NAVIGATING VIRTUAL HALLS: STORIES OF ONLINE TRANSFER, WORKING ADULT LEARNERS' JOURNEYS WITH STUDENT SERVICES

LaShica Davis Waters, North Carolina State University
Michelle Bartlett, Old Dominion University

ABSTRACT

This qualitative narrative inquiry study explores lived experiences of seven working adult part-time online students, mostly community college transfers, in a Research 1 institution's online degree-completion program. Using in-depth interviews, four key themes are identified: access, engagement, inclusion, and university pride in students' interactions with student services. Access covers service availability, engagement the interaction quality, inclusion the feeling of being valued, and university pride the overall perception of their educational journey. Engagement further divides into positive connections and negative disconnections. Findings suggest positive experiences with student services, recommending enhanced service provisions for similar students to foster accessibility, engagement, inclusivity, and a positive institutional perception.

Keywords: *narrative inquiry, online transfer students, nontraditional students, student services*

INTRODUCTION

Student support services offered in United States higher education institutions are pivotal in students' college transition and overall college experience (LaPadula, 2003; Schuh et al., 2016). For this study, the participants decided what they considered as services, to keep it broad. We did not want to narrow down specific student services in the research questions, to avoid excluding anything they deemed as a needed service as an online student. However, from the findings, the services mentioned included financial aid, admissions, advising, bookstore, parking, testing center, veteran services, faculty office hours, online library, and even websites/email communication.

With the rise of students not fitting into the traditional student definition, many institutions' approaches to distance education support, primarily an extension of on-campus services, have become outdated. Working Adult Learners (WAL) is used in this study to replace the often-used nontraditional student term, firstly in an effort to align with the current trends in higher education that the majority of learners no longer fit in the "traditional student" definition as a full-time, nonworking student who attends college straight from high school. This shift, exemplified by more than 20 million U.S. higher education enrollments between 2012–2016, reflects a changing student demographic, moving beyond the traditional 18–22 age group (Anderson, 2016; Arena, 2019; Chen, 2017; Meyers, 2012). And secondly, WAL is used to not "other" the learners who have chosen to participate in this study and share their stories by placing them in a "non" category (Gulley, 2021). As adult learners increasingly choose online education for flexibility and job market demands, they often encounter services tailored for traditional students, leading to feelings of isolation and potential dropout (King-Spezzo et al., 2020; Kurucay & Inan, 2017; Smith, 2016).

Institutions must ensure that support services cater to all students, particularly given the unique needs of adult online learners (Chen, 2015; Kippenhan, 2004). Adult learners, often juggling

multifaceted roles of work, life, family, friends, and other duties (Martin & Bolliger, 2023), often require increased ability for self-directedness in learning (Bowden & Purper, 2024; Knowles, 1977). As working adult learners are increasingly going back to college, there has been a preference for online learning options for the flexibility to balance working and education loads (Dieterich & Hamsher, 2020). This changing student landscape demands a reimagining of teaching methodologies, an adaptation of educational environments, and an expansion of support mechanisms (Dirr, 1999; Jiang & Koo, 2020; Schuh et al., 2016). Institutions are responsible for adjusting their practices to be inclusive of their entire student population.

Problem Statement

Working adult online students, often adult learners transferring to institutions primarily catering to traditional on-campus students, grapple with navigating academic and support services virtually (Dumais et al., 2013). Their online experience might foster feelings of isolation due to a lack of tailored support (Dirr, 1999; Major & Summer, 2018; Smith, 2016). These students are more prone to dropout, with attrition rates ranging between 20–50% for distance learning programs, often resulting from dissatisfaction or lack of connectedness (Kurucay & Inan, 2017; Smith, 2016). Tinto (1975) underscores the institution's role in fostering conducive environments for student success. However, there's a noted deficit in support for nontraditional distance learners (Boudreaux & Schoenack, 2016; Lorenzo, 2015). Despite being a significant portion of student populations, transfer students, especially those older or with dependents, face challenges from lower grades to social and academic adjustments, and often receive inadequate attention (Laanan, 2007; Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012). To serve these students better, institutions need to be more cognizant of their unique needs, with a pressing demand for focused research on the expectations and experiences of undergraduate online adult transfer students.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study was to explore the expectations and experiences of working adult undergraduate students transferring into the sole online undergraduate program at a prominent research university, which generally focuses its services on traditional-aged, campus-based students (Chen, 2017; Gast, 2013; Smith, 2016). While student services are vital for various reasons, including enhancing enrollment and fostering academic success (Dirr, 1999), many institutions still predominantly cater to traditional students. With the rise of online degree-completion programs, especially at major institutions (Chau, 2010), it's crucial to assess if student services sufficiently address the unique needs of working adult online transfer students. This investigation used a narrative qualitative research design to focus on adult students from the North Carolina State University's Leadership in the Public Sector program. The study aimed to comprehensively understand these students' online educational journey and provide recommendations for institutions to support such student populations effectively (Chen, 2015; Gast, 2013; Jacobs & Hundley, 2010; Kasworm, 2003; Smith, 2016).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

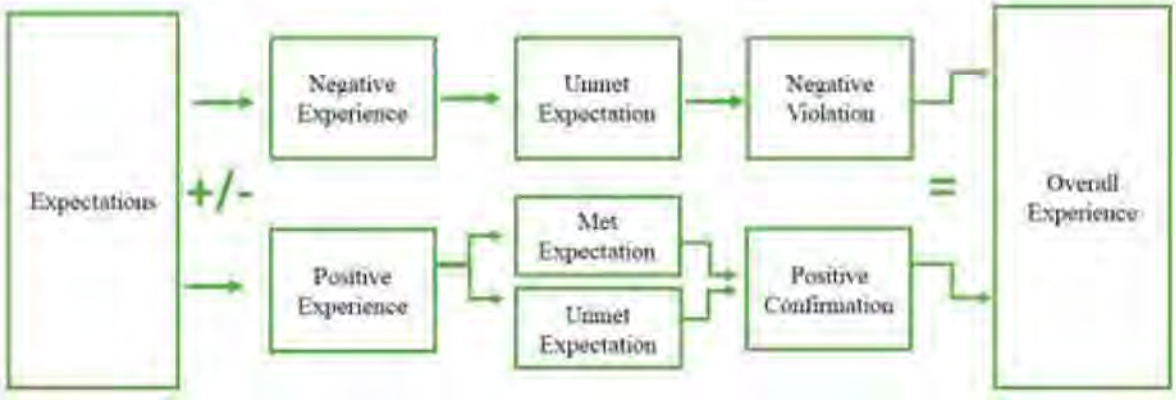
This narrative inquiry investigated the perspectives of online transfer students who are not following the traditional undergraduate path, directed by three specific research questions:

1. What are working adult online students' expectations of student services before they transfer into the only online undergraduate program at a large Research 1 land-grant university?
2. What are working adult online students' experiences with student services after they transfer into the only online undergraduate program at a large Research 1 land-grant university?
3. How do working adult online students feel their interactions with student services impacted their overall experience at the large Research 1 land-grant university?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study utilized the Expectancy Violations Theory (EVT), proposed by Burgoon in 1978, as its theoretical foundation. EVT explores how people react to expected and unexpected behaviors in interpersonal communication. It suggests that individuals form expectations about how others will communicate, and deviations from these expectations can lead to increased attention and positive

Figure 1.
Depiction of the Expectancy Violations Theory That Serves as the Theoretical Framework



or negative reactions. In this study, deviations were categorized as either positive or negative violations. Positive violations resulted in desirable outcomes, such as a pleasant, unexpected experience with student services, while negative violations led to undesirable experiences, like a negative, unexpected encounter. Figure 1 visually represents the theoretical framework employed in this study.

Expectancy Violations Theory, despite originating in 1978, remains a robust and versatile framework, continuously applied and validated in diverse contexts, including virtual environments (Kronimus, 2023), military academies (Lee, 2023), and role conflict for online learners who are working executives (Shukla & De, 2023), making it highly relevant for examining expectations and experiences of online adult learners. EVT serves as a suitable framework to assess the expectations of online transfer students who are working adult learners regarding student services at a research-intensive university. It aimed to determine whether these expectations were positive or negative and whether positive violations of these expectations improved the overall student experience. Drawing from the research of Boudreaux & Schoenack (2016), Chen (2015), and LaPadula (2003), this study applied EVT to enhance understanding and address the needs of online adult transfer students in higher education. By doing so, it sought to prevent the frustration resulting from unmet expectations with student services, promoting student persistence and a more satisfying educational journey. Furthermore, this study expanded the application of EVT beyond its original context of proximity and one-on-one communication by investigating working adult online transfer students' expectations regarding student services at a research-intensive university.

LITERATURE

Adult Learners

Adult learning has been a significant topic since Eduard Lindeman introduced it in the U.S. in 1926 (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). Malcolm Knowles later popularized the concept of andragogy, emphasizing a learner-centered approach for adults (Knowles, 1968; 1980). Knowles' theory highlighted the distinct characteristics of adult learners, emphasizing their motivation, experience, and self-directed nature (Åkerfeldt et al., 2023; Ross-Gordon et al., 2017; Stavredes, 2011; Xavier & Meneses, 2022). Adult learners often juggle various responsibilities, including work and family, which can sometimes hinder their educational pursuits (Huo et al., 2023; Schlossberg et al., 1989). The definition of adult learners has been debated, but they are generally seen as more motivated and serious than their younger counterparts (Kasworm, 2008; Wyatt, 2011). Institutions need to recognize the diverse identities of these learners, who range from professionals to grandparents (Chen, 2017; Coulter & Mandell, 2012).

Distance Education and Online Learning

Distance education has evolved over the past 300 years, with the introduction of the World Wide Web in 1989 marking a significant shift (Casey, 2008; Schultz et al., 2008). Online learning, a subset of distance education, relies on the internet as its primary delivery mode (Appana, 2008). In

2022, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) found that in the United States, out of 24.9 million college students, 26% were solely enrolled in online and distance education programs, and 27.4% participated in some form of online education. Most online learners are between the ages of 25 and 44, valuing its flexibility and convenience (CAEL, 2018; Lieberman, 2018). However, the growth of online education has also been accompanied by concerns about dropout rates (Britto & Rush, 2013; Choy et al., 2002).

Historical Growth of Transfer Students

Transfer students, who change their institution of enrollment, also make up a significant portion of the student population in higher education (Ishitani, 2018; Shapiro et al., 2018). Almost 40% of first-time students will transfer or co-enroll at least once within six years. Transfer students often have nontraditional backgrounds and experiences, making them a unique population (Austin, 2006; Choy 2002). They may transfer for various reasons, including financial constraints, academic performance, or personal changes (Davis, 2010; Kirk-Kuwaye & Kirk-Kuwaye, 2007). The types of transfers include vertical (from two-year to four-year institutions), horizontal (between similar institutions), and reverse transfers (from four-year to two-year institutions) (Crisp & Delgado, 2014; Kirk-Kuwaye & Kirk-Kuwaye, 2007).

METHODS

This study utilized a qualitative research method with a narrative inquiry approach to deeply understand the perspectives and lived experiences of research participants. Emphasizing exploration and description, qualitative research can derive findings from in-depth interviews, direct observations, and written documents (Patton, 2002; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Specifically, this study harnessed in-depth interviews to understand working adult online students' expectations and experiences when transferring to a university primarily serving traditional-aged students. Narrative inquiry was chosen to explore how these students articulated their expectations and experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). While definitions of narrative inquiry vary (Kohler-Riesman, 2008; Richards, 2011), there's agreement that it examines temporal verbal or written stories that provide subjective views of experiences (Richards, 2011; Spector-Mersel, 2010).

This study aligns with Polkinghorne's (1995) work, which sees narrative as a means to describe human actions through stories, emphasizing the importance of plot. This approach is particularly apt for researching working adult undergraduate transfer students, allowing historically marginalized voices to be heard. Polkinghorne's 1995 narrative framework, while not explicitly focusing on marginalized voices, provides a fundamental, adaptable basis for exploring the complex stories of working adult undergraduate transfer students. The emphasis on human actions and plot is particularly suited to capturing the nuanced experiences of these students. Employing Polkinghorne's foundational approach ensures a robust, comprehensive analysis that respects the depth and diversity of student narratives while also providing the flexibility to incorporate modern insights into our study. To truly support these students, it is helpful to first understand their needs (Chen, 2015; NCES, 2013), making narrative inquiry especially relevant for a university primarily catering to on-campus, traditional-aged students.

Alignment of Narrative Inquiry and Expectancy Violations Theory for This Study

Narrative inquiry is aptly suited for exploring EVT, as this approach is valuable in capturing the rich, personal narratives of these online working adult learners at a Research 1 land-grant university in the South. Particularly their experiences and expectations regarding student services that are primarily designed for on-campus learners. Through narrative inquiry, we can examine how these students perceive and react to the discrepancies between their expectations and the actual services provided, offering a nuanced perspective that aligns with the principles of EVT. However, it's crucial to acknowledge the limitations inherent in this methodology. The subjective nature of interpreting narratives could introduce biases, particularly in understanding the unique contexts of these learners. Moreover, the focus on a specific demographic at a single institution may limit the broader applicability of our findings. Recognizing these limitations is essential to ensure a balanced interpretation of how narrative inquiry enables a comprehensive exploration of expectancy violations among online working adult learners,

shedding light on their often-overlooked experiences in a predominantly on-campus oriented university environment.

Setting

This narrative inquiry study was conducted at North Carolina State University, a prominent research-focused institution in the South, primarily serving traditional-aged residential students. The focus was on the Leadership in the Public Sector (LPS) program, the university's sole online undergraduate completion program in liberal arts. Established in 2006, the LPS program primarily targets community college graduates, military personnel, and other working adult students. Admission prerequisites include an Associate of Art or Science degree or a minimum of 60 transferable hours with a GPA of 3.0 or higher. Over the past five years, the program has admitted an average of 29 students annually, with an average age of 35. The gender distribution is 60% female and 40% male, with 6% having military affiliations (p. 51). The LPS program follows the university's academic calendar and maintains the same standards as other majors within the College of Liberal Arts. Notably, to accommodate its target audience of working adults, the program offers 8-week accelerated courses, allowing students to achieve credits faster. These accelerated options are exclusive to the LPS department and are taught by instructors familiar with the working adult learner demographic. Additionally, LPS students undertake general education courses from various university departments, leading to mixed-age online classes. Often, these courses are designed with traditional-aged students in mind.

Story-Sharers

We feel that "story-sharers" is a more suitable term for those who participated in this narrative inquiry study, given the emphasis on sharing personal stories and experiences. Story-sharers implies a sense of active contribution and emphasizes the sharing aspect of participants' involvement, making it a thoughtful choice for studies focusing on personal narratives and lived experiences. It is our hope that using this term will humanize the research process, moving away from more clinical or detached terms like "subjects," "participants," or "respondents," and can convey a sense of collaboration and co-creation of knowledge between the researchers and those willing to share their stories. The term "story-sharers" will be used wherever appropriate. Other terms, such as "participants," may be used when capturing a quote or idea when citing from another source.

Stories-sharers for this study were recent or upcoming graduates from the LPS program over three semesters: Fall 2019, Spring 2020, and Summer 2020. Eligibility was based on six characteristics as defined by Choy (2002) and slightly modified for this research. These characteristics included factors like delayed enrollment post high school, part-time attendance, full-time employment

Table 1.

Participants' Working Adult Learner/Student Characteristics

Pseudonym	Years Delayed Enrollment	Attends Part-Time	Works Full-Time	Financially Independent	Dependents	Marital Status
Tkzari	9	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Divorced
Bill	7	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Married
Gabby	25	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Divorced
Lynn	25	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Married
Caleb	24	Yes	Part-Time	Yes	Yes	Married
Sarah	2	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Married
Dawn	10	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Married

Table 2.
Participants' Demographics and Characteristics

Pseudonym	Start Age	End Age	Gender	Race	Number of Children	Associate Degree	Previous Online Experience	Visited Student Services
Tkzari	39	42	F	White	2	No	Yes	Yes
Bill	28	32	M	White	1	Yes	Yes-All	Yes
Gabby	46	48	F	White	4	Yes	Yes-All	No
Lynn	46	48	F	White	1	Yes	Yes-All	No
Caleb	44	46	M	White	3	Yes	Yes-All	Yes
Sarah	23	24	F	White	0	Yes	Yes-All	Yes
Dawn	34	38	F	White	2	Yes	Yes	Yes

while studying, financial independence for financial aid determination, having dependents other than a spouse, and marital status. Notably, five out of the seven story-sharers met all these criteria (Table 1). Participants chose their own pseudonym in the questionnaire that collected their self-reported demographic information. At the start of the interview, researchers confirmed the pseudonym selection.

The story-sharers, ranging in age from 23 to 46 when they started the program, were predominantly White, with five being female and two males. All had prior online learning experiences before joining the LPS program. Six had completed an online associate degree, while one had transferred from two other online four-year institutions (Table 2).

Recruitment was done using an in-house database maintained by the researcher, who also served as the LPS program's academic advisor. Purposeful sampling was employed to select story-sharers who were most knowledgeable and willing to reflect on their experiences (Morse & Richards, 2002). An initial email was sent to eighteen potential story-sharers, with those interested directed to a demographic questionnaire on Qualtrics. The questionnaire ensured story-sharers met the study's working adult learner criteria and collected relevant background information.

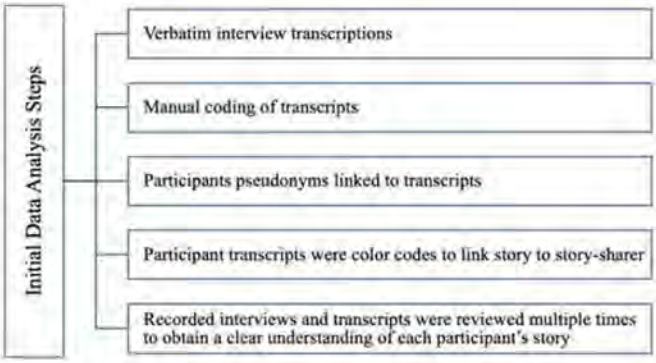
Purposeful sampling, as emphasized by Creswell (2013) and Morse & Richards (2002), is used in qualitative research to ensure representation from participants who can best address the research questions, rather than aiming for broad generalizability. This method allowed for the selection of diverse participants in terms of age, race, location, marital status, employment status, and other relevant working adult characteristics.

Data Collection

This qualitative narrative inquiry study utilized in-depth, semi-structured interviews to explore nontraditional students' expectations and experiences with student services upon transferring to an online program at a major research university. The essence of these interviews is to deeply understand story-sharers' perspectives, believing their insights are valuable (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Such methods aim to capture direct quotes about individuals' feelings, experiences, and knowledge (Patton, 2002) and are widely used across various academic fields (Schneider et al., 2023).

Semi-structured interviews were chosen due to their flexibility in addressing a specific topic while allowing room for organic discussion (Ahlin, 2019). As the researcher and academic advisor for the program, I had a foundational understanding of the university's student services. I designed an interview protocol guide with twenty main questions, follow-ups, and probes to address the research objectives (Castillo-Montoya, 2016; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). This protocol, structured into three parts, also included a script for the interview's start and end, ensuring a systematic

Figure 2.
Initial Data Analysis Steps



approach (Jacob & Ferguson, 2012). To ensure alignment, I mapped the interview questions to the research questions (Castillo-Montoya, 2016).

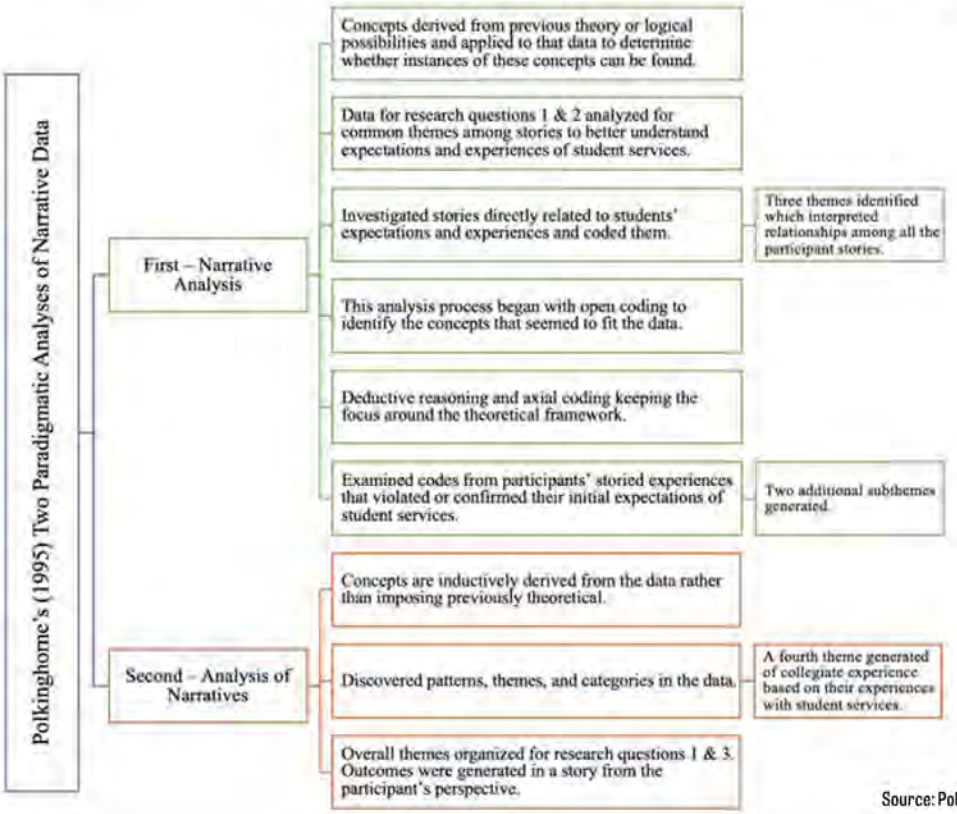
Logistically, interviews were scheduled via email, ensuring story-sharers' comfort and privacy (Roulston, 2010). Due to the online nature of the program and the Covid-19 pandemic, interviews, ranging from 55 to 90 minutes, were conducted and recorded on Zoom. Minimal notes were taken during the sessions, but key points were noted for follow-up questions. Story-sharers were provided with Zoom instructions beforehand, and all interviews were transcribed and edited for accuracy in data analysis.

Data Analysis

The data analysis process began with verbatim transcriptions of interviews, ensuring a precise textual representation of each participant's spoken words. Following this, manual coding of these transcripts was performed, a methodical process that involves assigning story-sharers' selected pseudonyms to their respective transcripts for confidentiality. Additionally, each transcript was color-coded, a technique employed to efficiently link each story to its corresponding story-sharer. Lastly, both the recorded interviews and their transcripts were reviewed multiple times, a critical step in gaining a comprehensive understanding of each participant's unique narrative. Figure 2 presents a detailed overview of the initial data analysis steps undertaken in our research.

The transcribed interviews were analyzed using Polkinghorne's (1995) two paradigmatic approaches to narrative data—narrative analysis and analysis of narratives—aiming to uncover connections within the participants' stories, thus revealing broader insights and interpreting relationships (Figure 3).

Figure 3.
Data Analysis Approaches Using Polkinghorne's Two Paradigmatic Analysis



Source: Polkinghorne, 1995

In the initial paradigmatic examination, connections were drawn from existing theories and were applied to the data to identify instances of the connections (Polkinghorne, 1995). In this study, research questions 1 and 2 were analyzed to identify common themes in the story-sharers' narratives, which were collected as data to gain deeper insights into their expectations and experiences of student services. Specifically, stories directly related to students' expectations and experiences were categorized accordingly. This process began with open coding to identify relevant concepts from the data. Subsequently, deductive reasoning and axial coding were employed, aligning with the study's theoretical framework (Morse & Richards, 2002). This phase involved examining the codes within story-sharers' narratives that either confirmed or contradicted their initial expectations of student services, leading to the identification of two additional subthemes.

Furthermore, the data were analyzed based on Polkinghorne's (1995) second paradigmatic approach, involving the inductive derivation of concepts from the data itself, rather than imposing preconceived theoretical concepts. Research question 3 aimed to unveil the students' emotional responses to their experiences, a dimension that could not be deduced theoretically. Inductive analysis encompassed identifying patterns, themes, and categories within the data (Patton, 2002). Research question 3 examined all story-sharers' narratives and uncovered a fourth emergent theme related to their overall impressions of their collegiate journey and the university, shaped by their interactions with student services. Results were presented as the story-sharers' narratives for the first and third research questions. For the second question, individual vignettes highlighted categories linked to the emergent themes.

Trustworthiness and Credibility

To ensure the study's trustworthiness, we immersed ourselves in the research topic, leveraging prolonged engagement and persistent observation with participants (Creswell, 2013). Prolonged engagement builds trust over time, leading to deeper insights (Roulston, 2010). Persistent observation entails delving into the study's details to discern what's most relevant (Creswell, 2013).

The lead author's nine-year tenure as the sole academic advisor for the university's only online undergraduate completion program allowed me to establish trust and gain a profound understanding of the student population. This unique position, while beneficial for establishing trust and understanding with the student population, could inadvertently influence the willingness of participants to engage in the study, given this key role in their academic journey. Therefore, it is key to note that all participants were recent graduates of the program. We intentionally did not solicit current students as participants to avoid a majority of the power dynamics and to decrease obligation to participate or sway their responses based on an ongoing advising relationship. A detailed informed consent form was provided that clearly explains the study's purpose, processes, and the voluntary nature of participation, ensuring the option to withdraw at any time without consequences and assuring that identities and data will remain confidential. For credibility, story-sharers were given their interview transcripts and the study's emergent themes for review, a process known as member checking (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Roulston, 2010). All story-sharers confirmed the accuracy of their stories and the study's themes. Lincoln and Guba (1985) regard this technique as crucial for establishing credibility (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

FINDINGS

As a point of clarification for the findings, the objective of qualitative research is not generalizability to extend findings to a wider audience. Consequently, the insights gained are specific to the individuals who shared their stories in this study. Although these findings may not be universally applicable, readers might find resonance with these narratives. The researchers contend that, despite their non-generalizable nature, these stories contribute meaningfully to the field. Three primary themes were generated from the research questions: (1) access, (2) engagement, and (3) inclusion. A fourth theme, university pride, was identified from the third research question. Story-sharers noted they had more access to services than anticipated, primarily through email communications and online resources. They found engagement through interactions with peers, relevant course content, and effective teaching strategies. However, some felt disconnected due to outdated course materials or instructors who seemed unfamiliar

with adult learner needs. On the flip side, they also highlighted positive connections with various university services and quality online courses.

These experiences of access, engagement, and inclusion fostered a sense of belonging and pride in the university, even for online students. This university pride was amplified by the comprehensive services that integrated them into the broader university community. The engagement theme further revealed two subthemes: disconnections and connections, reflecting both negative and positive interactions with student services. These subthemes align with the study's EVT (1995) theoretical framework. The story-sharers' strong sense of belonging, stemming from their positive experiences with student services, indicated that the positive connections significantly outweighed the disconnections, enhancing their overall university experience and pride.

Research Question 1 Findings

The seven story-sharers were pleasantly surprised and enthusiastic about enrolling in an online bachelor's program at a Research 1 university. They shared common expectations regarding student services, primarily centered on *access*. They anticipated easy access not only to the institution itself but also to the essential resources required for a smooth online undergraduate education. While they had prior experience with online courses at other institutions, they did not anticipate the level of ease and consistency in accessing services such as advising, the cashier's office, and financial aid. The university's user-friendly websites provided comprehensive information and step-by-step guidance, reducing the need for direct contact during business hours. The convenience of these accessible online resources allowed them to complete their degree requirements at their convenience.

One story-sharer, Sarah, indicated, "after reading more about the [online BA] program, it was a no-brainer since it complimented my career and future goals. Plus, from participating in so many online courses for so long previously at the community college, I felt like completing this [online BA] would be an easy transition."

This quote is added because many working adult learners shared these sentiments when they choose our online bachelor program. They expect to have access to the resources and services needed to successfully matriculate through the degree.

Furthermore, the story-sharers were eager for *engagement* within the degree program and course curriculum. They sought classes relevant to their career advancement and hoped to immediately apply theoretical knowledge to their workplaces, given that many of them worked in leadership positions within the public sector, which was the focus of the program.

Another participant, Caleb, said, "I was looking online for an online bachelor's degree and came across LPS. At that time, I had more experience in leadership roles which gave me the passion for protecting others. So, in hindsight, I think that's what really attracted me to the LPS program: just wanting to help people. Initially I thought I wanted to do something better than what I'm doing now, and LPS would give me something different."

Working adult learners often seek programs that will see an immediate benefit from professionally or personally. Many of our story-sharers were already working in leadership roles within the public sector or were seeking promotions and needed an undergraduate degree to qualify. Offering a relevant online program allowed them the flexibility to obtain the credentials they needed without adhering to a rigid on-campus schedule.

The story-sharers' desire for engagement extended to interactions with faculty and staff who understood the unique characteristics and needs of online adult students. Although not all story-sharers were aware that this was the sole online undergraduate degree-completion program, they expected to feel a sense of *inclusion* within their department and the university as a whole. They recognized the program's catering to working adult learner students and anticipated connecting with like-minded adults.

Tkzari shared, "I chose the LPS program because I needed the flexibility of being able to learn, not necessarily at my own pace, but really on my own time. As an online program catered to adults, I expected instructors who understood my need for flexibility and a curriculum that was relevant to my career path."

For some other story-sharers, the program provided a sense of inclusion to a prestigious research university, even if they were not physically present,

which was especially meaningful to those with prior affiliations to NC State University.

Research Question 2 Findings

For research question 2, the first theme of *access* explored the ease with which online students were able to access various university services. Story-sharers described these services as streamlined and often on autopilot, highlighting the convenience of online access to resources like the admissions process, cashier's office, bookstore, and library. They noted that most information and instructions were readily available on university websites, eliminating the need for physical assistance.

Another story-sharer, Gabby, said, "The process of getting in and the process of getting through things did not cause stress or put a kink in my life. There's a multitude of resources available. I never had any trouble with anybody not getting back to me or not responding to me, as far as services go."

Email communication also played a significant role in keeping students informed about available resources, events, and support, and story-sharers appreciated the responsiveness of service staff. The story-sharers were pleasantly surprised by the abundance of accessible online services, which made their academic journey smoother and less stressful. They also praised the user-friendly interfaces and online tutorials provided by the university. Overall, they found accessing resources and support to be straightforward and efficient, even as online students.

The second theme, *engagement*, also encompassed their interactions with others involved in the program, including fellow students, staff, and faculty who understood the unique characteristics of adult learners. Two subthemes were generated within engagement: disconnections and connections. Disconnections were primarily related to negative experiences with general education courses that did not align with the story-sharers' career goals or the instructors' lack of awareness about adult student characteristics. These experiences violated their expectations.

Tkzari shared:

> You want people to be well-rounded so certain general ed[ucation] requirements make sense, but not for somebody like myself. I don't want to waste time learning something that I'm not going to get some kind of a return on investment. It's got to have a purpose. And also, you know, just be mindful that adult students work full-time. From my perspective, mental fatigue is a very real thing—to work a full day and then have to do a three-hour exam on a Thursday night. I mean, you're not really going to take a day [off] for a [home] exam. I just feel like it would have been much easier on a weekend because I predominantly relied on the weekends to do my [school] work.

Tzkari's narrative above highlights how instructors should consider the intergenerational student population in their online classes to enhance the working adult learners' experience, not only in the classroom but with all services while enrolled.

The subtheme of *connections*, on the other hand, highlighted instances where student services professionals recognized and catered to the needs of online adult learners, enhancing their overall engagement with the program.

When story-sharer Lynn was told that the program was the only online BA degree at the university to cater to working adult learners, she noted:

> You can tell that you all put a lot of thought into walking through steps, you didn't leave anyone hanging anywhere along the way. And I would have thought there are a lot more programs online for the detail you have put into it. What you guys do for us is very important, because if we didn't have your support and encouragement telling us step-by-step how to get to where we need to go, it might not encourage us to do it.

As the only undergraduate online program it was evident early on which services did not originally cater to our working adult learners. In turn, we created many resources and established direct connections with other student service offices on campus to ensure they were aware of our student population's concerns as it related to the services they needed.

The third theme of *inclusion* was noted as a significant aspect of the story-sharers' experiences in response to research question 2. Inclusion in this context refers to the story-sharers' sense of

belonging and connection to the university, both as online students and through opportunities to engage with campus life. This theme was considered from various perspectives: access as inclusion, visiting the campus, connecting through events, inclusion through communication, and inclusion in the classroom.

Access as a Facet of Inclusion

Participants in the study articulated a profound sense of inclusion, primarily attributed to the accessibility afforded by the university's online platform. This sentiment was particularly pronounced given the unique context: the program in question represented the sole undergraduate offering in an online format from a renowned institution. Such an opportunity was pivotal for these individuals, as traditional on-campus attendance was precluded by geographical constraints. This scenario underscores the critical role of online education in democratizing access to higher education (Costa et al., 2022), particularly for those situated in remote or underserved regions, thereby fostering a more inclusive academic environment.

Visiting Campus

Many story-sharers, despite being in an online program, chose to visit the campus whenever they could. This physical presence on campus allowed them to engage with campus activities and resources. For some, the decision to visit was driven by the excitement of being part of the university community, even if they didn't necessarily need to be on campus for academic reasons.

One participant, Bill, was a prime example of this. He shared, "In the four years I've been an online student, I visited campus 50 times maybe for whatever reason—most of the time it was for testing. I actually joined a student club for one semester and got me some basketball tickets, so it was pretty neat. I think that if you live close enough to campus for somebody my age who didn't get to go to college, that's a cool thing to go do, you know."

Connection Through Events

Story-sharers who visited campus or engaged with campus events felt a stronger connection to the university. Events like Packapalooza were mentioned as opportunities for students and their families to participate in campus life and feel included in the broader university community.

Dawn took her family to this event every year and mentioned, "When I went on campus everyone was very welcoming. I always felt included and connected. Since I'm not on campus, this is one event that's not all young students that I can participate in and get my family involved. It's great that State offers things like that for the community."

Our goal is to have an online program with an on-campus feel. Dawn's words align with our goal to make our students feel included by hosting events and inviting them to campus often. We also host virtual workshops monthly for those who live further away to be connected to the campus community and various resources.

Inclusion Through Communication

Story-sharers appreciated the frequent emails and communication from the university about campus events and activities. Even if they couldn't attend in person, receiving invitations made them feel involved and part of the university.

Inclusion in the Classroom

Inclusion wasn't limited to campus visits; it extended to the online classroom experience. Adult learners in the program felt included in discussions and appreciated by their younger classmates, who valued their unique perspectives and insights.

Overall, the theme of inclusion highlighted the multifaceted ways in which story-sharers felt connected to the university, both through online interactions and physical visits to campus. This sense of inclusion contributed positively to their overall experiences as students in the online program at the university.

Research Question 3 Findings

Research question 3 explored how interactions with student services impacted the story-sharers' overall experiences at the university. A new theme of *university pride* surfaced in their responses, and the existing themes of *access*, *engagement*, and *inclusion* materialized as subthemes that influenced their sense of pride as online students. Participants discussed their sense of connection to the university and how it was fostered by factors such as access to resources, engagement in the academic process, the availability of student services professionals, and effective communication from the university. They expressed pride in being part of the university community and shared how their experiences as online students contributed to this

feeling of belonging. Each participant's narrative highlighted their unique journey and the impact of their online education at the university.

For example, Sarah expressed, "I just thought everything was wonderful. I don't have anything to complain about. All of the services were great. I had a great experience. And the T-shirts you all had made for our program were huge! Loved that! I was like, 'Yeah, I can have this from my school and my program.' I think the program overall is a big success."

Sarah's perspective is helpful to understand that things like providing university swag branded with their specific program could help provide a sense of belonging, which was the goal in purchasing the T-shirts. Others expressed gratitude for the opportunities and support they received, and many of them discussed their plans to continue their education at North Carolina State University or promote the LPS program to others. Overall, the story-sharers' narratives conveyed a sense of pride, accomplishment, and belonging, emphasizing the positive impact of their interactions with student services on their overall experiences as online students at North Carolina State University.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

This section details practical implications for higher education institutions in accommodating working adult learner online students. While findings only apply to our story-sharers, who are a very specific population at a specific university and a specific program, implications may benefit broader audiences who serve working adult learner online students. It highlights key areas such as access, engagement, disconnections, connections, inclusion, and university pride, offering insights into how universities can adapt and thrive in this evolving educational landscape.

Access

Higher education institutions may want to recognize the growing demand from working adult learners for online programs, especially those who are keen on joining reputable in-state schools. To cater to this demographic, it's imperative that institutions not only expand their online program offerings but also ensure that these programs are complemented by easily accessible online services. This can be achieved by developing intuitive websites and video tutorials, allowing these students to access essential services at their convenience.

Engagement

In today's fast-paced world, it's crucial for universities to offer programs and curricula that have immediate real-world applicability. Working adult students, many of whom might already be in the workforce, will greatly benefit from content that they can directly apply in their respective workplaces.

Disconnections

The shift towards online education brings with it the challenge of maintaining course quality. To address this, universities must invest in providing comprehensive training in online course design and instruction for all their educators. Moreover, with the diverse age range of online students, instructors should be encouraged to design courses that resonate with intergenerational audiences. Additionally, recognizing the rich work experiences that many working adult learners bring, institutions should consider offering them prior learning credits, especially when their experience aligns with their intended field of study.

Inclusion of Online Working Adult Learners into the University

The role of working adult online students within the university ecosystem, despite their often remote status, is crucial to the fabric of the academic community. It is imperative that these students are cohesively assimilated into the university's communication networks, encompassing diverse channels, such as email correspondences and strategic marketing initiatives (Peltier et al., 2003). Additionally, proactive measures should be taken to ensure their active participation in university events and activities, facilitating both virtual and physical engagement opportunities (Yang et al., 2022). The establishment of dedicated spaces and programs specifically tailored for working adult online students is essential in fostering a deeper sense of inclusion and connection with the broader university community (Sánchez-Gelabert, 2021).

University Pride

Recruiting working adult online transfer students should be a concerted effort involving the entire university, including departments like the

alumni office. By highlighting the myriad benefits of becoming alumni, universities can foster a sense of pride and belonging among these students. Additionally, creating avenues for them to stay connected with their peers, the program, and the broader university community will not only enhance their current experience but also pave the way for them to give back to the institution in the future.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Diverse Settings and Participants

Building on this study's foundation, which was limited to one university and program, there's a clear opportunity to expand the research across various online programs at multiple research-intensive institutions. By diversifying the participant pool regarding ethnicity, sample size, and geographic locations, the findings could become more universally applicable and offer a richer understanding of working adult online transfer students' experiences.

Comparative Analysis Through a Nationwide Study

A comprehensive quantitative study conducted across the United States could provide valuable insights into the differing experiences of working adult online transfer students enrolled in fully online institutions as opposed to those attending traditional brick-and-mortar schools. This research could be pivotal in determining which educational model more effectively caters to the specific needs and preferences of this unique student demographic.

Exploratory Analysis of Online Educator and Student Service Professional Experiences

There's a gap in understanding the experiences of online educators and student service professionals interacting with traditional and working adult transfer students. Delving into this could reveal whether these professionals recognize distinct needs between the two groups and if they modify their approaches to cater to each demographic better. By exploring these recommended areas, higher education institutions can refine their online offerings for working adult transfer students. Such endeavors can also bolster the knowledge base of administrators, educators, and student service professionals, better equipping them to serve this growing student population.

CONCLUSION

The research unveiled pivotal themes surrounding working adult students' experiences in online programs: access, engagement, inclusion, and a notable sense of university pride. While story-sharers appreciated the accessibility of services and felt engaged through meaningful interactions and content, they also identified areas of disconnect, particularly with outdated materials and instructors unfamiliar with adult learners' nuances. Yet, the overwhelming sentiment was one of belonging, amplified by the university's comprehensive services. This sense of belonging and university pride, rooted in their positive experiences, overshadowed the occasional disconnects they faced. As higher education institutions navigate the evolving landscape of online education, it's imperative to prioritize these insights. By enhancing access, fostering engagement, tailoring content for working adult students, and ensuring their inclusion in the broader university community, institutions can cultivate a strong sense of pride and belonging among this demographic. As the educational realm continues to evolve, especially post-pandemic, these findings and recommendations serve as a beacon, guiding institutions in refining their approaches and ensuring a holistic, enriching experience for all students.

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