Advising Adult Learners During the Transition to College

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Adult learners represent a growing population of students in higher education who need various types of support to successfully embark on the transition to college. One popular type of support is a transition program, which aims to promote successful entrance to higher education. This study's findings imply that, while adult learners who have participated in transition programs continue to face challenges as they attempt to pursue higher education, the connections the participants made within transition programs helped mitigate the barriers they encountered. Additionally, the narratives of adult learners in this study demonstrate the need for academic advising during the transition to college. More research on the impact and effectiveness of transition programs is needed to develop programming that meets the needs of adult learners.

Though definitions vary, scholars in the field have agreed that adult learners are a heterogeneous group who become more complex with age (Kasworm, Polson, & Fishback, 2002; Sandmann, 2010). Adult learners can be defined based on age alone, using either the legal age of adulthood, which commonly occurs between the ages of 18 to 21 depending on the learner's location, or the developmental age of adulthood, starting around 20 years old (Hansman & Mott, 2010). Ross-Gordon (2011), however, defined 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 college or university part time;
- or not having a high school diploma.

This definition suggests that age does not necessarily determine adult learner status, instead accounting for the various life circumstances that adult learners typically demonstrate. Similarly, in this study, adult learners are defined as individuals who exhibit "the social, psychological, and/or economic roles typically expected of adults in their cultures and collective societies" and who elect to participate in learning activities—formal or informal—that they hope will bring a sense of fulfillment or improvement in their lives (Hansman & Mott, 2010, p. 14).

Adult learners often face barriers as they attempt to enroll in postsecondary education. Many barriers for adult learners stem from their responsibilities outside of the classroom, such as childcare, work, and barriers that stem from institutional polices (Cross, 1991; Kobena Osam, Bergman, & Cumberland, 2017). Adult learners are often apprehensive about entering or returning to postsecondary education because of insecurities related to their previous educational experiences, as well as the multitude of changes in their lives (Hardin, 2008; Kasworm, 2003). When making the transition to postsecondary education, adult learners often change their daily routines, relationships, and ways of thinking (Anderson, Goodman, & Schlossberg, 2012; Hardin, 2008).

As more adult learners than ever before seek to enter higher education, there is a need to understand how to better support these students for more successful outcomes (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015; Sandmann, 2010). Transition programs have become an increasingly popular support for adult learners as they attempt to pursue postsecondary education (Kallison, 2017). Transition programs are meant to serve as preparation for entry into higher education (Alamprese, 2005; Kallison, 2017; Valentine et al., 2009; Zafft, Kallenbach, & Spohn, 2006). Participation in a transition program should take place before the first semester of classes (Valentine et al., 2009). The main aim of transition programs is to prepare adult students to enter or re-enter higher education while promoting postsecondary completion and persistence (Valentine et al., 2009; Zafft, 2008; Zafft et al., 2006). Adult learners should leave transition programs with a better understanding of their roles and responsibilities as students, and they should have acquired enough information during these programs to determine if

higher education is truly a good fit for their needs (Alamprese, 2005).

Unfortunately, the increase in transition programs has not been accompanied by an increase in understanding or research about the impact of participation in such programs or the best practices for transition program development. Although more transition programs are being offered, there has not been more robust research on the effectiveness of transition programs (Valentine et al., 2009). Additionally, the literature lacks information regarding adult learners' perceptions of their experiences in transition programs and their opinions as to whether or not their participation in a transition program was helpful in meeting their goal of entry to higher education. This gap in the literature calls attention to the need to determine the critical aspects of transition programs that facilitate successful transitions to postsecondary education for adult learners. In order to identify and replicate effective transition programs, it is necessary to learn from the accounts of adult learners who have participated in such programs. Understanding adult learners' perspectives on transition programs through their narratives can inform future transition program curriculum and development to ensure that transition programs meet the needs and expectations of adult learners.

The purpose of this study was to explore the narratives of adult learners enrolled in a transition program to arrive at a deeper understanding of their experiences. The research questions for this study were:

RQ1. How do adult learners participating in a transition program describe their experiences as they contemplate enrollment to higher education?

RQ2. What is the impact of a transition program on its participants' perceptions of themselves and their ability to transition to higher education?

RQ3. 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?

This article focuses on the applicability of the study's findings to the advising community by recounting themes related to academic advising and providing recommendations for academic advisors to better support adult learners in their transitions to higher education. This article also seeks to develop awareness among academic advisors of the challenges encountered by adult learners. Having an awareness of barriers and how they are perceived by adult learners "can help create more supportive educational environments" (Malhotra, Shapero, Sizoo, & Munro, 2007, p. 87).

Transition Programs

To provide context regarding the participants' experiences in transition programs, it is first necessary to develop an understanding of transition programs. Unlike adult education programs that focus on literacy or high school equivalence, such as the General Education Development (GED) program, transition programs emphasize college preparation (Kallison, 2017). Transition programs provide instruction beyond what is expected for a GED. They seek to help adult learners fill the gap between earning a GED or high school diploma and entering college. Adult learners seeking to enter postsecondary education are considered an at-risk population due to their high drop-out rates and frequent need for remediation (Kallison, 2017; Rutschow & Crary-Ross, 2014). In particular, there is a negative correlation between the amount of time spent in remedial classes and the likelihood of college graduation (Bailey, 2009). Transition programs therefore include preparatory courses designed to prepare adult learners for college prior to matriculation to limit the amount of remediation needed (Kallison, 2017; Rutschow & Crary-Ross, 2014; Zafft et al., 2006).

In addition to coursework, transition programs often incorporate additional services such as career counseling, academic advising, financial aid counseling, and assistance with the admissions process (Hector-Mason, Narlock, Muhisani, & Bhatt, 2017; Kallison, 2017). Moreover, students often have the option to participate in additional activities beyond the transition program, such as tutoring (Kallison, 2017). Anecdotal evidence suggests that integrating student services such as academic advising into transition programs' designs has beneficial outcomes for adult learners (Kallison, 2017). Many transition programs are offered on college campuses to help familiarize students with the campus environment (Rutschow & Crary-Ross, 2014). Students in transition programs often have the same access to resources as students enrolled at the partnering college, even if they have not yet been formally admitted to the college.

Other goals of transition programs are to remove barriers for adult learners and to help adult learners evaluate if they are ready for higher education (Alamprese, 2005; Jenkins, 2004). As

such, most transition programs are free. Funding for transition programs often comes from federal grants and partnerships with colleges (Bragg, 2010). The course components of transition programs operate as typical college classes with a designated length of enrollment, specific meeting times, and sequenced curriculum (Kallison, 2017). This format, as opposed to open enrollment programs with fluid participation, allows students and instructors to develop rapport and build connections. It also establishes a realistic college experience to prepare adult learners for the time requirements of college coursework. Given the goals of transition programs, it is best for adult learners to participate in transition programs prior to college acceptance so that they are able to remediate their deficits prior to placement testing and have the opportunity to truly evaluate if college is a good fit for their future plans.

Theoretical Framework

Adult learners in transition programs who are contemplating college entry are in a state of transition. To explore adult learners' narratives about their experiences in transition programs, I combined Schlossberg's transition theory (Anderson et al., 2012) with Cross's (1991) categorization of student barriers to form my theoretical framework. 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). The theory "facilitates an understanding of adults in transition and aid[s] them in connecting to the help they need to cope with [change]" (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010, p. 213). Cross (1991) provided descriptions of barrier types that adult learners commonly encounter as they attempt to enter higher education. Given that this study investigates the experiences of adult learners in a transition program with the intent of preparation for higher education, it was necessary to consider transition factors specifically related to higher education. Cross's (1991) explanation of barriers offered a framework to explore the internal and external circumstances of the transition to postsecondary education.

There are three phases of transition in Schlossberg's transition theory: *moving into*, *moving through*, and *moving on* (Anderson et al., 2012; Schlossberg, Lynch, & Chickering, 1989). Students enter the moving into phase as they begin contemplating enrollment in higher education,

and they remain in that phase until they have acclimated to college life and expectations. Using this context, all students in a transition program are in the moving into phase. The theory also emphasizes the role of perception in an adult's ability to cope. Coping is an evaluation of the transition and intake of resources (Fiske & Chiriboga, 1990). Perception is heavily influenced by the setting or context of the transition and the extent to which the transition impacts one's daily life (Anderson et al., 2012).

Successful coping is related to one's appraisal of available resources and the reality of the situation causing stress (Carpenter & Scott, 1992; Folkman, 1992; Pearlin & Schooler, 1978). This cognitive appraisal influences one's perception of the transition, which largely depends on the available resources that can help the adult learner cope (Anderson et al., 2012; Fiske & Chiriboga, 1990). Schlossberg's transition theory uses the 4 "S" system to define four factors that represent the elements influencing a student's appraisal of a transition. The factors of the 4 "S" system appraise how a student is able to cope with transition by highlighting assets or liabilities associated with the change (Anderson et al., 2012). These four factors are: *situation*, *self*, *support*, and *strategies*. For students in a state of transition, an assessment of each "S" will highlight the various internal and external resources (assets) or lack thereof (liabilities) that can be used to manage the impact of the transition. The 4 "S" factors are not mutually exclusive. They represent fluid categories that influence and act upon each other. For example, an adult learner's situation may very well influence the available supports or the strategies they use.

Situation includes the adult learner's daily routines, finances, housing, employment status, parental obligations, and responsibilities to others. *Self* is the personality and mindset of the adult learner experiencing the transition. The category of *support* marks the resources available to the adult learner, including relationships and institutional supports. For adult learners, a lack of support can impede the transition to college (Hardin, 2008). *Strategies* reflects the ways in which one responds to or copes with transition, including the methods used to access supports. This factor also encompasses how one attempts to use and seek supports, which is different from the available supports themselves. Choosing not to use a support is also a strategy, although such a strategy may be an ineffective method of coping. Strategies may include asking for more information; taking action

Figure 1. 4 "S" System factors and related barrier categories

Situation factor	Self factor
- Situational barriers	- Dispositional barriers
Strategies factor	**Support factor**
- Dispositional barriers	- Institutional barriers
- Situational barriers	- Situational barriers

to improve an outcome, perhaps through the use of tutoring; or, conversely, the inhibition of action, such as procrastination.

Cross (1991) defined three barrier categories that complement the 4 "S" system. These barrier categories are *situational*, *institutional*, and *dispositional*. *Situational barriers* include lack of time, financial issues, childcare, 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 unintentionally by a college, university, or other formalized program (Cross, 1991). For example, institutional barriers can manifest in the availability of staff who often end their days at the same time that adult learners are able to begin their student responsibilities, as well as policies that do not consider the needs of adult learners. *Dispositional barriers* are those related to self-perception or attitude, such as lack of self-confidence, lack of commitment, fear of change, or feelings of guilt because of time spent away from family while in school (Harris & Brooks, 1998).

Figure 1 depicts how Cross's (1991) categorization of barriers complements the factors of the 4 "S" system. This figure demonstrates how the 4 "S" system and Cross's description of barriers converge to form the basis for the theoretical framework of this study. In Figure 1, Cross's (1991) barrier types are nested under the 4 "S" system factors because these barriers offer a narrowed view of the various influences that impact an adult learner's transition by framing them in the context of higher education.

In reference to Figure 1, the situation factor encompasses situational barriers because both focus on the context of the transition. The self factor includes the strengths and weaknesses that stem from the same elements of dispositional barriers, including attitude, perception, and personality. The strategies factor, like the support factor, includes situational barriers because adult learners will encounter situational barriers based on the strategies they use. For example, adult learners who seek supports as a strategy may have situational barriers, like work obligations or an inability to pay for tutoring, that prevent them from accessing those supports. Additionally, dispositional barriers may influence the strategies that adult learners adopt. Students who are not confident may procrastinate or avoid asking questions, which are negative coping strategies. Lastly, the support factor is impacted by the instructional and situational supports that are available as resources or a lack thereof (i.e., barriers). Again, these categories are fluid and should not be considered clear divisions of the factors influencing transition.

Transitions Prep Program

This study took place over the duration of an eight-week transition program titled Transitions: College and Career Prep, hereafter referred to as Transitions Prep. Transitions Prep was offered on the campus of a large research-focused university in the Northeastern United States. Although students did not receive credit for participation in Transitions Prep, there was also no cost for students to enroll in the program. Like most transition programs, an objective of Transitions Prep was to limit how much remedial coursework the students would need to complete in a postsecondary program. The intent of the course was to prepare adult learners interested in entering college for college-level classes and expectations while helping them determine if college was necessary for their future plans. Although college admission was not required to participate in the program, one student opted to complete the program after college admission but prior to beginning the first semester of classes. The program met two nights a week for two and a half hours, totaling five hours per week.

One of the Transitions Prep instructors worked for Central Intermediate Unit (CIU) 10, a state-funded agency that offers support to the local community, including free adult education classes. She learned about transition programs at a conference and, realizing their value, developed a proposal to create a transition program in collaboration with the local university. She submitted the proposal to a contact she made at the university's office for continuing education who helped facilitate a partnership with a local school district. This was a natural partnership as the school district was the conduit for access to GED classes and thus

already had an established network for connecting with adult learners. The school district provided the second instructor for the course. The university provided the space for the course and some assistance with advertising.

Transitions Prep was offered for the first time in the Summer of 2011. In 2017, the university moved Transitions Prep to its online campus. Staff for that campus took over the instruction. From 2011 to 2015, eighty-eight adult learners completed Transitions Prep. The program followed the university calendar and was offered every Summer, Fall, and Spring. As the university prepared to change Transitions Prep to an online program, it scaled back advertisements and brought in smaller cohorts of students. The average Transitions Prep class size was approximately nine students. This study took place during Spring of 2016, the last term residential Transitions Prep was offered. There were six students enrolled in the course.

The instructors of Transitions Prep used their prior experiences teaching adult learners to design a curriculum to remediate common deficits they saw in their adult students. The curriculum for the course focused on the development of written and verbal communication skills through formal writing assignments and speech delivery. The instructors wanted to prepare students for the heavy use of technology in higher education. They taught lessons on Microsoft Word and PowerPoint, as well as how to do research online and how to post to class discussion boards. Due to state funding requirements, students in Transitions Prep had to take the Test for Adult Basic Education (TABE) at the start and end of the program. The TABE test was proctored by an approved administrator. The TABE assesses reading, mathematics, and language skills. During the program, the instructors focused on reviewing reading and language material that would be on the TABE to prepare students for the post-program test. Transitions Prep did not include mathematics instruction.

In addition to the remediation of language skills, the instructors also taught students about university supports and services. They invited guest speakers such as academic advisors, admissions counselors, career counselors, and staff from the Office of Disability Services to discuss available supports. The instructors also introduced the students to the partnering university's campus. For example, the class took a trip to the campus library using the student bus system. By introducing the students to the campus and contacts in various offices at the university, the instructors attempted to create a support system for the students in Transitions Prep. Creating a college-like environment supported another objective of Transitions Prep, which was to help the students determine their readiness for enrolling in college classes.

Method

For this study, I turned to narrative inquiry for data collection and hermeneutics for data analysis to come to a deeper understanding of the participants' experiences in the transition program, as well as the social influences that factored into their perception of their transitions. Hermeneutics is best for analyzing narratives of experience (Squire, 2013). Narrative research "begins with the experiences as expressed in lived and told stories of individuals" (Creswell, 2007, p. 54). Narrative inquiry and hermeneutics seek to gain knowledge through the meanings of the participants' stories (Kim, 2016). Narrative is a vehicle to understanding lived experiences as time unfolds (Hagen, 2018). Perception is given critical consideration in narrative inquiry and hermeneutics because it explains how individuals make meaning of their stories and changes in their lives (Hagen, 2018; Polkinghorne, 2005; Riessman, 1993).

When using narrative inquiry, it is essential that researchers explore and disclose presuppositions and biases (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007). I journaled throughout the study to reflect on my presuppositions to avoid the unintentional misinterpretation or misrepresentation of the participants' narratives. Through journaling, I sought to understand the narratives in the way that the participants wanted and not in the way that I could most relate. This is a measure of credibility of narrative inquiry (Leininger, 1994). Special care was also taken to refrain from criticism and judgment of the narratives.

Participants

All participants in the study were enrolled in Transitions Prep. The program was open to anyone with a high school degree or equivalent who was at least one year out of high school. In order to enroll, prospective students had to interview with the program instructors. The instructors conducted comprehensive interviews with each candidate to make certain that prospective students had the interest, ability, time, and basic skills to complete the program. Essentially the instructors were assessing for readiness and motivation. They felt

that the pre-screening interviews helped to limit course attrition but did not provide data to support that claim.

I presented the study to the students on the first day of Transitions Prep. Five of the six students in the program volunteered to participate in the study. Although this is a seemingly small group, it should be noted that theorists do not agree on an ideal sample size for narrative research (Kim, 2016; Knox & Burkard, 2009). When focusing on life stories, the sample tends to be smaller with a more in-depth data collection process (Kim, 2016). In narrative inquiry, the researcher typically spends hours with each participant to gain an in-depth understanding of the participants' stories. Therefore, when using narrative inquiry an "adequate sample size is one that sufficiently answers the research question" (O'Reilly & Parker, 2012, p. 192).

The participants in this study varied in age, with the youngest being 23 years old and the oldest 64. Three of the five participants were 45 years of age or older. Four of the participants identified as female, and one of the participants identified as male. The only male participant was also the only African-American participant in the study. The four female participants identified as white. All the participants had some previous experience in postsecondary education, ranging from having taken a few classes to earning a bachelor's degree. Every participant in the study had lifelong goals to further their education.

Additionally, all the participants experienced significant life events that prompted their desire to return to college and enroll in the Transitions Prep program. One participant was recently divorced and in remission from breast cancer. She had been a stay-at-home mom prior to the divorce and wanted to earn a degree that would allow her to provide for her two daughters. Before having children, she worked as a respiratory therapist, but she felt that respiratory therapy was too physically demanding for her health concerns. Another participant also had concerns about the physical demands of her job. After being injured at work, she needed to have back surgery, which caused physical limitations. Her limitations following surgery prompted her to seek a degree that would allow her to have a desk job. After being passed up for a promotion, another participant decided to return to school to pursue her dreams to become a nurse. Still another was inspired by her mother, who recently earned her college degree. Her mother's graduation prompted her to act on her own goals. The last participant already held a bachelor's degree but had been considering going to graduate school to fulfill his long-term goal of becoming a counselor since he retired. His retirement caused him to think about the career he had always wanted.

Data Collection

To gain a comprehensive perspective of the participants' narratives, I collected multiple sources of data. Having a multiplistic representation of the participants' narratives provided a more accurate and holistic view of their stories (Patton, 2002). The data points included participants' journals, participant and instructor interviews, class observations, and class assignments. All participants wrote four journal entries about their experiences and reactions in the program.

Each participant was interviewed at the beginning and end of Transitions Prep. The instructors were also interviewed midway through the program to gain an understanding of the program culture and curriculum. Being honest about my intent for the study and the purpose of the interviews helped to build trust between myself and the participants, which is viewed as the most critical aspect of interviews (Kim, 2016). The interviews followed a semi-structured format, which encouraged participants to authentically share their stories (Riessman, 1993). I used "a set of questions that guide[d] the interview rather than dictate[d] its direction" (Bold, 2012, p. 95). I aimed to allow for flexibility by providing a list of general topics and open-ended questions to explore (Galletta, 2013).

I developed the interview questions by considering the purpose of the study, the components of the 4 "S" system, and potential barriers and supports that the participants experienced while in the transition program. I also referenced the literature on adult learners and transition programs to identify questions that would address common areas of concern regarding transition programs through the experiences of the participants, such as the rigor of the content and the motivation for student participation. Additionally, I referenced the syllabus for Transitions Prep to develop questions about the helpfulness and utility of the lessons. The first set of interview questions was designed to learn why the participants enrolled in Transitions Prep and to gauge the levels of support they were receiving both from the program and their social networks, as well as to determine what, if any,

Figure 2. Visual of hermeneutic process
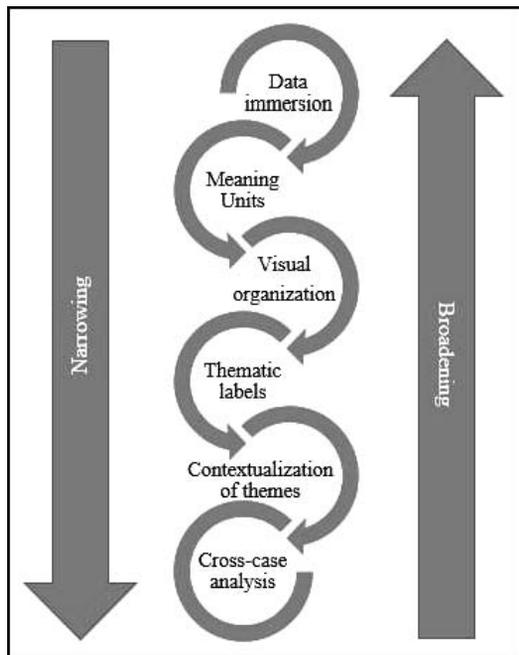
obstacles the participants had encountered throughout the program.

The second set of interview questions included follow-up questions from the first interview, as well as questions prompting the participants to compare their experiences at the beginning of the program and the end of the program. The second interview concluded with questions about the participants' overall impressions of Transitions Prep and their future plans. These questions helped to give a sense of the participants' progress in the program and determine whether or not they felt the program impacted their goals.

In addition to the interviews, I also conducted three observations of the participants and instructors of Transitions Prep. These observations gave insight into the participants' interactions with one another and the instructors (Chase, 2011). During the observations, I attempted to be an unobtrusive observer by sitting in the back of the class and refraining from participating when possible. However, the instructors frequently asked for my input, especially regarding topics related to academic advising. I participated when prompted and responded to general questions, such as the timeline to register for classes. I did not provide answers regarding specific situations, like scheduling recommendations, as this required a more in-

depth advising session. This helped me to build a trusting relationship with the instructors and participants.

Online discussion posts were required of the students in Transitions Prep, and I reviewed these discussion posts as part of my observations of the class. The topics of the discussion posts focused on the progress the participants had made towards their goals and their assessment of their performance in the program.

The final data source was the participants' essays. To conclude the program, the participants wrote essays about how the program helped to shape their future goals and decisions on enrolling in college classes. They also gave brief presentations about their essays. I observed the presentations and collected copies of each presentation for further review.

Data Analysis

Hermeneutics was used to analyze the participants' narratives. Through hermeneutics, researchers construct "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). As suggested by Patterson and Williams (2002), I developed an organizing system to outline my approach to data analysis. The development of an organizing system "promotes a more holistic understanding of the phenomenon by showing the inter-relationships among themes and by retaining a rich characterization of individual themes" (Patterson & Williams, 2002, p. 46). My process followed the six steps outlined below:

- Data immersion
- Identification of meaning units
- Visual organization of themes
- Conceptualization of thematic labels
- Contextualization of themes
- Cross-case analysis

I did not follow this process step-by-step as the hermeneutic process is not linear and is not intended to be (Kafle, 2011). I applied steps to move through the hermeneutic circle by cycling through the participants' narratives to identify themes and compare those themes to the whole story. Figure 2 depicts the recurring nature of this process through constant cycling from more narrowed understandings of parts of the narrative to the broader scope of the entire narrative. In

each circle, a step of my organizing system is listed.

Data immersion began with the *restorying* of the participants' narratives into a cohesive timeline. Restorying is used in narrative research to develop deeper understandings of the participants' lived experiences (Creswell, 2007). During restorying, 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. As I came to a deeper understanding of the participants' narratives through restorying, I began to identify meaning units, which "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 . . . context" (Patterson & Williams, 2002, p. 47). Moving from the raw stories of the participants to a more narrowed understanding of meaning units was the first step in coming to a deeper understanding and analysis of the participants' experiences.

I then visually organized the meaning units for each participant by plotting them out and drawing arrows between each point to make connections between the meaning units and to illuminate overarching themes related to parts of the narratives. This framework provided a means to contemplate the overarching themes within the context of the overall narrative. Theory should be used at this stage as the researcher "integrates the data into an explanatory framework" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 91). Therefore, I began to further contextualize the themes, which is a critical aspect of hermeneutics (Kinsella, 2006).

To contextualize the themes, I organized them within the framework I created through the combination of the 4 "S" system and Cross's (1991) conceptualization of barrier types. The theoretical framework emphasizes the internal (e.g., perception and identity) as the core of how transitions are experienced. As such, 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. However, I did not force themes into the framework. I also considered how the themes may not fit or be entirely represented within this theoretical framework to identify "deviant cases" (Patton, 2002, p. 466) and their significance to the study. Although I remained open to the possibility of themes that did not fit within the framework, Schlossberg's transition theory and Cross's (1991)

discussion of barriers generally permitted me to accurately capture the experiences described in the participants' narratives. That being said, the barrier of health was more central to the participants' narratives than is reflected in the framework.

The last step of data analysis was cross-case analysis. To begin cross-case analysis, I compared the participants' narratives to identify shared themes. As shared themes emerged, I referenced each participant's narrative to once again ensure that the themes represented the intent of the individual narratives as well as the collective whole. The process of moving from themes to the entire narrative represents a continuation of the hermeneutic circle.

Findings

This section summarizes the four shared themes of the participants' narratives as related to academic advising. These themes highlight the experiences of the participants that demonstrate a need for academic advising or could be improved through academic advising. The participants' narratives suggest that adult learners would benefit from academic advising as early as the prospective or *moving into* phase of their transitions.

Academic Options

The participants' desires for more information about academic options for their specific career goals presented as a shared theme. Knowing that I was an academic advisor, each participant asked if they could talk to me about academic planning. One of the participants referred to our advising sessions in her interview, stating, "I love them; it's the best thing that class gave me." In a discussion post, one participant wrote, "I need to narrow down what degree I want to go after." During the first interview, she said that she enrolled in Transitions Prep because "[she] didn't necessarily know what [she] want [sic] to do as a major." She wanted more help deciding on a major prior to enrolling in college. Another participant spent an hour after the interview asking questions about major options and degree requirements. She wanted to know how her interests aligned with different areas of study and how much math education she would need for various majors. She needed a starting point for how to explore major options. Yet another participant needed the assistance of an academic advisor to identify majors that also aligned with her strengths. When

talking about math in our first interview, she said, "Am I really going to be able to get through this?" Without talking to an academic advisor, she enrolled in a class towards a business major that required calculus. Knowing her concerns regarding math, I showed her other business majors that would not require advanced-level math.

Unfortunately, information about majors, transfer credits, the university structure, and general education, among other advising topics, was not addressed in the Transitions Prep program. The participants wanted the guidance of an academic advisor to discuss academic planning, set goals, and learn more about the correlation between career and major. Each participant expressed a need to research and explore their options related to career and major. They did not know about available degree programs or which programs would be best suited to their occupations of interest. The participants required the expertise of academic advisors to fill their void of knowledge regarding higher education and to direct them to the academic options available to them.

Connections

The connections that the participants formed through Transitions Prep also presented as a theme. Helping students to build connections to university resources, support services, and organizations, as well as developing an interpersonal connection with advisees, is foundational to academic advising (Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education, 2013; Hughey, 2011). As previously noted, all participants also asked to meet with me for academic advising, emphasizing the importance of the advising connection. One participant demonstrated the theme of forming connections when they stated, "Since coming to Transitions class, I have learned [about] so many wonderful resources and contacts that I would never have found on my own." Throughout Transitions Prep, the instructors scheduled university staff to come and share information about services related to their areas of expertise. Speaking about the university staff, one participant shared in her journal, "The special guest speakers have been an added bonus to the already full and diverse syllabus." All of the participants contacted at least one staff member who presented to the class. Several participants met with admissions and career counselors to

discuss career paths, while others met with a counselor to learn about disability services.

Discussing the connections that she had formed, one participant noted, "I'm learning new things. I like the small class. The teachers . . . Everybody: that you come in and . . . all the guest speakers that come to us." The participants expressed that their interactions with the staff led them to believe that other people cared about their success. A participant journaled, "I have enjoyed my fellow students and staff can't be beat." A different participant journaled, "I may want to give up but my support system will not allow that to happen." During our second interview, a participant shared, "The good part about talking to you is that I don't feel as though I have to protect anything."

Although beneficial, the support network in Transitions Prep was not as robust as the participants would have liked. The participants shared that they wanted to connect more with each other and other adult learners. One participant said that she wished there "was a venue where [adult learners] could sit and talk and say. . . It all started here, with this phone call, with this transition program, and you can do it too." Another participant wrote in his journal:

> 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 had the opportunity to share thoughts with each other, enabling all to get to know each other better.

The connections that the participants formed did not fully alleviate their concerns about being outsiders, which is another shared theme in their narratives.

Outsiders

Merton (1972) explained the notion of being an outsider by stating that outsiders are the group that does not have access to "social and cultural truth" because they "[have not] engaged in the run of experience that makes up [higher education]" (p. 15). Adult learners commonly feel like outsiders due to a lack of experience in higher education. Adult learners often face situational

barriers associated with a lack of resources and networks (Cross, 1991; Zafft, 2008).

Adult learners usually do not have access to the same information as traditional students. Such was the case for the participants in this study, who had many questions about college life, university policies and procedures, and academic planning. I inferred the shared theme of feeling like outsiders through the participants' questions, which demonstrated a lack of "insider" information, and their difficulties accessing information about college classes and expectations. The theme was also inferred through their statements of self-doubt as evidenced by the barriers they faced. They asked questions about class size, workload, resources, the academic calendar, course registration, academic requirements, and where to buy books. In the second interview, after the completion of Transitions Prep, one of the participants still had questions about transfer courses and how transfer credits could apply towards her intended major. Furthermore, she was unsure of the application process and academic calendar. In our second interview she asked, "Do you need transcripts?" "How many weeks is the regular semester?"

The participants also felt like outsiders due to their uncertainty about the expectations of college students. They wanted to know how many hours they would need to study and the level of difficulty of assignments. One of the participants questioned whether Transitions Prep gave an accurate picture of college life, noting in her journal, "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." One of the instructors was also concerned that the students were given an unrealistic expectation of college, saying, "Nobody is going to take the time with [them] in the classroom."

Barriers

The adult learners in this study needed assistance identifying resources to overcome barriers. The obstacle of technology—the need to have it, to use it, to understand it—was regularly discussed by the participants. Several participants shared that instruction on using technology was one of the main reasons they enrolled in the program. At the second interview, another participant shared how she continued to struggle with technology, saying, "My biggest problems lay in the use of the computer, and the difficulties in maneuvering in the tech world."

One of the instructors shared, "As good as this class is . . . [they have] difficulty finding what they're supposed to be finding [online]." As previously noted, Transitions Prep was eventually moved to an online format. When the participants in the study learned that Transitions Prep would be an online course, they all voiced concerns that such a move would prevent adult learners from accessing the course.

Health issues were also described as a barrier by the participants. In fact, health issues prompted two of the participants to enroll in the course. Both participants had previously worked in professions that became too physically demanding. They wanted to change professions and felt that a college education would offer more opportunities. One of these participants shared, "I've recently had surgery and I can't do my job that I normally do." Another participant was concerned about having to stand for long periods of time in the lab classes required for her intended major. She questioned, "Can I really do this? Do I have the physical and mental capacity at this age?"

Related to health are the barriers that develop as a result of the aging process. One participant noted on several occasions that she did not feel her ability to recall information was as good as it had been when she was younger. She said, "I just don't think I can absorb and retain like I used to and that kind of concerns me." Another participant expressed having less energy to deal with the stresses of his job as he approached retirement.

Discussion

This discussion contextualizes the themes of the study in relation to the theoretical framework. When discussing barriers, it is important to keep in mind that they often cannot be neatly boxed or categorized as one particular barrier type. According to Harris and Brooks (1998), "it is often difficult to categorize potential barriers into one and only one category" (p. 226). As such, the classifications of dispositional, institutional, and situational barriers are for heuristic purposes. All three of Cross's (1991) barrier types were represented in the participants' shared themes, suggesting a need for further support. Support is also a factor of the 4 "S" system (Anderson et al., 2012). If support outweighs barriers, adult learners are more likely to have a successful transition to college (Anderson et al., 2012; Cross, 1991).

Starting with institutional barriers, the themes related to participants needing academic information and being outsiders represent the participants' need for more access to information about majors, minors, and the required credentials for their career goals. Despite the support provided by Transitions Prep, the participants were still unaware of the different academic paths that related to their interests and career goals. Adult learners often lack access to information and resources compared to traditional students (Alamprese, 2005; Bowl, 2001; Hardin, 2008; Reay, 2002). Not knowing what to expect limits students' ability to prepare, which can hinder their success and result in dispositional barriers (Bandura, 1997; Cross, 1991).

Moving to dispositional barriers, the participants also needed guidance as they were attempting to redefine themselves and evaluate their abilities. Transition is a tumultuous time that often prompts individuals to reflect on their abilities and world views (Bamber & Tett, 2000; Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Merriam, 2005; Schlossberg et al., 1989). Dispositional barriers also represent the participants' struggle of feeling like outsiders. Feeling like an outsider can be categorized as the factor of self in the 4 "S" system, as it demonstrates the uncertainty of the participants. Adult learners often question their belonging and ability to succeed in college (Kasworm et al., 2002). The participants continued to question their readiness to take college classes and were still unaware of university processes, as exemplified by their uncertainty around how to transfer courses or the length of a typical semester.

Even adult learners who have some experience in postsecondary education have often been away from the school environment for prolonged periods of time, and their knowledge of processes and procedures may be outdated (Hardin, 2008; Kasworm et al., 2002). Such students, as demonstrated by this study, need "insider" information. The participants' only vision of university life was shaped by participation in Transitions Prep, their previous experiences in postsecondary education, and anecdotal evidence provided by other adult learners, which was limited as is commonly the case for adult learners (Kasworm et al., 2002). To combat feelings of being "outsiders," the participants needed more interaction with other adult learners and resources at the university. Kallison (2017) reported that meeting with academic advisors and mentoring can lead to positive outcomes for adult learners.

Even less so than the other themes, the theme of barriers cannot clearly be categorized as one type of barrier defined by Cross (1991). This theme also reflects the 4 "S" system factor of situation, which explores how circumstances such as access to technology or health status influence how one manages the changes associated with transition. For example, the need to understand and use technology may prohibit adult learners' participation in formal education and can therefore be categorized as both a situational and institutional barrier. Embedding instruction on technology into other assignments was an effective practice utilized by the instructors of Transitions Prep, but it was not enough (Bennett & Bell, 2010). Adult learners often encounter barriers related to technology, such as difficulties using online search engines for research, using course management systems, and using programs needed for written assignments and presentations (Hansman & Mott, 2010).

Health and aging challenges are reflective of dispositional and situational barriers because health can impact aging adults' socioeconomic statuses, relationships, and stress levels (Seeman & Crimmins, 2006). Health also falls into the factors of self and situation in the 4 "S" system. Health issues in particular have been identified as a factor for adult learners leaving higher education (Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2010). Although accounted for by the theoretical framework, health more heavily influenced the participants' narratives than its representation as a factor within the framework suggests (Karmelita, 2018). Health influences all factors of a transition and is also influenced by the circumstances of a transition. It is something that all adult learners experience the effects of in one way or another. Even returning adult learners who have not experienced significant health issues will have to grapple with the impacts of aging. The age of adult learners is increasing as people are living and working longer than ever before (Hansman & Mott, 2010). Common health issues related to aging include poorer eyesight, hearing loss, arthritis, and memory loss (World Health Organization, 2018). Although changes in health, including the effects of aging, can influence an adult's ability to learn, colleges often fail to take health factors into consideration (Falasca, 2011).

While it is clear there was a need for additional support due to the barrier types represented in the participants' shared themes, the participants' narratives suggest that participation in Transitions Prep mitigated barriers by helping the participants create connections. According to Kasworm et al.

(2002), most "adults desire a college where faculty and staff will value and respect them through special structures and programs that support their success" (p. 46). Through their connections, the participants gained a better understanding of university processes and which resources were available to them, thereby limiting some institutional barriers and improving the circumstances of support as defined by the 4 "S" system. Polson (1994) explained that "adults perhaps more than any other student population need someone within the institution who cares" (p. 22).

Access to university resources and Transitions Prep lessened situational barriers, which again improved the participants' situations in the context of the 4 "S" system. The university resources and supports included providing access to the library, course management system, and university offices such as financial aid, career services, and disability services, which were introduced and represented by the guest speakers. Bringing the guest speakers to the Transitions Prep program limited the participants' need to take additional time to meet with them or worry about transportation to different buildings. This is significant because work schedules and transportation are two common situational barriers (Cross 1991; Kasworm et al., 2002). Additionally, finances commonly pose situational barriers for adult learners. However, the participants did not have to worry about the cost of the program because it was free.

Furthermore, the connections the participants formed helped them to grapple with their feelings of inadequacy, which is both a dispositional barrier and an element of self in the 4 "S" system. Adult learners are often concerned about having a false sense of security regarding their abilities as a result of their initial lack of confidence (Cross, 1991; Ross-Gordon, 2003). While the participants in the program still struggled with their confidence, every participant shared they felt more capable because of the connections they made. Adult learners who feel as if they matter and belong to an institution typically have a better outlook on their abilities to succeed (Schlossberg et al., 1989). A positive self-perception can help remove barriers and promote academic success (Chemers, Hu, & Garcia, 2001).

Implications for Practice

Beginning with the theoretical framework, this section will provide implications for academic advising based on the study and its findings. Academic advisors help students in different states of transition. The theoretical framework of this study provides advisors with a lens through which they may approach and contemplate their work. Being able to identify various phases of transition can help advisors provide guidance and support that is appropriate for that phase. Advisors can also provide students with tools and information to help them cope with change. Additionally, using this framework as a guide, advisors can help adult learners be more aware of the different barriers and challenges related to transition into college.

During the *moving into* phase of transition, advisors can help students acclimate to college expectations and norms. This is especially important for adult learners who are often unfamiliar with institutional policies and procedures. It is important that advisors not assume adult learners understand or have been informed about policies that may seem to be well-known or commonly understood among other student groups. Higher education vernacular such as "late drop" or "academic warning" may not be clear. Adult learners may also be unaware of the advantages and purposes of academic advising. Advisors should be proactive in reaching out to adult learners to share the benefits of advising and establish a relationship early in the transition to college.

Students who have confidence in their ability generally experience a more positive transition and improved academic performance (Chemers et al., 2001). To improve confidence, academic advisors should help adult learners select classes at their readiness level so that they have a higher likelihood of academic success during their first semester. Advisors can also suggest adult learners participate in low-threat educational activities that will not be significantly detrimental to the students' confidence or academic record (Cross, 1991). Examples of low-threat educational activities include cost-free remedial and preparatory courses such as transition programs, which are commonly an entry point for adult learners looking to improve their confidence (Hansman & Mott, 2010).

Advisors can also assist adult learners by helping them develop a network of institutional support (Gordon-Starks, 2015). For adult learners, institutional supports in addition to advising, like counseling, financial aid, and career services, can be the difference between a successful transition through college and a failed attempt (Hardin, 2008). Advisors should play an essential role in helping students to overcome obstacles through appropriate referrals to supports and resources, as

well as by promoting student persistence by helping to limit barriers that students encounter (Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education, 2013). When referring students to various resources, academic advisors should be mindful of the potential struggles adult learners may have when accessing such supports. Typically, campus resources are available during business hours, which can pose challenges for working adults. When possible, advisors should try to accommodate the time constraints of adult learners.

Academic advisors should also be mindful of technology and health barriers when working with adult learners. I suggest that advisors spend time teaching adult learners how to use online tools necessary for student success. Without demonstration of how to use online tools and systems, such resources may not be easily accessible to adult students. In addition, I suggest advisors consider how aging poses physical limitations for adult learners and how to best provide appropriate accommodations or make appropriate recommendations for aging adult students (Falasca, 2011). Beyond the physical limitations, advisors should consider potential learning challenges or disabilities that adult learners may face and share information about academic resources, as well as resources for students with learning differences or disabilities.

As evidenced by the participants' narratives, adult learners struggle to connect their goals to their educational pursuits. Academic advisors are uniquely positioned to help students make meaning of their experiences and to reconcile how those experiences influence their goals (Hagen, 2018). Academic advisors should help adult learners plan an academic journey that fosters growth and relates to goals beyond career and major (Bland, 2003). Based on the preference of adult learners for an applicable curriculum, I also recommend that advising appointments include discussion of readily applicable advice, such as the discussion of study skills and time management, evaluation of student preparedness and progress, as well as exploration of university resources and tools (Knowles, 1990). I also suggest that academic advisors ask adult learners about their experiential learning and work experience to help adult learners connect that knowledge to classroom learning (Bland, 2003).

Lastly, I recommend academic advisors be mindful of how they may incorporate narrative inquiry and hermeneutics into their advising practice to capture students' perceptions of their lived experiences and provide insight into the intended meaning of narratives (Hagen, 2018; Polkinghorne, 2005; Squire, 2013). The essence of narrative inquiry and hermeneutics—meaning making, interpretation, perception, and identity—is foundational to advising. Advisors should seek to solicit students' narratives and to understand them in the way that students intend their stories to be understood (Hagen, 2018). Moreover, advisors should seek to understand how students perceive situations in order to frame advice in a way that is meaningful and able to be accepted. Narrative does not encompass all that advising is or does, but "wielding the power of story in our discourses with students gives [advisors] the means by which [they] can advise *well*" (Hagen, 2018, p. 53). Academic advisors should harness the power of their students' stories to help them frame their experiences in a way that encourages growth and promotes academic success.

Limitations

This study is limited to the experiences of adult learners in a single transition program. The findings do not compare experiences in different transition programs using a different structure or curriculum. In addition, narrative inquiry and hermeneutic analysis depend on the ability of the researcher to avoid forming an undue prejudice or preference when listening to the participants' stories. Even with efforts to minimize researcher bias, one cannot fully suspend their life experiences from informing their thoughts and opinions. Given the small sample size, the findings of this study cannot be generalized to all adult learners. Finally, this study does not follow adult learners through enrollment in college and cannot offer insight into more long-term effects of academic advising on adult learners who participated in a transition program.

Conclusion

The results of this study illustrate that in order to promote successful transitions for adult learners entering college, academic advising must adjust to meet the needs of adult learners. Adult learners require access to academic advising earlier in their transitions to college. Academic advisors are better positioned than other institutional resources to provide support and connect adult learners to other supports that can prepare them for college-entry. Recognizing the benefit of academic advising, some transition programs offer early access to academic advising to help adult students explore majors and appropriately select courses based on

placement and interest (Kallison, 2017). However, this practice is not yet widespread.

It is imperative that the advising relationship move from simply helping students schedule classes to helping adult learners utilize available resources and make sense of their educational journeys. Not all barriers (e.g., childcare, transportation, and additional costs, such as books or registration fees) are readily apparent. Academic advisors need to help adult learners predict potential obstacles so they can better prepare for future challenges. Preparation can help adult learners to develop positive perspectives of their abilities and experiences in college (Chemers et al., 2001).

In addition, advisors must also be aware of the impacts of aging and health on an adult learner's academic performance and be prepared to suggest resources for adult students with physical or cognitive limitations. Lastly, thinking about students' struggles, successes, and academic journeys as a narrative can help advisors interpret the stories of their students in order to better understand their needs and harness the power of students' stories to frame their experiences in a way that fosters growth (Hagen, 2018). By acknowledging the uniqueness of each adult learner's academic journey and providing earlier and more comprehensive advising, it is possible to enhance the adult learner's transition to college.

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