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**Perspectives on Learning Environment Within a “Shared Vision”
from “Nontraditional” Female Undergraduates:
An Interpretive Case Study**

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Dissertation

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Dedication

To my first teachers, my parents Betty and Bill Camp, who taught me to inquire, investigate, believe in myself, and challenge myself to do my best.

To my husband and life partner, Jon Mostyn: You provided the support and encouragement for me to return to college to fulfill a dream. You sympathetically listened and cheered me on through this educational journey. I couldn't have reached this point without you. Now it's on to the next adventure!

“It's never too late to be what you might have been.”

George Eliot née Mary Ann Evans

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A special “thank you” is extended to all the official participants in this study, my former students and fellow graduate students from around the world who helped me widen my own perspectives by allowing me into their own unique standpoints, which experiences continue to inspire me to find new ways to engage the increasingly “nontraditional” college students of all ages in this new century.

**Perspectives on Learning Environment Within a “Shared Vision”
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ABSTRACT

This interpretive case study investigated a purposive sample of ten “nontraditional” female undergraduates (age 20-46) who possessed two or more of the United States Dept. of Education “nontraditional” descriptors, which since 2002 no longer includes age as a descriptive factor. Using “standpoint” as a conceptual framework, this study inquired into (1) learning environment preferences and experiences, (2) multiple roles and responsibilities in addition to “student,” and (3) perceptions of one public university’s mission, vision, and values discourses referred to as “Shared Vision.”

Data analyses of focus groups, individual in-depth interviews, field notes, e-mails and follow-up conversations were developed into a thematic conceptual matrix which revealed learning environment preferences usually attributed to adult “nontraditional” students (e.g., Knowles, 1973/1980, Kasworm & Blowers, 1994; Kasworm, Polson, & Fishback, 2002; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). Emergent themes agreed with “adult student” studies (Hair, 2002; Parsons, 2005) addressing dimensions of Cross’ (1981) institutional, situational, informational and dispositional barriers. Analysis of comments regarding the “Shared Vision” institutional discourses, included student and teacher “misbehaviors,” segregated “hangouts,” “culture shock” experienced by some minority and international students, “time-limited” involvement (Lundberg, 2003), and “barriers” in student support services, such as advising (Dukes, 2001), orientation (Julian 2001; Welch 2004); or a combination of multiple factors (Cabrerre-Buggs, 2005; Linnartz, 2005; Miller, 2005; Morton, 2004; Yates, 2002).

Findings concurred with “adult student” dilemmas of multiple roles and responsibilities (e.g., DeRemer, 2002; Garrett, 2002; Hunter, 2002; Illanz, 2002; Kent, 2004, Kettle, 2001; Newman, 2004). Analysis of comments found similarities with other recent studies between traditional and nontraditional age students and/or within-group differences regarding learning environment preferences including instruction and course delivery formats (e.g., Chang, 2003; Coburn, 2003; Elwell, 2004; Garrett, 1998; Hudson, 2005, Kasworm, 1990; Seifried, 2001; Soucy, 1995), and contradicted other studies that found categorical differences (e.g., Bishop-Clark & Lynch, 1992; Houser, 2002).

“Standpoint” as a conceptual framework proved helpful in documenting the multiple dimensions (besides age) contributing to and competing with “student.” The

study concludes with suggestions for improvements to learning environment, alternative instructional formats and student support services to better accommodate today's time-limited nontraditional college students of all ages.

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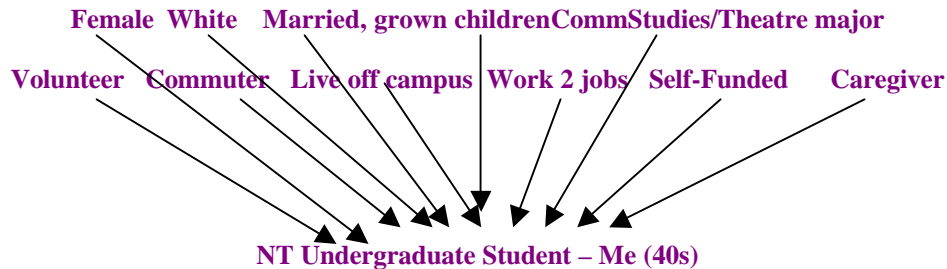
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Chapter I: Introduction

*“We don’t see things as they are. We see them as we are.”
Anais Nin, Diary, v.7, 1980.*



The year was 1994. After a career in legal and professional fields, I returned to college to finish a teaching degree that I had put on hold years before. Many of the current theorists, researchers, and experts in Education and Communication Arts (Theatre and Speech) could have been college classmates 25 years before. Now I’d returned to college with students literally half my age, yet learning information for the first time just as they were. To my shock, and totally against my own learning preferences, every course seemed to require “collaborative” presentation. The Theatre, Speech, and Education classes were almost totally group or “paired” assignments.

I hated relinquishing control over an assignment or project. I couldn’t trust these young strangers to complete their parts, could I? The only class I really felt comfortable in was a science classes that I still needed for my degree. The course, innocently labeled “Health and Nutrition – Science for Non-Science Majors,” was all lecture, memorization of information, and problem-solving on an individual basis. In actuality it was

unbelievably challenging and included organic chemistry, molecular biology, anatomy, and physics, which subjects I had not thought about in years. But at least I had total control of my learning environment and my assignments.

Why is my story remotely relevant to this study? Because when I went to college in the late 1960s and early 1970s, it was not common – it was not even allowed – for students to work together on anything! Every research paper, essay, and assignment had to be each student’s individual independent work. Working together would have been labeled “cheating.” In fact, because my optimum study environment has always been totally alone without distractions from others, I had never even considered study groups. I’ve always been a visual learner – I learn as I read material or type my notes. I remember and “see” information I read on a page or slide. In my opinion “talking it out” with others would just be a waste of my time. After all, I had always been near the top of my class throughout public school and three years of college. School had always been fun, fairly easy, and very satisfying to me.

But then I returned to school in 1994 and found this “collaborative learning” environment. I felt I might have waited too long to go back to school. I didn’t want to “share” my work with anyone! Was that even legal? How would the teachers know how much I had contributed? Would I be graded on someone else’s work? Fortunately, I soon met several other students in the teacher education program who felt the same way I did about school and learning environments. The main difference between us was our ages. I was about the age of their parents. They were around 20-21 years old and had entered college straight from high school. They were highly motivated, fiercely

competitive, and determined to be the top in the class, as was I! Our age differences soon became irrelevant.

I was at the university only one full year and two summers before I graduated. Those of us who enjoyed the same types of learning environment kept together in the cohort of student teachers and managed to make our individual preferences work for us, as we divided up the projects or assignments, feeling secure in the knowledge that we would all have quality work to present and turn in. Even so, every time I had the opportunity to do independent work I felt more comfortable. I graduated in December of 1995, and in January 1996 I began a master's program in Communication Studies at another university. Again I found a combination of independent projects, group presentations, and seminars with heavy emphasis on interactive discussion of readings and research. As before, I tried to seek out those who seemed to have the same learning preferences as I had. I became more comfortable working with other graduate students of various ages. At this time I began to notice that some of the youngest graduate students were better able to take control of their learning and balance their multiple roles and responsibilities away from school than some of the older students, several of whom either dropped out of the program or cut back the hours they were taking. Additionally, some of us "mixed-age" graduate students still enjoyed lecture and structure. And as in my undergraduate experience, we drew together as kindred spirits in our learning preferences, and tended to work together in presentation groups.

My own learning preferences were established in elementary school and have remained the same to the present, although my experiences have required me to adapt and adjust to the current dominant instructional strategies. This study is a culmination of

observations and experiences over the past ten years as a nontraditional undergraduate and graduate student in a new (for me) environment of “collaborative learning.” These experiences focused my attention on the variety of learning environment preferences, and the multiple roles and responsibilities that affect and influence many of today’s undergraduates of all ages.

A. Rationale

Over the last thirty years college undergraduate populations have changed dramatically. In a Special Analysis 2002, the U. S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (NCES 2002) cited comparative statistics from 1970 and 1999. Overall, the undergraduate population is 72% larger than in 1970 (7.4 million has grown to 12.7 million). Women are now in the majority – 56% up from 42% in 1970. Students termed “traditional” comprise only twenty-seven percent of the total.

Research studies done in the 1980s divided “traditional” and “nontraditional” students by age. However, in the last ten or fifteen years the term “nontraditional” has encompassed a range of definitions. For example, complicating the definition of nontraditional student is the issue of diversity. Statistics from 1999-2000 listed in NCES 2002 reported that a third of undergraduates were other than White (NCES’s term), 43% were 24 years and older, 27% had dependents, 13% were single parents, 80% were employed (39% of those worked full-time), and 9% reported some type of disability. The term “nontraditional” student now contains a wide range of characteristics, but the most recent Dept. of Education (2002) “nontraditional” descriptors do not include age! More importantly, a growing number of “younger” students who would be classified as

“traditional” (under twenty-five) have two or more of the Department of Education “nontraditional” characteristics.

Relevant to this study are some other statistics (NCES, 2002) that may challenge current pedagogical techniques and the structure of classroom learning environment. In the United States the percentage of White students has decreased, while the percentage of students from other ethnic groups has increased – from 25% in 1989-90 to one-third in 1999-2000. In addition, the percentage of students working full-time has increased by 7%, while the percentage of students working part-time has decreased by 9%, and a growing number are first-generation college students. In response to these percentage changes, it will be helpful to inquire about student learning preferences and perception of experiences in the mixed-age multicultural undergraduate classroom.

This study investigated learning preferences and classroom experiences from the multiple standpoints of a select group of “nontraditional” female undergraduates at one particular university, along with an inquiry into their multiple roles and responsibilities. The study further investigated these students’ perceptions of that university’s “Shared Vision” discourses.

Along with changing university student populations nationwide, one Texas public university (hereafter referred to as “State”) recently (February 2003) installed a new President, who introduced the theme of “Claiming Tomorrow: A Shared Vision.” Shortly thereafter, a number of revised policy discourses put forth State’s mission, values, and vision.

State was for many years a teacher education institution. In the last dozen or so years the previous administration promoted a strong initiative to increase both research

and the number and types of graduate programs. With the inauguration of a new President in 2003 those foci were joined by the new Administration's stated intention (in both oral and written form) to actively pursue faculty, staff, and students who would more appropriately reflect "the diverse population of Texas and the world beyond." Among the discourses posted on the university website www.txstate.edu were these (*with my emphasis added*):

"Vision Statement:

(State) will be recognized as one of the top three public universities of choice in Texas. We will be known for *our learner-centered environment*, offering students the advantages of both a small college and a large multifaceted university, valuing research and creative activity, and emphasizing the *central importance of teaching and learning*."

"Mission Statement:

(State) is a public, *student-centered*, doctoral granting institution dedicated to excellence in *servicing the educational needs of the diverse population of Texas and the world beyond*."

"Shared Values:

An *exceptional undergraduate experience* as the heart of what we do;
...
A *diversity of people and ideas, a spirit of inclusiveness, a global perspective, and a sense of community* as essential conditions for campus life;
...
Engaged teaching and learning based in dialogue, student involvement and the free exchange of ideas;
...
...
Thoughtful reflection, collaboration, planning and evaluation as essential for *meeting the changing needs of those we serve*."

B. Significance

Institutional Research (Fall 2005) revealed some interesting statistics about State's undergraduate population. Only twenty-two percent of students live on campus, yet eighty percent (the same percentage as NCEES 2002) attend full time. These statistics qualify State as a "commuter" campus. The percentage of students twenty-five and under

is 86% (compared with 57%, NCES 2002), minority populations have grown to 28% (compared with 33%, NCES 2002), and female undergraduates comprise 55% of the total (compared with 56%, NCES 2002). The significance of this study is that, since State represents a local example of the Department of Education demographics describing nontraditional students, the information obtained from the study will likely be very helpful at many other public universities, where student demographics are changing. Contrary to earlier predictions that the undergraduate population average age would increase with the surge in “adult” students over the age of twenty-five, at this university and many others there seems to be a trend toward more younger students who are in “nontraditional” categories other than age. For instance, in a comparison study with a similar study from 1995, Morton (2004) found that “nontraditional” students were younger than in an earlier study at the same institution.

My case study of one purposive sample of nontraditional female students illustrates that much of the past (and current) research using two arbitrary age categories of “traditional” and “nontraditional” may no longer be valid or relevant. Student roles and responsibilities are more complex, even though the students may be traditional-age. Further, the perceptions and experiences from each female student’s unique standpoint in this study may provide helpful feedback to the Administration regarding State’s vision, mission, and values discourses regarding its “Shared Vision.” In a larger context, the findings may contribute to a deeper, more meaningful understanding of the numerous roles and responsibilities, as well as the range of learning environment preferences from the unique standpoints of one group of today’s “nontraditional” female undergraduates as that term is now defined by the Department of Education.

C. Need for the study

Because the demographic makeup of today's college populations is changing, and colleges are beginning to target specific populations for recruitment, it will be important to find out as much as possible about them and their backgrounds, as well as their learning environment preferences and their lives away from the classroom. Many of State's students are first generation college students who may feel pressure to conform to a strange new environment. Quite a few students come from "blended" ethnic families and are often hesitant or insecure about discussing their backgrounds. Access to multiple forms of financial aid allows students from a range of socio-economic strata to attend college in numbers larger than ever before. Students from Mexico, South America, and countries around the world come to the United States to attend college, bringing their own prior educational experiences, diverse religious and family customs, and cultural backgrounds with them.

State's vision, mission, and values discourses use very specific language in speaking about the relationship of the university with its students. Wodak and Meyer (2001) describe the use of discourses as "...the result of the selection made by speakers or writers in their (my emphasis) mental models of events or their more general, socially shared beliefs...that influences the mental models, and hence the opinions and attitudes of recipients...and may have most obvious social consequences" (p. 103). Littlejohn (2002) comments that "...the 'real world' is to a large extent unconsciously built on the language habits of the group...We see and hear and otherwise experience very largely as we do because the language habits of our community predispose certain choices of interpretation" (p. 177).

State's institutional discourses through the use of specific symbolic institutional language in essence refer to "engaged pedagogy" as described by hooks (1994). She says that "to teach in varied communities not only our paradigms must shift but also the way we think, write, speak. The engaged voice must never be fixed and absolute but always changing, always evolving in dialogue with a world beyond itself" (p. 12). After several years under the "Shared Vision" discourses, I wanted to hear how these discourses were being perceived and interpreted by some of State's nontraditional female undergraduates who are themselves representatives of "varied communities" in their learning environments at State.

D. Conceptual framework

State's discourses are framed in specific institutional language, in which certain perspectives or "standpoints" may be foregrounded and others may be minimized, marginalized, or ignored altogether. Gee (1999) states that the primary function of human language is "to scaffold the performance of social activities...and to scaffold human affiliation within cultures and social groups and institutions" (p. 1). Messages (and institutional discourses) are situated within local meanings and semantic selections intentionally made by the producers of the texts to represent socially shared beliefs and values. I began the data collection within a preliminary conceptual framework based on Bourdieu's notion of "cultural and symbolic capital." In its institutionalized state cultural capital "provides academic credentials and qualifications which create a certificate of cultural competence which confers on its holder a conventional, constant, legally guaranteed value with respect to power" (Hayes, 2004). I felt it would be helpful to inquire into the discourses put forth by the Administration in juxtaposition with the

situated symbolic meanings given to those discourses by some of the nontraditional female students referenced in the discourses. However, as I continued to read the literature, I encountered a number of case studies and articles using “standpoint” as a conceptual and/or theoretical framework (e.g., Allen, 1996, Collins, 1991; Dougherty, 2001; Franks, 2002; Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1997, 2004; Hartsock, 1997; Hekman, 1997a, 1997b; Hennessy, 1993; Janack, 1997; Martin, Reynolds, & Keith, 2002; Mawkesworth, 2002; Orbe, 1998; Smith, 1997; Sprague & Greer, 1998; Swigonski, 1994; Wylie, 2003). After reflecting on the participant demographic questionnaire (Appendix B) I came to believe that the discussions and answers would more closely relate to each student’s perspectives or “standpoints,” from her own unique multiple roles and responsibilities, rather than from the cultural and/or symbolic capital that she brought to the university.

In the area of critical research the concept of “standpoint(s)” as locations for societal power positions was adapted from Marxist theory in the 1970s and ‘80s into “feminist standpoint” (Haraway, 1988; Hartsock, 1983) or “women’s standpoint” (Smith, 1987) to stress differences from masculine or male standpoint. Delpit (1988) referred to different ethnicities’ standpoints when she explained that “those with power are frequently least aware of it, or least willing to acknowledge it’s existence (and) those with less power are often most aware of its existence” (p. 282). This study was not conceived nor conducted in the critical research domain, but rather as interpretive research as defined by Merriam (1998). However, it must be acknowledged that issues of power and authority exist within a university system and “our ways of knowing are forged in history and relations of power” (hooks, 1994, p. 30). Merriam (1998) refers to

interpretive research in education as “a process and school is a lived experience. Understanding the meaning of the process or experience constitutes the knowledge to be gained from an inductive...mode of inquiry. Multiple realities are constructed socially by individuals” (p. 4). Over time the idea of “a standpoint” of any kind has been challenged, modified, and disputed because of a variety of interpretations and implementations, which will be discussed further in the Review of Literature. I will also clarify my specific interpretation of that term.

E. Background to the study

The historical “traditional” path for a college student was to enter college directly from high school and obtain a degree in about four years, at an age of twenty-two or twenty-three. Those students were likely to be similar in both appearance and experience. Over time as students began returning to college at various ages, the label “nontraditional” came into customary usage to refer to anyone not following the “traditional” path. Along with chronological age, the distinction between the two classifications of students has included such qualifiers as time between high school and college entry, marital status, full or part-time status, commuter or resident status, and whether or not the student has children (DeRemer, 2002; Dzindolet & Weinstein, 1994; Hunter, 2002; Kettle, 2001; Macari, 2003). Further complicating the definition of “nontraditional” for research purposes is the inclusion of immigrants, international students, first in family to attend and/or graduate from college, and/or minorities (e.g., Thomas, 2005; Tseng, 2001). So many other factors have been subsumed under the term “nontraditional” as to render the term meaningless from one study to another. In just the last few years studies using the terms traditional and/or nontraditional have been

consistently inconsistent in their definitions of those two populations (cf. Broschard, 2005; Kasworm, 2003a, 2003b; Lundberg, 2003; Macari, 2003).

More and more students do not fit the “traditional” student label, as the term is defined by the U. S. Department of Education (2002). In 2003, Ascribe Higher Education News Service (March 11, 2003) touted a \$950,000 research grant given by the Lumina Foundation to the University of Virginia’s Higher Education Center to study “nontraditional” students, defined by the U. S. Department of Education as “someone with two of the following characteristics: has delayed enrollment in postsecondary education following high school; has enrolled in a postsecondary program on a part-time status; works full time; is classified as financially independent for financial aid purposes; has dependents other than a spouse; is a single parent; or does not have a high school diploma.” As with the NCES 2002 the criteria did not include age.

Before proceeding, I would like to clarify the specific focus of this study. A large body of research and literature has built up around Malcolm Knowles, often called the father of adult education, and the concepts of andragogy, associative learning and lifelong learning (Smith, 2002). Knowles’ concept of andragogy and adult learners will be addressed briefly in the Review of Literature. Wonderful programs, theories and educational materials have been developed over the past thirty years addressing “adult” education with students usually defined as “over 25” or who “have had a break in education since high school.” Discussion of adult education studies relating to the current study will also be addressed in the Review of Literature.

The focus of this study was not “lifelong learners,” “continuing education” or “learning in adulthood,” but rather the focus was on a group of female nontraditional

undergraduates. This study utilized the U. S. Department of Education “nontraditional” college student categories, which no longer include age. All but one of my participants was under the age of 25. In the study I asked a select group of female undergraduates about their learning environment preferences and perceptions of learning experiences based on their unique multiple standpoints. Following is a detailed statement of the problem, research questions, delimitations and limitations, and definition of terms.

F. Statement of the problem

This study inquired into the learning environment preferences of one group of “nontraditional” female students, their perceptions of actual classroom experiences, their multiple roles and responsibilities in addition to “student,” and their perceptions and interpretations of State’s “Shared Vision.” discourses.

While inquiring into learning preferences and experiences of these students, I wanted to clarify in what ways they fit into the ambiguous and problematic category of “nontraditional” student. As mentioned in the Background to the study, the term “nontraditional” could refer to a wide range of criteria, such as age, work status, time between high school and entry into college, marital status, children, ethnicity, resident or commuter status, ability, or a combination of any of the foregoing (and possibly other) life circumstances, which I chose to label “standpoint(s)” – position(s) from which objects, persons, events, or discourses are judged.

G. Research Questions

The main research questions were:

RQ1: What are some of the learning environment preferences of one purposeful selection of nontraditional female students at State?

RQ2: What are the roles and responsibilities of these nontraditional female students?

RQ3: How do these nontraditional female students perceive and interpret State's "Shared Vision" discourses?

H. Delimitations and limitations of the study

1. Delimitations:

The study was delimited by exclusion of nontraditional male undergraduates. A further delimitation of participants was the invitation of only former students of mine who met two or more of the Dept. of Education's "nontraditional" criteria. Females currently comprise a majority (55%) of State's undergraduates. As a female "nontraditional" student myself for the last ten years, I wanted to investigate other nontraditional female students' preferences for learning environments compared to their perceived experiences. Also, because I have had to juggle multiple roles and responsibilities while pursuing my degrees, I wanted to investigate some other nontraditional female students' multiple life situations and standpoints. Further, I wanted to closely inquire into their perceptions of the institutional discourses from State's Administration regarding the vision, mission, and values included in the "Shared Vision."

2. Limitations:

Because this study was conducted at one specific campus, it is immediately applicable to that one public state university and the discourses grouped under the concept of "Shared Vision." A possible limitation of the study is that this particular university has a large percentage (almost 80%) of commuters. The responses in some cases may have been influenced by the students' life situations that often accompany

commuter status, such as living and/or working in town but off-campus, living and/or working in another town, possibly married, and possibly with children, or a combination of these (and perhaps other) situations.

I. Definition of Terms

Traditional Student: The NCES (2002) Special Analysis defines a traditional student as “one who earns a high school diploma, enrolls full time immediately after finishing high school, depends on parents for financial support, and either does not work during the school year or works part-time.” (Age is not specified.)

Nontraditional Student: The NCES (2002) Special Analysis identifies a nontraditional student as one who has any of the following characteristics:

- Delays enrollment (does not enter postsecondary education in the same calendar year that he or she finished high school);
- Attends part time for at least part of the academic year;
- Works full time (35 hours or more per week) while enrolled;
- Is considered financially independent for purposes of determining eligibility for financial aid;
- Has dependents other than a spouse (usually children, but sometimes others);
- Is a single parent (either not married or married but separated and has dependents); or
- Does not have a high school diploma (completed high school with a GED or other high school completion certificate or did not finish high school).

(The term “nontraditional” may also include ethnic groups, immigrants, and international students. Again, age is not specified.)

Learning Environment: Preferred manner of receiving instruction from a range of pedagogical strategies, such as lecture, large or small group discussion, student presentation, reading response, worksheets and handouts. Learning environment would also include class size, optimum number of students, the preferred physical arrangement

of desks, tables and chairs, and structure for communication interaction. (Definition adapted from Chang, 2003; Hair, 2002; Kasworm, Polson and Fishback, 2002).

Standpoint: Includes multiple dimensions of race, class, gender, socio-economic status, age, ability, work situation or occupation, marital and/or family status, religious affiliation, sexual orientation, nationality and/or ethnicity (and possibly additional factors). There is no “correct” or “true” perspective, only partial or incomplete perspective/viewpoint because of the multiple dimensions included in an individual’s standpoint(s). People in power positions have more resources to enforce their standpoint, while people in less powerful positions often have better insights into a situation because they are outside the power position. (Adapted from Collins, 1991, 2000; Delpit, 1988; Orbe, 1998).

J. Summary

Students classified as “nontraditional” comprise a growing percentage of college populations; the numbers are projected to increase, while the average age of those students is going down. Women have grown to represent a majority of college students and many of them fall into multiple “nontraditional” categories as specified by NCES 2002. The following review of literature will provide an overview of mixed-age college classroom research using “nontraditional,” “adult,” and “older” labels, relevant research in Education and other disciplines in higher education, research using related conceptual and analytic frameworks including “standpoint,” and recent research illustrating the confusion among studies using nontraditional age categories, which support a need for more complete information about today’s nontraditional female undergraduates’ learning environment preferences and their multiple roles and responsibilities (standpoints).

Further, several years into State's "Shared Vision," it should be helpful to inquire into the discourses' perception and interpretation from the individual standpoints of one purposefully selected group of nontraditional female students.

Chapter II: Review of Literature

*“In times like these, memories of past struggles can give us hope in the realization that history is always in process and changing, as the present turns into the past, and as the past reappears to us in new light.”
Weiler, 1998, p.258*

Chapter II provides a review of literature, beginning with a brief clarification of what will not be in the review, a general overview of mixed-age college classroom research, followed by a brief discussion of research using the labels “nontraditional,” “older,” and “adult” synonymously or interchangeably. Next follows a discussion of relevant research from a range of disciplines in higher education. The review of literature concludes with a discussion of research using related conceptual and analytic frameworks to the study, research using “standpoint” in a variety of situations and interpretations, recent research indicating new areas of interest and focus regarding nontraditional students, and an argument for a comprehensive focus on today’s female nontraditional students. Specifically, this study focuses on their learning environment preferences in the mixed-age college classroom compared with their experiences, their multiple roles and responsibilities, and the contribution the study will make to State in particular and to higher education in general.

Before beginning the review of literature, following is an explanation of what will not be part of the review or this study. A large body of research and study focuses on adult learners and lifelong learning based on the concepts envisioned by Eduard Lindeman and later Malcolm Knowles. A wealth of adult education research and literature (e.g., Cross, 1981; Daloz 1986/1999; Hayes & Flannery, 2000; Kasworm, 1982,

1990, 1993, 2003a, 2003b; Kasworm & Blowers, 1994; Kasworm, Polson & Fishbeck, 2002; Kegan, 1994; Knowles, 1973/1990, 1980; Merriam, 1988, 1998; Merriam & Associates, 2002; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999; Mezirow, 1991; Tennant & Pogson, 1995) addresses the dilemmas of juggling work and family responsibilities while pursuing further education. There are many valuable “adult education” programs, departments, and specialized degrees. Most distinguish “adult” learners from children and adolescent learners with reference to age. Knowles (1973) described adult or lifelong learning as a vision:

a prospect of a future education and learning in which all people, in many ways and using a variety of resources, can with ease engage in learning throughout their lives. The promise is that through lifelong learning lives can become more meaningful and, in consequence, the society more perfect. (p. 3)

He elaborated the concept of “andragogy” and the characteristics of adult learners as distinctly different from children:

1. Self-concept: As a person matures his self-concept moves from one of being a dependent personality toward one of being a self-directed human being.
2. Experience: As a person matures he accumulates a growing reservoir of experience that becomes an increasing resource for learning.
3. Readiness to learn: As a person matures his readiness to learn becomes oriented increasingly to the developmental tasks of his social roles.
4. Orientation to learning: As a person matures his time perspective changes from one of postponed application of knowledge to immediacy of application, and accordingly his orientation toward learning shifts from one of subject-centeredness to one of problem centeredness.
5. Motivation to learn: As a person matures the motivation to learn is internal (Knowles, 1980, p. 39).

Almost all college students today are over the age of 18 and are considered (and consider themselves to be) adults. Many of them, while under the age of twenty-five, possess the “adult” qualities described by Knowles and others. One recent study found that pedagogical instruction did not help learning outcomes in traditional age students, but that they preferred and showed more academic gains from collaborative andragogical (Adult) methods (Petty, 2004).

A. Historical overview of mixed-age college classroom research

As mentioned earlier, research studies investigating learning and learning environments in mixed-age college classrooms have been inconsistent in their conceptualization and operationalization of the terms “traditional” and “nontraditional” students. Traditional students were customarily classified in very early studies as eighteen to twenty-two years old. Beginning in the 1970s most studies used twenty-five as an arbitrary age cut-off point. However, in the last twenty years or so, along with chronological age, the distinction between the two classifications of students has included such additional qualifiers as time between high school and college entry, marital status, employment status, commuter or resident status, and whether or not the student has dependents (DeRemer, 2002; Dzindolet & Weinstein, 1994; Hagedorn, 2005; Hunter, 2002; Kettle, 2001; Lundberg, 2003; Macari, 2003). Further complicating the definition of “nontraditional” for research purposes is the inclusion of immigrants, international students, “adult” learners (e.g., DeRemer, 2002; Dukes, 2001); students pursuing degrees usually pursued by the opposite gender (King-Toler, 2004); and/or minorities (Thomas, 2005; Tseng, 2001).

Kasworm (1990) performed a meta-analysis using qualitative content analysis of ninety-six documents to identify the various areas of adult student research. Kasworm found that most early research defined adult students (mid-twenties and above) as distinct from young adult students (late teens to early twenties), the implication being that adult students were somehow categorically different. However, her meta-analysis of documents found differential adult intragroup characteristics along with similar intergroup characteristics with traditional-aged students. Kasworm suggested that research should address the undergraduate student “at any age – whether 18, 35, or 72 – and in any life situation” (p. 367). More recently, Kasworm, Polson, and Fishback (2002) provided a valuable sourcebook with regard to needs of “adult” students (25 and over), their learning environment preferences, multiple roles, backgrounds, and ultimate success in higher education.

B. Research using “nontraditional” synonymously or interchangeably with “older” or “adult” student

With regard to nontraditional-age, studies have focused on such areas as psychological and learning issues of older students (Chism, Cano, & Pruitt, 1989; Coburn, 2003; Drago, 2004; Emsch, 2005; Hagedorn, 2005); successful learning strategies and performance (Ford, 1998; Garrett, 1998; Hair, 2002; Hunter, 2002; Roddy, 2005; Sanders & Wiseman, 1990; Sheehan, McMenamin, & McDevitt, 1992); program design and course delivery time frame (Collins, 2005; Parsons, 2005; Petty, 2004); motivation and/or persistence, completion, and/or success, and satisfaction (e.g., Chao & Good, 2004; Donohue & Wong, 1997; Feldman, 2004; Kent, 2004; Newman, 2004; Samuels, 2005); emotional, psychosocial, and/or cognitive differences (Broschard, 2005;

Macari, 2003; Melton, 2006); student services (Cabrere-Buggs, 2005; Hoy, 2004; Linnartz, 2005; Miller, 2005; Morton, 2004; Sherman, 2005; Welch, 2004; Yates, 2002); and teacher education for nontraditional students (Barker, 1997; Manos & Kasambira, 1998). While students over the age of twenty-five (and a range of other arbitrary age cut-offs) are currently classified in one category, it seems reasonable to expect that there are differences and insights that may be obtained from students at various points along the age spectrum (see Kasworm, 1982, 1990; Kasworm, Polson, & Fishback, 2002), as well as from the numerous other “nontraditional” categories, and from students under 25).

C. Research incorporating “learning” in college environments

A review of literature in Education, Communication and other disciplines reveals contradictory findings from one study to another. Studies have included such factors as student gender (Latragna, 1997), teacher gender (Anderson, 1997; Howard & Henney, 1998), emotional intelligence (Drago, 2004; Phillips, 2005) and student ethnicity (Anderson, 2001; Barker, 1997; Chang, 2003; Latragna, 1997). Other studies investigated classroom environment (Bowman, 1989; Hair, 2002) and student-teacher interaction (Fusani, 1994; Hogan, 2004). Still other “learning” studies used a combination of these factors with specific outcomes (Coburn, 2003; Eppler & Harju, 1997; Feldman, 2004; Houser, 2002; Howard & Baird, 2000; Hunter, 2002; Lynberg, 2003; Nussbaum, 1992). Kasworm (1993) pointed out that the term “nontraditional” may carry its own negative connotation to denote “outsiders” from the norm and may lead to stereotypical assumptions and less than equal treatment by others. (See also “labels” in Westbrook & Sedlacek, 1991).

D. Relevant research using related conceptual, methodological or analytical frameworks

Bishop-Clark and Lynch (1992) used focus groups to investigate learning experiences of “older” students (age 26-56). Older students confirmed former research that continually documented nontraditional (age) students’ preference for more realistic interactive learning, with many younger students being more content with a passive lecture format.

Kasworm and Blowers’ (1994) qualitative case study inquired of “adult” students the complex relationship of experiences and meaning for those over age twenty-five. They conducted interviews relating to student role vs. adult role, engagement in learning, and perceptions of involvement in the college experience. Some students admitted “disguising” themselves as younger students to avoid discrimination and to keep the instructor from grading them more harshly than younger students. The study concluded that, based on the participants’ own observations and comments, adult students of various ages had disparate beliefs and learning experiences in both mixed-age and segregated-age classrooms. An investigation of adult students under 25 would have given additional valuable information.

Soucy (1995) used Kolb’s Learning Style Inventory and Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) to determine the relationship between status (traditional – 18-22 years or nontraditional 29 years and over) and learning style, personality type, gender, marital status, and employment. Interestingly, students between the ages of 22 and 29 were not included! She found that student status (T age or NT age) was not significantly related to either learning style or personality type. The relevance to this study is Soucy’s

observation that knowledge of learning styles (preferences) would be very beneficial in constructing more effective learning opportunities and instructional techniques for all students, regardless of age. Her study gives reason to question the continuing division of students into arbitrary age groups for research purposes.

Anderson (1997) used focus groups and questionnaires to investigate what traditional students (under 22) and adult students (over 22 and not attending college directly from high school) value in college instructor characteristics and behaviors, which would include structure of the learning environment. Adults and women valued instructor characteristics and behaviors more than traditional students and men. The differences between women and men (regardless of age) proved greater than between adults and traditional students. Cognitive type behaviors such as “course preparation” and “subject competency” ranked higher than affective type behaviors, such as “responsive to student needs.” This study also speaks to the importance of knowing what type(s) of learning environment today’s nontraditional students prefer, regardless of age.

Latragna (1997) used interviews and surveys to examine multiculturalism and student perceptions of social interaction among students and faculty, perceptions of the curriculum, and how gender and race might contribute to five dimensions of classroom learning environment: among them and relevant to the study were student learning preference, instruction, group activities, curriculum, and instructor-student interactions. The intent was to inquire into perceived discriminatory behavior or biased interactions across the dimensions. There were significant differences across gender and race. More females preferred nontraditional, cooperative or student-centered instruction. More students of color believed that the curriculum did not represent diverse perspectives, and

was presented from a “white male perspective” leaving out other racial, ethnic, and gender perspectives (Kasworm, Polson, and Fishback (2002). More females and students of color preferred instruction that dealt with cultural and ethnic identities. Most white students did not perceive unequal interactions, while students of color did, as well as feeling the instruction and curriculum were not inclusive. This study is relevant because the results show that many students, based on their unique standpoint(s), perceive they are not being well served by the instructors, instructional techniques, and possibly the curriculum being utilized. State would definitely benefit from finding out how some of its own nontraditional female students perceive their learning environments from their own unique, multiple standpoints.

McCollin (1998) used rating scales to obtain student perception of teacher instructional styles and whether there were any differences between faculty and student perceptions of teaching style. Student variables included age, gender, course, major, rank, and part-time or full-time status. One finding relevant to my study was that students rated instructors as more teacher-centered than the teachers rated themselves, which finding speaks to the need for an inquiry into the perceptions of some of State’s nontraditional female students and their learning experiences in a “learner-centered environment” as specified in the “Shared Vision.”

Herrington (2000) questioned how courses could be designed to meet the intellectual needs of nontraditional (age) students. Observation and debriefings found that many adult students experienced high levels of fear on entering the classroom. Working on course-content tasks in collaboration and interaction with classmates helped reduce that fear. He further found that lecture format prolongs fear and serves as a

barrier to participation. Instructor-facilitated joint-problem-solving was found to be the most productive. These findings reflect the discourses of “inclusion” promoted by State’s “Shared Vision.” However, many classes at State, both lower and upper level, are still delivered in lecture format in large auditoriums.

Dukes (2001) interviewed and observed students age 25 and older to produce a qualitative case study identifying needs of adult students with regard to student career/advising centers and services. The multiple roles and responsibilities of these students affected their ability to utilize many of the services. “Nontraditional” students under age 25 may likely experience some of the same difficulties and barriers due to their multiple roles and responsibilities.

Slonim (2001) conducted a qualitative case study from a feminist theoretical perspective to investigate possibilities and limitations of the use of feminist and critical pedagogies in a graduate classroom. The case study investigated the connection between the classroom and general society as students studied learning strategies for their own individual purposes. Specifically, students studied in an atmosphere that highlighted context, voice, silence, process over product, and the redefinition of student/teacher relationship. She implemented use of journals, autobiographies, and observation in the study. The autobiographies were especially helpful in revealing the multiple roles, responsibilities and standpoints of the students. The results showed that some of her “adult students” did not fit the andragogical model, in that some wanted or needed more structure, guidance and instruction. Although all the students were over age 25, not all had “obvious cognitive or developmental differences” from younger students regarding learning mentioned in some “adult” student studies.

DeRemer (2002) used Interactive Qualitative Analysis to generate, organize and analyze data from focus groups regarding the decision to leave school before completion. Results showed that school experiences, financial concerns, and unexpected crises were primary drivers (causes) that might propel a “nontraditional” (over age 24) student to drop out. The multiple roles and responsibilities, the relationship between costs and benefits of persisting, and juggling outside demands often competed with concentration on coursework. This study was valuable in highlighting a current dilemma of many college students. However, it may be expected that some “nontraditional” students under the age of 24 are also affected by similar competing demands and pressures.

Two recent studies produced findings contradictory to many “persistence” studies. Illanz (2002) used Pascarella and Terenzini’s (1980) scale adapted from Tinto’s (1975) model of student withdrawal. Results showed that factors external to the college did not relate to academic persistence or attrition, which contradicts most “barriers” studies that say external factors are very important, especially family, work, and multiple demands. Hunter (2002) investigated nontraditional students (25 and over, low income, first generation or ADA) using the Academic Persistence Scale and factor analysis regarding academic intention to persist, needs influencing persistence, help-seeking, and self-concept. None of the factors correlated with any of the other factors.

Hair (2002) used interviews, focus groups and a demographic questionnaire to examine the experiences of ten White and ten Black nontraditional undergraduate women and their preferred learning environment, why they chose to return to higher education, and any barriers (see Cross, 1981) they might have encountered. She found that regardless of age, race, or socioeconomic background, most preferred “a more engaged

pedagogy where their past experiences are valued as part of the teaching/learning process.” She also found that some of the women indeed felt situational, institutional, and/or dispositional barriers because of race, age, and gender. Although she interviewed nontraditional age women, the same questions put to traditional-age nontraditional students might have produced a more complete picture.

Houser (2002) focused on traditional and nontraditional (age) students’ learning orientations and expectations of instructor communication behaviors, and the connection between expectations and student classroom motivation and learning. She found that nontraditional students (23 years and over) had higher levels of trait motivation and learning orientation, while traditional students were less trait motivated and more grade oriented. While Houser found nontraditionals more learning oriented and internally motivated, both age categories desired more clarity from their instructors. She concluded her study with the comment that “there was a strong delineation continuously drawn between the traditional and nontraditional (age) students, when the differences may not have been quite so clear. It would have been interesting in many of the research questions to investigate within group variance” (p. 195). Ethnicity and other nontraditional factors of the participants, which were not requested on the demographic information form, might also have contributed valuable information regarding similarities and differences in preferences for learning environment within the age groups.

Kasworm (2003a) focused on “adult” students over the age of 30, and how they constructed knowledge in the classroom as it related to roles at work, with family, self, and community. Using a naturalistic inquiry approach, she produced a qualitative case study reflecting the students’ “tensions of adult living and...the unique interaction of

collegiate learning and adult life roles” (p. 84). The five “knowledge voices” identified in the study illustrated ways that the adults in the study constructed and negotiated learning along with its interaction with outside responsibilities. She quoted the definition of adult learning from Catherine Twomey Fosnot (1996, p. ix): “...a self-regulatory process of struggling with the conflict between personal models of the world and discrepant new insights, constructing new representations and models of reality as a human meaning-making venture with culturally developed tools and symbols, and further negotiating such meaning through cooperative social activity, discourse, and debate” (p. 81). Her valuable study included undergraduates from 30 to 59 and included both male and female students in their multiple roles and responsibilities. However, equally valuable insights may be gained from inquiring into the experiences of younger (especially female) nontraditional “adult” undergraduates who also have multiple outside roles and responsibilities to whom the definition of “adult learner” applies.

E. Standpoint, Standpoint Theory, Feminist Standpoint Theory, and Standpoint Research

Standpoint basically refers to a position in society (as in Hegel’s master/slave relationship or Marx’s proletariat/working class division of labor). Standpoint theory posits that knowledge is “situated” and “perspectival” and that there are multiple “standpoints” that produce knowledge. People and groups have differing perspectives or viewpoints depending on socio-economic, cultural, ethnic, and symbolic interpretation, which incorporates “cultures of power” (Delpit, 1988) and control of labor, money, and decision-making. “Feminist standpoint theory,” drawing on Marxist theory that men had a different standpoint from women, became a tool to problematize masculinist theories

and challenge masculinist “reality” (Hartsock, 1983). Smith (1987) developed a method for sociological research from the “women’s standpoint” which she distinguished from a “feminist standpoint.” However, the concept of only one “feminist” standpoint was continually challenged by women who were non-Western, non-white, non-Christian, and non-heterosexual, among a variety of categories. As Harding (1991) observed, there is no “typical woman’s life” (p.10) or typical woman’s experience, which in itself is an essentialist concept. (See also Franks, 2002; Kruks, 1995; Mawkesworth, 2002).

Standpoint has been used and debated in a variety of applications: as analytic method (Dougherty, 2001; Sprague & Greer, 1998), conceptual framework (Barker & Zifcak, 1999; Collins, 2000); epistemology (Janack, 1997); and theory (Collins, 1997; Harding, 1997; Hartsock, 1997; Hekman, 1997a, 1997b; Smith, 1997). It has been implemented in various disciplines, such as co-cultural communication (Orbe, 1998), law (Martin, Reynolds, & Keith, 2002), organizational communication (Allen, 1996), sociology (Smith, 1987), social work (Swigonski, 1994), science (Harding, 1991), and women’s studies (Franks, 2002; Rryse, 1998).

Standpoint theory as cited by Harding (2004) quoting Wylie (2003) “may rank as one of the most contentious theories to have been proposed and debated in the twenty-five-to thirty-year history of second-wave feminist thinking about knowledge and science” (p. 11). And Hennessy (1993), quoting Harding (1991), writes “not only is there ‘no typical woman’s life,’ but women’s experiences of their lives are not necessarily the same as feminist knowledge of women’s lives” (p. 14). As a mode of analysis, Harding (1997) commented that the multiple standpoints on standpoint theory... “are located in different disciplines and other cultures, with different interests, discursive resources, and

typical ways of organizing the production of epistemologies/methodologies...(Any) analyses are socially situated and constituted by the often hard-to-detect politics of the conceptual frameworks we adopt, intentionally or not” (p. 387). In argument for standpoint as a method, Harding (2004) states “...changes in the social order make interesting and even urgent new research topics and methods – issues of the context of discovery” (p. 30).

Building on the foregoing discussion, and rather than attempting to harness and define one version of a continually changing (and challenged) theory, not to mention the multiple interpretations of “feminist(s)” and “feminism(s),” I will use “standpoint” as a conceptual umbrella or framework connecting demographic information, learning preferences and perspectives, and multiple roles and responsibilities; in which each individual and situational standpoint is perspectival, partial, and unique.

E. Contribution of the study to State and to higher education

Mixed-age studies (Garrett, 1998; Mishler & Davenport, 1983, 1984; Soucy, 1995) have pointed out similarities throughout several age groups having to do with both cognition and classroom learning environment interaction behavior. These studies reported generally positive results, but with minor specific qualifications, such as gender mix, age mix, and class size or type. More important than chronological age, however, are the multiple “nontraditional” student descriptors listed by the U. S. Dept. of Education (2002) which, along with individual learning environment preferences in a classroom, are important details that may facilitate or inhibit successful learning and subsequent affective outcomes.

Research on classroom learning environment and learning preferences continues to divide students into categorical age groups, even while acknowledging that there are specific differences within the same age groups and specific similarities among various ages. Recent dissertations concluded that “traditional and nontraditional college students were equivalent...and more similar than previously thought” (Coburn, 2003) and “the two groups seemed to have more in common than most of the literature addressing adults as students had previously indicated” (Seifried, 2001). Research studies implicating that students in each age category are alike ignore the possibility that some students of the same age may be very different while some students of dissimilar ages may be very much alike in their learning environment preferences, with resulting effects on individual learning and perceptions of classroom experiences. The continued categorical division of students by age as a research variable, whether into two, three, or any specific number of groups, and the inconsistent definitions as to who is and is not “nontraditional” highlight the labeling incongruities from one study to another. It is the intent of this study to inquire into the learning environment preferences, and the multiple roles and responsibilities of one group of nontraditional female students of various ages from their individual, perspectival, unique, situated standpoints.

F. Summary

With college populations becoming more diverse, a current investigation into student learning environment preferences within the mixed-age classroom is needed. Each area of classroom research points to the fact that different “realities” exist for students in the same classroom. These individual realities give meaning to the classroom learning environment and may contribute to various outcomes. While all of the foregoing

studies have contributed to the body of research in college classrooms, the learning environment preferences of today's nontraditional female students compared with their experiences, along with their multiple roles and responsibilities, deserve a closer and more thorough investigation.

The continued division of students by age into “traditional” and “nontraditional” categories for research purposes is problematic. Kasworm (1990) observed that age reflects “certain life experiences, educational experiences, sociocultural contexts, psychological beliefs, perceptual expectations, and a probable historical-generational effect” (p. 364). Kasworm’s comment in itself highlights all the other contextual and situational components that complicate the “nontraditional” label. Further, the multiple roles and responsibilities of State's nontraditional female students include many who are traditional age, yet nontraditional in a number of the other ways mentioned by Kasworm (1990) and Kasworm, Polson, and Fishback (2002). Dissertations over the last ten years have continued to use various arbitrary age divisions to categorize students, yet the researchers often find more qualities that the student groups have in common than not, or that there is no “significant” difference (e.g., Coburn, 2003; Elwell, 2004; Garrett, 1998; Seifried, 2001; Soucy, 1995), or that some other “nontraditional” factor is more strongly related to difference than age is, such as gender or ethnicity (e.g., Anderson, 1997; Latragna, 1997). One study using “older” and “younger” rather than “traditional” and “nontraditional” found that student reference to older or younger students was gauged in reference to each individual student based on her/his own age, rather than to a specific age cutoff (Mostyn, 1998). For instance, to a freshman an older student might be a senior, although only four or five years may separate the two. Additionally, data analysis

revealed that learning environment preferences did not divide into two clean age categories as often suggested in research studies reporting that younger students prefer a “pedagogical” approach and older students prefer an “andragogical” approach.

The present interpretive case study inquired into a select group of nontraditional female students’ learning environment preferences, their multiple roles and responsibilities in addition to the role of “student,” and their individual perceptions of State’s “Shared Vision” discourses. The following section will discuss the methodology, data sources, data collection, instrumentation, and treatment of the data.

Chapter III: Research Procedures

*“Whose culture will be the official one, and whose subordinated?
What images will be projected and which marginalized?”
Cacoullos, 2000, p. 89*

This interpretive case study inquired into the learning environment preferences of one group of “nontraditional” female students, their perceptions of actual classroom experiences, their multiple roles and responsibilities in addition to “student,” and their perceptions and interpretations of State’s vision, mission, and values discourses referred to as “Shared Vision.”

A. Methodology

I used an interpretive case study approach to inquire into the preferences of nontraditional female students with regard to learning environment in the classroom, their own individual roles and responsibilities, and their perceptions of State’s “Shared Vision” discourses. Denzin and Lincoln (2003) explain that qualitative research “locates the observer in the world...involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach...attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (pp. 4-5). Further, the researcher is the main research instrument in interpreting how the participants make meaning in their particular setting (Glesne, 1999). According to Polkinghorne (1991), qualitative methods aid in the “generation of categories for understanding human phenomena and the investigation of the interpretation and meaning that people give to events they experience” (p. 112), cited in Rudestam and Newton (2001).

Merriam (1998) describes interpretive research in education as “a process, and school is a lived experience. Understanding the meaning of the process or experience constitutes the knowledge to be gained from an inductive...mode of inquiry. Multiple realities are constructed socially by individuals” (p. 4). Continuing, Merriam (1998) describes interpretive case study as containing “rich, thick description” in which the data are used “to develop conceptual categories or to illustrate, support, or challenge theoretical assumptions held prior to the data gathering” (p. 38).

Further supporting the choice of a case study is its power to investigate a variety of data, including focus groups, interviews, observations, field notes, and documents (Jones & McEwen, 2002; Merriam, 1998; Merriam & Associates, 2002; Stake, 1995; Yin, 1984). Merriam (1988) describes the characteristics of a case study as “particularistic – focused on a specific phenomenon; descriptive – interpreting demographic and descriptive data in terms of cultural norms and mores...; heuristic – illuminating understanding of the phenomenon under study; and inductive – discovery of new relationships, concepts, and understanding ...from examination of data gathered in the context itself” (pp. 11-13). As discussed in Hatch (2002), Stake (1995), Merriam (1998), and quoted in Merriam and Associates (2002), a “case study” involves “...an intensive description and analysis of a phenomenon or social unit such as an individual, group, institution, or community” (p. 8).

The case in this study was one state university (“State”) and its discourses with regard to the overall vision, mission, and values, referred to as a “Shared Vision.” Using terminology adopted for qualitative research, and discussed fully in Lincoln and Guba (1985), validity was addressed in the form of triangulation of data sources through focus

groups, individual interviews, extensive field notes and reflections, follow-up e-mails and conversations with participants, member checks, and continual review and comparison of transcripts and thematic grids. As for internal validity, Lincoln and Guba (1985) use the term “truth value,” for external validity – “transferability,” and for reliability – “consistency,” evidenced by whether results “make sense” and are consistent with the data collected. External validity or generalizability is addressed in the form of “rich, thick description...maximizing variation...audit trail...adequate database” (Merriam & Associates, 2002, p. 29).

Erickson (1986) stressed that since “the general lies in the particular” (p. 179), what is learned in a specific case can be transferred into related or similar situations. By using the wide range of individual standpoints from my participants, I hoped to broaden understanding of today’s nontraditional female students. And because in qualitative research the researcher becomes the main research instrument, asking questions and interacting with the participants, a concern for “researcher objectivity (was) replaced by a focus on the role of subjectivity in the research process” (Glesne, 1999, p. 5).

B. Data Sources

The study took place during Spring 2005 at a large public state university (“State”), using a purposive, criterion-referenced sample (Dept. of Education, NCES 2002 criteria) of nontraditional female undergraduates who had been students of mine in one or two core communication classes in the Department of Communication Studies.

My investment in this study was a very personal one. Not only had I taught all the women in my list of possible participants, but because of the nature of the courses I taught (Interpersonal Communication and Public Speaking), we had come to know much

more about each other than might normally occur in other types of classes. They all knew that I was a teacher/doctoral student because I used examples from my life in the classes to illustrate concepts from the coursework. I had kept in touch with most of them and had informally visited with them on numerous occasions. I solicited by e-mail from past class rosters a purposive sample of fifty-seven female students whom I knew to have at least two of the “nontraditional” qualities specified in the U. S. Dept. of Education (NCES 2002) description. My goal was to provide a range of female student diversity, and to increase the possible variety of data collected (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam & Associates, 2002). The university undergraduate population as of the last available distribution records (Institutional Research, Fall 2005) showed a total of 22,986 undergraduates, with slightly more than half (55%) of the undergraduates being female. The university Institutional Research (2005) undergraduate distributions by classification, age range, student credit hour status, and ethnic identification are as follows:

Classification

Freshmen	19%
Sophomores	21%
Juniors	26%
Seniors	34%
Total	(Approx. %)

Full time or Part Time

12 credit hours or more	80%
Less than 12 credit hours	20%

Age Range

17-22	66%
23-25	20%
26-29	6%
30-39	4%
40-49	2%
50 +	<1%
Total	(Approx. %)

Ethnic Identification

(Institutional Research Categories)	
White, non-Hispanic	72%
Hispanic	21%
Black, non-Hispanic	5%
Asian/Pacific Islander	2%
Am-Indian/Alaska native	<1%
Total	22,986 (Approx. %)

From the twenty-five students who responded to my e-mail invitation (**Appendix A**) who were available during the designated time frame, I selected eleven participants. The demographic breakdown (**Table 1, following page**) included two Asian students, two Black non-Hispanic students, three Hispanic students, and four White non-Hispanic students. One participant was married. Two participants had children. Six students were seniors, four were juniors, and one was finishing her freshman year. The range of majors included six Communication Studies, one Mass Communication/Communication Studies double major, one Psychology/Communication Studies double major, one Political Science/Philosophy double major, one Public Relations major, and one Family and Child Development major. Three participants worked full time, five worked part time, and three did not work. Only one participant lived on campus in the International Student dorm.

The age breakdown at the time of the study was: 20 – one, 21 – two, 22 – two, 23 – two, 24 – one, and “40-something” – two. Seven participants had educational loans, three were on scholarship and/or grants, four were partially or totally funded by parents, and two were totally self-funded. As the totals on funding suggest, several students had overlapping or multiple funding sources. The demographic information was important for my study because only two of the eleven nontraditional students agreeing to participate were actually nontraditional age.

Table 1: Participant Demographic Information

Alias	Abbi	Angie	Becky	Bonnie	Catherine	(Alias) Withdrew	Jessie	Kristi	Mary	Rae	Susan
Asian Black, non-Hispanic White, non-Hispanic	W, n-H	H	A	W, n-H	H	B, n-H	W, n-H	A	W, n-H	H	B, n-H
Age at time of study	23	23	20	46	21	48	21	20	24	22	22
Children	0	0	0	0	0	1 grown	0	0	0	1 (age 5)	0
Live: Campus; Off-Campus, In town; Out-of-Town	O/I	O/T	C	O/T	O/I	O/T	O/T	O/I	O/T	O/I	O/I
Commute (approx. round trip mileage)	10	50	n/a	60	10	60	50	10	50	10	10
First in Family to Attend or Graduate College	FiF						FiF			FiF	
Freshman Soph Junior Senior	Sr	Sr	Jr	Fr	Jr	Sr	Sr	Jr	Jr	Sr	Sr
Full-Time Work; Part-Time Work; No Work	FT	NW	PT	FT	PT	NW	FT	NW	PT	PT	PT
Loans, Scholarship/Grants, Parents, Self-funded	P	L, S/G	P	S	L,P,S	L,S/G	Self	L, P	L, S/G	L	L, P
Major/Minor:	Comm Studies	Comm Studies	Comm Studies	Comm Studies	Mass Comm/Comm Studies	PolSc, Philos.	Comm Studies /Psych	Comm Studies	Public Rels.	Fam/Child Dev.	Comm Studies
Married, Single, Other	S	S	S	M	S	O	S	S	S	S	S

As stated earlier, because I have known all my participants for several semesters, and have maintained friendly relationships beyond the classroom, I already knew their lives were very busy. Taking advice from Wolcott (2001) I wanted to treat my participants and former students “as people rather than objects of study,” and to regard my position as a “human who conduct(s) research *among* rather than *on* them” (p. 20). All the participants had described themselves as internally motivated high achievers and all maintained high GPAs. They were diligent students with very busy schedules. All but one participant lived off-campus and/or out-of-town. One participant opted out of the study after she read her interview transcript because she felt she might be identifiable by her specific situation and comments. As agreed on the Consent Form, her comments and insights will not be included in the Presentation of Data. Following is a brief description of each participant, in alphabetical order by alias. The ethnic descriptions from Institutional Research are used to describe the participants as “White, non-Hispanic, Black, non-Hispanic, and Hispanic. The two “Asian” students will be more specifically identified.

Abbi, age 23, White, non-Hispanic, came to the focus group wearing a black sweat suit, white t-shirt, and running shoes. Abbi is a senior and is one of the decreasing numbers of students who complete their degree in four years. She has attended class every summer in order to accomplish this feat. She is of medium frame, shoulder-length blond hair pulled back in a ponytail, large expressive blue eyes, big smile, and very animated expressions while she talks. She giggled a lot during the focus group session, maybe because of sleep deprivation at the end of the semester. She is taking 24 hours to graduate this summer, working about 30 hours per week for “spending money.” She

lives in an apartment complex off campus, is financially supported by her parents, and commutes to school in a late model car supplied by her parents.

Angie, age 23, Hispanic, is a senior transfer student. She came to both the focus group and individual interview dressed in blouse, skirt and low heels, rather than more casual school clothes. She commutes from a town about 25 miles away. She is physically very petite and quiet-spoken. She has short shiny black hair, and sparkly dark brown eyes. Her hands become very animated and her eyes widen with excitement when she talks. Angie was raised by a single mother, and is first in family to complete college. Much of her family still lives in Mexico, but she was born in Texas, and she lovingly discusses her Mexican grandfather, who is a WWII veteran. She depends on loans and scholarships to fund her education. She is very proud of accomplishing her goal of finishing college.

Becky, a 20 year old junior international student from Japan, appeared for the focus group dressed in jeans, green t-shirt, and flip-flops. She is tall and slender. Her long black hair is tinted with henna and pulled up in a pony-tail. She wears very little makeup, showing clear olive skin and bright brown eyes. One of her most usual expressions is a slight smile. She came to our individual meeting dressed in a professional black suit and heels because she was headed for a job interview afterward. Becky is always very animated in both her speaking and her mannerisms. She lives in the international dorm on campus and works on campus. Her parents pay for all education expenses. She chose her alias – Becky – because she thought it would be funny to be interviewed using my name!

Bonnie, age 46, White, non-Hispanic, describes herself as an “almost sophomore.” She arrived at the focus group in a long denim skirt, peasant over-blouse, light blue jacket, and sandals, her hip length brown hair in a pony tail. Bonnie is tall, with a quiet self-confidence, easy smile, earthy laugh, and bright brown eyes. She works at State full time and takes classes part-time. She is starting college again after working for twenty years in various fields. She also runs two businesses out of her home with her husband. She commutes every day – a sixty-mile round trip. She cheerily estimates that she will finish her undergraduate degree in about 8 years if she continues at the course load she is taking now. Because of time constraints and our conflicting schedules, I did not get to interview Bonnie at length one-on-one, but we talked numerous times on the phone and through e-mail. She responded in writing to the “Shared Vision” discourses.

Catherine is a 21 year old junior, Hispanic, with medium-dark skin, shoulder-length shiny black hair, and snapping brown eyes often covered by black-rimmed glasses. She wears very little makeup, dresses casually or more formally depending on whether or not she’s going straight to work from school. She has the air of always being in a rush, as if her life is over-scheduled, but she likes it that way. Like many of the other participants she is very animated, dramatically using phrases like “Oh-my-God! You won’t believe this!” She over-enunciates words like “reeeally” and repeats words for emphasis “reeeally, reeeally good class.” She seems to be always eating or drinking on the go, as if she doesn’t have time to sit down for a meal. Catherine is proud to be one of the few Hispanics from a “mostly white and German” community. She commutes from an apartment in town. Like Bonnie, because of scheduling conflicts and schedule over-load at the end of the semester, Catherine was unable to make both the individual interview

and focus group session. We met at length in my office, and discussed the topics used in both the focus group and individual interview protocols. She also followed up with comments through e-mail.

Jessie is 22, White, non-Hispanic, and a junior. She has a small frame, delicate features, quiet voice. She admits being a little slow to warm up to people she just met. She has large expressive dark brown eyes and below shoulder-length black hair. She came to the focus group in jeans, black jersey shirt, and flip flops. Due to end-of-semester time crunch, we were unable to meet for an individual interview. She is a first generation college student. Her voice and face exhibit intensity. When she is excited about something she speaks in “exclamation marks!” “I like going to school...there’s a lot of things I wouldn’t have been able to learn...the courses, just being challenged!” She came from what she calls a “small mostly-White Podunk town” and grew up “broke and poor,” but never considered not going to college. Like the others, she feels quite a bit of self-imposed pressure to do well. She lives in South Austin, works two jobs in Austin, and commutes daily. She pays for all her school and living expenses. She has a combination of financial aid (Texas Grant and Pell Grant) and loans. She has accumulated \$12,000 in loans, but feels that is “not bad for four years.” She enjoys the freedom of being on her own and managing her own finances, without having to “report to parents” about every expense. She’s a double major in Psychology and Communication Studies, with plans to get a master’s degree in experimental factors or research methods.

Kristi is a 20 year old junior, having graduated high school early. She was born and raised in a wealthy section of Houston. Her parents immigrated from China over 30

years ago. She is small and athletically built, with long black hair, clear olive skin, her face often breaking into a big grin. Scheduling conflicts kept her from attending either focus group. She came to our individual interview wearing a white tank top, short black shorts, and 2” platform flip-flops. To me she looks even younger than 20. She had told me when we first became acquainted that because of her physical appearance, which is distinctively Asian, she is often asked how long she has been here (the United States), and gets compliments on her “good” English. She doesn’t speak Chinese, her parents’ native language, and knows nothing about her parents’ or grandparents’ experiences or anything about her ancestors because her parents “just don’t speak about them.” Her voice and accent are almost California “Valley Girl,” very animated and fast.

Mary, age 24, White, non-Hispanic, came to a focus group and met with me individually in my office. She was dressed similarly for both meetings. She almost always wears jeans with a sweatshirt or dark blouse with a vest, and tennis shoes. She has curly short black hair, wears black-rimmed glasses, and gives the impression that she is older than her 24 years. She has worked professionally since graduating high school. She is a bit more reserved than some of her classmates and very quiet in class. She doesn’t do anything to draw attention to herself. She told me she just wants to “get a good education and to get on with” her life. She attended several other schools before transferring to State. She lives and works in Austin and commutes 50 miles every day. She depends on a combination of loans, scholarships and grants.

Rae is a 22 year old senior, Hispanic, and single mother. She works part-time at the school. She says she never talks in class; yet she was one of the more talkative students in my class several semesters ago. She was unable to make either focus group,

but came to her individual interview where we addressed both of the interview protocols at length. She was dressed in “professional casual” – skirt and blouse, low heeled shoes. She is very animated, with a breathy excited manner of speaking. She has long dark brown wavy hair, bright brown eyes, and reveals deep dimples when she smiles, which is often. She lives in San Marcos and commutes to school every day. She parks in the commuter lot and walks to campus. “It takes me about 12 minutes to get to the main campus area, but the walk is faster than taking the shuttle, and the campus is so beautiful.” She’s first in her family to attend college, coming from a predominantly Hispanic home town. She relies on financial aid and loans for funding her education.

Susan, Black, non-Hispanic, is a 22 year old senior, living off campus but in town, and commutes every day. She came to the focus group dressed in polo type gray/white shirt, jeans, a bandana covering her hair. She had had a hard week with tests and projects all coming due at the same time, and appeared stressed and exhausted, almost depressed. When she came to our individual interview a couple of days later she was more relaxed, dressed in jeans and t-shirt, short black hair neatly coiffed, eyes clear and bright. She was back to herself, laughing, talking very animatedly and fast, gesturing expressively with her long fingers. She is partially funded by parents, but also relies on financial aid loans.

C. Data Collection

The individual interviews (“conversation with a purpose” per Patton, 1980) were held in my faculty office on the “State” campus. During the interviews I sat in my chair with each individual participant sitting in a chair to the side of my desk rather than on opposite sides of the desk, with the recorder and microphone off to one side and out of

our direct gaze. The two focus groups met in the Communication Department lab and conference room with the participants and me sitting around an oval table, again with the recording equipment off to one side. My intent was to minimize our former student/teacher relationships and maximize the participant/participant-researcher roles. Because my teaching contract was ending, and several of the participants were graduating, I had access to my participants only through the Spring semester of 2005. Focus group sessions and individual interviews were conducted during the first two weeks of May, with transcription of each interview occurring within two days.

Learning environment preferences, individual students' roles and responsibilities, and perceptions of State's "Shared Vision" discourses (Appendix G) came from focus groups, informal conversations and e-mails, and in-depth interviews. Researcher observations and field notes, journaling, and member checks of interview transcripts supplemented the study in an attempt to secure multiple partial perspectives – "standpoints" – to acknowledge that "one does not have a complete knowledge of social reality: One may thus learn what other marginal standpoints have to offer" (Tanesini, 1999, p. 153, quoting Collins, 1991). In consideration of each participant, I kept in mind that, "Each group speaks from its own standpoint and shares its own partial, situated knowledge. But because each group perceives its own truth as partial, its knowledge is unfinished. Each group becomes better able to consider other groups' standpoints without relinquishing the uniqueness of its own standpoint or suppressing other groups' partial perspectives" (Collins, 1991, p. 236).

As stated in Littlejohn (2002), the "real world" is constructed to a great extent on the individual or group language habits and idiom, and the "language habits of our

community predispose certain choices of interpretation” (p. 177). The “Shared Vision” discourses composed and published by the Administration, utilize specific institutional terminology describing a “student-centered environment.” During the individual interviews I wanted to access the interpretation of those discourses from the unique and multiple standpoint(s) of each nontraditional female participant in the study.

I personally conducted all focus group discussions and individual interviews to inquire into the students’ learning preferences and experiences, their multiple roles and responsibilities, and their perceptions of the “Shared Vision” from their own particular “outsider-within” (Collins, 2000) standpoints as nontraditional female students. Each of the audio-taped focus groups lasted a little over one hour. Separate appointments were scheduled for individual interviews, which were conducted and audio-taped using interview protocols of open-ended questions concerning learning environment and interaction preferences adapted from Kasworm and Blowers (1994) (Appendix E) and Frymier and Houser (1999) (Appendix F). Each individual interview averaged approximately one to two hours. To supplement the interviews, I used observational notes during each interview and field notes immediately after each interview, along with audio-taped reflections to document my perceptions of interviewees’ distinctive verbal and nonverbal communication. These were supplemented by follow-up discussions and/or e-mails with my participants.

As a college instructor and doctoral student with an intense investment in the future of mixed-age multi-cultural college classroom instruction, I acknowledge that my participation in data collection was influenced by my own situated background, multiple roles and responsibilities, life experiences, and ongoing educational journey. As more

students who meet one or more “nontraditional” categories begin attending public and private universities, it will be important to address them in their situatedness from our multiple standpoints.

Each participant in the case study was considered a unique individual with specific learning environment preferences and experiences. These women were asked to conceptualize themselves as undergraduate students, and to reflect on their multiple roles and responsibilities. Key portions of the focus groups and interviews included descriptive background data and learning environment preferences compared with experiences. My intent was to elicit answers to the protocol questions, yet let the conversation flow spontaneously without unduly restricting the participants. In the focus groups I followed the protocol fairly closely, but the interviews were unique to each individual stemming from their particular standpoints.

D. Instrumentation

All students responding to my e-mail invitation to participate (Appendix A) were sent an Interview Participant Questionnaire (Appendix B). Before the focus groups and/or interview each participant signed a “State” Consent Form (Appendix C) and University of Texas Consent Form (Appendix D) allowing the use of information obtained. Each participant was given a code number and selected an alias to maintain anonymity. A protocol of open ended questions adapted from Kasworm and Blowers (1994) (Appendix E) was used to guide focus group discussions and in-depth interviews. A protocol adapted from Frymier and Houser (1999) (Appendix F) was used for participants to answer selected questions about learning environment preferences and

experiences. “Claiming Tomorrow: A Shared Vision” (Appendix G) was excerpted from State’s homepage regarding the mission, vision, and values discourses.

E. Treatment of the data

All focus groups, in-depth interviews, and researcher observations were personally audio-taped and transcribed within two days of the sessions. I also kept a reflection journal, detailed field notes, and calendar to document the study. Participant descriptions throughout the interviews provided a wide range of information regarding the learning environment preferences and experiences of these nontraditional female students, their roles and responsibilities, and their interpretations of the “Shared Vision” discourses.

Each transcript was read multiple times and catalogued into an individual participant grid constructed from terminology contained in the research questions and discourses in the “Shared Vision” along with emergent categories, constructs, metaphors, and standpoints generated by the participants in an effort to capture the totality of various learning environment preferences, classroom experiences, roles and responsibilities, and comments relating to State’s “Shared Vision” discourses. I then analyzed the individual participant grids for repetition or duplication, contradictions, special terminology used by the participants, and any information volunteered that I had not asked about. After re-analyzing participant grids I then reduced the number of categories by combining similar themes or constructs. From those categories I constructed a master conceptual grid (Table 2, following page) to facilitate comparison and contrast of participant comments. “Shared Vision” terminology is in *italics*. The “x” in each column indicate discussion of concepts and/or terminology drawn from the individual participant transcripts.

Table 2: Thematic/Conceptual Grid

	Abbi	Angie	Becky	Bonnie	Catherine	Jessie	Kristi	Mary	Rae	Susan
Adjuncts		x						x		
Admin, staff		x	x	x	x			x	x	
Attitude toward school and learning	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
B/W issues			x		x					x
Best (favorite) class	x	x	x	x		x	x	x	x	x
Class size, seating	x	x	x	x		x		x	x	x
Comments re NT's	x	x				x	x	x		
<i>Diversity</i>			x		x	x	x		x	x
E/C activities	x	no	yes	x	x		x		x	
<i>Exceptional education</i>		x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	
Family involvement	x					x	x	x	x	x
Financial Aid						x	x	x	x	
<i>Global perspective</i>		x	x	x	x					
Group work	x	x	x			x	x	x	x	
Hangouts			x		x		x	x	x	
H-S-I									x	
Image of State	x						x	x		
<i>Inclusion/ community</i>		x	x	x	x		x	x	x	x
<i>Learner centered, student-centered</i>	x	x	x	x	x		x	x	x	x
Learning env. – Activities	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Lecture		x	x	x	x	x			x	x
Segregation/ integration			x		x				x	
<i>Shared vision</i>	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Student behaviors/ “misbehaviors”		x	x							
Suggestions for State	x	x	x	x	x			x	x	
Teacher clarity		x	x					x	x	
Teacher “misbehaviors”	x	x	x		x	x	x	x	x	
Teacher responses/ feedback	x	x	x	x		x		x	x	
<i>Teacher/ diversity</i>									x	x
Tenured faculty									x	x
Workload/ classload	x			x		x			x	x
Worst (least favorite) class	x	x	x	x	x		x	x	x	x

From the findings based on analysis and discussion of the participants' comments I hope to implement Erickson's (1986) statement that "the general lies in the particular" in order to contribute to a more complete understanding today's nontraditional female students through investigation of one group of State's nontraditional female undergraduates concerning: 1) their learning environments preferences compared with their learning environment experiences; 2) their range of roles and responsibilities (standpoints) that affect and influence their roles as college students, and 3) their perceptions and interpretations of State's "Shared Vision" discourses.

F. Summary

The "Shared Vision" discourses promote specific images of a university culture that promotes community, inclusion, and a student-centered environment. As stated earlier, my study had several objectives. First, using "standpoint" as a conceptual framework, I wanted to inquire about learning environment preferences compared with experiences from a select group of State's nontraditional female undergraduates. Second, I wanted to investigate these specific students' multiple roles and responsibilities in addition to the role of "student." Third, I wanted to investigate the institutional discourses put forth by the Administration regarding State's "Shared Vision" as perceived and interpreted by this select group of nontraditional female undergraduates. The immediate local benefit for State will be a (re)presentation of the variety of nontraditional female students at State, their learning environment preferences, and their wide range of roles and responsibilities. A further benefit for State's Administration will be to receive feedback regarding State's institutional discourses from representatives of the majority (female, working, commuter) nontraditional undergraduate population. The

larger benefit to higher education in general will be to provide a more detailed description of today's nontraditional female undergraduates in their multi-dimensionality in order to enhance possibilities for student-centered environments, and to add new and additional perspectives to the areas of “adult” and “mixed-age” college classroom theory and research.

Chapter IV: Data Analysis and Findings

*“Our ways of knowing are forged in history and relations of power.”
b. hooks, 1994, p. 30*

A. Introduction

This interpretive case study inquired into the learning environment preferences of one group of “nontraditional” female students compared to their perceptions of actual classroom experiences, their multiple roles and responsibilities in addition to “student,” and their perceptions and interpretations of State’s vision, mission, and values discourses, referred to as “Shared Vision.”

As I discuss the findings of this study, my intent is to present a synthesis of information that emerged from the participants’ stories while leaving many of their insights in their own words, to give the reader a flavor of their energy, excitement, frustration, concerns, and levels of emotional investment in their educational journey. The terminology used for ethnic identity is from State’s categories or from the individual participants’ descriptions of themselves and others. Where necessary I have omitted specific references to instructors or courses in order to honor the privacy and identities of these multi-dimensional women. Participant comments related to the discourses taken from the vision, mission, and values statements included in the “Shared Vision” are discussed with the terminology from the discourses in **bold lettering**.

RQ1 asked “What are some of the learning environment preferences of one purposeful selection of nontraditional female students at State?”

Data analysis of transcripts from the focus groups and individual interviews revealed that these participants had analyzed their own specific learning environment preferences and knew the kinds of environments and techniques that work best for each of them. While each individual's preferences were a bit different from each of the others, their responses indicated that they are (or were) passionate about learning, internally motivated, goal-oriented, and enjoy personal challenges. Discussion of the findings will be grouped under headings describing andragogical learning preferences; motivation and learning environment preferences; learner characteristics; preference for "real world" application and student connections; learning environment differences and "culture shock" from a different cultural perspective; institutional, situational, informational, and dispositional barriers; and teacher "misbehaviors," and student "misbehaviors."

Andragogical learning preferences:

An initial finding from data analysis of the transcripts with regard to discussion of preferred learning environments, the majority of comments described the type of learning often reported in research studies as "andragogical" or self-directed and goal driven, and usually attributed to "older" students or "adult" students. Although nine of the ten participants were under 25, their comments contradicted the stereotype of passive "younger" students who prefer pedagogical "delivery of instruction" via lecture format.

The ten participants described a variety of specific learning environment preferences. Data analysis of their comments revealed that the majority enjoy collaborative projects and group discussion as found by Bishop-Clark and Lynch (1992) , Hair (2002), and Latragna (1997). Comments from both Abbi and Susan indicated they needed collaboration with others to keep them focused and to help discuss course

information to aid their understanding. Angie's comments indicated that she too liked to hear other perspectives or interpretations of course information in addition to the information presented by the instructor. Rae and Jessie admitted that even when they were a part of a group project, they tended to "take over" to make sure the assignment would be done, and done well. Their comments indicated that although both like "collaboration," they also prefer to be "in charge."

In contrast to much research which tends to lump women into one group preferring collaborative learning, group interaction, and interactivity, data analysis of comments from several women in this small purposive sample stated emphatically that they did not like group work, and much preferred individual projects on which they could devote as much time as needed to produce their best work. This finding agreed with Soucy's (1995) and Elwell's (2004) results showing status (gender and/or age) was not significantly related to learning preferences, and also with Chang (2003) whose research indicated that preferred learning style may be more related to choice of major, among other factors he investigated. For instance, Mary spoke with pride about her individual media project, accomplished with a little occasional constructive feedback from her professor. Rae also emphasized how much she had grown through an independent study in which she was a research assistant to two of her professors. She spoke excitedly about the rich experience of meeting for extended periods of time with them and discovering how much more was involved in her future career of Family and Child Development beyond the basic classroom instruction and field observations. She felt challenged to come up to the quality level they set for her, and was very proud of her accomplishments. Findings with regard to the preferences of these two students for independent projects

may begin to address Merriam's (1988) question about whether adult learning activities promote self-direction or whether self-direction is a precondition of adult learning activities. Both of these young women stated that "independent learning activities" helped them in their preference for self-direction, and self-direction through individual projects is their preferred manner of learning.

Motivation and Learning Preferences:

Rather than wanting a "passive lecture format," analysis of comments from all but one of the traditional-age participants specifically rejected lecture as a beneficial learning environment, which agreed with Herrington's (2000) finding that the lecture format itself prolongs fear in some "nontraditional" students and serves as a barrier to participation. Each of the participants stressed the importance of translating course content into "real life" application described by Knowles and others with regard to "adult learner" preferences. Data analysis of comments from the under-24-year-old participants challenged part of Houser's (2002) results, which found students 23 and over had higher levels of trait motivation and learning orientation, while younger students were less trait-motivated and more grade oriented. Grades were important to these "younger" participants, but only as confirmation that they had mastered the material and because they wanted to maintain a high overall GPA for their own satisfaction. The participants did agree with Houser (2002) that instructors need to provide more clarity in all areas. Following are interpretive vignettes derived from analysis of transcripts from the individual participants regarding Research Question 1 – specific learning environment preferences.

Abbi (age 23) was “super-motivated” when she came to college. She knew what she wanted to major in, and on the advice of her first advisor started taking her major courses along with the freshman core courses. She felt they were “super easy,” a continuation of high school, which led to a false sense of security. Now, because of changing her major, she has over a dozen hours that don’t count toward her degree; in essence, they are “expensive electives.” In her final semester she is taking 24 hours in order to graduate in four years. Her motivation has dissipated, and her goal orientation is almost gone. She has “hit a wall.” She knows she is not giving her full attention or effort to the classes, but also admits she doesn’t think she could last another semester. She commented, “By giving 50% or 75% I know that’s not my full potential and I’m not learning as much as I could.”

Her ideal learning environment is “structured but flexible.”

I like working in groups... because with different people you get different backgrounds and opinions and a more diverse viewpoint and experiences... but I don't like having to take notes the whole time, because I feel like if I don't get to discuss it with someone I'm not going to get the full benefit. I need some structure so that I know what we are going to cover and what I need to be learning about, but I also need the time to talk it out and learn more with other people and their experiences.

She wants active discussion and collaborative learning, but situational and dispositional barriers, along with a combination of informational barriers and poor advising at the beginning of her educational journey have combined to rob her of fully enjoying the completion of her undergraduate education. Her “best learning experience” was where

Everybody was completely open and honest and it wasn't a lot of homework, but you learned from all these people coming from different places, small town, big towns, different cultures. It was

just kinda like one big family, the way it was set up. People didn't always go to the same groups...It was a class based very much on our opinions and our thoughts...you didn't feel talked down to or that somebody was telling you "This is how it has to be." It was just more like, "You think differently." It was more than just one opinion or viewpoint or from one book.

Angie (age 22) likes small classes, with lots of verbal interaction regarding the subject matter. Discussions play an important role, because if several people are talking about a topic, she feels that she remembers details better and makes better connections between school and her life. From her perspective as a transfer student, she commented that "the professors here seem more involved, I think, with the students and the classes. I feel that they care about what they are doing." She stressed that lecture is unproductive for her.

I don't like just sitting and listening. That puts me to sleep. I feel like I could have read that for myself. I do like listening to the professor's opinion also because it gets the students to think...I like when people argue! It makes you, like, prove your point. I just think it's more fun not having the professor the center of attention, just having everyone contribute. We are in an educational institution! We're not in high school any more, we're adults!

Although Angie likes group discussion, she doesn't like group work because of the situational barriers of scheduling and commuting problems involved with living out of town.

I just don't like them because of the schedule conflicts, and people are not on the same level. You don't want to dominate the group but you want to be heard, and sometimes there's like the "leader" that wants to dominate... or like the people who just don't talk. I don't like that either. They just say "OK, whatever." So I don't like the groups projects.

Her favorite learning environment was

...one of the first classes where I felt included in the class ...we were like in a circle, equal, and we all got to say a little about ourselves, and got to know each other...it makes the class more comfortable, and for me it's more comfortable when I can ask questions of the instructor or one of my classmates. Also, some of the film clips that we watched, it helps stimulate the learning to remember things...Like some of the group activities where we didn't have to meet after class. We got into groups depending on a specific category, so we were in different groups each class.

She commented that she feels really lucky to have the opportunity to attend State. She is representative of many bilingual students. She easily slips back and forth between English and Spanish depending on whom she is speaking with. Many of her older relatives in Mexico speak only Spanish, while some of her younger cousins in Texas speak only English. She credits her grandfather, who came to Texas and fought in the United States Army during World War II, with her being able to attend school in Texas.

At 22 she is goal-oriented, internally motivated, and planning for a successful future.

Otherwise, I'd be stuck in a 3rd world country (*Mexico*). I want to be able to provide for myself and maybe one day provide for my mom and not be looked down upon, like, "Oh, you're a woman and you don't have an education? Poor you!" And I don't want to be a secretary! I don't want to go through my mom's footsteps. I want to do better than her and prove to her that she raised good daughters, and make her proud, and just be proud of who I am.

Catherine (age 21) also loves interactive classes. She prefers classes of thirty or less student and loves to "get into a good discussion." The only times she didn't feel like she wanted to participate was "because the classes were large lecture classes." In her interview she allowed that she had at first been impressed by the large lectures because they "reecally felt like college," but after just a few weeks she realized "lecture sucks!"

There was no interaction or allowance for questions or discussion, and she could have “read the material just as well by myself.”

A good topic would come up, like in my political science classes, good stuff would come up and people started reeeally getting into it and then the professor would be like, “Well, we don’t have time, we have to move on.” And it stinks! Every time we would be like, “No, let him talk!” And people would be going back and forth and actually stay awake during a 400-student lecture, you know, at odd times of the day. That could have reeeally gotten everyone going! But those were the only times when I felt like saying something, but I couldn’t because the **professor would have shot me down** (my emphasis) because we didn’t have the time.

Her comments illustrate another contradiction to discourses of “**student involvement**” and “**dialogue.**” She felt that even if she had wanted to ask a question or make a comment, the learning environment controlled by the lecturer did not encourage student participation. Now that she is in her upper level small classes, her comments indicate that she really thrives on being able to discuss, debate, and challenge herself.

... like with ethics conversations we get into in both Comm. Studies and Mass Comm. classes, ethics conversations are the best because they make you think – reeeally think. They put you in a position where you have to think and make a decision and sometimes it’s very difficult, but you get to know yourself better. I don’t know how many times I’ve said already that the only reason I came to college was to grow and get to know myself, and that has been fulfilled completely...100% money well spent.

Although Catherine is only 21, her description of the reason she came to college sounds like the type of comments expected from “adult” students who appreciate learning for learning’s sake and for “real-life” application.

Jessie (age 21) has been dazzled by the range of classes and opportunities for learning through discussions and group activities. She too reflects the type of adult

student who enjoys the challenge and stimulation of learning for its own sake. In the focus group she commented that

...it feels so good when you, like, finally are on the right track, and I know what I'm doing! And by the end of the semester I feel like I've really gotten it because I've discussed it with more people! And just the interactive activities when they put you in groups with different people! That really works for me!

...One of my favorites was an Honors course, and the seating arrangement was like this (around a large table) and really nice chairs, and they really catered to us. I didn't need that course for my major, but I just wanted to take the class so bad! I still see some of those students, and there's just a different communication there. You're sitting around a table just like this for the entire time having discussions. So that's why. *(Here she sits back, looks around at everyone, smiles, and takes a deep breath, almost as if she hadn't been breathing during her response.)*

Kristi (age 20) admitted in our interview that her attitude toward school is that school is "not exactly fascinating, but we're all here to learn, and I try to do my best...I do go regularly." As for learning environment and activities, analysis of her comments revealed that she too prefers smaller classes, rather than large lecture. She likes discussion and talking in small groups. "The big lecture room or auditorium with the professor up front behind a podium...I feel like I can't concentrate. It's just not as personal and I can't get involved." She admits to having trouble with her minor in Business because she did not select it; her parents required her to have "something to fall back on." She commented,

Well, the _____ classes are just boring to me...I think maybe it's because all the classes are so big and you're just sitting there looking at the lecturer, and sometimes it's just monotone... and it's easier to doze off or lose your attention.

With regard to course content, Kristi mentioned that one of her major classes did not have much information that related to her or her life because of the examples and discussions, which applied to older students who are married or who have children. In this instance her age (20) and life experiences didn't mesh with course content, and she often felt left out or unable to contribute to discussions.

...I love the class, but sometimes it's so hard for me to relate because there is such a wide range of ages in there. It seems like almost everyone in there is either engaged or married, and then I graduated high school early, so I feel like I'm still a teenager...like the majority of the class is really into it and there's a couple of us that, like, that just doesn't pertain to us and this period in our lives at all, so we're just kinda like (*smiles and moves her head from side to side like a metronome*)... I mean, it's interesting but then there's discussions about careers, children, religion, sex life, and I'm like "OK!" because I have none of that!

For Kristi, the situational barriers between her own experiences in her 20 years and the course content affect her ability to find practical application of course material at this point in her life.

Susan (age 22) has always considered herself to be a very diligent good student. Yet in her last semester of college her attitude has changed. A combination of ongoing dispositional, situational, and institutional factors have negatively affected her final semester of college.

I don't like to study. Outside of class I don't like to study at all. If I have a test coming up I will force myself to study. If I do study, I need to be in a group with somebody who will encourage me to study and read along, and that's the way I study.

Although several of her recent and current classes feel “frustrating” and “unproductive,” as with many of the other participants, Susan enjoys lively classroom discussion, interaction, and activities.

I must say that I enjoy class discussion, just in the fact that from personal experience, it helps me better to relate or understand what’s going on...I like group discussions because you are learning while you are discussing as a class...In one class last semester, the professor actually knew what was going on with us, and she would be very concerned about us, and that was good for me.

The fact that the professor knew personal information about her students made a big impression on Susan. Also important was the “**inclusive**” learning environment created by the instructor.

She actually gave participation points, but that didn’t matter to me, because you just wanted to jump in. Everybody had something to say; everybody looked forward to coming to class. People very rarely missed that class. So it was just...the extra participation points were like the icing, but I didn’t care about that.

Bonnie (age 46), the oldest participant, could have tested out of a number of lower level courses, but “the fun part of not testing out is because I want to see what’s in there and what makes it tick...I’m loving Freshman English because you have to write on demand and I wanted to see if I could do it.” Her eagerness to take basic classes to “test herself” diverges from adult student research and theory stating that adults want immediate application of coursework to their “real world” jobs or lives. Perhaps because she has been out of the classroom for so long, she admits to really enjoying the college student experience. Because of working at the university her fees are reduced, and she has received a developmental staff leave, which allows her to work part time and receive a full time paycheck, which is “like the best deal ever!” Going against conventional

wisdom and research (e.g., Bishop-Clark & Lynch, 1992; Howard & Baird, 2000) that states “older” students will talk more in class and often dominate conversation, Bonnie sat quietly during most of the focus group, (as she had in my class in which she was a student several semesters ago), waiting to be asked a question directly by me or one of the other participants. Bonnie loves discussion and interactive learning, but contrary to many “nontraditional-age” student descriptions, does not dominate discussion or speak more than any others in her group. She does prefer an interactive learning environment,

...like reading ahead and coming to class and discuss what we were supposed to have read, question and answer, and the thing that’s really worked well for me to help learn things is talk about it in class and take that information and put it in terms of real day-to-day application and examples.

Because of time constraints and our conflicting schedule, I did not get to interview Bonnie at length one-on-one, but she did send written responses to the “Shared Vision” questions, and we talked several times on the phone and via e-mail.

Analysis of transcripts from Abbi, Angie, Catherine, Jessie, Kristi, and Susan show examples of “traditional-age” students who are anything but passive receptacles for information doled out in “pedagogical” lecture format. It would appear that studies continuing to convey the idea that today’s younger, yet nontraditional, students don’t want to take charge of their education may be perpetuating misleading information.

Mary (age 24) prefers lecture, then reading the book. She also prefers individual projects that she can do on her own time, as discussed earlier in this section. Because she lives and works out of town, she needs from her instructors “quick feedback, to be available...structure, and consistency.”

...I like teachers who are organized and consistent. I think that when students come into a classroom, and the teachers constantly change due dates for things, I think that throws students off and makes them a little uncomfortable. Consistency would be my special preference for my classes. If I do miss a day or two, then you know what you are missing, but tomorrow I will know what's due. Especially if you are older (*she is 24*) and have other things going on.

As far as learning environment and discussion in class, Mary is a quiet private person who doesn't like the spotlight on her. She admitted she hardly ever talks in class unless directly called on to answer or comment, which she tries to avoid by not making eye contact with the instructor. Whereas in classes Becky is speaking a foreign language and is sometimes nervous about being called on, Mary is a native English speaker who just does not feel the need to talk and for whom group exercises and answering questions are intrusive. Classes that require participation in order to score "participation points" are especially troublesome for her. As with several of the other participants, most of her major upper level classes incorporate group projects.

I don't really like them at all...Mainly because I live in Austin, and a lot of the time people I'm doing assignments with live here or on campus and I'm like "Can we get together right after school?" and they want to meet later or on the weekend because they can walk to campus and stuff like that. When I'm not in class I'm away from the school. I have a job in Austin and I live there and I don't want to come back to campus until I need to for class. It's time, money, gas.

Mary is funding her own education through work and financial aid, so the barriers posed by the institutional course requirements and her own work and living situations are very real concerns.

Jessie, Angie and Kristi are in the category of "traditional-age" student who are reported in research to prefer "passive lecture format." They are anything but passive.

While their comments indicated they would be “too shy” to ask a question or make a comment in a large lecture auditorium, the classroom of 30 students or less provides a source of stimulation and multiple opportunities for them to participate. Jessie and Bonnie were in the same focus group. Their responses regarding their attitude toward learning were very similar. Jessie (21) and Bonnie (46) are both challenging themselves with Honors classes, which by definition are small, intense, seminar-type formats. They each commented that they had “no idea all this (the huge variety of disciplines and courses) was available!”

Only Mary “loves” the big lecture classes of several hundred students, because for her they provide a wealth of student resources to get notes or assignment updates in case she has to miss class because of her work schedule. She doesn’t like group projects, and doesn’t feel a need to be an active part of discussions. She prefers to sit back and listen to others “when they have something valuable to say.” Otherwise, she prefers not to “waste time” in group discussion at the end of a class. “If we’re done, let’s go. I have other things to do.”

In contrast, Abbi thoroughly enjoyed her class that regularly ran overtime because of the “really good discussion.” “We’d be, like, oh wait, let’s finish this! We couldn’t wait for the next class. Sometimes we’d continue discussing out in the hall as we left class...and no one was disrespectful or rude. We were all, like, well, that’s your opinion.” Susan, Rae, Angie, and Kristi also commented that they enjoyed hearing other people’s viewpoints, and having the professor coordinate or facilitate discussion without being the authority or center of attention.

Becky prefers small class lecture because that is the format she was accustomed to from elementary school through high school in Japan – lecture, then “respectful” questions. However, she prefers classes that are no larger than 30 students. The rest of the participants, with the exception of Mary, also agreed on 30 as the upper limit for optimum learning environment.

Preference for “real world” application:

Mary prefers to work in class with people her own age (24), or in the upper level classes. Because she has been working for over six years, she feels much older than some of her “younger” classmates, and comments, “When I graduated high school at 18 I didn’t go straight into college. I guess I just don’t realize how immature I was at that age...and I just look at them and go ‘Brats!’, you know? So, yes, I identify more with people who are in my position.” Mary’s “best class” is one where she has independent control and which approximates the kinds of projects she may encounter in her career. She likes individual projects that she can work on and consult her professor as each project comes together. This type of activity is as close to “real world” experience that college can offer, which is very important to her.

Each project has been really clearly put as to what you are supposed to do on the website, and he’s available for questions, and then your syllabus is straightforward as to deadlines, like “design a web site by this date,” and you have two opportunities to go talk to him, and I like that. It’s personal, it’s time-consuming, and the more time you put into it, the better you get.

Rae (age 22) describes her favorite learning environment and activities similar to Mary’s. They involve “real world” and “hands-on” activities. Her major is Family and Child Development, so going to the child care center and actually doing observations and

applying the knowledge are important components in preparation for her future career. She especially liked one interactive class “when the teacher sat with us! I’d never had that happen before! I think that’s one of my big fears...looking at professors, it seems like they are always on the other side...this was the first time in my experience that the professor was with us, you know?” She continued:

I didn’t feel like anyone was better than anyone else. And also the variety in the classes, there were some freshmen, sophomores, juniors, seniors. Usually I do everything with people who are in my major and grade level. I felt very comfortable in that class, whether it was the content, the professor, or a combination of all that. I talked in that class...not as much as I talk at home, (*laughing*), but I talked...I (usually) don’t talk at all in class...Depending on the severity... well, I’ll e-mail the professor, and I like to try and keep the conversation through e-mail. If I have to go in, I will, but I have a hard time...I think it’s an authority issue. I have a problem with authority figures.

As far as people are concerned I’ve learned a whole different world. I’ve learned there is a whole other aspect to school and that people enjoy it! I guess I thought robots wrote the books and stuff! (*laughing*). I just never thought about all these things!

In an echo of my own concerns as I returned to college and found “collaborative learning” projects, Rae voiced her concerns. She likes doing group work or group projects, but with a qualification: “I guess it’s a female characteristic that I want to take everything on my own, because if I want it done the right way I’ll just do it myself, and I don’t want anyone else to do it (*laughing*). So in classes where I’ve had to do group things, I’m pretty much the one who’s always the writer!”

Rae, like Mary, is really proud of an independent study project, in which she functioned as a research assistant to two of her professors.

I actually had to do my own research and find information. They are doing Hispanic attainment, and I had to narrow it down to specifically female Hispanics, so I had to do like a miniature thesis. (*Voice gets really animated*). And that was something, you know, being nontraditional...it was really fascinating! I enjoyed a whole different thought process and environment. That was my favorite class, and I guess I enjoyed it because I'm by myself and I don't have to worry about anyone else...I met with the professor twice a week, and in order to get credit hours we met like 6 hours a week...and we met the full six hours, and she's a really good professor. She's the one that got me started off, and I also gained a lot of respect for the professor. I didn't realize half the stuff that they do!

Although in one comment Rae said she was afraid of talking to her professors – in the above example she admitted spending hours talking with one of them. My impression from analyzing this contradiction was that there must be some qualitative difference for Rae in her various student-teacher relationships, and that some instructors utilize verbal and nonverbal communication behaviors that invite her to engage with them, as stated in the “Shared Vision” discourse of “**engaged teaching and learning**.” She also reflected on the connections between coursework, research, and their applicability to her future career. This process of self-reflexivity has been most often attributed to “older” students. However, Rae (22), Mary (24), and Catherine (21) eloquently described “andragogical” learning strategies.

Desire for more student connection - cohorts:

An interesting finding that came from analysis of Kristi's comments, and with which several other participants concurred in one of the focus groups, was that having a cohort of students starting in a major together and taking classes together would definitely help with study groups, discussions, and would help create a feeling of

“**community**,” one of the main discourses in the “Shared Vision,” which will be addressed again later.

The overall findings so far from analysis of data from these students indicates that for the majority, learning environment preferences involve small classes; active, teacher-facilitated discussion; and real-life application of examples – usually referred to as “adult student” preferences as discussed by adult learning theorists and scholars.

Learning environment and “culture shock”:

An important and timely finding from analyzing the learning environment data provided by my extended interview with Becky (age 20) involves different cultural perspectives toward State’s learning environment. As State’s student population becomes more diverse, in order to “**meet the changing needs of those we serve**” some adaptations may be necessary. Analysis of Becky’s comments indicated that she (and possibly other international students) may see our American educational system much differently than we Americans see it. Becky commented that she has tried to “act American” as best she can, but her culture and her education through high school were much different from her experiences in the United States.

Becky is one of two participants who actually prefers lecture, because that was the dominant form of instruction in her home country. However, she doesn’t enjoy the huge lecture auditoriums like Mary does, but rather prefers a small classroom with lecture style format with student questions and comments following. (In the few instances I feel her comments may need clarification, I will comment in *italics*.)

I could not get used to students asking so many questions, like raising their hands during class. That kind of student is really weird to me because I just cannot understand why people can talk in loud

voices (*make comments aloud*) and talk to each other while the professor is talking, you know? Maybe the teacher likes that kind of attitude but it's unusual in my country for students to speak out like that. Since I came here my attitude has completely changed since before I came. I had learned that American students were really participative, and would ask questions, and I knew that...At first I couldn't speak English in a loud voice (*Again she refers to speaking out loud in class to answer questions or make comments*)...I've talked to students from other countries who say the same thing...I feel really disappointed that I could not understand everything.

I asked her if the problem might be the "Texas accent" and she responded:

No, I don't think so, just general English. Whether it's Texas or New York or some other place, everything is a strain for me. Every single word is different. But now, there are words like "y'all" or "howdy" or stuff like that, I enjoy those words. But at first every single word sounded different. That's why it is hard to speak in a loud voice, because it might not be correct.

Although the interactive learning environment using small groups to discuss course information was comfortable for most of the participants, close reading and analysis of Becky's comments revealed that she experienced continual "culture shock," speaking for herself and on behalf of many of the other international students. She said that they had learned while preparing to come to the United States that American students were much more talkative in class than they were used to. However, she confided in her individual interview that she had not been adequately prepared for the "rude" comments and questions from students to the teachers, and among the students themselves. She has been put off by some students' "disrespectful attitude" toward the teachers and each other, which she described as "student misbehaviors." She feels "shame" for these students because they are acting inappropriately as seen from her cultural standpoint. Further, she commented that the idea of having to speak "ad lib" or impromptu in class

was very stress-producing for many of her friends who are international students because they feel self-conscious about their pronunciation or vocabulary, especially in front of each other in “American” classes. Because she is a Communication Studies major she has gotten used to speaking in groups and asking or answering questions in class. She is preparing for a career where translating will be a major part of her job responsibilities, and enjoys the opportunity to practice her English.

Institutional, Situational, Informational, and Dispositional Barriers:

A third important finding from analysis of all the transcripts, directly related to this particular university, coincided with findings from recent “adult student” studies (e.g., Ades, 2004; Cabrere-Buggs, 2005; Dukes, 2001; Ford, 1998, Garrett, 2002; Hair, 2002; Henke, 2002; Lynberg, 2003; Morton, 2004; Parsons, 2005) regarding institutional, situational, informational and/or dispositional barriers as originally discussed by Cross (1981) with regard to adult students returning to school for career or life-change reasons. Institutional and situational barriers included the time length of classes, course delivery format or number of times the classes met during the semester. State’s status as a “commuter campus” creates logistical problems involving travel time to and from class, parking and auto expenses, number of trips per week for class, and in meeting classmates for group projects outside of class. The dilemmas of living off campus, commuting, working part-time or full-time, and trying to coordinate multiple group projects from class to class caused continual frustration for these participants. Their comments agreed with Lundberg’s (2003) study of “time-limited” adult students who are juggling competing demands for school, work, and family.

Many of the participants' class assignments, regardless of major, were structured as group projects and presentations requiring meeting outside of class. In both focus groups the participants speculated on various ways this dilemma could be addressed, but could not settle on any one particular solution. This area will be discussed further in Chapter V. As far as course scheduling was concerned, several of the participants suggested that classes be held in longer time frames on fewer days, offering more evening, on-line, or weekend classes, and provide technology to facilitate computer-mediated discussions or meetings. Any and all of these suggestions would help ease the multiple barriers posed by commuting, class work, and their scheduling dilemmas of competing responsibilities, such as jobs and school. As Angie (22) observed,

We all had hour-and-a-half classes in high school! We can stand to be in a class for that long. If we had fewer students (in class) and a little more time, I think it's obvious that more ideas could surface and more conversation and learning from each other would take place."

As mentioned at the outset, all the participants admitted to being internally motivated over-achievers who put a great deal of pressure on themselves to do their best. While Angie, Catherine, Becky, Jessie, and Mary have either graduated or are about to graduate and eagerly anticipate beginning their careers, comments from Susan and Abbi sadly indicated that they felt "ground down" by their experiences, and that they were just trying to "hold on and get out." This type of dispositional barrier did not surface for them until their last couple of semesters. Whereas they entered college full of energy, enthusiasm, and internal motivation, the competing demands of coursework, jobs, commuting, outside responsibilities, and scheduling problems gradually took a toll on them. This finding concurred with recent adult student studies on student motivation,

persistence and/or attrition (e.g., DeRemer, 2002; Feldman, 2004; Hunter, 2002; Kent, 2004; Newman, 2004; Samuels, 2005). From close analysis of their comments, their particular classes or instructors may have played some part in their attitudes, which I will address in discussion of the third research question regarding State's "Shared Vision."

On the other hand, analysis of Bonnie's comments revealed an individual excited about a new life direction. At middle age, she is going into her sophomore year and speculates it will take about eight years to graduate at her current pace. Her energy and enthusiasm to be back in college are palpable. She spoke with animation about all the classes and experiences she had enjoyed so far, including watching the "younger kids" struggle with their own adaptation to various learning environments and schedule challenges. Although she was the oldest participant and could have tested out of some basic courses, she was eager to take the basic classes and experience the college learning environment that she had bypassed to begin working.

Teacher "misbehaviors":

The learning environment created or controlled by some of their teachers provoked a number of examples of what Becky, Susan, and Angie referred to as "teacher misbehaviors," and which directly contradict an environment that is **student-centered**, based in **dialogue**, and **inclusive**. These misbehaviors included teachers who "talked down" to the students, "talked over their heads," told "inappropriate jokes," "talked about themselves rather than the course," "talked about things not related to the class," having obvious favorites in the class or singling out "special" students to interact with. Other "teacher misbehaviors" included coming late to class, keeping the class over time so that they were late to their next class, not returning papers and grades in a timely

manner, changing due dates, lecturing on one topic and testing on another, not being prepared for class according to the syllabus calendar, lecturing straight from the book or slides, straight lecture with no allowance for questions, classes that repeat lower level information, multiple “busy-work” projects that consume large amounts of time but don’t count very much toward the final grade, using their class for a propaganda or political platform, and overall “lack of clarity” in content, assignments, and instructions. With reference to “timely return of papers and grades,” Angie, a senior, commented in focus group that she had received only one grade as of our interview the first week of May, although she had turned in numerous assignments. Days before graduation, she didn’t even know if she was passing the class or not!

Respect for students and approachability were named as key components of “good” instructor behaviors. Teacher responses and feedback were important to all the participants, especially in the form of positive constructive criticism, rather than vague or sarcastic comments. Analysis of data from participant comments found that female instructors more often than male instructors returned papers or tests with constructive criticism and positive comments. Susan and Bonnie mentioned that they had to seek out their instructors to get clarification and verbal reinforcement about assignments and their progress in the classes. Rae and Jessie relied on e-mail because they felt “intimidated” by certain instructors, and therefore preferred “computer-mediated” rather than face-to-face communication. Jessie and Susan specifically felt “put-down” by comments both in writing and verbally from male professors.

We were almost scared to participate because he just ...some of the stuff he was talking about we just really didn’t understand... And the examples, we didn’t understand what he was talking about.

Bonnie commented about an Honors seminar,

Before class we'd all be sitting there saying 'What are we supposed to be doing?' We were never really sure what he wanted...I spent more time going by during his office hours than any other class because I was constantly needing clarification.

Jessie, who had been excited about being in her first year of college, was intimidated by the professor, although she thoroughly enjoyed the course material:

When this guy would talk about (the course content), it was just boring and not structured, so when I'd hand in my paper it would come back with more than constructive criticism, you know? It would make me want to cry. I would have put so much into it and it would come back with 'Go to freshman comp!' and I'm like 'I am in freshman comp!' And then he might come out with some sarcastic clever remark to make me feel dumb! I still remember all that class stuff because it was sooo interesting and really neat, but the instructor was (*holds out her fist with thumb down and makes a razzberry sound with her tongue*).

Several participant comments referred to instructors who, as Rae described it, have "lost their umph." These instructors were labeled by three of the participants similarly – as the "older tenured" (male) professors.

I don't want to say that they don't care what the students get from the teachers, but it seems like they don't care what they are teaching us!

Two students commented on a few teachers in upper level classes they felt "set them up for failure." Analysis of their comments revealed that they felt a "Catch 22" situation, in which if they demonstrated independent thinking they would be penalized, and if they memorized information from the instructors' lectures, but left out a word or two, they would also be penalized.

I felt like sabotage was going on in that classroom...very few questions and very little class discussion because we didn't understand what was going on. We started off with 20 students and by the end of the semester we had probably 13. We were all scared to participate because if we did ask a question he would make us feel like 'Oh, you don't get that!'

In a related example another participant said,

The professor understands the material, but he can't teach it back to you. Like, most professors want you to put it in your own words; he wants you to regurgitate it just like he told you, and if you miss one word you are wrong. And that just killed me, because you don't learn by just regurgitating. You learn by rewording it; that's how you tell whether somebody's learning is like their own explanation...he will really mess up your GPA because you don't ever really understand anything...you are really lost and it's just like...What do you do? I felt like studying was pointless because I felt like no matter how hard I studied I would still get it wrong.

Because that one professor was the only one teaching certain courses in her major, she felt helpless in her situation, which only led to more stress and de-motivation.

In one focus groups the conversation turned to a discussion of teachers who had "brain smarts" or "research smarts" but had never acquired "teacher smarts" – they were perceived as ineffective, even "unqualified" teachers. One comment is exemplary of the majority attitude:

Like we have orientation that's supposed to teach us how to be college students. They should have some sort of University Seminar where professors do something to learn how to teach...some of the professors when they are becoming doctors, they don't learn how to teach.

In a university originally founded and well-respected for preparing future teachers, the number of comments regarding teacher "misbehaviors" directly contradicted discourses

contained in the “Shared Vision” promoting a “student-centered environment,” the “central importance of teaching and learning” and “open discussion based in dialogue.”

Student “misbehaviors”:

As mentioned earlier, in contrast to comments from the participants who like group discussion, important learning environment factors for international student Becky include “clear lecture” in a small classroom, a “respectful” environment, access to lecture notes to help studying – overall the concept of “teacher clarity.” She explained the learning environment experiences in her home country of Japan were markedly different from most of American students’ experiences during the last twenty years. Her comments provided valuable insights from an international student’s perspective of American students’ classroom behaviors, or as she describes them – “student misbehaviors.”

I really got used to it (*lecture style*) in my junior and high schools. Every single class was lecture style. The teacher or speaker talked, and after the person finished talking, then students could question. But even at question time, I don’t think a lot of people would try to ask the teacher to challenge or contradict. Because we were already told what the topic is, and we have to understand what they are talking about because they are talking not in a foreign language or jargon words, but in my own native language. And still some people may not understand, but they don’t ask a question because that is not allowed. If they dared to ask a question or interrupt our atmosphere of learning, that is not a good thing, it’s a bad thing. So, like here, after every single word, somebody asks a question, like “what does that mean?”...Like when it’s a basic first level class, and the text is in plain words and they are native Americans, they ask questions like this is an upper level class. That is not constructive questioning. I feel that kind of question is really rude, not only to the professor, but also the others. And I wonder, “Why are they allowed to ask questions? Don’t they feel shame?” That’s my feeling.

Analysis and reflection on her comments led to an important finding in this study because of the yearly increase of international students being accepted into American colleges. An “atmosphere of learning” based on lecture, then “respectful” questions from the students as Becky described is far different from many classes that Becky has attended at State, where she feels an almost combative atmosphere. Her understanding of how to “be a student” clashes with her observations of some of State’s undergraduates “being students” in the American educational system.

Becky’s description of the very different structure between classes at State and her home classes led me to ask her to explain in more detail her perspective on State’s learning environment. I asked her what a “really good class” would be compared to a class that would not be as enjoyable. Her comments focused on linguistic difficulties between cultures. Apparently “the Americans” speak English much faster than other international students speak English. She sat quietly for a moment, then leaned forward toward me and began to talk quickly and animatedly. Her earnest expression and intense eye contact conveyed her desire to help me understand her standpoint and position as an “outsider-within” State’s learning environment.

OK, in a really good class, it’s active arguments (*“lively discussion”*). Before I came here I didn’t hear anything about arguments. I hate arguments! But since I came here I find that some competition or some argument is really constructive and I feel good after reaching some goal or achievement. I feel comfortable with it. A bad class situation is...sometimes I cannot understand what they are talking about, especially in the conversations with the females, and I ask them “What did you say?” and then they say it again, with the same speed. I just want them to speak more slowly when I ask them what they said. With the other international students who can speak English fluently, like the German or French

students, we can say “What did you say?” and they will answer r-e-a-l-l-y s-l-o-w-l-y because they understand when they are talking fast. But an American-born student does not understand that because of their speed of speaking, we do not understand. They think we just do not know the words. We know the words, even with the jargon like “y’all” (*laughs*), so it’s not that we don’t know enough words or have enough English. We don’t understand them because of their speed of speaking...Yeah! In some classes the speed of speaking is a problem for me.

Our discussion then continued into State’s “learning environment” in general, which she found disturbing compared to her learning environment preferences.

...Some people say that is a good environment for learning because everybody can speak out on the topic. I don’t think it is, because in my culture, my home culture, there is no system to try to do that sort of thing. Some people try to (*adjust*), but they just cannot adjust to the American attitude because they (*international students*) feel very shamed when they (*American students*) interrupt, because somebody will be hurt. We are really concerned about the other’s feelings. Like one time in one of my _____ classes, they (*American students*) began arguing, and that was just, like, unbelievable!...in front of the other people, especially in the class! That was really childish... that is not an educational environment. That was a class, a public space.

Becky’s comments may not be just the perspective of students from other countries, but in my small group of participants, she was the most willing to describe her impressions in detail and at length. Based on analysis of her comments, on this campus there may be unintentionally created unflattering impressions and negative perceptions about American students.

So far, with regard to learning environment preferences, the findings from data analysis of comments from these nontraditional female students can be summarized as follows:

The majority of these participants are passionate about learning, and are eager to “practice” the skills they will need in their careers;

The majority of these “younger” students do not prefer passive lecture format, but specifically prefer interactive discussion facilitated by an instructor who respects the students and creates a supportive learning environment;

The majority perception is that teachers engage in specific behaviors that these students readily identified as helpful, supportive, or otherwise; these teacher “misbehaviors” lead to diminished student motivation and contradict State’s discourses of **inclusion, student-centered learning environments, and the central importance of teaching and learning;**

The trait motivation attributed to “older” students (for example, Houser, 2002) was present in all the participants early on, but diminished in a couple of the students as they approached the end of their college experience, perhaps from an accumulation of perceived barriers. Two of the participants seemed overwhelmed as they approached the end of their college experience, while the others seemed to pick up speed and excitement, including the oldest participant who was just beginning an eight-year educational journey. The institutional, situational, informational, and dispositional barriers affecting adult learners also affect the “younger” students;

Learning environment preference, based on analysis of participant comments, seems to be more an individual or cultural experience difference, rather than an age difference;

The American interactive learning environment for some international students is a “culture shock,” and argumentative interaction among students and with teachers is

seen as “student misbehaviors.” Becky provided a glimpse from an international student “outsider-within” perspective as to how some American students may be viewed by students from other countries with different learning experiences.

The previous arbitrary age categories that many studies use to compartmentalize learning preferences were not apparent in analysis of comments from this group of nontraditional students. If anything, the findings validate and confirm observations from studies (e.g., Chang, 2003; Garrett, 2002; Hudson, 2005; Kasworm, 1990) that found intergroup differences and intragroup similarities. Merriam’s (1988) question regarding “adult learning” came back to mind – “Is self-direction a precondition of adult learning, or is it one of the goals of an adult learning activity?” (p.42). This group of nontraditional students of mostly traditional age described learning preferences attributed in research to “older” and “adult” students. All of the participants with the exception of one felt that they were already “adults” and the learning activities that incorporated “real world” activities resonated with more value than “busy-work” activities.

The foregoing discussion of the types of learning environments preferred by eight of the ten participants are very similar to adult student learning preferences that incorporate “real world” application. Several of the participants indicated they would enjoy taking classes within a student cohort. They prefer taking charge of their learning environment, or at least participating in discussions and interactive classrooms. Because of her previous learning environments, Becky is not completely comfortable in the collaborative, unstructured environment. Mary simply prefers lecture, referring to herself as “sort of quiet and shy,” then individual projects where she has independent control

with supervision from her professors. The traditional-age participants are similar in many ways, but as far as learning environment preferences, are not the same.

RQ2 asked, “What are the roles and responsibilities of these nontraditional female students?”

Each participant in this study is uniquely multi-dimensional, possessing a wide range of standpoints that contribute to her role as “nontraditional student.” As discussed in the Review of Literature, a number of recent studies have inquired into student role vs. adult role (DeRemer, 2002; Henke, 2002; Kasworm, 2003a; Newman, 2004), barriers (Hair, 2002; Parsons, 2005) learning environment (Phillips, 2005), learning preferences (Hair, 2002; Lynberg, 2003; Tseng, 2001), persistence and/or retention (Garrett, 2002; Hunter, 2002; Newman, 2004), orientation programs (Welch, 2004), support services (Dukes, 2001; Linnartz, 2005; Morton, 2004) and a combination of these and other factors for those over 25. Because nine of ten of my participants were under 25 at the time of the study, the comparison of their multiple roles in addition to “student” illustrate the dramatically different situations of many of today’s traditional-age nontraditional students from those of a decade or two ago.

The common description of adult lifelong learners, as portrayed by Knowles (1973/1990), Cross (1981), and Kelly (2002) also portrays many of today’s traditional-age nontraditional students. A large number of young undergraduates have already begun working, living independently, taking on debt to finance their own education, and a wide range of roles and responsibilities that the former “traditional-age” student did not have to worry about. They are juggling jobs, families, personal lives, finances, commuting (and parking), and numerous other complications in addition to coursework.

They come from a range of socio-economic strata, educational backgrounds, community and cultural experiences, and almost innumerable individual circumstances. Both the demographic information from the Department of Education Statistics (NCES 2002) and the information provided by State's Institutional Research as of Fall 2005 document the wide range of roles and responsibilities contributing to each individual's standpoint(s). Nine of the participants define themselves as "single." However, that term probably means something a little different to each one. For instance, a couple of the participants are in serious relationships, but not married. Another is in an established gay partnership, but refers to herself as single.

The standpoint diagrams begin on p. 88. The multiple participant roles and responsibilities are by no means all-inclusive. Each of the terms used to label the multiple standpoints of these participants has its own cultural and symbolic interpretation. Even though the participants included several "White, non-Hispanic" students and several "Hispanic" students, each of these women most likely has a unique interpretation of what those identities or standpoints encompass. For instance, Rae doesn't necessarily want to be the "Hispanic representative" in her major classes. Neither does Susan especially want to be the "African American spokesperson" in her major classes. The term "Asian" is an all-encompassing label that masks the distinctive attributes of individuals. For instance, although Kristi classifies herself as "Asian" under the limited categories available, she is of Chinese descent, with no attachments to China. Also self-classified as "Asian" is Becky, a student from Japan, whose cultural background is very different from Kristi's. As mentioned earlier, Becky commented that she tries to "act American" as best she can, but even she admits she can only accomplish "maybe 95%."

She is usually called on in class to tell about herself as an international student, making her a representative of her country whether she wants to be or not.

Not all standpoints for these nontraditional students are included in each profile. Rae, for instance, is still the “baby” of her family at 22, but has worked and lived independently with her young daughter for a number of years already, pays her own educational expenses, and has prepared herself well for the type of career she wants to pursue. Jessie at 21 is also the “baby” of the family, but when she left home for college she claimed financial independence by getting full time employment, taking out loans, and virtually declaring herself an adult at 18. Her major fear is that she will miss some wonderful class before she graduates with her double major and begins graduate school. Kristi, age 20, is also the “baby” of her family. Now a Junior, she is financially supported by her family, and at their insistence is including with her Communication Studies major a Business minor, in which she has no interest or commitment; but because they are funding her education, she feels an obligation to honor their request. Angie is the older of two sisters, raised by a single parent, and first in family to graduate college. At 23 she says she feels “powerful” and ready to be a positive role model for her younger sister and other relatives. Mary, who took a year off from school after graduating high school to work and become more independent, is now eager to finish school and “get on with her life” and her professional career.

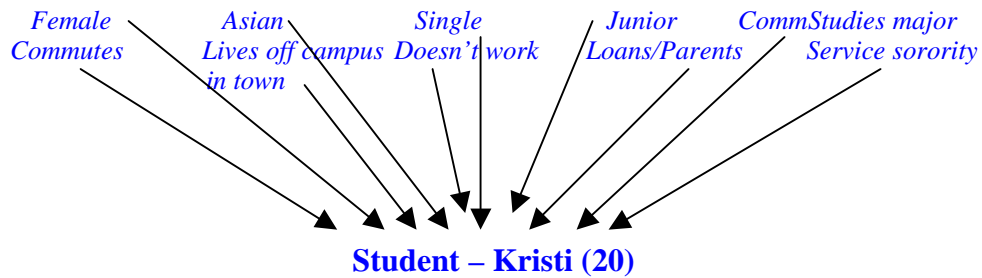
The majority of the participants feel confident and eager to begin their careers; yet two of the participants revealed that they do not. Their unique roles and responsibilities may have become overwhelming, or just too restrictive as they approach graduation. Abbi has decided to move out of state after graduation to “get away,” although at 23 she

has no job and no idea what career she will pursue. Susan just wants to graduate and “take a break” from everything before she begins a job in the Fall. Becky’s roles and responsibilities are different from the others because of several factors. She feels one of her most important responsibilities is to represent her country as a visiting international student. She feels (internal) pressure to more fully develop her role as an “American student” so that she can pursue a career in international business, while not losing touch with her home culture and customs.

Data analysis of comments from several of the younger nontraditional students reveals that they already possess the discipline and determination to schedule their priorities for work and school assignments, contradicting many of the previous mixed-age studies (e.g., Bishop-Clark & Lynch, 1992; Houser, 2002) comparing traditional and non-traditional (age) students, which indicated that older students were more organized and trait-motivated. Jessie, Bonnie, and Abbi are aware of prioritizing their multiple roles and responsibilities “according to the time of the month” as Jessie explains in her comments on page 90.

Following are the conceptual frameworks (standpoints) for each of the participating nontraditional female participants that contribute to and affect the role of “student,” beginning with the youngest participant at time of interviews.

Multiple Standpoints – Roles and Responsibilities

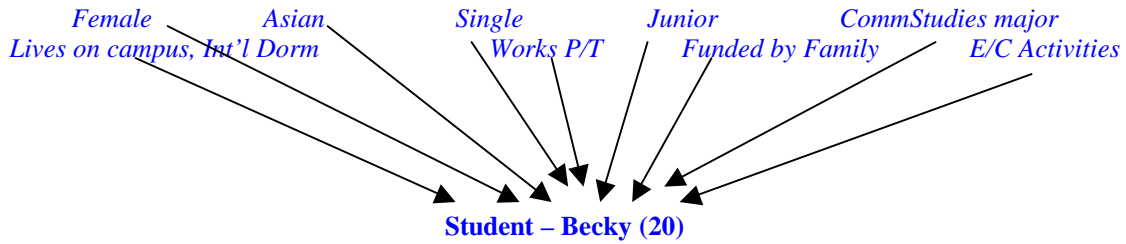


Kristi is a very energetic, busy student. In analyzing the data from her comment, I think perhaps because she is a “young” junior, recently moving away from her parent’s home, she is still a little insecure about her future plans and career, although she is very secure in her identity. Kristi does not work, gets the majority of her financial support from her family, and can focus on coordinating her school assignments and service sorority participation. Therefore, she does not have the dilemma of juggling as many roles and responsibilities as most of the other participants portrayed in this section. She was concerned that she “help” me by telling her story “right.” (*K is Kristi; R is Researcher.*)

- K: Am I answering these questions right?
R: There’s no right or wrong, just your reaction.
K: I feel like maybe I’m not comprehending the questions right.
R: No, no, you’re doing fine.

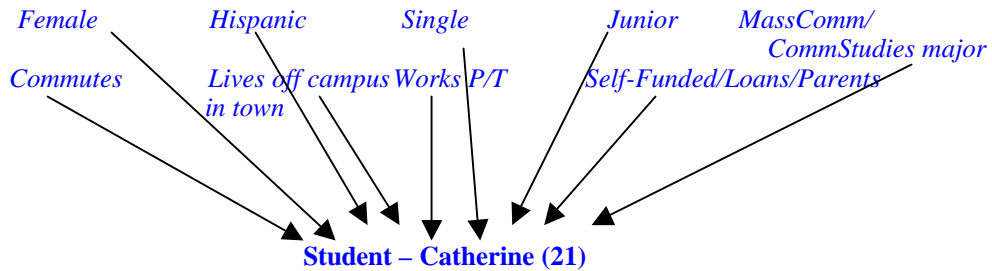
After her initial insecurity about “answering correctly” she relaxed and went on to make some very candid and insightful comments, which are included in the “Shared Vision” discussion.

Multiple standpoints – Roles and responsibilities:



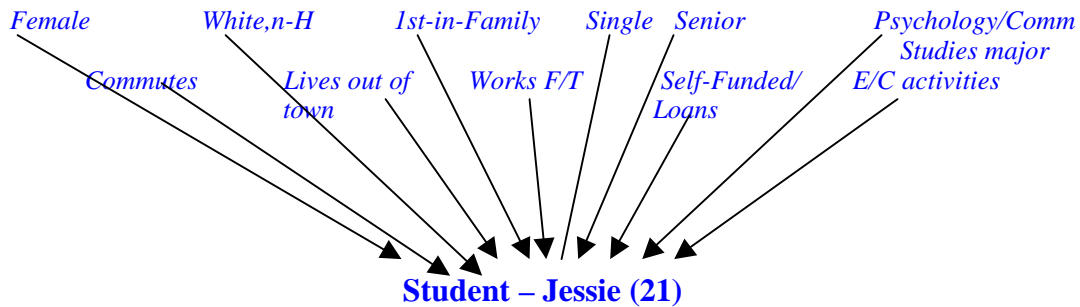
I pretend to be American here as much as I can, but you know, I realize I can't adjust to American 100%. I can be maybe 95%, but not completely American. At first, when I realized that fact, I was very disappointed about it, because everybody has customs in America. But I do not have it! I want to adjust myself to them, but I really struggle with the fact that I cannot adjust to that.

Multiple Standpoints – Roles and Responsibilities



I've learned how to write stories for the paper, and learned how to communicate with people, and juggle my job and commuting, and my classes, I've loved them all. I felt really cared about and catered to. I was so surprised how my teachers just went out of their way to make sure the class and me in particular, were feeling good about it and really giving good feedback. But socially, school is not social for me. I come to class, do my work, then I'm gone...I kinda see a lot of self-segregation around campus. It's not hostile, but it's definitely there.

Multiple Standpoints – Roles and Responsibilities

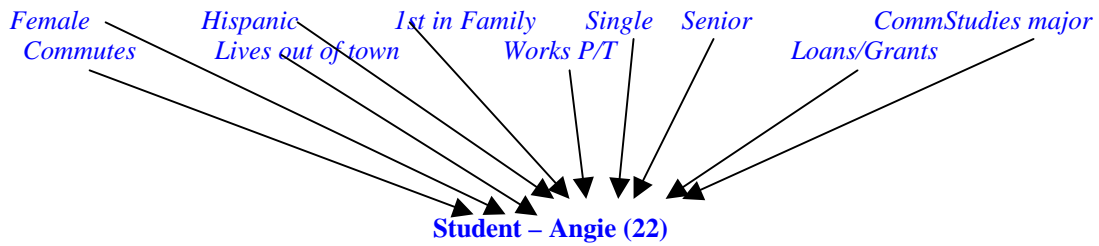


I like going to school...there's a lot of things I wouldn't have been able to learn...the courses, just being challenged.” “I pay all my bills and I got a brand new car that's reliable...and I work hard, and no one can tell me what I can or can't be! And they can't take away my funding!

Jessie is a first generation college student and was amazed at the range of courses she could choose from. She's taken several Honors classes “just for fun.” This semester she took 19 hours and has a flexible, but full, work schedule. At 21 she is in charge of her life, self-directed and internally motivated. In the focus group she explained her priorities for school and work “depend on the time of the month.” (*Abbi and Bonnie both agreed with her in the focus group that their schedules are very similar.*)

Like around the 15th of the month my priority is work, regardless of whatever else is going on, and around the 1st. But for instance around the 15th is car payment and all the other bills are due. And on the 1st that's when rent and insurance are due. But after the bills are paid at those two times, then the #1 priority is school and tests. Like I have a test tomorrow, and I worked my butt off all weekend, and when I got home I started studying and I studied all night, and when I'm done here (*the focus group*), I'll go home and probably study until 3:00 a.m. or so, and when I'm done with the test tomorrow, I'll go to work and start saving for my car payment. The priority level just kinda fluctuates between one thing and the other (*shifts her outstretched palms up and down to indicate a balancing act*). It just depends on the time of the month.

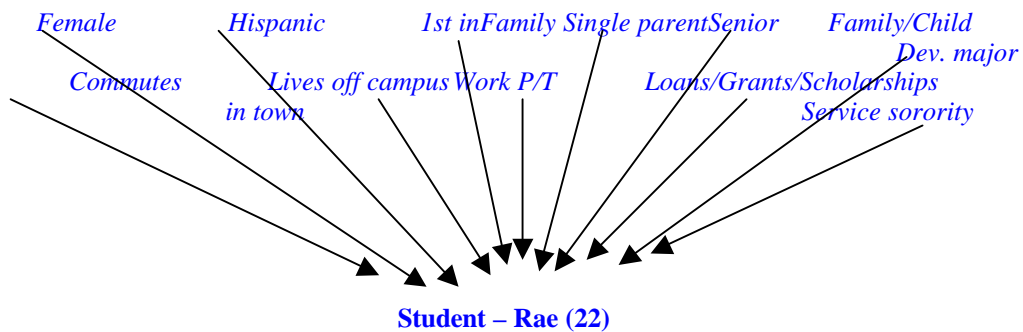
Multiple standpoints – Roles and responsibilities:



Angie is very proud of accomplishing her goal of finishing college in four years, while working and commuting:

Well, I like the fact that I can say that I know what I'm talking about, it's like a power trip thing, I guess. Just being educated, it's powerful. And I am first generation, and I was raised by a single parent, and I just feel that she deserves me to come to school and do better than she did. That's what she wants for me and my sister....better. *(The bulk of her comments are included in discussion of the "Shared Vision" discourses.)*

Multiple Standpoints – Roles and Responsibilities

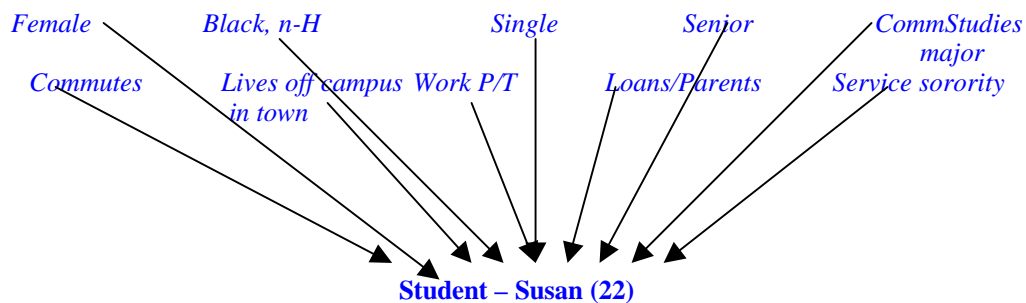


I came from a town where we were all Hispanic, you know? I would look around and I was not a "minority" and then I came here and I was like "Whoa! Where is everybody?!" As far as people are concerned I've learned a whole different world. I'm a totally different person. I call my Mom and I tell her "Hey, I got a 90 on my test." But she doesn't understand what a number is, because

she's like "Well, that's great!" or my Dad...I'll e-mail him and he'll e-mail me back with "You got a 90! Why didn't you get a 100?!" They're just happy for me. They don't really understand, and that's OK with me.

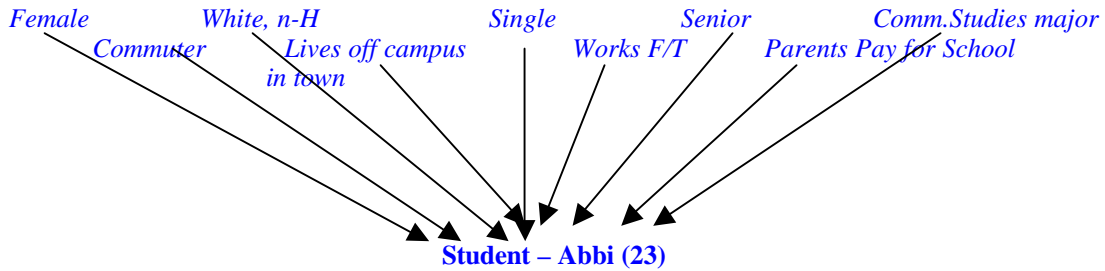
Rae, like Mary, is a very private person and rarely discusses her life away from school, particularly her home life and her child. Yet unlike Mary, she is very gregarious and open around other students and some professors with whom she feels comfortable. She was very active in the establishment of the first Hispanic sorority on campus a couple of years ago and promotes multicultural activities around campus.

Multiple Standpoints – Roles and Responsibilities



Susan lives in an apartment in town, works part-time on campus and is in a service sorority. She admits her first several years at State were very exciting, but due to a combination of factors, including a limited number of instructors teaching her major classes and trying to fit all of her out-of-class activities into her schedule, she admits the last several semesters have "ground me down." She keeps in close touch with her family back home and they are a source of encouragement. (*The majority of her comments are included in the "Shared Vision" section.*)

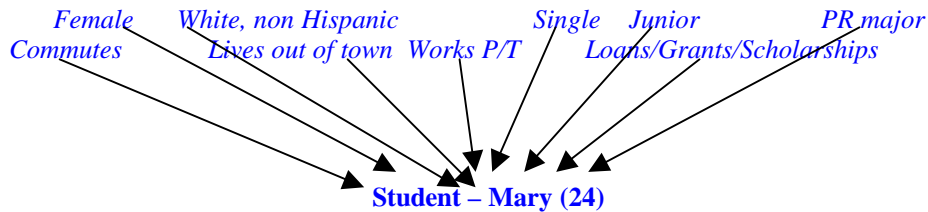
Multiple standpoints – Roles and responsibilities:



Although her parents are paying for educational “needs” – all her tuition, books, and living expenses, she is working over 30 hours a week for “wants” – those things she counts as extras, such as clothes, CDs, eating out. She is about to graduate in the summer, and she’s worried because she knows nothing about handling her own finances.

When rent is due I just pick up the phone and call Dad. But when I’m on my own and rent is due, I won’t have that option. It will be like “rent is due, oh, crud!”...I’m not moving back home, though. I’m moving out of state. I’m finally on my own...I’m going out of state just to get away from the pressure of always running into somebody you know...I’m not from a small town like this...I’m from the city, and I can’t stand it!”

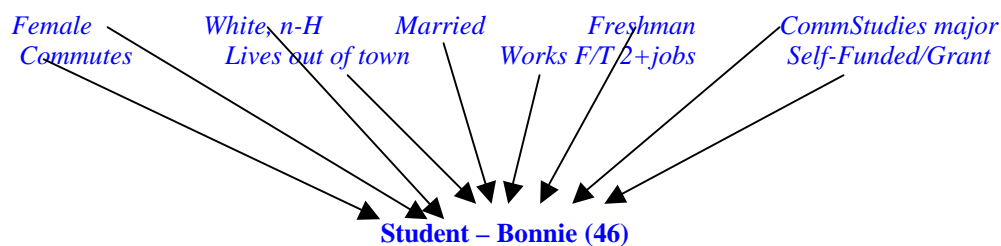
Multiple Standpoints – Roles and Responsibilities



Mary took a year off to work before beginning college, and has attended several colleges before State while continuing to work. She is currently paying her own way and working.

Yes, student loans. And there is that element that, you know, you want to make your parents proud... “See, I told you I could do it!”, that kind of thing, but I do like to learn. I wish it could be faster, and that I didn’t have to come to campus as much...I personally, until very recently, didn’t know I was classified as a nontraditional student. I always think about that one or two 40+ year old woman, and since I’ve been here probably I’ve had only one or two in my class.

Multiple Standpoints – Roles and Responsibilities



Bonnie has worked for a number of years in the public sector. She is currently working “2-1/2” jobs, one full time on campus, another in a music publishing company with her husband, and their band performs regularly for charity in the Hill Country area. She also cares for older relatives and commutes about 60 miles round trip every day. Her standpoint from her age sets her closer to me as the researcher than to her co-participants, except that in all other categories, she is very much like the majority of the younger participants.

Well, they’re (State) trying to make well-rounded individuals who do all these different service things and all that, and it’s kinda like forcing individual well-being in a journey that everybody takes at

their own pace. Some are service-oriented, some want to be involved with helping kids. My thing is that we play music for Habitat for Humanity, American Cancer Society, we do concerts when we're asked by certain people, but I'm not in any extra-curricular activities. I'd like to do Comm. Club. That would be the only thing that I have time for. But that doesn't mean I'm not a well-rounded individual giving back to my community...But I'm not doing it to be in Who's Who in College. I'm doing it because...(gestures to her heart)

Bonnie's comment regarding a desire to participate more fully in campus activities directly contradicts studies that found "nontraditional" or older students do not care about campus activities, but are concerned only with the knowledge they can use from their courses.

Before I begin discussion of data analysis from responses to **RQ3** I would like to re-emphasize the point that these women were chosen from a select group of individuals who met two or more of the Department of Education qualifications for "nontraditional" college student. Therefore, their comments are coming from situated, perspectival, partial positions, from "outsiders-within" a "Shared Vision." As mentioned early on, since "one does not have a complete knowledge of social reality...one may thus learn what other marginal standpoints have to offer" (Tanesini, 1999, p. 153, quoting Collins, 1991). The "Shared Vision" discourses promulgated by the Administration contain very specific and possibly locally understood symbolic language based on the negotiated understandings and interpretations of the members of the Administration. I wanted to inquire into the possibly multiple interpretations of these discourses from a select number of nontraditional female students.

RQ3 asked, “How do these nontraditional female students perceive and interpret State’s ‘Shared Vision’ discourses?”

State’s “Shared Vision” included vision, mission, and values discourses constructed from symbolic language developed by the Administration. Several areas or categories emerged from analysis of their comments regarding the “Shared Vision” discourses that encompassed the institutional, situational, informational and dispositional barriers identified by Cross (1981) with reference to adult or lifelong learners affected by competing roles and responsibilities; time limitations and course availability; extra-curricular activities; orientation and student services, and student involvement.

In order to focus on the discourses and their perceptions and interpretations from this particular group of nontraditional female students, in most cases I have placed individual participant comments within discussion of the terms or phrases included in the discourses rather than attributing a specific comment to a specific individual. For the purposes of this study, I felt that the participant source of a comment would prove less important or useful than the fact that this group of nontraditional students volunteered to speak honestly and candidly from their unique standpoints, in hopes that the information can be used as helpful critique to State’s Administration to continue developing the “Shared Vision” discourses into a more meaningful program for today’s rich student diversity. Following is a discussion drawn from the data analysis of the discourses as interpreted by my participants.

“Learner-centered,” “student-centered,” with the “central importance of teaching and learning”:

The discourses contained in the “vision” and “mission” statements refer to “**learner-centered**” or “**student-centered**” environments, with the “**central importance of teaching and learning.**” Analysis of comments from several of the students indicated most felt they were receiving “a well-rounded high quality education.” Several comments credited professors for being “passionate about what they are teaching” and “full of energy” and “making sure we really understood.” Three of the students specifically complimented instructors in their major classes for giving relevant examples and providing information that will be useful in their careers. On the other hand, a couple of participants suggested the opposite. Analysis of their comments revealed that they wanted learning experiences in which professors would use examples that “related more directly to students’ lives,” and would have liked projects that approximate the types of experiences they will have when they graduate and begin their careers. Several of the comments referred specifically to “lecturers” both in small classes and large sections who often did not include relevant or useful examples about the lecture topics, and who did not allow time for questions.

The majority of comments regarding “**learner- or student-centered**” courses were favorable. A couple of representative comments follow:

Learner-centered – I agree. In my major, the teachers have been passionate about what they are teaching...like in everyday conversation, I can say “Yeah, that happened to me.” Maybe you didn’t realize, like with expressions and people’s nonverbals, maybe you hadn’t even thought about it before. It’s so, like, common sense, and then we’re reading the book on it, and it’s like describing exactly all about it and what it means. It’s really neat!

The two _____ classes were really **student-centered**. I learned how to write a good lead, and how to think out a story and really process it, rather than just information thrown at me. Of course, all my _____ classes are

really involved. I had Research Methods, which was a really good class because I had already taken Statistics for my other major, but the professor made it so it wasn't just statistics, but that we really understood it and applied it. So I would say **very student-centered**.

On the other hand, Angie's comment regarding the lower level classes indicated:

The upper level I feel it somewhat, but of course the basic classes I didn't feel that at all. I don't know if other universities are like that, but my major classes are very **student-centered**.

Analysis of Abbi's comments indicated that she felt students in the first year of college should be prohibited from taking major courses and that students should be required to take only core courses in order to have time to settle into college and "get an idea of what they are interested in." This suggestion was in response to her specific experience in which an advisor had told her to take several classes in her first choice of major during her freshman year, and then she had changed her major and lost hours and money.

"Engaged teaching and learning based in dialogue, student involvement and the free exchange of ideas":

Referring to the "**central important of teaching and learning**" is the "values" discourse of "**engaged teaching and learning based in dialogue, student involvement and the free exchange of ideas.**" Again, close reading and analysis of comments found these participants rated the majority of their professors highly as being "really excited and happy to be there and totally dedicated and thinking and grinding the wheels!" They commended teachers who "teach to the upper crust" and "have unlimited amounts of time for you" and "help you see things in a new way." Their comments agreed with studies

reporting that teachers and the classroom are the main contact points for adult students.

Catherine's comments captured the flavor of several others:

Excited! Excited about teaching. My (major) professors show up and are like "Yes, I'm here, I'm ready, let's get some stuff into these kids' heads! Let's talk about it and really have some fun", you know? Just really excited and happy to be there and totally dedicated and thinking and grinding the wheels! They encourage people and they are like "Come to my office and let's talk about it." They have an unlimited amount of time for you. ...My (major) Law professor, I notice that he teaches to the top students in the class. It's challenging and really satisfying...If I'm going to these classes for 4 years and sitting in these classes for a semester, and I'm never challenged, and I just go and make my As...if it's not something that I can be really proud of as far as my work is concerned...All professors need to be that way. They really need to teach to that upper level, that group that wants to learn and is as excited as they are to be there.

Jessie (21) reflected attitudes representative of adult students who enjoy making connections and learning for it's own sake:

If it has to do with personal growth I have definitely felt that here. **Engaged teaching and learning**, all that has to do with learning how to present yourself, your ideas. In my classes and with different professors, maybe I'm just lucky because I'm a _____ major, but I've never felt like I couldn't say what I wanted to say, and have a good discussion about it. Right, like one of the classes I took was an elective and I thought it would be a fun blow-off class...And then we started analyzing lots of stuff in popular culture and all these new terms and all this stuff that I'd never really thought about before and for me that was really challenging, and it didn't really matter what grade I made, it wasn't for my major, it was just an elective. But the material was not an easy read, it was hard! And I'm like "Wow, I never thought about it that way!"

However, analysis of several comments found perceptions of "political hostility" in some classes in which a professor took a particular stance or seemed to have a specific

political or social agenda in the class, which they felt was “inappropriate” in a learning environment. Indeed, several of the young participants felt an air of “political propaganda” that contradicted their own beliefs, yet they didn’t feel that they could speak up in the specific classes if they disagreed with the instructor.

As for “**dialogue**” and “**the free exchange of ideas,**” analysis of some of the comments indicated there may be some room for improvement.

Well, I just think there’s a little bit of political hostility, I guess. And it’s not racial or ethnic, however you want to say it, and it’s not based on gender. But politically, I just think that people are so hostile. I always feel like I’m in the political minority being conservative. And I just feel that being near Austin, being on a college campus, that there are liberal people all around me, and that they’re all ready to wring my neck because I’m conservative. In all actuality they’re are probably more conservative people here on our campus than liberal, but ...I mean, everybody is very outspoken...there’s a lot of biting at each other and harsh tones and that kind of stuff...

I asked if she were speaking of students or teachers or everybody:

I think sometimes...not that teachers are hostile, but the teachers definitely get in on it. They have their say, you know, in lectures or in class, they can say and do and imply certain things. Like my one professor this semester never has said anything extremely obvious, but if you really listen, you’re like “Yeah, I know what that means, and I know where she’s been.” And I’ve heard about _____ professors or _____ professors that are just very outspoken about political topics. In that sense, I think there’s a lot of tension around campus.

My _____ professor is really good at not doing that, and my _____ professor is also very good. But I think even professors can be very outspoken. And especially, definitely, without a doubt students are. It’s like they just want to smack you!

In her interview Catherine commented that perhaps the whole idea of “**dialogue**” is not working as well as it could. She commented that on general topics and ideas the idea of

“**open discussion and dialogue**” is working, but that “...on some things, the hot button issues, it’s just a reflection of how it is in our country and our state. It’s exactly like the proportions and the ideas, the extremes...And it’s very hostile communication (*small wry laugh*) when it comes to politics...not always but enough.” With regard to “**dialogue**,” Susan volunteered: “And when it comes to race issues, no one wants to talk!” The overall finding that emerged from analysis of these critiques suggests that perhaps in some classes “open discussion and dialogue” about ideas are not as “freely exchanged” as they could be.

“Serving the educational needs of the diverse population of Texas and the world beyond”:

The “mission” statement includes the phrase “**serving the educational needs of the diverse population of Texas and the world beyond.**” Analysis of comments regarding this discourse revealed the belief that State is diverse, with “a lot of organizations and a great school paper.” Participants enumerated a wide range of excellent programs, but as Rae said, “the school undersells itself. Some of the departments here are the best in the nation, and we don’t do anything about it.” She followed this comment with a suggestion for more active and aggressive self-promotion of the university, its programs and accomplishments to the “**diverse populations.**”

Analysis of comments from several “first in family” students revealed appreciation and even amazement about their undergraduate experiences. Rae, who is Hispanic and first-in-family to attend college commented, “I’m a totally different person than when I came here...I’ve learned a whole different world. I’ve learned there is a whole other aspect to school and that people enjoy it!” Another first-in-family, Jessie,

was amazed at the wealth of information she could access. However, analysis of contradictory comments from other participants uncovered the apparent perception that State may be trying to reach too many different or diverse audiences. Comments alluding to this problem included,

I think they (*the Administration*) are finding out there's a trend that the incoming freshmen are less and less and it's more transfer students that have had the freshman stuff already.

They (*Administration*) need to find where they are going, and who they want to serve. If they are trying to serve everybody...I don't know how you can make everybody happy all the time.

They (*Administration*) want to have it all and they can't have it all unless they focus it down to a manageable length.

During the focus groups I asked the under-25 students for their individual perceptions of “nontraditional” students. Although they knew from the original invitation to participate in the study that they were classified “nontraditional” under the Department of Education criteria, they still envisioned nontraditional students as “older.” I found one of the comments particularly interesting, especially because it still represents the “older nontraditional” student stereotype. Abbi, age 23, commented:

Probably older than 25 or younger with children or married. I think it would be harder to be an older student here, or anywhere. As college students being in that late teens early twenties, you're allowed to go to school and accumulate all this debt, you're allowed to let Mommy and Daddy pay for everything, you're allowed to have some BS job. But when you're coming back and you are older, you're not allowed to accumulate debt, Mommy and Daddy are not paying, you're not allowed to have a BS job, you have to have a real job and this (*school*) has to be secondary. The younger ones for the most part are allowed to have that debt, and have this as **our** (*my emphasis*) only priority, where having a real job makes school second priority. It's kinda like “What's the point?” I would think it's discouraging for older students...Even **older students in their later 20s and early 30s** (*my emphasis*).

The above comment agrees with Mostyn's (1998) finding that "older" and "younger" are relative terms – relative to the age of the student.

An "exceptional undergraduate experience":

The values statement promotes an **"exceptional undergraduate experience."** Analysis of the data reconfirmed comments in discussion of **RQ1** indicating these participants felt a personal connection with many of their professors in a **"learner-centered"** environment. These students gave most of the credit for their **"exceptional experience"** to their professors, agreeing with results from Fusani (1994) and Hogan (2004) that the instructor is the main student/university connection for many "adult" students. Participant references to "professors" at State specifically included graduate teaching assistants and new faculty "seeking tenure status" whom they noticed attending community service and school-wide events. Comments included,

We have excellent professors...I have the encouragement of my teachers...I feel like I'm absolutely ready...I feel completely confident that I'm getting everything I'm supposed to be getting, especially with the reputation that our school has in (her majors).

My professors are so exceptional! They were so great, and really cared about whether we were learning it or not. I just felt really catered to. I was so surprised how my teachers just went out of their way to make sure that the class, and me in particular, were feeling good about it and really giving good feedback. That matters so much to me, like "This is good" and "This is how you can do it better" and my professors were so great last semester. I was totally happy.

I'm supposed to graduate next May, and I feel completely confident that I'm getting everything I'm supposed to be getting, especially with the reputation that our school has in_____.

As I re-read and reflected on comments about how much professors contributed to the “**exceptional learning experience**,” an interesting contradiction emerged in the analysis of comments from several of the participants. The comments implied that they perceive two groups or types of faculty, one group involved in the campus and with the students, and another group who are not very involved outside of their classrooms, and who are not really “visible” around the campus, appearing only in their classes or their offices. Catherine commented:

... The TAs and most professors, I do think they really, really care. The TAs are working for something they see going into their own lives. They are still real close to the students. And some of the professors who are still working toward higher degrees and stuff, you can tell there's still the flame there. Because I know a lot of professors who are looking for that tenure status, and they'll go to the community service school-wide events. You see those professors around and it's great to see them, like, they actually have lives!

A comment regarding other faculty members came from Rae:

But the tenured faculty...It's like they are there and we are just here, you know? (*She holds one palm up above her head and the other palm at waist level*)...it feels like they don't even want to be teaching, and then where are they? Why aren't they there? (*at school functions*). This university offers great diversity forums...and the Philosophy dialogue series... where are the professors? It's like they've already soaked up all their knowledge and they're not going to learn any more, you know?

Again from Catherine:

Professors are like ghosts...and sometimes you're like 'I think that's someone I know!' and they'll be like sneaking away! Oh, the other day I saw one of my professors walk right through the Quad, and I was like 'Good! There's a professor walking right through the Quad.' But it's like there's an underground walkway

or something for the professors because you never see them... they're like an abstract idea on campus...it's really weird!

Analysis of the data also revealed that several of the participants were less enthusiastic in their evaluation of the word “**exceptional**” to rate their overall undergraduate experiences: They included ratings of “just OK”...“about 75%”...“on a scale from 1 to 10, about a 6” and “Exceptional? I wouldn't go that far...but maybe right before ‘exceptional.’

As mentioned earlier, Becky indicated that some international students seem to interpret the relationship among professors and students in a less than favorable light because of their own early learning environment experiences. In our individual interview regarding the “Shared Vision” discourses her comments regarding her learning environment experiences as “**exceptional**” included:

Well, not really, because everybody seems to like arguments...In my culture we try to avoid arguments as much as possible, because it's time consuming. (*Becky, as an international student, said she felt “weird” when in several of her classes the professors would speak about political parties or religion.*) In my country they don't have a specific religion, but many religions, and it's not strong at all...and for politics, if some teacher talks about all Republican stuff for instance, the teacher might be accused by somebody. It's a biased way of thinking, or biased philosophy that might lead to a radical movement or demonstrations, or maybe some war or something!

Analysis of her comments indicated that she and some of the other international students felt really uncomfortable with these types of discussions (which she referred to as “arguments”). I interpreted from analysis of her comments that the highly interactive, “argumentative” communication environment in some classes may need to be discussed

more fully with international students before they actually get into classes with “argumentative” students.

“A diversity of people and ideas, a spirit of inclusiveness, a global perspective, and a sense of community”:

The “Shared Vision” discourses also mention a multi-dimensional environment that contains **“a diversity of people and ideas, a spirit of inclusiveness, a global perspective, and a sense of community.”** Careful reading and reflection on some of the comments revealed subtle indications that, while commending the faculty in their majors about **inclusiveness** and **community**, some stereotyping and prejudicial assumptions are still felt in the learning environment. For instance, following is an exchange with one of the Hispanic participants in our individual interview:

I have to say that we have really good faculty over there who are very open-minded. One of the classes we take is a culture and diversity class. We take a non-traditional family class. For the most part the faculty is very open to everything. I know when we say stuff about Hispanics do so and so, and everyone would look at me, like I had to represent the entire Hispanic population or something.

Q: Are you the only Hispanic in your degree plan?

No, there’s a couple of us, but we’re all female, except for one male and when we need a male perspective everyone jumps on him, poor thing!

Q: How do you feel about being a representative for a whole group?

It’s kind of hard, because they would be like “You know, most Hispanics are Catholic,” and I would have to say, “No, we’re not all Catholics, and we don’t all speak Spanish!”...and sometimes they would ask questions like, “I hear that Hispanics do this and this”

and I would say “Yes, some do and some don’t”. But it was never an ugly challenge.

Comparison and analysis of several participant comments seemed to contradict the discourses regarding a “**spirit of inclusiveness**” and “**community.**” These two areas involve student organizations and student “hang-outs.” Findings based on analysis of these participants’ comments echoed findings from studies of adult “time-limited” students and adult commuters. Rather than paraphrasing or synthesizing the various comments in this particular section, I want the reader to experience the candidness and openness of the participants’ observations by quoting them directly. With regard to campus, classes, extra-curricular activities and student organizations, comments from Catherine, Rae, Mary, and Angie reflected their awareness of less than full involvement in the college experience, yet connection within their classes.

I think the ‘**spirit of inclusiveness**’ ...sounds like more than it is...In academics and my professors and my work (on campus) I’d say 100%...If it weren’t for the people in my major classes I might be even more isolated than now. I just come to school and do my work and leave.

For **inclusiveness**, I do feel included in the classroom. But I’m not in any organizations or anything like that, so I don’t feel it...that doesn’t really touch me. But as far as the classes go, I do feel included.

From my perspective, I made my own **inclusiveness**. I don’t think it was something that I found. It’s not something that you just walk onto this campus and feel. It wasn’t like that at all. It’s hard, because I’m not one to go up to a person and say “Hi, you want to be my friend?” You just kind of have to provide your own...I don’t know if that’s a learning thing.

I definitely notice that it’s (*the campus*) predominantly White. From what I’ve seen I think there are organizations like for African

American students. I don't know...being a "White girl" I don't really talk to many other people.

Hmmm... a **sense of community**...I don't feel that. Maybe it's because I don't live on campus, I don't even live in town, so maybe that's why I don't feel it....I do see a lot of people in groups around campus, but I can't really say I feel that because of my situation.

All of the foregoing comments reveal one of the dilemmas of a "commuter" campus – the majority, almost 80% of State's "community" members, live elsewhere, and have other competing demands on their time.

Two participants commented on the benefits and drawbacks of ethnicity-based sororities and fraternities on campus. Perspectives from Catherine and Rae, both Hispanic, included these observations:

Catherine: I feel that if there wasn't a need for it (*the new Hispanic sorority*), it wouldn't have developed. Especially going back to the African-American fraternities that have been around since the early 1900s. Obviously they are doing something for themselves, and it's working. For them to have people like Martin Luther King, it's not just a social club. There's obviously something there.

Rae: (*Reflecting on her first semester at State*) Yeah, it was really hard. It really, really was. If I hadn't got involved in student organizations, I would have been in the odds of going home after the first couple of days. It was really, really hard at first. (*Regarding her active participation in a newly established sorority*)...It's very young. It's the first (*Hispanic*) organization for this university, and you get to set your own pace in it because it's such a young organization, and it's Latina-centered.

Catherine: I don't think it's a great idea, but I think that there's nothing else, no alternative, because you don't see a lot of Hispanics or Blacks getting into mainly Anglo...I mean, I have a friend who is African American, and he was the first (fraternity name) in, like, years, I mean years! And he told me that and I was like "What?!" I was just surprised to know he was in that fraternity,

because they are just Anglos, they are all White people, that's what they are, and I don't think that life in general calls for separate organizations. I think it would be better for us all to be in the same Greek organizations or whatever, but I guess that's unrealistic to expect.

The "Shared Vision" discourse of **inclusion** seems to promote "more than it is" for these participants.

Self-segregation and "Hangouts":

Analysis of comments from the participants indicated they could easily identify areas where specific groups congregate or "hang out" around the campus. They referred to "self-segregation" where various ethnic groups, sororities, and fraternities gather around campus, dining areas, and in the library. On certain floors of the library, people talk and eat and drink. "Don't go to the 5th and 6th floors if you want to study! Stay on the 3rd and 4th floors, the little quiet floors where you can get your work done." In an attempt to further tease out their perceptions, I asked the participants in their individual interviews to identify areas where they felt specific groups of people congregate around the campus. Data analysis showed almost unanimous descriptions. A paraphrase of their comments follows:

The various Greek organizations congregate in specific areas along the Quad (in the center of the original campus). They are mostly segregated by ethnicity. There are African American, Latina, and "white" groups, further identified as "jocks," "Greeks" and "internationals." Two participants commented that the de facto segregation reminded them of their high schools "where everybody has their place" and "just real small town." The international students tend to congregate to study and speak their native languages

together in various places on campus, because their “language and way of thinking is the same.” One ethnic minority participant summarized, “In classes it’s cool, but the Commons, Quad, Library, are segregated.” Analysis of comments from one Hispanic participant indicated a kind of envious longing to be like

...the African Americans...every Black kid knows every other Black kid on this campus, because they’ve got such a strong community, and I feel it’s that way off the campus also...they are all friends. That’s not as obvious with, like, Hispanic students. But there’s a lot of self-segregation on our campus, and I don’t think it’s hostile, but it’s there, definitely...It’s just easier to be around people that are like you, and people who have beliefs like you do. You don’t have to work as hard to be friends.

Becky, the most different as far as cultural experiences in learning environments go, was a valuable source of Collins’ (2000) “outsider-within” perspective. I asked her in our individual interview if she had any insights into why some students seemed to be hesitant to interact with each other. I asked her the question because early analysis of comments from several of the minority participants indicated more awareness of “segregation.” Her answer was long, but her expression conveyed to me her need to fully explain the “international student” dilemmas of living and communicating within a very different cultural learning environment.

Maybe it’s because of our attitude...If I am walking alone, the Americans might be easy to talk to me sometimes. Even though I’m Asian, I’m alone. But if 10 or even 5 Asian people are together, the American doesn’t want to talk to them because they are afraid of groups. It’s very hard to try to talk to a group all from the same nation. I understand that fear...Our way of speaking is really slow compared to the Americans, so that’s a difference...the speed difference is also irritating to the American students. (*I commented that American students can only speak one language in most cases.*) Yeah, I know!

They (*international students*) are not talking in English at all some times. They hate to, because they are shocked by the American students' attitude, like, "What do you want?" or "What are you talking about?" or "Do you understand what I'm talking about?" or something like that. That's a really natural question among the Americans, and I hear lots of conversation like that. But for us it's a real shock! It's really strong, you know? We use words like "Have I made myself clear?" or something like that. But if we use words like that, the Americans can't understand what I'm saying, because I'm being too vague to them. That way of talking and asking questions that the Americans use...we really struggle with that. **I don't know how to solve that problem. Maybe we need more practice** (*my emphasis*). But actually, it's hard to find the time to get together with the American students socially because the accent is very hard to follow sometimes. And sometimes the topic of conversation is very different from what we would talk about.

As I listened to Becky during our conversation, transcribed the interview afterward, and reflected on the transcript, I remembered her earnest expression as she tried to help me understand the dilemma of students living and studying in a very different culture. I marveled that she kept taking responsibility for some of the American students' impatience and even rudeness in communicating with State's international students. She continued explaining why they felt a need to "hang out" together, and her observation that other groups did the same:

And one more thing – a lot of students who come from the same country, the same nation – we can speak our native language and feel really comfortable because our language and way of thinking is the same. So when these students find other people from the same nation, they try to get together, like in the Quad I find that a lot of African Americans gather together all the time, and there are no Whites, actually...I don't think it's a bad thing, because we can talk in our native language, and we just talk about our country's stuff, you know?

Unless we are forced to get together with the other cultures or other raced people, we don't do that. It's very comfortable getting together with your own people. Here is a foreign country. But if

the professor requires it, they might do so, because my nation's students are basically very disciplined. Sometimes I feel too disciplined (*both laugh*).

Although the "Shared Vision" promotes "**inclusion**," analysis of the participants' observations with regard to some organizations and hang-outs indicated that areas of self-segregation do exist.

"Global perspective":

Several of the participants' comments challenged the "**global perspective**" promoted in the discourses. One Hispanic participant commented that her classes had "more of a focus on our culture, the American perspective." She mentioned that in her Literature classes there was not much cultural variety. One first-in-family commented, "It is varied, but I wouldn't go so far as to say we have a **global perspective**." She applauded efforts to present diverse views, like the Philosophy Dialogue Series, but also felt that these kinds of events and special programs are severely under-promoted.

Maybe there is one (*global perspective*), but nobody knows it. If there is something going on that would offer a **global perspective** we're not finding out about it. Maybe if a professor gives extra credit, but it's not like we find out about it because it's inevitable. It could be so much better, like, "This is important and we all need to go see this." And it's not like that.

Catherine commented about the need to provide better advertising for speakers and events occurring weekly on campus. She attended many of the events as a contributor to the campus newspaper, and noticed the usually poor student (and faculty) attendance.

There may be a wealth of information available in these lectures and presentations, but the usually small turnout is testament to the lack of advertising and promotion for the events. We're not learning all we can about different positions.

From Becky's international student perspective, course information is presented "somewhat differently" (as she diplomatically stated) from her home culture, especially history, political science, and world events.

I think it's a **global perspective**, because I don't see a bias as far as other parts of America or the world. I'm talking about in the classes. But if I am asked if there are global activities here at the university, I can only answer from the International Students' Association. I don't see any German Students' Association or any French...maybe they have it but it's really small, maybe.

"Meeting the changing needs of those we serve":

The final discursive phrase from the values statement included in the interview questions was "**meeting the changing needs of those we serve.**" As each of my participants and I reached the end of our individual interview, I asked if they had any general suggestions for the faculty, administration, or staff that could help "**meet the changing needs of those we serve**" or improve their perceptions of an "**excellent educational experience.**"

Perceived barriers:

The participants' comments reflected and sometimes duplicated research in the last few years investigating "adult" student barriers as described by Cross (1981). The barriers were mainly situational, informational and institutional due to the participants' multiple roles, but also overlapped with learning preferences and experiences. In response to the

discourse“**meeting the changing needs of those we serve**” one participant inquired, “Who are they trying to serve?” Participant comments were honest and uncensored, and from the partial situated perspectives and multiple standpoints of these nontraditional female students. I am presenting their responses verbatim with the hope that their comments will promote thoughtful reflection as to how we as teachers, administrators and staff can better “**meet the changing needs of those we serve.**”

Administration:

With regard to the Administration, participant comments included:

Administrators need to understand that we are juggling many more responsibilities that ever before (and) just help us get what we need.

The Administration is abstract to me...they're not real. I know somebody runs the school, but when it comes to me and my education, my experience, it comes down to the professors.

I think they try, but they are at such a higher level that they really don't understand the student perspective. Their intentions are good...they just don't know how to get it done.

They just need to find where they are going, and who they want to serve. If they are trying to serve everybody...I don't know how you can make everybody happy all the time.

I just don't think they (the Administration) have a real grasp of how hard it is nowadays. And I think...well, most of the Administration is made up of (former) traditional students who had everything just fed to them. All they had to do was go to college. They didn't have to work. They didn't have to take care of a

family, you know, things like that. I don't think this university thinks of that.

I guess it would have to filter down from the President, know people's names. Knowing a person's name can change lives. Like professors don't know their students' names. And the Deans don't know some of the professors' names, you know? Just filter down.

I'd say "Come out of the office!"...Like the other day the President walked through the Quad and I saw her, and you wouldn't believe how many people just walked right past her and didn't know her! I mean, they didn't know that the President of the university just walked past them! I know she has "open doors" but I don't think the VP of Student Affairs has "open doors" or the Provost, I don't think he has "open doors." They are the ones who directly handle the financial aid complaints and stuff like that. I think they should see the students as much as she does. There's only so much that she can do. They should come out of their offices!

In order to "**meet the changing needs of those we serve**" the above comments reflect this group of nontraditional students' desire for a better-informed, more accessible, and actively-involved Administration.

All of the participants commented on their experiences with various student services. The staff, which Rae described as the "administrative assistants," were "very helpful." She mentioned that many of those she deals with are Hispanic and they can speak Spanish with each other – "They genuinely care....and sometimes I see them looking at me like I'm fulfilling their dream too." Another student who works on campus said all her co-workers are really nice and "their way of thinking and talking is like our way."

Student Support Services:

A number of recent studies have focused on student support services from the “adult” student perspective (e.g., Cabrere-Buggs, 2005; Hoy, 2004; Linnartz, 2005; Miller, 2005; Morton, 2004; Sherman, 2005). Most of the services mentioned contained varying degrees of institutional and/or informational barriers that are continually reported in “adult student” research. As for student services and their availability to “time-limited” students, these female undergraduates easily and quickly identified problems that never occurred to me as an adult nontraditional student. For instance, the one main **library** is not available 24 hours for the many students who work and/or commute, and many do not have home computers with internet access. One participant observed that most of the **food locations** open at 6:30 a.m. and students who have class at 8:00 do not have time to sit, eat, and enjoy their food. All students, both residential and commuters need longer open hours on campus for places to get food and drinks.

Scholarships and **grants** have stringent criteria that may prohibit or limit equal consideration of nontraditional students who have multiple roles and responsibilities. One “time-limited” participant commented that she had recently applied for a prestigious university scholarship. She lives out of town, works full time, and her grades are excellent. She received a curt rejection letter saying “Sorry you weren’t involved in enough activities.” Along with working full time, she takes an overload of classes, and realistically cannot fit another extra-curricular activity into her schedule, except for the one honor society in her major. Her reaction was “Can’t they see how much I work?!” It may well be that she is not the only younger nontraditional student

turned down for scholarship or grant funds because of her multidimensional life away from campus, which limits the amount of time available for community service and extra-curricular activities required by most school funding sources.

The student services that garnered the most critical comments from these participants were **Financial Aid**, and to lesser degree, **Advising** and **Residence Life/Housing**. Analysis of Financial Aid comments revealed a department with some staff members who are undertrained and inadequate for the numbers of students needing information and advice. For instance, with approximately 21% (almost 4700 students) of State's undergraduate population being Hispanic, many of whom get financial aid, Rae (Hispanic, first in family to attend college) wondered why there was only one employee who speaks Spanish in the Financial Aid Office. She commented that many students come to State with parents or family members to inquire about courses, living arrangements, and financial aid options and the prospective students have to act as translator between the staff and family members.

I think in the Financial Aid Department they only have one staff member who speaks Spanish....and the majority seeking financial aid are Hispanics! And the parents, speaking numbers in different languages, it just doesn't work out. How can you expect to support a whole entire group of people if you don't even speak their language!

Mary, who receives financial aid every semester, commented that there are often a dozen or more students coming between classes during a limited time frame to apply for financial aid, waiting to see one of only two staff workers. Her comment: "It's like trying to get in to see the **Wizard of Oz**!" A third participant mentioned the frustration

of having to re-apply every semester after having established her qualifications for financial aid. She wished for a little special consideration for these established financial aid recipients over first-time applicants so they wouldn't have to go through the same procedure every semester. Several participants commented on specific encounters.

When I tried to apply for study abroad money this summer this lady pulled up my information and said "What makes you think you can get financial aid for the summer, when you didn't get it the last two years?" And I was kinda like "OK" (*almost whispering*). So I thought that was rude. I thought it was worth a try, you know, just to get a little bit of money.

Every semester I deal with them, and this semester I applied for a summer loan...how many students are taking out loans or doing some kind of financial aid?...there were two women in one room in a little cubicle, and there were about 17-18 people sitting there with numbers waiting their turn. And most of them were in between classes or on lunch break or something, and some were with parents. And those two women, they are the only two. It's like trying to get in to see the Wizard of Oz! And when you finally did, they were really not with it. They were really vague. I came prepared with a list of what I wanted to ask so I wouldn't forget, and they were like (*mumbles under her breath.*) This was really important stuff! I thought they could have been a little more helpful.

Financial Aid has been the hardest one. Just getting information about whether funds are available. I guess it must be stressful in there, but that's been one of the most stressful things for me this year. There are at least 2 or 3 people in there that are just wonderful. But if you are talking on a small scale, one thing... once a person has been certified for financial aid, there should be some importance put on the fact that a particular student has been on this campus since 2001, and it's now 2005, and they don't have to worry, they've had no changes in their lifestyle. Especially if they haven't had situations where, you know, it's different from one year to the next. Say they have a good class record, they're striving to graduate, you should be given more preference than someone else who is here for the first year. You've established a certain

trend or pattern of how you actually perform. I think that should say something.

Residence Life/Housing is sometimes perceived as not “user friendly” for the international students. Becky explained her dilemma, which she said was also expressed by other international students. Besides having some apprehension about speaking to staffers in English (a foreign language for them), between semesters, summers, and during holidays most student services are closed, including the dorms and dining facilities. During these breaks the international students have no place to stay unless they apply well in advance. Becky spoke for herself and others in the international student community on campus in requesting better (and earlier in the semester) promotion and communication about their options.

Orientation (known as PAWS Preview) and **University Seminar (GS1100)** garnered negative ratings and critical comments from all the participants. Findings from analysis of comments from several students who went through almost a week of freshman orientation (PAWS Preview), indicated that they felt the information provided could have been shorter, more relevant, and better organized. Comments suggested these students were not quite sure of the orientation’s real purpose, although a couple of participants did compliment the student mentors on information about the campus, class locations, and explanation of the library and computer services.

Comments from students who participated in the nine-week one hour course titled “**University Seminar**” also indicated that the purpose and benefit of GS1100 was not made clear to them. Comments included that it was “extremely ineffective” and “a

complete waste of time.” One participant volunteered that “It’s a class you go in, sit there for an hour, and are just thankful when you don’t have to go any more.” Another participant agreed that the nine weeks of GS1100 were not very productive, but she complimented her seminar instructor for showing her how to calculate her GPA! Two participants would have liked to get into relevant discussions about “how life really is as a new student on campus” and “how to be safe on campus at night...our fears as new students in a strange place.” The mandatory course provides only one hour of credit and the lack of uniformity among instructors leaves some students with little homework or minimal assignments, and other students having to write weekly papers on multiple readings. One student mused that if “the people in charge (*of GS1100*) ever read the end of course evaluations” for GS1100, the course might actually be improved to be beneficial to the new and transfer students required to take the course.

As far as talking about difficult situations like going to parties and how to take care of yourself and be aware of situations like that, because kids do so much partying when they get out of high school. Yeah, a lot of people talk about how to have safe sex and how to use condoms from the vending machines, but they are not really talking about it, like “These are things I’m scared of,” or “These are my experiences,” and there’s no exchange of those ideas in the university seminar class.

It didn’t help me adjust to college life or whatever it was supposed to do. It’s not like we went there and were helping each other and adapting. It didn’t help me with dorm life, or my work schedule, or with the school schedule, with getting assignments in, or getting to know my professors or the campus or the town. It didn’t help me with any of that at all. I don’t know what the deal is about how you pay for university seminar, but I know it’s required and it so should not be.

Although the focus of this study was learning environment preferences, multiple roles and responsibilities and perceptions of the “Shared Vision” discourses, several participants questioned me in relation to a new initiative they had heard about in which Hispanic students, staff and faculty were to be targeted for special invitation and recruitment. An interesting (and surprising) finding involved several minority students’ comments regarding their perceptions of the “**Hispanic Serving Initiative**” (H-S-I), in which the university goal is to attain 25% Hispanic enrollment:

It kinda bothers me only because....it bothers me a lot...And if it’s a good thing, yeah, let’s go out and get more Hispanics, but this university is doing nothing for the Hispanics they already have. That’s the way I feel. To me, it’s almost like they are setting not only themselves, but the university up for failure. But, individually...like, go ahead and bring more Hispanics here, but what do you have to offer them while they are here? The retention rate is going to go down, and it’s only going to hurt them, not help them. And what is it going to do for those individuals. I strongly see that, **being a Hispanic** (*my emphasis*) on this campus. I don’t see much support.

From another Hispanic participant,

I don’t like just H-S-I, why not African Americans too? Are other minorities represented in the State of Texas?...It doesn’t bother me because I’m getting what I’m supposed to be getting on campus, and I’m not being treated any differently than somebody else. So I don’t care whether they target them or not. It doesn’t matter. But that’s what makes a big difference is that equality... for what reason are you targeting that group?...are you going to treat them better because you are targeting them than you are going to treat other minorities on campus? That the question.

Analysis of comments revealed two additional areas that several participants felt contradicted portions of the “**Shared Vision**” discourses. This finding included State’s “**image**” and State’s “**lack of tradition.**” Along with the flattering portraits of “**excellence**” in teaching and learning and “**student-centered**” education, a composite

description of State emerged from the master thematic grid. From the perspectives of these participants, State's **image** includes a "small school," "party school," "easy to get into," "commuter school," "small town, middle-class, blue collar." With regard to "**image**," comments included the continuing perception by former and current students:

...This is supposed to be one of the easier school to get into if you didn't do very well in high school. And people still talk about the fact that this is a party school.

...I would say student-wise it definitely is a party school, in my apartment complex. If you go to the library, though, everybody is in the library. I mean, students here get their stuff done, and then they go party. The library is packed in any day of the week from early morning until it closes. So I think it kinda...I don't know the word...it kinda sucks, because I think it's a bad thing to be known as a party school, but what people don't know that don't go here is that people actually do study here and do actually get their work done, and then they go party!

...It comes off as being a little petty, a little bit double-open minded, like with our gay organization here....there's only about 30 members, and this is a big university.

With regard to "lack of tradition" several participants wished aloud that there was "something" that everyone valued or could share as a university **community**.

...There are just tradition issues here. I love Old Main because as a building it represents Texas State. It's our symbol, and symbols have something to do with tradition, and they say something about our general community and how everyone has a little bit of that inside.

...What bugs me about State I can just tell you is that there's not enough tradition here. I know that in my _____ class we did a cluster criticism on one of these areas, but they were saying how we are modern and we have new ideas, and that totally deflected from tradition. And that to me is really bad. Where are our traditions? There no "something" that everybody does or everybody lives for. It's not like that here. And our buildings, our campus, our social traditions...they're just not like other schools. I think that would probably help us when it came to certain "visions" and "values"...if we had more tradition, more of a collectivist attitude on campus instead of everyone for themselves.

As already discussed, most of the participants feel that have received excellent instruction from wonderful teachers, and that they are well-prepared for their careers. However, these unflattering descriptions stand in stark contrast to the institutional discourses of **excellence, global perspective, community** and **inclusiveness**.

Data analysis from the participants in this study agreed with Julian (2001) who found student needs were not being met with adequate services and orientation information regardless of their age. Kettle's (2001) nontraditional-age "mattering" findings were supported by data from this group of participants that they perceive they are not being fully served by the Administration and various student services, and that they have special additional challenges due to multiple roles and responsibilities. However, Kettle's respondents indicated that students felt they mattered less as they moved through their college experience, whereas these participants who were upper level and/or about to graduate felt their upper level major/minor classes and instructors were more focused on their needs and their success. Findings from data analysis of participants' comments that multiple roles and responsibilities affect their ability to get

advice and services also agreed with Dukes' (2001) investigation of career centers and the needs of adult students.

A synthesis of the findings regarding the learning environment preferences and experiences reveal that most prefer more interactive learning opportunities that include relevant examples and projects that reflect the student's lives and future career experiences. These particular nontraditional female undergraduates have multiple roles and responsibilities that contribute to their individual standpoints regarding their experiences in and out of classes, and with the university at large. State's "Shared Vision" discourses regarding a "**student-centered environment**," fostering "**inclusion and community**," to "**meet the changing needs of those we serve**," which includes the "**diverse population of Texas and the world beyond**" are perceived and interpreted by these students with mostly favorable reactions, but with specific qualifications, candid reactions, and suggestions for ways to reduce institutional and informational barriers to improve the quality of their and other nontraditional students' experience at State.

The majority of these participants feel their classes and especially professors in their majors are **exceptional**, encourage **dialogue** and honest of **exchange of ideas**, and provide challenges through projects that these students feel prepare them for their careers. However, data analysis revealed that some perceive a few (usually older male) instructors as rude, condescending, and disinterested in students and in teaching.

These participants are trait-motivated and goal oriented. All but one of the participants prefer smaller classes and interactive learning environments in which they can participate in discussion of topics. They all want examples that apply to their lives

and circumstances outside of the university, and projects that are relevant and not just “busy-work.” These particular undergraduate students want an opportunity to debate and question, but perceive they are not allowed by some teachers and/or the lecture format, especially in larger sections. All of the participants described a range of barriers identified by Cross (1981) or inconveniences dealing with course and class scheduling, their own situational barriers because of their multiple roles and responsibilities in addition to school, and the institutional and informational barriers with regard to classes, student services, and programs.

Analysis and comparison of data from the focus groups and individual interviews reveal interesting, timely findings with regard to student age. Although nine of the participants were at the time of the study under twenty-five, they all represented characteristics representative of “adult learners” including self-direction, internal motivation, goal-orientation, and an appreciation of interactive learning environments with “real life” application. The findings from this study with regard to learning environment preferences, multiple roles and responsibilities, situational, informational and institutional barriers, student services, class and course length, curriculum content, motivation and/or persistence, student involvement, and cultural difference confirm and supplement research studies with “adult” or “nontraditional-age” students. The findings from this interpretive case study document one group of nontraditional students who join other recent studies (e.g., Coburn, 2003; Elwell, 2004; Garrett, 1998; Seifried, 2001; Soucy, 1995) that found “traditional” and “nontraditional” or “adult” students may be more alike than previously thought. For instance, the concepts of involvement or

“mattering” (Kettle, 2001) were expressed by the younger participants in this study. Like “adult” students, these younger students are also commuters, hold jobs, and have multiple responsibilities that compete with class assignments and student support services availability. For instance, data analysis found that meeting for multiple groups projects is hard for these commuters and those who hold off-campus jobs, especially those who live and work out of town. Becky’s comments on her own behalf and some of her international student friends suggest that these students may feel “put down” by other students, some professors, and some support service workers because of their language differences. Comments regarding some student services, such as Financial Aid and Advising, indicate perceptions that they are understaffed and ill-trained, which may cause less than “user friendly” interactions with students.

The foregoing chapter analyzed one group of female student preferences for learning environment compared with experiences, their multiple roles and responsibilities in addition to the role of “student,” and their perceptions of the “Shared Vision” discourses. The final chapter will include an overall discussion, conclusions, implications, and recommendations with regard to this interpretive study of one group of nontraditional female undergraduates at State.

Chapter V: Conclusions, Implications and Recommendations

“One of the dangers we face in our educational systems is the loss of a feeling of community, not just the loss of closeness among those with whom we work and with our students, but also the loss of a feeling of connection and closeness with the world beyond the academy.”
b. hooks, 2003, xv

This interpretive case study inquired into learning environment preferences among a select group of nontraditional female undergraduates, their multiple roles and responsibilities, and their perceptions of the “Shared Vision” discourses at one state university.

The research questions guiding the study were:

- RQ1: What are some of the learning environment preferences of one purposeful selection of nontraditional female students at State?
- RQ2: What are the roles and responsibilities of these nontraditional female students?
- RQ3: How do these nontraditional female students perceive and interpret State’s “Shared Vision” discourses?

Following are some preliminary conclusions based on findings from data analysis of focus groups and interviews with one purposefully selected group of traditional age (with the exception of one participant), nontraditional female undergraduates, followed by implications and recommendations for the local environment at State and for higher education in general.

Conclusions

The responses in the focus groups and interviews are representative of hooks’ (1997) vision of “engaged pedagogy” and the idea that “the way we think, write,

...must never be fixed and absolute but always changing, always evolving in dialogue...” (p.12). As discussed in the Review of Literature and in Findings and Data Analysis, several valuable and fertile areas for current and future research have begun with regard to students in higher education. Importantly, the characteristics of “nontraditional” students have been updated in recent years by the U. S. Department of Education, which descriptions includes many factors such as ethnicity, work status, commuters, first in family to attend college, delayed enrollment in college, and a wide range of other factors. The category of age no longer appears in the description of either “traditional” or “nontraditional” students. However, “mixed-age” research as recently as this year (Melton, 2006) continues to divide college students into two arbitrary age groups. The preliminary conclusions drawn from analysis of data in this interpretive case study found that students of traditional age are not only different from each other, but many are very similar to their “older” counterparts in learning preferences, and in multiple roles and responsibilities and with regard to Cross’ (1981) institutional, situational, informational, and dispositional barriers.

All the participants were female and felt comfortable talking with me as a participant/researcher. After listening to my former students, who were delightfully candid in their comments about their learning preferences, roles and responsibilities, and interpretations of the “Shared Vision” discourses, I am able to paint a preliminary composite picture of one group of nontraditional female undergraduates. And since “the general lies in the particular” (Erickson, 1986) their comments may represent a much larger undergraduate community. All the participants were high achievers, internally

motivated, goal-oriented. In general, these particular students want more – experience, discussion, challenges, hands-on projects, process, and connection.

While all of the participants have had to juggle multiple roles and deal with numerous barriers, they have responded to these challenges in different ways. Most of the participants have maintained positive attitudes and consider their educational experiences to be mostly positive due to supportive instructors and quality instruction. Yet, two of them felt “ground down” as they approached graduation. A combination of internal and external factors have diminished their motivation, energy, and general enthusiasm as they complete college and contemplate their futures.

Analysis of transcripts and the conceptual grids constructed from focus group and individual interview comments given by a small purposefully selected sample, verify that not all of today’s students have the same background experiences, especially international students coming from cultural traditions where teachers are experts, and challenges to authority are not part of a learning environment. Minority students who were not “minority” in their home towns may feel overwhelmed or lost on a “mostly white” campus. All perceive the classroom and their instructors as their primary connection points to the university.

Overwhelmingly, these participants prefer small classes of 30 students or less. Many mentioned a preference for circular or horseshoe seating arrangement to facilitate more interaction and participation for those who like to discuss, ask questions, and make comments. Analysis of their comments indicate that they expect classes to be structured and organized, with clear explanations of assignments, due dates, and grading criteria. They expect their professors to be competent, trained instructors and facilitators, not just

lecturers. They would like classes to be less often and longer (for commuting convenience and auto/parking expenses), perhaps on-line, and in various accelerated or compressed time frames, so that, as Angie observed, “more ideas could surface and more conversation and learning from each other would take place.” Variable course delivery time frames, such as “mini-courses,” more evening or weekend classes or 3, 6, or 9-week formats, would help the “time-limited” students, who could take more courses in a shorter amount of time.

This group of nontraditional female undergraduates have already started their “adult” lives with multiple roles and responsibilities earlier than traditional students in the past. Many have begun working while trying to attend college. For State specifically, the majority of students (almost 77%) live off-campus and commute from in town or out-of-town, and do not (or cannot) participate in many of the groups, events, and extra-curricular opportunities available to residential students. Several students commented they would like to participate in more activities and campus programs, but are limited because of their other responsibilities.

More students are the first in their family to attend and/or complete college. As mentioned in Data Analysis and Findings, one first-in-family was turned down for a scholarship with the written comment “Sorry, you weren’t involved in enough activities.” She lives out of town, works two jobs, is paying for her own education, and takes 18-19 hours almost every semester. Scholarship criteria and possibly other financial aid criteria seem to be tilted against nontraditional students of all ages who cannot participate in a requisite range of extra-curricular activities due to their multiple responsibilities away from the campus.

Not only are the populations of today's universities changing, but the experiences and learning preferences of today students seem to be changing as well. According to data supplied by Institutional Research (Fall 2005) the "old" descriptions of traditional students who are 18-22, coming to college directly from high school, funded by their parents, living on campus, participating in multiple extra-curricular activities, no longer apply to the majority of State's students. The majority of students are under 25, but are also commuting, working, and juggling multiple roles and responsibilities.

In summary of the tentative conclusions, and contrary to predictions of a decade and more ago, the average age of college student populations is not going up, but as illustrated by State's demographic information the average age is decreasing and the percentage of students twenty-five and under totals 86%. First, many of those students grew up and were educated in a different, more collaborative learning environment than was experienced by "older" students, as well as by many in the Administration, faculty and staff who are over the age of 40. However, students who are first-in-family to attend/complete college, international students, minority students, and possibly others, may not have had these same interactive learning environment experiences. The descriptions of "nontraditional student" defined by the United States Department of Education attest to the reality that we are in a new century, with a different set of student demographics, from which age has been deleted.

Second, these students of "traditional" as well as "nontraditional" age are capable of identifying and articulating their individual preferences for learning environment. These participants are also adept at identifying those preferences compared with their

experiences. For the majority of these particular students, their preferred learning environment is the environment identified as favored by “adult” students.

Third, many of today’s nontraditional female undergraduates have a large variety of roles and responsibilities that create multiple standpoints that contribute to and perhaps compete with their “student” roles. In addition, institutional, situational, informational, and dispositional barriers complicate their already-complex lives.

Fourth, the “Shared Vision” discourses are being interpreted and understood in a predominantly favorable light by these nontraditional female undergraduates. The Administration’s vision, mission, and values discourses in large part have been translated by these students through the filters of their prior cultural and educational experiences with regard to professors and their individual classes. Their comments replicate findings from other studies which identify the instructors and the individual classroom as the major contact in their university experiences and perceptions (e.g., Broschard, 2005; Samuels, 2005). Discourses of “community” and “inclusion” also translate to the individual classroom and instructors, rather than to the Administration or the campus as a whole. The data suggest that “excellence” in individual education is tempered by a sense of self segregation among ethnic groups. Further, the Hispanic Serving Initiative, although not a part of the original study, emerged as a topic of interest for several minority participants, who had concerns about the program’s purpose and function, especially for minority students already attending State.

Finally, the use of “standpoint” as a conceptual framework for analysis proved helpful to identify similarities and differences and to “investigate the context of discovery” (Harding, 2004, p. 30) in which each individual and situational standpoint is

perspectival, partial, and unique. Several participants described themselves as “being” or “thinking” from their various standpoints in different places, positions, and even “times of the month,” meaning when rent or car payments are due or when assignments are due. Becky, as an international student, feels pressure from inside and outside to “be” more American and also to “think” more American. Two of the minority students commented they did not want to “be the representatives” of their ethnic group all the time. And true to the power positions that standpoint identifies, the less-powerful students dealing with various student services including Financial Aid, Residence Life, and the un-level playing field in terms of scholarship qualifications were able to target specific areas for improvement that I, from the standpoints of faculty, financially independent, white married graduate student had never even thought about. This study also confirms the findings from Jones and McEwen (2000) in their conceptual model of multiple dimensions of identity, that the multiple positions I refer to as “standpoints” are critical components contributing to the lived experiences and learning preferences of today’s nontraditional students.

Implications:

The conversations with a targeted group of nontraditional female undergraduates produced useful, current information regarding learning preferences that have important implications for higher education research, theorizing, and practice.

First, the continued division of students into two arbitrary age categories for research purposes should be challenged. If the Department of Education no longer includes age as a category to distinguish “nontraditional” and “traditional” students, of what value is “age” other than a piece of demographic information?

Second, the variety of roles and responsibilities identified by this small group of nontraditional female students could provide valuable up-to-date information which joins “adult” student findings with regard to higher education students’ multiple standpoints that deserve consideration in planning curriculum and reducing institutional barriers in an environment that includes a variety of ethnicities, cultural perspectives, social positions, sexual orientation, age, ability, gender, and possibly other factors.

Third, the “Shared Vision” discourses promoted by the Administration were met with mostly favorable reactions, supplemented by specific comments and suggestions for improvement. The Administration discourses highlight “meeting the changing needs of those we serve” State’s students. The last section will address their suggestions as well as my own suggestions for improvement at State and for future research and theorizing in higher education.

Recommendations:

This study was done on one campus, using a small, purposive sample of nontraditional female undergraduates, and investigated one specific set of discourses referred to as “Shared Vision.” Their perceptions and comments reflected their own multiple unique standpoints. The “Shared Vision” discourses emanate from a power position, and as Collins (1991) observed, “Each group speaks from its own standpoint and shares its own partial, situated knowledge” (p. 236). Inquiry into the perception and interpretation of the “Shared Vision” by these nontraditional female undergraduates was just a tentative beginning step in a much-needed up-to-date in-depth investigation into the “diverse populations of Texas and the world beyond.” For instance, the H-S-I program, from the perspective of this small sample, would benefit from better explanation to the

wider student population. These participants did not comment on targeting one (or more) minority ethnic group of faculty or staff for recruitment. However, the targeting of one future group of students provoked questions and reactions of skepticism about minority groups already on campus and future minority groups who are not Hispanic.

Areas for improvement at State identified by these nontraditional female undergraduates include

- Learning environment and course delivery format – more small seminar-style classes, more flexible course schedules, alternative course delivery time frames, options for on-line collaboration of group projects;
- Instruction -- updated instructional formats, teachers who “know how to teach” and “who teach to the upper crust;”
- Curriculum – inclusion of content from perspectives other than “American” and “white male;”
- Orientation and University Seminar – improvement through shorter timeframe and more relevant discussions (using feedback from evaluations)
- Expanded student services – library, food service, Financial Aid, and Residence Life (including expanded hours and additional staff who represent the “diverse populations of Texas and the world beyond”);
- Administration and faculty – more active involvement by some members of the Administration and faculty to promote “community” and “an inclusive environment.”

McKinnon (1997) advises “primarily White institutions” in the 21st century that they must adjust to “the dilemmas of lived multiculturalism”...(we) need revisionist

multicultural curricula as well as strategies that assist in divesting of racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, and ethnocentrism” (p. 298). Her suggestion is a timely one for this particular university, which is predominately “White.”

An interesting and practical suggestion for improvement from Rae (Hispanic, 22, single parent, commuter, working, first-in-family to attend college). She is preparing for a career in Family and Child Development where their motto is “Teach the whole child.” Her suggestion was to “teach the whole person,” which would include additional library hours, more food service availability, expanded student service hours, and a variety of course delivery formats.

Teach the whole person – I don’t think the university cares about the whole person, or what life is lived outside of the classroom, and what impact that has. In all reality everything outside affects the inside of the classroom.

Future directions for research concerning the younger “adult” undergraduates, or as Kasworm (1990) advises, “students of any age” might include an inquiry into male nontraditional students’ learning preferences and multiple standpoints, which would likely produce equally rich information. Additional studies, both qualitative and quantitative, using larger samples and additional university demographic categories, investigating the learning environment preferences of nontraditional students in other departments and disciplines on State’s campus would more fully inform the Administration as to methods for continual improvement of learning environment, student services, and for inclusive curriculum development.

As I defined “standpoint” using a synthesis of conceptualizations, there can be no “correct” or “true” perspective, only partial or incomplete perspectives because of the

multiple dimensions included in an individual's standpoint. Those in power positions or "cultures of power" (Delpit, 1988) have more resources to enforce their standpoint (State's institutional discourses), while those (students) with less power often have more awareness of that power and better insights specifically because they are outside the power position.

These nontraditional female students from 20-46 displayed many similar qualities in learning environment preferences, time-management and multi-tasking, and internal motivation, yet each one was unique in background experiences and standpoints. It is hoped that the information provided from the multiple standpoints of these nontraditional female students will contribute to a more complete understanding and appreciation of today's nontraditional female students. It is further hoped that the results of this study will lead to further investigation, dialogue, and improvement to better serve today's college populations, not only at State, but on all higher education campuses. The field of adult education has been a valuable area of study for many years, focusing on students returning to school for various reasons after a break in education. But as the college student population in general gets younger and more diverse, and as the definition of "nontraditional" student has changed and grown to incorporate more diversity and dropped the category of age, so should our research, structure of learning environment, and curriculum development grow and adapt to the undergraduates of a new century.

Appendix A

E-MAIL INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE

After several committee member changes and paperwork routing delays, I'm finally almost ready to conduct focus groups and interviews for my dissertation titled "Perspectives on Learning Environment Within a 'Shared Vision' from Nontraditional Female Undergraduates: An Interpretive Case Study". My time frame has been compressed to only a few weeks here at the end of the semester. I'm e-mailing all of you who were in my classes last semester, plus a few other people whom I'd like to include in the participant pool. Please read the qualifications listed below that are the Dept. of Education and/or Texas State descriptions of "nontraditional" student characteristics:

...first time or returning student after at least one semester break since high school

...currently or previously married

...parent or guardian

...lives off campus

...has a full time job

...is disabled

...is a military veteran

...has attended school in a foreign country

...is under 17 or over 23 years old

...has had a life experience or other life situation that sets student apart from "traditional" status

(I take this last condition to represent the various forms of "diversity" that include minorities, first generation to attend college, ALLIES categories, and ODS categories, among others.)

If you fit into two or more of these categories, you will be a great help in my dissertation research. Please respond in the next couple of days if you will be available and willing to participation in an afternoon meeting during any of the weekdays beginning Monday, April 18 through Friday, April 29. I will need about 1-2 hours of your time for focus groups, and an additional 1 hours of time if you are willing to sit for a little more in-depth one-on-one interview with me. The questions concern your individual learning preferences and classroom learning environments that you have experienced here at Texas State in your most favorite and least favorite classes. You will not be asked to identify the class or instructor unless you want to.

When you respond, please give me the exact dates you would be available so I can schedule small groups to meet in the Communication Lab conference room. I'll block off time every day between 3-5 for the focus groups.

I look forward to hearing from you!

BRM bm11@txstate.edu

Appendix B

AGREEMENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Thank you for participating in this research project on nontraditional female undergraduates at Texas State, and for agreeing to participate in the final segment of my doctoral journey. Your insights and perceptions will be very valuable as State moves toward a more inclusive, multicultural focus in higher education.

If you have questions or concerns at any time, please contact me:

Becky Renée Mostyn

bm11@txstate.edu

CENT323

245-9041

Participant Signature:

Appendix C

INTERVIEW PARTICIPANT QUESTIONNAIRE

Name: _____ Phone# _____ E-Mail _____

Participant ID# _____

Please **circle** the appropriate choice:

- a. (1) Married (2) Single (3) Other
- b. (1) Asian (2) American Indian (3) Black
(4) Hispanic (5) White (6) Other _____
- c. (1) Freshman (2) Sophomore (3) Junior (4) Senior (5) Other
- d. Birthdate _____
- e. Work: (1) Full-time (2) Part-time (3) Don't work
- f. School finances: (1) Loan (3) Scholarship/Grant
(3) Parents (4) Self
- g. Children: Number _____ Age(s) _____
- h. College major: _____
(If you are undecided, list the college/department, e.g.,
Fine Arts & Communication)

Appendix D

CONSENT FORM (“STATE”)

Subject No. _____

Pseudonym _____

I acknowledge that I have been adequately briefed about the research study “Perspectives on Learning Environment Within a ‘Shared Vision’ from ‘Nontraditional’ Female Undergraduates: An Interpretive Case Study” which is in partial fulfillment of the dissertation requirements for Becky Renée Mostyn.

- a. I understand the purpose of the study and my role in providing my perceptions during the interview.
- b. My participation is voluntary. My involvement in the interview and/or focus groups indicates my consent to participate and that, if I so choose, I can refuse to continue the interview process at any point.
- c. My responses will be made anonymously and at no time will my identity be revealed in reports of the research findings. I give my permission for the researcher to anonymously quote selected responses when publishing results in scholarly journals and proceedings.
- d. Following the study, feedback regarding the finding will be furnished at my request.

Subject Signature

Date

Researcher Signature

Date

I wish to receive a synopsis of the study findings.
Please send a copy to:

Appendix E

CONSENT FORM ("UT")

IRB APPROVED ON 5-5-2005

EXPIRES ON 5-5-2006

Title: *Perspectives on Learning and Learning Environment from Nontraditional Female Undergraduates: An Interpretive Case Study*
Conducted By: Becky Renee Mostyn, PhD20925@utx.utexas.edu, 830-379-3808
Of University of Texas at Austin Department: C & I Telephone: 471-5942
IRB PROTOCOL #2004-07-0040

You are being asked to participate in a research study. This form provides you with information about the study. The person in charge of this research will also describe this study to you and answer all of your questions. Please read the information below and ask questions about anything you don't understand before deciding whether or not to take part. Your participation is entirely voluntary and you can refuse to participate without penalty or loss of benefit to which you are otherwise entitled. You can stop your participation at any time by simply telling the researcher.

The purpose of this study is to inquire into the learning preferences and learning environment preferences of nontraditional female undergraduates compared with their experiences at our university.

If you agree to be in this study, we will ask you to do the following things:

- * complete a demographic information form
- * participate in one focus group of 2-4 participants
- * participate in one in-depth interview

Total estimated time to participate in study is 1-2 hours

Risks and Benefits of being in the study

- * the risk associated with this study is no greater than everyday life
- * The are educational benefits for participation in this study, including updating research regarding nontraditional female students' learning preferences and learning environment preferences.

Compensation:

- *None - beside knowing you are helping me complete my dissertation.

The records of this study will be stored securely and kept private. Authorized persons from The University of Texas at Austin, members of the Institutional Review Board, and (study sponsor, if any) have the legal right to review your research records and will protect the confidentiality of those records to the extent permitted by law. All publications will exclude any information that will make it possible to identify you as a subject.

Contacts and Questions:

If you have any questions about the study please ask now. If you have questions later or want additional information, call the researchers conducting the study. Their names, phone numbers, and e-mail addresses are at the top of this page.

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact Clarke A. Burnham, Ph.D., Chair, The University of Texas at Austin Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects, (512) 232-4383.

You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.

Statement of Consent:

I have read the above information and have sufficient information to make a decision about participating in this study. I consent to participate in the study.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent _____ Date: _____

Signature of Investigator: _____ Date: _____

DATE OF FIRST REVISION: _____

Appendix F

STUDENT INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

(Adapted from Kasworm and Blowers, 1994)

General Information and Classroom Interaction

- A. Describe yourself as a student (interest in school, your major, your classes).
- B. What is your age and rank? (When is your birthday?)
- C. Who would you consider to be "NT students" -- (age range, characteristics).
- D. How do you feel about group assignments?
- E. In groups assignments (5-6 students) what would be your preferred group membership – by age, gender, ethnicity, etc.

Learning environment

- A. What kinds of learning activities or environments do you feel work best for you?
Describe one of those.
- B. What kinds of class structures are the least helpful to your learning preferences?
Describe one of those.
- C. How comfortable do you feel asking questions or making comments in class?
- D. Do you communicate differently with students of different ages? How so?

Appendix G

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FAVORITE/LEAST FAVORITE CLASS

(Adapted from Frymier and Houser, 1999)

How do you feel about school and studying in general?

(ex. Motivated/not, excited/not interested/not, involved/not, dread it/look forward)

Directions: Tell me about your **favorite** class –

What did the instructor do that helped you “get” the material?

What did the instructor do that helped you feel a part of the class?

What did the instructor do that encouraged you to participate?

How clear was the feedback on your work?

How much do you share your school life with your family?

How were the assignment decided (group decision, syllabus from instructor)?

How much out of class contact did you have with the instructor?

Did examples apply to your life or work?

What kind of seating arrangement was there?

What about class discussion or student questions?

How did you feel about studying for **favorite instructor’s** class..

(ex. Motivated/not, excited/not interested/not, involved/not, dread it/look forward)

Think of your **least favorite** class last semester. Tell me about:

(Ex. Motivated Excited Uninterested Involved Dreading it)

Directions: Tell me about your **least favorite** class –

What did the instructor do that helped you “get” the material?

What did the instructor do that helped you feel a part of the class?

What did the instructor do that encouraged you to participate?

How clear was the feedback on your work?

How much do you share your school life with your family?

How were the assignment decided (group decision, syllabus from instructor)?

How much out of class contact did you have with the instructor?

Did examples apply to your life or work?

What kind of seating arrangement was there?

What about class discussion or student questions?

Appendix H

“Claiming Tomorrow: A Shared Vision”

“Vision Statement:

(State) will be recognized as one of the top three public universities of choice in Texas. We will be known for our *learner-centered environment*, offering students the advantages of both a small college and a large multifaceted university, valuing research and creative activity, and emphasizing the *central importance of teaching and learning*.”

“Mission Statement:

(State) is a public, *student-centered*, doctoral granting institution dedicated to excellence in *servicing the educational needs of the diverse population of Texas* and the world beyond.”

“Shared Values:

An *exceptional undergraduate experience* as the heart of what we do;
Graduate education as a means of intellectual growth and professional development;
A *diversity of people and ideas, a spirit of inclusiveness, a global perspective, and a sense of community* as essential conditions for campus life;
The cultivation of character and the modeling of *honesty, integrity, compassion, fairness, respect* and ethical behavior, both in the classroom and beyond;
Engaged teaching and learning based in dialogue, student involvement and the free exchange of ideas;
Research, scholarship and creative activity as fundamental sources of new knowledge and as expressions of the human spirit;
A commitment to public service as a resource for personal, educational, cultural and economic development;
Thoughtful reflection, collaboration, planning and evaluation as essential for *meeting the changing needs of those we serve*.”

Specific Shared Vision and Perception of Experience questions:

- A. Think about the classes you had last semester. In your opinion, how “student-centered” were your classes?
- B. Do you feel your “educational needs” were addressed? How so?
- C. Do you feel your experience last semester was “exceptional”?
- D. The values state that there is “a spirit of inclusiveness, a global perspective, and a sense of community” here on the campus. What is your opinion?
- E. Comment on the value of “engaged teaching and learning based in dialogue, student involvement and the free exchange of ideas.
- F. How closely are we as administrators and teachers meeting your individual needs?
- G. What suggestions might you have regarding your own special preferences for learning environment, instructional techniques, or course content?

Any general comments you would like to make about your experiences based on the “shared vision” put in the mission, values, and vision statements, the learning environment, student interactions, or teacher/student interactions?

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Vita

Becky Renée Camp Mostyn was born in Houston, Texas on September 18, 1946. She is the daughter of William B. (Bill) and Betty Young Camp. She received an Associate of Arts degree from Lee College, and attended the University of Texas at Austin and The University of Houston before embarking on a twenty-five year career in legal and professional fields. Her family includes husband Jon Mostyn, son Jon and wife Wendi, son Chris and wife Jennifer, and grandchildren Jack and Mollie.

Ms. Mostyn returned to school in 1994 to complete a Bachelor of Arts degree in Theatre and Speech for Secondary Education, graduating *summa cum laude* from Texas Lutheran University in December 1995. She completed a master's degree in Communication Studies at Texas State University – San Marcos (then SWT) in August 1998, and accepted a full-time teaching position with that department upon graduation. Her master's thesis was entitled *Preconceptions, Misperceptions, and Communication Interaction Over Time in the Mixed-Age Classroom: What's Age Got To Do With It?* In 2001 she received the Communication Studies Department "Gold Apple Teaching Award."

While supervising the Communication Lab and teaching Public Speaking, Interpersonal Communication, and Fundamentals of Human Communication in the Department of Communication Studies at Texas State, she returned to The University of Texas at Austin to begin doctoral studies in Curriculum and Instruction in the College of Education. Ms. Mostyn will receive the Doctor of Philosophy degree in December 2006. Her dissertation, *Perspectives on Learning Environment Within a "Shared Vision" from "Nontraditional" Female Undergraduates: An Interpretive Case Study* focuses on the learning environment preferences and experiences, and multiple roles and responsibilities

(standpoints) of ten “nontraditional” students (ages 20 to 46) as that term is now defined by the United States Department of Education. Her research interests include instructional communication, learning theory and learning environment preferences, curriculum theory, and the dynamic interaction in mixed-age, multicultural, college classrooms.

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