The desire to earn a degree for economic reasons is often cited by adult learners (Kasworm et al., 2002). For Norman, who was retired and was not seeking career advancement, money was a deterrent. Many adult learners find the cost of higher education to be an institutional barrier that deters participation (Cross, 1991).

Every participant also experienced a catalyst that prompted their participation in “Transitions Prep” and their wish to enter higher education. These catalysts related to the participants’ life situations and the situational barriers that they were experiencing. It is often a transition that prompts adult learner enrollment in higher education (Anderson et al., 2012; Cross, 1991; Kasworm et al., 2002). Norman had recently retired. His retirement was an anticipated life span transition (Anderson et al., 2012). Diane was passed over for a promotion, which was a personal nonevent and an unanticipated transition. Lucy’s more flexible job and increased support was related to life span events, such as improved employment and living with her boyfriend. Kate and Karen were both
experiencing health issues that prevented them from working in their previous occupations. Their health issues prompted unanticipated transitions. Karen also experienced a role change and relocation after her divorce, which was also an unanticipated transition. All of these circumstances were catalysts that prompted the participants to contemplate higher education and begin the moving in phase of their transition to college (Anderson et al., 2012).

Another situational barrier was the need to use technology on a regular basis. Technology now plays a pivotal role in our society (Bennett & Bell, 2010). Technology has the power to bring people to together or create deeper divisions between groups based on access and ability. Marissa commented that this particular class struggled with technology, which was surprising to her. She noted that over the years, students entered “Transitions Prep” with more and more technical savvy, but not this group. She found that the class especially struggled to navigate the online course management system. Upon learning that “Transitions Prep” would eventually become an online course with no in-class participation, the participants voiced concern. They all thought that technology barriers would prevent adult learners from accessing the course; especially those seeking to improve their computer skills.

As good as this class is, there seems to be-every class has sort of a theme to it and this class difficulty finding what they’re supposed to be finding in Angel (Marissa, Interview).

The only participant who did not have issues with technology was Lucy. Lucy acknowledged that other participants experienced difficulty and that she often helped them during class. This demonstrates the varied levels of preparedness for the students in the class. Lucy even helped the instructors on occasion. The theme of technology for Lucy was not about being inexperienced, but rather about being too advanced for what
the class covered. Figure 4.7 depicts these situational barriers in relationship to the theoretical framework.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Situation</th>
<th>Self</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Money</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catalyst</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategies</td>
<td>Support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Disposition</td>
<td>- Institution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Money</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 4.7. Cross-Case Analysis Findings for Situation and Situational Barriers

**Support and Institutional Barriers**

This discussion now turns to the cross-case themes that relate to the element of support in the theoretical framework. Throughout the study, the participants all described the varying levels of support that their families provided; a common factor in adult learner participation in higher education (Fairchild, 2003). Family support can often help individuals to overcome barriers. **Family** was also a shared theme. Lucy and Karen had very high levels of family support. Norman and Kate both received support from their children. The support that Kate received from her son was the only form of support that she had, while Norman also had a network of friends that were supportive. Diane had support from her husband and daughter about her decision to return to higher education, but did not describe high levels of family help. Diane also avoided telling her parents that she planned to return to school, and anticipated that they would question her decision to enroll. In all, family support and the lack thereof, was noted by all of the participants.

*The role of family and the support the offer is present on some level for each participant* (Researcher Journal Entry).
The participants also described the various connections they had made, either to staff, each other, or university resources through participation in “Transitions Prep.” These connections were another shared theme. The participants noted their connection to the instructors and the guest speakers of “Transitions Prep.” They described the instructors as very helpful and genuinely caring. Of the guest speakers, the participants remarked of their helpfulness and the connection that they provided to the university. Through the guest speakers, Diane felt as though she was at the threshold (Diane, 2nd Interview). Lucy described that she felt she already had a foot in the door (Lucy, 1st Interview). The participants also shared that because of the guest speakers, they had a new awareness of university services and resources, which strengthened their sense of belonging to the university. This sense of belonging is significant because it can help to facilitate a successful transition to higher education (Schlossberg et al., 1989).

All participants find the guest speakers of the program to be especially helpful and enjoyable. I think this demonstrates a want to feel linked and connected to the university… (Researcher Journal Entry).

In addition to the connection to the university, staff, and supports, everyone described a mutual bond and respect for one another. The classmates planned to continue their relationships after “Transitions Prep” ended. They even made plans to have a small reunion. The connections that the participants shared was a form of support. Although all participants indicated that they appreciated these connections, Norman and Diane suggested that they had hoped for more depth in the relationships that they established.

Being in the program…creates a shared experience and for these students, a community of people experiencing similar concerns. Even if participants did not experience similar circumstances in their transition, they shared similar feelings about the transition and become a support system for one another (Researcher Journal Entry).
These connections were also related to the strategies that the participants used during their transitions. The participants relied on the connections they formed to gain knowledge about college enrollment. Lucy formed connections partially as a strategy for learning because it was her preferred method for gathering new information. Other participants also expressed that meeting with people was part of their research about enrolling in college. Diane noted that she would have liked to meet more “Transitions Prep” alumni and learn about how they managed college level coursework.

Another connection that all of the participants recognized, was the connection to me— the researcher. I was mentioned in every participant’s final paper or presentation. When asked about their participation in the study, Lucy expressed that she felt working with me was the best part of the “Transitions Prep.”

Interviewer: Okay so then what do you think about our one on one sessions?

I love them; it’s the best thing that class gave me (Lucy, 2nd Interview).

Norman teared up when discussing our work together during his final presentation. He described feeling an openness with me.

When I mentioned you that’s my old tears came in, the sensitivity (Norman, 2nd Interview).

The good part about talking to you is that I don’t feel as though I have to protect anything (Norman, 2nd Interview).

The participants often referred to me as a counselor or as an adviser, but never a researcher or graduate student. Norman and Karen expressed that they participated in the study specifically to help me. They wanted to form a connection.

I serve as a connection to the university for them in my role as academic adviser. In reflection, this is most likely why participants struggle to identify me. They know I am
doing research and they are participating in research, but they view me as a representative of the university more so than a researcher (Researcher Journal Entry).

These themes related to the component of support are depicted as such in Figure 4.8.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Situation</th>
<th>Self</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Money</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catalyst</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategies</th>
<th>Support</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Disposition</td>
<td>Institution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connections</td>
<td>Money</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Connections</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 4.8. Cross-Case Analysis Findings for Support

**Strategies**

Moving to the discussion of themes related to strategies, the participants shared the themes of **deficit building** and **connections**, which were also strategies. The use of connections as a strategy was previously noted in the discussion of support. In addition to forming connections, all participants were seeking to improve upon areas of weakness through their participation in “Transitions Prep.” The participants described weaknesses in the areas of math, grammar, technology, and study skills. Adult learners commonly need remediation prior to taking college-level coursework (Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2010). Their participation in “Transitions Prep” was proactive. Not only did participants hope to improve particular skills, they also viewed “Transitions Prep” as a trial run at being a student. They were determining whether or not they had the skills they needed to be successful as students, which also speaks to the participants’ identities and the factor of self. The participants were engaging in an intake of their abilities, as is common for individuals in transition (Anderson et al., 2012).
The decision to participate in this transition program for these participants is not a result of enrolling in a higher education program and then realizing that they need to build foundational skills before taking classes. Instead, participation in this program seems to be motivated by the want to explore the options available and to test one’s ability (Researcher Journal Entry).

Figure 4.9 shows how the themes of connections and deficit building fall under the category of strategies and highlight the participants’ dispositional characteristics.

Disposition and strategies coincide because the participants’ attitudes about themselves influenced the strategies that they adopted to cope with the transition (Anderson et al., 2012; Cross, 1991).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Situation</th>
<th>Self</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Money</td>
<td>- Disposition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catalyst</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategies</td>
<td>Support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Connections</td>
<td>- Institution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deficit Building</td>
<td>Money</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Connections</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 4.9. Cross-Case Analysis Findings for Strategies

Self and Dispositional Barriers

The majority of the shared themes that emerged for this study were related to self and dispositional barriers. Self and disposition or dispositional barriers are categorized together because both concepts focus on the participants’ self-perspectives and identities (Anderson et al., 2012; Cross, 1991). When reviewing the cross-case themes, I noticed that those categorized under self and disposition were the most frequent, and most related to other themes. Based on this observation, I argue that the themes related to self and disposition were at the core of how the participants’ experienced the transition.
Perception is at the core of the theoretical framework (Anderson et al., 2012; Cross, 1991) and can be viewed as an extension of identity.

*I think the most important aspect of this transition program is about identity, connection, dispositional influences more so than building foundational academic skills* (Researcher Journal Entry).

The theme of **seeking self-actualization** also emphasizes self, disposition and identity. Seeking self-actualization suggests that the participants were looking to fulfill their potential and to achieve what they thought that they were cable of achieving (Ivtzan, Gardner, Bernard, Sekhon, & Hart, 2013). Self-actualization can be prompted by transition because it “often requires a person to abandon familiar comforts and explore new possibilities” (p. 120). For this study, self-authorship was the primary theory of identity development. Self-actualization and self-authorship share the notion that individuals develop through life experience and that change is a catalyst for growth (Baxter-Magolda, 2008; Kegan, 1982).

The mere decision to participate in “Transitions Prep” was a reflection of the participants’ self-perspectives, motivations, and desires to succeed. All participants were on a path to seeking self-actualization. They all had wanted to feel that their work and lives had meaning. Some participants were further on the path than others. Norman and Diane who already had long careers, were looking for more meaning and fulfillment in their futures. Karen and Lucy were seeking to be more self-efficacious, which is a step on the path to self-actualization (Ivtzan et al., 2013). The theme of seeking self-actualization also highlights the exploratory state of the participants. The search for a fulfilling career and the desire to meet their potential put the participants on a path of exploration.
This exploration stems from the search for fulfillment and stability (Researcher Journal Entry).

To further explore, all participants wanted to spend time with me after our interviews to review different degree programs and to get to know the opportunities at the university. Exploration also included working with the career counselor who was a guest speaker at “Transitions Prep.” During class, the participants took interest inventories with a university career counselor, which resulted in further contemplation of possibilities. Exploration also presented as an issue due to the participants’ lack of knowledge about their choices. It is difficult to explore without knowing what opportunities are available. This lack of knowledge is both a situational and institutional barrier (Cross, 1991). It is situational barrier because the life circumstances of the participants- their contexts- did not put them in a position to access social or cultural capital to aid in their enrollment to higher education. The lack of knowledge about options could also be attributed to the challenge of getting information from the institution.

These students don’t know how to fully explore, partially because they also are not sure of their own ability and/or interests. Exploration requires a sense of options available and the varying majors that can lead to employment in a particular field. Participants lack understanding of all the major choices available and being narrowly focused on career, don’t seem to realize the many different avenues they could take to get there (Researcher Journal Entry).

The theme of self-actualization relates to the theme of wanting more out of “Transitions Prep.” The need for more was expressed by all participants, but in different ways. Diane and Lucy wanted more critical feedback. Both questioned how well “Transitions Prep” mirrored the experiences they would have in a traditional classroom. Diane also wanted more mentorship and connection to others who had
successfully transitioned to being a student. Norman repeatedly remarked his want and need for more connection to enhance his level of engagement. Karen needed more help with technology than was offered during the class. She and Diane both expressed that they needed additional support in math. Kate did not participate long enough in "Transitions Prep" or the study to express if she felt anything was missing. However, her motivation for participating in the course was for more support and connection. Although generally satisfied with "Transitions Prep," all participants left hoping for more out of the class. They’re expectations were not completely fulfilled.

Seeking fulfillment implies that an individual is motivated or at least attempting to achieve their goals (Maslow, 1970). Participants in this study all indicated that they were motivated to succeed, but it is unlikely that an individual would participate in such an intensive, elective program if motivation was lacking. It is also unlikely that an individual who was very confident in their ability to succeed would feel the need to take a preparatory course. This may be why all of the participants in this study demonstrated feelings of self-doubt.

Self-doubt was one of the most prevalent themes discussed by the participants and is often experienced by adult learners (O’Donnell & Tobbell, 2007). Karen was the only participant who did not specifically mention insecurity regarding her ability to succeed, but she did demonstrate feelings of self-doubt about her inability to effectively use technology. Moreover, her focus on the building skills that she felt she lacked suggests that she was not confident about her academic foundation. In this study, the theme of self-doubt goes beyond feelings of uncertainty regarding ability. It also encompasses the lack of knowledge the participants had about the university, and the uncertainty that this
caused; reinforcing the idea that a lack of knowledge is a situational barrier (Cross, 1991).

Participants also experienced self-doubt because of the need to balance their multiple roles. **Balancing multiple roles and identities** was a theme for all, and is often a theme in literature regarding adult learners in higher education (Fairchild, 2003; Kasworm et al., 2002; Malhotra et al., 2007). Balancing multiple roles is often related to situational barriers and dispositional barriers (Malhotra et al., 2007), which was the case for the participants. The participants described conflicts of interest because of how they viewed themselves and their responsibilities. At times, the participants’ prioritized other responsibilities over “Transitions Prep.” They also encountered issues with time management as they tried to fulfill all of their responsibilities. For some, this led to questioning about whether or not they were able to handle demands of being a student in addition to their other roles.

Despite these feelings of insecurity, many of the participants described feeling more confident to take college classes after participating in “Transitions Prep.” Kate was the only participant who did not express feelings of confidence. Instead, she explained that she further doubted whether or not she was capable of being successful as a student. In both instances, participation in “Transitions Prep” led to a **changed perception of returning to higher education**. Understanding that “Transitions Prep” had an influence on the participants’ perceptions is critical because perception greatly influences how one copes with the transition to higher education (Fiske & Chiriboga, 1990). According to Bandura (1997), those who feel capable of their ability to do well as a student are more likely to be successful. All of the participants who expressed feeling
more confident about their return to higher education also had a more positive outlook regarding the transition in general. However, they also grappled with the dispositional barrier of reconciling their self-perspectives formed from prior negative educational experiences and the confidence they gained in “Transitions Prep.”

The positive regard that the participants had for the program may be related to the limited institutional barriers that they encountered. The more barriers one faces, the less likely they are to have a positive view of a transition (Anderson et al., 2012). Diane was the only student currently in a course and read to schedule future courses. She was also the participant who encountered the most institutional barriers. This may be attributed to Diane’s struggles with time management or other situational barriers, but it may also be related to her stage in transition. All of the other participants were beginning the moving in phase, while Diane was ready to start moving through. During the program, students heard about the many supports available to them, but had not yet tried to use those supports. It is possible that as the other participants progress towards taking classes they will also encounter more institutional barriers, which may or may not influence their perspective of the program. Figure 4.10 provides the final image of the cross-case themes and their relationship to the components of the theoretical framework. As with the individual analysis, the majority themes for the cross-case analysis related to self and dispositional barriers.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Situation - Situation</th>
<th>Self - Disposition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Money Catalyst Technology Balancing multiple roles</td>
<td>Seeking self-actualization A need for more Self-doubt Changed perception of returning to higher education Balancing multiple roles</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategies - Disposition</th>
<th>Support - Institution</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Connections Deficit Building</td>
<td>Money Family Connections</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 4.10. Cross-Case Analysis Findings for Self and Disposition

**Context**

In addition to use of the theoretical framework for organizing these themes, I also contemplated the themes in relationship to the participants’ larger contexts. Context is a critical element to how transition is experienced (Anderson et al., 2012). It is also a critical aspect of hermeneutics and narrative (Brunner, 1991; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; 2006). The situation, strategies, support, and self-perspective of the 4 “S” System are all situated in context (Anderson et al., 2012). In the image below, the outer circles depict the external forces of the transition. Both money and family are in the outer circle and part of the global context as they are not situated directly in the transition program or even the prompting event of the transition itself. I use the term global context to imply circumstances beyond “Transitions Prep,” not to suggest that these themes are experienced on a global level. Money is related to the economy, job prospects, one’s previous career, the cost of the degree, and available aid. Family history, values and beliefs are influenced by the global context as well and all have an indirect influence on the situation surrounding the transition (Anderson et al., 2012; Cross, 1991).
The catalyst of the transition moves inward toward the core of the transition experience. The catalyst did not occur within the context of “Transitions Prep,” but it did influence their decision to participate in the program. Other themes occurred within the context of “Transitions Prep” and directly related to participation in the program. Those themes include: the participants’ changed perceptions of returning to higher education, a need for more out of the program, deficit building, the connections that were forged, and use of technology.

The themes in the most inner circle depict the internal influences of the transition. They are at the core of how the transition was perceived and reflect the participants’ inner workings. These themes include: self-doubt, seeking self-actualization, and balancing multiple roles and identities. All external factors of the global context and those stemming from participation in “Transitions Prep” influence the self. Likewise, the self filters how these factors are perceived (Anderson et al., 2012). All factors are nested together to create a circular perception of transition.

Figure 4.11 depicts how these themes are situated in the context of the transition. It demonstrates how the circumstances of the participants’ transitions are influenced by the context outside of “Transitions Prep,” but are also influenced by their experiences in the program.
The participants in this study described recurring themes that are able to be situated within the theoretical framework. Based on the intent of the theoretical framework, narrative, and hermeneutics, these themes should be viewed as part of a larger global context. The shared themes of the participants indicate a strong influence of self on how transition is experienced. The participants’ self-perspectives, multiple identities, and identity development were all discussed as having an impact on transition and one’s ability to transition, which is highlighted by multiple transition theorists (Anderson et al., 2012; Arthur & Hiebert, 2011; Fiske & Chiriboga, 1990; O’Donnell &
Tobbell, 2007). These internal factors relate to the participants’ self and strategies, as well as the dispositional barriers that the participants faced.

Based on the participants’ stories, the external themes that emerged seem to have influenced their perspectives of self and also their perspectives of the transition. The external factors make up the participants’ situations and available support, which also impacted the overall transition experience. The external factors coincide with the situational and institutional barriers that were encountered by the participants and help to depict the challenges outside of their control.
Chapter Five: Discussion of the Findings and Recommendations

Chapter Overview

For this study, my goal is to depict and interpret the narratives of adult learners contemplating entrance to higher education while participating in a transition program. The research questions of this study are aimed at capturing the adult learner experience of transitioning to higher education and to better understand how adult learners perceive transition programs. This chapter reviews this study’s research questions and gives discussion to the findings. Additionally, the weaknesses of this study are addressed. I also give a personal statement to recognize the changes in my narrative through conducting this research study. Lastly, this chapter includes my recommendations for future research and practice.

Research Questions

This study has three guiding research questions designed to enhance understanding of the experiences of adult learners contemplating entrance to higher education while in a transition program. The first research question attempts to give further insight into the experiences of adult learners enrolled in a transition program. The second research question investigates the overall influence of a transition program on the participant perspectives of transition. Lastly, the third research question focuses on how Cross’s (1991) barrier categorizations apply to and explain the transition experiences that the participants described.

Research Question One

The first research question of this study asks, “How do adult learners participating in a transition program describe their experiences as they contemplate enrollment to
Based on the emergent themes of this study, all participants described generally positive experiences in “Transitions Prep.” When speaking about the course, the participants emphasized the benefits of the program. The participants all reported that they thought the curriculum was comprehensive and that they did not think it feasible to add any additional material. The participants also voiced that the curriculum was well tailored to their needs, which they attributed to the instructors’ work histories.

Both instructors had ample experience working with adult learners. Aside from her work with adult learners, Marissa had firsthand experience of being an adult learner. After retirement, she returned to college to fulfill her lifelong goal of earning a degree. She shared her experiences of being an adult learner with the class. Throughout the interviews, participants identified her as a role model. Sarah, the other instructor, had much experience teaching adults and was very familiar with their needs. The participants recognized this and expressed gratitude for her talent.

It seems that the instructors’ previous work experience with adult learners helped them to establish legitimacy and rapport with the participants. The participants indicated that they were especially appreciative of the applicability of what they were being taught. When asked about how they planned for the course syllabus, the instructors explained that they sought to make their lessons relevant to the lives of their students. The instructors also noted that they did not use any particular theory for guiding their course development. Although the instructors did not intentionally follow adult learner theory in the development of “Transitions Prep,” adult learners generally prefer a curriculum applicable to real-life situations (Kasworm, 2003). Additionally, adult learners tend to be more engaged if instructors include consideration of prior learning. Therefore, planning
educational activities for adult learners should be based on the “realities of human experience” (Knowles, 1990, p. 82).

Although all of the participants described an overall positive experience, they also indicated a want for more out of the program’s curriculum and structure. Norman suggested a need for more interaction and class discussion. Lucy recommended the development of different levels of the course to meet the varying preparatory needs of adult learners. Diane suggested there be a mentorship component. Several participants also showed a need for remediation with math and more help using technology, which is common for adult learners (Hansman & Mott, 2010). Yet, when asked to give critical feedback about “Transitions Prep” and the curriculum, the participants were hesitant. It is possible that the participants did not want to disclose their honest opinions in fear that it would reflect poorly on the instructors. It is also possible that the participants allowed their positive regard for the instructors to overshadow any concerns that they had.

Even though the participants described the course content as helpful, their descriptions suggested that the positive sentiments about their experiences stemmed from the connections that participants made with each other, the course instructors, and university staff more so than from what was learned. Based on the participant descriptions, much of the high regard had for the instructors was due to the supportive environment fostered by Marissa and Sarah. All participants commented that they enjoyed the instructors’ genuine and caring approaches. Marissa and Sarah both provided additional support to help facilitate student success. They arrived early to every class to welcome the students as they entered and to be present for any questions prior to class starting.
Marissa and Sarah also communicated that they sought to build on their students’ strengths and did not focus on weaknesses, emphasizing praise over criticism. When asked about their approach, they explained that they wanted to build their students’ self-confidence. Again, the instructors may not have looked to a specific theory as a guide, but their approach aligns well with previous research. One factor of adult learner participation in preparatory classes is often to build their self-esteem (Hansman & Mott, 2010). In order to build confidence, both instructors often tried to validate their students’ fears and concerns. During my observations, I heard Sarah and Marissa explain the advantages that adult learners have over traditional-aged students. The instructors were also empathetic to the multiple demands that adult learners face. The participants remarked about the instructors’ empathy and their ability to relate to their situations. Yet again, the instructors’ approaches mirrored what is suggested in the literature. Adult educators should be sensitive to the needs of their students and develop mutual respect for a conducive “psychological climate” (Knowles, 1970, p. 47). Most “adults desire a college where faculty and staff will value and respect them through special structures and programs that support their success” (Kasworm et al., 2002, p. 46).

In addition to their encouraging rapport with the instructors, it appears that the participants also formed their positive perception of “Transitions Prep” based on their opinions of the guest speakers for the program. In their final papers, the participants wrote about the help and encouragement that they received from the guest speakers. In their papers, the participants included me as a guest speaker. I think that the participants viewing me as a guest speaker was prompted by the dynamics established by instructors who regularly asked for my input as an academic adviser during my observations. The
participants also described feeling more connected to the university through the guest speakers. During my observations, I witnessed the guest speakers, who were university staff, emphasize the available resources provided by the institution. They also offered to meet with the participants to discuss whichever services related to their areas of expertise, thus giving access to university supports.

The finding that the relationships the participants made in “Transitions Prep” appear to have influenced their experiences is consistent with the literature. Adult learners need to feel appreciated and to feel as if they matter (Schlossberg et al., 1989). A feeling of mattering helps to keep adult learners engaged. Mattering can be a means to removing institutional, situational and dispositional barriers. The dimensions of mattering are attention, importance, dependence, ego-extension, and appreciation. These dimensions indicate that adult learners who feel they are noticed and valued have a sense of mattering (Schlossberg et al., 1989). Using these dimensions of mattering as a reference, the participants’ dialogues about their relationship with the university suggested a sense of mattering and belonging.

The participants described receiving attention from the instructors, guest speakers, and myself. They also echoed the instructors’ comments about the many benefits of being an adult learner, demonstrating a feeling of importance. The instructors also suggested the benefits the university would gain from their enrollment, indicating a level of university dependence on adult learner enrollments. Ego-extension, which implies a sense of going beyond oneself to be part of something more, was reflected in the participants’ descriptions of being at the threshold of the university. By feeling connected to the university, the participants saw themselves as part of the university
community. Throughout our interviews, the participants described having support,
knowing how to use the library, feeling more comfortable on campus, having a better
understanding financial aid, and more confidence using university technology. The
offering of “Transitions Prep” - a cost free course for adult learners- by the university
gave participants a feeling of being appreciated and welcomed. The dimensions of
mattering exemplified by the participants also infer a feeling of belonging.

Aside from the positive connections the participants formed through “Transitions
Prep,” their optimistic descriptions of their experiences may also be related to a lack of
institutional challenges encountered and a lack of awareness about the challenges ahead.
“Transitions Prep” focused on available supports and resources. However, the
participants were not at a point in their transitions where they had attempted to access
those supports. It is often in the attempt to access a support that one encounters obstacles
or realizes the limitations of provided supports. The participants also did not experience
the challenges of enrolled students because they had not yet matriculated. It is possible
that participants had higher levels of support during the prospective student phase than
they would once enrolled. The one participant who was ready to enroll in classes- Diane-
was also the one participant who encountered the most obstacles in her transition and
who suggested a need for mentorship.

Moreover, all participants also described a lack of cultural capital, signifying that
they did not know what to expect when enrolled. An unawareness of what to expect
poses situational barriers (Cross, 1991) and limits one’s ability to prepare, which can
hinder their success (Bandura, 1997). The participants in this study only had the vision
of university life that was shaped by participation in “Transitions Prep.” It is possible
that “Transitions Prep” gave a false positive perception of how the transition to higher education would actually unfold. Lucy indicated this as a concern during our interviews. She explained that she feared “Transitions Prep” gave her an overly positive sense of her ability as a student. Diane shared similar concerns. A lack of cultural capital may also be why the participants could not offer critical feedback regarding the course curriculum. It may be that the participants were unaware of what they should have been learning to be better prepared for college-life or that they simply did not know what they did not know. Additionally, a lack of cultural capital may be related to the need for exploration that the participants’ described. When describing their transitions to higher education, all participants expressed a need to research and explore their options related to career and major. They did not know of available degree programs or which programs would be best suited towards the occupations of interest: they were outsiders (Merton, 1972).

“Transitions Prep” and the experiences directly related to the program form only one layer of the participants’ transitions to higher education. The participants lived the transition experience within the context of their daily lives. They described their lived experiences of transition as being correlated to the impact or influence that participation in “Transitions Prep” had on their lives and the lives of those close to them. Adult learners “are changing their way of seeing themselves. They are altering their roles, routines, and relationships” (Schlossberg et al., 1989, p. 14). These routines and relationships help to form the pre and post environment surrounding the transition, which is a main factor in how it is perceived and is critical to how one views their overall transition experience (Anderson et al., 2012; Schlossberg, 1981). The pre and post transition environments are framed by the characteristics of the transition, which
influenced how the participants narrated their experiences. They described what prompted their transitions, as well as their other obligations and stresses, such as finances and the need to care for others. When asked to narrate their experiences, the participants did so in relationship to how those experiences affected their routines. Participants with more disruption to their daily routines described their experiences in “Transitions Prep” as more cumbersome than those with limited disruption. This finding is supported by the literature on transition, which specifies that the higher the degree of difference between the pre and post environments, the more disruption and stress for the individual (Anderson et al., 2012).

To summarize, research question one sought to elicit the narratives of adult learners in a transition program to gain a better understanding of the transition experience to higher education. The findings suggest that overall, participants had a positive view of the transition program, which was mostly due to the genuine and beneficial connections they formed with the “Transitions Prep” staff and guest speakers. This positive view may be somewhat skewed because of the participants’ high esteem for the staff and guest speakers, the stage of transition, as well as the lack of knowledge about their preparatory needs to enter higher education. The participants’ narratives of their experiences in “Transitions Prep” also reflected the circumstances of their transitions. Their perception of their experiences seem to be influenced by the situations of their daily lives.

Research Question Two

The second research question of the study inquires, “What is the impact of a transition program on participants’ perceptions of self and their ability to transition to higher education?” Based on the descriptions of all the participants, partaking in
“Transitions Prep” did influence their perceptions of self and their ability to transition to higher education. Participants so frequently mentioned a changed self-view that it emerged as a theme for this study. With one exception, the participants described having gained a sense of confidence, which they attributed to their participation in “Transitions Prep.” Kate, the participant who did not gain confidence, still indicated a change in perception about her ability. She noted concern, questioning and further doubt about her decision to return to higher education due to the challenges she had meeting the demands of the “Transitions Prep” curriculum. Kate, also did not complete the program or the study due to health issues, which are commonly a factor of adult learner “stop out” (Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2010). Her health issues may have further added to her heightened insecurity. For all other participants, their initial apprehension began to shift to excitement. By the end of “Transition Prep,” the participants expressed a sense of belonging to the university. Once more, having a sense of belonging indicates that the participants in this study felt as if they mattered to the university (Schlossberg et al., 1989). Additionally, the participants conveyed that they thought themselves more capable of taking on the role of student, which is frequently an outcome of participation in preparation classes (Hansman & Mott, 2010).

Based on their narratives, the participants’ improved confidence levels stem from a shift in their identities. It seems that being treated as a member of the university community by the instructors and guest speakers of “Transitions Prep,” the participants began to identify themselves as part of the university community. By being viewed as students, the participants started to take on the identity of students. The participants began to mirror how others saw them. They reflected the image that was being shown to
them-the image of student. Like a self-fulfilling prophecy, the participants’ portrayals of themselves as students shifted their self-perspectives. By the end of this study, the participants viewed themselves in the way that the instructors did— as students. This shift in identity led to more confidence about being a student.

This new confidence may also be due to the greater awareness of available resources and an improved understanding of the university structure. Knowledge of resources and how to access those resources helps to provide a sense of belonging (Schlossberg et al., 1989). Individuals require a sense of belonging before they can build esteem (Maslow, 1943). After the participants felt as if they belonged, they began to develop a sense of confidence and competence about their capabilities as they transitioned to higher education. Having confidence in one’s ability generally leads to a more positive transition and improved academic performance (Chemers et al., 2001).

Additionally, the improved self-confidence described by the participants may be related to the skills, strategies and tools that they learned in “Transitions Prep.” Participants enrolled in “Transitions Prep” because they acknowledged the need for skill building. Based on their stories, as they became more proficient in the areas that they hoped to improve upon, they also began to feel more prepared and capable. It is not uncommon to need remediation before entering higher education (Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2010). Through participation in the program, the participants thought that they had gained the skills necessary to be successful in higher education. A belief in one’s ability, also known as having self-efficacy, generally builds confidence (Bandura, 1997). As such, participation in “Transitions Prep” seems to have helped the participants to feel more self-efficacious, which increased their levels of confidence and
may help to facilitate a more successful transition to university life (Chemers et al., 2001).

The participants’ overall improved perceptions of self and ability may also be due to the likelihood that they initially started with poor self-perception and through their enrollment in “Transitions Prep” were seeking validation of their abilities. As previously noted, adult learners commonly lack confidence (O’Donnell & Tobbell, 2007). Often adult learners must grapple with “significant anxiety and self-consciousness about their acceptance, place in a collegiate environment, and ability to perform as undergraduate students” (Kasworm, 2008, p. 28). It is possible that the participants were looking to feel better about their abilities as students and therefore were seeking to become more confident. It is not uncommon for adult learners to participate in preparatory coursework to improve their self-confidence and feelings of self-efficacy (Hansman & Mott, 2010). Preparatory courses are low-threat educational activities, which are commonly an entry point for adult learners (Cross, 1991).

In sum, the findings of this study suggest that there is an impact of a transition program on participants’ perceptions of self and their ability to transition. Largely, the participants in this study gained confidence in their abilities and felt more prepared to enter higher education. Although Kate did not report a positive change in perception regarding her ability, she did demonstrate a shift in how she perceived her ability to complete college level coursework. Unfortunately, Kate’s discussion of her ability was limited to the initial interview. It is impossible to know if her doubt would have been eased through completion of “Transitions Prep” or had she not been experiencing difficulty with her health.
Research Question Three

The last research question of this study contemplates, “To what extent do earlier categorizations of barriers and challenges of participation in higher education reflect the experiences of students enrolled in a transition program?” Based on the participants’ narratives the categorizations of barriers identified by Cross (1991) help to situate the experiences of the participants, but they do not fully reflect the obstacles that were encountered. The obstacle of technology— the need to have it, to use it, to understand it—was regularly discussed by participants. Although this could be thought of as situational or institutional barriers, the intent of these categorizations does not fully encompass the scope of the barrier that technology posed. Situational barriers address those obstacles that are posed by circumstances surrounding the transition, such as money, time, and the need for childcare (Cross, 1991). The use of technology is required at every checkpoint on the journey to higher education. It is not a circumstantial barrier; it is a barrier in its own right. Technology is also more than an institutional barrier. Technology may be engrained in the institutional culture, processes, and procedures (Bennett & Bell, 2010), but that reliance on technology is not unique to universities. Technology has infiltrated our everyday lives. Its reach is much greater than a particular institution or a particular individual: it impacts everyone. Technology as a barrier is not a new concept. It has been previously identified as an obstacle that may prohibit adult learner participation in formal education (Hansman & Mott, 2010). Technology was such a barrier that the participants thought changing “Transitions Prep” to an online course would limit enrollment and detract from the quality of the program.
Health issues also presented as a barrier described by the participants. Three of the five participants- Diane, Kate, and Karen- all expressed that they had health problems that caused concern for their return to higher education. Kate suffered from an injury and could no longer perform the physical demands of her job, which prompted her return to higher education. Those same physical limitations also made the physical demands of being a student challenging. Karen was in remission from a recent cancer diagnosis and also intended to return to school because she could no longer meet the physical requirements of her previous occupation. Diane was concerned about the physical demands of her desired profession- nursing- and nursing school. Even Norman, who did not have any significant health issues expressed concern for his health as aged. Health issues are not uncommon for aging adult learners and have been identified as a factor for adult learners leaving higher education (Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2010). One may argue that health issues could be categorized as situational barriers because they are encompassed in the circumstances of transition. However, to categorize the health problems described by the participants of this study would de-emphasize the extent to which health influenced their actions and thought. I argue that health is a state of being: it is not a circumstance.

Related to health are the barriers that develop through the aging process. Cross’s (1991) only discussion of age was related to financial status, noting that younger adults often desire to participate in costly degree programs, but lack the funds as compared to older adults who have more resources. In the discussion of barriers for adult learners, more attention to aging is necessary because people are living and working longer than ever before, and so the age of adult learners is increasing (Hansman & Mott, 2010). Even
returning adult learners who have not experienced significant health issues as described by Kate and Karen will have to grapple with the impacts of aging. Diane noted on several occasions that she did not feel her recall was as good as it had been when she was younger. Norman expressed having less energy to deal with the stresses of his job as he approached retirement. Other common health issues related to aging may be poorer eyesight, hearing loss, arthritis, and memory loss (Skarnulis, n.d.).

Cross’s (1991) discussion of dispositional barriers is another instance in which the barrier types do not fully depict the challenges of the participants. In the visual representation of themes for the individual participants, it is apparent that most of the themes are related to the factors of self and dispositional barriers. The shared themes of seeking self-actualization, self-doubt and balancing multiple roles and identities are especially relevant to the discussion of dispositional barriers. The theme of seeking self-actualization speaks to the intrinsic motivations of the participants (Maslow, 1943). The desire to be fulfilled and to achieve their goals served as dispositional supports for the participants. In contrast, the themes of self-doubt and the need to balance multiple roles and identities posed many challenges for the participants and were frequently discussed as obstacles during the interviews. Questioning one’s ability, fear of failure, lack of confidence and balancing multiple demands are not unique to the participants of this study (O’Donnell & Tobbell, 2007; Sandman, 2010). These dispositional barriers are significant for all adult learners (Cross, 1991).

Cross (1991) emphasizes the importance of dispositional barriers, which greatly impact one’s ability to transition (Anderson et al., 2012). However, Cross (1991) describes the influence of dispositional barriers in equal esteem to situational and
institutional barriers. Although Cross (1991) notes that the influence of dispositional barriers may be minimized as individuals tend to underreport the dispositional barriers that they face, there is no deeper discussion on the centrality of these barriers. The same can be said of the 4 “S” System of Schlossberg’s Transition Theory, which lists self as a factor in equal relation to situation, strategies and support. Through this study, I have come to find that neither Cross (1991) nor Schlossberg’s Transition Theory, place enough emphasis on the factor of self. I find that the notion of self and identity should be rooted in the core of these theories. Throughout this research, I have referenced theorists who repeatedly acknowledge self, identity and perception as the quintessential factors that determine how a transition is experienced. I have also heard the testimonies of the participants whose narratives continually reflected the influence of identity and perception on their experience of transition over all other factors.

Cross’s (1991) discussion of adult learner barriers is also without consideration for the potential supports that these categories may pose. Much of the literature regarding adult learner transition to higher education references Cross (1991) and emphasizes the challenges encountered by adult learners. While these barriers are significant to the discussion of adult learners entering higher education, so are the countering supports that these categories present. The narratives of the participants in this study were complex and multidirectional. For all of the barriers that were described, there were equally as many supports that were discussed. During this study, many of the participants voiced praise for institutional supports as opposed to barriers. They utilized institutional supports outside of the university including adult education classes and community services. They also cited situational supports such as help from family and
friends. All of the participants demonstrated a desire to succeed and to overcome any obstacles they may face, reflecting a dispositional strength. To give a more holistic representation of the adult learner experience transitioning to higher education it is important to consider that Cross’s (1991) categories of barrier types do not just reflect the kinds of obstacles that may be encountered by adult learners, they also encompass the types of support that may be available.

Moreover, Cross’s (1991) barrier categorizations and Schlossberg’s Transition Theory are bound by context in which they originated. The need to consider context in relation to transition is a defining element for these two frameworks. It is also a factor of their design and influences their approach to understanding transition. That is why it is imperative to consider how the social context has changed since these theories have been developed. More recent social contexts do not reflect the same social dynamics as those at the time these theories were established. For example, Cross (1991) references the need to support women returning to higher education after staying home to take care of their children. While women certainly do stay home with their children and return to school for career changes, the number of women in the workforce is now almost equal to the number of men (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016). Since 1980, 20,000 women have entered the labor force. Additionally, the number of stay-at-home fathers is on the rise (Livingston, 2014). This is just one example of a change in the social context from the time of Cross’s (1991) research to today, which may impact the discussion of barriers.

To conclude, although Cross’s (1991) barrier types does not fully encompass the experiences of transition as described by the participants in this study, these categorizations are still relevant. The barriers of time and family support as related to the
participants’ situational barriers were frequently discussed by the participants. This is consistent with more recent literature on adult learner barriers (Sandman, 2010). The lack of time was often related to the competing demands that the participants had to fulfill, which is also addressed in Cross’s (1991) description of situational barriers. The barrier of cost, embodied in the discussion of institutional barriers also was a prevalent topic, and is also reflected in more recent literature about adult learner barriers (Sandman, 2010). Cross’s (1991) barrier types continue provide a foundation for the obstacles that adult learners entering higher education encounter, but these categories fall short of fully capturing the experiences of adult learners entering higher education.

**Personal Statement**

Like the participants who had the chance to reflect and grow during this study, I too had ample opportunity to contemplate my role and meaning making. Although unanticipated, the development of my own narrative was an outcome of this study. I found that conducting this research helped me to develop a better sense of my ideals as an academic adviser. When working with the participants, I frequently compared my interactions with the participants against my experiences with my advisees. Engaging in this comparison also helped me to separate myself as an adviser and researcher. I recognized that my goal as a researcher was different from that of my goal as an adviser.

As a researcher, I wanted to keep the integrity of the study, while still being helpful to the participants. As an adviser, my primary goal is to help students. Had I been an adviser to the participants, I would have encouraged further exploration and given assignments to prompt that exploration. I would have helped them to identify a plan of study that best matched their interests and goals. I also would have checked on
their progress instead of waiting for them to come to me with questions. Additionally, I found that I became more confident as a researcher. Just as the participants started to feel more confident as students, I grew more self-assured. Being able to recognize the differences between my profession and my role as a researcher improved my confidence.

I also found how much I identify as an adult learner. Graduate students are not often discussed as being adult learners, and yet that is what I am. As a wife and mother who worked full-time while in school, I balanced multiple demands and encountered similar situational, institutional, and dispositional barriers. I can fully relate to the woes of paying the high cost for higher education, the need to cook dinner while studying for class, and the questioning of one’s ability. Listening to the stories of the participants reminded me that adult learners are not just those seeking to enter higher education or engage in preparatory coursework- although that is how they are frequently discussed in the literature. Adult learners are individuals balancing the demands of being an adult while seeking to learn, acquire new knowledge and develop their skills. Through contemplation of my own narrative, I would argue that all adult learners seeking formal education, regardless of program or status, require supports to help them make the transition from adult to adult learner.

**Limitations of the Study**

The limitations of this study reflect some of its strengths. The close relationship that I was able to develop with the participants made them feel comfortable disclosing information during our interview sessions. It may also have limited what they disclosed. Narrative research hinges on what the participant is willing to disclose, the relevance and depth of their past experiences to the research matter, their relationship with the
researcher, and their account of the events (Bruner, 2004). It is possible that the participants told me what they thought that I wanted to hear in an attempt to help me. The same limitation may also have arisen due to the relationships that the instructors established with their students. The participants may have wanted to protect the instructors, therefore limiting the critical feedback that they provided.

It is also possible that participants only disclosed what they felt was relevant to my role. I offered to discuss academic advising related matters after each interview. Each participant came to the interviews with questions and an expectation of having an advising appointment once our interview had concluded. Meeting with an academic adviser in an office on campus seemed to give the participants a sense of belonging to the university. Unfortunately, the knowledge of my position may have focused the participants’ thoughts on topics related to my job.

Limiting the scope of this study to a small group of participants during an intensive program helped me to get to know the participants well. However, having a small sample also limited the breadth of data collected. The condensed timeline of the program allowed me to immerse myself in the eight-week experience of the transition program. Yet ending the study at the end of the program limits this research by not exploring the influence of participation in such a program through matriculation.

The participants of this study may also have contributed to some of its limitations. This study is dependent upon voluntary participation, which may indicate high participant motivation that could be a factor in how transition is experienced or perceived. Additionally, narrative inquiry is limited to one’s ability to recall a particular experience. Human nature does not allow “people do not have complete access to their experiences”
(Polkinghorne, 2005, p. 139). The narratives of the participants were limited by the nature of being human. Moreover, people change their stories as they relive them (Bruner, 2004). As the participants lived their lives, their narratives continued to evolve and change. Any understanding of a narrative is only partial because it is limited to an unfinished story.

Another limitation of this study is my inexperience as a researcher, as well as my biases and philosophies. It is possible that my previous negative experience transitioning to graduate school tainted the lens through which I viewed the participants’ stories. Additionally, the assumptions of this study also pose limitations. Given the assumptions, much of my attention was on focused on the perspective of transitioning adult learners, which is thought to be influenced by the social context. This focus on perspective and context may overlook other important factors of transition, such as developmental readiness or motivation.

Lastly, the theoretical framework of this study has some inherent downfalls. Framing circumstances that may prevent adult learner participation in higher education as barriers, may give a negative bias towards events that would otherwise be viewed positively. For example, an adult contemplating the return to higher education because of job loss, who then becomes steadily employed and opts out of higher education, could be presented as situational barriers of lacking time or money based on Cross’s (1991) categorizations. Using only the notion of barriers, these circumstances could be viewed as having prevented the adult learner from successful enrollment based on the need to work. However, it is ultimately the perspective of the individual who determines if the need and ability to work is a barrier or opportunity. To overcome this weakness, it was
essential to understand the participants’ views of a situation and to allow them to label
their circumstances. Additionally, the theoretical framework is also limited by the social
context in which these theories originated.

Moreover, the seemingly clear-cut categories of the 4 “S” System (self, situation,
strategies, and supports) as well as adult learner barriers (institutional, situational, and
dispositional) pose another limitation. Lived experiences are not always so easily
identified or neatly packaged. There may be instances when an individual’s transition
experience does not fit into these categories. It was a challenge to overcome the
temptation to narrowly think of participants’ experiences based on this framework. To
avoid this downfall, I as the researcher continually considered other possibilities for the
participants’ experiences in order to avoid limiting their experiences to the explanation of
the framework.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

Through this study, multiple areas of needed research come to light. First, there is
a need to re-conceptualize theory as it relates to adult learner transition. This study
sought to provide an update to Cross’s (1991) categorization of adult learner barriers.
The findings of this study suggest that there are additional barriers types to adult learner
enrollment not adequately addressed by Cross (1991). It is necessary to further explore
how barriers are conceived, and whether or not new categories should be added. Giving
consideration to new social factors and dynamics may change the lens through which
researchers view previously identified barriers. Additionally, Cross’s (1991) emphasis on
barriers does not give a holistic representation of adult learners’ experiences as they seek
to enter higher education. It is also necessary to further explore how the corresponding
supports to those barriers influence adult learners.

In regard to theory, there is a need to examine how to best situate the role of self
in Schlossberg’s Transition Theory. Currently, self is discussed as being equal to the
factors of situation, strategies and support as represented in the 4 “S” System. Referring
to self as a factor of transition does not demonstrate the significant role that identity
plays. A factor implies that something is a circumstance or influence. Yet, the literature
and findings of this study indicate that self is central to the experience of transition.
One’s identity and self-view influences their perspective of the transition and that identity
is potentially changed through transition. Therefore, identity is integral to transition and
should be depicted as such in theory related to transition.

In contemplating the role of identity and theory, there is also a need to explore the
relationship, if any, between self-actualization and transition. Going into this study, I
adopted the theory of self-authorship to explain and explore the role of identity in
transition. However, the participant narratives of this study depict elements of self-
actualization as the basis for the participants’ self-concepts and motivations. The
participants’ emphasis on health reflects the necessity to meet basic needs before
considering the more physiological driven desire to return to higher education. The
frequent mention of relationships and confidence also reveals the needs that the
participants were seeking to meet on the way to self-actualization. Based on the elements
of self-actualization that presented during this study, more research is needed on the topic
of transition and self-actualization. I encourage future researchers of transition to be
cognizant of motivation as explained by self-actualization.
Second, there is a continued need for quality research on the influence of transition programs (Valentine et al., 2009). This study provides a glimpse into the experiences of adult learners in a transition program as they contemplate university enrollment, but this research is limited to the specifics of one program and one university. Research is needed on the varying environments, program types, and populations for transition programs to determine which programs work best in particular contexts. Additionally, there is a need for longitudinal research on the influence of transition programs. To gain a better understanding of the impact transition programs may have on adult learners entering higher education, and their success in higher education, research that follows the participants through matriculation and even graduation is necessary.

Third, there is a need for more research on the impact of funding on program development. The literature on transition programs notes that funding often determines program design (Bragg, 2010; Zaft et al., 2006). However, I found the exact opposite to be true. Even though they received funding from a state agency, the instructors of the program for this study noted complete autonomy for transition program design. Knowledge on the impact of funding regulations may lead to the reevaluation of such requirements. An investigation of funding requirements also sets the foundation for an exploration of beneficial components to include in transition programs, bringing this discussion to the final recommendation for future research based on this study.

To ensure the success of future transition programs, it is necessary for adult educators to have guidelines for program design. The development of best practices can give adult educators a starting point for transition program design, future research, and
continued improvements. Best practices can also contribute to a shared understanding of the purpose of transition programs among adult educators.

**Recommendations for Practice**

Through this study, I have come to recognize the importance of transition programs. It is essential that colleges and universities also recognize their importance and create “guided pathways leading into and from its programs and services” (Frey, 2007, p. 6). Deggs (2011) notes that “if barriers cannot be eradicated, then colleges and universities must continue their efforts to assist adult learners in navigating these barriers through development and implementation of appropriate support systems” (p. 1550). Schlossberg et al. (1989) championed the development of an entry or preparation course that would include components of career exploration, academic goals, assessment of prior learning, developmental assessment, and study skills. While suggested over three decades ago, the findings of this study suggest that such a course is still needed.

The findings of this study also indicate that transition programs should integrate a mentoring component. Hansman and Mott (2010) explain that “formal mentoring programs for adult learners, which may provide role models and support self-esteem, confidence, and career related help should be included in adult education programs” (p. 21). The emphasis on career exploration and career related help is especially important to adult learners (Sandman, 2010). However, adult educators should make sure to include career exploration as it relates to possible higher education options. All of the participants in this study needed guidance to identify majors and degree programs that would help them to meet their occupational goals.
The development of transition programs and accompanying supports should not be a one-size fits all approach. Institutions must reflect on their unique student populations, strengths and weaknesses to develop robust programs that will effectively support incoming adult learners. In order to successfully transition, adult learners need experiences that result in assuming the identity of a student (O’Donnell & Tobbell, 2007). Colleges and universities should seek to create transition programs that accurately reflect the demands of being a student and that provide a sense of belonging to the participants (Schlossberg et al., 1989). It was through a sense of belonging that participants in this study began to feel more capable of being college students.

The findings of this study also imply that the creation of new supports for adult learners must be grounded in the literature and research on adult learners. Although the instructors of “Transitions Prep” did not purposefully refer to theory or literature as a guide, their knowledge of adult learner preferences helped them to develop a curriculum and classroom environment that met the needs of their students. As noted throughout Chapter Four, much of the program design for “Transitions Prep” reflects practices suggested by the literature. By developing programs and resources with the literature in mind, future supports will be more likely to achieve their intended goals.

Lastly, as adult learners continue to seek higher education, universities and colleges should consider health issues related to aging. The literature already identifies adult learners as a diverse population with varying needs. However, the discussion of these needs tends to focus on those related to situational barriers: time, cost, family obligations, remediation, etc. (Kasworm et al., 2002). Accommodations and supports such as flexible schedules, child care facilities, commuter parking, and evening office
hours are frequently suggested to help meet the needs of adult learners. Yet, there is also need to accommodate for the range of physical limitations that may result from aging. If accommodations for such limitations are already provided by the university, then it is necessary to make adult learners aware of such services.
References


Fairchild, E. E. (2003), Multiple roles of adult learners. *New Directions for Student Services, 2003* (pp.11–16). doi: 10.1002/ss.84


Appendix A

Interview Questions

The interview questions for this study served as a guide. Throughout the interviews, I improvised and added questions based on the direction of the discussion. To get a more in-depth understanding of the participants’ narratives, I wrote follow-up interview questions for each participant to be used during the second round of interviews. These follow-up questions were asked in addition to the general list of round two interview questions asked of all participants.

Round One Interview Questions

- How old are you?
- Can you describe your social & family backgrounds?
- Where did you grow up?
- What was it like where you grew up?
- How do you think other social and cultural norms affected your life?
- How would you describe your family?
- Have there been any significant changes in your life? If so, what?
- What social groups, if any, are you involved?
- How can you describe your social status?
- Can you describe your education thus far?
- Are you satisfied with your education to date?
- What education did you expect to attend?
• What educational opportunities did you have?

• What educational institution did you or your family choose for yourself, and why?

• Are you excited about returning to higher education or are you hesitant, but know this is something you should probably do?

• Why are you considering a return to formal education?

• Why are you considering another profession, if you are at all?

• What is your career goal?

• What education is necessary to achieve that goal?

• What are some strategies that you’ve used to help you adjust to the transition to higher education?

• What do you see as your biggest strengths and weaknesses in the return to higher education?

• How did you hear about the transition program?

• Why did you choose to participate in the transition program?

• What is your opinion of the transition program thus far?

• Is there anything you wish the curriculum of the program would address that it currently does not?

• What do you think about the length of the class, length of the program, structure of the class?

• How do you view the instructors of the program?

• Do you think having two instructors has positively or negatively impacted the class in any way?
• Has your participation in the transition program has changed your view of returning to higher education?
• Has your participation in the transition program changed your view of yourself in any way?
• If you were to tell a friend why or why not this program is worthwhile, what would you say?
• Who, if anyone, provided you any support to participate in the transition program?
• Who, if anyone, has encouraged you to enter or re-enter higher education?
• How would you describe the support you receive?
• Do you find the transition program, either the curriculum, instructors or your classmates, creates a supportive environment?
• Out of everything available to you, what provides the most support as you transition back to higher education?

Round Two Interview Questions: All
• Have the opinions of others influenced your view of yourself or your ability to transition to college?
• Do you worry what others might think about your return to college?
• What is your biggest fear about returning to higher education?
• Have you found participation in this study helpful in your transition to school?
• What did you like most about our one-on-one sessions?
• What role have your children played in your return to higher education?
• Do you find that you struggled or continue to struggle with the use of technology as a future student?
• Do you find that you’ve improved with your use of technology?
• Are you worried that your age may be a barrier as you enter school or the work force?
• Do you find that physically you may have some challenges coming back to school?

Round Two Interview Questions: Karen

• You said your father was in the military and that your family moved a lot. How long were you at your high school before moving to Germany?
• Why did you choose to go to Germany to live with your sister and complete high school?
• Did your parents’ divorce? You speak of your mother as a support but do not mention your father.
• How old was your son when you moved back to the U.S? How long was your first marriage?
• When did your son move back to be with his father? Did he go with you to Oklahoma?
• At what point in your second marriage did the car accident occur?
• How long did you live in California before moving to Nevada? How long did you live in Nevada before getting divorced and moving back to PA?
• How long after getting divorced were you diagnosed with breast cancer?
• Do you feel that your computer skills have improved since taking this course?
• Were you ever able to enroll in the math prep skills course? How would you compare that course to the transition program?

---

**Round Two Interview Questions: Norman**

• Now that you’ve gone through the transition program, is there anything you wish the curriculum of the program would address that it currently does not?

• Did you become more accustomed to the length of the class?

• What do you think about the length of the program?

---

**Round Two Interview Questions: Lucy**

• Did you find another job in addition to caring for your brother’s boyfriend?

• Do you think this job is related to your overall career goals?

• Have you done any exploring or thinking about a major?

• Did the lessons in the class get any more difficult for you?

---

**Round Two Interview Questions: Diane**

• Has the transition program influenced the program you’ve selected?

• Did you decide to enroll in any World Campus courses that could count towards your general education requirements for the nursing program?
• When we last spoke, you were very motivated to return. Do you still have that same level of motivation?

• Did you tell anyone else about going back to school?

• Have you made any progress on your math class?

---

**Round Two Interview Questions: Kate**

• Did you enroll in the free math course?

• Have you changed your mind about your major?

• Could you tell me about the educational opportunities you had in high school? Do you think your high school prepared you for college?

• How has your motivation been recently? I remember that was something you were struggling with.

• Did your son enjoy his study abroad trip?

• You mentioned your son as a major support. Anyone else in your family?
Appendix B

Visual Organizing Systems

In Appendix B, the visual organizing systems for each participant are pictured and depict the initial emergent themes of the participants’ narratives. In the visual organizing systems, the teal circles represent the components of the theoretical framework and the blue circles represent the themes. The sizes of the blue circles indicate the prevalence of that theme. The number in the blue circle represents the number of supporting pieces of evidence for that particular theme. The relationships among the themes are depicted by the connecting mechanism. A pink ray suggests a reciprocal relationship between the topics. A purple vector denotes that one topic seems to be influencing the other. The green lines depict conflicting themes.
Vita

COURTNEY KARMELITA
162 Amberleigh Lane Bellefonte, PA 16823 | 724-866-2038 | cec5032@psu.edu

EDUCATION
The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA 2016
D.Ed in Adult Education
Dissertation: Exploring Adult Learners’ Experiences Transitioning to Higher Education

Chestnut Hill College, Philadelphia, PA 2010
M.Ed in Secondary Education, Special Education concentration

The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA 2008
B.S. French and Francophone Studies | Minor: Human Development and Family Studies

ADVISING EXPERIENCE
The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA
Academic Adviser and New Student Orientation Coordinator 2014
Advise first and second year exploratory students. Assist in the planning and execution of New Student Orientation (NSO) for first-year students, which impacts approximately 8,000 incoming students each summer.

The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA
Lead Academic Adviser for Letters, Arts and Sciences 2012
Advised students in determining academic goals and identifying appropriate course scheduling options. Collaborated with different academic units to assess and update transfer course guidelines, curricular requirements, and academic exceptions.

CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS
The Impact of Schlossberg’s Transition Theory and Cross’s Discussion of Student Barriers on Practical Advising Matters
National Academic Advising Conference, Region 2 2014

The Role of Transition Programs for Adult Learner Retention and Recruitment
Hendrick Best Practices for Adult Learner Conference 2014

Transcending Adults: A Case Study of Prior Learning Assessment and Transition Program at the Pennsylvania State University
National Career Development Association Conference 2014

MEMBERSHIPS
National Academic Advising Association

HONORS
Penn State Emerging Leader