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Running head: IN THEIR OWN WORDS

In Their Own Words: A Narrative Inquiry into Part-time Master's Degree Student Persistence

A Dissertation Presented

by

Erin Schroeder

Submitted to the Graduate School of Education

Lesley University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

August 2019

Ph.D. Educational Studies

Adult Learning & Development

In Their Own Words: A Narrative Inquiry into Part-time Master's Degree Student Persistence

Erin Schroeder

Graduate School of Education

Lesley University

Ph.D. Educational Studies

Adult Learning and Development Specialization

**Approvals**

*In the judgment of the following signatories, this Dissertation meets the academic standards that have been established for the Doctor of Philosophy degree.*

Dr. Anne Benoit  
Print Name:

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Dr. Laura Douglass  
Print Name:

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Dr. Valerie Shinas  
Print Name:

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Dr. Stephen Gould  
Director, Ph.D. Adult Learning and Development

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Dr. Brenda Matthis  
Director, Ph.D. Educational Studies

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Dr. Amy Rutstein-Riley  
Dean, Graduate School of Education

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

### Abstract

While there are a number of studies that focus on adult undergraduate and even doctoral persistence, adult master's degree students and particularly those who study part time, are a population that have been overlooked by researchers. This constructivist, qualitative study of part-time master's degree students used narrative inquiry and experience-centered narratives to bring rich descriptive data to the conversation surrounding the persistence of part-time master's degree students and the barriers they face in pursuit of their degree. The data for this study was collected via semi-structured interviews with 15 participants and shows that part-time master's degree students enrolled in Humanities programs see the external support of family, friends, and employers, along with their commitment to obtaining the degree, as integral to their persistence. Situational, institutional, and dispositional barriers in the form of time management, financial concerns and internal compassion were identified by the participants as barriers that impacted their persistence and overcoming them often required creative solutions, although financial issues remained a constant concern. This study recommends that institutions increase support structures for their adult part-time master's degree students who may not have the external support necessary to encourage them to persist in the program and shows that further research into this population is warranted.

*Keywords: part-time, graduate student, master's degree student, part-time master's degree student, persistence, barriers*

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Thanks for sharing your experiences with the rest of us. Jeanne Townsend, Lilu Barbosa, Alicia Redden, and Anthony Edwards: you're next!

**Dedication**

I would like to dedicate this work to my daughters,

Belley and Gwen.

You two are my greatest inspiration.

I love you up to the sky. To the moon and back. To infinity and beyond.

To my husband,

Adam.

Pure enchantment lights our way.

And to the student reading this who is struggling with their dissertation,

I see you. Keep writing.

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

### **Introduction**

In 2016 there were more than 1.8 million students enrolled in various graduate programs throughout the United States. An incredible 74.2% of those individuals were graduate students seeking master's degrees and more than half (61.8%) of them were enrolled part time (Okahana & Zhou, 2017). Based on these findings, it is surprising and concerning that there is a considerable lack of peer-reviewed studies focusing on the part-time master's degree student population. While there is a plethora of studies that focus on undergraduate and even doctoral persistence, master's degree students and particularly those who study part-time have been overlooked by researchers. This qualitative study used narrative inquiry to investigate what part-time master's degree students enrolled in a Humanities program at a private, nonprofit, liberal arts college in the Northeastern United States (U.S.) thought was most important to their persistence, what barriers they faced in pursuit of their degree, and the strategies they used to overcome those barriers.

The remainder of this chapter will give a brief background on the subject of adult learners and part-time master's degree programs, before presenting the problem statement, statement of purpose, and research questions that were the focus of this study. The procedures of the study will be briefly discussed along with a short description of the researcher and her interests, and the significance of the study will also be examined. Finally, an overview of the organization of the entire dissertation will conclude the chapter.

### **Background**

For many adults who did not take the traditional path from high school to college, going back to school after many years away can be intimidating. To differentiate them from the

*traditional* student who enters college right after high school and may proceed to graduate school right after college, adult learners are defined as meeting one or more of the following criteria: they are above the age of 25, they work full time, they are financially independent, they attend classes part-time, and they may have dependents (Cohen & Greenberg, 2011; Cooke et al., 1995; Fairchild, 2003; Gigliotti & Huff, 1995; Hadfield 2003; Kasworm, 2003; Kasworm, 2014; Kilgore, 2003; Polson 2003; Rice, 2003; Ross-Gordon, 2003; Ross-Gordon, 2011). The term *nontraditional* is often used to identify this group of learners and has been used since the 1970s when the Commission on Non-Traditional Study chose it (Maehl, 2004, p. 7); however, this study chooses to use the term *adult learners* as older students who pursue higher education should not be termed as the “other” (Hansman, 2001, p. 90), especially when they make up more than 50 percent of the student body in the United States (Hansman, 2001; Lehman, 2011; Maehl, 2004).

Adult learners are not a new phenomenon. *The Handbook for Adult and Continuing Education* has been published since 1934 and with chapters in the 1930s titled “How Shall We Conceive the Task of Adult Education?” (Hansman, 2001, p. 87) the academic world has had plenty of time to discuss this issue, but still has yet to reach a firm consensus. Maehl (2004) reviews the history of adult education and relates how adult learners became more widely recognized and welcomed back to higher education after World War II and the GI Bill in the mid-1940s. He points out that those adults who took the GED “increased tenfold between 1949 and 1971” (p. 6) leading to an increase in adult student enrollment in higher education in the 1960s.

In the 1970s Malcolm Knowles used the term “andragogy” to refer to a model of assumptions that could be made about adult students and the ways in which they learned—one

that relied more on bringing experience into the classroom, a place where the adult chose to be rather than was obligated to be (Knowles 1975; Knowles, 1980). “Andragogy” was not a term created by Knowles, but one used in Europe since the 1800s that gained popularity after World War I as educators tried to understand how best to teach adults (Henschke, 2011; Knowles, 1980). While he would come to tweak and edit the theory over the next twenty years, Knowles (1975) believed that “the main purpose of education must now be to develop the skills of inquiry” (p. 15) and that the current method of teaching, known as pedagogy, was not structured to do this, as it was literally “the art and science of teaching children” (Knowles, 1980, p. 40) and thus not ideal for teaching adults.

While children enter the classroom to be taught and to experience things, most adult learners have enough experience in life behind them that they take it with them into the classroom and thus are not there just to passively be taught, but to actively participate in their own learning. Adult learners are choosing to be in the classroom, whereas children are required to be there, and as such adult students are looking to be taught things that they can apply to their lives immediately, rather than simply learning something to take them through the next step in their education.

With the introduction of technology nearly 50 years after Knowles made his initial pitch for andragogy in the adult education classroom, it appears that many (if not most) institutions with adult education programs have adopted andragogy as best practice when it comes to their adult learners. Part-time adult degree programs, both undergraduate and graduate, require a tremendous amount of self-directedness from their students in order to stay engaged (Wyatt, 2011). With distance-learning becoming a part of adult education in just the past decade, the impetus is now very much on the adult learners to be active participants in their own education,



bringing their own experiences into the classroom to enrich everyone's learning. The number of adults returning to higher education has risen by more than 100 percent since the 1970s, when the debate over andragogy was just getting started, with "15.6 million [adult undergraduate students] in 2007" and that number expected to continue rising through 2019 (Planty et al., 2009, p. 22).

Andragogy has broadened the field of adult education to enable educators to think outside of the passive, lecture-based format of pedagogy to interest new generations of students who want to take an active role in their education.

### **Master's Degree Students**

As part-time undergraduate enrollments rise in the United States (Markle, 2015; Wyatt, 2011), it is a reasonable assumption that a number of those who successfully complete their undergraduate studies in a part-time program will continue on to a part-time master's degree program. An adult learner may have an intrinsic motivation for returning to school to earn a graduate degree, such as a sense of personal pride at the accomplishment, but there are also extrinsic motivations like financial benefits that accompany receiving an advanced degree (Borchert, 1994, Cohen, 2012b, Glazer-Raymo, 2005; O'Brien, 1992). Baum and Steele (2017) found that those who had earned a master's degree made upwards of 23% more in the employment sector than their counterparts who held only an undergraduate degree. Also, as the job market becomes more competitive, more entry level job descriptions are listing an undergraduate degree as a basic requirement. Having a master's degree can set a job candidate apart from the rest, making it a valuable addition to a resume (Borchert, 1994).

Part-time master's degree programs are also quite valuable from a financial perspective for colleges and universities. Unlike undergraduate and doctoral students that mostly rely on

scholarships, grants, and other forms of financial aid, the majority of part-time master's degree students are normally not taking enough credits per semester to be eligible for financial aid and thus have to pay their own way either out of pocket or through employer reimbursement programs (Borchert, 1994; Cohen, 2012b). With nearly half of master's degree students nationwide failing to persist until graduation that equates to lost revenue for the schools. Students who do not complete their programs are not paying for classes or paying any fees associated with being a student. They are also not likely to provide free, positive word-of-mouth advertising about those programs, which might otherwise bring in new graduate students and thus more revenue (Cohen, 2012b). As such, it is in the financial best interest of colleges and universities to help part-time master's degree students succeed.

### **Problem Statement**

In an ideal world every student that entered a master's degree program regardless of credit status would successfully complete the requirements and graduate. It is difficult to put an exact number on master's degree student completion as there is no current database that monitors graduate degree graduation rates (Cohen, 2012a; Cohen, 2012b), and the National Center for Education Statistics (NECS) does not differentiate between doctoral and master's degree students or part-time and full-time status when publishing graduation rate surveys of graduate students (A. D'Amico, personal communication, 2018). This leads to some confusion as to the exact percentages; however, most researchers agree that what is known about master's degree student persistence points to graduation rates being low. Cohen and Greenberg (2011) claim the national average is just 50 percent, while in a paper presented to the Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE), Cohen (2012b) noted that it is not unprecedented to have one-third to one-half of students in a master's degree program fail to persist until graduation. In 2013 the

Council for Graduate Studies (CGS) conducted a pilot study of graduation rates in STEM master's degree programs and found that they averaged 66% (Allum, Bell, & Sowell, 2012). This shows that there are an alarming number of master's degree candidates that are failing to graduate from their programs, yet there is no clear indication of why the persistence rate is so low as there have not been many studies done on this population and even fewer done on the part-time master's degree student population.

The gap in data concerning master's degree students does not stop at graduation rates. There are very few studies that focus on master's degree students in general and even fewer that focus on part-time master's degree students (Allum, Bell, & Sowell, 2012; Barry & Mathies, 2011; Carlson, 1995; Carroll et al., 2009; Cohen, 2012; Cohen & Greenberg, 2011; Hammond & Shoemaker 2014; Mercer 2015; Shepherd & Nelson, 2012; Shepherd, 2015; Tinto, 1993). Those studies that are available often combine both doctoral and master's degree students when studying graduate students and the majority of them are quantitative in nature (Brazier, 1998; Girves & Wemmerus, 1988; Tinto, 1993). While quantitative data can be very informative, especially concerning how different factors impact each other in a statistically significant way, it often does not give a complete picture or offer *why* that factor or variable is important (Creswell, 2007; Mercer, 2015). Gray, Williamson, Karp and Dalphin (2007) point out that unlike quantitative data, qualitative data is able to “capture subtleties of meaning and interpretation that numbers do not convey” (p. 42). For instance, several quantitative studies show that age is a factor in persistence when it comes to adult learners, with older students having more trouble persisting than younger students (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Cohen, 2012a; Girves & Wemmerus, 1988; Tinto, 1993), but without interacting with the participants to understand what is happening with the older students, there is no deeper understanding of why that is. Perhaps it is because

health issues crop up more for the older students, or perhaps it is because they have a greater number of young children to care for, but without knowing the details, it is hard for administrators to act on the data to try to mitigate these factors and support the student in persisting. More qualitative research is needed in order to understand the needs of the part-time master's student population so that the investment the adult learner and the school makes into further higher education can be fulfilled.

### **Statement of Purpose**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to provide a better understanding of what currently persisting part-time master's degree students identified as important to their persistence, along with the barriers that they faced and the solutions they employed to overcome those barriers. This was accomplished by speaking directly to students who were actively enrolled in a degree program and asking them to provide thoughts and insights on their experiences. Two research questions were used to guide the investigation into the subject:

1. What factors do part-time master's degree students enrolled in a Humanities program identify as being most important to their persistence?
2. What barriers do part-time master's degree students enrolled in a Humanities program identify and how do they successfully push past them?

### **Study Significance**

This study provides unique insight into the persistence of part-time master's degree students in a Humanities program that no other research has contributed to the field. As the part-time master's degree student population makes up more than half of the currently enrolled master's degree students, it is in the best interest of college administrators to understand the distinctive challenges that these students face. Qualitative studies are lacking in this area of

research and are integral to understanding the why behind the numbers that quantitative studies provide for college administrators. Qualitative studies provide a human element and persuasive backstory to the numbers and figures usually collected by college administrators. While these results will not be generalizable due to the chosen method, the qualitative study itself can be repeated at other institutions with similar graduate programs. It is important that the stories of these part-time master's degree students are told so that future classes of part-time students can benefit from the lessons learned from the participants' experiences, and the findings will help inform the field of what might be needed to increase future graduation rates for this population.

This study provides valuable information for three groups concerned with part-time master's degree student persistence: school administrators who want to see their graduate degree graduation rates rise, adult learners who are considering returning to higher education for a graduate degree, and adult learners who are currently enrolled in graduate degree programs. The data collected from the participants in this study can help inform school administrators of the barriers adult learners face while pursuing their degrees and use it to provide better support and services to help part-time master's degree students persist through graduation. This will provide tremendous help to currently enrolled adult learners without support systems who may be struggling to persist. Adult learners who are considering returning to higher education can use the findings from this study to inform themselves about the multiple stressors and barriers that the participants identified. In this way they can prepare themselves for future studies and ensure that they have the correct support systems in place. And finally, current adult learners can take solace in the fact that there are others that struggle with similar barriers that they may be facing. Several participants in this study found comfort in knowing that others were facing the same challenges and doubts that they were and that they were not alone in these struggles.

The data from this study also helps increase the reach of Ekstrom (1972) and Cross's (1981) barriers to adult learning framework, something that Shepherd and Nelson (2012) confirmed was seen in the graduate students in their study. The data from this study shows that for this group of part-time master's degree participants, all three barriers (situational, institutional, and dispositional) were also present. This implies that there is considerably more research that can be done on this population and that issues in adult learner persistence possibly transcend degree level and apply to adult learners as a whole.

### **Procedures**

This qualitative study used experience-centered narratives to understand what the student participants believe to be most important to their persistence in their part-time master's degree program and what barriers they identified along the way. Narrative inquiry was chosen as a methodology because it was crucial to understand what the students themselves identified as important to their persistence and what they saw as barriers to that persistence. This allowed for a deep insight into the various challenges they faced, some of which were intensely personal, that quantitative studies have thus far not been able to capture in detail.

### **Site and participant sampling**

The site used for this study is a private, non-profit college in New England that offers degree programs designed to be completed by part-time adult learners. The site was chosen for three main reasons: 1. its long history of offering successful programs catering primarily to part-time adult learners, 2. its high graduation rates in the part-time master's degree programs, and 3. its accessibility to me as the researcher since I am familiar with the programs offered and the gatekeepers that needed to be consulted in order to gain access to the participants (Creswell, 2009).

The participants were purposefully sampled and recruited based on the following five criteria: 1. they were currently enrolled in a master's degree program, 2. they were entering at least their second year of study, 3. they had declared a Humanities field of concentration, 4. they were 18 years or older, and 5. they did not have a FERPA block on their records. A list of 224 student email addresses was generated based on these criteria and 70 were randomly selected over a period of two weeks and sent an initial email inviting them to participate in the study. From those emails, 15 interviews were successfully scheduled and completed.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

The data in this study comes from semi-structured interviews that were conducted and video recorded with 15 participants both in-person and over secure video-chat. After the participant indicated their interest in the study, a follow-up email was sent asking them to confirm a time, date, and preference for location if in-person, or application if over video-chat. All recordings were transcribed by the researcher within 24 hours after the interview took place and edited twice for accuracy. Three distinct phases of coding were made to identify both minor and major themes across all 15 interviews. During the coding process, the researcher met with her chair in order to review the data and the themes that were being identified. The researcher then used restorying to reduce each transcribed interview to a condensed narrative form using a consecutive timeline from oldest to most recent based on the events the participant described and focused on the themes that were identified in the coding process. To ensure that the researcher was not biasing or misunderstanding the information given by the participants, member checking was used, and each participant was asked via email to read, edit, and ultimately approve the restoried narrative written by the researcher. Participants were given the opportunity to review their transcript and the entirety of Chapter 4 to ensure that their statements and meanings were

not being misrepresented and to choose a pseudonym to be used in the presentation of the data in Chapter 4.

### **Ethical considerations**

This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Lesley University and interviews were conducted only after this approval was granted. The IRB of the institution was also contacted, and the representative confirmed that it was not necessary to go through their process for approval as I was a student at Lesley and that IRB approval was enough. This was not deemed to be a high-risk study, but during the interviews I kept a document on hand with student support services numbers and hotlines in case sensitive topics arose.

At all times the confidentiality and comfort of the participants was paramount. Participants were informed numerous times that they were free to withdraw from the study at any time. This was written in the initial email that asked for volunteers, on the consent form they signed, and verbally reiterated at the start of the interview. When transcripts were transcribed all names were replaced with a participant number and even if cities were mentioned, those were removed from the text and replaced with [CITY] or another generic term that indicated the general idea the participant was indicating but removed identifying features. Participants were asked to provide pseudonyms so that their real names would remain obscured, but the narratives would have a personal quality to them, rather than having the speaker constantly be referred to as a participant number. The participants were all asked to review the narratives through a secure link that only they could access and were told that without their approval, the narrative would not be included in the dissertation. All participants agreed to have their narratives included in the final dissertation.



**Researcher role and bias**

As the sole researcher, I conducted each interview myself and while I tried to remain impartial and professional during the interviews, there is always a chance that through body language, note taking, or word choice during the semi-structured parts of the interview I unintentionally indicated a bias to the participant that influenced their answers. As I am not a professor at the school there should not have been a student/teacher power dynamic in play. However, the participants were aware that I was a doctoral student and there is always a risk that this may have influenced the participant responses. This was part of the reason why member checking was so vital, as it allowed the participant to review the responses they gave and clarify when necessary.

As the only researcher conducting this study, it is important to note that I have direct experience as a part-time master's degree student in the institution, having obtained two master's degrees in two very different scenarios: the first with an intrinsic motivation (a field she loved with no career-relation) prior to having children but with a full-time job, and the second with an extrinsic motivation (career advancement) while pregnant and caring for an infant and holding a full-time job. As I write this, I am currently a part-time doctoral student that has two young children at home, making me very aware of the multiple roles graduate students can inhabit and juggle throughout their tenure in higher education. I practiced extensive memoing, keeping a personal journal to record my thoughts and assumptions throughout this process, and took extensive notes during participant interviews to not only jot down things like their body language or tone, but also how their stories were impacting me given my own experience.

I also have another affiliation to the site that other researchers would not as I am not only an alumna of the school but also an administrative employee. However, my role at the school

does not allow me access to students or faculty, or their data, nor do I inform policy that would impact any aspect of the educational programs under study. While this meant that I was familiar with the programs that were offered, the steps I had to take to gain access to the participants and do this research would have been the same if I were not a graduate or an employee. I believe that the site was the best choice considering the strong qualities that were already discussed in the previous section. And as I knew of the dangers of bias from the beginning, great care was taken to ensure that the results were derived from the data and not from my own biases. This is discussed more in depth in the next section and in Chapter 3.

### **Validity**

While validity in qualitative studies is a hotly debated topic, Creswell (2009) argues that it is “one of the strengths of qualitative research, and it is based on determining whether the findings are accurate from the standpoint of the researcher, the participant, or the readers of an account” (p. 191). He suggests using several “validity strategies” to “enhance the researcher’s ability to assess the accuracy of the findings as well as convince readers of that accuracy” (p. 191). *Peer debriefing* was the first of the four steps that I used in this process. I met with my dissertation chair to show her the data I had gathered and to review the coding scheme developed from the data. *Member checking* was used to ensure accuracy in the transcripts and the restored narratives. *Researcher bias* is also discussed in this chapter and more in depth in Chapter 3 in order to create an “honest narrative that will resonate well with readers” (Creswell, 2009, p. 192). And finally, *discrepant responses* are presented in both Chapters 4 and 5 in the hope that “[b]y presenting this contradictory evidence, the account becomes more realistic and hence valid” (Creswell, 2009, p. 192).

### **Definition of Terms**

**Attrition**

This term is used by college and university administrations to track the rate at which students who leave their program before completing the set requirements for earning their degree.

**Barrier**

A problem or hardship that a student faces that impacts their persistence in the program, such as needing to find childcare in order to attend classes or a long commute to campus (Cross, 1981).

**Completion**

When students successfully fulfill the set requirements and obtain their degree.

**Nontraditional Student**

This term is mostly used in older studies as *adult student* or *lifelong learner* has replaced it in current literature. This is a student who does not follow the expected educational path of moving from high school directly to full-time college study, who is usually identified as an adult who is over the age of 24, working full or part-time, and attending school on a part-time basis (Markle, 2015).

**Persistence**

A student's ability to remain in a program despite any barriers or obstacles that may occur prior to graduation. For this study a student was considered to be persistent if they were currently enrolled in classes.

**Retention**

The meaning of retention when it comes to adult learners is often debated but for this study it is defined as a college or university's ability to keep students enrolled in degree programs until graduation (Hadfield, 2003).

### **Chapter Summary**

The goal of this study is to provide a better understanding of what part-time master's degree students enrolled in a Humanities program identify as important to their persistence and the barriers that they face as they work towards graduation. This qualitative, narrative study used purposeful sampling to identify participants who met five criteria and invited them to take part in 60-90-minute semi-structured interviews to talk about their experiences in the program. The data was then analyzed for themes and subjected to several extra steps to ensure validity and lessen researcher bias. The results of this study will be presented in five-chapter form. Chapter 1 introduced the purpose of the study and its need, gave a brief background of adult learners and the part-time master's degree population, and an overview of the methods used to select the site, participants, and analyze the data. Chapter 2 goes more in depth with the history of the master's degree in the United States (U.S.) and offers a view of the current scholarship concerning master's degree students, persistence, and adult learners. It outlines the gap in the research and provides the theoretical frameworks of this study. Chapter 3 details the research design of the study and the methodologies chosen to collect and analyze the data. It offers a deeper discussion on validity and researcher bias as well as the steps taken to mitigate it. Chapter 4 presents the results of the study and portions of the participant narratives that were written by the researcher and member checked by each participant. It then presents the findings and weaves the narratives together to show how similar themes were brought up by each participant. Chapter 5 discusses the findings from Chapter 4 and situates them within the context of the literature discussed in

Chapter 2 and summarizes the impact these findings have on the field of higher education.

Suggestions for future research are also provided, along with implications for the field and my own conclusions.

## CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

**Introduction**

One of the main goals of this study was to help fill in the identified gap in the available data when it comes to the part-time master's degree student population. In her 2015 dissertation, Mercer reported very low numbers of usable studies being returned in academic databases using search terms like "*Master Student Persistence*, *Master Student Retention*, and *Master Student Progression*," (p. 13) a finding which was echoed in Gordon's 2016 dissertation on master's student persistence, and one that I discovered had only increased by a handful using the same search terms in 2018. As a result, multiple sources of information were used to compile this literature review, which mostly relied on scanning the bibliographies from other research studies with similar topics on master's degree students and/or persistence and exhaustively chasing down links until overlap in sources began to appear. Studies were also found by doing searches on databases like ERIC for peer-reviewed, scholarly articles and ProQuest for articles and dissertations. University library searches and the librarians themselves were integral in helping to find articles that were otherwise inaccessible online. A number of articles purporting to be on graduate student persistence would only mention doctoral students or point out that enrollment information on graduate students did not differentiate between master's or doctoral degrees. This lack of distinction highlights the fact that research into the part-time master's degree student population is needed.

This chapter begins with a brief history of master's degree programs in the U.S. followed by a discussion around the difficulties concerning research on part-time master's degree students. It then looks at the history of models of student persistence that have been presented since the 1970s and goes in depth into four of those models, explaining each and how they can be related

to part-time master's student persistence. Finally, a summary of the chapter concludes the literature review.

### **The First Master's Degree**

Considering how long master's degrees have been part of the curriculum of higher education in the United States it is surprising that there has not yet been a published, peer-reviewed model of full or part-time master's student persistence. In her article "Conceptualizing the Master's Degree," Glazer-Raymo (2005) reports that Benjamin Franklin was the first recipient of an honorary Masters of Arts degree from Harvard University and then three months later from Yale in 1753. But it was not until 1859 that the University of Michigan officially developed the first master's degree program that Glazer-Raymo (2005) notes "was essentially a liberal arts degree" (p. 6). While master's degrees would continue to evolve as more colleges and universities offered programs, Borchert (1994) and Conrad, Haworth, and Millar (1993) both point out that master's degrees were not respected in the academic community until after World War II. At that time there was a cultural shift in thinking that moved these degrees from being seen merely as "consolation prizes" for those students who could not get into or could not keep up with doctoral work, to beneficial degrees that employers sought in their applicants.

It was not until the 1950s and 1960s that colleges and universities began to design master's degree programs specifically catering to older, employed adults. These adult graduate students might have taken a less traditional route after college and entered the workforce rather than going straight from undergraduate work to graduate school and be unable to attend classes during the day like a traditional student. Those programs would not become widespread until the 1990s with the development of technology and the internet, which allowed colleges and universities to advertise to a global rather than local population (Glazer-Raymo, 2005). Still,

after 160 years as a population in higher education it is remarkable that there are so few studies that focus solely on master's degree students. With programs catering specifically to part-time master's degree students having been around for over 50 years, it is equally as striking that this population has been so overlooked in research.

### **The Enigmatic Student Population**

Many researchers have pointed out the dearth of studies involving master's degree students in general (Allum, Bell, & Sowell, 2012; Barry & Mathies, 2011; Carlson, 1995; Carroll et al., 2009; Cohen, 2012; Cohen & Greenberg, 2011; Hammond & Shoemaker 2014; Mercer 2015; Shepherd & Nelson, 2012; Shepherd, 2015; Tinto, 1993) and each of them have sought to fill these gaps in the research by focusing on different aspects of the master's degree student populations. The majority of the peer-reviewed studies that use graduate students as a participant population focus solely on those seeking doctoral degrees with either very little mention of master's degree candidates or, as is often the case, none at all (Brazier, 1998; Carlson, 1995; Girves & Wemmerus, 1998; Tinto, 1993). In those few studies that do focus on master's degrees candidates, the population is usually limited to those who are enrolled in full-time programs, which disregards more than half of the currently enrolled graduate student population who are pursuing a master's degree part time.

The lack of research on graduate students seeking part-time master's degrees is even more astounding considering the amount of work that has gone into looking at persistence in both full-time and part-time undergraduate students (Astin, 1993; Barry & Mathies, 2011; Bergman, Gross, Berry, & Shuck, 2014; Cabera, Castaneda, Nora, & Hengstler, 1992; Crawford & Duggan, 2008; Davidson, 2015; Davidson & Holbrook, 2014; Fitzgerald & Young, 1997; Hensley & Kinser, 2001; Kohen, Nestel & Karmas, 1978; Markle, 2015; McGivney, 2004;



Metzner & Bean, 1987; Milen & Berger, 1997; Miller, 2014; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980; Perkounkova, Noble, and McLaughlin, 2006; Tinto, 1975; Tinto, 1997; Titus, 2006; White, 2009; Yorke, 2004). There has even been a renewed focus on doctoral students and the challenges they face when working towards their degree (Attiyeh, 1999; Baker, 1998; Ethington & Pisani, 1993; Faghihi & Ethington, 1996; Girves & Wemmerus, 1988; Kuncel, Hezlett, & Ones, 2001; Lott, Gardner, & Powers, 2009; Lovitts, 2001; Lovitts & Nelson, 2000; Most, 2008; Tinto, 1993). Yet when it comes to master's degree students the focus gets much smaller: many existing research studies were conducted outside of the U.S. (Carroll, Ng, & Birch, 2009; Cooke, Sims, & Peyrefitte, 1996; Swain & Hammond, 2011), or were primarily focused on a specific field or degree such as sports medicine (Bowman, Dodge, & Mazerolle, 2015), agriculture (Hammond & Shoemaker, 2014), or business (Brown, 2006; Carroll, Ng, & Birch, 2009; Currie, 2007; Council of Graduate Schools 2013; Deis & Kheirandish, 2010; Rafferty, 2013; Siegert, 2008; Thorstensson, 2001). The majority of these studies are quantitative and either do not differentiate between full or part-time status or focus solely on full-time master's degree students.

The difficulty in finding aggregated data on part-time master's degree students may be partly because of the difficulty administrators have in identifying master's degree students, thus there are no large databases that researchers can turn to in order to pull quick facts and figures from (Borchert, 1994; Cohen, 2012a). Borchert (1994) points out that “[n]ational enrollment figures for graduate programs are not reported separately for master's and doctoral students” (p. 14) due to the blurry ground master's degree students sometimes occupy. For example, some entering doctoral candidates who might earn a master's degree on the way to their Ph.D. may be identified initially as master's degree students even though they were officially accepted to and

enrolled in a doctoral program, not a master's degree program (Conrad et. al. 1993). This becomes compounded when the designation of part-time is added to the population description as there is no clear distinction of what retention means for these types of students, making it even more difficult to identify completion rates. Hadfield (2003) contends that when it comes to student populations like this, students should be considered retained unless they transfer to another university or if they have passed away, as those enrolled in degree programs may be taking only one class a semester or take one or more semesters off before returning to their studies. How a program might report these students would vary based on the institution and the person compiling the reports as there are no hard rules concerning how a college or university administration should define this important marker.

This lack of clarity has an impact on the many different ways that persistence can be viewed by researchers. For instance, in Carlson's (1995) dissertation on persistence in mid-life women (aged 40-59) looking to obtain a graduate degree, she defined a "non-persistent" student as one who had not been enrolled in a course for two years and had not graduated. Yet there is no discussion on other important factors that should have contributed to that definition, such as these: how many credits and requirements did that student have left before they could graduate? Being one class away from graduation carries different implications than having three or more classes to go. Had the students been in contact with anyone in the program concerning their time away from course work? There is no mention of whether or not those students labeled as "non-persistent" still had time left to finish their degree or if their time in the program had been ended without completion. Carlson's study, like so many others that focus on graduate students as a population, also does not make a distinction between those seeking master's degrees and those seeking doctoral degrees.

In 2011, Cohen and Greenberg conducted a mixed-methods study on the persistence of part-time master's degree students at a small, state university that offered 25 different master's degree programs, 24 of which were offered part-time. They were particularly interested in what factors, both internal at the school and external, such as family and work obligations, impacted the part-time master's degree students positively or negatively. An email with a link to a questionnaire was sent out to 1,499 identified participants who were either currently enrolled in a master's degree program at the chosen site or alumni from one of those same programs. Of the 465 participants that completed the questionnaire, 420 were part-time students. Three focus groups were also conducted with participants that completed the questionnaire. A total of 13 participants attended one of those three meetings, which were made up of both currently enrolled students and alumni. However, the demographics and background of those 13 and whether or not they were part time (or had been part time in the case of alumni) were not given.

Cohen and Greenberg (2011) found that much like the nontraditional undergraduate population that Bean & Metzner (1985) had studied, the part-time master's degree student population wrestled with the many roles they played in their everyday lives, such as student, parent, spouse, caregiver, and employee. Of the participants who completed their online survey, "16 percent of the respondents said they either withdrew or seriously considered withdrawing from the university. For many, the stress of handling so many responsibilities was overwhelming" (Cohen & Greenberg, 2011, p. 109). They found that the most important institutional factor that related to part-time student persistence both in the questionnaire responses and the focus groups was treatment by the faculty, with "[b]eing treated with respect" (Cohen & Greenberg, 2011, p. 105), while the more important external factor relating to part-time master's degree student persistence was support from family members and those in the

workplace (bosses, co-workers, etc.). Based on their findings, they compellingly argue that current college and university administrators are not equipped or able to deal with the additional external stressors these part-time students face, which in turn leads to lower student retention for the school and a lack of persistence for the students.

Perhaps surprisingly, like Carlson's (2015) research, a good number of qualitative studies that do focus on master's degree programs are done by graduate students themselves as doctoral dissertations or master's degree theses. Using a focus group and in-depth interviews with nine currently enrolled part-time graduate students (both master's and doctoral) majoring in education and three of their faculty members at a public university in the northwestern United States (U.S.), Brazier's (1998) dissertation research found nine commonalities in the student's experiences that impacted psychological and educational wellness: family support and involvement, financial implications, program workload, time management, workplace support, understanding requirements, program mentors, schedule flexibility, and cohort support. Shepherd's (2015) dissertation used narrative case studies of ten adult learners to understand the reasoning behind their decision to return for an MBA degree at a public university in the southeastern U.S. All ten of his participants were from the same cohort and he found that their reasons for returning were very varied, but all expected some career growth after finishing the program. He also found that the participants had to "make short-term sacrifices in almost all areas of their lives in order to successfully persist" (p. 170) but that they made the most of the experience due to their own interest in learning and the interactions with the cohort. That same year Mercer's (2015) dissertation also focused on MBA students at a small, private, religious university in the Southwest U.S., but with a focus on the barriers that they encountered and how they managed to persist in spite of them. In her, narrative study, she interviewed nine students who were currently

enrolled in an MBA program and she identified six themes concerning MBA student persistence: faculty and student interactions (caring, flexibility, value), support (friends/family, employer/coworkers, institution/department), individual effort, motivation for degree pursuit, quitting not an option, and balance. Interestingly, she found that the group that most influenced the MBA students was the faculty. Faculty interactions and support were the main factor she identified as being important to MBA student persistence.

While there is far less research on master's degree students than there are on other populations, that does not mean that there are no questions to be explored. Mercer (2015) notes that two of the studies that do look at master's degree students actually disagree on the impact full- and part-time status have on a student's persistence. Nicholls' (2007) quantitative research at an Australian university used absorbing markov chains to conclude that part-time master's degree students are more successful than their full-time counterparts. However, Barry and Mathies' (2011) quantitative study of full- and part-time master's degree students in the southeastern U.S. directly contradicts these findings, revealing that full-time master's degree students are far more likely to persist to graduation than those who attend part-time. It is interesting to note that both of these studies were quantitative yet arrived at starkly different conclusions, which might be due to the different models of analysis used and the fact that they were studying populations on two different continents. Yet with such an evident gap in the existing literature, this research study helps to provide qualitative insight into what can be considered an understudied and enigmatic student population: part-time master's degree students enrolled in a part-time master's degree program.

### **Barriers to Adult Learner Success**

Barriers are often also referred to as hardships, obstacles, or hurdles, and are discussed quite frequently in academic literature related to adult learners as they face different challenges than the traditional aged college student when returning to school. As is the case with a majority of studies concerning adult learners, the focus on understanding the barriers they face has so far been focused on the undergraduate student population rather than the master's degree student population (Cross, 1981; Ekstrom, 1972; Genco, 2007; Hostetler, Sweet, & Moen, 2007; Kasworm, 2010; Markle, 2015; Osam, Bergman, & Cumberland, 2017).

Concerned with the low numbers of women returning to school compared to that of men, Ruth Ekstrom (1972) identified three types of barriers that “exclude women from participation in post-secondary education:” situational, institutional, and dispositional (p. i). Nearly a decade later, Patricia Cross (1981) would take those three types of barriers and apply them to both men and women in order to understand why adult learners decide to (or not to) return to school. Cross (1981) explains that situational barriers have to do with “one’s situation in life” (p. 98) at the time the adult learner is taking classes. These may have to do with where they are currently living in relation to where their classes are being held, their financial situation, or the number of other people in their lives that demand priority at any given time such as children, parents, or coworkers. Institutional barriers are those challenges that come about because of decisions the administration has made in their “practices and procedures” (Cross, 1981, p. 98) that might limit access to information, or classes of a type that are not appealing to adult learners, or even simply the price-point of classes. Dispositional barriers are those that are based on the adult learners themselves. They are “related to attitudes and self-perceptions” (Cross, 1981, p. 98) that the adult learner has about themselves and often manifest as doubts about whether or not the adult learner

can succeed when going back to school since it has been so long since they were last in an academic environment.

In 2012, Shepherd and Nelson conducted a small phenomenological study that focused on just three female graduates using Cross's (1981) three barriers to adult learners as a framework. All were women in their 40s who were mothers and juggled numerous responsibilities outside of school. Two of them had obtained their master's degrees and one had obtained her doctorate. They found that the three barriers, situational, dispositional, and institutional, were absolutely valid when applied to the graduate student population, both those pursuing master's degrees and those pursuing doctorate degrees. All three women described institutional barriers such as scheduling issues or negative treatment by faculty and staff, situational barriers such as commuting to campus, work, and childcare issues, and dispositional barriers such as a loss of confidence in their abilities to succeed in higher education given the other roles they also had to manage. This was the only study that could be found that looked at the barriers master's degree students faced when it came to persisting in their degree programs.

Cross's (1981) book is unique in that it looks at adult learners as a whole and focuses on the concept of the lifelong learner, which while there is some argument about the exact definition of the term, usually refers to how adults engage in learning throughout their lives whether it be for personal enrichment, training for an aspect of their job, or returning to higher education for a degree or certificate. Still, like a majority of studies that look into the barriers that adult learners face, Cross (1981) was mostly concerned with the adult undergraduate population. As the multiple roles adult learners juggle when returning to school are likely the same regardless of degree level, several are covered here to show that the same barriers come up over and over again in these studies and were identified by the participants of this study as well.

Using a phenomenological approach at a small community college on the East Coast, Genco (2007) interviewed 24 participants who were either enrolled in programs there or who had recently graduated. The makeup of the participants was interesting in that they were not all on the same academic level, with two already holding college degrees (one master's and one undergraduate) and half pursuing their undergraduate degree with no previous college experience. She found that the participants reported all three types of barriers impacting their persistence, with situational barriers focusing around the multiple roles the students took on in their lives (family and work), dispositional barriers focusing on the anxiety surrounding being an adult student and being successful in their studies, and institutional barriers focusing on dealing with scheduling conflicts with classes. It is interesting to note that the dispositional barriers faced by these participants were also raised by the participants in this study, and like Genco's participants, found that these fears were relieved once they had taken a few classes.

In trying to determine who returned to higher education and what that pathway looked like, Hostetler, Sweet, and Moen (2007) conducted a quantitative study of hetero-sexual couples over 30 in one New England state. By gathering data on both the husband and wife they were able to see that there were different pathways and barriers for each when it came to returning to school. Surprisingly, they found that "[h]usbands and particularly wives with the heaviest combination of work and family demands are among the most likely to return to school" (p. 99) and cited situational barriers such as childcare and work as barriers that would keep them from continuing their education. While they focused mostly on the differences in gender roles and the divergent paths they saw in the decision-making process, one thing that they do not follow up on is the role that self-efficacy might play in the decision making process. They note that the finding that those with many roles to juggle "breathes new life into the worn-out maxim 'where there's a



will, there's a way'" (p. 111), but do not discuss how that might inform the decision-making process of those returning to school. Perhaps this is because self-efficacy has only recently been looked at in studies on adult learners and is still an evolving lens with which to view data.

Deutsch and Schmertz (2011) focused on a group of women who were returning for their undergraduate degrees at two same-sex colleges in the northeastern U.S. and conducted focus groups for their narrative study to better understand their motivation for returning to school, the barriers they faced, and the support systems they used to overcome these barriers. They found that a majority of the women in their study mentioned situational barriers concerning both children and caring for parents. Several of the women in the study had parents pass away during the school year, something that was quite difficult emotionally to process. This was related to the financial barriers the women brought up surrounding paying for classes, books, and also childcare. They found that the women in the study turned to support from their "family, friends, and institutions" (p. 498) when things got tough and particularly valued faculty that understood what they were going through.

Markle (2015) was interested in the barriers that adult learners returning for their undergraduate degrees faced and how they moved past them. Her mixed-methods study collected both quantitative and qualitative data by use of an online survey from 494 participants at a public university in the southwestern U.S., 60 percent of which were attending classes for full-time credit. Similar to Hostetler, Sweet, and Moen (2007), she found that the barriers faced were distinctive by gender and were mostly situational barriers, with men focusing on financial issues and women focusing on the barriers that interrole conflict played in balancing work, life, and school. Women also came up against institutional barriers when it came to interaction with faculty, with many feeling that they were "patronized by professors, especially regarding family

issues” (p. 277). Unlike Deutsch and Schmertz (2011), Markle (2015) found that the interactions reported by her participants were mostly negative and centered around what was deemed as a lack of respect from the professors towards the adult learners.

In all of these studies, situational barriers like childcare, work responsibilities, and financial concerns were raised by the participants, which were similar to the barriers indicated by participants in this study. It is interesting to note that most of the discussion on barriers is related to adult learners *returning* to higher education (Cross, 1981; Ekstrom, 1972; Hostetler, Sweet, & Moen, 2007; Kasworm, 2010; Osam, Bergman, & Cumberland, 2017) rather than impacting adult learners while they are *continuing* through their programs. While the former helps administrators understand the implications barriers have to adult learners enrolling in programs, the latter would help administrators understand what adult learners struggle with while enrolled so that they could better structure programs to support their students and help them push past the barriers they face in order to persist (Fairchild, 2003). Even though all but one of the studies mentioned above did not focus on graduate students, they provide important context as the barriers identified by the part-time master’s degree student participants were quite similar to those mentioned here and fit into the situational, dispositional, and institutional barrier framework.

### **Models of Student Persistence**

The persistence of student populations, particularly undergraduates, has been of interest for several decades, and many scholars have offered models that purport to explain why some students complete their degree programs while others do not. Othman Aljohani (2016) gives a wonderful overview of several of the most popular models in his article “A Comprehensive Review of the Major Studies and Theoretical Models of Student Retention in Higher Education,”

discussing the theories that each of the models were predicated on and giving a brief history of the scholarship before 1970 when there was a shift in the dominant thinking. He explains that before 1970 “[t]he student attrition phenomenon was often explained in terms of the students’ characteristics, personal attributes and shortcomings” (p. 2), something that later scholars would find distasteful, as they took a more sociological view of the issue and believed the answer to student persistence would not be found from investigating just the students themselves, but also the universities and their administrators.

Spady (1971) was the first to put forth a model to try to explain the steps to the undergraduate dropout process based on Durkheim’s theory of suicide: the undergraduate dropout process model. He outlined two distinct groups of variables that impacted a student’s decision to drop out: the academic and the social. This was followed closely by Tinto (1975, 1993) who looked at the same population in his institutional departure model and central to this model were the same two groups of variables that Spady had used: the academic and the social. However, Tinto looked at the process longitudinally, taking into account data from before the student was admitted (high school GPA, etc.) and outlining the thought process and factors both internal (academic) and external (social) that might cause an undergraduate to drop out or fail to persist. Tinto would continue to improve his model and expand to other degree programs with his doctoral student persistence model in 1993. The slight change of title for the model is interesting as he went from focusing on a relatively negative outcome (dropout/incompletion) to a positive one (persistence/completion).

While Spady (1971) and Tinto’s (1975) original models were looking at four-year residential undergraduates as a population, Bean and Metzner’s (1985) model of nontraditional student attrition looked at non-residential, older undergraduate students, who would not quite fit

Tinto's (1975) original model as they had limited time on campus and thus could not become actively involved in departmental activity, something Tinto found to be helpful in keeping doctoral students in their programs. Bean and Metzner (1985) found that external factors, which they called environmental variables, had the most impact regarding whether or not an undergraduate adult learner would drop out of a program. These variables had been somewhat touched upon with Spady (1971) and Tinto's (1975) social integration variables, but those still mostly focused on the support of people internal rather than external to the programs.

Girves and Wemmerus's (1988) model of master's student degree progress is mostly a side-note to their focus on doctoral student degree progress, but it is still the first model to focus exclusively on graduate students. Rather than looking at attrition or persistence, they focused on the different steps a student would take to progress through a degree program and the points at which the student may decide to drop out and why. This set the stage nicely for Tinto's (1993) doctoral student persistence model, which offered a complicated look at both the path students would take towards their doctoral degree, but also a detailed map of what variables impacted their persistence at every step. Nearly two decades later and based mostly upon the work of Bean and Metzner (1985), Cohen's (2012) dissertation research condensed the number of variables that were being looked at, excluding those that would not impact part-time adult learners in a master's program such as high school GPA, and her findings resulted in her master's student persistence model. This model was unfortunately never published in a peer-reviewed journal but was presented at a conference in 2012 (Cohen, 2012b).

While there is no published, peer-reviewed model of master's degree student or part-time master's degree student persistence, these three published, peer-reviewed models and the one unpublished dissertation model, can be used as loose theoretical frameworks when considering

part-time master's degree student persistence: Bean and Metzner's (1985) non-traditional undergraduate student attrition model, Girves and Wemmerus' (1988) graduate degree progression model, Tinto's (1993) doctoral student persistence model, and Cohen's (2012) model of master's degree student persistence. The first three models do not directly address issues concerning part-time master's degree student persistence, but they each mention a version of external stressors on students that can inform our understanding of that population. The following section will discuss each model in detail and how it can inform our understanding of the part-time master's degree student population.

### **Bean and Metzner (1985)**

In 1985, Bean and Metzner set out to study the reasons why older, “nontraditional” undergraduate students dropped out of their programs at a higher rate than “traditional” undergraduate students. Their ultimate goal was to develop a model that outlined the variables that lead to nontraditional student attrition. They define a nontraditional student as a person that is over the age of 24, is enrolled part-time, and who does not live on campus. Additionally, they stipulate that nontraditional students' primary goal is obtaining a degree or certificate to show they have completed a class or program, not to socialize or engage in extracurricular activities.

Their extensive research collected an astounding amount of data from previously published models on attrition in the undergraduate student population and research studies based on nontraditional students in order to form their own model. They found that there were three “environmental press” (Bean & Metzner, 1985, p. 489) variables that impacted nontraditional students: 1. Lower engagement at all levels (student to student, student to faculty, extracurricular activities, and available student services), 2. Classes taught as if the students were traditional, on-campus students, 3. High interaction with other non-school related people/activities (work,

family, etc.). While Bean and Metzner's model focuses only on part-time undergraduate students, all of these "environmental press" factors would also be applicable to a part-time master's degree student.

The variables that Bean and Metzner (1985) used for their model of nontraditional student attrition [Figure 1] were ones that they saw repeated throughout the literature during their review of previous models and studies of undergraduate attrition. Their model cites four main

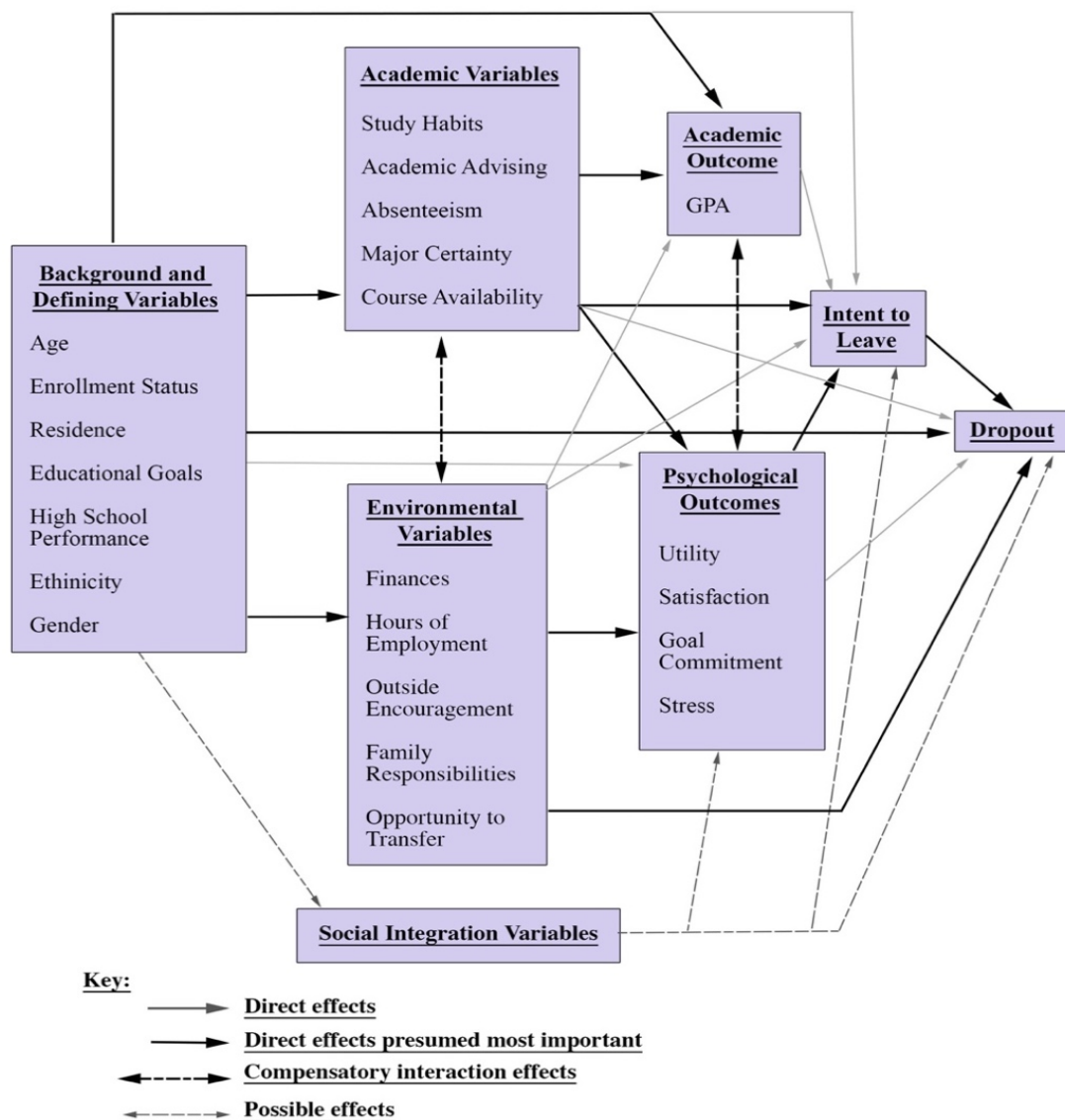


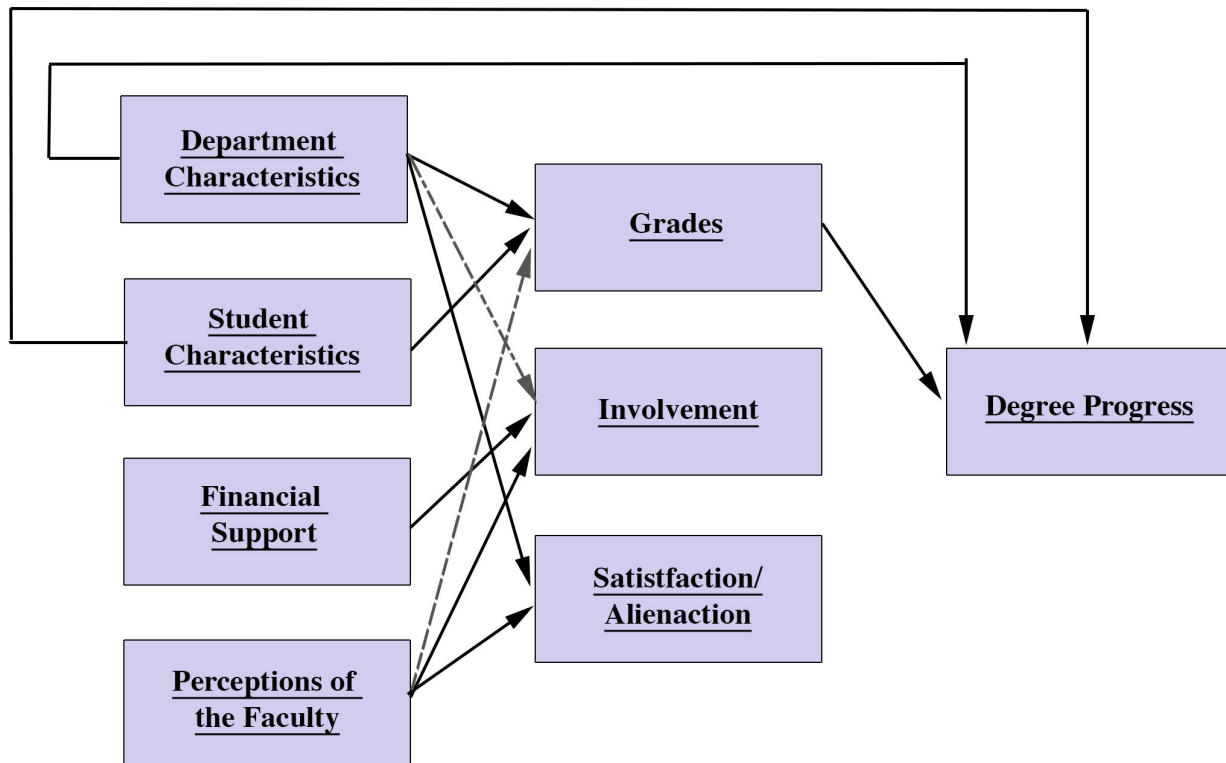
Figure 1. A Conceptual Model of Nontraditional Student Attrition. Adapted from Bean and Metzner, 1985, p. 491.

groups of variables that can predict attrition in students: 1. academic performance (both past and current), 2. intent to leave, 3. background and defining variables, and 4. environmental variables. They note that “environmental variables are expected to have substantial direct effects on dropout decisions” (Bean & Metzner, p. 490), yet that is not clearly indicated on the model they produced. Environmental variables are placed on the same level and given the same influence as academic variables, suggesting that both are playing an equal role in the decisions that lead to either positive or negative academic and psychological outcomes. However, in their discussion of the model, Bean and Metzner note that it is the environmental variables that indicate whether or not the student will be retained. If the academic variables are positive and the environmental variables are negative, the student will not be retained. If the environmental variables are positive, even if the academic variables are negative the student will be retained. The *environmental* variables appear to be the key factor in whether or not the student will persist in the program.

The environmental variables in Bean and Metzner’s (1985) model of nontraditional undergraduate persistence are labeled as: finance, hours of employment, outside encouragement, family responsibilities, and opportunity to transfer. With the exception of opportunity to transfer, which while not unheard of in graduate careers is still rather unlikely, these are all variables that would impact part-time master’s degree students. When speaking directly to part-time master’s degree students in the current study, I found that the variables Bean and Metzner termed outside encouragement and finance in particular had an impact on part-time master’s degree student persistence. By gaining a better understanding of these environmental variables in a part-time master’s degree student’s life, part-time master’s degree programs can work to minimize negative impact and increase retention rates.

**Girves and Wemmerus (1988)**

Just a few years later, Girves and Wemmerus (1988) noted the lack of research into the graduate student population and conducted a study that led to their graduate degree progression model. Hesitant to try to define what might count as retention, they instead decided to focus on what steps there were in each graduate degree (master's and doctoral) that lead to progression in the program. This resulted in two different models, one for master's degree students [Figure 2]

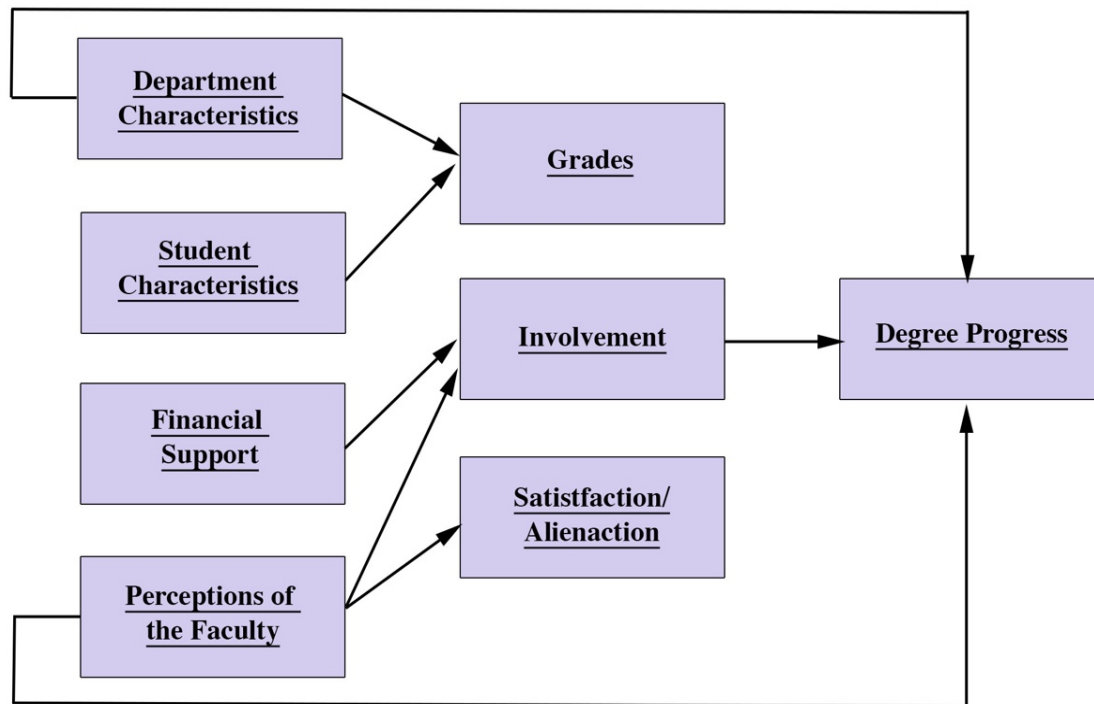


Note: Solid lines represent significance at the .01 level  
and dashed lines represent significance at the .05 level.

Figure 2. Empirical Model of Master's Student Degree Progression. Adapted from Girves and Wemmerus, 1988, p. 179.

and one for doctoral candidates [Figure 3], which show that there is a distinct difference in progression for both groups. This is particularly interesting as a large number of studies that focus on graduate students still tend to group both populations together. According to the National Center of Educational Statistics (NCES), while NCES does collect data concerning





Note: Solid lines represent significance at the .01 level and dashed lines represent significance at the .05 level.

Figure 3. Empirical Model of Doctoral Student Degree Progress. Adapted from Girves and Wemmerus, 1998, p. 179.

graduate students, it does not distinguish between master's degree graduates and doctoral graduates when publishing its reports. This is a surprising finding considering how distinctly different the progression models for these two student populations are, which implies that the two groups would need different forms of support to succeed. Being able to access data concerning either graduate population would be exceedingly helpful.

Girves and Wemmerus (1988) found that master's students had a degree progression that consisted of two steps: 1. complete required classes, 2. obtain degree, while doctoral candidates had three steps: 1. complete required classes, 2. pass required exams/dissertation, and 3. obtain degree. Further, student characteristics had a direct impact on whether or not a master's degree student would progress forward in their steps, whereas doctoral student progression was more

connected with department and faculty involvement. To test their models, Girves and Wemmerus (1988) did a quantitative study using mailed surveys to 486 enrolled graduate students (both full and part-time) at a single university in the midwestern U.S. They do not specify the number of questions, but they do show that they were not open-ended as from the excerpts shown participants were either provided lists from which they selected their answer or were instructed to use a scale. As a result, their findings were definitive with some variables, but lack context and understanding as to exactly what these variables mean and imply.

For master's degree students Girves and Wemmerus (1988) found that the student characteristic and departmental characteristic variables were indicators of student progression. Particularly, they cite grades as being useful in showing if a master's degree student would move from the first step of taking classes to the second step of earning their degree. Notably they found that enrollment status was significant in predicting whether or not a student would progress to graduation with full-time students being more successful than part-time students when it came to master's degree completion. Their data ultimately led them to conclude that if part-time students wanted to be successful, they needed to "register full-time and to avoid other distractions, such as outside employment" (Girves & Wemmerus, 1988, p. 184).

Clearly since some part-time master's degree students are able to successfully persist until graduation, there must be ways to mitigate these "distractions," but quantitative data is not going to be able to provide those answers. This study enhances the understanding of the real meanings behind the numbers in quantitative studies like these, since while Girves and Wemmerus present several variables that they argue have statistically significant impact on student progression, they cannot explain the "why" behind them. Their discussion section is full of what that "might" mean or what "may be," but without having talked directly with any of the

students, they have no real insights into what aspects of the characteristic variables cause students to progress or fail to progress.

### Tinto (1993)

Working with only part of the graduate student population Girves and Wemmerus (1988) examined, Tinto (1993) developed his doctoral student persistence model [Figure 4]. While this model of persistence does not deal with master's degree students at all, it is reviewed here for two reasons: the first being that the path can be minimally altered to reflect the path of a master's degree student on the thesis or capstone track. The second is Tinto's use of external

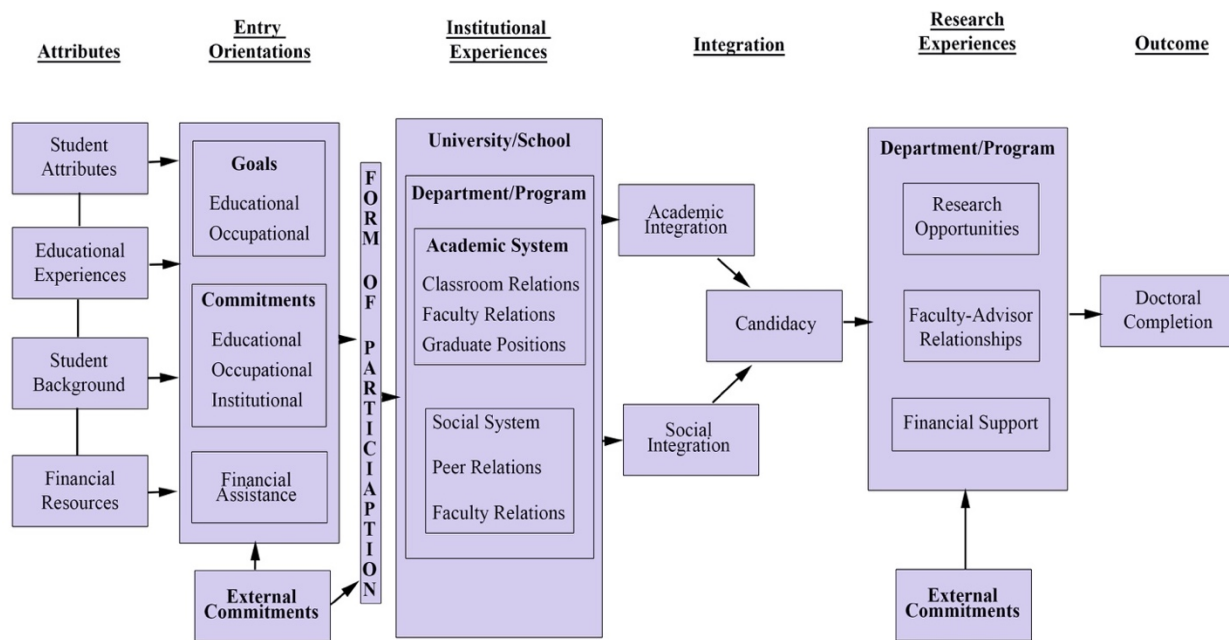


Figure 4. Doctoral Student Persistence Model. Adapted from Tinto, 1993, p. 240.

commitments, which he uses twice in his model: once at entry orientations and once at research experiences. Unfortunately, Tinto does not go into what those external commitments might be in any great detail, which is surprising considering that they show up twice in his model. However, it can be assumed that this reflects an understanding that there will be outside constraints on graduate students, such as work and family obligations, that will impact graduate students at

these points. This is an integral aspect for program administrators to understand when it comes to part-time master's degree students who are not able to enroll in a full-time program often due to these external commitments.

While Tinto (1993) devotes only one paragraph to discussing the difference between full-time and part-time doctoral students, the conclusions he draws related to time commitment can be applied to part-time master's degree students as well. He states that part-time status "directly undermine[s] persistence by isolating the person from the intellectual and social life of the department" (Tinto, 1993, p. 234). A parent or caretaker that is working full time while trying to obtain a master's degree part-time will experience that same sort of isolation and lack of engagement he and others say is important for persistence, retention, and success.

### **Cohen (2012)**

In her 2012 dissertation, Kristen Cohen utilized quantitative data collected from 400 master's degree students to test if Bean and Metzner's (1985) model would work when applied to a different student population: master's degree students. An online survey with 100 questions was sent out to the entire master's degree student population of 2,240 at one large, public university located in the Northeast United States, which resulted in 400 usable replies from 320 part-time students and 83 full-time students. The questions were mostly six-point Likert scale asking how much the participants agreed with or disagreed with a certain statement, although there were some yes/no questions and some demographics information. All questions had pre-set answers to select from, there were no open-ended questions. While some overlap was found with Bean and Metzner (1985), the results were different enough that Cohen (2012a) proposed an entirely new model of master's student persistence, from her findings [Figure 5].

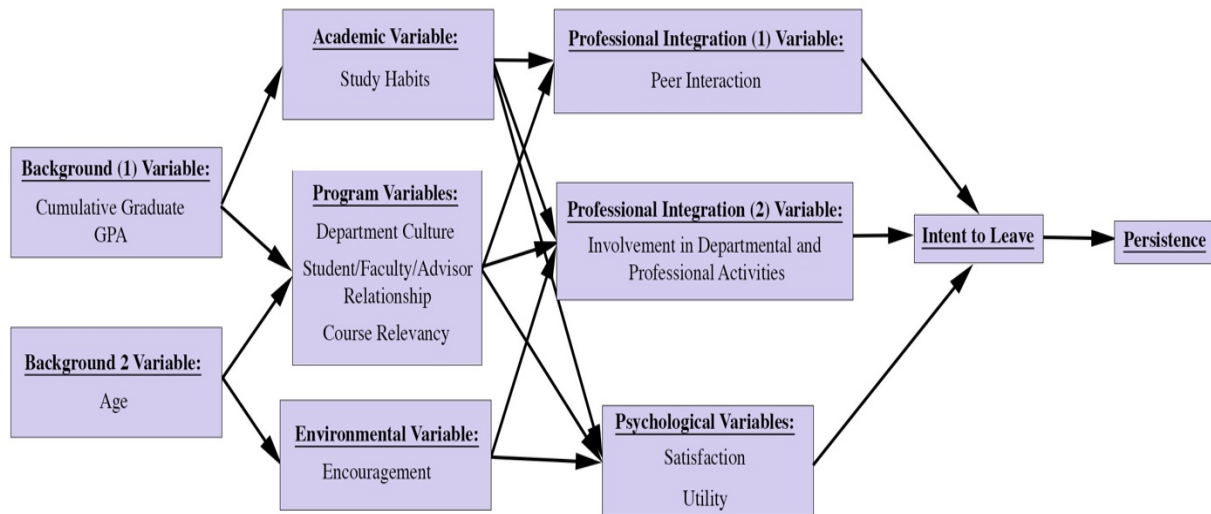


Figure 5. Master's Student Persistence Model. Adapted from Cohen, 2012, p. 24

The results of the study were organized by degree type, which Cohen designated based on the university's catalogue as academic masters, specialized training for career, and credentialing for career advancement. Like the other models, Cohen identified groups of variables that influence master's student persistence: background, academic, program, environmental, professional integration, and psychological. However, unlike Bean and Metzner (1985) and Gives and Wemmerus (1988), Cohen (2012a) found that grades/GPA did not have an impact on master's degree student persistence. Instead, her study found that age, involvement in professional and departmental activities, and especially intent to persist were the variables that most impacted persistence in the master's degree students that completed the survey. Further, self-efficacy was an overwhelmingly important factor in student persistence:

Student self-efficacy, especially as represented by intent to persist, was able to overcome some significant negative effects on persistence that were felt from the age and peer interaction factors. As prior studies have found, when students were committed to

earning the degree, they were able to overcome obstacles that other students found insurmountable. (Cohen, 2012a, p. 103)

While self-efficacy is a key aspect of her model, Cohen (2012a) does note in the limitations section that this result may be because the participants who had particularly high self-efficacy were more likely to complete the survey. Students with low self-efficacy and those who had already made the decision to drop out of the program or were considering dropping out were likely not represented in her sample.

In the first three student persistence models discussed external influences such as work, and family are mentioned but not actively researched. Bean and Metzner (1985) call them environmental variables, Tinto (1993) calls them external commitments, and while Girves and Wemmerus (1988) do not explicitly refer to external stressors in their model, these are implied in the involvement and alienation steps of their progression model with students who have external commitments being unable to fully immerse themselves in their studies and who experience trouble connecting to faculty and peers outside of classes. These correspond well to Bean and Metzner's (1985) psychological outcomes, which are heavily influenced by environmental variables, as is the integration step in Tinto's (1993) model. Cohen's (2012a) model accurately reduces the list of variables that impact part-time master's degree students, but confusingly lists variables that she found did not impact student persistence such as GPA in her model. Self-efficacy, which she found had a profound impact on persistence, is not listed at all; however, her environmental variable of encouragement, meaning the support of friends and family, directly impacts the psychological variables, much like Bean and Metzner's model.

All of these models provide helpful insight as to what impacts student persistence, but to fully understand the complexity of the challenges these external influences present to part-time

master's degree students, researchers need to hear from the students themselves so that the "why" behind the often-abstract boxes these frameworks present can be understood and steps can be taken to offer these students the support they need to persist.

### **Chapter Summary**

This chapter began with a review of the purpose of this study and gave a brief history of how the master's degree became established in the U.S. It then discussed the difficulties of finding peer-reviewed research based on part-time master's degree student persistence and the lack of clarity in defining part-time students and master's degree programs. Literature on the barriers to student persistence was reviewed and a history of models of student persistence was then presented with a detailed look at four of the models: Bean and Metzner (1985), Girves and Wemmerus (1988), Tinto (1993), and Cohen (2012a) and how each one could be used when looking at the part-time master's student population. Finally, the literature review chapter concluded with a summary of why qualitative research into this population is needed.

## CHAPTER THREE: METHOD

**Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to provide a better understanding of part-time master's degree student persistence and the barriers this population faces by using in-depth, semi-structured interviews to collect narratives from enrolled master's degree students at a private, nonprofit, liberal arts college in the Northeast United States that offers several degree programs specifically designed for part-time students. Since a majority of the studies of graduate degree populations and their persistence have been quantitative, this study helps to fill research gaps in three areas: the lack of studies focused on master's degree students in the Humanities, the lack of qualitative research on persistence of master's degree students, and also the lack of research focused on persistence in *part-time* master's degree students. This study brings much needed insight from the students themselves as to what they believe impacts their part-time graduate persistence. It also helps to address the *why* behind the numbers in quantitative studies which, while informative, highlight only the *variables* that are important to student persistence. How some of those variables like age, finances, and encouragement actually impact student persistence are explained in this study by the students themselves, thus giving the rich descriptive data and context (Creswell, 2009; Geertz, 1973; McAlpine, 2016) that is needed to the previously published quantitative studies.

Understanding what students believe to be most important to their persistence in their part-time master's degree program is critical to helping college and university administrators adapt their interactions with this population, which should in turn help to increase graduation rates. Using narrative inquiry, experience-centered narratives were collected from 15 participants and the following two research questions were addressed: 1. What factors do part-time master's



degree students enrolled in a Humanities program identify as being most important to their persistence? 2. What barriers do part-time master's degree students enrolled in a Humanities program identify and how do they successfully push past them?

This chapter will first discuss the research design that was chosen for the study, explaining the selection of methodology, then outline the site, participant population and methods that were used to collect the data. How the data was coded and analyzed will be examined, along with ethical considerations and study limitations. Finally, a chapter summary will conclude this section and lead the way to the results of Chapter 4.

### **Research Design**

It does not escape me that I am passionate about part-time graduate student persistence because I was (and am again until my conferral) a part-time graduate student. One of the best pieces of advice that we were given during our doctoral work was to find something we were passionate about that would get us to the library when it was cold and rainy and for me that came from wanting to see part-time students succeed. Originally, my initial focus had been on part-time undergraduate students; a population that these days has been widely studied and continues to attract attention as enrollments soar (Markel, 2015). But after reading Cohen and Greenberg's (2011) article on part-time master's degree students, an understudied and often overlooked population, I knew that was where I wanted to focus my attention. This was the ever-sought-after gap in the research that I was confident this study could help fill.

Once I established my research questions concerning the identified gap in research knowledge, I knew that I would be working within the realm of narrative methodology. Bruner (1991) states that "narrative organizes the structure of human experience" (p. 21) and it was essential to me that I capture how the students themselves structured their experiences and where

they placed the emphasis for their continued persistence in the program. By focusing on providing “rich descriptions of the content of [their] stories” (McAlpine, 2016, p. 35), I was giving a voice to an overlooked student population and obtaining a form of data from a population that has thus far been unexamined in research studies.

### **Narrative Inquiry**

This study was interested in what the students themselves identified as important to their persistence and what barriers they faced during their experience in their program and narrative inquiry worked well to frame this process. Using narrative inquiry, the students were able to tell their own stories and place emphasis where they felt it needed to be when it came to what helped and hindered them in pursuit of their master’s degree. I then interpreted those stories to write their narratives, placing what they had said within the context of the research questions I was looking to answer. The participant narratives, presented in Chapter 4, show how their lives have impacted their educational experience and vice-versa.

Narrative inquiry relies heavily on Dewey’s (1938) theoretical framework of experiential learning, which is predicated on the relationship between education and experience. Dewey (1938) argued that learning happened through life experience and that two principles, continuity and interaction, were key to that learning taking place. Dewey’s (1938) principle of continuity explains that learning that is happening in the present is something that is always informing past and future experiences. It is meant to be remembered and built upon, to evolve as new ideas are impacted by old memories and experiences, and open to change based on what happens next. His principle of interaction revolves around the importance of the surroundings of the learner and the “transaction taking place between an individual and what, at the time, constitutes his environment” (Dewey, 1938, p. 41). Narrative inquiry takes all of this into account as narratives

exist in a three-dimensional space that encompasses the personal/social (interaction), the timing (continuity), and the place (situation) (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) point out that “[e]xperience happens narratively. Narrative inquiry is a form of narrative experience. Therefore, educational experience should be studied narratively” (p. 19). Narrative inquiry allows researchers the ability to understand experience specifically suited to research in the realm of education. Since it was important to understand what experiences students identified and assigned meaning to as they engaged in their part-time master’s degree program, narrative inquiry was an optimal choice for this study as the participant’s experiences with the school and those around them, both internal to the program and external to it, would impact their learning in numerous ways.

The role of the researcher in narrative inquiry also made it an appealing method for this study as Clandinin and Connelly (2000) point out that the researcher and her experience must be taken into account since the researcher ultimately produces the stories and frames the focus of the participant narratives: “Narrative inquiry is an experience of the experience. It is people in relation studying with people in relation” (p. 189). The researcher is also a character in the stories she creates as she is an active audience that the participants are engaging with. Because of my own background as a part-time graduate degree student, I needed to bracket and record my own thoughts and experiences in order to be as transparent as possible and confront possible biases when it came to my role in the construction of the students’ narratives.

Along with the researcher, the “audience is always a presence and interpretively shapes the field texts constructed” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 102). Beyond other researchers of the part-time master’s degree population, another audience these narratives were written for are the administrators at colleges and universities that want to understand their part-time master’s

degree student population and what factors both aid and hinder their persistence. These audiences helped to shape the narratives written from the participants' stories and that should be kept in mind while reading them. The impacts of this study and recommendations for both future research and administrators are discussed more in depth in Chapter 5.

### **Experience-Centered Narratives**

Experience-centered narratives can be "defined by theme rather than structure" (Andrews, Squire, & Tomboukou, 2008, p. 43) and "bring stories of personal experiences into being by means of the first person oral narration of past, present, future...experience" (p. 37). In this study, the theme being investigated was the participants' experiences as part-time students in a graduate program and the stories the participants presented were often deeply personal with context that went beyond their time in a classroom. This context was crucial to understanding their persistence in the program.

### **Reflexivity**

Reflexivity is defined by Pillow (2003) as a "focus [that] requires the researcher to be critically conscious through personal accounting of how the researcher's self-location (across for example, gender, race, class, sexuality, ethnicity, nationality), position, and interests influence all stages of the research process" (p. 178). It is not just acknowledging that all researchers come to their research with preconceived notions, ideas, and assumptions that they may not even be aware are influencing their thought process as they conduct their research, but practicing "self-awareness during the research process which aids in making visible the practice and construction of knowledge within research in order to produce a more accurate analysis of our research" (p. 178). Reflexivity is a method that encourages researchers to think critically about themselves and their thought process.

Throughout this process, I practiced self-reflexivity and kept a detailed research journal in which I would record memos about what I was thinking and feeling, along with worries that I had concerning the project. After each meeting with my committee or a discussion with anyone that was unlucky enough to ask me about my dissertation research, I would write down ideas that came up or assumptions that I had identified. During each interview I took notes on details I noticed while the participants told their stories (tone of voice, animation of hands, etc.) and also how their stories were impacting me as the researcher (memories, feelings, etc.) in order to reduce researcher bias and add depth in the analysis phase (Pillow, 2003). After each interview I would write up a small synopsis of my thoughts as well as note any themes that I thought were emerging or that I had noticed came up. In this way, I tried to always be aware of my positionality (Takacs, 2003) relative to the study, the data, and the participants and was able to develop richer context for my findings as a result.

## **Interviews**

Interviewing part-time master's degree students about their experiences within their degree programs was the best way to allow me to better understand what they felt was important to their persistence and allowed the participants to tell me these stories in their own words. Fifteen experience-centered narratives were collected through 60 to 90-minute semi-structured interviews (APPENDIX A) with each participant. Four interviews were in-person and the rest used one of three types of video-chat applications over a secure network: six were on Facetime, three were on Skype, and two were on Zoom. All interviews had both video and audio recorded, either with a built-in screen recorder for video chat-based interviews that captured image and sound, or with an iPhone X that used video and/or voice memo software.

Interviews were chosen because the format allows the researcher to capture the participant's thought process in the moment (Gray, Williamson, Karp, & Dalphin, 2007). There is little time for editing a narrative when a person is responding to a question immediately, whereas with a written response, participants might edit their language, tone, and even the perspective of their answer before submitting it. Hesitations, body language, inflection, etc., can all help to color a narrative and add depth that would not otherwise be noticed in a written response, and represented data points I was interested in capturing (Gray, Williamson, Karp, & Dalphin, 2007; Seidman, 2013).

A semi-structured framework was used during the interviews as I wanted the participants to be able to focus on the things that they deemed important rather than what they thought I might want to hear as a researcher (Creswell, 2009). There were five main questions that served as prompts to get the participants to tell me their story and reflect upon their experiences within their part-time master's degree program (APPENDIX A). While the five main questions were asked of each participant, the follow-ups and probes were different depending on what aspects of their story the participants wanted to tell and place emphasis on--something that was easily accommodated with a semi-structured interview style. As a result of this flexibility, each interview had unique moments in which the participants focused on different aspects of their experiences, some of which were quite personal.

At the start of each interview, I always made sure to greet the interviewees, thanking them for being willing to participate and asking how their day was. This provided a bit of an icebreaker to the conversations, built some rapport while still remaining professional (Gary, Williamson, Karp & Dalphon, 2007) and allowed for a pleasant lead-in to the starting speech I gave each time. During the interviews I tried to be an active listener and never interrupt the

speaker, letting some pauses draw out so that they could finish their thought completely before I asked a follow-up question (Leech, 2002; Seidman, 2013). While I found not filling in the silence those pauses caused was the most challenging aspect of the interviews, it often led to far richer descriptions from the participant as they were able to reflect on their experiences and the details they wanted to emphasize without interruption or feeling rushed to the next question, leading to even more follow-up questions to get to the essence of their stories.

The last question asked in every interview was “Is there anything else you would like to talk about that we have not brought up so far?” This gave participants an opening to bring up issues that they might not have felt they had an opening to discuss earlier. They would almost always remember something they wanted to mention before or ask a question themselves that continued the conversation, often to add an incredibly interesting point to the discussion. As a result, I quickly learned to not stop recording until the person either ended the conversation by shutting down the video-chat application or had left the room, thus signaling a true end to the interview.

### **Research Site**

The study site was a private, accredited college in the New England area with a program that was specifically designed for part-time students interested in certificate programs, associate degrees, bachelor’s degrees and master’s degrees. Unlike traditional master’s degree programs that require tuition for a term or a year of enrollment, the site’s part-time programs allowed students to pay only for the classes they took during the semester with payment due upon enrollment. Thus, a student could pay for one, two, or more classes at a time depending on the kind of course load they wanted or could afford during a semester. Along with proof of a bachelor’s degree and an application essay, admission to their part-time graduate degree

programs required a prospective student to complete one pre-requisite writing class and two other classes of their own choosing and earn a grade of a B or above. No special testing such as the Graduate Record Examinations (GRE) was required for admission.

Convenience sampling (Creswell, 2009) was used to select the site as it was local to me and I had knowledge of the programs that were offered and the information gatekeepers I would need to interact with as I am a graduate and employee of the school. This is discussed more in depth in the last section of this Chapter. As master's degree programs cover a wide range of subjects from Education to Computer Science and more, the focus was delimited to those enrolled in the liberal arts degree program with a Humanities field of concentration. Humanities programs have seen a recent decrease in degree production (Okahana & Zhou, 2017; Okahana & Zhou, 2018) and my assumption was that the impetus for seeking a Humanities degree was intrinsic (personal edification) rather than extrinsic (career growth), which I thought would lead to more interesting answers to such questions as 'why did you want to obtain a master's degree' than 'I wanted a promotion' (Cross, 1981). This assumption would turn out to not be entirely true and is discussed in more depth in Chapter 4.

To confirm that the site would agree to allow me to conduct the study there and provide me with the student information I needed, I met with the director of the Master of Liberal Arts program and the director of the Academic Affairs office who handled all FERPA related policy for the college. I provided them with a copy of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) proposal that I had submitted to Lesley University's IRB along with the interview guide and answered any questions they had. They agreed that it was a promising study and since I was known to both of them, they trusted me to act professionally and ethically with the student emails that they would provide. Once the Lesley University IRB approved the study, I provided them with the letter of



approval, and they put me in contact with the database administrator that could pull the student emails according to the participant criteria I requested by querying the student database.

### **Participant Sample and Recruitment**

The minimum number of participants sought for this study was 10 in order to ensure that a wide enough range of experiences would be incorporated, while the maximum number of participants was kept to 20 so as not to lessen the individuality of the insight that each narrative could provide (Creswell, 2012). Guest, Bunce and Johnson (2006) found that data saturation in qualitative studies was often reached around 12 participants, thus it was assumed that this range would provide sufficient information on the population. Participants were chosen using purposeful sampling (Patton, 2002) to identify students that fit the five specific inclusion criteria I was looking for: 1. students who were currently enrolled in a master's degree program, 2. students who were entering at least their second year of study, 3. students who had declared a Humanities field of concentration, 4. students who were 18 years or older, and 5. students who did not have a FERPA block on their records. Based on those criteria, the site provided me with a spreadsheet containing 224 email addresses of students who fit my participant profile with no other identifying information. To reduce any researcher bias in participant selection, 30 student emails were selected using a random number generator (random.org) from the master list. Those students that were selected were then sent an email from my Lesley University student account and asked if they would be willing to sit for an interview relating to their persistence in the master's degree program (APPENDIX B). None of the students selected for this study were known to me before the initial email contact.

The first round of emails resulted in 10 volunteers, although only nine interviews were successfully scheduled and completed as one student did not follow-through to set a time and

date despite two follow-up emails. The following week another round of 30 student emails were randomly selected and the initial contact email sent out. Seven students from the second round volunteered to be interviewed, but only six were successfully scheduled and completed as again one student did not follow-through to set a time and date despite two follow-up emails. After six interviews it was clear that several major themes were already identifiable and interviews 12-15, while they offered interesting perspectives, did not result in any major changes to the themes that had been coded (Guest, Bunce & Johnson, 2006). Thus, once 15 interviews were successfully completed, no new further participants were deemed necessary as data saturation had been reached and no further emails were sent out.

Once students replied to the original email to express interest, a second email (APPENDIX C) was sent out that either confirmed the date, time, and format of the interview or asked that they name a date, format/location, and time for the interview if they had not communicated those details in their initial reply. Participants were asked to choose a format they were comfortable with for the interview that worked with their location and schedule: either in-person or using a video chat application such as Skype, Facetime, or Zoom. For in-person interviews I had a ready list of appropriate venues (private or semi-private spaces with low noise levels like library conference areas, study rooms, or offices) that the participant could choose from if they did not have one in mind already.

Before each meeting, all participants were asked to read and sign the Informed Consent form sent via email (APPENDIX D) indicating that they were volunteering for the interview, that they agreed to be recorded, that they had agreed to review a document to confirm their narrative was being reported correctly, and that they could decide not to participate at any point and end the interview at any time. Each participant was emailed a \$10 Amazon gift card before the start

of their interview to thank them for their time and participation. Participant consent was also confirmed for a second time verbally at the beginning of the interview recording as I went over the procedure and reviewed any risks associated with the study. Each interview started with the same opening speech and ended with the same closing speech which again reiterated their rights as participants and advised them that they could withdraw from the study at any time without consequence (APPENDIX A). None of the interviews lasted the full 90 minutes although some came close, with the average interview lasting for 64 minutes.

Of the 15 participants interviewed for this study, four identified as male and eleven identified as female. Seven were married and seven identified that they had children, although only four of the participants had children currently living in the household with them. Three were employees of the school and benefited from a generous tuition assistance package. One participant was at the beginning of the program, six were in the middle, and eight were at the end with only a couple of classes or a final project (thesis or capstone) between them and graduation. The participants had an average age of 42, with the oldest participant being 80 years old and the youngest being 21.

### **Data Analysis**

After the interview concluded, I transcribed the audio recording into a Microsoft Word document within 24 hours. There were four passes made in the transcription process: the first was done to create a working document of everything that was said during the interview. The second was done to correct for any typographical errors and to ensure that there were no mistakes in the transcription of the audio. A third was done to note any inflections or mannerisms of the participant that could be heard or seen in the recording, such as laughter or an increase in vocal volume. And finally, a fourth was done to transcribe the notes that I had made

during the interview into italics within the text. This allowed me to become increasingly familiar with each transcription and its contents.

In order to analyze the data, first I had to decide on which of the two traditional forms Polkinghorne (1995) notes are used for narrative: “*analysis of narratives* moves from stories to common elements, and *narrative analysis* moves from common elements to stories” (p. 12). Ultimately, I decided to use the analysis of narratives framework when reviewing my data as I was moving from the participant stories to common themes among them. I also took a naturalist stance when it came to analyzing the data, focusing on the “rich descriptions of the content of people’s stories” (McAlpine, 2016, p. 35) and trying to ensure that the participant’s voice was not lost in my interpretation of their story. This required reading and re-reading the transcriptions throughout each step of this process. I would not only return time and time again to the documents I had on my computer, but also kept a pile of printed transcriptions on my desk, which I would constantly refer to. Every few days I would re-read the transcripts and listen to the recordings to make sure I was immersed in the data as I began the coding process.

When it came to coding the data there were three major steps to my process: looking at individuals, looking at key categories and themes across the participants, then meaning making from those categories and themes. Each participant was given a column on a spreadsheet that tracked their data responses. I initially pulled out some key information that would help me in the restorying process: age, gender, their position in the program (beginning, middle, end), and any previous degrees they had identified. I then went through each participant’s transcript and identified the parts of their stories that occupied the three-dimensional space in which narrative exists: personal/social (interaction), the timing (continuity), and where was it happening (situation) (Clandinin & Connelly, 2011). This was exceedingly helpful during the restorying

process when reconstructing each participant's narrative as I ordered them based on the series of events they described in consecutive timeline, from oldest to most recent. A second round of open coding was performed (Merriam, 2009) and identified base themes within the story to label across all the narratives such as challenges, successes, persistence, and support in the spreadsheet. These themes were made into column headings on a spreadsheet and then each participant's responses were summarized under each theme and the corresponding quotes moved under head heading. The third and final round of coding involved interpreting the base themes that had been identified, which resulted in the identification of major themes that influenced persistence and identified barriers to persistence that the participants faced.

Once the major themes were identified, restorying was then performed to "reorganize[e] the stories into some general type of framework" (Creswell, 2012, p. 74) and retell the stories of each participant in an organized, concise way that highlighted these themes. To do this I would read through the participant's transcript, listen to their audio recording, then read through the transcript again to re-familiarize myself with their story. I then wrote up a short summary based on the major points I identified throughout the transcript, keeping a printed copy beside me that I could refer to, and refined this summary based on the themes that had emerged during the data coding process. The summaries were then refined and expanded to become narratives, including many quotes from the participants themselves so that while the narratives are my interpretation of their stories, their voices come through in each one.

To ensure the voice of the participant was not lost and to help with validity via member checking, participants were asked to review the restoried narrative so that any errors or misunderstandings could be corrected, and any clarifications or additions could be made. Only three participants asked for any changes to be made to the final narrative documents, two asked

for the language in their responses to be tweaked for clarity and one asked for several line edits to better reflect their responses. To protect participant identity, each restored document used a pseudonym which was chosen by the participant in place of their real names and were stored on a university server that was approved for Level 3 secure information (information that could cause risk of material harm to individuals or the University if disclosed). Each participant received an email link to the document that only they could access, and as soon as the narrative summaries were completed and approved in writing (email) by the participant, the document was deleted from the share.

### **Ethical considerations**

The participants were not known to me prior to the initial email contact and as I am not a professor or academic administrator at the school, I do not have access to any student information or academic databases and there should have been no coercion based on rank or role. As I was the only researcher, great effort was taken to ensure anonymity (pseudonyms, one-use links for document review, researcher transcribing interviews herself), and permission was sought at several levels—from IRB approval to securing permission from both the head of the graduate program and the institution's FERPA representative to ensure that all protocols were being followed to protect the students' identities and their data (Seidman, 2013).

While this was not a high-risk study, several sensitive topics emerged in the interviews, including suicide ideation, divorce, separation, health issues, and spousal death. While I had on hand a list of helpful student services that the participants could utilize, such as counseling services and student hotlines, none of the participants felt they needed to take it when offered. Participants are all identified in the study by a pseudonym that they have chosen, and the file that links the pseudonym with the real identifier is kept in an encrypted, password protected file on a

secure network drive that is suitable for storing Level 3 secure information, which was only accessible by me. That file will be kept for five years and then purged from the system in 2024.

### **Limitations**

I tried to ensure that my questions did not influence the participants towards a particular answer, but there is always the danger of response bias, in which the participants try to answer questions based on what they think the researcher wants to hear, or the researcher gives some indication through body language or intonation that favored one answer and not another (Creswell, 2009). During the interviews, I often paused to make sure that my word choice would not impact possible answers, and while I was engaging, I strove to remain professional and give the interview a mostly formal feel (Seidman, 2013). As the participants had been purposefully selected, participants were actively persisting at the time of this study and were outgoing enough to agree to an interview in order to share their experiences. As a result, this did not include students who were persisting but were unwilling to share their experiences in the program or students who had already failed to persist and were no longer enrolled in the program. The findings of this study are not generalizable, but I hope that an emphasis on an understudied population and the study's findings are intriguing enough to start a conversation about part-time master's degree student graduation rates at other institutions.

### **Researcher Bias**

I do not think my affiliation with the site or the program has caused any bias in data reporting or collection, and I have intentionally "employed multiple strategies for validity" (Creswell, 2009, p. 177) in order to try to mitigate any doubt that may cause. Although Patai (1994) warns that "we do not escape from the consequences of our positions by talking about them endlessly" (p. 70), I believe being transparent about possible issues, assumptions and biases

lends validity to this study, and I have taken steps to do so along every step of the way during the development (discussing various possible issues with my chair and others, memoing, bracketing), recruiting (ensuring that there was no association/relationship of any kind with any of the students in the study), data gathering (reflexivity), analysis (member checking, peer debriefing), and writing of this study (discrepant information reflection on possible bias).

While the cautions against “backyard research” are numerous, with Creswell (2007) noting “[a]lthough data collection may be convenient and easy, the problems of reporting data that are biased, incomplete, or compromised are legion” (p. 177), other scholars have argued “that keeping ourselves distant from our research in the end may be a disservice to what we have to offer as researchers and the potential social change that can result” (Gardner, Ng, Ropers-Huilman, Ward & Wendel, 2017, p. 90). My interest in part-time graduate student persistence is not limited to one school or one program, as my ultimate goal is to see graduation completion rates for the entirety of the United States rise to the upper 70<sup>th</sup> percentile or higher. I believe my knowledge and experiences as a part-time graduate student put me in a position to help make a difference (Gardner, Ng, Ropers-Huilman, Ward & Wednel, 2017). I know the guilt of having to miss bedtime because of studying or paper writing and the stress of trying to find (and often failing to find) childcare when last minute plans fall through. Even before I had children, I was juggling classes along with a job that required 24-7 access and attention should something go wrong with a server. I am not just a researcher looking at a new population, I am an insider to the experience I am investigating.

I have been very aware throughout this process of trustworthiness and validity and have tried to carefully bracket my thoughts and experiences to confirm that the voices that are heard in the data responses and throughout this analysis are those of the participants. I engaged in



member checking (Creswell, 2009; Saldana 2016) at various stages: participants were asked to review the restoried document to ensure that my interpretation of their stories was correct and were also offered the chance to review their entire interview transcript if they desired to do so. Participants were also offered the opportunity to review the entirety of Chapter 4 to ensure that they were not being misrepresented in any way in the presentation of the findings. I also engaged in “peer debriefing” (Creswell, 2009, p. 192) and met with the chair of my committee during data analysis to show her the data and themes that I was identifying as well as kept her apprised throughout the design and implementation of the study so that she could ask questions and remain engaged. Discrepant information was also presented in the discussion of evidence concerning the themes identified in Chapter 4 to demonstrate that not every piece of data fit nicely into the coded themes and categories of the study’s findings (Creswell, 2009).

### **Chapter Summary**

This chapter began with a discussion of the study’s research design, explained the choice and rationale for its methodology, outlined and identified the research site and participant population, and highlighted the interview methods that were used to collect the data. How the data were coded and analyzed was also presented, along with the ethical concerns and study limitations that were considered. Chapter 4 will first introduce each participant through their restoried narrative, then discuss the themes that were identified, their implications, and the findings associated with each one.

## CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

### Introduction

The purpose of this study was to develop a better understanding of what part-time master's degree students enrolled in a liberal arts program with a concentration in the Humanities believe impact their persistence. This study used semi-structured interviews to collect data directly from 15 part-time master's degree students in order to answer the following two research questions: What factors do part-time master's degree students enrolled in a Humanities program identify as being most important to their persistence? What barriers do part-time master's degree students enrolled in a Humanities program identify and how do they successfully push past them?

This Chapter will first present the restoried narratives of each participant in order to ensure that their voices are heard. The discussion will then move to the findings above and each research questions will then be addressed individually. The Chapter will conclude with a brief summary and overview of what to expect in Chapter 5.

### Participant Narratives

#### Sarah

Ever since Sarah was young, she has always loved learning. She would wait by the mailbox for her *Highlights* magazine to be delivered so she could read it and finish all the puzzles before her siblings and cousins could get their hands on it. Often found with a book or two that she would devour in just a few sittings, she carried that love of learning with her throughout her life:

I think that as a person to grow you need to be constantly educating yourself even if it's something as--you know taking a class learning how to do excel spreadsheets or it's

learning anew app, music how to turn your records into music files you know I think it's really important just to grow as an individual if you want to travel somewhere and learn a new language or um I really think that's important.

Starting college right after high school, she would end up moving into the professional world before she completed her degree. When the lack of a bachelor's degree became a problematic hurdle during a job search, Sarah decided to go back to school as a part-time adult learner for her undergraduate degree, a process she describes as "the best experience I ever had, next to probably marrying my husband and adopting a rescue dog." She was able to transfer the college credits she had earned 26 years before, which helped cut down her course load, something she was grateful for considering she was still working full time while attending classes. After graduating with her undergraduate degree in 2015, she knew that she wanted to pursue a graduate degree right away and immediately started looking for programs that would dovetail nicely with her professional background in public relations.

With her busy schedule, the graduate program needed to not only have the right focus, but be mostly online as well:

physically for me it's really hard for me to work all day and then go to like class at night for two or three hours--you've got the commute, you've got to deal with parking, lugging your books around, um, and then you have the drain of well who knows what kind of day you had?

She found an online graduate program at a prestigious institution that fit what she was looking for, but they lost her application not once, but twice. Frustrated, yet armed with a great sense of humor, Sarah decided to return to the school where she had such a fantastic part-time undergraduate experience to enroll in one of their part-time master's degree programs.

Her experience this time around has been just as fantastic so far, even though she admits that her memory is not what it used to be. While most of the classes can be taken online, there are residency requirements that need to be fulfilled, but rather than a semester they can be done over a weekend or shorter intensive periods like an intensive three week on-campus course in January or a seven week intensive on-campus course over the summer, which is flexibility that Sarah appreciates since she does like to go to campus to meet the professors and her fellow classmates:

I think my favorite moment is going to the learning weekend--so what will happen is you'll be—you're transported to [CITY] and you have class on Friday Saturday Sunday and then you're transported home and I think that immersion with the professors has been really great and it's like you're—and you're also interacting with your classmates for the first time.

This is incredibly helpful for not only forging bonds between students for the class itself, but to trade insider knowledge about work and careers:

Those weekends are really rewarding because they connect and you're all three for the same purpose so you're trading and you're sharing industry knowledge about what's going on with the industry like one example is um, news and reporters and it's journalism, so it's like what's the best way to record an interview, what do you use to record your interviews, do you transcribe your interviews, what software do you use? For shooting video, what do you use to shoot video, you know, do you use your iPhone? Do you use a camera? do you use a lens? So, there's all these little crevices of knowledge which to me is like—you're there for the same purpose.

She finds the knowledgeable faculty also incredibly helpful as they are “they’re the best in their field” and very supportive with their students, even the ones taking the class from afar, by offering office hours over Skype.

And Sarah would need that support as while she was taking classes for her master’s degree she found that her workplace was not as supportive of her educational goals as she needed them to be. While the company offered tuition reimbursement, the employee had to pay out of pocket up front, then turn in their grade upon completion of the class to be reimbursed: “they paid you based on the grade and then you submitted it um for payment and then you had to continue to work there for a year and if you didn’t, if you left there then you had to pay them back” and she did not feel that they were responsive to her pursuit of her master’s degree or other educational opportunities she pursued, such as a program that would require spending a few weeks during the summer at Oxford University in England. The stress from her “high pressure job” caused her to worry that she might have to quit the program, but ultimately she decided that her education was more important: “I didn’t see that job being long term for me where I saw my education being—had more long term benefits than that employer had” and she stayed in the master’s program. She began looking for a new job and she applied for the Oxford summer program anyway as she felt that the classes that were being taught would add to the skillset she used at work.

When she got into the summer program, she was excited, but also nervous because she thought “there was no way they [unsupportive employer] were going to let me go to Oxford for the summer, there was no way!” Fortunately, she got the new job and “they [new employer] let me study—or I studied—it was a grueling four weeks, but they let me work and study” and she was able to complete the summer program and move into her new position at the new company.

When she marveled at how accommodating they had been considering she was such a new hire her boss told her “what kind of employer would we be if we held you back from that opportunity?” which was exactly the sort of environment she needed to be in to excel at both work and school.

The new company continued to support her throughout her academic graduate work by offering time to work from home when she needed it or asking her to share her expertise through lunch and learn sessions because “they want their employees to be at the top of their game. So, that’s why education is important to them.” Sarah was able to use the skills she learned during her summer in Oxford to write biographies for all of the executives at the company, something she said she would not have been able to do if she had not attended those classes.

Still, there were times when she struggled with keeping up with her classes, work, and life. She considered taking a semester off when a class became very intense at the same time she was starting at her new job. She spoke with her advisor who talked her through several different prospective avenues she could take if that happened, but all of them meant ending her graduate career with the super stressful course she was in. “This one law class is only offered in the spring and I was like this is not the class I want to end my education on (laughing) this is not the class it’s gonna end on! I wanna exit with something fun!” So, she stuck with it until the midterm and when she saw she did well on it, decided to see it through. Cost was also a factor in the decision, as she would not have gotten her money back if she had dropped the course at that point. It would have meant paying for a semester she did not finish and also paying for a future semester to make up the missed time: “just losing that cost? That you know that’s a huge investment that’s like losing all your money in the stock market that’s like whoa—that’s money I don’t, you know, that I’ll just keep pushing through. If I get a C, I get a C.”

That did not mean that she did not still suffer some unexpected setbacks. One semester when Sarah was taking two classes, she ended up withdrawing from one after suffering a back injury. Confined to reading in her bed, she was holding up a very heavy law tome when it slipped from her hands and fell on her face. She took it as a sign that even though she would not be able to get her money back for the class, she should withdraw. She saw other students struggling with these sorts of issues as well:

I've seen a lot of women who have just had a baby or about to have a baby, it's really tough on them I mean I don't know if personally if I was pregnant or about to have a baby I don't think I'd be able to finish the program—again not to say that there isn't—there aren't people that can do that I think it's really tough for them especially if they're first time moms I've seen a lot of them or even I've seen those two types of people drop out.

These sorts of situations solidified for her that practicing good time management and having people there to support you when things get overwhelming are vital to continuing in the program. She enthusiastically praises her husband for being her biggest supporter throughout the process, “I don't think I'm strong enough to do it on my own, I think that because of the support of my husband I've really been able to get this done,” her employer for allowing her to take the time she needs to do well in her classes, and her advisor for her “excellent advice” whenever she needed someone to talk to about the intricacies of the program and needed assurance that she was still on track for graduation.

Now in her 50s, she is aiming for a 2020 graduation and nearing the end of the program with one more class to take and then a capstone to complete in the next year. While it has been

difficult at times she believes “if you really want this internally and if you want this, not you employer not your kids, I think if you want this you can do it.”

### **Livingston**

For Livingston, choosing a part-time master’s degree program was just a normal step for her non-traditional educational upbringing. Homeschooled until she was 16, she then enrolled in a “super small state school” where she found the other students did not seem to be very engaged with the material, which was disappointing to her. After graduating with her bachelor’s, she decided to go to graduate school as she wanted to:

be able to develop as a writer and have a space where I could have my work critiqued, learn some new techniques, maybe get introduced to different writings and thought processes. Um, basically, the reason I wanted to was--just to get more exposure to different ideas and different people.

For Livingston, it was more of a personal goal to obtain a master’s degree than it was to help with her career. She looked at a number of programs with the main goal being to find a school where she felt could develop those writing skills but with some very important caveats: it had to be a program where you could get in based on merit and not based on standardized test scores as she is “morally opposed to standardized tests.” It also needed to be a part-time program that she could do while also working, something that she was skeptical she could find at first.

When she did finally settle on a part-time master’s degree program, she found those concerns were still there: “I was initially hesitant because the whole point of the program was that you work and you do grad school on the side so I was like, how does that work, am I going to be able to do that?” While she is at the beginning of her studies, she has been overwhelmed by how involved the other students are: “it has just been an extraordinary experience to meet with



all these different people and get feedback and have these really lively discussions!” Since many of the classes have a mixture of graduate and undergraduate students, there are many different viewpoints expressed and the range of ages mean there is a variety of experience brought in and shared that she finds inspiring. She feels like she has already seen an improvement in her writing and is enjoying both learning more about her chosen field and others that she did not realize she might be interested in: “I’m actually taking this really cool philosophy class now, that was something I was never really interested in but um, they’re presenting it through superheroes and it’s just this really fun cool way to look at things.”

While her workplace has been supportive of her educational pursuits, such as allowing her to take days off to work on school work, she does still find that it’s difficult being a part-time student juggling both work and life obligations when the days can get very long:

going to work for eight hours and then going to class--as invigorating as class can be--it’s still a struggle sometimes to work up that motivation to be like I’m here now, be extra engaged in, you know, what they’re talking about and basically making the time to commit to the class and to do well.

Still, she finds that there are tough moments where she wonders if the degree is worthwhile when it takes so much time, effort, and energy:

Is a graduate degree in creative writing and literature worth it—is it worth it to spend all this time and money and ultimately I usually arrive at the conclusion that yes it is, but then there are those moments where I question myself like shouldn’t I just like you know spend more time independently writing I could devote class time to that—but I think ultimately um what comes down to it being worth it is...I know I keep repeating this but the environment, just having you know everybody there and the professors and students

and deadlines help a little, it's gotten me definitely into a regular writing habit and for me that's been amazingly beneficial to my writing. So. There's that too. Too it and I know it will help in further career prospects it is worth it but it's just those moments where you're really struggling and you had a long day at work and you're like is this really what I want?

In those moments she finds that the support of her family helps her through her doubts if they do linger. They encourage her and tell her that "it's something that you've always wanted to do so keep going." Livingston finds that incredibly helpful as when each semester draws to a close and gets stressful as things are due, she often wonders if she should withdraw from classes:

I would say that consistently like every semester since I've started it's like three weeks before the end of the class I'm like I want to withdraw, but I think that's pretty normal for most people, it's just a matter of pushing through that and kind of acknowledging that yes it's hard now but it won't always be hard. And I know a lot of people in my classes have a lot more responsibilities that I do—I don't have children, I'm not married, so, um, it's just a matter of me getting through that

She has never actually withdrawn from a class, despite that last-minute semester panic she often feels and is confident that she will continue with the program despite the barriers of being a part-time student who works full time. She advises that time management is vital, although admits it is clichéd when discussing the trials and tribulations of college, and that "you just have to know how to manage your time it's a commitment so you have to be able to manage it, so understanding your own time constraints is important."

**Kathryn**

Kathryn is a 49-year-old woman who is married with seven children, three of which are still at home. After completing her undergraduate degree in history in 1991, she was a stay at home mom for 23 years before deciding to go back to school again to earn a master's degree when her youngest child was in pre-school. She earned her first master's degree online in curriculum and education and taught school for a few years after that. That experience was interesting because with the exception of graduation ceremonies, she "did not set foot on campus" even though she only lived twenty minutes away, something that was very convenient at the time since all of the classes were handled online. Still, it was such a positive experience that while she was teaching, she decided to take another class from a different school since that would inform a topic that was coming up in her own classroom curriculum, "It happened to fall over Christmas break, it was a weekend in [CITY] and so I went and I loved it--I loved every second of it and it was so applicable to the class that I was teaching."

Her decision to enroll in another master's degree program was mostly career based as she wanted to teach a class that was a "combination of U.S. History and American Literature" at a local high school, something that was normally taught by two teachers and "once I decided that that was what my career path wanted to be I needed to have an English degree." However, she does note that there is a personal aspect to it as she loves learning and visiting campus to fulfill her residency requirements. After taking a few classes and finding that it "wasn't difficult doing it one at a time," she quit teaching to focus on trying to attain the degree as quickly as possible. But, taking multiple classes at a time was very different than taking just one and even without the distraction of work, finding any kind of balance between life and school was difficult:

It's difficult finding balance I think—and I think that the word balance is...impossible to find balance when you're doing a part-time degree and you have other responsibilities whether you're—I actually took a couple of classes when I was still teaching and the word you need to find is priority and you have to switch your priorities. Sometimes your priority is school and it has to be. Sometimes your priority switches away from school to family or work or whatever but that's the beauty of taking an online degree is that you have that flexibility and you can do that.

With her family behind her “100%” she has managed to get an “an A in every class except one, which was an A- and I'm kind of mad about still” and while things are difficult, she relishes the challenge. “That's been the most satisfying thing to be intellectually challenged and stimulated and be able to reach those challenges and go I can do this I really can. And that's been really satisfying. Exhausting but satisfying.” Even though the program was created for part-time students, Kathryn has found that the curriculum is rigorous, and the professors hold all their students to high standards. In particular in one of the main writing classes she discusses a professor that pushed them all to succeed and invested a lot of time and effort into helping them improve their writing: “it was hard and I've heard that it was harder than most of those that are taught in his area but because of his investment—I'm ready. I'm ready to write my thesis.” The rigor of classes has pushed and improved her writing and critical thinking skills. That the professors were all at the top of their fields and still invested in their students was also a big reason why Kathryn fell in love with the program and wanted to continue taking classes at this particular school. The fact that “they are willing to extend that knowledge to people who are outside of their regular community of learners” was incredibly powerful to her and helped to

make her feel like she belonged at the school and could rise to the level of scholarship they normally demanded.

Still, there were moments where even though the professor and the teaching assistant were great, the material and workload could get overwhelming. Kathryn thought about withdrawing from one of her most recent classes because it “wasn’t what I anticipated” and even looked up the withdrawal date, which had unfortunately already passed. “I had missed it by three days! (laughs) and I was like oh crap! So—and I talked with my husband and I was like is it worth it—is it worth this, should I just quit now and get the W on my transcript, and I sent an email to [School name] uh, what’s--how will this affect my GPA.” Withdrawing after the deadline carried with it not only a possible negative GPA impact, but a high financial one as well. Those who withdraw after the deadlines are usually not entitled to any sort of refund. In the end, with the midterm looming, Kathryn decided to push through it:

I decided that I would see how my midterm turned out and...I put in more study in that stupid class than my other three classes combined, and I ended up pulling it out! And I think it’s going to be okay. But it made me see that I had it maybe more than I thought I did which was really good in the end, but don’t love the class still, but I’m gonna finish and I’m gonna finish strong and I’m glad I didn’t withdraw.

While she is very pragmatic about the differences between schools that cater to full time students and those that cater to part-time ones, Kathryn believes that those who are juggling other responsibilities must be willing to work twice as hard in their classes and make difficult choices:

It’s hard to manage real life and a degree at the same time. I think that most of these younger kids that do it before they have their families established or not married or whatever—their only priority is getting drunk on the weekend and getting homework

done. But you know I've got...bills and kids and piano lessons and—and—gymnastics and I have grandbabies being born, and it's very difficult to put this as a priority? And like I said, my thing is that I have to alternate my priorities, not so much that I try to balance 'cause you can't balance it. You know, but my priorities have changed and right now I have seven papers due in the next five weeks and that has to be priority because...and my family takes up the slack. So. (shrugs) That's what been the hardest, having to realize that it's going to take up more of my time than I...I guess I thought it would. I just was kind of surprised that it did.

Regardless of the difficult circumstances, Kathryn is on track to start her thesis in the fall and has the intention of graduating in May of 2020. Even though she will welcome having more free time, she notes that she's really enjoyed rising to the challenges that this program has presented her with and that it has provided something special that was only hers:

I think it's an incredible program I think it's an incredible opportunity...I keep thinking I'm going to miss this, I'm going to miss this when it's over and I have to move on back into regular life. That it's really filled a void that I couldn't—because of the limitations of having a family established in their lives and my husband with his law practice and whatever, I don't have the luxury of moving to [CITY] but I do have the luxury of visiting it two or three times a year and you know, sucking up as much of it as I can.

### **Hannah**

Hannah, a married woman in early 50s with three children had never considered pursuing an online education until she heard a news story on the radio which highlighted a student who lived in a different state than the school they were enrolled in and that sparked her curiosity on how they were taking classes if they were not on campus. She looked it up, filed the information

away, but did not do anything with it until a few years later when a struggle with mental health issues forced her to close her law practice. Since she had always wanted a master's degree and wanted some way to "define her achievements" she decided to start taking classes in visual arts: "I felt kind of lost after I stopped being a lawyer and I needed some way of defining my achievements since now I was just afloat in life."

While Hannah knew that it would not help her professionally when she opened her practice back up, she always held a deep appreciation and love for the arts and enjoyed expressing herself creatively: "I realized it won't really, um, advance me professionally in the sense that I will suddenly command more money from the degree. It was a personal, um, definement and I found that to be a commonality amongst fellow...students." Unfortunately, while she was taking classes the school discontinued the degree program for visual arts and she was unable to apply the credits towards a degree. Unphased, but with "three thousand dollars down the drain," Hannah decided to switch her major to creative writing and applied and was then accepted into that program instead.

At first, she was intimidated at the thought of taking classes, but soon came to realize that she greatly enjoyed the environment and was proud that she had taken the steps to enroll: "getting into the program, deciding to go into creative writing, all these things are really scary." She credits her husband and family with being her main source of support and encouragement, which helped her not just to enroll in classes to begin with, but to persist now as she nears the middle of the program:

I couldn't have gone back to school or gone into art without my husband saying, 'look I just want you to take care of yourself and do what you want' because it was really awful what I went through so absolutely I couldn't do it without my family's support.

Even the support of her former coworkers has been surprising, but welcome as some of them have confided to her that they would also like to go back to school, “it was shocking how many of them said you know what, if I can get out, if I’m not supporting the family, I’d be doing what you’re doing.”

Now that Hannah is back to work while continuing classes, it has sometimes been a struggle to balance things. Since her work schedule is somewhat flexible and requires her to fill in as a substitute judge sometimes with little notice, she did once have to drop a class as it caused her to miss one of the sessions: “[the professor] said look, you know that’s the rule and you knew that and I said you’re right and he said look just take it in the fall and he was perfectly affable, just real life butting in.” But even with setbacks such as having to withdraw from a class, Hannah remains determined to complete the degree:

Oh, I’ve spent so much money I need to finish this! You know, like it’s a test of—it’s a test of here I am, I am given the opportunity to go after what I’ve always wanted, if I don’t finish this, I’m letting myself down as well as the people who support me.

### **Michelle**

Michelle is a single woman in her late 50s who already has a master’s degree, an MBA, a PhD, and a rather insatiable appetite for learning. While on a semester-long sabbatical leave from her teaching position and waiting to see if she would be accepted to a visiting fellowship position at another college, she started looking at the part-time master’s degree programs the college offered and decided if she did not get the fellowship position she would apply to one of them. When she was offered the fellowship position she accepted, but decided that while she was in town she would take one of the on-campus requirement classes just in case she ever did decide to



go for the degree—and liked the class so much she decided to do both and enrolled in the journalism program.

Improving her writing is a personal goal that would also benefit her employer as it helped teach her skills and techniques to polish the articles she writes and submits for publication. As she states it, “I wanted to learn something, and I wanted it to help my career.” These classes have already been helpful as “the very first article I wrote for my very first class...got the silver medal in the country out of over a hundred articles.” But her employer is not very supportive of her chasing another degree and “they don’t understand it” because she does not intend on switching careers to journalism, just using the skills she learns to write better articles in her field of accounting: “most of the people in my journalism class they’re mostly looking for kind of a career change? So, they have a different motivation from me—that I’m doing it for fun. It’s my hobby.”

Even as a fun hobby, Michelle often struggles to try to fit in with the “culture of journalism” she finds the faculty cultivate. In comparing all of her degrees, this one has been the most challenging and the biggest struggle “this journalistic mindset culture...this uncertainty of the not explaining what people want or even giving examples, I mean, you know, I don’t know how I’m supposed to figure it out.” Luckily, she has a cousin that she speaks to often who offers encouragement, advice, and tips since he has a journalism degree. “he’s very supportive—if I didn’t have him helping me—like a little bit as a mentor...he helps me understand, he sends me examples, usually too late (laughs).” This cousin was one of the reasons she decided to stick with the program when she was thinking of dropping out. As often happens to adult learners, life took priority for three semesters as her mother got sick, ultimately passing away, and then Michelle needed surgery herself and suffered from complications:

I got behind because I had a semester where my mother was put in hospice, then the next semester my mother passed away, then the next semester I had gallbladder surgery, then um, because of the gallbladder surgery which was just last fall I had to go to a neurologist because I had some kind of physiological reaction to the surgery and I had this kind of...dementia. I had short term dementia, so she told me to take a month off and just relax.

Fortunately, her advisor was able to connect her to the accommodations office, which worked with her to ensure that she could just take one class a semester and still finish the degree without worrying about the time limit. Still, it was frustrating for her to have to reach out and initiate contact throughout all of these personal trials: “I think...they could do a better job of just following up with people, you know talking with them like hey what happened to you, what’s going on with you, find out what’s going on. I mean a lot more life can happen in five years of trying to get the master’s degree than if you’re just knocking it out in a year.” It was during this time that her cousin talked to her about the program and encouraged her to try again. It also helped that she had made a friend in a previous class who she could reach out to for encouragement and questions:

I have one friend in the program, and I met her on a weekend where we came in for a weekend and we kept in contact and she just finished, and she’s been encouraging to me. She’s the only person I know—I wish I knew people because that would help me... she’s been encouraging me to stay in the program. She says just stay in the program.

This encouragement helped combat the waves of anxiety Michelle would get which caused her to question whether the degree was “worth it.” She ultimately decided it was, concluding that “there’s a very strong benefit and I’m willing to (laughs) suffer for it!”

She's thought about why she keeps going back to get degrees and has no real answer: "I don't know, that's what I wonder about myself (laughs) is my ego out of check that I need to keep getting these degrees? I don't know." One thing that is definitely driving her towards completion of this degree, however, is that she has "always wanted to be able to make an impact and ah, unless I can write for the public, for the general audience I won't see that impact made." This degree helps her to think more critically about her writing and how she approaches things and she finds "seeing my improvement" and "being able to write where people like it" to be extremely satisfying even if the program is sometimes difficult.

Michelle believes adult learners in their programs must "love what you're doing—number one you've got to love what the subject matter is because it's going to be hard to do if you don't love it. Especially if you're working." One of her most challenging classes will come up in the summer of 2019, but while she's dreading it, she knows that "if I can get through that I'm good."

### **Samantha**

Samantha is a woman in her 30s who already has a master's degree in art history and was the first in her family to receive an advanced degree. She initially did not intend on pursuing another graduate degree, since while she enjoyed the subject matter for her first one she did not like the theoretical aspects of the program, but when she became an employee of the school she learned about the tuition assistance program that allowed employees to take classes for low rates. As she has always loved learning, she decided to take a few classes and was surprised and impressed by the practical, day to day knowledge they were imparting that helped her in her current position. She started working towards a certificate, but before she knew it, she had the

maximum number of credits they allowed a person to apply with and decided to use them to enroll in the museum studies program.

While it has sometimes been challenging to juggle life, work, and school, Samantha says that her family “was not surprised” she wanted to go back for more education as she has always loved learning and credits them, her partner, coworkers and boss with being supportive and interested in what she’s doing with aiding in her persistence. If she ever needs to “take a day” off of work she can do so without trouble and often is encouraged to share what she has learned with her coworkers during lunch and learns or at meetings. Samantha tries to balance things so that if she is taking a summer class, she still “feel[s] like I’m having a summer.” Because she was not trying to rush through a degree, she managed her time mostly by taking only one class a semester so as not to overload herself. Even so, when things get difficult, she has a system:

I kind of parse things out task by task—I’m one of those people who sort of makes lists and checks things off and allows myself sort of time to get things done...always having an end in sight is helpful for me, like this is a hurdle, one small hurdle I’ll get through this, and then I’ll tackle this next thing.

Already passionate about her chosen career, her classes have only increased her excitement for the future, and she was impressed with how some of the classes allowed her to delve into interests she otherwise would not have been able to pursue. She very much enjoys the age ranges in her classes and how unique perspectives from high school students to those in their senior years help her to understand the different viewpoints she needs to take into account and help her to be better at her full-time job. When taking a required writing class, Samantha was not looking forward to going through the motions to prove she knew how to write a paper and expected to have to do the same rote assignments she had done in other classes already.

However, when an assignment asked her to write about “museum troubles” she was able to examine an aspect of the museum world she had never been able to focus on academically:

so I wrote actually about this recent phenomenon of Jay-Z and Beyonce’s filming at the Louvre, in Paris, and I really wanted to explore how that was something to be looked at critically in terms of the museum world and what it’s doing and what all this buzz is about, but it’s something that I don’t feel will fit into many classes or that I could have seen being accepted somewhere else as a real critical topic to think about.

Another class included a learning weekend at the Smithsonian where Samantha was able to bond with her fellow classmates and see how a working museum operated, something she found to be extremely beneficial considering she currently works at a museum. While she does not intend to seek out another degree after this, because of the reduced price of the classes and how much she enjoys them, she says she likely will continue to take more even after she graduates: “sometimes I tell myself, ‘no, stop taking classes, you have the degree!’ but I know myself and I know that if there’s something super appealing that I just can’t miss I will just have to do it.” And being this close to graduation she knows that she will definitely earn this degree:

I think it’s also just always been my personality too, that when I’ve committed to something I stick with it. When I make a commitment, I take that really seriously and I think once I got to the point where I felt, okay, yes, I’m going to apply, I know I’m close, I know this is doable, there’s not really a question at this point for me whether or not to see it through.

### **Clara**

Clara is a single mother in her early 30s who lives across the country from the master’s program she is currently enrolled in. She already had a master’s degree and an MBA but was still

nervous about going back to school because she did not want it to negatively impact her time with her son. At the time she was taking her first class, she was having some issues at home with her son's father and was not looking to enter a degree program: "Initially I didn't say oh, I'm just going to jump into a master's degree program; I'm going to take one class and if I can actually handle it, then maybe I'll look at more." The class mostly took place online but had an incorporated on-campus weekend involved, and Clara was instantly hooked. Since the class was on negotiation, she was able to use the skills she learned to apply to her life and co-parenting with her son's father, whom she had separated from. "It made me realize, oh my God, I'm not alone like this happens all the time so seeing that after the first class I said okay well I can do a graduate certificate and then a semester later I was like no I can actually do a master's degree." From that fantastic first experience she quickly enrolled in the part-time journalism master's degree program.

Part of her hope with returning back to school was to make more money in her current industry, higher education. But even with an MBA she felt like "I had to go back and study even harder and try—try to prove myself I guess" and thought that the journalism degree would complement the one she already had. However, her workplace was not supportive of her education or her life in general, so she ended up leaving that position, which "makes financial stuff even worse but now at least I have the time to fully dedicate to my son." This is partially mitigated by having supportive family members close by, but even then "it's been a challenge."

Balancing time with her son and school/classwork has been one of the biggest issues and Clara uses time management skills and creativity to try to come up with solutions that maximize fun times with her son while also making sure she has enough time to study and complete assignments:

My son when I have him here, when he's present, I make sure that I do not have meetings or homework. And I do—some—okay, this is how I've figured out how to do it. I do everything when he's at daycare or with his dad. And then I block out—there's some serious time management going on—and then when I'm with him the stuff we do we do experiments and stuff that somehow is related to what he's learning in school or what I am, and when we go to sleep at night if I have to, I'll read him my textbooks.

(laughing) um and that works! (laughing) that's what we—what makes it all come together at the end of the day.

Having two sets of grandparents close by helps when childcare issues arise and so does being friends with other parents in the area who can come by with their children for playdates where the other parent will watch the kids while Clara goes to study or connect to a class session. This is incredibly helpful when previously made childcare plans fall through unexpectedly.

Even though it can sometimes be a struggle, Clara greatly enjoys all of her classes: its something that I do for myself. Um, I love learning so it's basically like, some people go to Pilates religiously or something like that but I really like learning and turning in a really great well researched paper just gets me going!

She describes herself as being an extrovert, something that she's found really helps with establishing connections and networking during classes. Especially in classes that have an on-campus component where the students might only be meeting in person for two or three days over a long weekend. These connections are integral to her success as students give each other tips on how to navigate what can otherwise be an overwhelming system:

I forged some really great friendships there to the point where now every time I go to [CITY] I stay at this woman's house...any time I'm like I don't know what I'm going to

do I just text her instead of my advisor and ask where do I find this or how do I get there and I'll get, you know much more of a fast, better, easier response than I will trying to navigate—which again is not a great solution for everyone but I've made it work

She discusses in detail the systems that the students have put in place to collect money for snacks, coffee, and doughnuts, which leads to instant bonding when they are all together in the classroom, that gets people to relax and talk to one another: “there’s just this whole system that brings people together and allows people to really focus and work for several hours you know when we’re already jet lagged and tired and cranky.” These bonds that form allow her to stay connected with other students even if they are not taking the same classes and reach out for support if needed: “I forge these connections with people that are really...real. And would help me get through any bump in the road as if we were in person.”

And there are bumps in the road even though Clara stresses that the majority of her experiences have been great. She talks about one class where she was placed on the waiting list, attended the first online class, and was then thrilled when the professor announced she would be able to accept all the students into class, letting them know there was an on-campus component to the class in just two weeks so they needed to get their travel arrangements done quickly. Excited for the opportunity, Clara went ahead and bought the tickets and traveled to campus to take part in the classroom activities. But when she got there, she noticed no link to the class had been added to her online profile and she could not see any details.

I guess she...there was some administrative error or errors on her part anyway, she wasn't allowed to accept any other students and then neglected to tell me so I traveled...and she was like oh I didn't tell you? And that just...that hurt so much because like money is really tight right now. So, having to change my tickets and realizing there's



no recourse, there's nothing I can do, it's just gone. Really made me second guess whether or not this was something I could even afford to continue. Like it might be easy for some people, but it really wasn't for me.

There are moments of levity and professors that are very understanding, however. In one of her recent classes a professor made a comment that she was surprised to see a student in class because she had just given birth a few days before and stressed that the student had been given a pass not to come to class if she did not feel up to it. Clara noted that it really spoke to her to see this new mother still pushing through and coming to class, that "she wanted the escape, she wanted to do this, and I think that's just really beautiful. That just shows what we're all about I guess."

And that's something she wants to make sure her son learns as he grows up seeing her juggling life, work, and school. Whether or not things are chaotic or balanced, she's pushing through and not only determined to finish the program, but already excited to write her thesis at the end:

Life is happening whether or not I'm recording it or aware and present and I want...I mean five years will pass whether or not I have a degree or not, whether or not I go to school. And I just want my son to realize that...you know his mom is a powerhouse, like women can do this

### **Aaron**

Aaron is a single, transgender man living across the country who found that his MBA was not helping him secure a well-paying, full time job in an area that appealed to him. His mother, who already has two master's degrees, was looking for another degree program for herself and instead found one that she thought would appeal to her son. He looked it over and

agreed that it would be a better fit with his undergraduate degree in Fine Arts. He applied and was then accepted to a part-time master's degree program in museum studies. As he puts it, "what else was I doing with my life?"

While financially going back for his master's degree has been a burden, his family has been very supportive both emotionally and in helping to pay for classes until he managed to qualify for financial aid. For Aaron, the most challenging part of the program is the costs associated with travel since he lives far away from campus and needs to arrange flights and accommodation to meet the on-campus requirements:

Going through this program takes a lot of time and commitment as well as cost for traveling. I love the options for travel but, financially the program doesn't really offer help with that. Traveling or staying near campus for the short classes has been great, but I think financially that's the biggest struggle for me.

However, Aaron has made the most of the events the school offers, both on campus and in his area, which help connect students, alumni, and faculty. This has been extremely important to him as his main goal in getting this degree is to be able to find a career path that better suits his talents and academic background.

He does think that charging into it was not the best way to approach what has become a very time consuming and intensive process:

I jumped into the program knowing it was a great option. I thought, what else am I doing with my life that will get me where I want to be professionally? But, once you get really into it, especially towards the end, it's something that does take a lot of time and commitment and if you don't plan for it, it can become pretty stressful.

Still, Aaron appreciates the framework of the online classes that both allow him to interact with his fellow students, but also gives him the space to do his own projects as everyone realizes everyone else has other demands on their time—and quite probably lives in different time zones:

I think with online classes, it's an understanding of okay we have this allotted time to be online with each other and it's going to be really difficult to find time outside of that because everyone's in a different state, a different time zone. But there is a sense of group appreciation that we're all in this together we're getting through this online class and it gives all of us a chance to do my own work individually, but also have a network to check in with online if needed.

Even though the process has sometimes been difficult and more than a little overwhelming, he remains focused on graduating with the degree now that he has made connections in the museum world. He credits his ability to manage his time with helping him continue to persist in the program and looks forward to graduating so that he can “say that I did it and got through it.” He also keeps in mind some wise words from his mother when things get tough:

My mom has two masters and has been a tremendous support through all my education. She often says, ‘no one can ever take your education away!’ so as long as you finish the program, it's always going to be with you.

### **Jeffrey**

Jeffrey is an international student in his 40s who is married with two children. He completed his undergraduate degree, but “didn’t think they did anything in any great depth or detail at the time” so always wanted to go back for a graduate degree that could focus in more detail on an individual topic. When talking to his wife about how he was thinking about going

back to school, she suggested that he look at a degree in museum studies since he had always been interested in museums since he was young. He looked online to see if there were any schools that offered any kind of program in museum studies and found one locally that offered a certificate but decided that he “always wanted to get a master’s degree.” Only a few schools offered one, all with relatively similar pricing, and the school he ultimately chose was the one with the most robust online program since he was not in the same country and would need to do a majority of his classes from a distance. Now with just one class and a capstone standing between him and graduation, he is looking forward to making a career change once he has his degree—and ribbing all of his friends who only have undergraduate degrees.

While at first Jeffrey was nervous about returning to school considering he worked two jobs, had two kids, and had not been in a classroom setting in over a decade, he found it rather easy to acclimate:

I graduated my undergrad in 94...went back to school for one year in 2001. And then that was the only—and then going forward 14 years or 15 years and applying into a program again I’m like, oh, man, I need to clear all the cobwebs out of my head and try to get back into the routine of ah, of doing like post-secondary level education! But I found that because I was passionate about the topic it didn’t really bother me whatsoever.

He credits the support of his family and the flexibility of his workplace with aiding in his persistence, especially his wife who gave him the idea for this particular degree in the first place, and his daughters, whom he wants “to set a good example for.” When things get tough, his family is always there to help him out:

I think having the familial support helps in the fact that, um, even when—everyone has an ebb and flow of their feelings—so when I’m starting to get a little discouraged,

sometimes the family is there saying hey, how are things going what do you need and that sort of buoys me back up a bit.

Because of his commitment to his family and work, it can sometimes be difficult to juggle school when things get busy. In these cases, support helps, but so does having good time management, focus, and passion for the subject:

Time management is a huge thing, um, it's particularly—well, a lot of things going down at work and a lot of activities with the kids and then you have to do a 12 page paper for example and it's a lot of plates to spin simultaneously...I basically sit down, I prioritize what has to be done, then I sit down with my wife and she says 'what can I do' and I'm like 'how can I help' and we divvy that up.

But while there are times when he has felt overwhelmed by all of this, Jeffrey has managed to stick with all of his classes and is nearing the end of the program. Something he says he would not have been able to do without his family and his employer: "If I didn't have an employer that was supportive and if I didn't have a family that was supportive, it wouldn't have been possible—I would've had to have dropped out for sure." He credits his employer with allowing him to take time off when he really needed to study or get school work done without giving him any hassle. This allowed him to stay focused in his classes and keep learning in a field he is very passionate about: "The amount that I'm learning and especially in something that I really enjoy doing has been really rewarding."

Jeffrey believes that focus and passion have helped him engage positively with the program as he takes great care in selecting his classes—investigating the syllabus and the professors before he chooses them to "make sure I'll enjoy it." When in doubt, he will email the professors directly to ask about the class content or ask the many friends he's made in his

previous classes “which classes are better than others” while also checking in on “how their progress is going in the program.” In this way he cultivates his contacts with both students and faculty and ensures that he only takes classes that will fulfill his requirements and, perhaps more importantly, interest him so that when he has to make it a priority over work or family, it is worthwhile. At this point, graduation is a goal he knows he will obtain:

I think that drives me a bit too—knowing that there’s an end to it, that it’s the end of the beginning as Churchill put it so, I don’t know, I’m really interested in getting on a different career path rather than what I’m doing now so it’s like...just driving me.

### **Steve**

Steve is a married father in his 40s who has a two-year-old son, is an employee at the school where he works full time, and who has always wanted to be a published author—of screenplays or novels; he is not picky. He knew he could benefit from the school’s generous tuition assistance program, which offers classes at a heavy discount of only 40 dollars per class for employees and after a few classes decided to enroll in one of the part-time master’s degree programs. He is very clear that if it were not for that benefit, he would not have been able to afford to enroll in another program.

While a master’s degree in creative writing and literature will not help his career in student services, enrolling in the program was entirely based on a personal goal rather than a professional one since he’s been writing a movie screenplay since 1997:

It’s more personal than anything and if it works out such that I realize these ideas and there’s a place for them out in the world wherever that might be, great! But I’m not doing it to you know, make me a better employee, I’m not doing it to ah, um, advance within

the department, I don't think it has any practical application at all. It's really just a way to kick me in the behind and get me to do what I like to do and just need discipline to do it. Having already earned a master's degree in linguistics 25 years earlier, Steve's main concern was whether or not he could be a "21<sup>st</sup> century student" and sit in classes that were not entirely lecture based, but instead invited discussion among the students. He worried he would not have the patience to listen to his fellow students discuss their thoughts when they could be listening to the professor's expertise:

I wasn't sure if I was going to be able to sit in a classroom where like everyone has to share and everyone has to say what they're thinking...I want a lecture, just tell me what you know, that's what I'm used to so that was the concern you know, am I going to have the patience for that and then it turns out I do have the patience for it and it's fine.

His second concern was getting used to the online learning environment, something that he admits he still struggles with as it makes interacting with other students in the class more difficult: "I can't so easily after class pick a classmate's brain and kind of have an offline conversation to get a sense of what they're about...so that's a little challenging and I've had to kind of resign myself to it being a mostly individual experience." He says he's also still getting used to the fact that "going to school" is going down to his own basement in his pajamas and putting on headphones even now when he's taken enough classes to be halfway through the program requirements:

If I were leaving my house and my wife and my son for the evening knowing that I was going to take a course, I would feel much more at liberty to take another half hour after just having that social time, whereas now it's like okay. Class is over. I guess I'll go to bed because I'm already in my pajamas and I just have to go upstairs anyway.

Still, the “laid back” scheduling of the classes means that he is able to adjust things so that the program does not impact his work schedule or his family life for the most part. There was a bit of a learning curve as to the art of doing this, since the first class he took was during the summer and “it met three nights a week for three hours and it was just—it was a lot. And that was sort of the test; I mean, I hadn’t sat in a classroom in 25 years, so I was kind of like can I even do this—do I know what to do?” Once he was sure that he could do it, it became much easier to plan out his courses for minimal impact on his other priorities, but it can still be hard to gauge just how much work a class is going to be.

Steve cites a history of science fiction course he took last semester that, while fun, turned out to be a lot more work than he was expecting as they were reading a novel a week—sometimes 500 pages or more! He considered withdrawing “not because I didn’t think I was doing well or understanding it; I just thought it was too much and I was tired all the time because I was staying up late reading all the time,” but stuck with it until the midterm to see how well he did before he made a decision. He did well even though he “maybe didn’t invest in as much as I thought I could have” and decided after that he just needed to readjust how he was approaching the class so that it would not take up so much of his time, like not doing a “deep reading” of the very long novels, but still doing the work to the best of his ability, and not caring about grades so long as what he received was still enough to get credit for the course.

When thinking back on his previous education, he does not believe he took advantage of all the resources that were available to him at the time. While he would not change going into the workforce rather than going for his PhD after getting his first master’s degree, he is very aware of the opportunity this program is now presenting him, so he is determined to take advantage of it now. He’s outlined three goals for himself which help keep him on track during the program:



“Ultimately this is just about me finishing writing projects. That’s the goal, secondary goal finishing the program, writing the thesis...and then tertiary goal, doing so well, like contributing in class, being a good student, being a good resource for others as well,” but he is not worried about his persistence and at least some of that is related to the lack of financial stress he feels about his classes:

I’m paying 40 dollars to take this class. So, if it doesn’t work out...it’s 40 dollars. You know. And I have classmates who aren’t staff who are paying three thousand dollars so it’s a very different investment—so I can understand, you know, worrying about the grade because you’ve--you know made a different kind of investment, um, so I guess I have to remind myself of that from time to time, but I still want to succeed just like they want to succeed. I just know that if it doesn’t work out...I’m not really losing all that much.

In the back of his mind, he’s constantly thinking of Michael Himes’ three key questions: “What give some joy? Am I any good at it? Does the world need me to do it? I think my answers to those questions are: writing, yes, and...if I do it well enough, then yeah.” Another aspect that contributes to his persistence is that he wants to set a good example for his son: “And now I have a son who...is gonna look up to me, and eventually, he’s going to have to answer these questions for himself, and I want to be a good example...that’s what keeps me going.”

### **Emily**

Emily originally had no intention of going back to get a second master’s degree after having a less than ideal experience that left her feeling like “I wasn’t higher ed material.” An employee of the school, she decided to take advantage of the tuition assistance program and take some classes at a reduced cost, “and before I knew it, I was kind of at the threshold where if I

didn't decide to apply to the degree program, I would start losing some of the credits I'd earned...so I just decided to do it." She credits those initial classes as making her feel more confident in her abilities and like she could actually do well in a graduate degree program.

Now in the middle of the program, Emily has found herself a community of fellow students that help encourage each other throughout their studies, whether it's with proofreading help, advice about classes, or just inspiring emails throughout the semester: "We'll send each other a little email, or last semester I had a writing group and she would send out Beyonce quotes when it was like really bad." While these supportive writing groups may start out as fellow classmates in a writing workshop, Emily keeps in touch with many classmates from her former classes and credits one of them with encouraging her to submit a piece for publication, something she says she would not have done on her own. She believes this community is integral to her persistence in the program as they rely on a shared experience:

Just this community of people who are all trying to do the same thing and all of us fail at one point or another (laughing); it's helpful with the persistence. It's helpful to know that there are other people out there.

She relies on this community not only for encouragement, but they also help her make tough decisions. She told the story of how she had reenrolled in a class on writing war and found herself intimidated by not only being the only woman in the class, but the only non-military student as well:

I was talking with my writers group from another course and I was like I don't know what I'm doing in this class, like we're about to start workshoping and like I'm so nervous to get these military guys—and they were like if you're not getting what you

need out of it...you can withdraw and I was like I can withdraw?! What? I can withdraw from a class!? (laughing).

The support of her community in this instance introduced her to an option she had not considered, but also assured her that “it wasn’t a catastrophe” and that everyone had either thought about withdrawing from a class or had withdrawn from one before. This made her feel far less anxious about withdrawing from the class than she would have without their support.

She is now a firm advocate to anyone that approaches her asking for advice on whether or not they should take a class that they should “just take that first step. Just take a class” and points to herself as a success story. Uncertain as to whether she could make it in higher education, she is now halfway through her program and believes that “finding your community,” whether that is a group of your peers, family or friends, is integral to being able to succeed:

I wouldn’t be getting this degree if people weren’t really—if I weren’t surrounded by people who were really interested in the same things that I am...folks really care and being in a community of care has made me just want to not stop.

Even after finishing this degree, she wants to keep taking classes and continuing her education. The low price point of the classes due to the employee benefit and the confidence she now has because of the experiences she has had in her current program have her thinking about pursuing other degrees in the future. After all, “what would I do if I didn’t have a paper to write on a Saturday?”

### **Margaret**

Margaret is an established journalist in her 30s who has had articles published in various high-profile magazines and travels a lot for work. Even though it would not move her forward career-wise, Margaret knew she wanted to go back to get another higher education degree but

was undecided as to what she wanted to do. She applied and was accepted to law school, only to have her father, who himself was an attorney, ask her “why are you going to law school? You need to go out and get your master’s in journalism.” At the same time her editor had assigned her a story on continuing education, and she learned an immense amount about the part-time opportunities there were for people who wanted to go back to school but were working full time and also discovered how technology meant that even those living far away from campus could still attend classes online:

I found out that continuing education is way cheaper usually than a regular master’s, it allows people to be fluid, they can have professional careers and take classes at night, they can travel and do it from on the road, they can do online classes—so it was like this whole digital age had brought about a whole new generation of students that allows them to...be educated and pursue degrees without having to go to a brick and mortar school and to have that commitment. And that really appealed to me as a 30-year-old journalist who was constantly on the road.

With her family’s support, she declined her admission to law school and instead enrolled in a part-time master’s degree program with a focus in journalism.

Now at the end of the program, she has found that the majority of her classes have been fantastic. As a self-taught journalist, she has found it incredibly helpful to learn the “jargon for journalism” and to get “an academic understanding of what it is to be a journalist.” Even if some of the material has repeated things she already learned in the field, she finds it all worthwhile because the classes have taught her more about the legal aspects of the system, “the constitutional rights that we have as journalists, how to protect your sources” and have helped

her get “closer to perfecting the writing,” something she is always working towards in general, but with this program “I get my master’s out of it, so it’s nice.”

While she had not been in school for around 12 years, she did not find it to be much of an adjustment, citing her time management skills and inherent ability as a self-starter with keeping her on track to graduation. Being open in her communication with her supervisor and her professors also helps as she is able to prioritize and move things around in the rare event things become overwhelming: “I’m looking at my list, and I’m like, oh my God I’m overwhelmed. I will reach out to an editor or my professor and just be like I don’t think this deadline is feasible.” Keeping in touch with her advisor also helps her to feel like she is navigating the system and staying on track: “She must get annoyed with me but every semester I’m like ‘I’m signing up for this class and wanted to make sure that’s on track for my master’s and to reiterate this is what I need to fulfill still,’” but cites this persistence as integral to her success.

This has served her well even in classes that she found challenging to stay interested. In one online class last semester, the professor would not allow students to use the camera during their sessions because he thought doing so would cause cliques to form among the students, an idea Margaret found to be absurd considering “most of the people in that class were in their 30s and 40s, like, we’re all professionals.” While she considered withdrawing from the class since she said it was hard to want to sign in for sessions where all you saw was a blank screen “like having to listen to a radio show,” she kept hoping that it would get better: “I kept thinking maybe I’m going to learn something, maybe there’s a diamond in the rough there. And it didn’t really happen, but I stuck with it.” This experience left her wishing for a way to learn about professors before she took the classes so that she could know which professors her fellow students found to be incredible so that she could tailor her schedule to include more “great classes.”

Still, she stresses that the two of the classes she took were so “tremendous,” “it made everything worth it, it was so great” and that being able to take classes from everywhere has been a big help since “I would travel all over the world so I’ve taken classes...you know from Dubai, from France, from Israel, which is so cool and so exciting.”

### **Jenna**

Jenna is an entrepreneur in her 30s who is starting her own business and did not know about the school until she saw it on someone’s LinkedIn profile. Since she had always wanted to go back to school, she did some research on it and was thrilled to see the programs were offer partially online, as before she did not think she had the time to commit to a degree or that it was financially feasible. But as she “really value[d] education” and wanted to learn how to write better, the ability to take only one or two classes a semester and pay for them along the way was attractive to her. After taking the three classes required for admission and performing well in them, she applied and was accepted into the journalism program.

While she wanted to be challenged and see her writing skills grow, she was nervous as to how hard it might be both to just do the work in class and to balance that work with everything else she had going on at the time: “My fears were that it was going to be too hard for me because I had been out of school for so long.” However, because she loves learning she has found that the key to being successful in the program is “only picking classes that light me on fire.” During her undergraduate degree she found it “so disempowering” to just “check the boxes” by taking the classes that were needed to fulfill her requirements but might not be anything that interested her. By being very careful about the classes she chooses and only taking ones that interested her even if that meant to take a semester off, she has managed to remain motivated and driven throughout the process:

I only take classes that really excite me, like *really* excite me. Like that's another way I pick—if I'm going to take classes I look at the schedule and if there's a conflict and I have to do these other classes that I'm not very excited about, I just don't take classes that semester because my time is so valuable.

Because of this, she has never felt like she has needed to withdraw from a class as they are all so carefully chosen. But this is also why even though she has been enrolled for three years, Jenna is only halfway through the degree. She paces herself and makes sure that her business is receiving as much attention as it needs without school detracting from it.

In this way, her workplace is not supportive of her educational endeavors even though she knows it will help in the long run. She has often had to take a semester or two off in order to devote her attention to growing her business. This dividing of her attention had caused some doubt as to whether or not she should withdraw from the program entirely:

I thought about withdrawing from the program because I just didn't know that it really mattered anymore—like I really needed all my attention on the business. But um, but you know like I said my advisor was really great and helped me see how this could be fun and interesting.

It also helps that she's "not a quitter," so once she commits to something, she sees it through until the end. Her family and partner have always been supportive of her academic endeavors—she met her business partner when she took her first class and they went on to become "everything partners." And while earning the degree is a goal, the classes themselves are highlights. She's found the professors to be extremely helpful as well since they are not "someone who just has their PhD in that area of study," but are often working in the fields

themselves and are able to provide valuable insight. And it helps that the other students are often as hardworking and motivated as she is.

I'm blown away by the education...it's conversation, it's discussion...there's a huge portion of it that wants like critical thinking or like creative thinking abilities and those are not muscles that...we are trained to use in the traditional education system.

She is determined to finish her studies within the five-year program deadline even with the demands of running her own business "cause at the end of the day I do want my master's. It's important to me."

### **Wendy**

Wendy is a woman in her late 70s who never seems to slow down and always has a story or three she is happy to share. She knew from an early age she wanted to be a journalist and worked for a weekly paper then a nearby daily before heading to college to get her bachelor's degree in the 1960s. From there she worked for United Press International while setting her sights on working for the Associated Press (AP). After "pounding the beat" in Washington D.C. as the New England regional reporter for the AP, she left her job to raise her son and would return to the workforce part-time as an English teacher at a private-school as he grew older.

About ten years ago Wendy decided she wanted to work on a writing project and looked for classes that could help her "refresh" her writing skills. She never intended on enrolling for a master's degree in journalism, "I mean, I already was a journalist; why did I—why do I need a master's degree in journalism?" but someone in the Admissions office at the school wrote to her unprompted to request that she apply for the program as they had noticed she had accumulated a large number of credits, and normally by that point, a person would have been enrolled for a degree. This started an amusing back and forth between Wendy and the Admissions office, as



Wendy made it clear that no, she was just taking classes and did not think she would be accepted into the program if she applied, and the Admissions office pushed back to ask why Wendy thought she would not be accepted as she had great grades in all the classes she had attended thus far?

I said well, that's true, but the reason I know that I will be rejected is that...I flunked out of college not once, not twice, but three times! So, I know you will reject me; there's no point in my applying, so I'm sorry about this because I've enjoyed taking the courses, but thank you for your letter...they wrote back and said that's ridiculous; when was this? Did you actually get a bachelor's degree? I said this was in the sixties, and yes, I do have a bachelor's degree...so...I was persuaded to apply, I did apply, then I was accepted.

Wendy has enjoyed all of her classes and gotten "a tremendous amount" out of them. She initially found it challenging to write some of the longer papers as she still had the journalistic mindset of keeping things to a concise 500 words. When a final paper assignment for a course asked for a minimum of 12-15 pages, she initially panicked, but when she sat down to write, she ended up having more to say about the topic than she thought and ended with an impressive 22 pages. "It was very satisfying to do that, and yes, I did get an A!" However, the most challenging aspects of taking classes were found not in the courses themselves, but when health issues intervened. As she describes it, the past 10 years "have been very tumultuous." First, she had to have knee-replacement surgery, which restricted her ability to drive to her on-campus classes. Thankfully, her son stepped in with an offer to drive her to and from campus when she needed it, and she was able to continue them. Then in 2017, she was diagnosed with two kinds of lymphoma and went from "a very healthy person with nothing on my medication list to a cancer patient." She pushed through to finish the class she was in at the time, asking a

friend to help her film her final project since she knew her energy was limited—and had a great time doing it.

For many people this diagnosis would have been an immovable barrier to continuing in the program, but Wendy was determined to continue with her studies:

It kind of kept my mind off worrying. I mean I went to all my appointments and there were many—more than 12—here, there, and I said to myself, I’m going to go to these appointments, I’m going to follow instructions, and I’m not going to think about this. I’m going to think about what’s going on in my course. And that really helped me mentally. Complications from the first round of chemotherapy, where she ended up exhibiting every single one of the side effects the doctors warned about, meant that she could not continue with her next class and she ended up withdrawing. She proudly related that it was the only time she had to withdraw from a class and continued on throughout other chemotherapy sessions:

I set my laptop for the online classroom and organized what I was wearing ahead of time and what was around me so that no one would see the pole with the chemotherapy bag on it and later I met about six other students in the class...and I asked them did any of you think I was ill? And they all said no, why would we have thought you were ill?

Wendy credits the classes she was taking at the time with giving her something else to focus on rather than worrying incessantly about whether she was going to go into remission and they also kept her mind occupied when another tragic circumstance occurred—her husband entered home hospice care: “I think in many ways, um, these classes have (pauses) given me a (pauses) invaluable way of keeping, to whatever extent it’s possible, my own mental stability, because in the meantime, my husband was dying.”

Despite the obvious barriers she has endured, Wendy is optimistic about her time in the program and has one more course and then a capstone project to get through before graduation. She does admit that it will be difficult to continue without her husband's encouragement but is still determined to graduate in 2020. She has kept in touch with her advisor about her situation and knows she can get support from the administrators at the school when she needs it.

I did not set out to be an example of this but looking back on the last eight, nine years, whatever many years it is that I've been taking the courses I think that I am...a very strong example of how taking...intellectually challenging courses...can...promote mental stability through the largest most trying challenges a person can face in life (tears up) it was very, very helpful for me to be able to focus on assignments...while my husband was dying, while I was having chemo treatments, while...the uncertainty dominated our household of whether I was going to come out of the cancer treatments in remission, which I am in remission and how long Peter could continue to live in a state of ongoing physical and mental decline. So, these courses have been helpful to me in ways I could never imagine. Nobody gets into this kind of uh commitment with that as a goal but that has been an unintended consequence that has really been a life saver for me in many ways. And I do think the degree will enhance my obituary (laughs).

### **James**

James knew that he wanted to go back for a master's degree but needed to find the right part-time program so that he could continue with his military career. A married man with a growing family, he also wanted to make sure whatever program he chose would have courses that would challenge him and improve his writing skills. A master's degree used to be a requirement for promotion in his current workplace, but that was rescinded around 2014. Still, he

worries that it might become a requirement again sometime in the future, and since he always wanted to get a master's degree, made the decision to enroll in a part-time program. "I enjoy academic work, and I enjoy—I'm an English major—I don't know; I just enjoy that kind of thing. It's kind of a recreational thing for me."

James has absolutely loved all of his classes so far and is near the end of the program with one class and a thesis remaining between him and graduation: "The academic side of the house has been awesome. Some of the best teachers I've ever had, some of the best kind of coursework I've ever done, I definitely think I've improved insofar as...both as a reader and a writer." As he was stationed overseas in Japan until recently, nearly all of his classes have been online. He praises the quality of the courses he's been involved in even as a distance student: "There's this perception, at least in my mind, that online equates to kind of like—like, ah, not a decrease in quality, but you aren't going to get what you'd get in person. And I think these classes have totally proved that wrong." He cites the excellent faculty members he has interacted with, professors and teaching assistants that were willing to work with him even given the terrible mis-match in time zones: "the time zones suck—my morning is your night and your night is my morning and just his [the teaching assistant] willingness to coordinate those times." He also keeps in near "constant communication" with the administrators of the program as his time is limited, and he always wants to make sure that he's on track for graduation.

One major issue he ran into was with logistics, since one of the required classes for admission was only given in an on-campus format, something that while he was in Japan he could definitely not do. He kept in contact with the Admissions department to ensure that it would be all right for him to take most of the other classes required for the degree before he actually applied to the program, so in essence he would be nearly done with the degree once he

was officially enrolled. This turned out to be a source of constant frustration for him as while he stressed that “they’re all wonderful people, they’re great” and he was relieved the office was willing to work with him, he often found their responses to be a bit out of touch with the types of people and life-circumstances many of their students struggled with:

And then some of the answers I’ve received, I’m like, am I the only person who is like this that you’re working with? You can’t be because you’re a part-time institution that caters to and advertises to people who are doing full-time work, um, yeah, I don’t know; they’re like ‘Well, just come next summer!’ and it’s like, who can come for a summer?...that’s like ridiculous, and it wasn’t even—it’s not even responses like that that are frustrating. It’s like the cavaliness with which they’re offered.

Still, while it took him nine months of asking and providing paperwork to people in the chain of authority, James was eventually able to secure the time he needed to come to campus to take that missing class, but even then a class that he thought he would be able to take in-person while he was there was then only offered online rather than on-campus. This is one of the reasons why he advises other students to stay in contact with the program administrators to make sure the plan they have in mind works for their schedules.

He notes that having this plan, being meticulous about choosing his classes, and time management have been key to his persistence in the program:

I’m definitely one of those people where if I have a paper due in a month I’ll try to finish it a month prior...I definitely know what I’m signing up for; I know when the assignments are due—the classes are well researched before I even sign up for them and I kind of put that on my work schedule and I know like, this is feasible, this is when things are due, everything is pretty planned out.

Planning things in advance is crucial since his work schedule is very rigid. But it also means that he has never had to withdraw from a class because he was well aware of the requirements and deadlines before it even started. His wife also is a constant source of support as she will give him the space and time he needs when he has to work on readings or get some writing done.

And he is on a deadline to finish since in 2021, he will be entering a training program at work that will not be flexible enough to allow him to continue with school. Should he not be finished at that point, he will need to request an extension. But James is determined to graduate, stating that he's "a goal-oriented person, so I usually don't start things I don't finish" and laughing that "the time and money invested like...like I'm not willing to leave that on the table." But in the end, he enjoys the intellectual challenge and knows that he will miss it when it is all over:

I've really enjoyed it. I think I go through a—you know, oscillations between by the time the semester is over, I'm ready for this to be done, but then I'll go a little bit not having a class and be like...oh my God, I need to do something. Or it's time for another one, you know...I just really enjoy it.

### **Findings**

In the process of coding the data collected during the interviews, seven base themes were established: challenges, successes, support, persistence, finance, passion, and organization. These were further condensed into the five major themes this chapter will address: external support, time management, commitment, financial concerns, and internal compassion. For clarity, 'internal' refers to systems set in place by the administrators at the school whereas 'external' refers to everything outside the school, such as family and the workplace. There were five major findings from this study:

1. Nearly all of the participants relied on external support rather than internal support in order to persist in their program.
2. The participants described themselves as having high levels of intent to persist, (i.e. “I’m not a quitter.”) and devoted to the commitment they had made when they enrolled in the program.
3. All participants mentioned that time management was an important, necessary skill, but that balancing life, work, family, and other issues that could arise was a constant and major barrier.
4. As many of the participants were only taking one class a semester and would not qualify for financial aid, many of them expressed concerns about the monetary investment in the program being a barrier that was difficult to get past.
5. Compassionate faculty members who understood that sometimes life could get in the way were coveted whereas faculty who were overly strict, particularly about attendance, or indifferent were seen as a barrier.

### **First Research Question**

The first research question that this study set out to answer was that: What factors do part-time master’s degree students enrolled in a Humanities program identify as being most important to their persistence? This study found that there were two factors that the participants indicated positively impacted their persistence to a significant extent: external support and commitment. External support came from family, peers, and employers and helped the participants deal with any doubts they had that arose during times of challenge. Commitment was a very personal standard where several participants indicated that they were not quitters and

that once they made a commitment, they saw it through until the end no matter what barriers presented themselves.

There were two divergent participant answers for this research question. The first was Jenna, who thought that only choosing classes that she knew she would enjoy was most important to her persistence. The second was Kathryn, who while she mentioned that her family supported her decision to return to school, did not cite them as being integral to her persistence. Instead, she was very clear that she believed herself to be a very persistent individual and that this trait allowed her to stay in the program, as there was no doubt in her mind that she would finish no matter what. This commitment to success was not uncommon in the participants of the study and will be discussed below, but Kathryn and Jenna were the only participants to not put any emphasis on support of any kind when it came to their persistence.

### **External Support**

Nearly every participant (13 of 15 or 87%) identified that external support was integral to their persistence, and this support took three main forms: support from their family, support from their peers, and support from their employer. A majority of the participants mentioned that the support of family members got them through the tough moments where they wondered if they could actually complete the program. Jeffrey is very grateful that he has his wife and two daughters to support him when he starts to doubt his abilities: “if I didn’t have a family that was supportive, it wouldn’t have been possible. I would’ve had to have dropped out for sure” and Michelle attributes her persistence in the program to her cousin, who talked her out of dropping out after she had taken a break from the program for health reasons:



I was actually going to drop out of this program, and I started working on a degree at [Other School], and then one of my family members had spent time reading my writing and he said, ‘Michelle, you should really try journalism again.’

Because of his encouragement, Michelle stuck with the program even though she found her interactions with faculty very challenging. Livingston had a very similar example from when she started to doubt her ability to persist and turned to her family for support: “they give me that—this is important and it’s something that you’ve always wanted to do, so keep going,” while Hannah simply stated that her family’s support meant everything to her and she specifically mentions her husband as the one that enabled her to go back to school to pursue her goal of getting a master’s degree.

Sarah was very forthcoming in admitting that her husband was the reason she made it through and that she believed other students needed the same type of support and encouragement to be successful in the program:

You need the support of someone that’s close to you and I’m not saying you need the whole support of your family—if you get the whole support of your family—fantastic! But if you have that one person who—you know you—you trust, you know, they have your back and they support you to do the program—that you can go to them when you’re in a panic—on the verge of a panic attack or you just want to vent—that’s the person that you go to—you need that one pillar of support.

It can be very challenging when that pillar of support is no longer there, as Wendy discovered after her husband passed away. However, she still has her adult son, who has been supportive of her time in the program in the past to the extent that he would help her get to campus (an approximately two-hour drive) after her knee surgeries.

Beyond family ties, some students find that they are able to create a community of peers by making friends in their classes or at networking events, who offer advice and encouragement as they head through the program. Emily has surrounded herself with a writing community of other students who are in the same program as she is, who help each other with general encouragement, paper editing, and advice on what classes and professors to take and avoid. Clara found a friend when she was on campus for a learning weekend who taught her how to make connections and invite other students to bond during the few hours they had together. As a result, she now stays at another student's house when she comes to campus and does her best to reach out to help support other students since she firmly believes students should support each other. Jeffrey trades emails with former classmates regularly to see where they are in the program and to both ask and give advice and Aaron has made connections during alumni networking events in his area which make him hopeful for his future career path.

For Clara, these peer connections were incredibly helpful when navigating a school website she described as “pretty confusing, but still better than a lot of other universities out there,” which made it hard for her to find the information she was looking for. As a result, she would turn to a fellow student she had befriended in one of her earlier classes who was more familiar with the program and who would get back to her quickly with the information she needed. In Emily's peer support arrangement, the members of her writing group all reach out and help when it comes to needing encouragement. She turned to them when a class she was taking ended up not being what she was expecting. Several of them suggested she withdraw from the class, which she eventually did, and described doing so “with the support of my writing community.” She credits them not only with giving her the idea that she could withdraw, but also

for being so supportive and encouraging when she finally did, that she felt certain that her decision was correct and has had no regrets.

Employer support was the least mentioned of the three forms of external support. For 3 out of the 15 participants, taking part-time classes had no impact on their employment as classes were taken outside of working hours. In Steve's case, he was not even sure they knew he was taking classes as it was not something that he mentioned to anyone since he knew it would not conflict with his work schedule. For these three participants, work was neither supportive nor unsupportive, their employers were, as James put it "a non-entity." For another three participants, their place of employment was actively non-supportive of their academic endeavors. Michelle stated that her employers "just haven't been supportive, they don't understand it," but that she decided to continue with getting her master's degree anyway because the benefits outweighed the anxiety their disapproval was causing: "It's hard to go against my employer, but the end result benefits them because of my publications." For her, the writing skillset that she was acquiring would benefit her career and that outweighed any protests her employer might have.

Similarly, Sarah had a very unsupportive work environment when she first started the degree program to the point where she wondered if due to the high-pressure work environment she would be forced to drop out. However, she quickly decided that the benefits of the degree were more important: "I didn't see that job being long term for me where I saw my education had more long-term benefits than that employer had." She luckily found another position with a company that had a completely different philosophy on professional development and a boss that wanted her to excel at every opportunity she was offered, including her current master's degree program.

The other nine participants mentioned that they had supportive workplaces, with Jeffrey's allowing him to take days off to study without hassle: "I'd say hey, I need Tuesday off to do this, and they'd say hey, no problem see you later." That extra time to study or write a paper and the knowledge that he did not need to worry about taking a day off helped to lessen his anxiety when things got very busy. Samantha stated that her workplace had always been "very supportive in general of professional development and opportunities outside of work" and that she would often give lunch and learn presentations to her coworkers based on what she had learned in her classes since the subject matter was often directly related to their daily work. Emily also offers the same type of presentations at her work place and puts herself out there as a person that her coworkers can connect with if they have questions about classes or the program:

I say please reach out to me as a resource and have tried to start creating that community in my workplace because I think that's—when I talk to people that's the hardest hurdle for people to overcome like, how do I do this while I'm working?

By doing this, Emily and Samantha are fostering external support in two ways, both as workers and as student peers.

### **Personal Commitment**

Nine participants also mentioned the commitment they had made upon enrolling to the degree program and that they were sure they would see it through no matter what through personal persistence. Kathryn in particular identified herself and her nature as being most important to her persistence: "I'm inherently persistent, so once I commit, I don't have a problem with that." There was absolutely no doubt in her mind that she would finish the program despite any hurdles that life threw in her way. Margaret also described herself as persistent, something

that had helped her in her journalism career, and Samantha felt the same, describing herself as someone that did not walk away once she decided to do something.

Likewise, Jenna initially had some doubt that she could juggle the degree program and grow her business, but she has managed to make it work and does not see herself stopping now even if it takes longer than the slated five years. She definitively stated that she is “not a quitter” and fully expects to complete the program. Livingston mentioned she was well aware that enrolling in the degree program was “a commitment, so you have to be able to manage it,” something she was able to do with the support of her family. Having gone through chemotherapy during a semester and not let her instructor or fellow classmates know, Wendy was proud to have pushed through that difficult time and completed the course, the thought of quitting never entering her mind. And while James knows that there are some big hurdles coming up for him in the future that will negatively impact the time he will have to work on his degree, he is determined to finish what he has started and has no doubts that he will graduate.

The idea of commitment was not just limited to how the participants described themselves, but also how they described their peers. Sarah talked about classmates that inspired her with their commitment to their programs, some of them traveling for hours on the bus or train in order to get to class on campus:

There’s people I know—they will take the train in on like Sunday and they’ll stay at a hotel on Sunday and Monday and then they will go to class on Monday and Tuesday and then they take the train back...there was one guy that came to a term—who took the bus in and then was taking the bus back. That’s commitment for you.

Steve also commented on the commitment of his classmates, noting that it was impressive that some of them have “to get up in the middle of the night because they’re on the other side of the world and speak very softly so as not to wake their children up.”

### **Summary**

External support was the single most important factor a majority of the participants identified as important to their persistence. A family member, usually (but not always) a spouse or a child, was the most common person the participants turned to when they were feeling overwhelmed or questioning their abilities. Peer support was not only a close second, but also more important when it came to researching and sharing information on classes and professors. Those who were further along in the program were a vital source of information on what the participants could anticipate in their future. Work support revolved around being given time when things got overwhelming. Whether it was being able to take long breaks or a day off or leaving early to study, participants found it incredibly helpful to not have to worry about work when prioritizing school. By not having to worry about angering their boss or coworkers, participants could focus on what they needed to get done. While the family provided emotional support, peers provided both emotional and informational support, and work provided time and in a roundabout way, emotional support. All three external support groups helped bolster the confidence of the participants and enabled them to persist when barriers arose.

At the same time, the participants wanted to acknowledge that by nature, they were very persistent. Once they made the decision to enroll in the program, they were determined to stick with it even through the worst of what life could throw at them. Several persevered through job changes, health issues, and the death of loved ones. By sticking to their commitments, they

showed that one of the most important factors to their persistence was their own determination and drive to meet the goal they had set for themselves.

### **Second Research Question**

The second research question that this study set out to answer was this: What barriers do part-time master's degree students enrolled in a Humanities program identify and how do they successfully push past them? This study found that there were three major barriers that students identified: time management, financial concerns, and internal compassion. While financial concerns and internal compassion somewhat overlapped, they were distinctive enough to some participants to warrant individual categories. In the case of time management, the participants had a number of inventive ways to overcome their setbacks when trying to balance life, work, and school such as setting priorities, sharing the responsibilities with a spouse or with friends, and taking classes in subjects that they were passionate about so that they would be motivated to find the time to do the assignments. In this way, sometimes classes became a welcome distraction when tragedy would strike. The financial concerns the participants identified did not often have solutions and remained a troubling weight that often caused anxiety for the participants, while internal compassion required participants to do their due diligence when researching their classes, to rely on the advice and suggestions of others, and in some cases just to roll with the punches if they chose their classes poorly and ended up with an indifferent professor for a semester.

#### **Time Management**

Thirteen out of fifteen participants [87%] bought up time management as one of the biggest barriers they had to deal with when it came to balancing work, life, and school. Many participants with children struggled to find time for schoolwork. Kathryn, a mother of seven,

pointed out that she was often busy with her children's activities and keeping up with every day life that it was hard to keep school as a priority. Jeffrey also had a hard time finding that sweet spot where school could fit in when things would get busy at work and at home when due dates were looming.

As a single mother, Clara often had to contend with childcare plans falling through or sudden sicknesses in the household:

It's a struggle and it's a constant struggle because child care plans fall through and people get sick and seriously my kid was sick from like October to February and he ended it by giving us all the swine flu, which I didn't even know they could test for it, but you just get these nightmare situations.

Serious health issues for the participants and their loved ones was an issue that Sarah, Michelle, and Wendy all dealt with to varying degrees and outcomes. Having hurt her back during the semester and instructed to lay flat in order to aid with healing, Sarah was relegated to holding large law books above her head to read them, causing at least one of them to fall on her face when it slipped out of her hands. She took this incident as a sign that she was trying to do too much and withdrew from the law class. Michelle had to take time off after a hellish three semesters in a row that started with her mother getting ill and then her own health issues that required surgery and then a recovery from surgical complications which left her unable to study or focus. Wendy also had her hands full when it came to health issues. Not only did she have knee surgery on both knees, rendering her incapable of driving to and from her on-campus classes, but she was diagnosed with two forms of lymphoma and underwent chemotherapy over the course of two semesters. And to make matters worse, her husband's health was declining, and he eventually entered home-hospice, passing away in the middle of a recent semester.



Many participants talked about trying to find a balance between all of their responsibilities and how difficult that could be. Sarah often found herself so overwhelmed with work and school that everyday tasks get passed over: “I work more than a full time job and it’s—balancing—especially like, I have one law class right now and I can’t get to the grocery store right now because of work and studying for this.” While Hannah loved her creative writing classes, she often found it difficult to find the time and motivation to sit down and do the assigned work. Samantha found it challenging to focus on school when work would conflict and often worried about enjoying her summer while still taking a summer school class.

Aaron has had trouble finding full-time employment that would allow him the time that he needed to complete his schoolwork, something Livingston also struggled with. In a recent interview she had a negative interaction with a prospective employer who required a more flexible schedule than her being enrolled in a graduate program would allow. Even though Emily has “a supportive partner and a supportive workplace” she still finds that trying to balance homework and work is extremely difficult. Jenna often has the demands of her new business taking up her attention from school, and James has a demanding job and a growing family that he needs to contend with when trying to find time to write papers. The majority of the participants talked about trying to find balance, but Kathryn adamantly insisted that balance was something that could never be achieved, stating that “it is impossible to find balance when you’re doing a part-time degree and you have other responsibilities.” Rather, she focused on constantly shifting her priorities based on where her attention was needed most in that moment.

None of the participants ever claimed that they were able to find that perfect balance between their responsibilities, but they did have some rather ingenious ways of using their time management skills to make attaining that balance less of a burden, such as planning ahead,

finding creative ways to weave their school work into their everyday lives, and making sure that school was something they enjoyed so that they would be motivated to continue. Clara was quite proud of the way she has been able to be “super creative” when organizing her time to make the best of her and her son’s schedules, often doing work while he was at daycare or spending time with his father and sometimes turning story time at night into studying time by using her textbooks as his bedtime stories. She also relied on the support of her friends to help her when she needed to get something done but her son was with her: “it’s about calling up another mom and being like ‘hey bring your kids over and let them run around in the back yard; I have to duck into this interview (laughing).”

Sarah often prioritized her schoolwork and brought her books with her when she went on vacation: “my husband laughs; he says every vacation we go on; you’re studying. You’re writing a paper; you know there’s something going on.” When things got busy for Jeffrey, he would take a step back to decide what needed to take priority and then arrange some details and responsibilities with his wife:

Once responsibilities are kind of divided um, I take what I need to do and um, I prioritize any time sensitive objects obviously, and then what I’ll do is allocate time for the week. I’ll say okay, I’m gonna do 4 hours Friday, I’ll do 8 hours Saturday, another 6 hours Sunday and I’ll usually just go to the library and be offsite so that I don’t have any distractions and then I’ll just, ah, plow away at it, and then if I say I’m going to be back on 4 pm Saturday, then I go back home and then I’m back into the routine, and then Sunday back into it again just basically establishing a rigid time schedule, as difficult as that is with children, but it’s possible (laughs).

James also relied on his wife to help him split responsibilities when things got really busy for him: “my wife is just like I’m going to leave you alone; you do what you need to do.” He also tried to never procrastinate, often starting papers weeks if not months before they were due and researched his classes so that he could take ones that he would enjoy and find the gaps in his work schedule that would make completing assignments that much easier for him. This was something that was echoed by Jenna, who stressed that she only took classes that “light me on fire.” In this way, she could ensure that she would want to make time for them and would want to do the work when her business was trying to take all of her attention. If she did not find a class that she thought she would enjoy or if her business was demanding more of her time, she would simply take the semester off and plan to make up for it later.

A passion for learning was mentioned by several of the participants as a solution to troubling time management issues. Because they loved learning and the subject matter of their classes, it made it easier to prioritize school when life got in the way. From her very first class, Kathryn knew that going back to school was the right decision for her: “I went and I loved it--I loved every second of it” and that feeling has yet to go away, even when she ends up with classes that are more difficult than she anticipated. James, who specified that to him writing was “this self-induced pain because writing is like bleeding for me; it’s just so painful” found that he continued to take classes because “I love English and I love the whole major.” Even though she sometimes found it hard to get up the motivation to go to class after long days at work, Livingston found that what drove her to do so was the environment itself: “just rewarding to be in that environment and gain more insight on things.”

While dealing with several huge, heartbreaking issues that would have caused many to turn away from school entirely, Wendy kept up with her classes and considered it more than

worthwhile as they allowed her to keep her mind sharp and active and kept her from worrying too deeply about the other things going on in her life. She stressed that throughout her and her husband's illnesses, being able to focus on her assignments, going from one to the next and being able to check them off as complete was an extremely helpful distraction. It kept her moving forward even when life seemed to want to make her stand in place and kept her mind occupied with positive thoughts during a time of despair. In much the same way, Clara pointed out that while school made an otherwise packed schedule even harder to manage, it also acted as an "amazing break" from what she was dealing with in her life, explaining that taking classes was "something that I do for myself" and that this helped her want to make time for it. Jeffrey's apt advice for those that struggled to keep from being overwhelmed was to "find your passion then follow that as cliché as that might sound" because it can act as a motivator to want to do work that would otherwise become overbearing.

### **Financial Concerns**

The part-time program that the participants were enrolled in was designed with a five-year term in mind. This would allow students to take only one class a semester for the five years and still be able to complete the program. While this was helpful to those with busy lives, it also created something of a problem when it came to finances, since financial aid is normally only given to those enrolled full-time or half-time. Half-time in this program would require two classes per semester, something many of the participants could not manage. As a result, money was often on the minds of the participants and impacted some of their decisions concerning their education.

Aaron relied on his mother to help him financially until he made the decision to take more classes a semester in order to become eligible for financial aid. Livingston had recently

found herself grappling with whether or not she could afford to continue her education given her recent difficulty finding a new job. The support of her family had been integral to her continuing in the program, but she pointed out that it “is rooted firmly and exclusively in my ability to support myself while I get the degree.” This increases her anxiety surrounding the program and whether it will ultimately be “worth it” in the end.

Tuition assistance programs offered by employers were utilized by four of the participants. Steve, Samantha, and Emily all stressed that without the greatly reduced tuition price, they would not have returned to school to get a graduate degree. Steve flat out stated, “I couldn’t afford to do it without the benefit” and Samantha reiterated the same thought, saying that with the tuition assistance “the cost was actually affordable to me. I don’t think I would pursue a secondary master’s degree if that weren’t the case--if it wasn’t at this low price point.” Emily agreed and said that “it would have been cost” that kept her from returning to school if she had not ended up working and receiving the tuition benefit. But even in instances where an employer offered tuition assistance, it was not always an easy to use or overly attractive benefit. Sarah discussed how her previous employer seemed to make it difficult for anyone to actually use the benefit, in direct contrast to her current employer:

For the previous employer like you had to pay out of pocket and then when you got your grade? You submitted, ‘cause they paid you based on the grade, and then you submitted it um for payment, and then you had to continue to work there for a year, and if you didn’t, if you left there, then you had to pay them back. This employer, everything is pre-approved.

While tuition assistance of any kind seemed like a benefit, having to pay out of pocket in advance and having reimbursement be based on the letter grade received in the course only increased the stress levels of those participating in it.

Aaron pointed out how traveling to campus to meet the on-campus requirement for some classes involved not only a time commitment, but a large financial one as well:

I love the options for travel but um financially, the program doesn't really offer help with that. As far as like coming on campus for the weekend classes, you don't get help traveling or staying while you're there, and I travel quite a bit for the program, which has been great, but I think that's the biggest struggle for me.

Clara also expressed how financially draining traveling could be, especially when there was not clear communication from the professors concerning on-campus weekends. In one of her classes she had been waitlisted, and then erroneously told that the professor was able to accept everyone on the waitlist into the class. She made childcare and travel arrangements, flying in only to find that she did not have access to the class. This miscommunication cost her hundreds of dollars and left her questioning as to whether she could continue with the program.

Hannah found herself in a similarly frustrating situation when the school decided to end a degree program she had been taking classes for, but not yet applied to: "had I taken the pre-requisite class, I could have grandfathered in, but I didn't, um, so that was three thousand dollars down the drain." While she was able to find a similar program that sparked her interest, she could not apply the credits she had already taken towards it. But she tried to look on the bright side, laughing as she stated that she had to finish the degree program since "I've spent so much money on it!" James also expressed a similar sentiment: "I've already spent so much money on

it, I have to finish it. Um. Just the time and money invested like...like I'm not willing to leave that on the table, so it's like got to be finished."

Several times when participants thought about dropping classes, they ultimately did not do so because the deadline for withdrawing and getting a refund had passed. When Kathryn thought she needed to drop a class she immediately went and looked up the withdrawal deadline, which she had missed by three days. She spoke to her husband about whether or not it was financially feasible for them to drop the class at that point and even went so far as to email her advisor to figure out how a withdrawal would impact her grade point average (GPA). Ultimately, she decided to remain in the class after doing well on the midterm, which mitigated both the concern over finances and the GPA.

When Sarah hurt her back and realized she could not keep up with one of the classes she had enrolled in for the semester, her withdrawal came after the required deadline in which a refund could be processed. Since it was a lot of money and she had a lot of medical bills, she took her case before the school board to see if she could get a refund: "I didn't get my money back but...I know people who have done it who have. My problem was that I was taking two classes and I only dropped one." Still, she pushed through with her other courses because even when life gets in the way, she has paid so much into the degree at this point, it would be a huge loss to not finish. She returns to this line of thinking whenever she feels like she is overwhelmed and might want to take a semester off. While the money she has already paid into the degree may not be the main reasons she persists, it is enough to keep her moving forward.

### **Internal Compassion**

For many participants the compassion or lack thereof from administrators and faculty had the ability to make or break their experience, especially when dealing with overwhelming life

issues. While traditional master's degree programs usually last one or two years, the part-time program was designed for students who were taking classes at a slower rate to finish in five years. And as Michelle eloquently stated, five years is a significant time period to invest into a degree and a lot of life changes can happen in that time, especially for older students. This requires administrators and faculty to be more understanding and lenient of the issues that might arise in the life of a part-time student over this longer period of time.

Participants indicated several barriers caused by faculty that made them doubt whether they could continue either with just a class or the program altogether. Livingston wrestled with the dichotomy of how a program that was designed to provide those who worked full time with access to classes seemed to have tons of classes with strict attendance policies:

Several of the syllabi that I have read have cited that work is not a valid excuse for being late to class, demanding perfect, if not early, attendance. I understand this stipulation but am confused as to how a program that is designed for working professionals is so hostile to the realities of having a career and going to school. However, if I were to give up my day job to pursue the degree, I would lose one of the things I value most about the program which is to be able to work and go to school at the same time.

Hannah had to withdraw from a class after she was called in to work and missed one class meeting. While she expressed that the professor "was cool about it, he said look you know that's the rule and you knew that and I said you're right," this moment of "real life butting in" set her back a semester, and she was "really sad about it."

Margaret told the story of a demoralizing online class that she took one semester where the professor did not allow them to use the camera feature so that classmates could see each other as the professor claimed that "he didn't want us to get cliquey. Which was insane to me



because most of the people in that class were in their 30s or 40s, like we're all professionals?" Instead of being able to see the other people in the class, she would spend over an hour looking at blank black boxes on her computer screen. Because of this, she had a hard time motivating herself to even attend class every week: "We're just like having to listen like it was a radio show, like it was challenging to even want to sign in every Thursday or whatever it was cause it was just...such a bad class." To make matters worse, when she wanted to clarify issues with her performance in the class, the professor was not open to discussing it with her: "when I would ask him follow up questions after he graded something, he would say sorry I'm not available for questions; it's not fair to the rest of the students. So, to me he just didn't make himself available." She called this experience challenging and was very glad that it had not been her first experience with an online class at the school, as it would have soured her experience with the program. Luckily, she cited two classes she had taken previously as being "so stellar that it made up for everything."

After an engaging experience with her first professor, who inspired her to pursue a degree in journalism, Michelle often found it very challenging to relate to her other professors and make sense of their assignments. As someone who was new to journalism, she often did not understand what professors wanted out of the assignments they gave and found the lack of detail given to be distressing. She would reach out to her cousin, who was a journalist, for help and he would show her examples of the type of article that had been assigned in order to set her on the right path and lessen her anxiety. Still, the lingering anxiety at times made her "hate journalism."

James had issues communicating his strict schedule to the administrators while stationed overseas. Unable to simply take an entire summer off to fulfill a pre-requisite class that was only offered on-campus, he was consistently frustrated with trying to get those he talked to at the

school to understand this. The standard answers he would receive from those in the admissions office that did not consider his particular circumstances left him particularly annoyed: “I was like okay. Yeah. Great idea. Um. That’s totally feasible but not really at all.” At the same time, he also had several positive interactions with them, such as when the program was undergoing changes that would alter his plan. While he had taken a large number of courses towards the degree, he had not yet enrolled since he could not get to campus to take a class required for admission:

I was like the only reason I’m not admitted is because I’m not on campus and I’m not on campus because I’m in Japan. Like, other students who only three courses in are being grandfathered in, can you cut me a break?

After several emails and long phone conversations, the administrators agreed that so long as he applied within the year, they would grandfather him in, something he said was “a huge win” and left him very relieved that they were willing to work with him towards a positive outcome.

Several other participants noted that compassionate faculty and administrators had helped them push past their barriers. Wendy noted that she had not ever expected to go back for a graduate degree at all and likely would not have ever applied to the program if it were not for a persistent admissions officer that refused to take no for an answer. While she had been happy to update her writing skillset by just taking classes, once she was accepted to the program, she was thrilled to be officially earning her graduate degree.

Michelle had to grapple with the failing health and eventual death of her mother along with several of her own health issues but was able to reach out to her advisor and draft a plan that would allow her to still stay on track to complete the program. When she was ready to return to classes, she did so with a warning from her doctor not to overdo it and was connected with the

accommodations office. They worked with her to ensure she would have the time she needed to complete tests and assignments, which was a great relief to her. When Wendy lost her husband, she wondered how she would continue in the program without his encouragement but was looking forward to meeting with her advisor to “get my marching orders.” She was also touched that her advisor had sent a sympathy card, which she said she appreciated: “I haven’t had a chance to tell her yet, but it was very kind of her.” This made Wendy feel supported by her advisor and made her future at the school seem a little less bleak.

When her business started taking up more and more of her time, Jenna wondered if she should drop the program altogether and turned to her advisor for advice on what to do. Based on the conversation they had and how her advisor was able to show her how a master’s degree would be beneficial to her business, she decided to stick with the program and now makes sure to check in every so often to ensure that she is still on the right path towards graduation.

Emily was effusive in her praise of the professors she has had and how they were lenient when it came to life getting in the way of class:

They really, really understand that we’re working at the same time but they still manage to hold us to a really high standards, like I don’t feel like I’m getting cut any slack, but I do feel like I can send an email and say oh my faculty member asked me to stay late I’m sorry I’m going to be ten minutes late and they don’t like kick me out of the class.

Because her job could sometimes ask her to stay late, this flexibility allowed Emily to feel confident that she would not be punished in class if work or life interfered with her class schedule. This experience was in contrast to what Margaret and Livingston identified as a barrier, with faculty members seeming indifferent to the struggles a part-time student had to deal with. It highlighted an exasperation that was felt by those participants that did not have a student

peer they could turn to in order to ask for advice. As Margaret summarized: “I wish there was a way for me to find out what teachers are incredible—like maybe a [ratemyprofessor.com](http://ratemyprofessor.com), I don’t know.”

Professors and administrators that were unwilling to adapt to the many different stressors that the participants faced were seen as barriers, but compassionate professors and administrators were seen as helping to overcome other barriers that the participants had to deal with. Those with peers in the program such as Michelle, Emily, James, and Jeffrey, were able to mostly side-step this barrier by asking for advice from those who had already taken certain classes. Those who did not have peers to turn to, like Livingston, Hannah, Samantha, and Margaret, often found themselves either enrolled in classes that added additional stressors to their lives or caused them to have to withdraw from the class.

### **Summary**

Time management was the most common barrier mentioned by the participants in this study. Trying to find balance between life, work, and school was a common stressor, yet time management was also the way they pushed past this barrier by identifying what needed to take priority in the moment and adjusting things accordingly. Some found that sharing responsibilities with a spouse helped to alleviate the issue, while others adopted creative ideas like reading textbooks to their children in order to get their schoolwork done while still spending time with their family. Several participants noted that by taking classes they were passionate about, it made it easier to want to do the work and give priority to school when necessary. All of these solutions helped to lessen the participant’s anxiety and made them feel like they could and should continue to persist in the program.

Financial concerns were more complicated in that there was rarely a good solution that mitigated the worry entirely. One participant decided to take on more courses per semester in order to qualify for financial aid. Others wrestled with taking classes they were not enjoying and wanted to withdraw from when could not get a full refund from the school. Often times in these instances, the participants continued with the challenging class rather than lose the money that they had invested. Likewise, internal compassion seemed to be hit or miss when it came to the participants, with some of them encountering wonderfully understanding faculty and administrators, while other participants found the faculty and administrators they encountered to be indifferent to the struggles a part-time student faced on a day to day basis. One way for participants to avoid the latter scenario was to have an informed group of peers that could offer advice on who to talk to and what classes to take, but if a participant did not have a group of peers to rely on, they could not benefit from this solution.

### **Chapter Summary**

This chapter introduced the participants through their restoried narratives and presented the five findings related to the two research questions. The first research question on factors that were identified as most important to the participants' persistence was found to have two main responses: external support was seen by a majority of participants as vital to their persistence, and the participant's commitment to the program along with a personal nature of being persistent also helped. The second research question on barriers to persistence and how participants were able to move past them was found to have three responses: time management, financial concerns, and internal compassion. While the results of the study were presented here, Chapter 5 will analyze the findings and report on their importance as well as make recommendations for program administrators and future research.

## CHAPTER FIVE: SUMMARY, DISCUSSION, FUTURE RESEARCH, AND FINAL REFLECTIONS

### **Summary**

Chapter 1 of this dissertation laid the groundwork for the problem and population that this study focused on: persistence in part-time master's degree students. It introduced the purpose of the study and its significance and provided a brief overview of the procedures used to collect the data. It presented the two research questions that guided the research and writing and gave an outline for what to expect in subsequent chapters. Chapter 2 covered the relevant literature related to part-time master's degree student persistence and opened with a history of the master's degree in the United States, following how it evolved from a mere honorary title to inspire numerous programs around the country. Important models of student persistence were examined and a framework of barriers to student persistence was identified and discussed. Chapter 3 detailed the research design of the study and explained the choices of narrative inquiry, experience centered narratives, and semi-structured interviews. Each step in the process of study from the data collection to the data analysis was described in order to situate the reader for the participant narratives and the results drawn from them that were presented in Chapter 4.

While Chapter 4 introduced the participants through their restoried narratives and the themes that were discovered during data analysis, this chapter puts those discoveries into the context of the current literature. The discussion section is organized around the two research questions and the identified themes, situating them in the context of the models of student persistence presented in Chapter 2 and other studies. Following this is a section on recommendations, which are informed by the conclusions of this study for administrators of part-time master's degree programs and also for part-time master's degree students to help foster

improved completion rates for part-time master's degree students. Avenues for future research gleaned from the findings will also be suggested in this chapter, which concludes with the final reflections of the researcher on the dissertation writing process.

### **Discussion**

This qualitative research study sought to better understand what part-time master's degree students identified as most important to their persistence and what barriers they encountered during their time in the program, along with the ways they overcame them. Using 15 semi-structured interviews with part-time master's degree students enrolled in a part-time liberal arts master's degree program at a private university in the northeastern U.S., this study found that external support (for example, family, peer, and work), along with a strong sense of personal commitment to the goal of completing the degree, was integral to aiding students in persisting with their programs. There were three main barriers that were identified by the participants: time management, financial concerns, and internal compassion, and each participant had various solutions and/or workarounds for these challenges. The findings in this study point to the need for more research on this population and the adjustment of the current programs and support systems that are offered by college and university administrators when it comes to part-time master's degree students.

**Research Question 1:** *What factors do part-time master's degree students enrolled in a Humanities program identify as being most important to their persistence?*

There were two factors that the participants indicated positively impacted their persistence to a significant extent: external support and commitment. These mirror the findings of Cohen (2012a) who found that strong intent to persist was the most important factor in her model of master's student persistence, and those of Cohen and Greenberg (2011) and Mercer

(2015) who found that both internal and external support were crucial to the persistence of the master's degree students they studied. Of the four models of student persistence that were reviewed in Chapter 2, these results primarily align with those of Bean and Metzner (1985) and Cohen (2012a) and suggest that future research take the findings of this study into account when looking to bolster part-time master's degree student completion rates.

### **Finding 1 – External Support**

External support represented encouragement that the participants found helpful from people in their lives that were not employed by the institution they were attending. This was normally found to be from their family, their peers, and their place of employment, and it took many forms. Support could be the sharing of responsibilities when schoolwork needed to take precedence, time off when things were hectic, or emotional support and motivation when experiencing moments of doubt. This form of support was mentioned by 13 of the 15 participants as being most important to their persistence in the program.

Steve, Jeffrey, Emily, Samantha, Hannah, Clara, and Jenna all expressed that initially they had misgivings about whether or not they could succeed as master's degree students. This was despite the fact that several of them already having attained a master's degree in the past. In Emily's case, her previous master's degree only increased these misgivings as the experience made her wonder if she "wasn't higher ed material." For others, the long gap between their last experience with higher education them nervous that they would not be able to acclimate to a new classroom experience. Cross (1981) identifies these feelings of inadequacy as dispositional barriers to the participant's success and found that they are not uncommon in adult learners at every level, although most commonly this has been seen in adult learners returning for their undergraduate degrees since that population has received the most study (Genco, 2007; Goto &



Martin, 2009; Hostetler, Sweet & Moen, 2007; Kasworm, 2010; Osam, Bergman, & Cumberland, 2017; Shepherd & Nelson, 2012).

A majority of the participants in this study mentioned that the support of their family, peers, and workplace helped to overcome these dispositional barriers when they arose. When a participant was feeling overwhelmed or wondering, like Steve, if they were “21<sup>st</sup> century student material,” often times their family or a fellow student would step in to soothe their fears and encourage them onward. Michelle and Emily both credit their fellow classmates with pushing them forward when they started to doubt that they could continue. When Michelle had considered giving up entirely and wondered if she was “missing something” required to succeed in the program, her friend, who had recently graduated from the same program, encouraged her and told her to “just stay in the program.” This outside encouragement and support from someone external to the institution was integral to persistence for many of the participants. When things became overwhelming, it was this external support that allowed them to push forward in the program.

While it is not heavily indicated in the representation of the model, Bean and Metzner (1985) placed significant emphasis on their environmental variables when it came to nontraditional undergraduate student persistence. In order to retain a student, environmental variables needed to be positive. Academic variables could be positive or negative and still result in student persistence as long as the environmental variables were positive. One of those environmental variables was outside encouragement, which Bean and Metzner (1985) describe as “a student’s parents or spouse, close friends, [or] an off-campus employer” (p. 504). This aligns directly with the external support mentioned in this study, which consists of support from family, peers, and work.

Much like the results of this study, Cohen and Greenberg (2011), along with Mercer (2015), also found that external support was important to the persistence of their participants. Cohen and Greenberg's (2011) participants identified family, particularly their spouse or their children, as being "the most important individuals to the student's persistence" (p. 106). Mercer's (2015) dissertation research found that support was the main theme to emerge from her data; however, she found that internal and external support were just as important, and one participant, Maria, decidedly did not have the support of her husband, but persisted regardless. With the exception of one participant who mentioned that his employer provided financial support for graduate studies, Mercer's (2015) participants did not mention their employers, whereas Cohen and Greenberg (2011) found that their participants cited that their employers were "motivators for persistence" (p. 106) on par with that of supportive parents. This is an interesting disparity considering the mixed responses of the participants in this study: 60% of the participants said that their employers were supportive and that the support mostly came in the form of interest in their studies and/or the ability to take time off to get assignments and studying done, while the other 40% indicated that their employer was a "non-entity" (James) and the remaining 20% indicated that their employers were actively unsupportive. Employer financial support was discussed by five of the participants, all commenting on either the great benefit of lack thereof of a tuition assistance program, but the majority of discussion concerning the workplace was focused on the ability to take time off without it adding additional stress to the participants and encouragement from co-workers and bosses.

While Cohen (2012a) did not find that encouragement was an integral factor in her participants' persistence, she did find that it was "the factor with the most significant level of correlation with the dependent variables" (p. 72) when it came to the environmental influences.

While she groups peer interaction as a professional interaction variable, she notes that it “had a significant relationship with intent to persist” (p. 72), which she found was the most important factor when determining master’s degree student persistence. Still, both outside encouragement and peer interaction appear in her final version of her master’s student persistence model.

### **Finding 2 – Commitment**

Nearly all of the participants in this study described themselves as having high levels of intent to persist and devotion to the commitment they had made when they enrolled in the program. This was raised in a number of ways, from Jenna stating that she was “not a quitter” to James and Samantha explaining that once they made a commitment they would always follow through, to Hannah laughing that she had “spent so much money on it” that there was no possibility of her not finishing the degree. Kathryn was so adamant that her ability to persist was an innate quality that she cited it in her answer as to what was most important to her persistence.

Mercer (2015) also found that the participants in her study reflected this sort of commitment in her theme: Quitting not an option. She notes that the current literature does not appear to cover this personality trait, citing that Bean and Metzner’s (1985) goal commitment variable is not quite the same thing. I agree with her assessment here, as Bean and Metzner’s (1985) goal commitment variable was defined by them as “the amount of personal importance that a student ascribed to obtaining a college education” (p. 524). This is not the same as the commitment described by the participants in this study. While they did ascribe importance to obtaining the degree at the end of the program, what they were ultimately stating was that they believed that they could finish the program and obtain the degree, making the commitment theme identified here slightly different from Bean and Metzner’s (1985) goal commitment variable.

However, I believe that this ability to commit to a goal such as program completion is actually a facet of self-efficacy, something that Cohen (2012a) also noticed in her participants. What this study termed as commitment, Cohen (2012a) called her intent to persist variable. When this variable was present, she found that it mitigated other variables, such as psychological factors and the utility of the degree (p. 96). This ultimately led to her conclusion that “when students were committed to earning the degree, they were able to overcome obstacles that other students found insurmountable” (p.103), something that was reflected in this study’s findings as well. She states that the intent to persist variable is actually a version of self-efficacy and points out that while there have been some studies on the self-efficacy of undergraduate adult students, studies have yet to focus on the master’s degree student population, something she recommends as a path for future research that this study also recommends.

Self-efficacy situates in Bandura’s (1977) social cognitive theory and is defined by Goto and Martin (2009) as “what people expect they personally can accomplish with their actions” (p. 11-12). Bandura (2006) stresses that “[s]elf-efficacy is concerned with perceived capability” (p. 308) and should be identified by *can* statements rather than *will* statements. This was exemplified by Kathryn stating that “[t]hat’s been the most satisfying thing to be intellectually challenged and stimulated and be able to reach those challenges and go: I can do this. I really can.” By believing that she had the capability to succeed in her classes, Kathryn was exhibiting that she had high self-efficacy as a part-time master’s degree student and would likely continue to take classes until the program was complete and she graduated. As this was reiterated by many of the participants in this study, it warrants further research.

**Research Question 2: *What barriers do part-time master’s degree students enrolled in a Humanities program identify and how do they successfully push past them?***

This study found that there were three major barriers that students identified: time management, financial concerns, and internal compassion. The barriers that the participants identified are not ones that are applicable only to part-time master's degree students but can also be applied to part-time students and adult learners in general. In fact, much of the research focused on barriers has so far only examined on adult learners seeking or considering an undergraduate degree (Genco, 2007; Goto & Martin, 2009; Hostetler, Sweet & Moen, 2007; Kasworm, 2010; Osam, Bergman, & Cumberland, 2017; Shepherd & Nelson, 2012).

However, the themes that were identified in this study make it clear that these barriers to adult learning happen at the graduate level as well. While the participants in this study were already enrolled in the program and not considering returning to school, the barriers they identified fit nicely into these three categories. The majority of barriers mentioned by the participants were situational and institutional barriers, although one dispositional barrier was mentioned above in the discussion of the first research question. This shows that Ekstrom's (1972) barrier categories have wide-ranging implications and can be used for more than just the barriers adult learners deal with when deciding to go back to school. The ramifications of these barriers last beyond admission and can affect student persistence throughout the life of their degree program.

### **Finding 3 – Time Management**

The most common barriers that were mentioned by the participants were situational barriers (Cross, 1981) to their persistence in the form of time management. Every participant commented on how difficult it was to balance work, life, and family, especially when things could get busy in all three realms at once. As seven of the participants were parents, for those with younger children, childcare was often an issue when it came to attending classes or doing

homework. For those with unsupportive workplaces, like Sarah, trying to balance work and school often led to excruciating stress levels that ultimately resulted in her having to choose between her job and her degree. Livingston also struggled with how to craft a work schedule that would allow her the time she needed to study and experienced feelings of frustration as she tried to make school fit into her life.

These concerns were not unique to the part-time master's degree students that participated in this study. Brazier (1998) found that the workload of the MBA students was sometimes overwhelming and that time management skills were necessary in order to create a flexible schedule that would work for the participants and their families. When these plans did not work it negatively impacted the participant's psychological and educational wellness. Shepherd (2015) also found that the participants in his study who were able to successfully persist needed to make "short-term sacrifices" (p. 170) at work and with their families. Mercer's (2015) participants also commented on the additional stress they faced when trying to manage all aspects of their lives. Like Brazier's (1998) participants, Mercer's (2015) found "that they needed to make sacrifices if they wished to obtain their various short- and long-term goals" (p. 135) and very few of them were ever able to actually achieve the balance that they sought.

The impact these situational barriers have, and the struggles students face when it comes to time management have been mentioned in multiple studies that focused on adult learners pursuing their undergraduate degrees. Many studies have found that balancing school, work, and family (particularly childcare) is a juggling act that not everyone can sustain (Davidson & Holbrook, 2014; Gigliotti & Huff, 1995; Markle, 2015; Mullen, Goyette, & Soares, 2003; Perna, 2004; Shepherd & Nelson, 2012; Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005). Bean and Metzner (1985) listed family responsibilities and hours of employment under their ever-important environmental

variables for their model of nontraditional student attrition. As discussed in the previous section, these variables needed to remain positive in order for a student to remain in the program. This reinforced the notion that time management is critical to the success of adult learners regardless of their degree level.

Taniguchi and Kaufman (2005) note that for adult learners returning for their undergraduate degrees, having a young child “significantly suppresses both men’s and women’s college attainment” (p. 924). This was something Clara struggled with as a single parent despite having a strong family support nearby for her son. She sometimes raced to find last minute childcare when plans fell through and she needed to attend class, study, or write a paper and while she came up with creative solutions to her problems at times, it remained something that caused anxiety even at the best of times.

There were multiple solutions that the participants of this study employed to push past the situational barriers that presented themselves. Most commonly, the solution to time challenges was utilizing time management skills to figure out a way to get everything done and reaching out to others in order to help shift responsibilities and deadlines. Kathryn gave up on any chance of ever finding balance and decided to instead prioritize what she needed to get done, whether that was a family event or schoolwork. Margret talked to her boss or her professors to see if she could shift some deadlines when things got overwhelming for her. Jeffrey often relied on his wife to help shoulder some of the familial responsibilities so that he could get schoolwork done. Along with Sarah, Samantha, and Emily, he felt comfortable asking for time off from work if necessary, in order to study or get coursework completed.

Interestingly, only three participants mentioned reaching out to faculty or administrators for help with these situational issues. Margaret asked her professor for an extension if work and

travel got in the way, Emily often communicated with her professors if a work or family issue would make her late to class or keep her from attending, and James had longstanding contact with the admissions team in order to facilitate his admission to the program, which was delayed due to his being on another continent and not being able to take a required on-campus class. The rest relied on themselves or the support systems around them to help shift priorities so that if responsibilities could not be completely balanced, at least they would still be taken care of. This finding dovetailed well with Cohen and Greenberg's (2011) study. They had a dire warning for program administrators in the conclusion of their article that these "multiple roles and the cost of trying to reconcile those roles" would likely lead to withdrawal "without sufficient support" from the programs and institutions the part-time master's degree students were attending (p. 111). This is especially critical to those students who do not have a support system in their family, their peers, or their workplace that they can turn to when they find themselves overcommitted and unable to manage the stress of the situation.

#### **Finding 4 – Financial Concerns**

Cost is a situational and an institutional barrier that many of the participants noted negatively impacted their persistence and at times made them doubt if they could continue in the program. The situational aspect of this barrier was two-fold and included not only where a personal was physically located (and thus might need to pay to travel to campus), but also the financial situation of the participant: whether they had a well-paying job, a one- or two-income household, or were unemployed. The institutional aspects encompassed not only tuition and fees for enrolling in classes, but also the cost associated with traveling to campus and staying for sometimes extended periods of time in order to meet program residency requirements. As these



costs and requirements were set by the institution, this made financial concerns both a situational and an institutional barrier.

As some of the participants were only taking one class a semester and would not qualify for financial aid, they expressed concerns about the monetary investment in the program being a barrier to their persistence. Thirteen out of the fifteen participants brought up finances as a barrier in one way or another, either by pointing out that they needed family members to help support them in paying for classes or that traveling to campus when they did not live nearby had not only a monetary cost, but was a significant time investment as well. Because part-time students are not taking a full course load, they often do not meet the standards for federal financial aid and rely on paying out of pocket for their classes if they cannot get other loans either privately or from the school itself. This can be compounded when adult learners who are also working do not have the ability to meet with those in student services and finance offices that keep normal 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. hours in order to learn about what financial help the school might be able to offer (Hadfield, 2003).

While there is ample literature available on the financial barriers that the adult learner population struggles with, a large portion of it is based on the assumption that financial concerns are something that are wrestled with before the adult learner applies to a program (Cross, 1981; Osam, Bergman, & Cumberland, 2017). This assumption seems predicated on the notion that a person returning to school will face the same yearly tuition schedule as a traditional student who is entering an undergraduate or graduate program. However, this is not always the case, especially when dealing with part-time programs. The site of this study, for instance, did not charge a yearly or semester tuition, but rather charged students for the classes they signed up for each semester. This allowed flexibility both financially and schedule-wise so that students could

set their own pace throughout the program. They might take two classes one semester, but only be able to afford one the next or need to take a semester off before they could afford another. The program was built to account for this with no financial penalty to the student as they would only pay for classes while they were taking them.

It is interesting to note that finances or financial support show up in nearly all of the models of student persistence covered in Chapter 2. Finances are one of the important environmental variables that Bean and Metzner (1985) include in their adult undergraduate model, but Girves and Wimmerus (1988) also identify financial support as impacting master's student degree progression, and Tinto (1993) finds financial issues so important that he lists them three times: once as financial resources as a basic student attribute, once as financial assistance at entry to the doctoral program, and once as financial support from the department/program during doctoral research. While Cohen (2012a) had included finances as an environmental variable in her hypothesized model of master's student persistence, it is not included in the final version and there is no explanation as to why it was excluded. This is perplexing since her survey asked no less than four questions concerning financial aid and how the students were paying for their education, yet there is no discussion of this aspect of her study.

There were no easy answers when it came to solving financial issues and for a majority of the participants it remained a constant concern. Aaron ultimately decided that he needed to take enough classes to be able to qualify for federal aid, a decision that he realized would not allow him to sustain a full-time job. For Hannah, James, and Sarah, completing the program and "not leaving that [money] on the table" (James) became a large motivator in keeping them enrolled in the program as they were unwilling to waste the investment they had made in themselves and their education. This mirrored the experiences of Markle's (2015) adult

undergraduate participants, who she explains “continued because they felt they had already invested or sacrificed too much to give up” (p. 278).

### **Finding 5 – Internal Compassion**

Another institutional barrier (Cross, 1981) that the participants raised (although in far less frequency than the others) was the attitudes of faculty and administrators that served to help or hinder their progress in the program. Compassionate faculty who understood that sometimes life could get in the way were coveted, whereas faculty who were overly strict about attendance were seen as major barriers to persistence, as were administrators who were unable (or unwilling) to work with students who were operating under extraordinary circumstances that required a delicate response rather than a scripted response. This was a major issue for James, who needed help to figure out how to apply to the program when he could not take a required on-campus class due to being stationed outside of the country for work. He found himself on the receiving end of many frustrating conversations where it seemed like the administrators did not understand the barriers that part-working adult students like himself had to deal with. Being told to “just come next summer” (James) was infuriating to him, and while ultimately things worked out in his favor in the end, it left him with a lingering distaste for the program administrators and wariness in future interactions. Clara despaired of a bad faculty interaction that left her paying to travel to a course she was not actually enrolled in, something that left her questioning whether she could afford to continue in the program. Margaret as well had a bad faculty experience when a professor seemed to refuse to treat the class like the working professionals they were and had her considering withdrawing from the class.

All of the models discussed in Chapter 2 except for Bean and Metzner’s (1985) mention faculty in their model. Girves and Wemmerus (1988) note that perceptions of the faculty impact

student involvement and their sense of satisfaction or alienation, whereas Tinto (1993) lists it twice, first as faculty relations under institutional experiences and then again under research experiences as faculty-advisor-relationships. Cohen (2012a) has student/faculty/advisor relationship as a program variable that impacts both the professional integration variables and the psychological variables for the student. Bean and Metzner (1985) do mention academic advising as one of the academic variables that would impact attrition, but there is no mention of faculty at all.

Cohen and Greenberg (2011) found that treatment from faculty was the most important institutional factor that impacted master's student persistence in both their survey and their focus group. Their participants expected and wanted to be treated with respect from their professors. Mercer (2015) found that for her participants, faculty interactions "dominated the discussion" (p. 97) and were overwhelmingly positive. Like Cohen and Greenberg (2011), Mercer (2015) found that faculty was the most important institutional factor, but in the case of her study it was the support, understanding, and subject mastery of the faculty that stood out. While one participant in her study voiced a negative interaction with faculty members, Mercer (2015) notes that the majority of stories the participants told about the faculty were focused on positive interactions. In particular, participants in her study noted the flexibility of faculty members when it came to life or work impacting their studies.

This is interesting due to the lack of mention the participants in this study made of faculty interactions. While three participants discussed some of the professors they had had with enthusiasm, the majority mentioned them only in passing, if at all. In particular, two of the participants who had major life and health issues, Michelle and Wendy, did not mention ever seeking faculty assistance. Michelle contacted her advisor and the accessibility office when she

needed help with accommodations for her recent surgeries, but Wendy made no mention of informing anyone of her cancer diagnosis or subsequent chemotherapy sessions except for her peers in the class and then only after it was over. When her husband passed away, Wendy did inform her advisor, which would suggest that those models which combine faculty and advisor involvement are conflating two very different groups of people that can impact student persistence.

Cohen and Greenberg (2011) found in their study that health problems were cited as a significant issue for their participants and most often led to withdrawal from a class. Michelle, Wendy, and Sarah were three participants in this study who experienced health issues and also ended up withdrawing from a class at the time. While these issues were physical, Cohen and Greenberg (2011) suggest that there should be “education of faculty and staff about physical and mental health conditions and their possible consequence for learning” (p. 111). This could prevent students from assuming that when health issues, both physical and mental, arise they have to withdraw from the class. If faculty and staff are apprised of the issue and know how to handle it both with the student and administratively, there may be alternative scenarios that would allow for continuation in the class.

The most common way for the participants in the study to avoid disinterested faculty and staff was to get advice from their peers. Jeffrey, James, Michelle, Emily, Samantha, and Clara all mentioned that the friends they had made in their classes were people that they trusted to provide recommendations on which professors and classes to take or to avoid. In this way, peers who were further along in the program were seen as having insider information that could help them avoid taking a bad class or professor. Unfortunately, this solution only worked for those that had that peer support system. Students like Margaret bemoaned the lack of advice regarding which

professors were good or bad and thought that one disappointing class she had taken could possibly have been avoided if someone had just told her what the professor was like. While ultimately, she did not end up withdrawing from the class, it left her feeling like she had missed out on taking a class she might have enjoyed and gotten more out of.

### **Discrepant information**

This chapter has so far outlined the way that the findings of this study fit into the current literature, but there were some findings that did not, and further, some data that showed up as a constant in other studies was not mentioned at all by the participants in this one. GPA shows up as a variable that impacts students in all the models discussed in Chapter 2, but the participants in this study made it clear that grades were not very important to them. While Kathryn commented that she had one A- on an otherwise perfect record, Steve, Michelle, and Sarah dismissed grades away as unimportant so long as they received earned credits for the class. Most participants did not even mention grades at all during the interview.

Cohen (2012a) found that adult master's degree students wanted to be involved in professional and departmental activities and included those in her model as important to persistence, but those were not mentioned by the participants in this study, save for Aaron who was involved in alumni networking events and once worked as a faculty aide. In Bean and Metzner's (1985) study they outlined three environmental press variables, two of which applied to the participants in this study (lower engagement at all levels and high interaction with non-school related persons) and one that did not: classes taught as if the students were traditional. No participants raised this issue, although this was most likely because the program that they were enrolled in was specifically designed for part-time adult students and thus the faculty was at least partially aware of the different needs of this population.

### **Recommendations**

The findings of this study suggest that institutions need to offer avenues of support for part-time students who do not have a built-in support system. While those students with a supportive family have people to turn to in order to bolster themselves when things get tough, students who do not have a spouse, children, or other family members to turn to may find themselves overwhelmed and unable to continue in the program. As Sarah stated, “You need the support of someone that’s close to you.” Even if it is not your entire family, just one person will do, as Michelle found when she turned to her cousin for support. Since advisors are the student’s main point of contact, they may be ideal for this position, although it would require looking carefully at student ratios to ensure that the advisor could devote enough time to each student. In lieu of that, it may be beneficial for institutions to have specific counselors that are on hand to give out advice when more personal rather than academic issues arise.

In addition, students need to know where to go to ask for help or to report a large, life-changing event such as the death of a loved one or an illness with long term implications. When Wendy’s husband passed away, she told her advisor who sent a card for the funeral, but there was no mention of whether or not there would be follow up beyond Wendy’s initiating a regular advising session. As her husband was her main source of encouragement, it would be helpful for the school to have a way to proactively follow up with Wendy and students like her to ensure that they continue with their programs.

More contact from the administration in general beyond admission would also be helpful. Several participants mentioned that they engaged actively with the admissions office, but that once they were admitted, communication dropped off. Clara mentioned that while she got an email nearly every semester that warned students about plagiarism, what she really wanted was

more readily available information on things that would help her as a student, such as how to get a student ID or navigate the library system: “Maybe there was an email when I first got accepted but like, you know, busy life here.” An email or two every semester from the advising office that gave easily accessible links for resources that the students had access to but may not be aware of would help the students continue to be self-directed, but also feel as though the administrators understood what their particular student population needed most and were being supportive of their needs.

Since multiple participants mentioned that it was around the time of midterms and after the final withdrawal deadline that they worried most about persisting with a class, an encouraging email from the administration might help struggling students decide to persist rather than drop out. Something that reminded students about withdrawal deadlines was seen as helpful but going further and perhaps listing resources that could help bolster a student’s confidence such as any writing center hours or even computer lab information could be enough to prompt students to reach out for the help they need.

Administrators should also look at ways to foster peer relationships and a feeling of community between students. This is understandably a monumentally challenging task as many students are international or not located near enough to campus to establish in-person friendships, but enough participants in this study mentioned needing a fellow student to turn to for advice that it may be a fruitful avenue to pursue. Enrolled students who could act as student mentors who had a good grasp of administrative departments and policies or who knew enough to point another student in the right direction might allow a more welcoming path for struggling students to reach out and strengthen the idea that Clara verbalized that “we’re all here to support one another.” The participants in this study indicated that there was an informal practice of this



happening now, but a formal, administrative supported team of identified enrolled students that were willing to help their peers might be helpful.

Finally, administrators should make an effort to involve the families of students and help them to understand and be a part of the part-time master's degree student's journey. As was reiterated many times by the participants, while they were the ones earning the degree, their families were helping to support them and helping to shoulder responsibilities when they needed to prioritize schoolwork over other activities. This may be easier for families to do if they feel more involved in the process or have a better understanding of what their loved one is doing. This could be as simple as hosting events for prospective students and their families or having orientation materials that were geared towards those families after the adult learner has gained admission to the program.

### **Future Research**

The findings of this study are intriguing and suggest that the part-time master's degree student population needs more research devoted to it in order to best understand the needs and challenges of this population. In general, master's degree students are not often studied without their doctoral counterparts, and studies on part-time graduate students are also rare, but clearly there is an impressive amount of data waiting to be uncovered within this growing higher education student population.

There were several findings that were outside of the scope of this study that would provide a rich resource for future studies. The role of technology in the classroom was brought up by a number of participants, many of whom took classes at a distance from the comfort of their own homes or offices. It would be interesting to see if there were any correlations between the compassion of professors that mostly taught in on-campus classes versus professors who

mostly taught online courses. Several participants also mentioned that information was hard to find on websites and that informational emails sent out rarely contained the sort of information they were looking for, so it would be helpful to investigate what information part-time master's degree students find they need from their institutions versus what they actually received. While financial concerns were covered in this study, the income of the students was not included in the data that was gathered. It would be interesting to know what the income levels of these students are and how hard of a financial impact the degree program had on them, leading the way for studies into the cost of these programs and what price-point they felt equated a sufficient return on their investment.

A mixed-methods study would also be beneficial to add more depth to the data on this population. By gathering institutional and personal data on the participants and as well as conducting interviews, the qualitative data could inform the quantitative data and give a richer overview of the participants and their persistence. This would allow direct correlation from quantitative models of student persistence to see if they work for the part-time master's student population. It would also be interesting to do a study on students who had failed to persist and dropped out of the program. This study was concerned with those students who were currently persisting, but interviews with students who had already left the program could provide missing insight as to what barriers they were unable to overcome and how an institution might intercede in future cases.

Finally, a follow up study with these participants in two years would be beneficial to see if they did actually complete their programs or if they were still persisting towards the degree. It would be interesting to see if the participants were able to successfully complete the program and

if they were not, whether the factors that had kept them from graduating were ones that were highlighted in this study, or new ones that were not addressed here.

### **Final Reflections**

When I first started as a doctoral student at Lesley University the imposter syndrome that I felt was nearly overwhelming. I am sorry to say to those reading this as they work on their own dissertation research that the feeling never quite goes away, although it was little by little as I worked through my study, it was replaced with the creeping suspicion that I might actually know what I was talking about. The turning point in my study design came when I picked up the Cohen and Greenberg article on master's student persistence. Like a bride that tries on a wedding dress and knows it was the one, that was the moment that I realized I had found the population I wanted to focus on. Trading emails with researchers at the National Center for Education Statistics and the Council for Graduate Schools and confirming that persistence data on master's degree students, never mind part-time master's degree students, was nearly impossible to come by only fueled my resolve. Still, I worried that even if my study were approved, I would never be able to find enough participants.

That fear was quickly resolved, and I remain entirely thankful to the participants that volunteered to be interviewed. I found the interview process to be incredible informative in multiple ways, both for the data I was searching for and also for myself as a researcher. My first interview went so well that it set the stage for the rest and built my confidence with every hour I spent talking to each participant about this important topic. Coding the data was my favorite part of this whole process. I felt like an archaeologist uncovering an unknown civilization as I sorted through the participant responses and was delighted at how quickly patterns emerged. It was a moment of pure satisfaction to find that my many of themes were discussed in the literature—not

on this specific population, but on adult learners in general. In the end I feel that I have made a significant contribution to the field by looking at an understudied population and using a qualitative approach to gather my data, and while writing this massive document has been a saga that has stretched on for years now, it feels amazing to write these final words of this momentous achievement.

I firmly believe that the support systems currently offered to part-time master's degree students can and should be improved upon, which will lead to an increase in completion rates within those programs. Adult, part-time master's degree students juggle a number of responsibilities in their day to day lives, yet still manage to enroll and attend classes in their programs, sometimes navigating their way through increasingly complex circumstances in order to meet their degree requirements. They are investing precious time and attention to their quest for a graduate degree and institutions should ask themselves how it reflects on their programs that nearly half of those enrolled students will never see a return on their investment in higher education. It is my hope that this research inspires others to engage with part-time master's degree students to provide even more data for school administrators to use in order to strengthen their programs and the support systems offered to these students. Speaking directly with part-time master's degree students is the best way to learn, in their own words, how their unique journeys in academia have affected their persistence in their programs.

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## Appendix A

### Semi-Structured Interview Questions

#### Initial comments to interviewee:

“Thank you for agreeing to sit down and talk with me. My name is Erin and I am studying persistence in adult students that are enrolled in part-time graduate degree programs. Just so you are aware I have started recording this conversation. Could you please state your name and that you have agreed to be recorded for the length of this session? Thank you. Just to reiterate what was on the consent form, you are free to not answer any of these questions if you do not want to as your participation is entirely voluntary, and you can withdraw from this study at any time. With that said, how has your day been?”

**Approximate length of interview:** 60 to 90 minutes.

#### Questions:

1. Could you tell me the story of how you decided to enroll in the program?

Key Follow-ups: Why did you want to pursue a graduate degree? What were your hopes/fears? Why did you choose your program?

General follow-ups: Could you tell me a little bit more about that? How did that make you feel? Where was this? Who was with you?

2. How has your experience been so far?

Key Follow-ups: What has been most challenging aspect of the program so far? What has been the most satisfying aspect of the program so far? Where are you at in the program?

General follow-ups: Could you tell me a little bit more about that? How did that make you feel? Where was this? Who was with you?

3. What do you think is most important to your persistence in the program?

Follow-ups: When things get tough, how do you get through that moment? Have you ever thought about withdrawing from the program or a class?

General follow-ups: Could you tell me a little bit more about that? How did that make you feel? Where was this? Who was with you?

4. What would be the most valuable piece of advice you would give to someone thinking about enrolling in the program?

General follow-up: Could you tell me a little bit more about that?

5. Is there anything else you would like to talk about that we have not brought up so far?

**Final comments to interviewee:**

“Thank you so much for agreeing to sit down with me and taking the time to talk about your experiences in the program. Do you have any questions or further comments before I stop recording? In the next few weeks I will be sending you an email asking if you would like to review or correct the transcript of this interview so I can be sure that I have captured everything you have said correctly. I will also offer you the opportunity to review the summary of your story once I have written it so that you can again verify that I have correctly understood everything. Thank you again for agreeing to sit with me for this interview, I really appreciate it!”

**Appendix B**

## Initial Email Contact

Sent from: eschroed@lesley.edu

Subject: Part-time Master's Degree Research Study Opportunity

Hello,

My name is Erin Schroeder and I am a doctoral candidate at Lesley University conducting dissertation research on the persistence of part-time master's students. This study is intended to gather information from currently enrolled students to help colleges and universities improve the graduation rates of their part-time master's degree students. I am very interested in talking to students like you to learn about the experiences you have had thus far in your studies at [School name].

I am looking for participants who are willing to sit for a 60-90 minute interview either in person or over video chat (Facetime, Google Hangout, Skype, etc.). Participation in this study is entirely voluntary and should you volunteer, you will receive a \$10 Amazon gift card as a thank you for your time and all data collected will be kept confidential.

If you would like to participate in this study, please reply to this email confirming your interest and let me know what dates and times work best for you in the next two weeks.

Thank you,

Erin

## **Appendix C**

### Secondary Email Contact

Hi [Participant name],

Thank you for your interest! Would you like to meet in person (I am based in the [CITY] area) or talk over video-chat? I can do Facetime, Zoom, Skype, or Google chat, whatever works best for you. I am attaching a consent form in advance of us speaking, if you could sign and return it to me before the interview that would be great.

Thanks,

Erin

**Appendix D****Written Informed Consent Form****Informed Consent to Participate in a Dissertation Research Study****Lesley University****Graduate School of Education**

Dear \_\_\_\_\_:

My name is Erin Schroeder, and I am a doctoral candidate in Educational Studies at Lesley University. I am conducting research on persistence in part-time master's degree students. I would welcome the opportunity to talk with you about your experiences and invite you to participate in the study which is described below.

If you agree to participate, you will be contacted to schedule an interview which will last between 60-90 minutes and will be recorded. Interviews will be held at a location and time convenient for you either in person or via video chat (such as Skype, Facetime, etc.) on a password protected network.

In order to protect your privacy, identity, and anonymity, you will be asked to provide a pseudonym as the name by which you would like to be referred to in the study.

Once the interview is transcribed, you may be contacted again via phone or email to enhance or clarify your statements. You will have an opportunity to review your own responses and

statements in the form of a narrative summary of your interview to ensure accuracy. Once the study is complete, you will have the chance to read the study outcomes and findings if you are interested in doing so.

Participation in the study is voluntary, and you may withdraw at any time without penalty.

All information provided by you will be treated in a confidential manner, and no real names will appear on the transcripts of the interview or in the discussion of the study results. In addition, your institution will not be identified in the study.

While portions of the study may be presented publicly or later published, no identifying information will be included.

There are very few risks anticipated with participation in this study. Due to the semi-structured nature of the interviews if sensitive topics arise, I will provide a list of several phone numbers for student services programs that may be helpful. For participating in the study, you will receive a \$10 Amazon gift card via email before the start of the interview.

If you have questions about the study or your potential participation, feel free to contact me via phone at 617-921-6295 or via email at [eschroed@lesley.edu](mailto:eschroed@lesley.edu). There is a Standing Committee for Human Subjects in Research at Lesley University to which complaints or problems concerning any research project may, and should, be reported if they arise. Contact the Committee Chairperson at [irb@lesley.edu](mailto:irb@lesley.edu).



Please read and sign below if you are willing to participate:

I, \_\_\_\_\_ (print full name), hereby agree to participate in the project described above. I give my permission to be interviewed and understand that it will be tape recorded. I understand that my responses will be kept and secured for five years before they are destroyed.

I understand the nature and intent of the study and have been given the chance to ask questions. I understand whom to contact if I have any future questions. I also understand that I can withdraw from the study at any time without consequence, and I can expect to receive a copy of this consent form.

Participant's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_