

EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES OF AGING NONTRADITIONAL UNDERGRADUATE  
STUDENTS

By

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A thesis submitted to  
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in partial fulfillment of the requirements for  
the degree of Master of Education with Specialization in Gerontology

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## ABSTRACT

This qualitative study describes the educational experiences of older full-time nontraditional undergraduate students. The participants in this study were over 40 years old and came from varying educational backgrounds. One left high school early while the others had graduated. All had entered the workforce directly from high school, but only one subsequently had attained higher education. None had previously attended university; however, all had degenerative injuries that precipitated a return to school. Questions that explored early school experiences, subsequent learning activities, changing social support mechanisms, and transitional events that affected participants' educational experiences provided a research framework. This study utilized life course and persistence theories to analyze data. Four main themes emerged: 1) lifelong learning; 2) educational experiences at Lakehead University; 3) adult student identities; and, 4) the impacts of age on nontraditional students.

The research revealed that major life course events, a love of learning and a history of lifelong learning precipitated individual decisions to become full-time undergraduates. Early school experiences profoundly influenced older students' choices of formal or informal educational pathways leading to full-time university study. Nontraditional students' identities reflected complex social and family responsibilities and a focus on higher education providing enhanced economic opportunity. Age had no effect on older students' cognitive or intellectual abilities, but age did have social consequence within the university community. All older students felt respected but also experienced ageist behaviours, including, age-based preferential treatment and infantilization.

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## CHAPTER ONE: OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

The knowledge explosion and consequential transformation to a knowledge-based economy compel individuals to be lifelong learners (Schuetze, 1987). Only through a commitment to learning throughout one's life can one actively participate in society and reap the economic benefits it provides (Kressley & Huebschmann, 2002; Leader, 2003; UNESCO 1972). As a result, universities are no longer places just for young people. Increasingly, older lifelong learners are returning to university. This study explored the educational experiences of three nontraditional students who entered university in later life to gain personal fulfillment and to prepare for new careers.

### Research Problem

Prior to the knowledge explosion, students attended university with expectations and confidence that they would graduate with a degree and knowledge base that guaranteed lifetime careers at well paid, and secure jobs (Schuetze & Slowey, 2000). Higher educational experience, however, no longer assures individual economic competitiveness (Withnall, 2006). This is supported by Kasworm (2003), who describes that one third of all jobs are in a state of flux. A result of a transforming economy, characterized by exponentially increasing demands for knowledge, is that no higher education program can assure perpetual economic viability by meeting all demands, nor can one person acquire all knowledge that is available (Adair & Vohra, 2003). Accordingly, Schuetze and Slowey argue it is the ability and willingness to learn throughout one's life course that promises economic viability:



The dominance of resource-based and goods-producing sectors has given way to the production of high-value-added products and the provision of services.

Consequently, the pace of change towards a more knowledge-based economy has...accelerated the demand for skilled workers ... [and affects all workers]... who need to expand their knowledge base and skills to adjust to new jobs and tasks (p. 128).

A lifetime career as a lifelong learner “is now viewed as a social prerogative and an economic necessity” (Anderson, 1999 as cited in Leader, 2003, p. 361).

The purpose of this study was to explore the educational experiences of older nontraditional undergraduate students and examine the institutional response to the needs of those students. The educational experience of nontraditional students is profoundly different from that of traditional students. Age is the simplest distinguishing characteristic. Nontraditional students are older than the traditional, who are between 18 and 24 years old (Schuetze and Slowey, 2002). At a more complex level, nontraditional students represent differing educational pathways and routes to post secondary institutions (Agbo, 2000). Traditional undergraduates take years to plan the university experience. Students stream courses in high school to meet entrance requirements, explore multiple program options, and arrange funding. Family and high school counselors give years of support that results in informed educational choices and direct entrance to post secondary studies from an entrance qualifying secondary institution (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2006).

Direct entrance means that the age of traditional undergraduates is between 18 and 24, resulting in nontraditional students being, by definition, older than 25 (Agbo,

2000). This study however deliberately studied educational experiences of students aged 40+. This criterion was imposed for two reasons: 1) Lakehead University's Office of Institutional Analysis compiles age-based data and 40+ is the oldest data category. (Lakehead University, 2006); and, 2) age 40+ is representative of returning baby-boomers, who in retirement are expected to return to post secondary institutions in huge numbers (Foot 2001; Kressley & Huebschmann, 2002).

Nontraditional students anticipate the return to school in varying ways. For many it is a planned and welcomed activity, part of a commitment to lifelong learning (American Association of Retired People (AARP), 2001). Unfortunately, the post secondary experience for some nontraditional students is very different. For example, Ontario's Workplace Safety and Insurance Board (WSIB) authorizes some injured workers to acquire post secondary education under a Labour Market Reentry Program (LMR). The return to school for LMR students is essentially unique and imperative when a return to a pre-injury job is impossible (WSIB, 1997). The educational experience is often unanticipated, unplanned, unwelcome and traumatic. Withnall (2006) suggests that negative qualities characterize the learning experiences of an even wider section of the nontraditional student body:

However, for many adults, particularly those returning to organized learning, the actual processes of learning are more likely to be perceived as challenging, demanding and even painful, particularly if qualifications are sought... (p. 11).

This study was necessary to comprehend the educational experiences of LMR nontraditional students.

There is a dearth of research on the LMR nontraditional student. Previous research has been macro, focusing on identifying nontraditional students' characteristics and has identified four key characteristics (Agbo, 2000; Gorard & Selwyn, 2005; Schuetze 2000; Schuetze & Slowey 2002). Nontraditional students are over twenty-four. Many return to post secondary education after lengthy breaks. Some do not possess basic academic entry requirements and gain acceptance by virtue of accumulated life experiences. Finally, many nontraditional students return for professional upgrading or recertification (Schuetze & Slowey, 2002).

There is a massive body of quantitative data describing the kinds of learning pursued by typical nontraditional students (American Association of Retired People [AARP] 2000; National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2004; Statistics Canada, 2001). Canadian researchers at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education [OISE], under the leadership of the National Chair for Lifelong Learning, are detailing the relationships between learning and work and are legitimizing the informal knowledge acquisition of lifelong learners (Livingstone 2002 and 2004). Adult student post secondary learning characteristics are equally well described (Jonas-Dwyer, 2004; Kasworm, 2003 & 2005). Student motivation and persistence are now acknowledged as primary predictors of positive effect leading to academic success (Bye, Pushkar, & Conway, M. 2007; Castles, 2004; Ponton, 2004). Again, neither quantitative nor qualitative research exists that provides deep understanding of the educational experiences of LMR students in post secondary institutions.

Ironically, Castles (2004) suggests that more attention has been given to reasons for student failure and withdrawal than has been given to understanding their

success. Her insight guided this research. Qualitative research, using semi-structured, open-ended interviews was used with purposeful samples of nontraditional students from Lakehead University. The objective was to identify school-bound issues and practices that positively and negatively influenced chances of success. Increased awareness of issues affecting nontraditional students will help administrators and instructors fulfill a primary objective of enabling all students to reach their full potential.

### Research Questions

Research explored three basic questions:

1. What precipitates older nontraditional students' decisions to attend a post secondary institution?
2. What are the educational experiences of older full-time nontraditional undergraduate students?
3. To what extent do Student Services at Lakehead University meet the self-identified needs of older full-time nontraditional undergraduate students at Lakehead University?

### Definition of Terms

#### Traditional students

Traditional students enter post secondary higher education institutions directly from secondary or other qualification granting preparatory schools. Accordingly, traditional students fall within the eighteen to twenty-four age brackets (Schuetze &

Slowey, 2002). Agbo (2000), writing about nontraditional students in the United States, sets twenty-three as the demarcation age.

### Nontraditional students

This group includes four categories of learners:

1. Those who access services after a lengthy break in post secondary education;
2. Those who are categorized by age. (i.e. students 25 and above);
3. Those who gain entrances on the basis of life experience. (i.e. generally defined as the mature student who enters with life experiences but lacks an entrance certificate granted by a traditional qualifying institution); and
4. Those who enter for specific training, professional upgrading or mandated certification (Schuetze and Slowey, 2002).

### Lifelong learners

Gorard and Selwyn (2005) contend that lifelong learners are committed to “regular and relevant learning” (p. 1193) throughout their life course in order to respond to ever changing economic demands. As jobs-for-life decline, individuals need to maximize their social capital by retraining. This results in economic preparedness (equity) and averts social exclusion (Gorard & Selwyn, 2005). Marsden (2000) describes the adaptive struggles of New Canadian immigrants who he terms lifelong learners struggling to acquire “mastery of a foreign language” (p. 5). Often they are adult students seeking validation of previous learning and “ultimate recognition of

degrees granted in foreign countries” (p. 3). Candy (2000) gives the broadest definition, “... [lifelong learning] includes... [students in all]... aspects of education and training – formal, non-formal and informal – at all ages and all stages of life, irrespective of where it occurs or who organizes it” (p. 101).

The operational definition of lifelong learner adopted in this study blended Gorard and Selwyn definition with Candy’s. This study considered adult students who had learned informally and formally throughout their life course, but at the time of study were earning degrees or professional certification for personal and career enhancement through full-time study at Lakehead University.

#### Adult education students

Students in adult education programs share some characteristics, such as age and discontinuous educational pathways, with lifelong learners. Adult education program students differ from lifelong learners in that adult education program students are seeking basic knowledge and skills forfeited either through educational failures or by quitting school without earning graduating diplomas. Returning to school is remedial for adult education students who are better classified as delayed learners (Gorard & Selwyn, 2005).

#### Older students

Older students are given operational definition by Lakehead University as 40 and above. No age-specific data exists beyond that age. This is consistent with post secondary institutions throughout North America (Palazesi and Bower, 2006).

LMR is an acronym for Labour Market Reentry. LMR is a last stage, Return to Work (RTW) program sponsored by Ontario's Workplace Safety and Insurance Board (WSIB). The Board sets limits on this costly retraining program in that injured workers only qualify when:

1. the nature of the injury makes a return to the pre-injury job unlikely;  
or
2. the employer can not safely provided suitable employment within pre-injury wage parameters ; or
3. the employer is unwilling to co-operate in arranging work (WSIA 1997).

#### WSIB

WSIB is an acronym for Ontario's Workplace Safety and Insurance Board. WSIB administers and delivers programs relating to workplace safety and worker rights. Worker rights include participation in various Return to Work [RTW] programs of which LMR, described above, is central to this study.

#### Rationale

Despite Lakehead University's commitment to meet the needs of students "at all stages of life", there are few older students on campus (Lakehead University, 2006). This fact conflicted with the university's strategic plan that dedicates Lakehead University to be an open and comprehensive university committed to meeting student needs and the needs of Northwestern Ontario. The university's vision statement mirrors and expands upon inclusiveness:

Lakehead University is a comprehensive university committed to excellence in undergraduate and graduate education and research. It will build on its reputation as a welcoming, accessible and accountable institution known for enabling students at all stages of life to achieve their potential. It will reflect and serve the Aboriginal and other diverse cultures, institutions and organizations that comprise its unique regional setting as it reaches out nationally and globally (Lakehead University, 2005).

I returned to Lakehead University in retirement in 2003 to complete an undergraduate degree and held expectations that I would be joining a community of older students at a university that takes pride in meeting the needs of diverse student populations. I was perplexed to see student demographics apparently unchanged from my student days decades earlier (O'Heron, 1997). Societal changes caused by greater longevity, baby-boomer retirements, declining birth rates, increased leisure time, health care improvements, early retirement options and administrations adopting cost efficient business models to recruit older students had resulted in commonly held beliefs that campuses are aging (Kressley & Huebschmann, 2002). Yet, I found myself to be a lonely representative of the supposed hoard of baby-boomers who were thought to be making late life course decisions to access post secondary education (Foot, 2001).

Apparent older student invisibility was also confirmed by Lakehead University's Office of Institutional Analysis. The office submits annual enrolment data to Statistics Canada during the funding process. Undergraduate and graduate enrolment data defined by age groups is contained in two tables: 1) Enrollment by Level and



Registration Status 1990 to 2004; and, 2) Age Distribution of Registered Students 1993 to 2004. The oldest category contains data on students older than forty, who were considered the subject of this research (Lakehead University, 2006).

A secondary analysis of the data in these two tables, that converted the 40+ cohort's enrolment into percentages of total enrolments, allowed me to track the university's enrollment history during the time period in the following four basic categories: 1) Undergraduate Full-time - Students Aged 40+ as Percentage of Total; 2) Undergraduate Part-time - Students Aged 40+ as Percentage of Total; 3) Graduate Full-time Students - Aged 40+ as Percentage of Total; and 4) Graduate Part-time Students - Aged 40+ as Percentage of Total

These data are depicted in tables on the following pages.

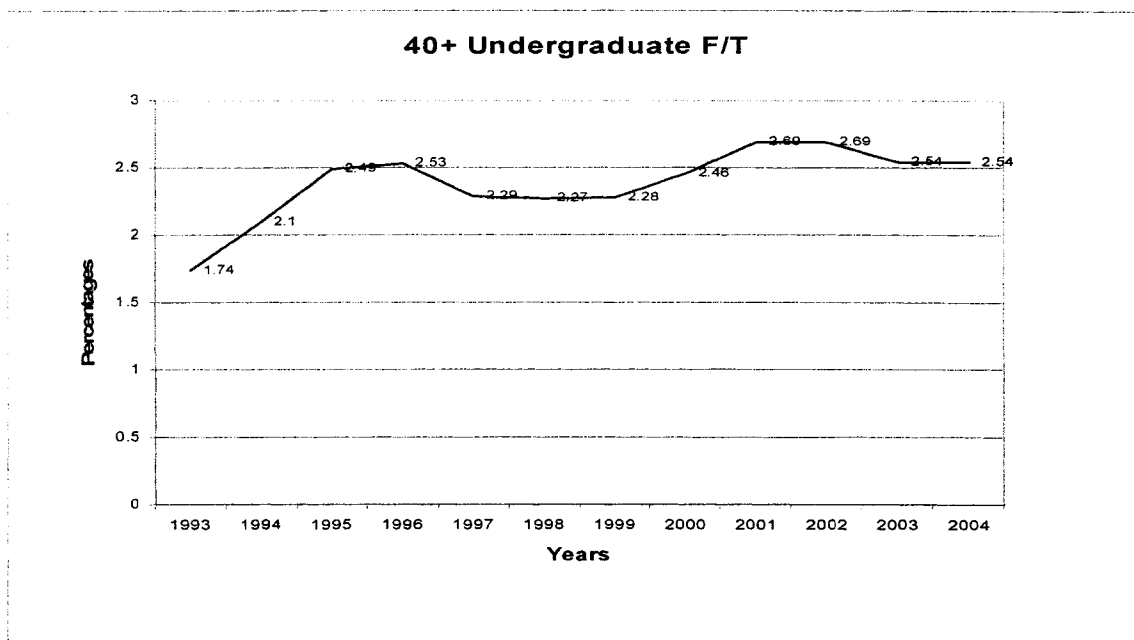


Table 1. Undergraduate Full-time - Students Aged 40+ as Percentage of Total.

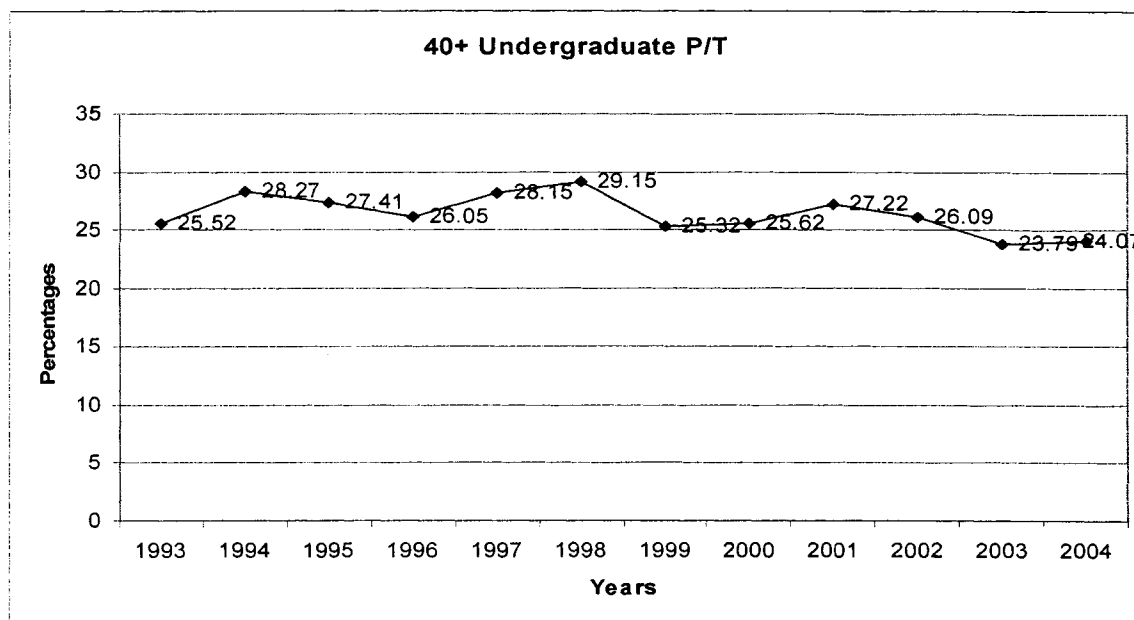


Table 2. Undergraduate Part-time - Students Aged 40+ as Percentage of Total

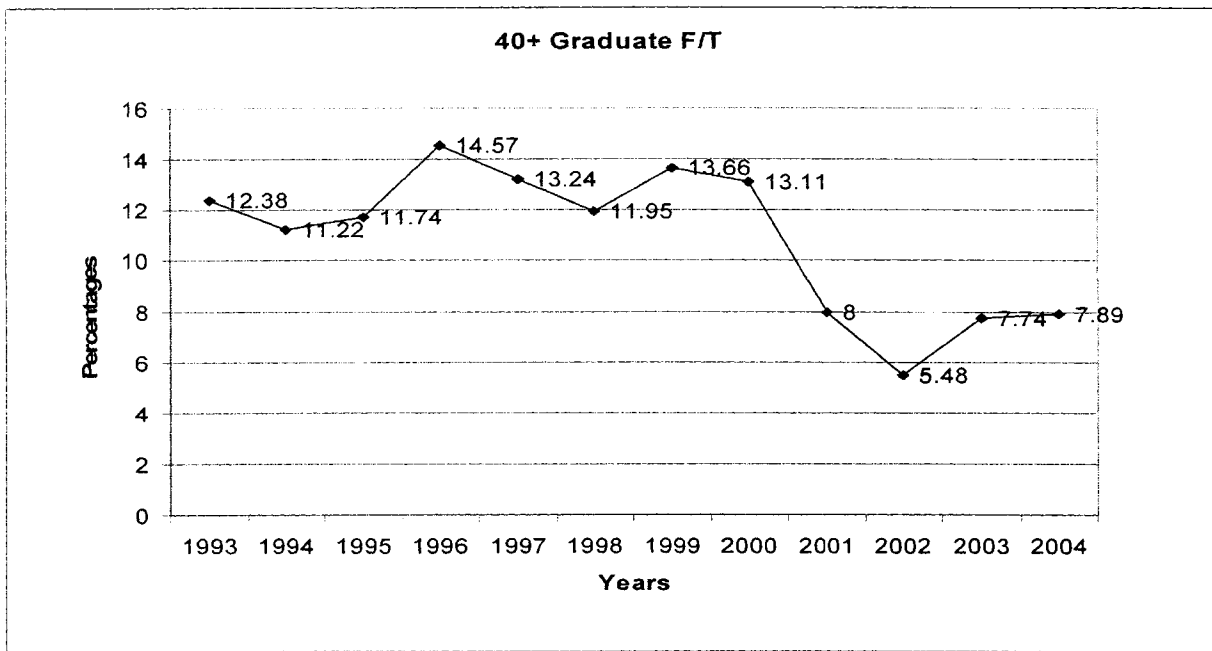


Table 3. Graduates Full-time - Students Aged 40+ as Percentage of Total

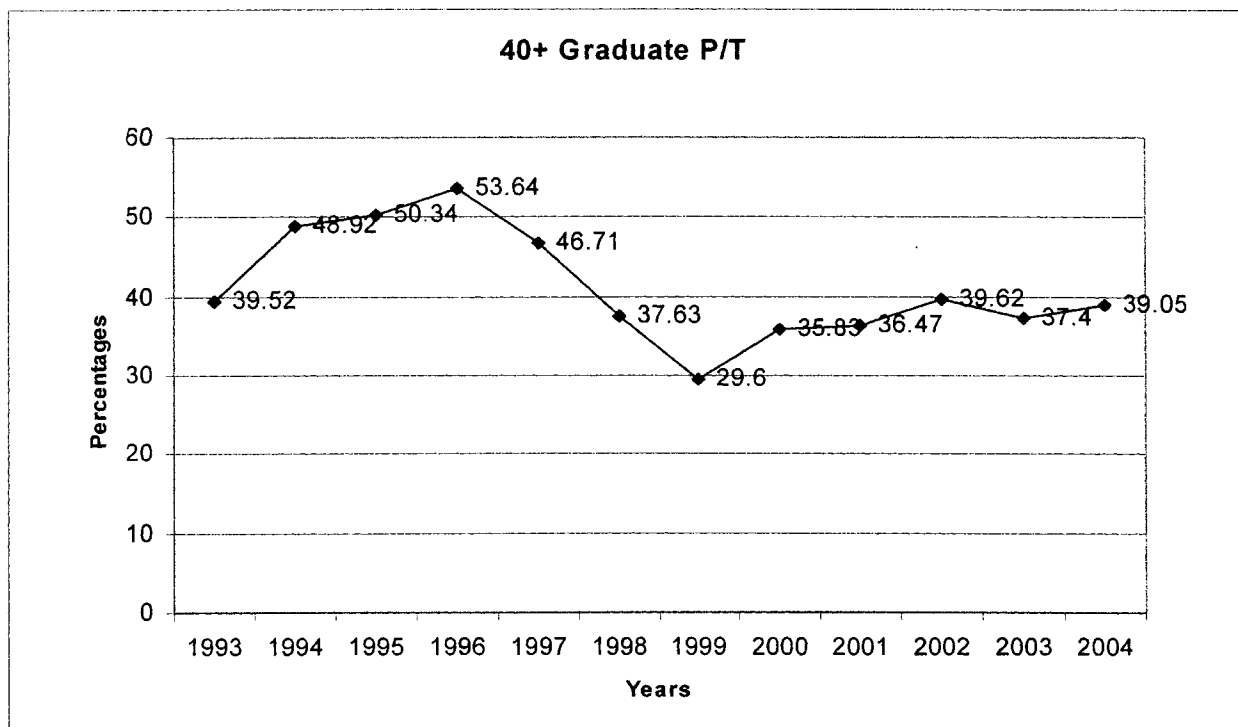


Table 4. Graduates Part-time - Students Aged 40+ as Percentage of Total

Table #1, describes the number of full-time undergraduate students, over age 40, as a percentage of the total number of full-time undergraduate students. In 1993 the 40 + group represented 1.74 % of the total undergraduate full-time student population. During the subsequent decade the percentage peaked in 2002 at 2.69 % and fell to 2.54 % in 2004. The data illustrate a 0.8 % increase of full-time undergraduates, over age 40 between 1993 and 2004.

Table #2, describes the number of part-time undergraduate students, over age 40, as a percentage of the total number of part-time undergraduate students. In 1993 the 40 + group represented 25.52 % of the total undergraduate part-time student population. During the subsequent decade, the percentage peaked in 1998 at 29.15 % and fell to 24.07 % in 2004. The data illustrate a modest 1.45 % decline of part-time undergraduates, over age 40 between 1993 and 2004. These data are consistent with findings that older students constitute a significant component of the part-time student body (Kressley & Huebschmann, 2002).

Table # 3, describes the number of full-time graduate students, over age 40, as a percentage of the total number of full-time graduate students. In 1993 the 40 + group represented 12.38 % of the total graduate full-time student population. During the subsequent decade, the percentage peaked in 1996 at 14.57 % and fell to 7.89 % in 2004. The data illustrate a 4.49 % decrease of full-time graduates, over age 40 between 1993 and 2004.

Table #4, describes the number of part-time graduate students, over age 40, as a percentage of the total number of part-time graduate students. In 1993 the 40 + group represented 39.52 % of the total graduate part-time student population. During the

subsequent decade, the percentage peaked in 1996 at 53.64 % and fell to 39.05 % in 2004. The data illustrate a modest 0.47% decline of part-time graduates, over age 40 between 1993 and 2004.

The Kressley & Huebschmann ( 2002) findings that older students form a large component of part-time student populations applies equally to undergraduate and graduate studies. The data were also consistent with North American survey data that reveal that older students are more likely select short courses on topics of either personal interest or personal need (AARP, 2000; Statistics Canada, 2001; and NCES, 2004).

Data in Tables #1 through #4 revealed a minimal population growth rate for older undergraduates and actual decline for graduate students attending Lakehead University during the 1993 to 2004 period. The study addressed this issue by seeking individual nontraditional student's answers to three identified research questions:

1. What precipitates older nontraditional students' decisions to attend a post secondary institution?
2. What are the educational experiences of older full-time nontraditional undergraduate students?
3. To what extent do Student Services at Lakehead University meet the self-identified needs of older full-time nontraditional undergraduate students at Lakehead University?

These questions provided a research framework supported by life course theories and theories explaining factors affecting the persistence of adult learners. Life course theory "emphasizes the value of linking life stages, examining transitions and

exploring agency within context” (Elder, 1998). The theory postulates that the ability to respond successfully to the stressors contained in current transitional moments is linked to adaptive behaviours and social factors that occurred earlier in the life course. As Crosnoe and Elder (2002) wrote, “Individuals with the same current status may have different outcomes...because they arrived at this common status in different ways.” This study utilized life course analysis to investigate how early school experiences, subsequent learning activities, changing social support mechanisms, and transitional events affected the educational experiences of older nontraditional students.

Adult student persistence theories explain factors affecting the success of adult learners by identifying optimum study conditions. Castles (2004) theorizes that educators need to be aware of social and environmental factors that comprise students’ histories. Complex social conditions routinely expose adult students to traumatic and distracting events. As a result, adult students possess unique talents and needs.

To help older nontraditional students persist and successfully complete their studies, higher education administrators, program staff and professors need to be aware, that because of accumulating and unique life events, older students present needs different from those of the traditional students.

### Significance of the Study

This research explored nontraditional student educational experiences and explored the provision of student services to gain understanding of organizational policies and practices affecting the participation of nontraditional learners. Findings will assist students and institutions of higher education to address barriers that apparently

limit the participation rates of nontraditional students. Identification of barriers limiting full participation will enrich the educational experiences of LMR participants and has generalized value to the entire nontraditional student population.

Generally, post secondary institutions can anticipate increased numbers of nontraditional students (Foot, 2001). Typically, such students will display limited and specific employment and lifelong learning objectives (Palazesi & Bower, 2006). Specifically, Lakehead University which is situated within a region that is undergoing profound social and economic change, needs to be prepared to meet nontraditional student demands.

Southcott (2004) describes Northwestern Ontario as aging faster than any other region in Ontario. Southcott further details that the economy of Northwestern Ontario is transforming from a resource economy based on grain transportation and the extraction of raw materials, to a service and knowledge based economy. Southcott informs us, “along with a decline in blue collar industrial employment has been a rise in service sector employment” (p. 8). Recent census data (Statistics Canada, 2001) shows similar trends. Southcott’s research predicts skill shortages in the following sectors: Health Care, i.e. doctors and nurses; Education, i.e., elementary teachers; and, Trades, i.e., industrial electricians (p.38). Skill shortages will negatively affect the economy as “chronic shortages...would have a negative impact on the quality of life in the communities of Northwestern Ontario” (p. 39).

Lakehead University pledges in its academic plan to “realize the potential of a wide range of students” (Lakehead University, 2006c). As part of the institutional response to nontraditional students, Lakehead University pledges to fulfill a larger

strategic initiative to meet “local and regional ... mandates in regard to providing high quality education, research and creative activities, and service to the community” (Lakehead University, 2006c).

#### Delimitations

1. The decision to limit the study of the educational experiences of older students attending Lakehead University narrows the generalizability of the findings. Results may not apply to older students attending other higher educational institutions.
2. The sample size is too small to generalize findings that substantiate institutional response as regards to changes that could be made to accommodate older nontraditional students.
3. Finally, the research may have a gendered perspective as two thirds of the participants were female.

#### Limitations

1. This research focused exclusively on the educational and lived experiences of older, full-time undergraduate students. It did not explore the experiences of part-time older undergraduate students who attend classes on campus or who are enrolled in Lakehead University’s Distributed Learning Centre programs. Results of this research therefore are limited to a portion of the total older undergraduate population at Lakehead University.
2. Given, that the two post secondary institutions in Northwestern Ontario that deal with nontraditional students offer extensive on-line, web-based distributed



education courses, it will be necessary to know how nontraditional students are faring outside the traditional, on-campus educational system. This study does not take into consideration part-time nontraditional learners throughout Northwestern Ontario.

3. Finally, the opinions expressed by the participants represent a particular perspective at a specific point in time and therefore may not represent the views of a broader population.

### Assumptions

1. This research brought a particular bias to research that assigned value to the objective of increased participation of older nontraditional students.
2. Given that participants met selection criteria, the research makes a fundamental assumption that the participants are representative of the older nontraditional student body at Lakehead University.

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature was selected for relevance to this study's central phenomenon, the educational experiences of older nontraditional undergraduate students. During the review, five categories emerged: 1) nontraditional students; 2) adult learning statistics; 3) lifelong learning; 4) gerontological discourse; and, 5) persistence and motivation and changing student identities. Furthermore, literature presented within these emergent categories were linked to one, and often more, of the issues identified within the three research questions: 1) educational history; 2) current educational experiences; and, 3) university responses to older nontraditional student needs. This chapter discusses literature within the five categories and concludes with a summary.

### Nontraditional Students

Schuetze and Slowey (2002) define nontraditional students as:

1. Accessing services after a lengthy break in post secondary education;
2. Categorized by age (i.e. students 25 +);
3. Gaining entrance based on life experience. (i.e. generally defined as the mature student who enters life experiences but lacking the entrance certificate granted from the traditional feeding institution); and
4. Entering for specific training, professional upgrading or mandated certification.

Traditional students commence undergraduate studies directly from secondary schools or other qualification granting preparatory schools. Quite naturally, traditional students fell within the eighteen to twenty-four age brackets. Age was the sole criteria

with those over 24 defined as nontraditional. These definitions remained adequate until universities expanded in response to increased demands following World War II (Agbo, 2000).

Returning service personnel were responsible for initial changes (Agbo, 2000). Soon women, blacks, other racial minorities, immigrants and generally people of lower socio-economic status flooded universities. North American universities were no longer exclusively elite institutions. Schuetze (2000) describes the alteration of the demographic structure of North America universities that occurred throughout the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as "the massification of the educational system" (p. 129). Broadened access to higher educational institutions resulted in observations that the single variable of age did not adequately define nontraditional learners. Schuetze and Slowey (2004) refined the distinction between nontraditional and traditional students by adding educational pathway to age in recognition that many undergraduates commenced higher education after stints in the workforce.

According to Schuetze and Slowey the four criteria of age, break in studies, mature status and professional upgrading are bound to age and chronology and therefore are unable to "reflect significant underpinning dimensions including socio-economic position, gender, ethnic group, physical ability and, urban vs. rural location (p. 315). Female students who were once nontraditional best illustrate their concern. Female students now outnumber males in European and North American universities, completely reversing the nontraditional/traditional roles (Association of Universities and Colleges in Canada, 2002). Schuetze and Slowey's work now focuses on three criteria:

- 1) Educational biography, i.e., winding path and varying value and motivations;

2) Entry route, i.e., regular with certification or alternative without standard entry qualification; and

3) Mode of study, i.e., patterns of full or part time and the interplay of educational objectives and other competing adult responsibilities of family or work for example.

Better able to define the population, Schuetze and Slowey developed a set of action policies for provincial and higher education institutional administrators to help maximize educational opportunities for nontraditional students. Their first recommendation requires recognition that nontraditional students differentiate the higher education systems and most often access non-university institutions and programs. A second suggestion is to support local or regional control of programming and student recruitment. Their third recommendation is to maximize entry opportunities by establishing assessment, recognition and certification protocols that validate previously acquired knowledge. The fourth instruction is that higher educational institutions minimize the three biggest participation barriers of employment, distance, and competing time demands by offering offer flex study, distance education and credit transference. The fifth recommendation instructs administrators to overcome the structural discriminatory aspects of current financial schemes. Schuetze and Slowey decry that current undergraduate funding deters potential nontraditional students because student financial assistance is linked to age, full time study and a demand for financial payback regardless of wage-earning impacts. Finally, the sixth suggestion is to support continuing educational opportunities by providing short courses, or non-credit courses to meet student demands.

Nontraditional students are a component of the rapid expansion of North American higher education. Canadian university enrollment increased from 90,000 in 1950 to 1.3 million students in 1998 studying in a two-tiered system similar to that of the United States. Canadian data reveal 38 per cent were in the 2-year college stream and 52 percent in the traditional university stream (Schuetze, 2000). In contrast the student population in the United States rose from 2.5 million in 1900 to an anticipated 16.1 million in 2008 of which twenty-five percent will attend two year colleges and fifty-four percent will attend four year colleges (Agbo, 2000).

The similarities between United States and Canadian nontraditional students are depicted by the meanings attached to the concept by various scholars: 1) It is understood that nontraditional students are older; however, the exact age varies (Agbo, 2000). Canadian data sets the definitional age at twenty-four (Schuetze & Slowey, 2002) while United States data often uses 23 (Horn & Carroll 1996); 2) Nontraditional students are deemed to be financially independent from their parents. Agbo (2000), who found no increase in this category, suggested it is assumed in the United States that financial independence from parents occurs after age twenty-three. Agbo contests that this assumption masks the fact that many younger students are forced to work and now fit the nontraditional student category (p. 156); 3) Part time study is the preferred study mode of students over twenty-five, students with family responsibilities and students with financial restrictions who must work (Agbo, 2000; Kressley & Huebschmann, 2002). Recent Canadian data however, reports a decline in the part-time participation rates of older Canadians (AUCC, 2007); 4) More students are engaged in paid employment and working increasing numbers of hours. By 1998, forty-seven percent of undergraduates

in the United States worked in excess of 20 hours per week, many full-time (Agbo, 2000). Similar Canadian data confirm that most undergraduates have part-time employment (AUCC, 2002); 5) Employment has a positive effect by providing meaningful and exploitable employment skills but increased paid employment may reduce academic opportunity and performance students by diminishing flexibility toward schedules, course selection and course load (NCES, 1998; Schuetze and Slowey, 2004); 6) Both Canadian and American students without high school qualifications may pursue nontraditional route enrollment. American applicants can take the General Education Development (TGED) exam (Agbo, 2000). Canadian students qualify as mature students by meeting requirements set by individual institutions. In addition to a break in formal education, mature student age requirements vary from 19 to 22 and some Canadian institutions require completion of the Canadian Academic Achievement Test (CAAT); and, 7) Agbo's (2000) important generalization that "nontraditional students are likely to be women, to belong to a racial/ethnic minority group and to have less well-educated parents than traditional students" (p. 155), is substantially mirrored in recent Canadian data, noting only that there is a higher proportion of females in almost every discipline (CAUC, 2007).

Literature in this section characterized the nontraditional student body by identifying shared features, among them: age; preferred mode of study; and, employment patterns. The following section provides detail regarding the extent and nature of adult learning.

## Adult Learning Statistics

According to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, (OECD), lifelong learning “is currently promoted not only for economic reasons but also as a means of strengthening social cohesion. Adult learning is an important ingredient in both lifelong learning and civic society in North America” (Statistics Canada, 2001, p. 10). Statistics Canada further clarifies the link of adult education to the universality of lifelong learning by quoting a 1972 UNESCO declaration that adult education is “a subdivision, and an integral part of a global scheme for lifelong education and learning” (p. 11). Accordingly, this study explored nontraditional student social and economic motivational factors. This study narrowed its investigation of nontraditional students by focusing on the educational experiences of three nontraditional students at Lakehead University but contextualized the participants within the body of nontraditional students at higher educational facilities throughout North America.

Lakehead University's Office of Institutional Analysis issues an annual “Institutional Statistics Book” that provides age-specific statistical information about its students. A table, “Age Distribution of Registered Students” (p. 31) gives student age-categorized enrollment data on the bases of full-time and part-time undergraduate and graduate status. Students over 24 represented 19.4% of the total full-time undergraduate student population; 73.8% of full-time graduate students and 66.1% of the total part-time undergraduate population; 98.8% of part-time graduate students (Lakehead University, 2005).

The National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES 2001) issued results from its mega analysis, the “National Household Education Surveys of 2001” in a series of

papers, including “Participations in Adult Education and Lifelong Learning: 2000-2001”. Findings are consistent with Statistics Canada review of Canadian data (Statistics Canada, 2001), including a key observation that prior educational attainment is the greatest single predictive attribute associated with participation in educational activities. For example, people with a bachelor degree or higher are three times more likely to participate in some training than are people with high school diplomas (NCES 2001, p. 13). Accordingly, this study explored each participant’s educational attainments prior to entering university. The study did not limit educational attainment to formal educational instances in which certificates, diplomas or degrees were granted. This inquiry was broader and recognized all forms of learning, especially informal, previously unrecognized learning.

The American Association of Retired People’ (AARP), “Survey on Lifelong Learning” (2001) describes learner characters and preferred learning styles, using age, gender, income characters and prior education as variables. AARP, like NCES (2001) and Statistics Canada (2001) confirms prior education to be the greatest indicator in a lifelong quest of learning activities (p.34). The AARP survey showed that respondents with less than college education prefer group study for issues relating to their community, the arts and culture and spiritualism but, prefer one-on-one tutoring or self-study when subjects are more personal, i.e. health or stress levels (p. 32). Respondents with college degrees, however, showed the highest preference for group learning regardless of subject matter (p. 35). As part of this study, I explored participants’ relationships with professors, teaching assistants and fellow students and probed to gain understanding of their preferred learning styles.



Literature in this section described the extent and nature of adult leaning. The following section addresses individual, civic and financial attributes and introduces the universality of lifelong learning.

### Lifelong Learning

Lifelong learning is more than adult education (Candy, 2000). Candy suggests that lifelong learning is a concept of engagement and preparedness to learn throughout one's life. Candy further suggests that the role of post secondary institutions is to promote lifelong learning by reestablishing links to school, workplaces, alumni bodies, in fact any sector of the community that supports continued learning.

Lambeir (2005) describes lifelong learning as "the human condition" required by our transformation into a learning society. Lambeir identifies concrete lifelong learning components of information management, retrieval, dissemination and evaluation, as key concepts. "Learning now is the constant striving for extra competencies and the efficient management of the acquired ones" (p. 349).

Parker and Sharrar (2003) contend that traditional pedagogical models that simply transfer important ideas are no longer adequate and schools must foster broad, problem solving skills as individuals need adaptive skills to cope with the ever-changing world. Twentieth century pedagogies that promoted algorithmic or formulae based-learning must be replaced by systems that stress learner adaptability and creativity.

UNESCO (1972) fueled lifelong learning by declaring that lifelong education involves "a fundamental transformation of society, so that the whole society becomes a learning resource for each individual" (cited in Hager, 2004: p. 22). Lifelong learning, at

first glance, appears emancipatory and universally endorses individual educational rights. Coffield (1999), however, expresses concern that lifelong learning is simply a ploy to transfer educational responsibilities from the state and corporation to the individual. Coffield bemoans that all workers must be lifelong learners fitting employer defined rigid molds at the consequence of the “devaluation of individual abilities and interests” (p. 483). Hager (2004) presents a financial concern that global capitalism creates the concept of individual responsibility to be a lifelong learner thereby displacing staff development costs formally born by human resources departments. Tempering voices, in O’Donoghue & Maguire (2005), argue for a balanced integration of efforts by individuals, states and corporations to meet lifelong learning needs. Similarly, Akdere, Russ-Eft and Eft (2006) endorse lifelong learning, arguing it is consistent with the Koran’s revelations and command that all seek the truth. Field (2000) however states that lifelong learning” is nothing more than HRD in [disguise]” (p. 250).

Literature in this section described the individual, civic and financial attributes and introduced the universality of lifelong learning. The following section discusses gerontological discourse on learning in later life after introduces a useful analytical tool, life course perspective.

### Gerontological Discourse

The life course perspective, based on the analysis of life cycles, life histories and life spans, is generally considered the dominant theoretical perspective within social

gerontology (Chappell, Gee, McDonald & Stones, 2003). Life course perspective becomes a powerful analytical tool when key constructs of life trajectories and life transitions are added (Liddle, Carlson & McKenz, 2004). The perspective is further strengthened by Crosnoe and Elder (2002) who add developmental trajectories, social pathways, social convoys and turning points in their analyses of aging styles. One can easily see the relevance of Schuetze and Slowey's (2004) inclusion of pathway in their quest to refine the definition of nontraditional students. Similarly, Elman and Rand (1998) argue that older students may be nontraditional by virtue of continuing an interrupted educational trajectory or they might be labeled as they seek unfamiliar educational stimuli while retraining or transitioning from work to retirement.

Manheimer's (2005) evaluation of Third Age Learning Centres raises conceptual issues that suggest that formal education in later life is not routinely pursued by older learners and therefore is non-normative. His humanistic gerontological perspective holds that education promotes "development in later life", thereby directly contributing to healthy and productive aging. The productive aging concept finds its broadest theoretical base in the morbidity compression theory, which Chappell et al (2003) describes as a theoretical belief that a positive lifestyle delays physical decline (senescence) and ultimately postpones death. Old age, i.e., the third age becomes a prolonged period of mental and physical health followed by a rapid decline into death in the fourth. As Manheimer's presentation of post-modern theorists suggests however, too many voices represent the aged for there to be any overarching service delivery model. As institutional validity is deconstructed, learning centre validity, whether

institutional or community based will require service models respecting plurality, spirituality and age irrelevance (p. 209-213).

The development and vitality of Osher Lifelong Learning Institutes provides a contrary viewpoint (Lightfoot & Brady, 2005). Osher Institutes specifically address the post secondary educational requirements of students fifty years and older. The first institute started in 1996 at the University of Southern Maine as an “Extended Academic Program” and later became a “Senior College Initiative” (p. 223-224). Upon injection of philanthropic support from the Osher Foundation, the Senior College Initiative emerged into Osher Lifelong Learning Institutes which now exist in twenty-three additional states (p. 226).

There are other models of adult education to study. Rutgers University, the State University of New Jersey, actively recruits older learners who wish to add intellectual spice to their retirement. Rutgers offers a cross-disciplinary, 30 credit program, leading to a Liberal Studies Masters of Arts Degree (Rutgers, 2006).

Katz (2000) approaches busyness in retirement from multiple perspectives based in numerous gerontological theories to champion retirement life as busy, creative, and healthy. For example, activity theory proposes that idleness not aging, hastens illness and decline. Similarly, disengagement theory, states that mutually agreeable abandonment of previous roles provides individual functional renewal.

Francis Bacon, cited in Katz (2000), wrote in 1628 that older individuals should “live a retired kind of life but their minds and thoughts should not be addicted to idleness.” This quotation provides counterpoint to Katz’s commentary on the frenzy of contemporary life and the normative power of activity. Katz continues that older people

are compelled to be active, to reject aging and in many ways reject their identity. Their choice of activity, contrary to Mannheim's theorizing, is not limitless. It is in fact socially sanctioned and defined. Activity alone is insufficient. The specific activity must further the work ethic or values of the dominant society. Therefore, it is uncommon that older students pursue a traditional degree-based educational experience unless the older student is responding to changing work demands (Katz, 2000).

Literature in this section introduced gerontological discourse on learning in later life and the life course perspective. The concluding category links nontraditional student persistence, motivation, changing student identities to academic achievement.

#### Persistence, Motivation and Student Identity

The participation rates of lifelong learners are significantly influenced by individual and group characteristics of persistence, resilience, and resistance (Gorard & Selwyn 2005; Hammond 2004; Lambeir 2005; Ponton et al 2005; Robertson & Merriam 2005; and Tulle-Winton 1999).

Palazesi et al (2006) trace the emergence of renewed identities of nontraditional students that occur over the course of a two-year community college program, positing that an adjustment to self-plan is the inevitable result of a return to post secondary learning. They declare students are dependent on support agencies, normally their family but can also be dependent on school services. The authors also contend that student identities are transitory. Nontraditional students first identify with other students in an effort to fit in. As familiarity grows, students transform into excited thinkers and finally emerge as integrated, independent learners. Accordingly, this study explored

participants' independence and self-development by exploring financial issues and by discussing progressive changes in attitudes towards and relationships with fellow students and professors.

In her review of injured Northwestern Ontario workers, Stone (2003) suggests that the strength of the worker identity, although not limitless, is a source of strength throughout the worker's absence from work. To the contrary and with relevance to the LMR student, Beardwood, Kirsh & Clark (2005) suggest that the bureaucratic experience preceding the return to school will have engendered victimization. These conflicting concepts were incorporated into this study, as all participants were injured workers. The study explored the impact of injured worker status upon participants' educational experiences.

The success or failure of nontraditional students is influenced by many factors. Castles (2004) identified 36 separate items affecting persistence. She grouped these factors into the following three categories:

1. Social and environmental factors that preexist;
2. Traumatic factors that emerge throughout the course of study; and
3. Intrinsic factors that the individual brings to the programs.

Within the broad categories were factors Castles described as positively affecting persistence. Her argument includes: that positive early educational experiences affect persistence; that persistence is strengthened by the absence of family or personal crisis during term of study; that students with personal agency positively affect their own persistence by working strategically towards assessment and by engaging in reflective

study; that academic achievement is positively influenced by successful engagement with the institution and instructors; that persistence is promoted by personal wellness and feelings of success; and, that lacking new stressors contributes to student persistence and success.

### Summary of the Literature

The literature review presented five main categories; nontraditional students, adult learning statistics, lifelong learning, gerontological discourse, and persistence, motivation and changing student identities. The review informed us that there are similarities between nontraditional students in Canada and the United States. Age, discontinuous educational histories, part-time and full-time modes of study, and employment during studies are shared definitional features. Adult learning statistics suggested that previous university study is the greatest predictor of attendance in later years. Statistical data also informed that older students prefer group modes of study for social issues but individual modes for personal and health related studies. Lifelong learning literature promoted both economic viability and civic responsibility. There were, however, discordant voices that argued that lifelong learning was a ploy of global capitalism that resulted in the loss of individuality and transference of training costs from states and corporations to individuals. The life course perspective, a dominant gerontological theoretical perspective, provided a framework to trace individual educational histories influencing older student educational pursuits. Gerontological literature contained conflicting views of education in later years. Some research linked education to healthy aging, while others believe no service delivery model could meet

older students varied educational needs. Moreover, some critical social gerontologists argued that education in later years is non-normative, unless it related directly to financial rewards. Literature on persistence and motivation discussed the impact of changing student identities on academic achievement. In particular, Castle's (2004) work on factors affecting persistence became the foundation of the theoretical framework to my research.



## CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN

### Personal Ground

In this chapter, I provide a methodological context for the study, which includes my personal background. My personal background is relevant to this study because of my dual status as a nontraditional student and researcher. As an older student, I have educational experiences in common with the participants. In fact, my experiences within the nontraditional student body led to my research role. I observed that there were few older full-time undergraduate students on campus. Furthermore, Castles (2004) informs me that I had non-academic experiences common to most nontraditional students. I too struggled with personal health and family issues while meeting the demands experienced by all undergraduates.

Unknowingly, my initial observation was the start of personal inductive research. I had intuitively begun to gather exploratory and emergent data which Glaser and Strauss (1967) claim is central to qualitative research methodologies. Qualitative methodologies characteristically demand, “theories generate from data that are firmly grounded in day-to-day observations” (Trochim, 2005). Inductive research continued throughout my return to school.

I commenced graduate studies immediately following completion of Bachelor of Arts and Bachelor of Educations degrees. Performing teaching assistant tasks sensitized me to the unique needs of full-time nontraditional students who attended exam-preparation and essay writing workshops that I presented. In these workshops, participants voluntarily spoke about their nontraditional student educational experiences. One, like I, sought personal enrichment. Another sought a mid-life career

change. Yet another participant self-disclosed to be a student sponsored by the Workplace Safety and Insurance Board under its Labour Market Reentry program. I have prior knowledge of this particular program. During the twenty years preceding my return to university, I had been an administrative manager within the Ontario Public Services. This employment history provided me extensive, hands-on experience with Workplace Safety and Insurance Board claims, including those of LMR employees.

### Qualitative Paradigm

In the previous chapter, I stated that this research flowed from a personal observation that there appeared to be few nontraditional students on Lakehead University's Thunder Bay Campus. The observation led to a period of inductive reasoning. Contrary to the positivistic tradition, I did not have a theory to generate hypotheses that could be tested by gathering supporting or disproving data (McMillan, 1996). Rather as Cook and LaFleur (1975) describe:

The raw beginning of induction is the fact of the basic observation, external to the self that is first made; this essentially is repeated for a sample of the universe one is observing. From this raw fact the imagination is informed to give shape to the whole (p. 3).

The fact that I saw and experienced few older students led to this research to explore and discover participant observations, which Patton says, "build toward general patterns" (p. 56). Whereas Patton (2002) contends that qualitative research allows participants to naturally unfold their educational experiences without preconceived

definitions or guidelines, McMillan stresses the importance of participant perspectives, stating that “qualitative researchers try to reconstruct reality as the participants they are studying see it” (p. 240). That goal is met when one uses purposeful sampling techniques to gather information rich data. (Gabo, 2004)

I approached the analysis with what Bogdan and Bilkin (1992) describe as an “attempt to mentally cleanse [my] preconceptions” (p. 58) and allowed themes to emerge from grounded data (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). As Creswell (2005) suggested, qualitative research provided openness and flexibility as I responded to emergent themes (Creswell, 2005).

Data were generated by allowing nontraditional student participants to use their own words to describe their educational experiences at Lakehead University. Positivism, and the ability to hypothesize about and measure reality, was rejected in favour of “using qualitative and naturalistic approaches to inductively and holistically understand human experiences and construct meanings in specific settings” (Patton, 2002, p. 69). Taylor and Bogdan (1984) describe the conflict between the two theoretical perspectives, Positivism and Phenomenology. Positivism generates knowledge by testing theory-generated hypotheses from which test outcomes are measured and subsequently compared with anticipated results expressed as limits within the test hypotheses. Alternatively, Taylor and Bogdan continue, knowledge can be generated from phenomenological research. This “alternative theoretical perspective [understands] social phenomena from the actor’s own perspective. He or she examines how the world is experienced. The important reality is what people perceive it to be” (p. 1-2).

The participants' phenomenological perceptions were augmented by hermeneutics, a related theoretical approach which expands and gives perspective to phenomenological inquiry by "remind[ing] us that what something means depends on the cultural context in which it was originally created as well as the cultural context within which it is subsequently interpreted" (Patton 2005, p. 113-115). A hermeneutic approach provided cultural context to activities and meanings. It demanded openness and recognition of my own cultural identity as I derived meaning from data.

### Narrative Research Design

Narrative analysis was the chosen research design as it continues the hermeneutical tradition by emphasizing interpretation and social context. "Narrative studies are also influenced by phenomenology's emphasis on understanding lived experience and perceptions of the experience" (Patton, 2005 p.115). Participants were encouraged to share their stories as, "the central idea of narrative analysis is that stories and narratives offer especially translucent windows into cultural and social meanings" (p. 116).

The research design closely followed Creswell's (p. 484-487) detailed seven steps in conducting narrative research:

Step #1 I identified the problem by establishing a central phenomenon that addressed educational experiences of nontraditional students;

Step #2 Participants were purposefully selected. This research design required three purposefully selected participants based in the criteria that they be full-time undergraduate students (either currently or last year) and be over age forty. All

participants were able to give insight into the central phenomenon, i.e., the educational experiences of aging nontraditional undergraduate students (Patton 2002). One of the participants was pursuing university studies as part of an industrial Return-to-Work [RTW], Labour Market Reentry [LMR] retraining program (Workplace Safety and Insurance Act S.O 1997);

Three participant recruitment techniques were employed. First, the Learning Assistance Centre was provided a promotional flyer seeking volunteers (see Appendix D). The Centre offered to contact client students who fit the criteria, share the flyer with them and ask if they were interested. Additional information was available for those students expressing an interest. Second, the researcher approached potential participants. Third, colleagues familiar with the research design identified potential participants. A list of potential participants was compiled. I telephoned potential candidates and contacted them through their Lakehead University e-mail accounts. The potential participants and I reviewed research details and I answered questions. Interviews were scheduled at mutually agreeable times and locations when each participant was provided and signed both "A Letter of Informed Consent" (see Appendix B) and a "Consent Form" (see Appendix C);

Step #3 Individual stories were obtained by collecting data in semi-structured interviews. Open-ended questions (see Appendix A) allowed me to probe for meanings and allowed participants the freedom to digress, unearthing data that would have remained hidden (Creswell, 2005). Each interview lasted from one to two hours. With informed consent, the interviews were audio taped, fully transcribed after completion of the interview, and analyzed for qualitative themes. Information gathered during the

interviews addressed the research questions designed to probe the central phenomenon:

1. What precipitates older nontraditional students' decisions to attend a post secondary institution?
2. What are the educational experiences of older full-time nontraditional undergraduate students?
3. To what extent do Student Services at Lakehead University meet the self-identified needs of older full-time nontraditional undergraduate students at Lakehead University?

Step #4 I restoryed each participant's narrative from interview transcriptions. All participants individuals were given pseudonyms. Interview questions reflected areas covered in the Literature review, i.e., nontraditional student status, adult student identity, social support systems, lifelong learning, and life course/trajectory decision making;

Step #5 I collaborated with the participants by sharing the restoryed narratives in subsequent meetings and through e-mail exchanges. Each participant was able to delete information, add information or make amendments;

Step #6 I wrote final narrative reports that incorporated subsequently collected data. These narratives are accounts of the participant's total experiences; and,

Step #7 I validated the accuracy of the report with participant in collaboration.

## Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using a five step general inductive approach (Thomas, 2006), based on the grounded theory methods developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967). As Creswell (2005) reports, Glaser rejected preset categories to ensure that themes could emerge from data. Glaser's ultimate goal was to develop theories describing social processes and therefore emergent design is consistent with the recognition given to the influence of social factors on educational behaviours contained within the conceptual framework that guided this research (Elder, 1998; Castles, 2004).

The design process indicated that interviews were audio taped, fully transcribed after completion of the interview, and analyzed for qualitative themes. Thomas (2006) described these initial procedural steps as: 1) preparation of raw data files; and, 2) close reading of the text (p. 241). Step 3) created categories when transcriptions were manually coded in line-by-line analysis. Step 4) identified overlapping codes and uncoded texts within transcriptions, subsequent data from field notes and e-mail communications were similarly analyzed (p. 242). The initial analysis resulted in 162 coded items. Analysis involved constant comparative coding which provided a mechanism to determine if the code appeared in one or more participant's data sets. Secondary analysis condensed the 162 codes into 56 code categories. Step 5) progressive refinement of the categories (p. 242) resulted in 16 code categories subsumed within four themes: 1) lifelong learning; 2) educational experiences at Lakehead University; 3) adult student identities; and, 4) the impacts of age on nontraditional students.

Lifelong learning subsumed five code categories: 1) early school experiences; 2) subsequent formal and informal learning; 3) life course pathways and transitions; 4) higher educational needs; and, 5) current educational status.

Educational experiences at Lakehead University subsumed four code categories: 1) experiences with Faculty; 2) relationships with professors, teaching assistants; 2) relationships with fellow students; 3) assessments of university services

Adult student identities subsumed five code categories: 1) participants' perceived nontraditional student identities; 2) relationships with family; 3) relationships with professors and students; 4) immediate and long term goals; and, 5) personal motivators.

Impacts of age on nontraditional students subsumed two code categories: 1) consequences of age to educational experiences; and, 2) social consequences of being an older student.

These themes provided the basis for the presentation and discussion of the research findings.

### Role of the Researcher

As the researcher, under the supervision of my faculty advisor, I personally organized and conducted the research. I applied to the university's ethics board and subsequently selected research participants. I conducted interviews, collected, analyzed and disseminated data. Findings were included in this thesis, written in partial fulfillment of Master of Education requirements. Upon request, I would provide participants a summary of the research findings



## CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

### Introduction

This chapter contains the restoried narratives of three older nontraditional undergraduates at Lakehead University. Pseudonyms were provided to offer confidentiality to all participants and individuals mentioned in these findings and quotations were minimally edited for clarity and readability. Consistent with Step 4) of the narrative research design discussed earlier, the restoried narratives allowed each participant to voice his or her experiences and opinions. Each participant had the opportunity to give input into the final version of his or her narrative through follow up meetings or e-mail communications. Narratives are presented sequentially to reflect experiences across the four-year term of undergraduate studies. Bill's narrative is first. He is awaiting the start of undergraduate studies. Alice follows as she is at the halfway point, entering the third year of a four-year honours program. Charlene provides the concluding narrative. She will graduate in May 2007 with a B. A. (Gerontology Major).

### Major Themes of the Study

Four main themes emerged from the present study: 1) lifelong learning; 2) educational experiences at Lakehead University; 3) adult student identities; and, 4) the impacts of age on nontraditional students. The first theme, lifelong learning, concerns participants' on-going educational activities prior to attending Lakehead University. This theme subsumes code categories capturing early school experiences, subsequent formal and informal learning, other significant life course pathways and transitions or events that precipitated needs for higher education. It concludes by identifying current

educational status. The second theme, educational experiences at Lakehead University, explores code categories on participants' experiences with Faculty, professors, teaching assistants, fellow students, and explored the participants' assessments of common university services. The third, adult student identities, reveals participants' perceived nontraditional student identities: by commenting on their relationships with family, professors and students; by indicating their immediate and long term goals; and, by reporting personal motivators. The fourth, the impacts of age on nontraditional students, deals with the code categories of real or perceived consequences of age to educational experiences and also considers social consequences of being an older student. The themes revealed that although participants have unique and differing experiences, common experiences predominated.

Themes and individual and common experiences are voiced within each participant's restoryed narrative. Following each narrative, the themes are further clarified by supporting data drawn from original interview transcriptions or subsequent communications with the participants.

#### Bill's Restoryed Narrative

I am a 43-year-old husband and father of one son. In September of 2007, I will become a first year Social Work student at Lakehead University. It will be a huge change in my life.

I went to school in Dorion and Nipigon, but quit after Grade 10. Although I now wish I had stayed in school, I struggled with book-based learning and

wanted out. With my parents' approval, I started to work in the bush. Dad, who was a heavy equipment operator, taught me how to maintain and service the skidder that Mom lent me money to buy. Leaving school was normal and none of the nine kids in my family went beyond high school.

I worked in woodlands operations for 24 years until back injuries led to a WSIB claim and a ruling that I could never go back as a heavy equipment operator. I told WSIB's contracted Labour Market Re-entry counselor that I wanted to go back to school. After many meetings and tests, they approved a plan to attend Lakehead University. WSIB will be paying wages and full school expenses and in return, I am going to do my best. However, this isn't the first time that I've thought of going back to school.

I started thinking about my future ten years ago when I realized the forest industry was in trouble. I began correspondence courses but work and family demands forced me to stop. That changed when I was injured. I had the time and by the summer of 2006, did enough correspondence courses to earn a Grade 12 diploma. I am proud that I did that on my own, without WSIB help. Unfortunately, I didn't take advanced English, so I presently go to Scholars twice a week to get the necessary 12U level. I'm doing very well; all my marks are in the 80's and 90's and now feel that I can handle university level work. My injury is actually a blessing. My employer went bankrupt and the Nipigon mill burned down. Like many other forestry workers in Northwestern Ontario, I'd be out of work. Attending University is now my new job.

In many ways, I am self-driven, but family and friends, particularly two friends in my Bible study group, support me. My son thinks my marks are cool. However, support varies. A sister thinks I am a jock and believes that you have to be an intellectual to attend University. Some who knew me as a worker, at their level, now seem to be talking down to me. Other folks think I should study forestry instead of social work. I just tell them that for 24 years lumber was the product I gave society. In four years time, my product will be service to my community. I want the degree, for my own sake, but I also want to be able to say that in my new job I will be helping people.

I don't think being an older student will be a problem. Society rejects aging but I don't think being older limits my abilities. My recent high marks prove that. Being older shouldn't affect my relationships with younger students or professors. I hope professors respect me and recognize me as an attentive student who is doing his best and I'm probably better able to get along with younger people than I was when 25. Sure, I'd like to make new friends but being older does mean that I have family, vehicle and property responsibilities. They come first.

I have concerns. I am completely computer illiterate and university functions on-line. I'm used to dealing with people directly, but in University you talk to people for a few minutes then you are sent off to do it all on your own, on-line. Everybody seems to give you ten minutes then you're expected to do it all yourself. Everybody says they will be glad to help you but I feel alone. I worry about registering and getting into the right courses. I worry about learning

accommodations. The Learning Assistance Centre supplied a form regarding services I will need. My doctor completed it, specifying that I need note takers and special exam considerations to enable me to stretch at regular intervals. My LMR service provider however, advised not to submit it because WSIB might consider me too great a risk!

The university has treated me well the three times I've been on campus. They've been professional. Academic Advising has been helpful and the Learning Assistance Centre says they will continue to help me out. My faculty thinks that having life experiences will make me a better Social Worker. They were open and receptive. I hope that's the feeling in all the university.

### Lifelong Learning

Bill's narrative informs us that he had episodic, formal lifelong activities prior to entering Lakehead University. For example, he completed formal upgrading in 2006 after a previous failed attempt. Bill explained that:

About 10 years ago I was working for Great Lakes [Forest Products sic] and I was just thinking about the bush, thinking, that someday maybe I wanted to get out of it. I knew there was no chance with Grade 10, the way everything was changing, so I started doing a little bit of upgrading. However, it was nearly impossible with working and family. There was just no time. Ten years ago, I started by doing a couple of lessons in English and that was it. That was... then I just stopped.

Life course changing workplace injuries precipitated his entry into higher education. Bill described events preceding a WSIB sanctioned educational program in the following manner:

A year ago January, it's been 15 months or so, I started getting pains in my back and legs. I was diagnosed with herniated discs in my lower lumbar. After all my physio and everything, it was about 6 months of that, I hit a plateau where it was not going to get any better. Then they measure you whether you can go back to what you were previously doing. They ruled that I could no longer go back as a heavy equipment operator and take the vibrations and pounding of stumps and rocks and prolonged days. They were up to 17-hour days. They said, "That's going to be out."

At the time of the first interview, Bill had received a conditional letter of acceptance into the first year of studies in the Honours Bachelor of Social Work program and was acquiring a compulsory 12U English credit. As Bill indicated, the process was still unknown to him:

Now, what's happened now? They received the hundred dollars. They gave me an acceptance letter, conditional upon completion of this 12 U. Now I'm just waiting to pick my course. Once they send me the letter, I guess it's up and running.

Early in the interview, I realized that Bill did not acknowledge the learning experiences that followed his early school departure. He did not realize that people

learn throughout their lives, formally, within schools or similar institutional setting, but also informally, usually from parents but often by repeating workplace tasks. His narrative reveals that he thought only his upgrading accomplishments constituted learning. He made no mention of any workplace training or skills development in the fifteen years between his early school departure and his first failed attempt at upgrading through the Independent Learning Centre. Realizing that Bill owned or operated heavy equipment costing hundreds of thousands of dollars, I asked if he repaired the equipment and how he learned that. His response revealed rich informal learning:

...funny in high school, in my shop class, the books were talking about pistons and how they work. I could not understand. I had no idea. Like really, I could not visualize it. Soon as I bought my first skidder, as soon as I got it home, the engine went. We stripped it apart. My dad and I repaired it and ever since then I could take something apart and fix it. But reading a book, I just didn't think (pause) but hands on...

### Educational Experiences at Lakehead University

Bill had limited interaction with university staff or any other community, but his initial reactions are positive. For example, an encouraging Faculty staff member inspired him by telling him that having life experiences will make him a better social worker. In Bill's words:

She was actually excited for me, that I am coming in as an older student.

Because of my life experiences, she said, "Oh, it will be so great to have you in there." She was pretty open and receptive.

Given limited interaction with Lakehead University departments and personnel, it is to be understood that Bill predominantly expressed expectations rather than lived experiences. In response to questions about his anticipated relationship with professors, Bill replied:

I hope I can feel comfortable and say, "I don't really understand that." Or if they can give me tips. You know what I mean?

Probing about his perceived on-campus relationships with younger students, I asked him to comment on his anticipated response to group projects and communal learning. He expressed surprise:

That is something I never probably thought about until right now. Because actually, that is true. As I say, for 24 years I worked in the bush and had always been independent. I did my own thing. But, you do work in groups too. Like, you have to work two machines side by side doing a job, but never in a room setting. I never even thought of that.

Bill expressed apprehension about some student services program requirements. Being required to register on-line after a brief counseling session with Academic Advising is one worrisome example. Bill explained fretfully:

My anxiety is so high it is overwhelming. Like, you have no computer skills. You quit in Grade 10, worked for 24 years and then just go back into university, when every thing is on computer, on-line. It's really wild.



Field notes from a subsequent interview, during which Bill confirmed that this restoryed narrative accurately captured his voice, explain that his fears about on-line course selection and registration had abated. The notes indicate that:

Bill is now fully registered and all courses have been picked. He was happy to say that his Scholar's Tutor (coincidentally one of my colleagues in Lakehead University's M.Ed. program) showed him how to register. She had him create a perfect schedule, based on his availability, and then taught him how to use the course calendar. He picked courses based on course requirements, his interests and his preferred availability. Bill and his tutor entered the first two selections together. He completed the on-line registration by himself. Bill told me that on-line registration really was simple once he knew what to do.

#### Adult Student Identities

Bill's narrative reveals classic adult student identity characteristics. For example, he brings experience and knowledge and his long-term goals are practical. Bill described his goals in the following:

My goal is to come out of there with a degree, hopefully in Social Work. Yeah, even just to think of somebody, me or somebody in my family (pause). There were nine kids and the highest anyone went was high school. To get a degree would be awesome and to be able to help somebody. That is my next thing. To be able to help somebody in the job I do. I think social work would probably lead me that way.

Goal orientation was further observed in narrative comments that described service to the community as a product. An adult student's pragmatic approach is illustrated in the following response to a probing question about the anticipated impact of student workload demands on existing social relationships. Anticipating this issue, Bill said:

That's right, how will it impact, or if it will? That's one thing that I was thinking about. I guess I'll have to juggle it. Maybe I'll have to cut back on some other things. Since I've been off I have been volunteering. Perhaps I'll have to do a little bit less and not worry about my neighbours. I have a little plough and I will plough their driveway. Now I'll just (pause). No, this will be my commitment.

His identity is confirmed in a response to my question about his anticipated relationships with younger students, Bill indicated firmly:

I don't know about the students. I guess in one way it's important but also not important. I'm not there to make a bunch of friends. I am looking at this as a job. I'm there to do my job. I want to do the best that I can at it. I want to have, to make new friends as well. But how will they (pause)? I don't think I will have problems. I am looking forward to it.

### The Impacts of Age on Nontraditional Students

During the interview Bill generally revealed a belief that aging would neither interfere with his ability to study nor define on-campus relationships. An exchange from the original interview transcription reveals that Bill was worried that he had left an incorrect impression that he thought increased age resulted in failing memory rather

than improved academic performance. I told Bill that I could rephrase the question and asked him if “he firmly believed that with age comes diminished ability to study for everyone?” and “Is there a common decline in academic ability or is age irrelevant?” As Bill stated:

Well, actually from my last comment it was more negative but since my upgrading I've been getting 90's and 100's and I'm 43, just turned. When I was 18, 16 and 15, I was getting 50's and 20's. There is a big difference there. I know that I want to do it. Then, I knew that I had to be in school. Now I want to be there.

He reported, however, that his change in status from peer to older student resulted in alterations in some existing friendships:

I got injured while he knew me and now when he talks to me, I'm not sure if it's really just in my head, but it seems like he (pause) like I'm going to be a study bumpkin. I don't know. I just feel that he is talking down to me. While before we were both employed and now I just feel a little bit different. That I'm at a different level. Now, that could just, just ummmm. But that's how I feel anyway.

#### Alice's Restoryed Narrative

I am a 53-year-old wife and mother of two adult children. In September of 2007, I will continue my dream of getting a university education when I enter the third year of a Social Work program at Lakehead University.

Going to University has not always been a lifelong ambition. I didn't enjoy my Thunder Bay public and high schools experiences. I was very shy and had few friends. If not for supportive parents, I would have quit prior to acquiring a grade 12 diploma. I graduated in 1972 and marriage soon followed. We had two children, a boy and a girl now approaching thirty. In approximately 1985, I started working for two doctors at the Port Arthur Clinic. In 1991, my husband committed suicide, leaving me without adequate means to support two teenagers. I explored options at Confederation College and Lakehead University, thinking a better education would lead to a better job with increased income. Insecurity and financial worries made me decide that a return was impossible. In an on-going effort to combat debilitating shyness, I took a few special interest and public speaking courses at Confederation College. I also continued singing and now work professionally with a local band and in recent years, I have been a grief and weight loss counselor.

By 2001, deteriorating discs, resulting from 16 years of sedentary employment and former incidents of domestic abuse, made it impossible to continue work. A long-held ambition to go to university matured in the subsequent two years that I was off work. While attending at St. Joseph's 16-week pain management program, counselors encouraged me to apply to Lakehead University. Support also came from my daughter, who has a degree in human resources and my new husband, a registered pharmacist. I started with an intersessional course and in 2005 commenced full-time studies to earn a degree in Social Work and a Certificate in Palliative Care. Becoming a university

graduate therefore addresses three objectives; self-fulfillment, community service, and meaningful employment.

Being an older student has not been personally problematic. Aging does not bring intellectual or cognitive impairment. I have consistently obtained B's and A's. Professors have been respectful and I have student friends of all ages. Many younger students, in various programs, treat me like a mother hen and I am flattered that some of them have asked if they could study with me because they think I am smart. Additionally, student colleagues in the social work program support me.

I have known older students who struggled. I don't believe that they were incompetent or that their age made it more difficult to study. Other circumstances caused their difficulties. I suspect that they were misadvised and should have been directed to other areas of study. One, in a return-to-work program, never adapted to university demands. He should have been directed to trade rather than academic programs.

Being older does bring uniquely aged-based problems that younger students are less likely to experience. For example, although my children are wonderful adults, a mother always worries. In addition, I am disqualified for student assistance. OSAP recognizes our family income but ignores our large monthly expenses. I worry about tuition and routine bill payments. Major disruptions occurred in consecutive fall exam periods. First, my father had a life-threatening stroke and later, our basement flooded. I put these matters in God's

hands, knowing that at this moment I am doing what is intended for me. I am completely satisfied with my life.

I have the same difficulties as all undergraduates. I had to learn how to study. I had to develop research and essay-writing skills and I have cried with anxiety over assignment deadlines and exam pressures. Currently, I anxiously await a decision regarding acceptance into the third year of the Honours Bachelor of Social Work program.

I am pleased with university services. I haven't needed accommodation through the Learning Assistance Centre although I did have them review an essay prior to submission. I am grateful to two accommodating professors, one who allowed a rewrite and the other who gave a deadline extension. Frankly, I cannot comment on my Faculty given that we rarely interact. At first, I put professors on imaginary pedestals, treating them like Gods. I now realize they are people, like all the rest of us. Library staff is always very helpful. Unfortunately, time conflicts prevented me from attending any of their training programs, but I am proud that I learned how to use the library on my own. Academic advising gave me supportive and realistic information.

I believe that I have adapted well to undergraduate demands but other older students may have different experiences. My life experiences make me a firm believer of support groups. My sole recommendation is that the university establishes an association or group solely for mature students. It will boost self-esteem, self-confidence and let mature students know that they are not alone.

Lifelong Learning,

Alice's narrative discloses a lifelong quest for knowledge and growth. For example, she combated shyness by taking courses and eventually became a professional entertainer. As Alice stated:

I took things at Con College in the evening, twice actually. I took two different Toastmaster Courses to feel better. Not necessarily public speaking, but just to be able to communicate whether it's just to somebody in my family or somebody in authority. There was always that intimidation of speaking to someone that I didn't know. I felt very insecure so, this was a way to get over that hurdle.

More significantly, she explored educational options in response to horrific life experiences. Similarly, it is very revealing that Alice rejected idleness and chose to attend university after back injuries made return to work impossible. She reported:

I was off work because of chronic back pain. To make along story short, I was on disability (and still am) and that was the motivating factor. Do I just stay home now and get this pension money coming in or do I do something constructive with my life?

Realizing that she has learned throughout her life, Alice offered to share her experience and wisdom to Lakehead University's mature students by recommending a Mature Students support group. Alice offered the following advice:

I think the only thing I would really like to see is some kind of, I don't know if support group is the right word, but some kind of group entirely for Mature

Students. You know, where you can bounce ideas off of (pause). I am such a firm advocate of support groups. I believe in them so much. I know there is strength in having somebody to identify with you. It can boost your self-esteem, boost your self-confidence and help you realize that you are not alone.

In our initial interview, Alice told me that she was happy to be a student and is content with her life:

I wouldn't change a thing. Most people are saying, "I can't wait five years from now" and they are saying, "You have to go to school for four years. That's a long time." I tell them, "It is. But I am going to enjoy the journey, not the destination." That's what I think about it anyway.

#### Educational Experiences at Lakehead University

Alice's narrative repeatedly demonstrated adaptive abilities. She accessed student services when needed and her comments on professors revealed a maturing appreciation of the academic culture. Alice described a transformative first year exchange with a professor, recounting:

The very first paper I did in sociology, I failed. I was devastated and was under the assumption that the grade you got was what you were stuck with. Yet, when I approached the professor he just said, "You know you are barking up the wrong tree. It was good. It's a great Psychology paper, but not Sociology. This is what you should be looking at. Just rewrite it." I was thrilled and so grateful that I had



a second chance. And I got an 85! You know, those kinds of things I was happy about. So, it was good I was given that opportunity.

Alice's integration into the academic culture is transparently clear in her response to an interview question about her social support group. Alice answered:

I also get a lot of support and I support my other school colleagues. There are a few in particular (pause). We are very close, as we are pursuing Social Work degrees. So they understand completely, or we understand each other so well, the drive to want to get this. When one is having some tough times, the other ones say, "You know we'll get through it and at the end it will all be worth it."

Alice told me she had little contact with her Faculty. When asked if she thought her Faculty demonstrated awareness of older nontraditional student needs, Alice replied:

I haven't had any dealings with them at all yet, other than picking up an exam and going over it. There has been such limited exposure, other than Dr. Daltry when I first started, who was great! I can't really give you an honest answer. I really haven't had anything to base a decision on.

Alice is pleased with the services provided at Lakehead University. When asked to assess if the university met the needs of older nontraditional students, Alice commented:

...but from my own perspective, I can't think of any issue off-hand. I think as a whole it's pretty good. When I've needed to see someone, they have gotten me

in pretty quickly and pretty much gave me the information that I needed. I guess there are always areas that can be improved, but from my perspective, which is the only one I can speak from, it is fine.

### Adult Student Identities

Alice, like most adult, seeks career and financial reward from her studies, but self-actualization is her primary motivator. When asked to identify what motivated her, Alice responded:

People looking into our lives think that the only reason you would pursue an education is to get a better income. That isn't the issue at for me. It's not that we are rolling in dough. Far from it! Actually, that will be one of the goals for me. Once I get into the professional career that I chose, perhaps I'll make some decent money. But that's not the motivating factor in any way shape or form. It's the personal achievement of getting this degree. It could be different for a lot of people.

Alice is proud that she "fits in." Her responses reveal a unique student identity that combines elements common to younger, traditional students with elements normally associated with older, nontraditional students. As Alice illustrated:

I thoroughly love every aspect. Not to say there has not been incredible stressors. You know, when you come to Lakehead and you've been out of school for 35 years, it was very, very intimidating. However, I seemed, for whatever reason, to just fit in, very easy, very smoothly and just focus on doing the very

best that I could do. I've seen where I started in July to where I am now. I'm waiting for one more mark and all my marks are in the 80's this whole year.

Alice's narrative tells us she has friends of all ages and like her younger student friends, she has experienced deadline pressures and had to negotiate extensions. However, when asked to describe her ability to cope with demands common to students regardless of age, she provided a response that showed empathetic, multi-generational understandings:

Yes. It is stressful at times. I have cried. I have been extremely frustrated. I have questioned briefly as to why I am putting myself through this stress. I could easily stay home and putter in the garden. I have questioned why I am doing it. But I think that the rewards are worth it. It's definitely stressful. It's no wonder that not everyone goes to university, because it is a huge commitment. I don't think I could have done it if I had my kids still at home.

When asked if she felt supported by professors, Alice reported:

Absolutely! Yes! Emphatically yes. Going back to that first paper that I did poorly on, the professor was so supportive and kept reassuring me that things would only get easier. He said he understood that this was all a new learning curve for me. Yes, it was all very, very positive.

However, Alice was less satisfied with teaching assistants, as revealed in the following statement:

I haven't had a lot of experience with the teaching assistants. In my first year of Sociology there were assistants. Never saw their faces. We were just told that they would be marking our papers and if I saw them on the street I would not know who they were.

### The Impacts of Age on Nontraditional Students

Alice's integration into Lakehead University's undergraduate community reflects a conviction that "age doesn't have anything to do with learning or memory". Comments regarding an unsuccessful first-year classmate reveal a sensitive understanding that variations in intellectual and cognitive functioning relate to individual differences rather than to aging:

Oh, this person is a mature student, what they class as a mature student, but several years younger than me. He just didn't or couldn't grasp the concepts. I mean, there are people who do struggle for sure. Older adults have the capacity to be able to be just as competent as young people. But there is varying, what's the word I 'm looking for...? There are many circumstances around that.

Typically, her narrative reveals that expanded domestic and financial responsibilities do accompany aging. However, these complicating demands were managed:

So how do you concentrate on (pause) just how to study and retain information while worrying if my father is going to live or die? Those things are not pleasant. And that has happened to me, twice. He's been ill, had very serious... (pause) and it seems to happen at exam time. Now this year, he was Ok, but we had a flood a week before Christmas in our house. I went through 10 strangers in my

house ripping things apart for Christmas exams. Now, during April exams, the work is still not completely finished. I have gone through two sets of exams with the distractions of personal upheaval and with stuff being damaged and fixed. You know, it is just unfortunate but I managed to pull it off – somehow.

Her response to my questions regarding older students' relationships with younger professors reinforces her belief that while she is respected for being older, her success resulted from academic efforts. As reported by Alice:

Yeah, it's been great, great relationships. I think most of them actually have shown me a great deal of respect. Maybe it's admiration for an older person going to school or they know that I'm serious about it. (pause) They all've been great!

#### Charlene's Restoryed Narrative

I have been studying full-time at Lakehead University for the past four years. In May 2007, at age 53, I will graduate with a B.A. (Gerontology major). My parents were immigrants with little formal education and no one in my family has received a university education. Obtaining this degree will complete a lifelong dream.

My mother died when I was 11 and understandably I remember being unhappy during public school. However, I fondly remember high school. Regrettably, I could not afford to join my Thunder Bay high school friends, all of whom went to university. I remember describing my goals to an incompetent

high school counselor, who suggested that I just get married. Unfortunately, I did exactly that. The fiasco of a marriage lasted three months. At my older sister's suggestion, I then trained as a Registered Practical Nurse. At 33 I got a student loan and attended Confederation College full-time to earn my Registered Nurse's Diploma. I worked at various Thunder Bay hospitals until back injuries and subsequent surgery in my late 40's made me contemplate a job without physical requirements.

At 50, with part-time nursing income supplemented by OSAP assistance, I entered Lakehead University's Bachelor of Sciences in nursing program. In my third year, I transferred to a Bachelor of Arts program. I enjoyed learning and loved the subjects and course I studied. Despite the fact that I had always been a lazy student who could have done better, I did well on papers and overall received B grades.

My goals are clear. Higher education provides the potential for more money, increased job potential, widened employment opportunities and increased social status. While I am presently developing a Graduate School application, I also seek employment. I am and always will be a Nurse.

Being single, I am self motivated. My sister and her children give me support. My father always encouraged me to acquire as much education as possible. It is different for women who are married and have families. I even know husbands who refuse to let their wife pursue higher education. Conversely, I also know mothers who studied and graduated with their daughters.

I don't believe that ageing results in any intellectual limitations. My brain is sharper than it has ever been and I attended Gerontology classes with many bright, part-time older students. Nevertheless, my age has significantly affected my university experience. My focus differed from that of young undergraduates. Most importantly, I wanted to be there. I was not distracted by their pressures and distractions. I was not driven by surging hormones. Unlike most young students, I know who I am. I know my talents and interests. I attended all my classes and unlike one extreme example, did not sleep through classes I found uninteresting. Age separated me from younger students who I found unwelcoming and daunting. I was isolated.

I had no relationship with my Faculty and only learned about the Departmental Chair in my third year. However, Lakehead University has excellent professors who were sensitive to older students' needs. I was given special treatment and sometimes thought Professors gave me high marks because of my age. There were a few professors who were poor teachers. One in particular, this young guy wanted to be their friend and you can't be their friend. I did not do as well in their courses. I only knew one teaching assistant. The others only marked papers and distributed exams. Those who were young girls appeared afraid to open their mouths. They should have been more involved and be given some teaching responsibilities.

Lakehead's library is too noisy to work in but its librarians are excellent. They gave me personalized service and saved me a lot of time. I did not access

Learning Assistance Centre accommodation services but took many of their skill development courses.

I received very poor academic advising. No one told me what to do or explained options. Information I did receive was often incomplete or wrong. Sometimes it was not provided as promised. I don't think advisors know enough and I think they are overworked. There are only two to counsel all undergraduates. Most importantly, they're geared to meet younger student needs. Unlike younger students, who experience university as a social time when they define their abilities and interests, older students know who they are and what they need.

Lakehead University tries to deliver services to older students but it serves a population that would rather enjoy the easy pension life than try for self-improvement. Few older students come to this university. Those who do attend study part time or on-line. Most older students attend Confederation College. Older students have a greater presence on university campuses in larger, diversified centers. Thunder Bay, however, is becoming a pension city. As the city ages, social acceptance of older students will rise proportionately. Social acceptance is increasing.

### Lifelong Learning

Charlene's narrative reveals a classic pattern of lifelong learning. She completed high school studies, graduated from a community college and obtaining a university degree is simply her most recent educational activity. As Charlene remarked:



I got 13. So, all my friends went to university or college and I thought what am I going to do? So, after that fiasco of a marriage I went into training as a practical nurse and I did that for many years. I did that until I was 33. When I was 33, I got a student loan and got my R.N. diploma. I worked at that for 20 years.

This pattern not only revealed a willingness to learn, it clarified that entering university was a comfortable and familiar choice when a back injury resulted in a major life course transitional event. Charlene informed me:

Then I had a back injury. A patient threw me against a wall and I had subsequent back surgery. Then I thought, Oh, my God! What am I going to do now? So, I still had this dream to go to university from when I was a teenager. And here I am, 50 years old.

In response to a question about her educational objectives, Charlene revealed that she was considering furthering her education. Charlene replied:

I wasn't going to pursue Graduate School but it was Esa (a graduate assistant) who I've always talked to. He's one of the very few people I can, I've actually become friendly with. You can talk to Esa about anything. Because we are both Finn, I guess there was that connection. We started to talk to each other. He encourages me. Has encouraged me to go into the graduate program. He thinks my nursing background would be an asset. So, even though my marks are not stellar, he thinks they would overlook that because of all the nursing experience I have had, especially with older people. So (pause) I'll try.

## Educational Experiences at Lakehead University

After four years of undergraduate study in two separate faculties, it is not surprising that Charlene has the most to report about the educational experiences of older students at Lakehead University. Her narrative reveals that she enjoyed studying and that she thought her Professors professional and caring. As Charlene stated:

The majority of them were good. Very good. Even though, Lakehead is a very small university, I think the Professors are great. They are knowledgeable and they are always willing to help you. That part was always very good.

Charlene, however, more frequently offered critical statements. While grateful for personalized Library Services, her following comment criticizes student behaviour within the library:

The library is Ok. Noisy! Don't study there unless you get a room. But the rooms are mostly for tutors. If you want to go downstairs, forget about it. Go home and study because it is less noisy. There was a study, a research thing on the library that was on the web and that was one of the questions. Do you think the Library is good atmosphere for study? I wrote down No! No! Too noisy! No! No!

Similarly, her narrative reports dissatisfaction with Academic Advising. While discussing her return to school and educational objectives, Charlene expanded her criticism and spoke on behalf of other older students:

I had very poor academic advising when I came here. No one told me a lot of the programs or what I could take or they gave me the wrong programs. And there

(pause) there's quite a few older women, also in the gerontology program but they only do it part time. I talked to them and they also were given the wrong academic advising.

Probing for additional information about advice provided older nontraditional students, I asked Charlene if Academic Advising had suggested that she seek advice from the Chair of her department. She informed me:

No, not at all! I was in third year before I even know what a chair was. So, it was really poor!

During discussions of her feelings about return to school, Charlene dramatically offered the following:

How did you feel going back to university? I have one word

I S O L A T E D (drawn out by Charlene).

Her feeling of isolation from the student body was dramatically portrayed in a response to questions exploring her involvement with the Learning Assistance Centre. After telling me that she took a number of courses provided by the Centre, Charlene offered the following comments that, in addition to addressing the Centre's services, clarified her perceptions of her experiences as an older student at Lakehead University

I would go there and take a course. I took a number of courses, 'Multiple Choice' or 'How to Study', whatever courses they had.

I then directly asked her, "How would you assess them in terms of meeting your needs?" to which she replied:

I think they are very good because, being an older student is, I imagine it feels the same as being a person in a wheelchair. That's why we have very few students. Because other students isolate them. Can you imagine going to university in a wheelchair. I feel so sorry for those kids. Not because they can't do it. Because they can. There is nothing wrong with their brains. But because the other kids just ostracize them. So, it's like being an older student. To just...not one of the crowd.

### Adult Student Identities

Charlene reveals a well-established career oriented adult student identity. She pursued formal education throughout her life to promote career opportunities. After her marriage failed, Charlene trained as a Registered Practical Nurse. Approximately twelve years later, she attended Confederation College, full-time, to become a Registered Nurse. Twenty years later, as an injured worker, she entered Lakehead University and again pursued nursing studies. In Charlene's words:

If I went back to nursing I would have to lift and my back would not stand it anymore. So, well, I'm going to go to university and maybe I can get a different kind of job where I don't have to do the physical stuff. So, I began the first two years in the Bachelor of Science (Nursing) program.

Although she subsequently transferred into Arts, her major, Gerontology, is closely related to health sciences. In the following response to a probing question about nurse's in-service training, Charlene declared her worker identity:

I am still a nurse!

When I asked if she still practiced, she replied:

Oh, I'm going to. Look around (pause). There isn't much in Thunder Bay right now, but...that's something that you can always get a job at.

I later asked Charlene who motivates her to continue her studies. After describing that younger students have different motivators, Charlene described her motivations.

Charlene, however, is unsure why she is different from most people her age. Interview transcriptions include the following passage:

When you're 53 years old, you just want that piece of paper. If you want to go further, you'll want that paper because it means more opportunity, more money a better job, ah, people look at you different – a better class of person. All of those things. We are different than let's say the person on welfare, like the majority of people that live in my building who never completed high school. I notice in my building there are a lot of middle-aged people who never ever completed high school and they look at me with supreme envy, jealousy and I know that. And people my own age, in that building, that never went to school. But, why not? Why can't you go? What is it that's different? Is it because somebody said, "You can't do that"? What is it? What makes you, a person 53 years old, go back to school to better themselves or to collect welfare? What is that difference? I don't know.

### The Impacts of Age on Nontraditional Students

Results from our interview revealed Charlene's belief that age presents no academic limitations. She informed me that:

We are so lucky in this day and age; to be able to go to school at whatever age you want to. I found that in one of my classes. It was all older gerontology students. And we were all bright and we were even better than first years who don't show up except for the first class. We wanted to be there and that's the difference between young people and old people. And I am not old. There's the desire. Is it because we desire more when you are older? I think it is.

Age has had a significant impact on Charlene's university experiences as noted in references to issues of age-based isolation from younger students. Conversely, her data detail her perception that she benefited from aged-based preferential treatment:

Charlene said:

And here you are and Professors, they're good, but it is only because there is a scattering of us still. So I found I was treated special, better, I received better... special attention.

and,

A lot of my marks were better because I was older. And I know they gave me better marks. I know that because often times I was the only older person in the class.

Special attention approaching infantilization was described in the following passage about librarians who provided enhanced service because of her age. Charlene reported that younger students received a reduced level of service that required them to accomplish tasks themselves. In consequence, she was required to do less work than

her younger colleagues. When asked if she took the training courses offered by the library, Charlene provided a telling response:

No, but they were great. They'd do things for me. I didn't have to do anything for myself. I'd say, "I need this!" Ok, they'd do it for me. Instead of the kids, they say do this. It saved a lot of time.

### Summary of the Results

Results revealed that major life course events, a love of learning and a history of lifelong learning precipitated individual decisions to become full-time undergraduates. Early school experiences profoundly influenced older students' choices of formal or informal educational pathways leading to full-time university study. For example, all reported rich, informal workplace learning, but only high school graduates reported prior, formal learning at higher educational facilities.

Positive interactions with departmental chairs, professors and fellow students, while appreciated, were not considered essential to student success. Generally, participants felt respected, but valued professional working relationships more than friendships. However, the availability and quality of student services, especially Academic Advising, were highly valued.

Nontraditional students' identities reflected complex social and family responsibilities and a focus on higher education providing enhanced economic opportunity. While all participants expressed beliefs that higher education provided intrinsic reward, two of the participants displayed firm worker-student identities, one actually referring to undergraduate studies as his new job.

Age had no effect on older students' cognitive or intellectual abilities. All participants thought that maturity brought heightened desire, improved work ethic and academic success. All older students felt respected but also experienced ageist behaviours, including, age-based status loss, social isolation, preferential treatment and infantilization.

These results are discussed in greater detail in the following chapter.



## CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

This last chapter is divided into four sections. The first section provides a summary of the study. The second section contains a discussion of the results. The third part details the study's policy, practice implications for Lakehead University and suggests future research. The chapter ends with conclusions in the fourth section.

### Summary of the Study

This study is an exploration of the educational experiences of older nontraditional undergraduate students at Lakehead University. The study was guided by three basic research questions:

1. What precipitates older nontraditional students' decisions to attend a post secondary institution?
2. What are the educational experiences of older full-time nontraditional undergraduate students?
3. To what extent do Student Services at Lakehead University meet the self-identified needs of older full-time nontraditional undergraduate students at Lakehead University?

The genesis of the research was an observation I made four years ago when I was an aging nontraditional undergraduate student at Lakehead University. I was surprised that I met few undergraduates in my age bracket. I had thought that baby boomers were returning to campuses (Foot, 2001) and wondered why older

undergraduates did not have a visible presence at Lakehead University. These private musings were formalized in this research project.

The research is qualitative and uses narrative analytical methods. Three participants were purposefully selected by meeting three design criteria: 1) they had to be current or recent Lakehead University undergraduate students; 2) they had to be older than 40; and, 3) they had to be able to give insight into the central phenomenon, i.e., the learning experiences of aging nontraditional students at Lakehead University. Narrative stories were obtained in semi-structured interviews. Restored narratives were drafted from transcriptions of the initial interview and from field notes of subsequent collaborative meetings and e-mail communications.

Four themes emerged from the narrative findings: 1) lifelong learning; 2) adult student identities; 3) educational experiences at Lakehead University; and, 4) impacts of age on nontraditional students. The findings are discussed in the following section.

### Discussion of the Results

This section illuminates the learning experiences of aging nontraditional undergraduate students at Lakehead University through a discussion of the findings underlying the four main themes emerged from the study. This study is theoretically grounded in two theoretical streams: 1) in life course theories developed by Elder (1998) and Crosnoe and Elder (2002); and, 2) in theories about factors affecting the persistence of adult learners developed by Castles (2004). These two theoretical streams provide the conceptual framework to the following discussions.

## Lifelong Learning

Participants' narratives revealed that early school experiences have a lifelong effect on future learning. For example, an initial finding revealed that early school experiences significantly affected the route taken to reach undergraduate studies. One participant, an early school leaver, learned informally from family and co-workers and met entrance requirements through independent formal upgrading. Other participants previously obtained entrance qualifications in high school. One, who disliked high school, focused on informal, self development activities, the other, who successfully completed Grade 13, routinely acquired formal training to further her career. However, this variation in nearly school histories did not fully support Castles' (2004) identification that early educational experience was a predictor of success.

These histories did, however, indicate a lifelong love of learning which Castles identifies as a significant intrinsic factor affecting student persistence. In other words, love of learning explains an apparent initial inconsistency with Castles (2004), in that a commitment to lifelong learning had become the participants' new, positive learner identity, replacing a dated negative identity. Engagement in lifelong learning therefore provides intrinsic motivators that positively affect the persistence of older nontraditional undergraduate students.

These varied lifelong learning histories illustrated Schuetze and Slowey's (2002) statement that nontraditional students take winding educational pathways to reach undergraduate studies. They also confirmed that individuals learn throughout their lives (Tough, 1999) and that many nontraditional undergraduate students attend university to expand their employment opportunities (Gorard & Selwyn, 2005). The findings also

revealed that participants sought both intrinsic rewards of self-development and extrinsic rewards of increased civic involvement in confirmation of the 1972 UNESCO declaration.

All of our participants pursued higher education in response to debilitating back injuries that forced them to abandon previous careers. All sought higher education in preparation for different futures. Their actions confirmed Ronka et al (2003) observations about the importance of personal choice and decision-making in the perceptions of and outcomes from life events and transitions. Similarly, the responses to life changing injuries, demonstrated a heightened level of personal agency and planfulness needed to maneuver difficult turning points in their life course (Elder, 1998; Crosnoe & Elder, 2002).

These findings have particular importance to university student advisors who need a rich understanding of nontraditional students. Advice must recognize nontraditional students's educational history, and their degree of personal agency and planfulness. Failure to recognize these issues underlie participants' mixed and sometimes critical comments of their educational experiences at Lakehead University. Concerns are detailed in the following section.

#### Educational Experiences at Lakehead University

Participants in this study valued positive interactions with professors who primarily were described as professional, informed and caring. A few instructors, however, were described as inexperienced, or worse, uninterested. Unfortunately, the participants reported little or no relationship with faculty representatives and

departmental chairs. The importance of positive interactions was consistent with Castles (2004), but also stressed that student success was influenced more by issues of social support, positive work habits and intrinsic and personal attitudes toward learning.

Participants in this study reported a range of experiences with traditional students. One participant was unconcerned about these relationships. Another was fully integrated into the undergraduate student life and had developed many friendships with younger students. Another participant developed no relationships and felt herself isolated within the undergraduate community. Given that all participants were successful, these findings significantly conflict with Castles' (2004) theories. Positive relationships with fellow students did not influence the persistence of the participants in this study.

Lakehead University's student services profoundly influenced nontraditional students' perceptions of their educational experiences. Orientation sessions set positive tones. Library services were described as excellent and supportive. The Learning Assistance Centre was especially praised for offering timely and useful services. The universal praise given these two departments demonstrated that they met fundamental needs. They gave 'support' which Castles (2004) refers to as the primary factor influencing student persistence. Participants, however, reported conflicting experiences with Academic Advising.

Participants both praised and criticized Academic Advising. Participants described the advice they received as informed and timely or alternatively, as late, faulty, misinformed or directed to young student needs. Critical comments applied to

initial and on-going academic advising services indicating that this department did not meet the needs of aging nontraditional students. This is a significant issue as the criticism is a clear expression that Academic Advising frustrated older students' needs for support, strategic educational planning and positive interactions with institutional staff as recommended by Castles (2004). The criticism further suggested that this department neither engendered agency, nor effectively provided adaptive tools enabling adults to persist in challenging transitional situations (Elder (1998).

### Adult Student Identities

Participants identified family as their principal support group. This selection is consistent with widely supported definitions of adult learners which identify complex family relationships as the primary distinguishable feature separating traditional from nontraditional students (Kasworm, 2003 & 2005; O'Heron, 1997; Pusser et al, 2007). Having strong family support is also consistent with Castles (2004), who identifies support as the most important factor affecting student persistence. Similarly, Crosnoe and Elder (2002) determine that 'family member' is the key adult role that sustains individuals throughout their life courses and directly contributes to later life well-being. Therefore, it is not surprising that, aging nontraditional students identified family as their primary concern.

Neither was it shocking that close relationships with younger students and professors were not key components of the participants' adult student identities. Participants did welcome friendships and two of the participants enjoyed collaborative studies with younger students. Similarly, participants valued competent and

professional professors and all valued their professors' respect. One participant thought that her student identity, vis-à-vis professors, developed during the course of undergraduate studies, approaching that of peer at the end of her four-year program. These findings are all consistent with Castles' (2004) who found that interactions with professors was a low ranking indicator of adult student persistence.

Participants maintained their existing worker identities as they developed adult student identities. For example, one participant referred to leaning as his new job. His strategic approach to learning endorses Tough's (1999) assertion that adults seek control to ensure their learning reflects their style and pace. Another sought a new professional career and another, sought a different career within her profession. These findings support literature that describes adult students as practical and goal oriented, seeking educational experiences that are directly relevant to applied work demands (NCES, 2004; Pusser, 2007; Statistics Canada, 2001).

Additional motivators were identified. For example, all participants said attending university was a long held dream and that they were learning for themselves. These intrinsic motivators closely correspond to a love of learning, which Castles (2004) describes as an important factor influencing persistence. These motivators, however, are intrinsic.

It is also noteworthy that each participant in this study was an injured worker who sought a new professional career. In as much as each participant's educational objectives was framed by a workplace injury, it is not surprising that each participant's student identity included his or her worker identity. This is consistent with Stone (2003) who describes the durability of injured worker's identity. Stone informs us that pre-injury

worker identities sustain injured people as they adapt to the consequences brought by their injury.

### The Impacts of Age on Nontraditional Students

All participants expressed concerns that they or other aging nontraditional were separated from the younger traditional students because they were older. They described feeling alone. 'Feeling alone' may be a criteria effect in that selection criteria demanded that participants be current or recent full-time undergraduate students at Lakehead University and be older than 40. The feeling is natural given the demographic reality of Canadian campuses. It is a myth that Canadian campuses are graying. They are in fact becoming younger. Five out of six Canadian undergraduates on Canadian campuses are younger than 25 (AUCC, 2002). These demographic data suggest that feeling alone should be an expected condition.

Age did not affect intellectual abilities or capabilities. To the contrary, all participants sensed heightened acuity and received grades that surpassed marks earned when they were younger. They believed that improved academic achievement resulted from disciplined work ethics, and increases in desire, self-determination and self-awareness. These findings are consistent with Palazesi and Bower (2006) who compare older students' work habits and high achievements to those of traditional students within multigenerational classrooms.

All participants thought professors treated them respectfully, in part because of their age, and all reported getting special treatment because of their age, reporting that



professor gave them high marks because they were older. Participants revealed they might have experienced ageist behaviours.

One participant described a learning environment in which she felt intimidated and isolated by daunting, young undergraduates. She described a poisoned environment that violated Lakehead Universities Harassment and Discrimination Policy and Ontario Human Rights Code's entitlement to equal service without discrimination because of age (R.S.O. 1990. s. 1).

Another student suffered status loss outside of the school community as he transformed from adult worker to student, a role normally associated with young people. Librarians were reported to do all the work for one older student whereas younger students simply were taught how to accomplish tasks. In effect, the older student was required to perform at a reduced standard and her educational program was modified. These reported experiences are examples of infantilization, an ageist discriminatory practice, which defines older people as less capable and assigns status and power levels associated with dependent children. The net effect is that older people are stigmatized and suffer a loss of personhood. Marginalization, in this case separation from the traditional student body, is an inevitable outcome (Hockey & James 1993).

### Implications

While Canadian campuses are not graying and students over 25 represent less than 17% of the undergraduate student population on Canadian campuses, there are local or regional variations and issues that affect nontraditional students. There may

only be 126 full-time undergraduate students over age 40 currently enrolled at Lakehead University but the institution is located within a region that is aging and undergoing profound economic transformation. Retraining and higher education are regional priorities (Southcott, 2002 & 2004). As the region ages and individuals acquire additional knowledge and skills, the university will experience greater impetus to fulfill its commitment to meet the learning needs of individuals throughout their life course (Lakehead University, 2006c). The following policy and practice implications were developed to enrich the educational experiences of aging nontraditional students at Lakehead University,

#### Policy Implications for University Administration

Meeting the needs of learners throughout their life courses is dependent upon enriched understandings of those needs. In response to participants' general feeling about feeling alone as older students, an important first step would be a review of services provided aging nontraditional undergraduate students. Although this is costly, it is recommended that the University appoints a Coordinator of Mature Student Services, reporting to the Vice-Provost (Student Affairs). This staff member would be charged with developing and implementing overriding policy that would guide all institutional staff and departments. Utilizing conventional program compliance techniques, the coordinator would develop action plans to assist staff and departments meet nontraditional student policies. Enacting due diligence business practices, the coordinator would: create training programs to develop staff competencies; prepare and distribute instructional material; implement a monitoring system; and, conduct program

compliance reviews. A principal purpose, however, would be to act as a general resource, providing advice on all emergent problems.

The Office of Academic Advising received particular attention. Clarification of the Office's mandate is required. It advertises services to assist 1st year students, students in transition, students on probation, and undecided students. It certainly has an obligation to older nontraditional students in their first year. However, the Office directs all 2nd, 3rd, or 4th year students to contact their faculty advisor for assistance. A clear finding of this study is that nontraditional students have little or no contact with departmental chairs and faculty representatives. Criticisms suggest that aging nontraditional students are unaware of this service delivery model. Remedial action is required.

In recognition of participants' dissatisfaction, the Office of Academic Advising should designate an advisor to be responsible for all nontraditional students. That advisor should become expert in adult education issues and be able to apply life course analysis to better identify nontraditional student needs. Alternatively university administration, and preferably a newly appointed Coordinator of Mature Student Services, would work with departmental chairs and faculty representatives to develop and advertise student counseling services.

Nontraditional student services need to be advertised. Nontraditional students should be aware of available services. A number of measures can be taken. E-mail and print communications should target the nontraditional student population. In recognition of older student identities and the primacy of family obligations and support, the President, accompanied by Deans and Departmental Chairs, should hold an annual

luncheon to introduce nontraditional students and a significant family member to the services provided by the university community.

### Practice Implications for the University Community

Nontraditional student identities must be better understood to maximize the educational experiences of aging students. For example, it is unlikely that an aging nontraditional student would bring forward concerns that he or she feels alone or marginalized with the undergraduate student community. To do so would reveal a lack of personal agency and weakened educational strategies. Therefore, it is incumbent on university administration to ensure that departmental chairs and professors are sensitized to aging nontraditional student needs and can make appropriate referrals when required.

A lack of planning, or uncertainty about one's educational plan is a major stressor facing aging nontraditional students. The Office of Academic Advising could address this issue if it expanded the use and availability of formal educational plans. In addition to being a proven remedial plan that benefits probationary students, it could serve all nontraditional students by documenting and explaining course requirements and options thereby becoming a course map to steer them through their undergraduate studies. Education plans need to be reviewed annually. An academic advisor could review the plan annually, if it is determined that the Office of Academic Advising maintains on-going responsibility for aging nontraditional students. Alternatively educational plans developed by Academic Advising could be forwarded to departmental chairs who would discuss and review it at annual meetings held every nontraditional student.

Many universities engage and empower nontraditional student by establishing mature student associations or clubs. Mature student clubs provide many additional benefits: they provide a forum in which nontraditional students can express their concerns; they make recommendations to enhance the university community; they foster student ownership of issues affecting individual students; and, they are information clearing houses. There are policy implications to this topic, especially if initial funding is required or if a staff member is assigned to liaise with the association or club.

Social networking is a key function of mature student clubs or associations. Some clubs utilize voluntarily accessed computer programs to promote social interaction. York University's Mature Student Club, for example, utilizes "Facebook", an on-line meeting program. Lakehead University's Office of International Students, however, offers a similar manual system for its clients. That office oversees a buddy system in that provides newly arrived international students with a helpful friend and guide to smooth the transition into a new environment. New students are matched with an experienced student who has interests or cultural and personal traits in common with the new student. A Lakehead University Mature Students Club or Association could provide similar services to new nontraditional students.

#### Suggestions for Further Research

This study of the educational experiences of aging nontraditional undergraduate has focused exclusively on full-time students. It would be worthwhile to study part-time

nontraditional students to identify factors affecting their decision to study part-time. Analysis of nontraditional students' decisions to opt for either full or part time modes of study will provide university administrators opportunities to market nontraditional student services. Effective marketing would both contribute to meeting individual student's educational needs and incidentally develop the full-time undergraduate student body.

Participants in this study all attended Lakehead University. It would be worthwhile to conduct a similar study of the educational requirements of full-time nontraditional students at Confederation College to more completely understand individual and regional educational requirements of nontraditional students throughout Northwestern Ontario.

While all participations in this study were injured workers, only one was involved in the WSIB, Labour Market Reentry Program. His narrative provided detailed information about interactions with a LMR service provider leading to his acceptance into a university program, but focused primarily on his broader experiences as an aging full-time nontraditional undergraduate student. Further research, focusing exclusively on the educational experiences of LMR nontraditional students, would expand our knowledge of the nontraditional student body at Lakehead University.

### Conclusions

This study explored the educational experiences of aging nontraditional students at Lakehead University. Four themes emerged from the present study: (1) lifelong learning, (2) educational experiences at Lakehead University, (3) adult student identities, and, (4) the impacts of age on nontraditional students. Each participant

described feeling alone that to be a defining characteristic of their existence as a full-time aging nontraditional student at Lakehead University.

Analysis of the narrative data that underlay the emergent themes led to an understanding that older students are capable learners with unlimited imagination and intellectual capacity. Age has no relevance to their academic capability. The data did reveal a number of unique needs that are age related. The needs for information, communication and support resulted in a number of suggestions to positively impact institutional policy and practice.

Three participants willingly shared their histories. Allowing their stories to be told is a noble gesture expressing their commitment to the Lakehead University's well-being. I am honoured to have been allowed to articulate their voices.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix A: Interview Themes and Possible Thematic Questions

#### Regarding participant's past educational experiences

1. What is your birth date?
2. Please describe your early school experiences.
3. What was the highest level of education that you achieved?
4. Are you satisfied with that level or do you wish that you had done things differently when first attending school? (Prompt re early school departure and associated low levels of self esteem).
5. When did you first consider pursuing higher education? And why?
6. How soon thereafter did you commence studies? (Probe re delays, barriers etc)

#### Regarding participant's current educational experiences

1. What is your current student status? (Prompt re year, major, program)
2. What is your educational objective?
3. Are you satisfied with your course selection? (Prompt to determine congruence with return to school factors)
4. Are you satisfied with your professors? (Prompt re satisfaction with services provided by teaching assistants.)
5. Does being older affect your relationships with younger students or younger instructors?
6. Are you accessing services from the Learning Assistance Centre? If so, please describe these services. (Prompt to determine level of satisfaction with the centre staff and services)
7. Has your age impacted on your ability to study?
8. Reflecting upon your knowledge of other older students, have you detected academic limitations that are experienced by all older students?
9. How would you describe your abilities to cope with demands common to students regardless of age? (Prompt re incidents when it was more difficult to cope)
10. What are some strategies that people could use to help cope with the demands associated with being an older student?
11. What key words describe your life as an older student?
12. Have you noticed a difference or change in the way people treat you or perceive you following your return to school?
13. Do you think society accepts aging, nontraditional students?

14. Did you have to reorganize or modify your family life, employment life and life in general prior to starting your studies?
15. What is the financial fallout of your decision to return to school?
16. Did you have to negotiate with family members?
17. Has the return to school curtailed social activities?
18. What or who motivates you to continue your studies?
19. Have you experienced any difficulties in your life as a result of your decision to return to school? Can you expand on these experiences? (Prompt re family crises, health crises, financial hardship and social exclusion)
20. Who are the member of the social support group that assists you during your return to school (Prompt re spouse/partner, parents, siblings, children, employer, co-workers, health care professionals)
21. Please describe any support group changes occurring during your studies?
22. How would you describe your current level of satisfaction with your life? Please explain any changes occurring during your studies?

## Regarding the University's response to nontraditional student needs

1. How would you describe your experiences at Lakehead University? Can you suggest improvements?
2. Have you ever required accommodations to be an effective student? If so what was the process to get the accommodations and have they been implemented?
3. Do you think professors demonstrate awareness and sensitivity to the needs of older nontraditional students? (Probe re teaching assistants)
4. Do you think your Faculty demonstrates awareness and sensitivity to the needs of older nontraditional students? What changes would you suggest?)
5. Do you think the library is structured to meet needs of older nontraditional students?
6. Do you think the Learning Assistance Centre meets the needs of older nontraditional students?
7. Do you think the University meets the needs of older nontraditional students?

## Appendix B: Letter for Informed Consent

Title; Restrictive Barriers and Nontraditional Students at Lakehead University

Dear Potential Participant,

I am inviting you to participate in a research project studying the educational experiences of nontraditional students at Lakehead University. The research is conducted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Education degree. Along with this letter is a list of questions about your past and current educational experiences, your broader lived experiences and your perceptions of the university's response to nontraditional student needs. Please look over these questions as they will give structure to subsequent interviews. Noting that you can decline to answer any question, please decide if you wish to participate. An initial interview will last approximately one hour.

The educational experience of nontraditional students is profoundly different than that of traditional students. With your participation, the study will explore, understand and seek ways to enhance the educational experiences of nontraditional undergraduate students and assist the provision of institutional services to Lakehead University's nontraditional student body.

The interview will take from one to two hours and with your permission will be tape recorded and transcribed for further analysis. Many of the questions are personal and there is a slight chance that they might cause minor psychological distress. Such stress would be no greater than could be anticipated if your raised the topics in normal conversation. Regardless, your participation is voluntary. You have complete authority refuse to answer any questions or withdraw from the research at any time without penalty. Following the interview, I will provide a counselor's contact number should you wish to share any concerns.

Your identity will be kept completely confidential and you will be granted anonymity by using a pseudonym. I promise not to share any information that identifies you with anyone other than Dr. Agbo, my supervisor, and research committee members, Dr. Brady and Dr. Kelley. This project has been approved by Lakehead University's Research Ethics Board who may be contacted at (807) 343-8283 if you have any concerns about the interview or participating in the research. I too can be contacted at (807) 768-7458 or [jfmacken@lakeheadu.ca](mailto:jfmacken@lakeheadu.ca). Following the completion of the study, e-mail me or write to Lakehead University to receive a summary of the research.

Please contact me or my supervisor, Dr. Seth Agbo at 807-343-8836 or [sagbo@lakeheadu.ca](mailto:sagbo@lakeheadu.ca). if you have any further questions regarding this research project

Sincerely

John MacKenzie

## Appendix C: Consent Form

### RESTRICTIVE BARRIERS AND NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENTS AT LAKEHEAD UNIVERSITY

I, \_\_\_\_\_ have read and understood the cover letter explaining the nature of the above-named study, its purpose, and procedures and I agree to participate in the study by John MacKenzie on restrictive barriers and nontraditional students at Lakehead University. I also understand the following:

- I am a volunteer and may withdraw my participations at any time.
- There is a minimal risk of psychological distress, and there is the potential to benefit psychologically by talking about my experiences.
- I will be asked questions of a personal nature that may arouse feelings of discomfort. I am under no obligation to answer questions that I am uncomfortable answering.
- The data I provide will be included in the report under a pseudonym and will remain confidential. I will not be named or identified in any way. This information will/may be shared with Dr. Seth Agbo, research supervisor, and members of the supervisory committee.
- I understand that the interview will be tape-recorded and that no one except John MacKenzie will have access to the tape recordings, and that they and all primary data will be securely stored for 7 years at Lakehead University.
- I will receive a summary of the study, upon request, following the completion of the project.

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Signature of the Participant

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Date

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Signature of the Researcher

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Date

Appendix D: Learning Assistance Centre Recruitment Form

The Faculty of Education, Lakehead University

PARTICIPANTS NEEDED FOR  
RESEARCH IN THE EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES OF

- a) ALL NONTRADITIONAL STUDENTS AGED 40 +,  
and
- b) NONTRADITIONAL STUDENTS AGED 40 + SPONSORED BY WSIB'S  
LABOUR MARKET REENTRY PROGRAM

We are looking for volunteers to take part in a study of

RESTRICTIVE BARRIERS AND NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENTS

As a participant in this study, you would be asked to participate in an audio-taped interview and debriefing.

Your participation would involve *two (2)* sessions, each of which is approximately *ninety (90)* minutes. Your participation is completely voluntary. You need not answer any question and have rights to confidentiality and to withdraw from the process at any time, without consequence. In appreciation for your time, you will receive a Lakehead University pen.

For more information about this study, or to volunteer for this study,  
please contact:

*John MacKenzie*  
(Faculty of Education)

at

343-8837 (Campus) or 768-7458 (voice mail)

Email: [jfmacken@lakeheadu.ca](mailto:jfmacken@lakeheadu.ca)

This study has been reviewed by, and received ethics clearance  
through, Lakehead University's Research Ethics Board