

ADULT LEARNER APPROACH TO TRANSFORMATIONAL CHANGE:  
AN INTERPRETIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

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## **ABSTRACT**

**ADULT LEARNER APPROACH TO TRANSFORMATIONAL CHANGE:**

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This qualitative study was an exploration of the lived experiences of adult learners (over age 24) enrolled in graduate teacher preparation programs and their distinct needs and expectations related to program entry, persistence, and completion. Five graduate teacher preparation degree-seeking study participants openly shared their respective academic and lived experiences. With a theoretical framework comprised of Knowles' andragogy theory and Vygotsky's theory of social constructivism, an inductive approach to data analysis facilitated condensing extensive and varied raw data to code-listed categories and themes. Interpretive phenomenological analysis was appropriate to show how adult learners make sense of their academic and lived experiences and the efforts they made to conquer challenges during program entry, persistence, and completion. Several themes emerged aligned to the research question and subquestion: How do adult learners make sense of their academic and lived experiences as they enter, persist, and complete their graduate teacher preparation program? and, How do adult learners engage and negotiate the university experience to meet their needs and expectations? This study contributed to the literature on how adult learners engage and negotiate their experience in graduate teacher preparation to make sense of met and unmet needs.

Keywords: Adult Learner, Higher Education, Graduate, Teacher Preparation, Transformation, Andragogy, Social Constructivism, Qualitative Research, Interpretive Phenomenology

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

*We know that if we're going to remain economically competitive in the world, and viable as a civic democracy, that we're going to have to get more people educated to higher levels.*

—Margaret Spellings, Secretary of Education (U.S. Department of Education, 2006)

An adult without some college or a 2-year degree is 50% more likely to live in poverty (Weise, 2018). Pew Research Center (2014) noted that adults without any college are more likely to pay less tax, need government help, lead an unhealthy lifestyle, and die younger. Higher education enrollment faced an unprecedented drop during the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (2022), enrollment losses in the pandemic represented a 2-year decline of 5.1%. Given college access and completion's impact on social mobility and economic opportunity in the United States, there is a growing public focus on understanding the challenges and opportunities for all students in higher education and efforts to better measure institutional success (Espinosa et al., 2015).

Achieving academic success in higher education extends beyond gaining admission (Sogunro, 2015). Success can be even more challenging for nontraditional students or adult learners. Ross-Gordon (2011) defined adult learners as meeting at least one of the following characteristics:

- Entry to college delayed by at least 1 year following high school,
- having dependents,
- being a single parent,
- being employed full time,
- being financially independent,

- attending part time, and
- not having a high school diploma.

This definition suggests that adult status is determined not by age but by the multiple life circumstances adults typically hold.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2019), adult learners in the United States account for more than 50% of the enrolled student population in colleges and universities. In 2019, the overall enrollment of traditional 18- to 24-year-olds was 41%, indicating that adult learners hold the numerical majority. However, perceptions of the 4-year college student landscape focus on vibrant, young high school graduates ready to explore career opportunities while living and learning on campus. Traditional students fit the pattern of devoting a significant portion of their time to full-time classes and college activities. With higher education anchored in historical traditions of residential enrollment for youth, there is little space, voice, and value for other groups, particularly those most different from young, traditional-aged students: adult learners.

Because adult learners constitute more than half the student population, it is useful to examine what higher education leaders are doing to prepare for adult learner growth. An important consideration is whether higher education institutions (HEIs) are prepared for and adequately serve adult learners (Caruth, 2014). If not, students outside the historical college-going pattern could perceive the college experience as not tailored to meet their needs (Westervelt, 2016). Over 30 years ago, Cross (1980) warned higher education systems of the growing presence of adults on college and university campuses. In doing so, Cross advocated for a better understanding of barriers faced by adult learners. Quinnan (1997) found that most adult learner researchers were quantitatively focused on comparing adult and traditional-aged learners

through studies of needs, retention, and persistence. Terenzini and Pascarella (1998) deemed the lack of adult learner research substantial bias, leading to further disparities for the already-underserved group. Kasworm et al. (2000) found inequities in qualitative research further marginalized adult learning in higher education, spanning public policy, institutional programming, and institutional mission development. Despite researchers addressing the shifts needed in higher education, few have attempted to understand and identify promising practices to support adult learners navigating the paths between education and employment (The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning [CAEL], 2022). Thus, there has been little exploration of this population's learning needs, interests, and supports.

Remenick (2019) suggested that HEIs' long-entrenched systems and structures have left adult learners institutionally invisible, marginalized, or systematically ignored. Evidence shows that existing higher education structures and incentive systems are not well-positioned or designed to serve adult learners (Gallagher, 2021). According to Donaldson (2022), adult learners do not drop out of college for academic reasons; they leave because the higher education system lacks the flexibility and responsiveness they need in their already-full lives.

Traditional students and adult learners require different services based on diverse needs (Caruth, 2014). Compared to traditional students, adult learners (i.e., nontraditional students) face challenges balancing jobs, families, and school (Bidwell, 2014). A commonly held view is that adult learners lack the confidence and academic skills typically held by their traditional-aged counterparts (Ford & Grantham, 2003; Marshall, 2016). Knowles et al. (2014) asserted that HEIs are deficient in providing for nontraditional students who might not fit university life tailored to the traditional student. Adult learners attending HEIs face various personal, professional, and academic barriers that impact their ability to enter, persist, and graduate successfully (Spellman,

2007). Adult learners experience barriers when seeking degrees, such as the need to balance multiple work–life roles while pursuing higher education (e.g., Osam et al., 2017), difficulties attending classes while working a full-time job (e.g., Chen, 2017), a lack of familial support to return to school (e.g., Gagnon & Packard, 2012), the need to reduce work hours and take pay cuts to accommodate schoolwork (e.g., Kim & Baker, 2015), and difficulties transitioning to the role of a student after an extended time away from school (e.g., Chen, 2017).

Adult learning theories contribute to program design and implementation. The multiple learning theories provide insight into how adults learn and how instructors center their practice around effectively meeting the population’s needs. Andragogy, the art and science of teaching adults, is a framework for developing effective adult learning processes (Smith, 2002). Andragogy’s learning principles align with social constructivist theory (Vygotsky, 1978), thus enabling sense-making. Constructivists believe knowledge creation does not occur in isolation but within the learners’ social environments. Adult learners’ higher education experience profoundly impacts their successful entrance, persistence, and degree completion. The complex interaction among adult students, institutional focus and support, and external influences are factors that, when taken together, create the adult students’ learning environment and might increase the risk of adult learners not completing their degrees (Merrill, 2015).

### **Research Question**

The research question for this study was, How do adult learners make sense of their academic and lived experiences as they enter, persist, and complete their graduate teacher preparation program? The subquestion was, How do adult learners engage and negotiate the university experience to meet their needs and expectations?

## **Background of the Study**

The challenge in higher education is understanding the adult learner population to design responsive programs for them to thrive (Ross-Gordon, 2011). One of the largest teacher preparation programs in the Southwestern United States, the College of Education (COE; blinded for review) redesigned its undergraduate and graduate certification programs over the past 3 academic years. The COE is within a comprehensive 4-year public research university, measured not by whom it excludes but by whom it includes and how they succeed; advancing research and discovery of public value; and assuming fundamental responsibility for the economic, social, cultural, and overall health of the communities it serves (Arizona State University, n.d.-a).

The authentic process of understanding and implementing equity efforts requires an intentional focus on historical and structural inequalities that have been institutionalized through practices and policies that require systemic transformation. The COE abides by the commitment to systemic equity, the idea of which is to consciously design/redesign processes, procedures, and policies—whole systems—that seek equity, justice, and inclusion. Systemic equity is a measured process of removing barriers and providing access and resources to reflect the needs, demands, and approaches for all communities to achieve systemic equality of outcomes.

The COE's student population of learners between 18 to 24 years has decreased, and the average age of students transferring to the COE's teacher preparation bachelor's program is 25.2 years. As evidenced by the COE data, adult learners enrolled in undergraduate and graduate programs have higher median loans, and traditional students (between 18–24) receive higher median gift aid. Considered independent students, learners over 24 years do not include their parents' income in their expected family contribution. Comprising 37% of graduate students, adult learners age 30 and older have the lowest graduation rate at 81%.

COE enrollment data show a steady increase in students 25 years and older (see Table 1). In the 2021–2022 academic year, 5,907 of the students enrolled in the college were 25 years or older; in comparison, 4,543 were between 18 and 24. Enrollment numbers for students 25 years and above exceeds the 18–24 enrollment at the program’s start.

**Table 1**

*Enrollment Trends at the COE by Age Range at the Start of the Program*

Age	AY 2016–2017	AY 2017–2018	AY 2018–2019	AY 2019–2020	AY 2020–2021	AY 2021–2022
18–24	3,250	3,404	3,620	3,988	4,314	4,543
25–29	1,558	1,798	2,008	2,246	2,457	2,566
30–34	766	830	890	1,000	1,180	1,252
35–39	456	538	590	708	760	801
40–44	344	377	399	451	496	546
45–49	223	253	287	323	358	375
50–54	94	108	124	128	140	177
55–59	45	55	68	84	89	90
60–64	5	9	12	12	9	18
<18	65	69	61	64	63	61

The COE seeks to better understand the overall student experience within its teacher education programs. Recently, the college undertook a program redesign focused on personalized program pathways, student flexibility, and reduced barriers. COE leaders recognize the importance of serving adult and working learners for future success. They need to understand the challenges or barriers facing adults when enrolling and completing a graduate degree or

teaching certificate and, more importantly, how the college can reduce or remove the barriers. Therefore, this study centered on the lived experiences of adult learners in graduate teacher preparation. With COE's increased enrollment of students 25 years and older and a full year of implementing the redesigned program, it was necessary to explore how the college met or failed to meet adult learners' distinct needs and expectations. Understanding the redesigned graduate teacher preparation program's (GTPP) impact on the adult learner's academic and lived experiences is vital for the college's growth and expansion and particularly important for future adult students.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Adult learner enrollment in higher education will continue to rise. The learner experience significantly impacts enrollment, graduation rates, institutional sustainability, and life beyond the curriculum. The challenge for higher education leaders is to discover promising practices for adult learners to thrive as they navigate the paths between education and employment (CAEL, 2018).

The COE leadership is seeking adult learner feedback to foster flexibility in innovation. In gathering this information, COE leaders focus on the most significant factors needed to support adult learners by aligning programs and services with real-time workforce needs (see CAEL, 2022). Some students want to be educators. The COE leaders' quest is to understand and value everyone's work-life situations and provide balance for students studying to become educators while maintaining full-time employment, managing a household, and fulfilling other responsibilities. There is a need to encourage and equip adult learners to build social capital and diversify the workforce.

## **Purpose and Significance of Study**

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of adult learners (over age 24) enrolled in GTPPs to identify their distinct needs and expectations related to program entry, persistence, and completion. This research is important in many ways. First, it was a study of adult learners in GTPPs. Understanding how adult learners make sense of their academic and lived experiences could help HEI leaders design programs and services more intentionally. Second, this study's findings could allow university faculty and staff responsible for programmatic design to consider the experiences offered in graduate teacher preparation. For example, with relevant learning experiences focused on knowledge of background differences and similarities in course content and field experiences, adult learners could be more motivated to learn and connect to perform tasks. Finally, this study contributes to the education literature by providing insight into how a person (i.e., an adult learner) in a given context (i.e., enrolled in a GTPP) makes sense of a given phenomenon (i.e., program entry, persistence, and completion).

## **Theoretical Framework**

Adult learning theory (Knowles, 1984), or andragogy, was the primary theoretical framework for this study. However, because individuals construct learning in social spaces and lived experiences are social phenomena, social constructivist theory (Vygotsky, 1978) contributed to the study's design. An understanding of adult learning theories is instrumental in designing and implementing programs. Instead of other learning theories, andragogy and social constructivist theory enabled deeper insight into how adults learn so that instructors are more effective and responsive to their learners' needs.

Andragogy, the art and science designed to teach adults, provides a foundation for developing guidelines for effective adult learning processes (Smith, 2002). A link to social

constructivist theory (Vygotsky, 1978) emerged from the learning principles of andragogy. Constructivists believe knowledge does not occur in isolation but within the learner's social environment. The complex interaction between students, institutions, and external influences increases the risk of adult learners not completing their degrees (Merrill, 2015). Adult learners' college experience profoundly impacts their successful entrance, persistence, and completion.

This study was a means to determine how adult learners make sense of their academic and lived experiences as they enter, persist, and complete their GTPP. In addition, I wanted to understand how adult learners engage and negotiate the higher education experience to meet their needs and expectations. Therefore, andragogy and social constructivism provided an appropriate frame for the study.

### **Summary of Methodology**

This qualitative study had a social constructivist-interpretivist paradigm. Interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) is a scholarly approach based on participants' experiences and emerging common themes (Creswell, 2008; Ponterotto, 2005); thus, it was an appropriate method of inquiry for this study. Interpretive phenomenology was the qualitative research design used to focus on the experiences and lives of adult students who have completed or are completing the COE teacher education program. Although quantitative research would provide statistical and comparative data on enrollment, retention, course completion, and graduation rates, a qualitative approach is appropriate to understand the participants' perspectives of their experiences (Kelly, 2016).

This study focused on adult learners enrolled in graduate-level teacher preparation programs. Purposeful sampling was the approach used to identify participants who met the

following criteria: (a) over age 24, (b) enrolled in a GTPP, and (c) working full-time. This study was an exploration of the academic and lived experiences of five adult learners.

Denzin and Lincoln (2011) noted that qualitative research is appropriate to answer questions about the complex nature of phenomena, often to describe and understand a phenomenon from the participants' point of view. The goal of exploring perspectives of lived experiences is to describe the meaning of the experience in terms of what the participants experienced and how (Teherani et al., 2015). By examining the experiences of others, researchers can develop new meanings and appreciations to inform their understanding of the experience (Laverty, 2003). Chapter Three will present the research process in greater detail.

### **Researcher Positionality**

An important research component is for researchers to disclose their positions and links to the study. Over the last 15 years, I have served in various roles within the P-20 educational environment and have participated in designing and deploying educational systems and pedagogical techniques. As the COE's Associate Director of Teacher Preparation and Clinical Assistant Professor of Teacher Preparation for the last 3 years, I have recognized the need to elicit feedback to identify areas of strength and opportunity. Specifically, it is necessary to collect information specific to the success of adult learners, a student group experiencing a wide equity gap, to identify priorities for redesigning the higher education system with a focus on equity. Some issues that adversely impact adult student enrollment, course completion, and retention include financial aid challenges, family influence, and personal responsibilities (e.g., childcare and transportation needs).

In addition to my professional experience, I obtained my master's degree as an adult learner working full time. I am pursuing my doctoral degree while working full time and

managing a family with two children under 5. My lived experience aligns with the individuals I studied. I conducted, organized, and wrote the study objectively based on the literature, a select adult learner pathway (graduate), and the selected participants. The research related to learners' academic and lived experiences amid constant transformation in higher education.

Power asymmetries exist in people's abilities to create and access knowledge (Bozeman, 2019). Higher education institutions are well-positioned to improve academic, student services, and outreach models focused on adult learners' needs (Deggs, 2018). I sought to understand the lived experiences of members of this population to inform continuous improvement of the COE's educational systems and pedagogical techniques to help adult learners succeed and graduate (see NASPA, 2017).

### **Assumptions**

The rationale for this study stemmed from the assumption that the GTPP presents barriers for adult learners. Also assumed was that much is unknown about adult learners and their experiences at HEIs, particularly at the COE. Phenomenology was a means to capture participants' voices in direct involvement with the researcher.

### **Limitations and Delimitations**

The limitations of this study came from the design and methodology characteristics that influenced the interpretation of the findings. One limitation is that the sample size was small due to the time-consuming nature of the research. Phenomenological researchers invest significant time in obtaining in-depth accounts of lived experiences. In addition, there was a limited sample population, as the focus was a specific graduate teacher education pathway within a college of education in the Southwestern United States. Furthermore, although the narrowed sample and

selection enabled in-depth analysis, the transferability of the findings from participants' lived experiences of the phenomenon might be limited.

### **Definitions of Terms**

*Adult learner.* Ross-Gordon (2011) identified adult learners as meeting at least one of the following characteristics:

- Entry to college delayed by at least 1 year following high school,
- having dependents,
- being a single parent,
- being employed full time,
- being financially independent,
- attending part time, and
- not having a high school diploma.

*Andragogy.* According to Knowles (1970), andragogy is the art and science of helping adults learn. Andragogy is synonymous with adult learning theory.

*Interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA).* Husserl proposed IPA as a means to discover the essence of a phenomenon (Mapp, 2008; Moran, 2000). A constructivist paradigm orients interpretive phenomenology with an anchor in the understanding of being (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

*Social constructivism.* Vygotsky (1978) proposed the theoretical framework of social constructivism, arguing that learning is the result of a combination of previous external influences and new external influences and experiences (Karpov, 2014).

## **Summary**

Chapter One provided an introduction to the study context and background, including the concepts of andragogy and social constructivism, adult learners, and the population's lived academic and student experiences. In addition, Chapter One presented the problem statement, the purpose of the study, and the guiding research question and subquestion. After a brief discussion of the significance of the study, there were definitions of relevant terms and the assumptions, limitations, and delimitations.

## **Organization of Study**

Chapter Two will present a literature review of the research and perceptions about adult (nontraditional) learners, indicating the gaps in scholarly research this study addressed. Peer-reviewed articles and books by major scholarly contributors will provide insight. The organization of the synthesized review will be by themes related to the study, divided into three major sections. Moreover, Chapter Two contextualizes the study in current research and literature.

Chapter Three will begin with the topic background, the research question and subquestion, and the methodology and study design. The study took place in Fall 2022 and involved five adult learners from the COE teacher preparation program. Finally, Chapter Three will present the informed consent, data collection, and data analysis procedures.

Chapter Four will be a detailed presentation of the findings, with the emergent themes in narrative form. The study's focus was on how adult learners make sense of their academic and lived experiences as they enter, persist, and complete their program. Chapter Four will present findings to answer the interpretive phenomenological question, How do adult learners make sense of their academic and lived experiences as they enter, persist, and complete their program?

and the subquestion, How do adult learners engage and negotiate the university experience to meet their needs and expectations? There will be a summary of the findings and an action plan.

After a summary of the findings and conclusions, Chapter Five will present further discussion of the study's implications for research and practice. Limitations of the study and future research recommendations will appear. Chapter Five will conclude with a review of the study.

## **CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW**

The purpose of the study was to understand the lived experiences of adult learners (i.e., students over 24) enrolled in GTPPs as they identify their distinct needs and expectations related to program entry, persistence, and completion. Chapter T is a means to explore and discover the gaps in the literature addressed by this study. Salient topics from the literature review include changing demographics in higher education, adult learners in higher education (adult learners and andragogy, adult learners and social constructivism), and higher education responses to adult learners.

### **Changing Demographics in Higher Education**

The evolving U.S. economy and workforce demands have led to greater adult learner enrollment in higher education (Dellas & Sakellaris, 2003). Over the last few decades, there has been increasing pressure for HEIs to produce outcomes aligned with job market needs. Despite rising enrollment among adult learners, the probability of completing their degree remains significantly lower than their traditional-aged counterparts (Markle, 2015). Although adult learners (nontraditional students) display a higher attrition rate than traditional students (Astin, 1975), the reasons for this discrepancy are unclear (Bean & Metzner, 1985).

Cross (1980) described the adult learner (nontraditional student) as one who engages in either part- or full-time education while maintaining employment and family obligations. Ross-Gordon (2011) characterized adult learners as challenged by balancing higher education with life roles, including those of parent, caregiver, spouse or partner, and working professional. Although having multiple life roles allows adult learners to bring rich experiences to the classroom, their commitments present challenges to academic time and resource allocation. For this group to

thrive, HEI leaders must understand what motivates adult learners to excel academically when barriers arise (Chao et al., 2007).

Despite some progress, research shows HEI leaders have not effectively grown their understanding of adult learners' personal and educational needs (Bruce-Sanford et al., 2015). Higher education leaders may implement programs and services and create a campus climate inclusive of adults in all academic programs (Kasworm et al., 2002). Benshoff (1991) urged a reexamination of all aspects of the college environment to address the adult learner population properly. Specifically, institution leaders must better understand adult learners' perceived barriers and preferred program features (Baharudin et al., 2013; Stein et al., 2011).

The literature review presents significant evidence that adult learners' characteristics impact academic programs and the students' ability to enter, persist, and graduate in higher education. Many of the characteristics described by researchers suggest the need for research into how these characteristics impact the higher education experience and how adult learner programs respond. According to Wiltshire (1973), understanding learner needs was one of the most prominent topics to address in adult education. However, scholars have devoted limited attention to the adult learner community (Donaldson & Townsend, 2007). Many researchers have addressed the higher education entry, persistence, and completion of traditional-aged students; however, few have explored adult learners' entry, persistence, and completion at 4-year institutions (Guidos & Dooris, 2008).

## **Theories Framing Study**

### **Adult Learners and Andragogy**

Addressing the needs of adult learners in higher education requires examining adult learning theories. Despite several theoretical approaches to adult learning, andragogy was the

most prominent and the best suited for this qualitative study (see Ross-Gordon, 2011). Unlike pedagogy, which is instruction for children, Knowles (1984) defined andragogy as the art and science of instruction for adults. Knowles' andragogy model of learning serves as a resource to bridge the gap between adult learners and HEIs. The five assumptions of andragogy theory specific to adult learners are self-concept, adult learner experience, readiness to learn, orientation to learning, and motivation to learn.

With the assumption of self-concept, Knowles (1984) asserted that adults become more self-directed learners as they mature. For example, if schools do not give students ownership over the learning journey—whether by allowing them to choose what they learn or how they learn it—students will lack the motivation to acquire new knowledge and skills. Adult learning theory educators and researchers suggest that allowing students to direct their learning gives them empowerment and motivation (Bergeron & Rudenga, 1996; Knowles, 1984; Rule, 2006). Carroll (2004) stated that choice occurs when instructional practice allows for greater individualization and instruction. Adults should be self-directed and primarily responsible for planning, continuing, and evaluating their learning experiences (Brookfield, 2009; Knowles, 1984; Merriam, 2001). Through self-directed learning, students can identify their needs, set learning goals, identify resources, and select strategies for learning and evaluating outcomes (Boyer et al., 2014; Knowles et al., 2014). Brame (2016) contended that engagement in knowledge creation and understanding is critical for adult learners.

Knowles' (1984) second assumption is the adult learner experience, suggesting that adults bring significant experience to the educational setting. A foundational assumption of andragogy is that adults have acquired a wealth of skills and lived experiences that can enrich the learning environment. Knowles (1970) argued that prior experiences are the best resources and

tools to equip adult learners for future learning opportunities. Programs that include experiential learning techniques are a way to engage past experiences in group discussions and activities, problem-solving exercises, and simulation activities.

With the third assumption, readiness to learn, Knowles (1984) asserted that adults are eager to learn when information helps them accomplish relevant tasks. According to Knowles et al. (2005), an implication associated with readiness to learn is accurately timing a learning experience to match a life development stage. More specifically, adult learners have greater motivation when they seek to improve their current life situation, whether personal (health, family) or work-related (Silliman & Schleifer, 2018; Sogunro, 2015). Therefore, Knowles emphasized providing the learning objectives to students when they start a course to address its purpose and relevance to their lives (Howell, 2001; Knowles et al., 1998).

Knowles' (1984) fourth assumption, orientation to learning, means that adult learners want to solve problems. As adults mature, they move away from subject-based learning, which centers around knowing about a concept, to applying theory to practice in real-world situations (Knowles et al., 1998). More specifically, orientation to learning is the notion that adults are task- or problem-centered in their approach to learning; in comparison, younger learners are generally subject-based (Knowles et al., 2005).

With the final assumption, motivation to learn, Knowles (1984) argued that adults prioritize internal over external motivation. Merriam (2001) suggested that although adult learners might respond to external motivators, internal priorities are more important and thus more motivating. Compared to traditional-aged students, adults demand direct and immediate application of knowledge as their time perspective shifts (Knowles et al., 1998).

In addition to the five assumptions of adult learning focused on how adult learners process information differently, Knowles (1984) developed four principles of andragogy, which provide further insight for applying these assumptions. The first principle is that adults must be actively involved in planning and evaluating their instruction. With the second principle, Knowles stated that experience, including mistakes, must be the basis for learning activities. The third principle suggests that adults engage most with learning subjects or skills that have immediate relevance and impact their job or personal life. Finally, Knowles' fourth principle is that adults must engage in problem-centered learning rather than be passive participants when acquiring new knowledge.

The principles of andragogy work best in practice when adapted to fit the uniqueness of the learners and learning situations (Knowles et al., 2014). According to these underlying assumptions, if institution leaders develop teaching and learning strategies to meet adult learners' diverse needs, the students will be more academically motivated, even during the most challenging times (Knowles, 1984). Knowles (1984) stressed that adult learners thrive academically when motivated; therefore, andragogy suggests strategies and supports conducive to such outcomes.

### **Adult Learners and Social Constructivism**

Although widely referencing Knowles' (1984) theory of andragogy, scholars have researched other prominent learning theories. Vygotsky (1978) introduced sociocultural theory, an approach to cognitive development that underpins social constructivism. Vygotsky addressed the construction of new knowledge from adult social interactions. According to Vygotsky, learning is a combination of previous external influences and new external influences and experiences (Karpov, 2014). Social constructivism, therefore, is essentially "a search for

meaning... Knowledge is not simply ‘out there’ to be attained; it is constructed by the learner” (Baumgartner, 2003, p. 2). Meaning-making involves persons-in-conversations, with learning taking place when more skilled members (e.g., subject matter experts) introduce other individuals to information (Driver et al., 1994).

The zone of proximal development (ZPD) also applies to education. Vygotsky (1978) defined ZPD as the difference between what individuals can independently accomplish and what they can achieve with teacher assistance or peer collaboration. To develop and awaken internal processes, individuals interact socially with others in their environment. Jaramillo (1996) stated that classroom social interaction stimulates learning through diverse perceptions and engagement among peers.

A learner develops new information or skills within the ZPD based on internalization (Brown & Ferrara, 1985), or the transformation of communicative language into inner speech and verbal thinking (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996). At its foundation, internalization suggests that social interaction (e.g., collaborative activities) creates ZPDs that enable human development, which individuals internalize over time as self-regulatory practices (Brown & Palincsar, 1989). Educators should leverage social interactions, easily workable skills, and instruction to improve performance levels in previously unattainable ways (Forman & Cazden, 1986). As learners leave their zone of current development, they engage in learning through purposeful and meaningful interactions with others, making proximal development toward their learning goal (Pritchard & Woollard, 2013).

Creating environments for learning requires a social context that allows for ZPDs (Hausfather, 1996). According to Greenberg and Moll (1990), individuals develop skills based on how they interact with others; thus, an instructor must design the classroom for the interactive

construction of knowledge. Too often, instructor control shuts down dialogue. Productive activity involves reciprocal social relationships for the joint construction of knowledge within social contexts (Greenberg & Moll, 1990). K–12 environments conducive to creating zones of proximal development have received research (Brown & Palincsar, 1989; Hewson, 1988; Peterson et al., 1989; Scardamalia & Bereiter, 1985); however, there has been little inquiry into the application of Vygotsky’s (1978) sociocultural approach in teacher education (Hausfather, 1996).

Knowles (1984) introduced andragogy to differentiate how adults learn from how children learn. Constructivists, like Vygotsky (1978), view learning as a process of constructing new knowledge from previous knowledge. The theoretical framework of andragogy and social constructivism could be a foundation for curriculum development, learning and teaching strategies, student assessment, and program evaluation. This study’s purpose was to understand the academic and lived experiences of adult learners in graduate teacher preparation. Andragogy and social constructivism provided a framework for the educational systems and techniques for adult learner success. Although the literature on adult learning is robust, moving from theory to practice is limited (Cruce & Hillman, 2012).

### **Higher Education Responses to Adult Learners**

According to Chen (2017), instructional systems and structures are active barriers to access and degree completion. Understanding the nature of adult learner diversity is essential for institution leaders to avoid perpetuating limited opportunities to meet adult learners’ educational needs. Leaders of HEIs have attempted to create programs and services responsive to adult learners, challenging institutions to think beyond traditional ways of teaching and learning.

Responding to adult learners' needs requires prioritizing program design, accessibility, and operational change and strengthening data systems.

### **Program Design**

Adults tend to enroll in institutions that are readily accessible, cost-effective, responsive to their current needs, supportive of nonacademic commitments, and flexible in course offerings (Kasworm, 2010). Hagedorn (2005) suggested institution leaders become more receptive to the needs of adult learners by developing programs encompassing what they want and need to learn. Historically, HEIs have struggled to provide appropriate programs and services for adult learners (Deggs & Miller, 2011). Institutions can become more adult-centered through their leaders' increased awareness of barriers adult learners face.

### ***Relevant/Authentic Learning***

According to Knowles (1984), adult learner motivation and engagement increase when learning is relevant. McDougall (2015) found that activities are more effective if designed to be authentic. Although the term *authentic learning* is relatively new, there have been extensive teaching and learning engagements involving real-world inquiry, higher-order thinking skills, and application to audiences beyond the classroom (Rule, 2006). Resnick (1987) addressed authentic learning through classroom application to the work environment in research on bridging apprenticeships. Further, Collins (1988) stated that for learning to make sense, the knowledge and skills must be applicable and useful in real life.

Researchers have found that adults are motivated by learning environments to which they can connect, suggesting that authentic learning components are integral in knowledge construction (Cercone, 2008). Authentic learning has its roots in the real world, with a focus on helping students transfer theoretical classroom-based learning to life or work settings (Rule,

2006). Maina (2004) and Renzulli et al. (2004) identified the following defining elements of authentic tasks: activities mimic real-world situations, learning takes place in meaningful situations that are extensions of the learner's world, and the learner is at the center of instruction. Examples of authentic learning tasks include project-based learning, the case method, problem-based learning, cognitive apprenticeship (Collins et al., 1989), situated learning, constructive learning environments (Jonassen, 1999), collaborative problem-solving (Nelson, 1999), and goal-based scenarios (Schank et al., 1999). Wlodkowski and Ginsberg (2017) agreed that adult learners are extrinsically motivated when they see the relevance of their academic undertaking.

In addition to providing authentic contexts for learning, Callison and Lamb (2004) identified the authentic assessment of process, product, and performance as an integral component of programmatic design for adult learners. According to Lombardi and Oblinger (2007), higher education has long focused on teaching and assessing skills that are relatively easy to acquire—remembering, understanding, and applying—instead of the arguably more pertinent skills of analyzing, evaluating, and creating. Quality assessment practices emphasize learning and knowledge application rather than recall and reproduction of information. To make meaningful changes in assessment, institutions provide opportunities for learners to apply learning through explicit assessment criteria, student self-assessment, and teaching evaluation (Shepard, 2000). Metacognition—thinking about one's thinking—is an example of an effective self-assessment opportunity (Scott, 2000) for learners to assess their learning and set goals (Burke, 1994), and determine the limits of their knowledge (Fogarty, 1994). Assessment or evaluation tools to measure authentic learning include theory application, rubrics or matrices, written work, portfolios, student self-grading, class participation, group work, creative work, self-reflection, presentations, and a signature capstone (Bransford et al., 2000).

In researching social constructivism, Vygotsky (1978) explored ways to engage and motivate adult learners. With a focus on student-centered learning, Vygotsky examined learning environment design more deeply and instructional design less closely (Bransford et al., 2000). Arghode (2013) emphasized that although effective instructional design and content presentation skills are important, effective learning cannot occur without students' engagement and willingness to learn and apply the concepts. Examples of student-centered teaching and learning strategies include inquiry-, problem-, and project-based learning and case studies (Cole et al., 2013; Sexton & Griffin, 1997). A goal of social constructivism is to align theory with the application of practice (e.g., classroom instruction to teaching) for workplace development (Halpern, 2001).

### ***Work-Based Application***

Adult learners typically desire active, participatory approaches to learning and value opportunities to integrate academic learning with their life and work experiences (Benshoff, 1991). Work-based practicum experiences allow students to earn a degree and work in the context of real-world or applied settings (Eberly Center, n.d.). The goal of work-based application is greater alignment between coursework and workplace skills (Strada Institute for the Future of Work, 2020). Adult learning is about working professionals seeking a career pathway for upskilling or reskilling, thus requiring alignment between workforce needs and employer integration (Gallagher, 2021). Additionally, work-based application leads to the reduction of financial barriers, such as tuition costs, transportation, living expenses, and childcare, given the opportunity to receive an income (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2021).

## *Human Relationships*

A promising practice in developing a positive experience for adult learners in higher education relates to human relationships (Light, 2001). Adults generally manage multiple roles while pursuing academic endeavors; therefore, they might struggle to form connections with faculty and peers and become involved in their institutions (Nordstrom, 1997). To address the challenge, Vella (2002) suggested effective adult learning environments incorporate some of the following characteristics: (a) a sense of security, (b) respect for students as decision-makers, (c) a culture of teamwork, (d) relationship-building, and (e) learner engagement. When adult learners become more socially integrated, they have fewer feelings of isolation, resulting in a more positive academic experience (Hardin, 2008).

Theories of adult learning consistently suggest that adults learn through cognitive recognition and active engagement in the learning process (Ertmer & Newby, 2013). Although student learning outcomes frame the educational path, process and collaboration allow for the construction of knowledge (Cole et al., 2013). Through teamwork, group projects, discussion, and cooperative learning experiences, adult learners have opportunities to connect and become more socially integrated with their learning environments (Burden & Byrd, 2009). Ross-Gordon (2003) urged faculty to maximize opportunities to strengthen relationships with their students through classroom instructional activities.

Higher education research has consistently shown that interaction between faculty and students significantly influences student engagement (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1983) and persistence (Tinto, 1989). According to Tinto (2008), university classrooms are academic and social spaces that connect faculty and students and provide a direct link to a community outside the classroom environment. Astin (1999) asserted that interactions between students and faculty

in higher education correlated with self-reported intellectual and personal growth. Adult learners who frequently interact with their faculty and peers generally express greater satisfaction with their overall higher education experience.

Vygotsky (1978) highlighted an approach in which students use language and social discourse to make sense of the world. Vygotsky asserted that individuals build new learning from prior knowledge, such as life experiences, and social interactions. Knowledge comes not from educator–learner transmission but from a learner’s self-created meaning through problem-solving and social interaction in age-related or contextual experiences (Cole et al., 1978). When the learner is more of an inquirer than a passive participant, the classroom can incorporate interaction and discussion of ideas (Merriam & Bierema, 2014). The educator serves as a facilitator of learning and a guide for the learning process (Knowles et al., 2014; Merriam & Bierema, 2014). Learner–instructor collaboration provides a framework for conceptual anchors, allowing students to self-reflect or evaluate past experiences and learning on which to build (Cochran & Brown, 2016; Knowles et al., 2014).

### ***Prior Learning***

Chen (2014) suggested a developmentally fit approach to supporting adult learners’ academic success by building on background knowledge and life experiences. Gannon (2018) noted the benefits of programmatic design, which stems from what diverse learners bring to the classrooms. Whereas younger, traditional-aged learners often have limited life experiences, their older, nontraditional counterparts tend to have vast histories. Adults’ life experiences afford accelerated movement from theory to practice in tangible and relevant ways (Nelken, 2009). Some institutions use prior learning assessments (PLAs) to offer credit for students’ prior knowledge and experiences. Leveraging learning from life and nontraditional education

experiences in a traditional academic program is a component of institutions' use of PLAs. PLAs allow the adult learner to demonstrate prior knowledge (American Council on Education, 2022; Sheffer et al., 2020) through the evaluation and assessment of learning obtained outside of the college classroom for college credit, certification, or advancement toward further education or training (Klein-Collins, 2010).

Similar to PLA, competency-based education (CBE) is an emerging, less-than-traditional approach geared toward adult learners. CBE is a flexible learning structure focused on mastery regardless of time, place, or pace of learning (Porter & Reilly, 2014). A CBE approach often includes an assessment of prior learning and multiple ways of knowing and deeper meaning through critical reflection (Chen, 2017).

Learning within a competency-based framework is not dependent on seat time in the classroom but on developmental progressions through the demonstration of skills and knowledge (Merriam et al., 2007). The traditional credit-hour system is an increasingly more youth-centric model posing systemic barriers for adults (Knowles et al., 2012; Laitinen, 2012). Institutions are expanding their use of PLAs to reduce time and mitigate financial barriers traditionally associated with degree or certificate completion (CAEL, 2018; Delleville, 2019; Klein-Collins, 2010; Ryu, 2013).

### ***Flexibility***

Adult learners struggle to balance work schedules, family, and other interests with their class schedules, leading some to withdraw or drop out (Chen, 2017). Given the demands of adult life, institution leaders should provide flexible instructional practices and programs to fit adult learners' needs (Falasca, 2011; Hainline et al., 2010; Kidd, 2010). In a qualitative study, Ross-

Gordon (2011) found that 68% of U.S. HEI leaders stressed the overwhelming need to offer flexible schedules to adult learners.

Modifying course pace, frequency, and schedules might increase retention, persistence, and overall academic success. Flexible pathways, such as accelerated programs with shorter course terms, summer coursework, and multiple start dates, are more efficient for adult learners than traditionally designed programs (Sheffer et al., 2020). For example, hybrid learning is an alternative to traditional face-to-face offerings that affords the flexibility of online learning and the stability of more traditional in-person learning (Anthony et al., 2018). Milman et al. (2020) noted that course modality flexibility reduces competition with existing obligations.

### **Accessibility**

#### ***Finances***

Although programmatic design tailored for adult learners is paramount, investigating issues of accessibility is also instrumental. Examining factors related to accessibility could reveal conditions prohibiting adult learner participation in higher education. According to an Education Commission of the States Evaluation, most state programs include two or fewer suggested characteristics to support adult learner accessibility (Pingel & Holly, 2017). Sheffer et al. (2020) championed adult learner financial reform focused on (a) ensuring institutional and state aid works for adult learners, (b) using financial levers to increase higher education engagement and progression for key adult learner populations, and (c) conducting comprehensive outreach to reach all adult learners. Pathways to accessibility designed to support adults include policy and funding reform because traditional-aged outreach and funding opportunities do not successfully serve these students (Hanover Research, 2018).

Whereas previous studies include quantitative data on the types of educational barriers, Marienau and Klinger (1977) adopted an anthropological approach to barrier research by engaging the voices of adult learners about issues directly influencing their access to continuing education. Those interviewed identified five barriers, with finance influencing adult learner participation in education for three-fourths of the participants. Sheffer et al. (2020) recognized finances as the most significant barrier for adult learners to achieve their educational goals.

For many adults, finances play an essential role in their ability to complete educational goals (Fairchild, 2003). Wlodkowski et al. (2002) claimed work conflicts, responsibilities at home, and tuition costs were the most common reasons more mature students drop out of higher education. Adults are often challenged with work-related responsibilities, caring for their dependents, parents, and managing household tasks. Due to multiple role demands and institutional barriers, many adults attend part-time or in accelerated formats (Kazis et al., 2007). Federal and state aid policies and financing models offer little incentive to discourage compressed and accelerated scheduling needs (NASPA, 2017). National organizations like the State Higher Education Commission Officers and the Education Commission of the States encourage policy reform for financing and student aid options that support flexible and accelerated learning options like prior learning assessments.

The literature shows that institution leaders look beyond federal and state funding streams to private funding sources to address the completion challenge. Small-dollar retention and completion grants are approaches to cover end-of-program tuition costs and reduce dropout rates (The Hope Center, 2018). Institution leaders consider emergency funds a key component of aid offerings, as unexpected emergencies can be one of the greatest challenges for adults. Strategic resources have proven to help improve retention (Beach et al., 2008).

Increasingly more state and institution leaders are implementing career pathway programs (e.g., financial support) to address multiple barriers to completion (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2021). Career pathways are a workforce development strategy to help individuals who are not on a traditional college trajectory develop skills, earn credentials, and find and retain employment in high-demand occupations (Eyster, 2018). A vital strength of the programs is that students can earn as they learn; they do not have to leave their job or reduce their hours to participate (Mortude, 2018). Therefore, the model provides an opportunity to embed upskilling strategies among individuals for whom reducing employment or income to pursue academic endeavors is not feasible (Eyster, 2018). Three of the most significant federal laws to help expand career pathways include the Every Student Succeeds Act (2015), the Higher Education Opportunity Act (2008), and the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA; 2014). Under the federal WIOA, states are encouraged to align their resources to support integrated service delivery across federal and state funding streams (U.S. Department of Labor, 2016).

### ***Outreach***

Almost all U.S. states have established ambitious college completion goals; however, engaging adult learners requires shifting the paradigm typically used for more traditional-aged students (Lumina Foundation, 2021). Traditional outreach methods are often youth-centric, lacking strategies to consider the complexity of adults' lives (Sheffer et al., 2020). Adults come to higher education with different goals, expectations, and experiences; therefore, successful engagement must adjust accordingly (Hagelskamp et al., 2013). Traditional outreach methods are less successful in acknowledging and addressing adult learners' situational, dispositional, and institutional barriers (Clark & Wecker, 2017).

According to Hanover Research (2018), four key outreach aspects are instrumental in attracting adult learners: showing awareness, demonstrating positive and tangible outcomes, targeting outreach, and acknowledging unique student groups. To create an adult-friendly campaign, institution leaders could orient outreach and materials around addressing financial, logistical, and psychological concerns (Smith, 2021). Transparency about time, cost, value, and flexibility are needed considerations (College Insights, 2017).

### **Operational Change**

The literature shows that strategizing operational change to improve adult learner outcomes is worthwhile, particularly in academic and student support services. Gast (2013) encouraged public research university leaders to examine all support services to determine whether the available resources effectively address the needs of enrolled adult learners. According to Soares et al. (2020), adults frequently face inflexible systems, mismatched supports and services, and misinformation. Adult learners often report schools' lack of attention to providing the appropriate types of guidance and resources (Blankenstein & Wolf-Eisenberg, 2020; Kasworm, 2010; Nelken, 2009).

As institution leaders strive to provide avenues for students to enter, persist, and graduate, they could find a modification of both programs and services to be instrumental (Brown, 2012). Otherwise, adults face barriers such as administrative and student support office hours that conflict with work schedules (Soares et al., 2020), are only available face-to-face, and are from individuals with large caseloads on a narrow set of topics (Blankenstein & Wolf-Eisenberg, 2020). In recent years, institutions have expanded services to better fit the needs of adult learners (e.g., evening hours, adult-centric groups; Chen, 2017).

It is necessary to proactively (Morgan et al., 2020) and holistically (Rowh, 2018) address known barriers and explore an integrated model of academic and student support services (Deggs, 2016; National Research Council, 2008). A repeated emphasis throughout the literature is the importance of academic and student support service staff relationships with students extending beyond basic course scheduling toward personal growth and development (Bland, 2003; Light, 2001). Within this holistic approach, students receive customized services to improve outcomes (Bland, 2003). Wlodkowski (2008) found that deploying teaching strategies and support helped sustain adult learners' motivation in their course or program.

Once enrolled, adults often face competing non-academic and academic responsibilities. Work obligations, access to child care, and financial concerns significantly impact adult learners' academic endeavors (Porter & Umbach, 2019). Giancola et al. (2008) found that adults are apprehensive about returning to school and fear they lack the skills, time, and knowledge necessary to succeed. Hardin (2008) asserted that students who have not utilized specific academic skills within a few years might need additional guidance, support, and practice. Although adults generally approach higher education eager to learn, they are less likely than traditional-aged college students to seek assistance for fear of seeming unprepared and unintelligent.

A promising practice is orientation programs, which provide the skills, time, and information students returning to school need to succeed (Comings & Cuban, 2007). However, orientation programs often lack customized, population-specific efforts (Giancola et al., 2008). Love et al. (2019) maintained that institution leaders should be proactive in assessing students' needs and creating the conditions for all to thrive. Morgan et al. (2020) suggested administering

a study survey for customized support to determine the types and delivery modes of coordinated care needed.

A holistic approach to education could reduce barriers and increase overall retention rates (Schroeder & Terras, 2015). Linking theory to practice is not easy; it requires a willingness to improve outcomes. Established ways for making decisions, including soliciting qualitative input from adult learners (ACPA & NASPA, 2004), help reduce barriers resulting from a lack of input (Harper, 2007, 2011).

### **Strengthening Data Systems**

An important population often neglected in higher education is adult learners, with limited data systems used to improve entry and overall success. To make decisions that increase and accommodate a diverse student population, institution leaders must strengthen their data systems (Chen, 2017). White et al. (2016) deemed institutional self-assessment of student readiness critical in providing opportunities for institution-side change. Evaluating institutional student readiness allows for a systematic review of factors that could interfere with or prevent student entry, persistence, and graduation (Chen, 2017). Most often, institutions overly focus on students' college readiness, putting the adult (nontraditional) learner at a disadvantage.

The student population in higher education appears to be outgrowing the traditional educational system. Ignoring student diversity will have larger societal ramifications: economic, political, and social. Bensimon (2016) urged institutions to develop standard metrics and definitions of adult learners to more meaningfully serve the diverse population (e.g., race, age, ethnicity, full-time, part-time, veteran, parenting status, etc.). According to the Education Commission of the States (2020), states can connect the P-20 and workforce data systems; however, the investment varies drastically by state. Institutions that partner with employers

deploy high-value programs and better position themselves for stronger outcomes (Valentine & Clay, 2019). Attracting and engaging this population is insufficient to meet adult learners' needs and wants. Without devising data systems specifically focused on the adult learner, institution leaders will fail to develop this population over the long term (Stevens, 2014).

### **Inferences for Forthcoming Study**

According to the literature, most adult learner program components and designs came from traditional student programs. This literature review presented a synthesis of the research related to areas that impact adult learners' academic and lived experiences in higher education. Collectively, the literature showed the changing demographics of higher education, with researchers highlighting the characteristics of adult learners, theories of adult learning, and higher education responses to adult learners. There are gaps in the literature relative to the experiences of adult learners (over age 24) enrolled in graduate-level programs and how HEI leaders design programs and services to serve this population.

Among the multiple adult learning theories, the literature did not show a dominant theory in practice that contributed to adult learner programmatic development, higher education persistence, or retention. Accordingly, there are gaps in need of further exploration related to the study of adult learners. There is shallow research on graduate-level adult learners' academic and lived experiences and the programs designed to serve them. The present study's design came from the findings, analyses, and conclusions in the literature.

Findings from the literature review led to this study's research question: How do adult learners make sense of their academic and lived experiences as they enter, persist, and complete their graduate teacher preparation program? The subquestion was, How do adult learners engage and negotiate the university experience to meet their needs and expectations?

Answering the research question and subquestion addressed the gaps and fulfilled the study's purpose, which was to examine the lived experiences of adult learners (over age 24) enrolled in GTPPs to identify their distinct needs and expectations related to program entry, persistence, and completion. A clear understanding of adult learning and the factors affecting it is fundamental to planning adult programs (Caffarella & Daffron, 2013). Higher education challenges in the 21st century warrant additional research to explore how a person (i.e., an adult learner) in a given context (i.e., enrolled in a GTPP) makes sense of a given phenomenon (i.e., the entry, persistence, and completion of the program).

Additional research is required to extract deeper stories about how adult learners make sense of their academic and lived experiences. The findings from these stories could help HEI leaders design programs and services more intentionally. Rather than being an anomaly within higher education, the adult learner could become its most important ally (Finch, 2016).

## **CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY**

### **Restatement of the Problem and Purpose of the Study**

This chapter presents an overview of the study's research methodology. There is a discussion of the research design, population and sample, and data collection method. Chapter Three also includes a review of the data analysis procedures.

### **Problem and Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to examine the lived experiences of adult learners (over age 24) enrolled in GTPPs. This study was a means to identify their distinct needs and expectations related to program entry, persistence, and completion. The findings provide insight into the degree of effectiveness of GTPPs and suggest deeper insight into the life and collegiate experiences of adult learners.

### **Research Site**

A detailed description of the research site appears in Chapter One under the Background of the Study section (i.e., enrollment data, graduation rates, and program redesign). As mentioned, the location for participant recruitment, interviews, and data collection was the COE in the Southwestern United States. As one of the nation's largest schools of education, internationally ranked for the quality of its teacher preparation programs, and renowned for the depth and breadth of its education research and the knowledge it creates, the COE is deeply committed to addressing systemic challenges in the teacher to school leader pipeline. The college's nationally distinctive teacher preparation programs leverage a broad network of university-district-school partnerships designed to increase educator satisfaction, effectiveness, and diversity while promoting equity and learning for all students.

As highlighted in Chapter One, the COE's redesign of the GTPPs represents a significant departure from the previous structure. The college offers four graduate degree programs with three entry points per year and one combined structure for professional experiences. Current program offerings are Graduate Certificate, MEd in Elementary Education, MEd in Secondary Education, and MEd in Special Education, with MEd Early Childhood Education and MPA Physical Education added later. The programs are available face-to-face (via ASU Sync) and online, with varied entry points in summer, fall, and spring for the online program and fall for the face-to-face program (via ASU Sync). ASU Sync provides students with technology-enhanced, fully interactive remote learning. It offers the benefits of face-to-face instruction in an interactive group learning environment (Arizona State University, n.d.-b).

Following is an overview of the program structure:

- Pedagogical core courses: Shared courses across all students with differentiation within courses by degree program.
- Professional core courses: Courses specific to each degree program taken only by those students.
- Professional experience: Combined experience with traditional and alternative teaching routes.

The graduate certificate is a flexible alternative teacher certification pathway with elementary and secondary education tracks, allowing students to obtain a teaching certificate in a compressed time frame. Through intentional course design, video-based teaching observations, and supportive coaching, the graduate certificate qualifies as an alternative pathway to teacher certification.

## **Research Questions**

The research question for this study was, How do adult learners make sense of their academic and lived experiences as they enter, persist, and complete their graduate teacher preparation program? The subquestion was, How do adult learners engage and negotiate the university experience to meet their needs and expectations?

## **Research Methodology and Design**

Qualitative methodology allows the researcher to ask different questions to understand a phenomenon. Creswell (1994) defined qualitative research as “an inquiry process of understanding a social or human problem based on building a complex, holistic picture, formed with words, reporting detailed views of informants, and conducted in a natural setting” (pp. 1–2). Qualitative studies are personal and not centered on variables of measures (Creswell, 2008). Characteristics of qualitative research include a socially constructed nature of reality, an intimate relationship between the researcher and the study topic, and situational constraints that shape inquiry (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). A qualitative approach is appropriate to produce a thick (detailed) description of participants’ feelings, opinions, and experiences and interpret the meaning of their actions (Denzin, 1989). Qualitative researchers discover the participants’ inner experiences and determine how meanings are shaped through and in culture (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

Qualitative research has drawbacks and skeptics. Because the researcher is the instrument for data collection and analysis, qualitative findings are inherently subjective. Richardson (1994) suggested that qualitative research alone could neglect the social and cultural constructions of the variables studied. There has been some resistance to qualitative studies, as policymakers might view the findings as less credible (Sallee & Flood, 2012).

Instead of testing hypotheses, qualitative researchers explore participant data to identify, analyze, and report repeated themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This methodology presents a way of orienting research that allows an in-depth examination of lived experiences, with the findings capable of shaping future decisions (Frechette et al., 2020). An IPA design guided the exploration of five adult learners' academic and lived experiences. Researchers use IPA to conduct detailed examinations of personal lived experiences (Laverty, 2003).

### **Insights on Phenomenology**

Husserl proposed IPA as a means to discover the essence of a phenomenon (Mapp, 2008; Moran, 2000). The purpose of phenomenological research is to describe the nature of a particular phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). Phenomenological researchers focus on the commonality of a lived experience within a particular group and the contexts or situations that have typically influenced experiences of the phenomenon. According to Husserl (1970), pure phenomenological research is a means to describe rather than explain and starts without preconceptions or bias. In exploring lived experiences, adding an interpretive dimension to phenomenological studies allows researchers to uncover new understandings (Gadamer, 1976; Rogers, 2015). This study's intent was to identify similar phrases or themes and group them without any predetermined classification.

### ***Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis***

Interpretive phenomenological research is distinct from a generic phenomenological approach. IPA emphasizes the contextual nature of qualitative research findings gathered through a co-construction between the researcher and participant (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). A constructivist paradigm orients interpretive phenomenology with an anchor in the understanding of being (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Using IPA, I considered how adult learners make sense of

their academic and lived experiences as they enter, persist, and complete their GTPPs. Another area of exploration was how adult learners engage and negotiate the university experience to meet their needs and expectations.

### ***Data Method and Analysis***

The study involved five adult learners at one of the largest public 4-year teacher preparation programs in the Southwestern United States. Sample sizes in qualitative research, specifically IPA, tend to be small to support the depth of case-oriented analysis fundamental to this mode of inquiry (Smith & Fieldsend, 2021). Data collection occurred through a series of semistructured interviews to assist in the discovery of participants' lived experiences (Creswell, 2009; Smith et al., 2009). Semistructured interviews were the data collection method used to discover participants' lived experiences related to the research question and subquestion. Each participant engaged in a semistructured phenomenological interview to provide a deeper understanding of the entry, persistence, and completion experiences. Semistructured interviews were the most suitable method of data collection to allow participants to share their stories and experiences.

I maintained a researcher journal to document my thoughts throughout the process. According to Russell and Kelly (2002), a journal allows researcher reflexivity to examine personal assumptions and goals and clarify individual belief systems and subjectivities. Journaling brings researchers into the study, focusing on how their horizon of significance unfolds in the research process (Frechette et al., 2020).

After interview transcription and coding, there was a search for common themes to identify patterns. The emerging patterns could have revealed unknown phenomena related to how adult learners make sense of their academic and lived experiences as they enter, persist, and

complete their programs. After the identification of individual and grouped themes, there was a comparison to the CAEL (2018) framework for adult learner success and Knowles' (1984) adult learning theory principles. Using member-checking strategies during data analysis ensured the accuracy of participants' experiences.

### ***Institutional Review Board and Informed Consent***

Before data collection, I sought Institutional Review Board (IRB) review and formal approval to conduct research involving human subjects. A component of the IRB application was a certificate of completion of CITI training to engage in human subjects research. Seidman (2013) stated,

Each local IRB will have its own application format, but basically IRBs ask researchers to describe briefly the aims of the research, the nature of their participants, their research methodology, the researchers' qualifications to do research, the risks and benefits involved in the research, and how the researchers will obtain informed consent from their potential participants. (p. 62)

### ***Research Procedures***

In qualitative studies, the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003), with all data mediated through the human instrument. Quality phenomenological studies require the researcher (human instrument) to deploy techniques to maintain objectivity and avoid bias (Streubert & Carpenter, 1999). To fulfill this role and minimize study bias, a researcher must describe relevant aspects of self, including any biases, assumptions, or personal elements (Greenbank, 2003).

## ***Participants***

The voluntary participants were those who met the purposeful selection criteria. Purposeful sampling allows researchers to select participants with rich knowledge of the phenomenon (Mapp, 2008; Polit & Beck, 2012). The participation criteria were adult learners (a) over age 24, (b) enrolled in a GTPP, and (c) working full-time. The invitation to participate included the definition of an adult learner.

I maintained participant confidentiality throughout the study. Data collection occurred through recorded semistructured interviews, which I later transcribed and securely stored. The data will remain on my password-protected computer, which includes double-factor user authentication. Because the data come from one-on-one interviews, I am the only person with access to the data. The consent form included the data retention policy, including data destruction 5 years after dissertation publication.

## **Data Collection Procedures**

Interviews are an in-depth method of data collection in phenomenological research (Kvale, 1996). One-on-one semistructured interviews occurred with five participants who met the study criteria and provided consent. Individual interviews elicit a participant's narrative, allowing respondents to remember and recount what is meaningful to them (Benner, 1994). During data collection, a researcher actively listens to uncover participants' lived experiences and "underlying beliefs, assumptions, and interpretations" (Hargrove, 2008, p. 99). Interpretive phenomenological studies involve the researcher and participant engaging in deep dialogue about a specific set of lived experiences. In this study, the co-construction of data centered around the nontraditional adult learners' experience in their GTPP. Interpretive phenomenological interviews can be unstructured or semistructured; in either case, guiding questions serve as a

knowledge construction starting point (Benner, 1994). Semistructured interview protocols include an outline of topics with guiding questions and prompts (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Following are the outline topics for this study aligned to the three points within the graduate teacher preparation experience (i.e., the entry, persistence, and completion experiences):

**Point 1: Entry**

- Distinctive needs and expectations as an adult learner
- Addressing challenges
- Influential people and factors—what attracted them to the program
- Confidence level
- Academic performance
- Relationships
- Making meaning of your experience

**Point 2: Persistence**

- The impact of a professor's instructional style
- The impact of course design
- Insights on overcoming intimidation that is academic-related
- Shaping the expectations for the next chapter of life
- Envisioning the rewards of investing in an adult learning program

**Point 3: Completion**

- Influential people and factors
- Making meaning of experience
- Confidence level

IPA data analysis moves the researcher to uncover hidden information until achieving saturation (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Data saturation occurs when, through the course of interviewing, the researcher determines that new information provides no further insight, with the same themes emerging (Creswell, 2008). Chapter Four presents the interview findings, moving beyond description to interpretation and getting to the *so what?* of academic and lived experiences.

### **Interview Protocol**

I began the interview protocol with appreciation for the participants who agreed to share their academic and lived experiences within graduate teacher preparation. I put the participants at ease, making them feel comfortable before posing any substantive questions. The opening question was a means to elicit general background information, such as what was going on in their life before their time at the COE and why they chose to enroll in their specific program of study.

A researcher's role is to facilitate and guide rather than dictate the encounter (Smith & Shinebourne, 2012). The topics vary to provide a deeper understanding of the entry, persistence, and completion experiences. As each participant's narrative unfolds, the researcher unravels the phenomenon using silence, probing questions, and reflection on nonverbal cues (Frechette et al., 2020). These approaches help uncover the participant's authentic voice (Heidegger, 1927/1962). As the interviews concluded, I expressed gratitude for the interviewees' participation and reminded them of the study's significance. For example, understanding how they make sense of their academic and lived experiences could help the COE design programs and services more intentionally.

A research journal is a means to monitor the study process, with entries providing space to capture initial thoughts and feelings immediately following interviews. In the journal, researchers document their thinking upon initial and subsequent transcript readings. Another purpose of the journal is bracketing, or addressing and setting aside biases. I used the researcher journal to record preliminary impressions and reactions later used to help inform thinking or questioning during the iterative analysis process.

### **Data Analysis Procedures**

A thorough data analysis process was crucial to make sense of adult learners' academic and lived experiences as they enter, persist, and complete their GTPP. In adopting an inductive approach to qualitative data analysis, a researcher condenses extensive and varied raw data to identify meanings from shared experiences (Thomas, 2003). Inductive analysis requires exploring interview statements and allowing findings to emerge from the frequent, dominant, or significant themes inherent in raw data without the restraints imposed by structured methodologies (Backett & Davison, 1995; Stolee et al., 1999). The outcome of inductive analysis is the development of emerging themes (or categories) into a model or framework (Marshall, 1999). Coding produces five elements: (a) a category label, (b) a category description, (c) text or data associated with the category, (d) links, and (e) the type of model in which the category resides (Thomas, 2003).

Figure 1 presents a general inductive approach for qualitative data analysis. The intended outcome of the process is to create a model incorporating the three to eight most important categories from the raw data (Campbell et al., 2003; Jain & Ogden, 1999). Inductive analysis processes often include a summary section under the main category headings. Under each main category, detailed meaning will be documented and explained by quotes and descriptions that

demonstrate the categories' importance. Inductive approaches for data analysis allow the researcher to provide deep and rich data descriptions and evidence to answer the study questions. Each participant's experience underwent analysis as an individual experience. This process for analyzing data was case-by-case analysis, which entails reading the exploratory notes, formulating experiential statements, finding connections, and clustering experiential statements into personal experiential themes (Smith & Nizza, 2022). Using this process, the researcher works through the transcript line by line. The next step is a cross-case analysis (Smith & Nizza, 2022). After identifying the individual participant categories, the researcher will compare categories to identify commonalities and differences among lived experiences. The final narratives will retell the individual and collective nontraditional graduate student experience in a teacher preparation program to develop a deeper understanding of the phenomenon.

**Figure 1**

*The Coding Process in Inductive Analysis*

Initial read through text data	Identify specific segments of information	Label the segments of information to create categories	Reduce overlap and redundancy among the categories	Create a model incorporating most important categories
Many pages of text	Many segments of text	30-40 categories	15-20 categories	3-8 categories

*Note.* Adapted from Creswell, 2002, Figure 9.4, p. 266.

Dedoose qualitative software was used to analyze the semistructured interviews.

**Credibility and Validity**

Researchers use several techniques to avoid bias and ensure reliability and validity (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Validating qualitative research data entails assessing the findings' accuracy such that the researcher, participants, and readers perceive the study as reliable (Creswell &

Poth, 2016). The Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (Tong et al., 2007) suggests best practices for reporting qualitative findings. One recommendation is member checking to enhance rigor, “ensuring that the participants’ own meanings and perspectives are represented and not curtailed by the researchers’ own agenda and knowledge” (p. 356).

Member checking is a validity procedure for exploring the credibility of research findings (Creswell & Miller, 2000). To ensure trustworthiness, the data are “subjected to the scrutiny of the persons who provided the information” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 236). Conducting member checks in interpretive phenomenology enhances the study’s rigor (Doyle, 2007). The member-checking approach selected depends on how it fits the study’s theoretical position (Birt et al., 2016). In this study, member checking occurred throughout the interview process, with frequent checks for understanding, clarity, and a correct understanding of the experience. To further support the findings’ validity and quality, all participants had an opportunity for a member-check following data analysis (see Doyle, 2007). Participants could review their narratives and respond with any feedback within 2 weeks. The member-check interview aligned with the study’s epistemological constructivist/interpretive stance.

### **Summary of Methodology**

IPA enables in-depth analysis in qualitative research. The method elicits rich personal accounts from participants about their lived experience of the topic under investigation. In this study, five participants shared narratives of how they make sense of their academic and lived experiences as they enter, persist, and complete their graduate teacher preparation. The participants also discussed how they engage and negotiate the university experience to meet their needs and expectations. The IPA paradigm emphasizes researcher–participant co-construction as

they work together to make meaning and share perspectives and interpretations (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Pringle et al., 2011; Smith et al., 2009).

The qualitative phenomenological approach assists in discovering participants' lived experiences to provide a deeper understanding. The study was an effort to uncover the redesigned GTPP's impact on adult learners. The findings contribute to education literature by providing insight into how a person (i.e., an adult learner) in a given context (i.e., enrolled in a GTPP) makes sense of a given phenomenon (i.e., program entry, persistence, and completion).

## CHAPTER FOUR: NARRATIVE STORIES AND INTERPRETIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

### Overview

Chapter Four presents the results of this study, an interpretive phenomenological interpretation of adult learners' academic and lived experiences in graduate teacher preparation. Specifically, the study was an exploration of how adult learners navigate and negotiate their academic and lived experiences as they enter, persist, and complete their GTPPs at a specific COE. This chapter presents the narratives of the five study participants, aligning their stories with the identified themes to address the research question and subquestion:

**Research Question:** How do adult learners make sense of their academic and lived experiences as they enter, persist, and complete their graduate teacher preparation program?

**Subquestion:** How do adult learners engage and negotiate the university experience to meet their needs and expectations?

I used inductive analysis to analyze the data from the five participants' semistructured interviews. I began with line-by-line coding to identify segments containing meaningful units, with codes emerging for each segment. After generating several initial first-round codes, I developed a model of the salient categories while revising and refining the categories. Reviewing the codes during the open coding round allows for pattern identification. Over time, in response to the study's research question and subquestion, summary categories emerge (Delve, n.d.). The categories and codes then develop into themes, summaries, and conclusions, as discussed in Chapters Four and Five.

## Participants

All five participants were women over age 24 enrolled in graduate-level teacher preparation programs and working full-time. My intention was not to focus on gender in this project; however, despite an open call for participants, all volunteers were women. The unexpected gender dynamic revealed something unexpected. Since the 1980s, there has been a significant amount of literature on women's roles in families. When women entered the workforce, domestic equality was not granted (Hochschild & Machung, 2012). Many women work full-time and care for their children (in essence, working a second shift). Gertsel (2000) described a third shift when mothers also try to continue their education. The theories of Knowles (1970) and Vygotsky (1978) did not address issue of gender; however, gender adds significant richness to the discussion of adult learning theory.

This section provides a brief overview of the five women, including their age, gender, and COE program. They ranged in age from 25 to 51 years. The participants attended the same COE, one in special education, two in elementary education, and two in secondary education. Table 2 presents the pseudonym, age, gender, and enrolled program of study of the five voluntary participants. Because this project did not focus on ethnicity or other affinity groups, Table 2 indicates gender but not other demographic variables. I included participants' programs to aid in programmatic decision-making, as discussed in Chapter Five. Following the table, I provide a brief sketch of each participant.

**Table 2**

*Participant Demographics*

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Program
Sam	46	Female	Special Education
Sally	28	Female	Secondary Education
Tina	34	Female	Elementary Education
Amanda	51	Female	Secondary Education
Grace	25	Female	Elementary Education

**Sam**

Sam was a 46-year-old mother and a full-time student currently employed full-time. She had previously worked for the State Department of Education in the Division of Developmental Disabilities, where her stress level was high. She found her passion amid the job’s challenges. Previously, Sam had taught secondary education for 6 years, but her experience at the state sparked a passion for special education. She described the moment as “ one of those where I was like I fell in love.” At the time of the study, Sam was enrolled in the COE’s special education program.

**Sally**

A 28-year-old woman, Sally started teaching when she enrolled in the GTPP at the COE. After earning her master’s and bachelor’s degrees in history, she worked in marketing for public libraries and schools and children’s educational books. Upon arriving in Arizona, Sally began to reflect deeply on what she wanted to do with her degrees, proclaiming she began “to open her eyes up to the thought of the [teaching] career again.” Informed by her emotions to create a more satisfying, authentic career choice, she enrolled in the secondary education program, working full-time and attending school online full-time.

## **Tina**

Tina, a 34-year-old mother and the wife of a teacher, had always dreamed of becoming a teacher. Her initial career choice was teaching golf, but her heart and mind told her, “This isn’t making me happy right now, and it was all based around my job.” At that point, she “really began looking into options.” Her heart illuminated passion, and her mind guided her to return to her passion for teaching in a new capacity: teacher education. Tina was currently enrolled in the GTPP for elementary education and worked full-time. She wanted a schedule that was the same as her husband’s and children’s.

## **Amanda**

A 51-year-old mother, Amanda decided to re-career after retiring as a massage therapist, a physically demanding and low-paying job. Amanda switched to education to have a similar schedule to her son. She recalled thinking, “Oh, I can’t pass that opportunity up,” so she enrolled in the COE’s secondary education program.

## **Grace**

Grace was 25 years old and worked full-time while studying online full-time. She began working at the sheriff’s office to meet financial obligations but opted to pursue a career in education because of the dedication and perseverance of her grandmother, an educator with a doctorate. Grace had self-confidence and conviction, stating, “Teaching has always been what I wanted to do.” Grace was studying elementary education at the COE.

## **Analysis Findings**

Adult learning theory and social constructivism served as the guiding theoretical frameworks for this study. Based on Knowles’ (1975) andragogy theory, adult learning theory suggests that adult learners are self-directed individuals who take responsibility for their

decisions and thrive from independent learning. Collaborative learning requires a social-constructivist approach, emphasizing social participation with value placed on learners' experiences and backgrounds (Vygotsky, 1978). Both theories were decidedly applicable to this research.

Data analysis of participants' interview responses produced two themes: self-directed learning and collaborative learning. Self-directed learning included the subthemes of the need for format flexibility and resources, and collaborative learning incorporated the subthemes of learner support and learner engagement. The themes addressed the central research question and subquestion.

Participant quotes derived from the interviews provided support for the themes. The narrative examples provided insight into the academic and lived experiences of the five adult learner participants. I used IPA to share the participants' lived experiences related to their entry, progression, and graduation. IPA gave depth to the study, enabling rich, detailed, first-person accounts of the participants' lived experiences (Smith et al., 2009).

### **Theme Development**

The study themes emerged from an iterative analysis of the participants' academic and lived experiences. This section presents the participants' words to support the themes and provide an accurate narrative, with all quotes reflecting the five adult learners' voices and experiences. The participants provided a rich, accurate, and clear understanding of their perspectives on the phenomenon under study (Kelly, 2016; see Table 3).

**Table 3**

*Themes and Subthemes*

Themes	Subthemes
Self-directed learning	Format flexibility Resources
Collaborative learning	Learner support Learner engagement

**Theme 1: Self-Directed Learning**

This section provides a discussion of the first theme of self-directed learning and the corresponding subthemes of format flexibility and resources. In semistructured interviews, the participants expressed intrinsic motivation to access course information whenever it was convenient for them, which is consistent with the notion of self-directed learning. As defined by Knowles (1975), self-directed learning refers to the process of assessing one's needs, setting goals, and determining the best strategies. Learners are free to navigate their academic experience, having autonomy over the methods and approaches they use to acquire skills and knowledge (Merriam, 2001). Along with the theoretical framework of andragogy, the study's research question and subquestion aligned with the theme of self-directed learning.

***Subtheme: Format Flexibility***

Among the participants' reflections, format flexibility emerged as the first subtheme under self-directed learning. Participants strongly supported online courses in the COE, which aligned with the concept of self-directed learning. Using this self-directed strategy, students can design the learning path they want to follow.

Amanda added to the development of the theme by explaining her preference for the COE program:

Because it was online. You know, there was no specific class time. So with my schedule, being crazy, like, single parent, and, you know, trying to go to school and working full time, it was nice, because I could do it.

Sam confirmed this sentiment, saying,

The opportunity to do it fully online while I continued working was huge because we have two kids. ...I've done stuff at midnight. I've done stuff at 6 a.m. Like, honestly, it being online is probably, for me, the best modality, [although] what I like [would be] to have in person because I'm older.

The institution promotes and offers a graduate teacher preparation program in online and hybrid formats. The online modality allows students to optimize scheduling so learning can occur anytime and anywhere. Sally stated, "I would recommend either of the programs I did at the COE, to be honest, for a lot of the same reasons. One is flexibility. The ability to do it flexibly."

When discussing her overall experience, Tina commented,

For the most part, it has been amazing. Because I've come into a routine where I get up, I do my work, I go to work, I come home, I spend time with family with my kids. And then I have that time after they go to bed. And that's when I can usually knock out all the coursework.

All five study participants valued the self-directed nature of the online modality. In addition, they identified pacing as an asset to the program experience, allowing them to select Term A/B or C courses: the first 7.5 weeks, the second 7.5 weeks, or the full semester (15 weeks plus final exams). With the pacing options, the participants could accelerate or decelerate the program as it suited them.

Grace identified pacing as conducive to individual needs. She mentioned, She [my advisor] offered, like, three different programs, like, a super-accelerated version... If you're in or if you're working, this is really not the one you want to be doing. This one of them, like a middle one, that kind of combined and accelerated.

Tina discussed whether pacing flexibility impacted her persistence toward degree. She said,

It's also been nice if I'm on the accelerated path. And knowing that there is still the option of dropping some classes, and I just extend out my time. It's not— That's not a big deal to me. If I were to get completely overwhelmed, but that doesn't— having that option kind of reduced the stress for me, because I knew if it is too much, there's some, there's another option. I don't have to do it all at once.

Tina felt the option to accelerate and decelerate made the GTPP accessible, especially when balancing life as an adult learner. She identified pacing as fundamental to self-directing learning, stating,

You can get through the program and the three semesters, or you can spread it out and take your time to get through it. That has— that allows you the freedom to kind of go at your own pace and know what you can handle yourself.

The participants also addressed self-directed learning in terms of the ability to earn and learn. Due to the online program modality, adult students could earn their degree while working full-time.

Grace described how the online modality enabled her to earn a degree while working as an educator:

I could structure my time in a way because I was online. I could structure my time in a way that works. So, if I saw that I had a bunch of meetings for school, you know, or I guess my work, my employment, then I was able to put in my coursework in places where [it] fit and still be able to manage getting the things I needed for work done as well as the things I needed for my coursework done.

Although the participants acknowledged the convenience of format flexibility, they found balancing work, school, and family life an ongoing challenge. Family, job, and school commitments impact personal schedules and present challenges to attending college and achieving academic goals. Tina articulated these sentiments, stating,

The only drawback I had was the internships because I was working 5 days a week. So I was very lucky that I was able to adjust my schedule to working weekends so that I could do my internship during the week.

Another participant, Sam, received support despite her initial hesitance about the format. Sam recalled, "I was a little hesitant because it was online. ...But at the same time, I knew that surely there would be support someplace. And just to, kind of, that COE would know what they are doing." The participants' narratives suggested that format flexibility is a preferred learning method, allowing students to engage in learning in a way that suits them.

### ***Subtheme: Resources***

The second subtheme under self-directed learning was resources. Self-directed learning allows individuals to design their learning paths and choose resources and information to aid in the process. Identifying and selecting higher education financing can be stressful, especially for adult learners with a variety of personal considerations. In their interviews, the participants were transparent about how finances contributed significantly to their decision to pursue a master's

degree. They identified scholarships, grants, and work opportunities as ways to remove financial barriers.

Tina reported, “The in-state tuition was also kind of a big factor.” The participant used a unique state-level program to help pay tuition and fees for education students at state universities. As an employee of the COE, Amanda had the financial incentive of the tuition reduction program, which reduced financial challenges and provided encouragement to achieve her educational goals. She explained, “A perk of working at the COE is that they pay a significant amount of your tuition if you decide you want to go to school. So I thought, ‘I can’t pass up that opportunity.’”

The participant narratives presented adult learners’ self-directed nature, specifically in solving problems and devising solutions. The five participants described equipping learners with tools and resources as critical determinants of success and stressed the necessity of financial resources. The adult learners encountered challenges in the self-directed learning process as they struggled to access financial resources. Sam reflected, “It would have been awesome to know that there were scholarships available...that could have paid even for that first semester. ...I wish I had known because I paid for that first semester.” Further, the participants identified challenges accessing other resources and tools outside of funding, such as technology, learning materials, and other course-specific information.

Sam felt that orientation was a missing strategy for improving adult learning outcomes. She said,

Actually, [what COE provided] wasn’t— it wasn’t orientation. I don’t think there was a prospective webinar, like, even in a prospective webinar to say, “Hey, here’s all the different things that may or may not have been around when you last went to college.

We've got all these tools and things to make it so you're successful." Because there were some things I didn't utilize that I might [have].

Sally expressed similar sentiments, stating, "I was very overwhelmed at first, you know, half of the first semester, but by the second quarter of my first semester, I was feeling much more prepared."

Tina discussed feeling stressed and overwhelmed upon program entry, lacking the resources and effective tools needed to motivate and facilitate learning as she desired. She described her experience, saying, "It was stressful in the beginning, but I feel like as the classes went on, I got a good grasp of what the requirements actually were to be a teacher." Amanda reflected on her entrance to the program and expressed similar feelings. She said, "The whole process of doing it was intimidating, you know, being 51 years old and going back to school."

The participants' narratives indicated their independence and resourcefulness and how they took action to learn. They discussed skills that helped them navigate academic and personal experiences as adult learners and expressed dissatisfaction when they could not leverage these skills. The participants wanted to make informed decisions and expressed the need for readily accessible information on finances and study programs, including earn-and-learn options. According to andragogy, adults become increasingly independent as they mature, seeking freedom, choice, and control over their lives. The participants' narratives aligned with this concept, and the five students found the flexibility well-suited to their needs.

## **Theme 2: Collaborative Learning**

A second theme, collaborative learning, emerged from data analysis. As an approach to learning, collaborative learning emphasizes active interaction with materials and the exchange of experiences with others (Dillenbourg, 1999). Self-directed learning develops through social

interactions within a ZPD and involves learners co-constructing knowledge (Vygotsky, 1978). Consequently, collaboration enhances the benefits of self-directed learning. The participants' narratives showed collaborative learning aligned with the study's theoretical framework. Learner support and learner engagement emerged as subthemes.

***Subtheme: Learner Support***

The participants frequently mentioned the significance of learner support, which helped them navigate their academic journeys and feel supported throughout the program. In their narratives, each participant described her academic journey as a collaborative process, as she drew upon learner support from outside or within the classroom environment. Throughout their interviews, the participants discussed using a variety of learner supports. An instrumental component of the social constructivist approach is the scaffolding of learning by the ongoing collaboration between learners in their ZPD (Watson, 2000).

In their interviews, the participants emphasized the role of advising staff as a source of useful information and ideas that benefited their academic and personal lives. Sam stated, "The advising team was invaluable." Tina highlighted support earlier in the enrollment process, noting, "I could sit down and see somebody face to face and ask all the questions and when other questions came up. The actual enrollment part was super easy, super easy."

Amanda stressed the need for active participation between the learner and instructor to develop the skills necessary to navigate complex issues. However, active participation could not occur if the learning environment was not learner-centered. She explained,

Professor X was very valuable. She was always there. I would— she was always there, like, you know, "Give me a jingle. We'll talk about it." Whether it was class-related or even work-related, she was there for me. I had some questions about, you know, other

math classes that I could take to become highly qualified, and she was just so enthusiastic.

In discussing learner support, Tina reported having a strong system behind her. She identified her clinical practice mentor teacher as providing support for her schooling and encouragement to succeed through her academic program, saying, “They would help me out whenever I need them.” Tina expressed gratitude for the just-in-time support.

Grace made a similar statement, saying,

A lot of the teachers especially, like, they’re there as...a resource. So, like, I’ve definitely learned that more in my graduate level than undergrad. I never took advantage of that undergrad to, like, reach out to their teachers, because the worst they’re gonna say is no.

In their narratives, the participants expressed finding support for deep learning and skills development from the various COE faculty and university staff. Support systems contribute to student success on the path toward completion.

Discussing support in her academic journey, Sam stated, “The college, or university, [has] wonderful support. I took advantage a lot.” She continued, “Education is a very challenging career in a lot of ways. I took advantage of things at the counseling services, which are really useful.” Sam also felt she had strong learner support behind her education. She explained, “It’s a great program. Because the COE does have so much to offer. It has so much to help you, so many supports along the way. Like I mentioned, some of those other supports they have from the university itself.”

The learner support system is collaborative and could be a strategy for success. Learners must have opportunities for collaboration and avenues to gain the skills they need for navigating school, work, and life. The learner support system could extend from one person to many within

and outside the classroom. The participants who felt supported had a much more positive view of their experiences and perceived they had someone to lean on.

***Subtheme: Learner Engagement***

Under the theme of collaborative learning, learner engagement was the second subtheme that emerged from participant interviews. Vygotsky described learner engagement as the concept that individuals are active participants in the creation of their own knowledge (Schreiber & Valle, 2013). By Smith and MacGregor's (1992) definition, active learning refers to all classroom activities in which students are actively engaged, other than watching, listening, or taking notes. The findings showed that participants generally favored active learning strategies and techniques. Constructivist theories emphasize the importance of building connections between prior knowledge and new experiences and concepts in active learning strategies.

Amanda felt the GTPP's design "encourages conceptual learning instead of procedural. And it's almost easier because I can ask [the instructors] questions and have them figure stuff out." Amanda's statement shows how learner engagement contributed to developing her knowledge, skills, and ideas. As a result of her active engagement in the collaborative learning space, Amanda facilitates her learning process.

Participants expressed comfort working with people both similar and different from themselves. In discussing the learning environment, the participants described gaining knowledge, skills, and ideas that would help them succeed in their endeavors due to engaging with others. Participants primarily considered their active learning experiences with others as positive.

Sally detailed her learning as a collaborative process aided by individual interactions. She contended, “I think that community, I think, is the biggest thing. The COE gave me, like, really just trying to think back on it.” Sally added,

I actually made a lot of friends in this program, more than I made in my previous online program. I still text some of my friends. I still talk to them. I actually feel like I’ve built a bit of an educator community outside of the university because of the COE.

The findings showed that active engagement was an effective method for motivating learners. Active learning encourages communication and discussion to help learners solve problems, reach goals, and complete tasks (Settles, 2009). The participants addressed finding deeper learning in collaborative learning spaces. According to Park and Choi (2014), noncollaborative activities such as traditional classrooms or lecture-based settings offer learners little opportunity to develop 21st-century skills.

Tina expressed a desire for a learner-centered approach and an active and collaborative learning environment:

Sometimes we get a lot of readings to do for the week. And I don’t feel like you’re going to— When you’re reading three different articles or five different articles, you’re just not going to remember a lot of that kind of stuff without something to back it up. So maybe more kind of reading, reinforcement, rather than just, “Oh, hey, read this. It is Tina’s perception that her overall learning experience is static and lacking in interaction.”

Similarly, Amanda said, “I just felt that there was a lot of almost busy work in them [courses]. A lot of reading and writing that didn’t help me.” Amanda felt there was not enough attention to designing coursework in consideration of the need to balance adult learners’

responsibilities. At times, she found the coursework was not sufficiently relevant or meaningful to her overall development.

Participants reported finding it difficult to balance roles. Despite the value of collaboration, time and balancing expectations emerged as challenges. Sam voiced, I know collaboration is important, because we all have to collaborate at work and everything like that. But there are times when collaborative assignments are put in. And it is hard with us being adult learners who have jobs, potentially that are needing to have obligations.

Sam's words show adult learners' difficulties in completing their schooling while maintaining their personal lives and various means of experiencing collaborative work.

With more responsibilities than traditional students, the adult participants struggled to manage all their regular tasks and schoolwork. Tina expressed difficulties managing responsibilities, revealing,

I think, keeping it— the group projects, keeping those at a minimum, because of the fact that I've been very beneficial in the groups. [The groups] I've been in have been willing to work around my schedule. But I guess you could run into problems since we are, a lot of us are nontraditional students like this, where we are working a full-time job.

Setting priorities, especially when balancing independent and group work, was a strategy discussed by the participants. Collaboration takes more time than working independently, and the time investment can present challenges for adult learners who often have limited availability while striving to balance work, life, and school.

The active learning process includes tasks that show students how to enhance their understanding or improve their performance (Paulson & Faust, 1998). Sally reported difficulties

meeting a course's learning objectives due to the lack of clear success criteria. The following semester, another instructor actively engaged with Sally, helping her to understand what was expected of her. She stated,

Yeah, I had— I had actually talked to some of the professors once I got into the 593 class, and they finally gave us the things I wanted to see in the 511. And I was like, “Oh my gosh, this makes so much more sense now.” Like, I was like, “All I needed was this one thing.” And so she was like, “Oh my gosh, I'll let them know.” Because really, I was like, “I feel like you just need to give us an example in that class.” Like, give us an example of timeline. And then I think things would make more sense.

According to Hattie (2012), learners are likelier to succeed and be more satisfied with their performance when they have the tools to take control of their learning. The active learning strategies of self-assessment and student clarity provide the foundation for substantial growth in student learning (Johnson & Johnson, 2008).

Participants' narratives also indicated the significance of collaborative learning spaces outside the classroom. This finding further supported a social constructivist approach, which emphasizes the importance of students collaborating in the real world as they construct knowledge (Abdal-Haqq, 1998). Collaboration is a holistic trait integrated into day-to-day life and focused on lifelong learning (Smith & MacGregor, 1992).

Unlike passive learning, the constructivist approach emphasizes interaction between existing knowledge and social interaction (Vygotsky, 1978). Central to constructivist clinical practice is an active, learner-centered approach, where learners build on what they already know. Tina described engagement in real-world experience as ultimately testing theories (i.e., classroom learning). She noted, “Just because coursework can only take you so far: projects,

readings, that kind of stuff. Until you're actually in the classroom, I don't think you can learn a lot."

Participants valued their clinical experiences, which involved an integrated approach to building content knowledge and pedagogical expertise. Throughout her interview, Amanda discussed her experiences participating in clinical practice, which she described as "my favorite. ...I learned so much and took it right into my classroom as I was learning it." She claimed the experience of applying academic knowledge to practice in classrooms was "by far my favorite semester. I learned so much and took it right into my classroom as I was learning it."

Grace divided the overall clinical experience into aspects she found noteworthy. She stated,

I think the connections, the people, my internships. So, I think it's actually super beneficial to see the other side how everything kind of goes into, what goes into creating that environment. The lessons, the units, all of that, like, kind of just [make] everything real.

Amanda's classroom placement allowed for exploration, reflection, and direct application of pedagogical skills to evaluate her ability to teach effectively. She noted, "One of my classes was hitting a lot on behavior. And I took a lot of what I learned and put it on those fourth-grade kids, which was nice, because it kind of correlated with what I was doing."

Sam also found the clinical practice the most beneficial, specifically "the ability to apprentice teach, because I had already been a teacher. So I understood all of the teacher basics. I just needed to become an expert in an additional part of teaching." This finding aligns with Darling-Hammond (2014), who advocated for increased opportunities in well-supervised clinical practice to improve teacher education, a critical element of effective preparation.

Study participants described having positive experiences in collaborative learning environments. Their time within clinical practice, learner support, and various strategies for learner engagement provided encouragement to persist. The concept of collaborative learning reflects the premise that knowledge is created through active engagement with the material and sharing experiences between learners (González et al., 2006). Study participants actively engaged in knowledge co-construction, drawing on the support of others to navigate and negotiate their experiences.

### **Summary of the Findings**

Five adult learners enrolled in the COE GTPP agreed to share their perspectives and experiences in qualitative interviews. The study provided insight into how adult learners enrolled in GTPPs make sense of program entry, persistence, and completion. I used an IPA process to identify two themes, self-directed learning and collaborative learning. The codes, themes, and subthemes drawn from participants' experiences answered the research question and subquestion.

The participants described how they made sense of, navigated, and negotiated their academic and lived experiences through self-directed and collaborative learning. Adult learners have families, jobs, and commitments that differ from traditional college students. The COE offers flexibility in modality, scheduling, and pace, which shows the college's commitment to self-directed learning. The participants discussed economic barriers, financial incentives, and program information as critical resources to accomplish goals.

The five participants also mentioned strengths associated with collaborative learning, providing their perspectives on learner support and engagement under this theme. The participants drew on a rich support system as an active learning technique to help solve

problems, achieve goals, and complete tasks efficiently and effectively. According to the findings, collaborative learning techniques focus on enhancing educational experiences through engagement.

Theoretical findings through the participants' experiences emerged through the lenses of andragogy and social constructivism theories. The theories of andragogy and social constructivism aligned with the participants' expressed needs. All study participants were women, which contributes to the larger discussion about gender and adult learners. Based on the findings, gender is an area in need of further research. Cheris and Kramarae (2001) reported that women often balance three shifts—education, work, and care—which introduces a number of issues, considerations, and implications. Chapter Five provides further discussion of the study's findings and recommendations.

## CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

### Overview

The purpose of this interpretive phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of adult learners (over age 24) enrolled in graduate teacher preparation programs to identify their distinct needs and expectations related to program entry, persistence, and completion. The study is significant to understanding how adult learners make sense of their academic and lived experiences in HEIs. The findings could help HEI leaders design programs and services more intentionally. The insights and views emerged from adult learners' experiences as they engaged and negotiated the university experience to meet their needs and expectations. This study contributes to the education literature by providing insight into how a person (i.e., an adult learner) in a given context (i.e., enrolled in a graduate teacher preparation program) makes sense of a given phenomenon (i.e., program entry, persistence, and completion).

The research question and subquestion used to drive the study were:

**Research question:** How do adult learners make sense of their academic and lived experiences as they enter, persist, and complete their graduate teacher preparation program?

**Subquestion:** How do adult learners engage and negotiate the university experience to meet their needs and expectations?

Chapter Five provides a review of the findings and interpretation of the results. The chapter shows how the data answered the research questions and their relation to theory and literature. After a discussion of the study's strengths and limitations, the chapter concludes with a recommendation for future research.

## Discussion of the Findings

Two essential themes emerged from the study: self-directed learning and collaborative learning. This section shows how the themes answered the research question and subquestion. The participants identified self-directed learning and collaborative learning as essential for making sense of and navigating their academic and lived experiences. The five female adult learners used both types of learning, which enhanced their learning experiences despite the approaches' seemingly contradictory nature. In this study, all the participants were women by chance, which makes narratives about women a prominent part of the study.

The participants stressed the importance of self-directed learning and overwhelmingly supported the COE's online option due to its convenience and flexibility. Tina expressed appreciation for the flexibility, stating, "The opportunity to do it fully online while I continued working was huge because we have two kids." Participants' need to bridge the technology knowledge gap was the most common drawback of the online format. When participants entered their programs, they did not feel they had adequate digital skills. Amanda recalled, "The technology was biggest thing" that was making the transition "super-challenging," as "they used a lot of it."

The participants' emphasis on self-directed learning highlighted the significance of and need for accessible institutional resources. Resources and information access were common challenges identified by the participants. The adult learners in this study stressed the importance of colleges providing information and resources that will directly benefit them. Sam advocated for change in the COE, discussing the challenges in her journey resulting from a lack of access to information. She recalled, "I don't even think there was a prospective webinar." Sam found the

COE did not assist students in their transition with “tools and things to make it so you’re successful.”

In emphasizing collaborative learning, the participants highlighted the need for learner support. Fairchild (2003) stressed the importance of strengthening social networks for adult learners. In discussing their experiences, the participants reported positive learner support outside and inside the classroom. Sally stated, “Education is very challenging [but] I took advantage of a lot of things at counseling services [and] writing services.” Along with mentors, dedicated advising, enrollment, faculty, and staff members supported participants’ academic journeys. Participants described balancing the autonomy of learning with access to a network of support to co-construct knowledge. Sally identified “community [as] the biggest thing” the COE provided to navigate the journey.

The second aspect of collaborative learning that emerged in participant interviews was the importance of learner engagement. Although the adult learners found support from faculty members, they also identified less-positive aspects. Participants’ dissatisfaction could reflect their desire for faculty to function differently in an online GTPP than in a more traditional setting. Tina wanted her instructors to “pull all the relevant information out” in more meaningful ways than having students “[read] three different or five different articles [that they’re] not going to remember.” She stressed the importance of finding new ways to actively engage learners for increased motivation and knowledge construction.

Based on this study’s findings, institutions could benefit from integrating self-directed and collaborative learning elements to enhance learning. Participants’ narratives revealed tension and a desire to find a balance between collaboration and self-direction. The study suggests that HEIs emphasize programmatic design to balance interdependence and independence among

group dynamics. Despite these findings, adult education literature rarely addresses the need to foster autonomy through independence and connection through relationships.

The study's findings contribute to conversations around andragogy (Knowles, 1970) and social constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978). There is a focus on individual autonomy and collaboration, as indicated through the narratives of the five women. Students' confidence in their abilities appears to increase when they work collaboratively; not only do they not feel judged, but learn their mistakes are not their own. With students encouraged to evaluate their strengths and weaknesses, self-directed learning positively influences collaboration, involving students in decision-making processes to identify what is not working and what they need to do to succeed in the classroom.

This study's findings indicated ideas for balancing both self-directed and collaborative learning within an HEI. Balance might involve designing programs and services more intentionally with engagement of self-directed and collaborative learning. The following sections includes suggestions for the practical application of these findings. Furthermore, this study was an unintentional exploration of adult women based on random selection, indicating the importance of examining this population of learners in greater depth. Despite the random selection of the study population, it is not surprising that the study population was all women, as 83% of COE students are female for the 2022-2023 academic year. The two dominant adult learning theories are relevant to the academic and lived experiences of graduate-level adult learners and the programs designed to serve them. Adult learning theories provide a foundation for designing and implementing higher education programmatic design and tailoring programs to meet the student population's needs.

## **Recommendations for Practical Application**

The findings from the participants' narratives could help HEI leaders design programs and services more intentionally. Recommendations address the need for an orientation program, faculty development, and the use of communities of practice.

### **Recommendation 1: Development of an Orientation Program**

Based on the study's findings, the COE could consider developing an orientation program. Merriam and Bierema (2014) identified the need for an easily understood orientation program tailored to the characteristics and needs of the population. When adult learners enroll at a university to pursue a degree, orientation to the school is critical to building confidence and preparedness.

The study participants described transitioning as challenging, with some identifying deficiencies that hindered their academic progress. According to Kallison (2015), adult learners could lack reading, writing, mathematics, and technological skills when they return to higher education. College readiness also encompasses other factors, such as student behavior and time management. In light of these concerns, a recommendation is for the COE to develop an orientation program tailored to the specific needs of adult learners. Adult learners need unique academic, career, and personal support services.

Another consideration when designing orientation programs is that many adults have other responsibilities, such as work or childcare, making it difficult for them to attend programs (Miller, 2017). This consideration is particularly relevant, given that this study's participants were all women. More women than men spend added time caring for their homes and children (Hochschild & Machung, 2012). Participants in this study appreciated the COE's online options, which offered flexibility and reduced barriers. With an online orientation program, adult learners

might be more likely to participate and succeed. However, Chan (2019) found that only one of the 39 colleges studied offered a hybrid orientation combining in-person and online courses.

Creating a collaborative community was another consideration. The COE should provide a virtual way to foster a supportive environment for knowledge exchange. Scagnoli (2001) recommended using highly interactive, small-group formats for learners to converse with one another and obtain support from various individuals within an institution. Through virtual collaboration, learners can form professional relationships with faculty and staff while transcending geographical and time barriers from orientation to graduation. Online orientation would familiarize adults with university technologies like email, synchronous chats, and discussion boards (see Scagnoli, 2001). The participants also reported challenges related to technology gaps.

## **Recommendation 2: Faculty Development**

The study's findings suggest the need for faculty development. Participants' critiques of the program correlated with their role as passive recipients of knowledge. According to Freire (2016), education should be learner-centered, a dialog between teacher and student should be encouraged, and education should be problem-based. The learner-centered environment facilitates a more collaborative approach to learning. Teachers act as facilitators, providing feedback and answering questions as needed (Brockbank & McGill, 2007).

The COE might consider faculty development that prioritizes active learner engagement in the co-construction of knowledge. The development could occur in a constructivist environment that includes building on prior knowledge; purposeful, active learning; and sense-making. Teachers are primarily responsible for creating a collaborative learning environment where students are active participants. Educators act as facilitators in the classroom by modeling

a skill, providing hints or cues, and adapting materials or activities (Coppole & Bredekamp, 2009). Professional development for faculty is crucial to deploying aligned teaching strategies in constructivist learning environments.

### **Recommendation 3: Fostering Communities of Practice**

The COE is in the business of ensuring that human flourishing is equitable. To create positive social change, the COE is committed to the intellectual and social development of its learning communities. This study showed that participants valued collaboration opportunities, as active learning increases engagement in the learning process and enhances learning effectiveness. Based on the findings, a recommendation is to create communities of practice (CoPs).

At its basic level, a CoP is a group of people with a shared goal. A CoP has three characteristics: (a) the domain of the CoP, expressing the common interest shared by the CoP; (b) the community, which refers to the social structure connecting the group; and (c) the practice, which refers to the knowledge produced by the community (Li et al., 2009; Wenger, 2011; Wenger et al., 2002). At the COE, a CoP would be a dedicated team of professionals coming together to support the human flourishing of students, staff, and faculty. The COE leaders could consider organizing COPs in a manner that helps students, teachers, and staff thrive. The COE could also consider providing virtual communities of practice, connecting people via online communities (Sibbald et al., 2022) to eliminate access barriers.

The innovative CoP environment could include programmatic faculty coming together to develop key performance indicators of quantifiable progress for adult learners in the COE GTPPs. Because CoPs are voluntary, success requires exciting and engaging members within a shared domain of adult learner interest (Wenger, 1998). The COE community members can

bring their internal direction, character, and energy to address adult learner programmatic design (Wenger et al., 2002). Further, the fundamental design should encourage open dialogue to include the voices of those within and outside the community. The individuals responsible for cultivating the CoP should put the adult learner at the center of decision-making.

### **Methodological Observations**

Five participants comprised a purposeful and narrow sample that enabled a deeper analysis of the data. This IPA study of adult learners in the COE's graduate teacher preparation program provided insight into how the population makes sense of academic and lived experiences. HEI leaders at the COE could design programs and services more intentionally based on these findings (e.g., communities of practice, orientation, faculty development). Programmatic designers and faculty could draw upon this study's findings to consider the experiences available to graduate teacher candidates. With practical applications of self-directed and collaborative learning, adult learners might be more motivated to learn and connect to perform tasks. Finally, this study contributes to the education literature by providing insight into how a person (i.e., an adult learner) in a given context (e.g., enrolling in a graduate teacher preparation program) makes sense of a given phenomenon (i.e., program entry, persistence, and completion). The study presented a description of women's academic and lived experiences in navigating and negotiating higher education in the 21st century. Based on the findings, there is a need for further exploration of self-directed collaborative approaches to meet the needs of adult learners in higher education.

## **Recommendations for Future Related Research**

After considering the academic and lived experiences of the women in the study and producing findings about the COE GTPPs, I developed suggestions for future scholarly research, as follows:

- To expand on study's insights into self-directed and collaborative learning, further exploration of self-directed collaborative learning approaches and strategies is warranted. It is important to conduct an in-depth study of what self-directed learning and collaborative learning are and how individuals develop these skills. Self-directed learning emphasizes the individual rather than the collective (Servant-Miklos & Noordegraaf-Eelens, 2021). Although individual control is essential, students must also learn how to work in teams as a community (Nerali et al., 2016). Future researchers can focus on models and assessments that promote self-directed learning for collaboration and teamwork (Moore et al., 2007).
- An action research study would be appropriate to determine the effectiveness of self-directed and collaborative learning approaches and strategies.
- To assess self-directed learning, researchers could evaluate assessment recommendations to provide student feedback on the processes required to become a self-directed learner (Ricotta et al., 2022).
- A case study would allow an exploration of faculty perceptions of self-directed and collaborative learning and faculty professional development requirements. In a higher education environment, a researcher could analyze the resources and support available to facilitate self-directed collaborative learning approaches.

- Although this study did not focus on gender, all participants were women. As a gender-based consideration, researchers could explore whether the study's findings are generalizable across genders.
- This study's focus was graduate teacher preparation at teachers' colleges. A comparative analysis of adult women's academic and lived experiences across programs, colleges, and universities would be beneficial. It is vital to understand the difficulties many women face to encourage institutions to respond positively.
- There are disproportionately more women in education (Wong, 2019), and more fields specific to gender diversity could come in the future. Additional research on self-directed and collaborative learning in higher education by gender would expand the understanding in this area.
- Future higher education learning studies could also address factors such as race, ethnicity, gender, geographical representation, and first-generation and continuing-generation students, among others.
- Researchers could conduct studies to compare adult learners in undergraduate programs at COE and adult learners in COE graduate teacher preparation programs. College and university leaders could use the findings to design programs and services with adult learners in mind, regardless of the students' degree-seeking status.

### **Summary**

An IPA of participants' narratives showed how academic and authentic, lived experiences relate to adult learning theory, andragogy, and social constructivism. The study's findings align with scholarly research and institutional data. To provide the best learning experience for adults,

HEIs that serve adult students should address and accommodate these nontraditional learners' needs.

The needs and desires expressed by the five female participants align with the four assumptions of andragogy (Knowles, 1970). Adult learners move from dependency to self-direction in accordance with the andragogic assumption. As they navigated and negotiated their academic journeys, the five adult learners demonstrated varying levels of independence. Learning in a new environment and engaging as adult learners emerged throughout their narratives. This study contributed to the literature on adult learners, showing a dichotomy between appreciating self-directed learning and collaboration, as both are important. A self-directed education focuses on the individual, whereas a collaborative learning approach centers on the co-construction of knowledge (collaborative learning). Participants in the study described engagement as a learner-driven process; however, faculty and peers also played a critical role in guiding and promoting self-directed learning (Sawatsky et al., 2018).

Findings of the study contribute to the literature on how women navigate and negotiate higher education. There is a lack of analysis of gender differences in current adult learning theory. 83% of the total enrollment population in COE is comprised of women, who are consistently left out of the planning process in adult education. It is particularly significant that this study focuses exclusively on women in adult education. Additionally, this study contributes to the literature through its regional focus, which is lacking in previous studies.

Although taking ownership does not negate collaborative learning, the design of adult learner programs is not entirely self-directed. Learners benefit from constructivism, the active process of creating knowledge and meaning through experience (Vygotsky, 1978). The narratives in this study suggest that taking ownership involves both support for and engagement

by adult learners. Active instructional methods and a support network positively influenced the adult learners in this study.

Studying adult learners' characteristics and impact on academic programs builds on existing theories and offers new perspectives on adult learners' experiences in higher education. Identifying and understanding these characteristics can help provide a viable direction for improving the adult learning experience in higher education through more intentional programmatic design. A systemic approach to understanding, addressing, and eradicating historical and structural inequalities is required to achieve equity among all students. Equity in the system is a priority for the COE. Therefore, systemic equity refers to intentionally designing and redesigning processes, procedures, policies, and entire systems toward equity, justice, and inclusion. For all communities to achieve systemic equality, the COE must remove barriers, provide resources, and adapt approaches to reflect each community's needs, demands, and approaches.

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## Appendix A: Recruitment Email

Hello \_\_\_\_\_,

My name is Heather Villarruel, Clinical Assistant Professor and Associate Division Director of Teacher Preparation at Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College. In addition, I am currently a doctoral candidate in the Educational Leadership Program at Northern Arizona University. My dissertation work is entitled *Adult Learner Approach to Transformational Change: An Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis*.

I would like to ask you to participate in my research regarding lived experiences as an adult learner (over 24) enrolled in graduate teacher preparation to identify your distinct needs and expectations related to program entry, persistence, and completion. The specific criteria for study participation are as follows:

The participation criteria are adult learners (a) over age 24, (b) enrolled in a graduate teacher preparation program, and (c) working full-time. The invitation to participate included the definition of an adult learner.

This study is personally and professionally important to me because I am passionate about understanding how adult learners make sense of their academic and lived experiences to help higher education institution leaders design programs and services more intentionally.

If you participate in this, it will involve an interview held online via Zoom. The interview will consist of a series of questions about your distinct needs and expectations related to program entry, persistence, and completion. The estimated time commitment is 45-60 minutes. Once the interview has been transcribed, you will be provided a copy of the transcript to review and add any additional comments.

I sincerely hope that you will be able to participate in my study. If you are interested in participating and meet the specific criteria for study participation, please contact me at [heather.villarruel@asu.edu](mailto:heather.villarruel@asu.edu).

I appreciate your time, and I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Thank you,

Heather Villarruel  
Associate Division Director, Division of Teacher Preparation  
Clinical Assistant Professor  
Arizona State University | Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College

## Appendix B: Consent to Participate in Research

**Study Title:** ADULT LEARNER APPROACH TO TRANSFORMATIONAL CHANGE: AN INTERPRETIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

**Principal Investigator:** Heather Villarruel

You are being invited to participate in a research study titled *Adult Learner Approach to Transformational Change: An Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis*. This study is being done by Heather Villarruel from Northern Arizona University.

I would like to ask you to participate in my research regarding lived experiences as an adult learner (over 24) enrolled in graduate teacher preparation to identify your distinct needs and expectations related to program entry, persistence, and completion. The specific criteria for study participation are as follows:

The participation criteria are adult learners (a) over age 24, (b) enrolled in a graduate teacher preparation program, and (c) working full-time. The invitation to participate included the definition of an adult learner.

While you may not directly benefit from this research, participation in the study may help higher education institution leaders understand how adult learners make sense of their academic and lived experiences to design programs and services more intentionally. This study's findings could allow university faculty and staff responsible for programmatic design to consider the experiences offered in graduate teacher preparation. Finally, this study should contribute to education literature by providing insight into how a person (i.e., an adult learner) in a given context (i.e., enrolled in a graduate teacher preparation program) makes sense of a given phenomenon (i.e., program entry, persistence, and completion).

If you agree to take part in this study, it will involve an interview held online via Zoom. The interview will consist of a series of questions about your distinct needs and expectations related to program entry, persistence, and completion. The estimated time commitment is 45-60 minutes. Once the interview has been transcribed, you will be provided a copy of the transcript to review and add any additional comments.

Participation in this study is voluntary. Refusal to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which the subject is otherwise entitled. Participation may be discontinued at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

By submitting the consent form, you are agreeing that the information collected through the data collection process may be used as described in the research project. There are no other expected risks to you as a result of participating in this study. The information that you provide in the study will be handled confidentially.

With your permission, I would like to audio record and video record this interview so that I can make an accurate transcript. Data from this study will reside on a personal password-protected

computer with two-factor authentication for security. This confidential data will be stored on ASU’s secure cloud storage, and only the researcher will have access to this data. Furthermore, the researcher will be the only person to conduct the interviews and access the study data, transcripts, and researcher journal. Deidentified data collected as a part of the current study will not be shared with others (e.g., investigators or industry partners) for future research purposes or other uses.

The information that you provide in the study will be handled confidentially. However, there may be circumstances where this information must be released or shared as required by law. Northern Arizona University Institutional Review Board may review the research records for monitoring purposes.

If you have questions about this project or if you have a research-related problem, you may contact the researcher(s), **Heather Villarruel**, [heather.villarruel@asu.edu](mailto:heather.villarruel@asu.edu).

For questions about your rights as a participant in this study or to discuss other study-related concerns or complaints with someone who is not part of the research team, you may contact the Human Research Protection Program at 928-523-9551 or online at <http://nau.edu/Research/Compliance/Human-Research/Welcome/>.

### AGREEMENT TO PARTICIPATE

I have read (or someone has read to me) this form, and I am aware that I am being asked to participate in a research study. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and have had them answered to my satisfaction. I affirm that I am at least 18 years of age and voluntarily agree to participate in this study.

I am not giving up any legal rights by signing this form. I will be given a copy of this form.

<b>Printed name of subject</b>	<b>Signature of subject</b>	<b>Date</b>

**Signature of Investigator/Individual Obtaining Consent:**

To the best of my ability, I have explained and discussed the full contents of the study, including all of the information contained in this consent form. All questions of the research subject and those of his/her parent or legal guardian have been accurately answered.

Investigator/Person Obtaining Consent: \_\_\_\_\_

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

## Appendix C: Interview Protocol

**Title:** Adult Learner Approach to Transformational Change: An Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis

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

**Time:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Location:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Interviewee:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Pseudonym:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Signed consent form:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Notes to interviewee:** \_\_\_\_\_

Thank you for your participation in this study. Your input is valuable to this research in understanding how adult learners make sense of their academic and lived experiences to help higher education institution leaders design programs and services more intentionally. Confidentiality of your responses and identity will be assured of confidentiality throughout the research process. Participant information will be encrypted and remain confidential. No identifying information will be released or shared. The approximate length of the interview is 45 to 60 minutes, including nine major questions.

**Purpose of the Research:** The purpose of this study is to explore the lived experiences of adult learners (over age 24) enrolled in graduate teacher preparation programs to identify their distinct needs and expectations related to program entry, persistence, and completion. This research is important in many ways. First, it will be a study of adult learners in graduate teacher preparation programs. Understanding how adult learners make sense of their academic and lived experiences could help higher education institution leaders design programs and services more intentionally. Second, this study's findings could allow university faculty and staff responsible for programmatic design to consider the experiences offered in graduate teacher preparation. Finally, this study should contribute to education literature by providing insight into how a person (i.e., an adult learner) in a given context (i.e., enrolled in a graduate teacher preparation program) makes sense of a given phenomenon (i.e., program entry, persistence, and completion).

### Interview Protocol

**Research Question (RQ):** How do adult learners make sense of their academic and lived experiences as they enter, persist, and complete their graduate teacher preparation program?

**Subquestion (SQ):** How do adult learners engage and negotiate the university experience to meet their needs and expectations?

**Warm-Up Question:** Please tell me what was going on in your life before your time at MLFTC and why you chose to enroll here.

## Interview Questions

### **Point 1: Enter (Enroll)**

1. How did you learn about MLFTC programs? (Employer, word of mouth, website, flier, radio, etc.)
2. What attracted you to MLFTC's graduate program? (a pathway for working adults, reputation, academic majors available, cost of attendance, location, facilities and/or amenities, student activities, career services, faculty, etc.)
3. What or who was helpful in supporting you to enroll? (online resources, university staff, self)

### **Point 2: Persist (In Program)**

4. How did you feel when you first started this program? (Expand, what made you feel that way?)
5. I am very interested to know how the program was structured. How did the program structure meet/not meet your needs as an adult learner? Feedback/suggestions? (i.e., Course times, modality, instructional techniques, student engagement)
6. The vision at MLFTC is to build the Next Education Workforce. The vision entails redesigning education for learners and educators. Why? We ask teachers to be all things to all people at all times. As a result, our education system does not reliably deliver quality learning outcomes and experiences for nearly enough people and communities. It's an unsustainable system. The current education system is designed to produce inequitable outcomes despite good intentions.

In order to produce the outcomes desired, what shifts do you see as necessary in teacher preparation? What changes within teacher preparation are most likely to yield better outcomes for PK-12 learners? (i.e. what new activities and experiences would be beneficial)

### **Point 3: Complete Program (Graduate)**

7. Now when you look back over the program, what do you think was most valuable during that time? (Be ready to expand, people, teachers, teaching methods)
8. Would you recommend the program to people that are seeking education as an adult learner? If not, what changes would you recommend and why?

### **Wrap-Up Question**

Is there anything else you would like to add about your overall experience as an adult learner in our graduate teacher preparation program?

Conclusion of the interview: Thank you to the interviewee. Reassure confidentiality. Once the interview has been transcribed, you will be provided a copy of the transcript to review and add any additional comments.

## Appendix D: IRB Approval Letter



Institutional Review Board for the  
Human Research Protection Program

525 S Beaver St  
PO Box: 4062  
Flagstaff AZ 86011  
928-523-9551  
<https://www.nau.edu/IRB>

Office of Research Compliance

**To:** Heather Villarruel, Doctor of Education Degree in Education Leadership  
(in progress)  
**From:** NAU IRB Office  
**Approval Date:** November 7, 2022

**Project:** ADULT LEARNER APPROACH TO TRANSFORMATIONAL CHANGE:  
AN INTERPRETIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS  
**Project Number:** 1965933-2  
**Submission:** Revision  
**Action:** APPROVED  
**Project Risk Level:** MINIMAL RISK  
**Approval Expiration Date:** November 4, 2027

**Review Category/ies:** **The project is not federally funded or supported and has been deemed to be no more than minimal risk.**

This project has been reviewed and approved by an IRB Chair or designee.

- Northern Arizona University maintains a Federalwide Assurance with the Office for Human Research Protections (FWA #00000357).
- All research procedures should be conducted in full accordance with all applicable sections of the guidance.
- The Principal Investigator should notify the IRB immediately of any proposed changes that affect the protocol and report any unanticipated problems involving risks to participants or others. Please refer to Guidance Investigators Responsibility after IRB Approval, Reporting Local Information and Minimal Risk or Exempt Research.
- All documents referenced in this submission have been reviewed and approved. Documents are filed with the HRPP Office within IRBNet. If subjects will be consented, the approved consent(s) are available within IRBNet upon approval notification from the HRPP Office.

### Important

The principal investigator for this study is responsible for obtaining all necessary approvals before commencing research. Please be sure that you have satisfied applicable external and University requirements, for example (but not limited to) data repositories, listserv permission, records request, data use agreement, [conducting University surveys](#), [data security](#), [international](#), [conflicts of interest](#), [biological safety](#), [radiation safety](#), [HIPAA](#), [FERPA](#), [FDA](#), [sponsor approval](#), [clinicaltrials.gov](#), [tribal consultation](#), or [school approval](#). IRB approval does not convey approval to commence research in the event that other requirements have not been satisfied.