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# Look Again—Traditional Women as Nontraditional Students: A New Face in Higher Education

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Look Again—Traditional Women as Nontraditional Students:  
A New Face in Higher Education

Candi Jones Newell

A dissertation submitted to the faculty of  
Brigham Young University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

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## ABSTRACT

### Look Again—Traditional Women as Nontraditional Students: A New Face in Higher Education

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Doctor of Philosophy

This study explored the experiences of 13 culturally traditional women who returned to higher education as nontraditional students. An individual unstructured interview, with guiding questions, was held with each woman. This provided the opportunity for these women to articulate their experience. The interviews were transcribed and interpreted using a synthesis of qualitative methods based upon Kvale's method. Seven themes emerged: (a) participants would tell a woman considering a return to school to "do it!" (b) participants saw spousal support as significant in their ability to return to school, (c) participants saw their families as generally supportive of their return to school, (d) participants felt their spirituality increased when they returned to school, (e) participants were surprised they did well academically when they returned to school, (f) participants felt returning to school had increased their world view, and (g) participants valued higher education and wanted to finish something they had started. The implications of this study support the need for a more open dialogue about the experience of a traditional woman as she returns to obtain her undergraduate degree as a nontraditional student. The support of family and institutions appear integral to both retention and completion for these women who now make up a significant portion of those presently attending institutions of higher learning.

Keywords: traditional, nontraditional students, women, students, higher education

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## DESCRIPTION OF DISSERTATION CONTENT AND STRUCTURE

This dissertation, *Look Again—Traditional Women as Nontraditional Students: A New Face in Higher Education*, is written in a hybrid format. The hybrid format is a combination of the traditional dissertation format and a journal manuscript format. The introductory pages are formatted based on the university's dissertation submission requirements. The main body of this dissertation is presented in the format of a journal article—following recommendations from the American Psychological Association's publication manual (6th ed.). This dissertation contains two references lists, one for the manuscript portion and one for the literature review (Appendix A). Included in Appendices A, B, C, and D are the literature review; sample recruiting script for participants; informed consent, approved by the university's Institutional Review Board; and supporting quotes from the qualitative interviews.

## Introduction

The 2000 United States Census shows the number of *baby boomer women* born in the United States between 1946 and 1964, is now approaching one-sixth of the entire population. The possible impact of this development, and of an aging population in general, prompted the National Institute on Aging, in conjunction with the MacArthur Foundation Research Network on Successful Midlife Development, to conduct a national survey in 1994-1995 known as Mid Life in the United States (MIDUS I). A follow-up study, repeated ten years later in 2004-2005, is referred to as MIDUS II (Brim, Ryff, & Kessler, 2004). The studies aimed to investigate the role of behavioral, psychological and social factors in accounting for age-related variation in health and well-being in a national sample of Americans. Brim et al. (2004), using data from the survey, suggest women are, in general, living longer, healthier lives. This aging population is also experiencing social and economic forces which have increased their participation in higher education including the “rapid pace of technological change, and the constantly shifting demands of the workplace in this era of a global economy” (Ross-Gordon, 2011, p. 1). Additionally, “the phenomena of early retirement, the recognition that many older adults still want to work, and longer life spans and better health that make them still able to work necessitates preparing for the *third age*—that period beyond the career job and parenting which can last up to 30 years for some” (Brown, 2002, p. 69).

### The Nontraditional Student

Serving the needs of nontraditional students in higher education has become an important priority of higher education institutions (Rice, 2003). Researchers define nontraditional students as “those who are over age twenty-five and enter postsecondary education for the first time or return to continue postsecondary study begun at an earlier time” (Martinez Aleman & Renn,

2002, p. 336). Dr. Susan Aldridge writes, “They may be a little bit older, but some of them are insecure about coming back to school into a traditional environment. They’re worried about failure, cost and whether they can balance the other activities in their lives along with academic studies” (as cited in Pelletier, 2010, p. 6). Nontraditional students are the fastest growing population on university campuses (Fairchild, 2003). Additionally, in 2008, more than one-third of undergraduate students were over the age of 25, and nearly 25% of those were parents and half of those parents were single parents (Bok, 2015).

The National Center for Education Statistics (2009a) suggests that between 2005 and 2018, college enrollment will increase to 20.4 million and that nearly 60% of the students will be women. Of that increase, 21% will be in women who are older than 25 years of age (Hussar & Bailey, 2009). In 2005, according to Snyder, Dillow, and Hoffman (2008), women made up 57% of the 17.5 million undergraduate students. Interestingly, only thirty years earlier, in the 1970s, 58% of undergraduate students were men (Marcus, 2017). Lorentzen writes, “it is projected that female enrollment will increase by 16 percent between 2011 and 2021, while male enrollment will increase by only 7 percent” (2014, p. 1).

### **Higher Education and the Traditional Woman**

For the purpose of this study, a traditional woman is defined as “a woman whose central value system and cultural mores emphasize homemaking and childrearing as their primary role” (Leavitt, 2005, p. 5). Traditional women frequently sacrificed their own immediate educational goals and committed themselves full-time to their role in the family (Eakins, 2010). Many women choose to interrupt their education and careers to focus their time and attention on the care of children (Betz & Fitzgerald, 1987). Bianchi (1990) suggests women almost always drop out of school for reasons having to do with others as they trade academic dreams for the tugs of

family, and in many cases, come to rethink those trades after their children are grown. For women with traditional values, the pursuit of higher education later in life presents an opportunity to forge an identity not solely linked to their family role, while preserving their primary roles of wife, mother and homemaker (Martinez Aleman & Renn, 2002). Women often maintained their personal goals in education as something to pursue at some other, unspecified point in time. We can no longer think of women's lives as set stages from youth to old age (Eakins, 2010) as the previous sequential pattern of life/education/work now allows for an interruption in education to focus on the responsibilities of motherhood, with a reentry to the world of education and/or work at a later time (Whitmarsh, Brown, Cooper, Hawkins-Rodgers, & Wentworth, 2007).

However, the scope and variety of choices women make in education is increasingly important, especially in the twenty-first century. "Earning a post-secondary degree or credential is no longer just a pathway to opportunity for a talented few; rather, it is a prerequisite for the growing jobs of the new economy. Of the 30 fastest growing occupations, more than half require postsecondary education" (Obama White House, 2016). Carnevale, Smith, and Strohl (2012) project the U.S. economy will need 22 million workers with post-secondary degrees.

O'Shea and Stone's (2014) research shows older women tend to limit themselves in terms of what type of a degree they choose to pursue as their learning is frequently coordinated around domestic and childrearing responsibilities (p. 82). Each woman adapts and sustains her educational ambitions, and shifts are observed as to how generations have met this challenge. Just as women acquire an education for different reasons, so their uses of education may vary (Martinez Aleman & Renn, 2002).

## **Changing Role Expectations and the Traditional Woman**

In the first half of the twentieth century, higher education was seen as an impediment to marriage for women, because a career orientation was seen as incompatible with the roles of middle-class wife and mother (McClelland, 1992). In the latter half of the twentieth century, attitudes began to change slowly, although this could perhaps be attributed more to the increasing reality of economic and political pressures rather than to theological or cultural shifts (Eisenmann, 2006). However, cultural expectations for what it means to be a mother, wife and homemaker *and* to be an educated woman with an academic degree and the possibility of a career are often perceived as mutually exclusive (McClelland, 1992). The nontraditional female student's educational journey can be impacted by the traditional female roles of caring for family and households (Deutsch & Schmertz, 2011).

Changing role expectations are particularly evident during midlife, especially for the more traditional woman. Most female nontraditional students are balancing their education with multiple roles—many have spouses, and most have children, often creating a stressful crisis of loyalty when the various roles collide as the woman tries to blend her academic life and her other life (Eakins, 2010). Children then leave home and the family structure shifts. Women may find themselves uncertain as to their parenting roles as they develop adult relationships with their maturing and increasingly independent children (Evans, 2007). Stewart, Ostrove, and Helson's research (2001) suggests that midlife aging has been construed as a negative period despite literature that is inconsistent with that view. As traditional women make the transition back into higher education as nontraditional students, they may experience issues with role definition, priorities, and identity (Martinez Aleman & Renn, 2002).

## **Application of Theory**

Brown (2002) suggests the importance of applying adult development and adult learning theories to better understand the expansion of life choices for older adults as they are the beneficiaries of better health and longer lifespans. Eakins (2010) would also argue for the exploration of the impact on women, characterized by an *identity-integrity* crisis as women who had previously been at home return to college. She continues with a recommendation to explore adult life stages for these women, to better understand their reengagement with higher education, particularly with regard to changes in the housewife role in recent years. In previous stages, there were role models, and the course was familiar.

Fitzgerald and Harmon (2001) suggest “the history of women’s traditional roles as homemaker and mother continue to influence every aspect of their career choices and adjustments” including the continuation of and return to their education (p. 215). This group of women, as nontraditional students, has unique challenges, needs, expectations, aspirations, and experiences (Eakins, 2010).

## **The Purpose of This Study**

In the twenty-first century, there appears to be an additional, emerging role now available to traditional women, which provides the opportunity to complete higher educational goals, previously set aside, with attendant experiences and possibilities. Although the literature is adequate regarding the nontraditional student experience and outcomes, there is limited research addressing the experience of a traditional woman as she takes on the role of the nontraditional female student.

As the Harvard historian Laurel Thatcher Ulrich (1991) reminds, The story of female experiences in America is not to be found in a linear progression from darkness to light, from constricted to expanding opportunities, from negative to positive valuation (or vice versa), but in a convoluted embroidery of loss and gain, accommodation and resistance. There can be no simple explanation of the female status because that status is in itself complex . . . best understood in the close exploration of the lives of ordinary women. (Afterword, para.13)

Traditional women becoming nontraditional students are living that *non-linear progression* (Ulrich, 1991) and experiencing that *complex status* as they become the new face of higher education. The purpose of this study is to highlight the experience of traditional women as they return to higher education as non-traditional students.

### **Method**

A qualitative research method was used in this study. Working within the paradigm of qualitative research, the researcher attempted to understand the experience of the participants from the participants' point of view and within the context in which those experiences occur (Moon, Dillon, & Sprankle, 1990). According to the six methodological assumptions outlined by Merriman (1988), qualitative research (a) focuses more on process, or how things occur, than on outcome; (b) tries to capture the meaning that people give to their lives and experiences; (c) involves the researcher as the primary instrument of data collection and analysis; (d) focuses on observations of participants in their natural setting; (e) involves collecting and analyzing descriptive data such as words and pictures rather than numerical data; and (f) builds or generates theories, concepts and hypotheses inductively from an analysis of the detailed interactions and experiences of the selected participants.

## Participants

Participants for this study were women who returned to higher education in mid-life, with the goal of completing their undergraduate degree. Participants interrupted their involvement with higher education to fulfill culturally traditional roles of wife, mother and homemaker. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2009b), an absence or interruption of at least three years from higher education gives a student the moniker of a *nontraditional* student, an accepted definition in most university settings.

Participants were recruited from different areas within the United States. The sample was a sample of convenience, as the primary researcher reached out to family and friends to identify possible candidates for the study. Recruiters were given a recruiting script to guide them in their solicitation of possible candidates. The sample size was 13 individuals. Participants received a \$40.00 gift card for their participation.

An email with a brief introduction to the study was sent to each potential participant, with information about the anticipated requirements for participation with an attached Informed Consent. The email instructed the possible participant to reply if they were interested and to attach the signed Informed Consent. When the participant replied with an affirmative answer, with the signed Informed Consent attached, they were instructed to provide their preferred telephone number contact for the interview. They were also provided a choice of possible dates and times to conduct the interview. An email confirming the date and the time of the interview was sent to each participant.

Twenty-three women were initially contacted. Eighteen women responded back and 13 women actually participated in the study. The average age of the woman interviewed was 43 years. Twelve of the women were married, and one was a single mother, and two were

previously divorced. The number of children in each family ranged from two to seven, and the mode was six. A total of sixty-one children were represented in the thirteen families. The average age of the children was 15.5 years, with the mode being 19 years. All of the women identified as members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS).

### **Data Collection**

The principle researcher is a doctoral candidate who has training and experience in qualitative methods. The principal researcher returned to college to complete her undergraduate degree 12 years ago and considers herself to be a traditional woman who is also a nontraditional student. Data was collected using unstructured interviews. One-on-one interviews were conducted by the principal researcher by telephone. A list of interview topics and guiding questions were used to avoid having the interviewer ask leading questions and to maximize the depth and breadth of interviewee responses (Patton, 1990). The interviews ranged in length of time from 30-45 minutes, with an average of 37 minutes. Each interview was recorded by the primary researcher. The interviews were then transcribed by the researcher and two research assistants. Both research assistants had training and experience in qualitative methods.

The philosophical foundation for the method of study was based in a relational ontology (Jackson & Patton, 1992). This foundation assumes that relationships are primary and necessary to understanding the human experiences. Dr. Jean Baker Miller's psychology of women, specifically Relational-Cultural Theory (RCT) also informed the foundation of this method (1976). In keeping with this fundamental foundation, the method used is based on an epistemological foundation that is both hermeneutic and dialectic (Jackson & Patton, 1992). Schwandt proposed that a major tenet of this epistemology is that "understanding is something

that is *produced* in [that] dialogue, not something *reproduced* by an interpreter through an analysis” [italics in original] (2000, p. 195).

Accordingly, Kvale’s approach to interviewing was incorporated, as it supports this philosophy. It is the researcher’s belief that a qualitative approach such as that outlined in Kvale (1987, 1996) is a suitable method for looking at the experience of non-traditional college women regarding social constructs which may impact their personal and academic experiences. This approach includes the following aspects adapted from Kvale (1996, pp. 30–31).

1. Attention to the everyday “life world” of the participants.
2. Efforts to understand the meaning of the themes in the dialogue.
3. Dialogue aimed at qualitative rather than quantitative knowledge.
4. Encouragement of in-depth descriptions of the participants’ experiences.
5. Encouragement of descriptions of specific experiences.
6. A deliberate openness to novel and unexpected perspectives.
7. Focus on the phenomena of interest without using restrictive questions.
8. Acknowledgement of possible ambiguities and contradictions in the dialogue.
9. Awareness of new insights that may come to the interviewer and participant in the interview.
10. Knowledge that each interview brings varying degrees of sensitivity to different aspects of the participants’ experiences and perspectives.

The interviews were conducted using an unstructured format. A uniform introduction to the interview, including a review of the Informed Consent, was given to all participants. After the introduction, the primary researcher began asking questions from previously determined sample questions. Reflective listening and minimal encouragers were used to maximize

participant responses and increase the depth of the interview content. The actual wording of the questions was adapted to be appropriate to the context and flow of the individual interviews. Participants were given a copy of their transcription to clarify, correct or expand on their responses. Analysis for themes was done from the corrected manuscripts.

The following questions were typical of those asked during the course of the interview.

1. Would you please tell me about your decision to return to school?
2. What do you feel about your role as a traditional woman—wife, mother, and homemaker—combined with the role of a nontraditional student?
3. Would you please tell me about your experience as a traditional woman returning to school as a nontraditional student?
4. How do you feel the members of your family view your roles of mother and student?
5. What surprised you about returning to school?
6. What challenges have you faced in returning to pursue your education that you feel might be addressed and made easier by the college/university that would better facilitate your non-traditional student experience?
7. What would you say to another traditional woman who was considering a return to school?
8. Is there anything else you would like me to know, or you would like to share about your experience as a traditional woman returning to complete her education as a nontraditional student?

## Data Analysis

The interpretation of the transcribed interviews used the same philosophical and theoretical assumptions that were used in conducting the interviews. The post-interview interpretive process is described below:

1. An unfocused overview of the text attempted to study the text with as few presuppositions and assumptions as possible to approximate the meanings articulated in the dialogue between the researcher and the participant (Jackson & Patton, 1992; Kvale, 1987, 1996).
2. Successive readings of the transcribed interviews provided the researcher the possibility of discovering progressively deeper and emergent meanings in the text (Hoshmand, 1989; Kvale, 1996; Polkinghorne, 1984).
3. Language was identified that accurately communicates the findings.

Once interpretations were made, the researcher worked to effectively articulate the findings with the goal of accurately capturing and communicating meaningful themes (Kvale, 1987, 1996).

The process of identifying themes is “a back and forth process between the parts and the whole” (Kvale, 1996, p. 48). The first reading was to get a general sense of the meaning of the text. Then, in subsequent readings, themes began to emerge as the researcher looked for deeper meaning and compared unique expressions, single statements and interpretations to the more global meaning of the interview as a whole (Kvale, 1996).

The primary researcher conducted the initial analysis. A faculty member served as an auditor of the analysis. The analysis was conducted as follows: First, the researcher conducted several successive reviews of the transcripts to identify an initial set of themes. Themes that continued to be supported in successive readings of the transcripts were retained. Themes that

did not have broad support in successive readings were removed. The researcher then performed an independent analysis of the emergent themes. Findings were reported to the auditor after the researcher concluded the initial independent analysis. Auditor feedback was appropriately incorporated to clarify themes.

## **Results**

Results were obtained following the procedures outlined in the method section. Seven general themes emerged, and additional quotes to support each theme can be found in the Appendices:

- Theme One: Participants would tell a woman considering a return to school to “do it!”
- Theme Two: Participants saw spousal support as significant in their ability to return to school
- Theme Three: A paradox existed as participants reported their families were supportive but the reality of that support appeared challenging
- Theme Four: Participants felt their spirituality increased when they returned to school
- Theme Five: Participants were surprised they did well academically when they returned to school
- Theme Six: Participants felt returning to school had increased their world view
- Theme Seven: Participants valued higher education and wanted to finish something they had started

### **Theme One: Participants Would Tell a Woman Considering a Return to School to “Do It!”**

When the participants were asked the question “What would you say to another traditional woman who was considering returning to school?” every participant said in some

form they would encourage her to return. While they also acknowledged there would be increased stress and challenges the participants seemed to feel that what they gained personally and academically outweighed the sacrifices and stressors. Some participants prefaced their encouragement to return by suggesting that the woman first determine what resources were available to support them in their additional role, and *then* they should return.

In encouraging the return to school, many of the participants also appeared to feel that returning to school at a later date allowed them to appreciate the experience more. Many referenced the maturity they had gained through *life experience* since they had interrupted their education. They also referenced the educational environment—how *the system* had changed and seemed to better accommodate nontraditional students who might be juggling many roles. Several of the participants shared that advisers and professors were willing to work with them. The participants seemed to feel that if a woman wanted to return to school, she could make it work.

A few of the participants suggested that if a woman was considering a return to school, she should seek to return to school with a specific degree and career in mind. Others seemed to feel that returning to school just for the experience and knowledge gained gave them an increased sense of self-confidence and *empowerment*.

Participant 7. Just do it. Do it! You'll never regret it. It's great. I mean . . . and I think too, I mean, I feel like the life experience that I had going into school really deepened my school experience now. I feel like it was a richer experience even than it was when I was 19 or 18. So I feel like you do, even though you feel like, "Oh, I'm odd. I'm not the twenty-something in the classroom." I feel like the students have been so welcoming of me and of my viewpoints, my experiences. The professors have been so helpful and

flexible in working with me. You know, if I need an extra day for a deadline or something like that. So, I feel like, I feel like it's been an amazing experience, you know, with all those different parts put together, and I think that I would strongly encourage everyone to do it.

Participant 6. When I talk to women and they're thinking, "Oh maybe I'll want to go back . . ." I try to encourage them. I say, "You should. You really should. You can do it at your own pace. You can make it work. And it is so much more flexible now than it was . . . 20 years ago. It's just easier, so do it! Make it work for you. It might take you five or six years, but I mean, how is that going to make you different than not doing it? The time goes by no matter what." So I encourage people, women especially, to go back.

Participant 2. I am always very supportive of women that want to go back to school, even if they have hardly had any college, or if they're one or two classes away from being done. It's like "Girl, get back in that school and get that done! You will never regret being there. You've got to make it a priority!" I think it empowers women, basically is what happens, that's what it boils down to. If you're going to go back to school, you need to go and be in the moment and enjoy it for what it is. I thoroughly enjoy going to school. I've had a great experience. It's not all been rainbows and unicorns—that's for sure. I mean, it's hard work, but it's worth it! I just love going to school, and just even talking about taking classes excites me.

Participant 3. Everybody I talk to, over the pulpit [a podium in LDS churches where talks are given to the congregation] or whatever, I just tell them to do it. Absolutely do it! There is no reason why you cannot. No excuse you can give me is good enough. This is inspired. We've been commanded [LDS beliefs that God has asked them to do

this] to get further education. You need to just put the trust in the Lord and do it. Even if it's just one class a semester, one step at a time, you need to do it because the self-confidence you gain in yourself is worth every sacrifice that you'll give. That's what I tell everybody.

Participant 5. Oh, hands down, they should do it. Unless it was a financial burden, but if they have the means and it's something they've always thought about, I would definitely just try it—it is a great thing to do! It is just fantastic. I would do it in a heartbeat!

### **Theme Two: Participants Saw Spousal Support as Significant in Their Ability to Return to School**

Only one of the participants in the study was single. The other women were married, although two had previously divorced. The women who were married frequently referenced their spouse as a significant support for their return to school when asked how the members of their family viewed their roles of traditional woman and nontraditional student.

Many referenced the role accommodation that took place as husbands took on the more traditional tasks of food preparation, child-care, attending children's events, laundry, and housekeeping. Although the process of role negotiation was often difficult, it appears spouses were committed to doing what *needed to be done* to ensure their wives were not simply adding another role to their traditional role responsibilities. The other roles appeared to have been modified and adapted through the support of spouses.

Several of the women reported that their husband's belief that they could successfully accomplish their goal of obtaining degree contributed to their own belief that they could be successful students. Husbands often took on the role of *cheerleader* for their wives. In addition,

many of the participants seemed to feel their relationship with their spouse was strengthened because of the support and encouragement they had received from their husbands.

Participant 7. Whew! I get emotional just thinking about it. I didn't expect that. I want to say that I . . . You know, that he was incredibly supportive and so that has . . . I feel a gratitude to him and a love for that, for him, because of that, you know . . . I can't even imagine how it would have been otherwise, but I feel just incredibly touched. He made it a priority, and we actually moved back to the states so I could finish my degree. I mean, I don't feel like my English degree at this point in time is going to be as big of a breadwinning salary as what he is doing and will be doing with mechanical engineering. But, I continue to develop. That he would take the time to help me is you know . . . with my works cited list in the middle of the night. He would help me with that. And that just kind of endears him to me forever. He didn't place a value on time like "oh my time is more valuable," or, you know, "what I'm doing is more valuable." He has his own deadlines in the PhD program and that kind of thing. But, he would not hesitate to drop everything and help me with whatever I needed or take over parts of the household duties, or whatever it could be, just to work together with me, to juggle it. So, I feel it's brought us closer.

Participant 2. He has always been 100% supportive of me going to school. It wasn't easy. He knew how important it was for me. After 8 years of taking a class or two each semester while raising my family, I finally got my associates degree. It meant the world to me that I got it. I was like "I did this—with four kids I got my associates degree!" It was a huge, huge deal. He's very proud of me. He has made sacrifices along the way to make sure I could attend. Coming home early from work, fixing meals, cleaning, running

errands etc. But he knew for me to be happy it was a goal I needed to accomplish. He might have to have dinner by himself because I have to stay at the library to study, and he's okay with that. Now, anytime I want to go back to school I just tell my husband "Hey, I'm thinking about going back to school," and he's like, "Really? All right, great!"

Participant 8. When I went back to work for a little while I thought, "Well, maybe I shouldn't continue with school," and I kind of floated that by my husband and he said, "No, no, I think you need to finish." And so even though it's a sacrifice from him, he's committed to me finishing, so that's good.

Participant 12. He's been very supportive. I feel like it's probably made our relationship stronger because he has been supportive of me, and he knows I want to do this. He does more things to help out, like taking the kids to school and taking them to practices.

Doing dinner and just helping with cleaning and stuff like that where I usually would have had more time to do those things. He's been willing to do a lot of that kind of stuff. He is a medical doctor, so he has a really busy life, but he helps out and is supportive.

Participant 10. Sometimes my husband talks to me about balance. I will get up at 5:00 a.m. to study and then get to campus and not get home until 9:00 at night. But he has never really followed the idea that this is my work and this is your work. He just sees what needs to be done and does it—even when I was working and not doing school. We are both that way. He is a good cook. So even when I was not in school, we both took care of things. He has just been such a support. He fully supported my going back to school. So I went back and got my associate's. But, I still wanted to have more than just my associate's degree. So I applied to BYU to get my bachelor's degree. My husband is

highly supportive of me attending BYU for my bachelor's and then hopefully my master's.

### **Theme Three: A Paradox Existed as Participants Reported Their Families Were Supportive But the Reality of That Support Appeared Challenging**

The average number of children in participants' families was 4.5 and the average age was 15.5 years of age. Although the need for support from their families was frequently mentioned and participants stated that their families were generally supportive, the reality of the support seemed to require sacrifices from family members.

Participants mentioned children would often take on more household responsibilities to alleviate the role strain being experienced by their mothers. Participants also seemed to feel children would sometimes question why their mothers were less involved in their day-to-day lives and activities. The word *sacrifice* was frequently heard when speaking of family support. However, participants also mentioned that having family members take on more responsibilities was a *good thing* for their relationships.

The tension between the idea of being supportive and the reality of what that meant to family functioning was articulated as participants mentioned their children and families were "proud" of their return to college even when it might mean less involvement from their others in their day-to-day lives. Several participants seemed to feel that relationships with their children were better because they were all around the table doing their homework together.

Participant 1. They were all 100% supportive and I thought I'd made it clear what it meant when mom is putting in 17 credit hours, just like they were! But, you know, still . . . sometimes all they seemed to care about was "we're outta milk" or "there's no food in the house." But there were also a couple times I forgot to bring a pen or pencil

and I'd have to text them and ask them to run me a pen over to the Kimball Tower! It was hilarious. At night, one end of the dining room table—we were all at the table and working on our homework. We had the best dialogues that year. We were talking about things, and “what time are you going to be at the testing center? Okay! I'll meet you there! And what did you get on your stats test?” For a mom, honestly, I'm almost glad I didn't finish because to come back 28 years later and have this interaction and dialogue with my children was a little piece of heaven even if it was hard sometimes.

Participant 3. Family has been 100% supportive and also 100% frustrated because of sacrifices with things that normally I would've been able to do with them. I have three grandchildren and I've had to say no I can't do that, where normally I would have been on the next airplane flying to see them. It does definitely affect the whole family. Just, with sacrifice, you can do it.

Participant 2. I just basically said, “This was something I needed to do to better the family, and you need to look at the big picture. I support you in everything you do—you need to support me, and that means give and take. So I give up some of my time to make sure that I'm at your things, you need to be respectful and do the same thing with me. Just because I'm your mom doesn't mean I'm not a person.” So I tried to explain and sometimes kids have a hard time seeing that—you're just mom and you're not this person that's really trying to better yourself. As they got older, probably into high school, things settled down and it was rarely an issue. They just knew “oh, mom had school.” In fact, we would all sit and do our homework together around the one table.

Participant 4. My children thought they were behind me 100%, but it was a huge adjustment for them. I had always been a stay-at-home mom. I always wanted to be a

stay at home mom, and to not have mom home all day long to just run out to help whenever they needed something was a huge lifestyle adjustment for all of us. And so even though right at first, like psychologically they were “oh yeah, this is cool,” the reality was not that clean. It was definitely messy. So there was quite a bit of a transition . . . me telling my kids, “I know you say you support me in school, but when you don’t take charge and responsibility for your chores and your homework then you’re not really supporting me in school.”

Participant 6. I think my kids had had to do a lot more, which I don’t see as bad. I actually see it as good. I am kind of an intense person anyway and I like things done a certain way, so if I’m available all the time, I’m doing it that way. But if I’m not available, then I’m trying to encourage them to step up and get involved. I think that it’s important for our children to learn. At least, for me, I really felt that it was important to them to learn how to be independent, to learn how to, you know, step up and take a role in the home, and to participate as I continued my education. I think that’s been really amazing for our family. It has helped my kids to hopefully grow up to be independent adults.

#### **Theme Four: Participants Felt Their Spirituality Increased When They Returned to School**

An unexpectedly strong theme that emerged was the increase in their spirituality many of the participants seemed to feel as they returned to college to complete their education. Many mentioned that they believed they needed to also *read their scriptures and say their prayers* (LDS idiom) to do well academically. Several referenced the balance they acquired through

prioritizing their spirituality, even with other demands on their time. Although all of the women were LDS, not all of them attended schools of higher education affiliated with the LDS church.

Some spoke of an increased understanding of church doctrines and beliefs while affirming the *eternal* value of education. Participants referenced the opportunities for spiritual growth in attending a religious institution or program. Often, participants stated that their personal spiritual beliefs (testimonies) were *strengthened* through their experience, and not just because they were taking religious classes.

Several participants referenced an intuition or feeling (a spiritual prompting) for their return to school. Many reported that when they received the prompting, they questioned how a return to school would “fit” with their role of a traditional woman. They spoke of a feeling of reassurance that returning to school is what God wanted them to do and many seemed to feel they were seeing themselves “through God’s eyes.”

Poignantly, many of the women articulated the belief that they could not do what they were doing by themselves. Several reported feeling closer to God, seeming to feel how aware he was of them individually. Participants reported feeling the reality of God in their lives—whether they were fulfilling a church assignment or writing a paper.

Participant 13. I knew that I needed to rely on that higher power to be able to help me to accomplish what I needed to do. I was gaining that confidence in myself and maybe changing who I saw myself as and maybe seeing myself a little more through God’s eyes and his purpose for me. I really didn’t know if the timing was right for me to go back to school through but through receiving that confirmation [feeling from God in LDS beliefs] that I needed to go back to school, and I knew it wasn’t from me, it was a little bit a test of faith. Like, I can’t do this—I’m a mother. I would try to question, “Heavenly Father,

why do I need to go back to school?" I am still applying faith to my education process in life. I recently took a small break again from school while trying to heal from cancer. I plan on returning again to school this August. I won't be sure of my results from cancer by then, but I will rely heavily on my relationship with my Heavenly Father in guiding me when I return.

Participant 7. I developed such a testimony [personal spiritual belief] of . . . He is aware of everything. He cares about the topic of your paper and if you're in tears and you don't know what to write your paper on and you kneel down and pray and beg for His help, He will tell you what to write your paper on! I received inspiration [a feeling] and so I felt . . . I really came to realize that He's there for every little thing. I just really felt like Heavenly Father took me through and held my hand and through each hard thing and each deadline. I learned to completely trust in Him and somehow things would work out.

Participant 9. Being spiritually grounded helped me get through school. Not only was I a single mom, going to school full-time, working full-time, I was also the Relief Society President [LDS women's service organization] for the four years that I was in school. But, I think that actually helped a lot. I took Sundays off. I never worked on Sundays and I never did any schoolwork on Sundays so I could stay spiritually grounded. But it was still tough. There were so many nights that I was just praying and crying and like "How in the world am I supposed to do all this? I cannot do all this." And there were several times that I distinctly heard in my mind, "You cannot do this. But we can." And I knew I had that support.

Participant 3. I had a stroke back in 2008. I was 42 years old. I struggled greatly with retention and memorizing and that kind of stuff. So it scared me to death to go back to

school because I thought there's just no way I'm going to be able to do it. I believe it's in Doctrine and Covenants, section 6:36 [LDS book of scripture] where it says, "Look unto me in every thought; doubt not, fear not." Doctrine and Covenants 84:85 promises that if I study and work hard, I will be blessed with the information given to me right when I need it. I remember the very first Pathways meetings [online educational program sponsored through the LDS church] I taught the very first lesson of the program and that scripture came so powerfully and strong to me. I rely heavily on those promises and they've come true. I have had the retention. I have been able to keep up and learn, and to fear not. I finished my associate's and now I'm close to graduation and it's just been truly a miracle. God holds true to His promises and I'm living proof of it.

Participant 10. I know I could not have done it without God. I know my husband has been supportive, but even he would say the same thing. I felt like I was prompted {had a feeling from God] to go back to school, and I know that I have grown spiritually by having to rely on God. There are times when I have felt I could not do it, but then I knew I could because of God.

### **Theme Five: Participants Were Surprised They Did Well Academically When They Returned to School**

When participants were asked what surprised them about returning to school the theme of being able to actually be successful was clear. Most entered with doubts about their ability to perform academically either because they had not been strong students the first time they had attended college, or because they seemed to feel that fulfilling the role of a traditional woman had compromised their intellect.

Frequently, they attributed their success upon their return to “maturity—knowing they had to do the work to get the grade.” Many expressed that they had acquired strong organizational skills through life experience that seemed to help them in their studies. Some participants also recognized a new willingness on their part to access resources as part of their academic success the second time around.

Participants seemed to feel pride in their accomplishments, often referring to specific grades they had received or their GPAs. They referenced their accomplishments while occasionally still expressing doubts about their abilities.

Participant 12. I did not get straight As when I first went to college. But I did when I went back to school. I did get straight As—well, except for one class. The teacher was—we were just very different. She kind of had an agenda. But that’s fine; I’m not too worried about it. But, I just feel like I could have gotten straight As. But I got As because I was more mature. I realized that I needed to do what it takes to get the good grades. So whatever that was, that’s what I did. I feel like before, when I was in school, I would think, “Oh, I don’t have time to do that.” But going back to school I have made it a priority to get everything done that I need to get done. Also, being more mature, I was willing to use resources. They have free tutoring so I did tutoring—I just did whatever I needed to do. I reached out to other people and before I wasn’t really willing to do that very much.

Participant 6. What surprised me is that I was able to do it. I guess as we're talking, sometimes I get thinking about how this is also so much harder than anything else that I’ve done. But probably . . . even as I’m older, I feel like I’m more capable than I was when I was younger in certain ways. I can understand when things really matter, and

when they don't. As a younger student, I see some of the kids stressing out about things and I'm thinking, "Oh wow. That doesn't even weigh in the scale of things . . . that doesn't really matter." So, I guess there are benefits to going back to school when you're older.

Participant 8. When I was in school, starting in elementary school, I was placed in the gifted program. When I got to college, when I first went, I struggled because of ADD. So I kind of had low self-esteem as far as my academic capabilities, even though I knew I was smart. I think my self-esteem was so low was because I felt like I was a failure. I couldn't get through a class in college. I kind of thought about that when I started back to school. I just thought, "I wonder if I can do this?" It surprised me that the academics have not really been very hard until maybe this year. I'm in some very difficult classes right now but what surprised me is that I've been able to overcome these deficits that I've had throughout my life and do well this time.

Participant 5. Honestly, I really wasn't a good student as an 18- and 19-year-old, and I fretted that I still wouldn't understand, that I wouldn't be able to wade through the process and remember and memorize and learn! But going back a second time, I just had this "aha!", like it really isn't that hard if you just study! I could do this! Isn't that funny? And I was very successful going back. I realized I really was smart and I've got this!

Participant 7. I just noticed that I felt . . . I don't even know how to put it nicely, but I felt so stupid going back to school. I felt like, "I can't do this. I've been out of school. I've been a stay-at-home mom." I was almost withdrawn from the world because of that. You know, those duties and that lifestyle and I felt like my brain is, you know, it probably doesn't even work. I felt like I was petrified and "can I do this?" Every time I got an A

or submitted a paper and I didn't like, and got good reviews from the professor, I thought, "Oh my goodness! I'm not stupid." It has been a huge confidence booster. I still remember when I came back from the very first test I took and I was in the testing center and I had no idea . . . this is all new. I'd been gone for so long and I came out of the testing center and saw my score and I just sat down on the bench and I started crying in the middle of the day! I can do this! I don't need to drop out of school after all!

Participant 2. I'm very much driven by grades. I like a good challenge and getting that A has always been a challenge for me, and so I can proudly say I have a 3.9. For me, for my life, working, having four children, raising a family, being married and running a household, I think that's pretty darn good!

### **Theme Six: Participants Felt Returning to School Had Increased Their World View**

As participants shared their experiences as traditional women who returned to college as nontraditional students, many articulated the idea that they felt they had awakened their "snoozing" intellects, and in so doing, they had become more open to engaging with others as well as thinking about things "differently." They seemed to feel that as they acquired more knowledge and interacted with students on campus they became more "accepting and tolerant of differences" while also having a desire to better understand those around them.

Participants seemed to feel that as they became more "open-minded" they were able to share those thoughts and values with their families and friends, creating a more accurate and compassionate world view not only for themselves but also for their friends and families. They seemed to feel they were able to engage positively with those who might have differing opinion, values and/or beliefs.

Participant 2. I think education empowers women. Basically that is what happens, that's what it boils down to. It empowered me. It made me very aware of things that are going on out there that maybe I wouldn't have been aware of had I not gone. I like the challenge and the openness and the world view of things.

Participant 4. Gaining an education has helped me realize a lot of things that we think are right or wrong is actually more on a . . . I've just had a big paradigm shift that we are all just experiencing life, and that experiences are okay, and that they are not really right or wrong, it's how we react or use those experiences. It has just been life-changing for me, to see the world differently. I see myself differently, I see others differently, and a lot of that has come from my college education.

Participant 5. It just really helped me think, and even in many of my other classes, in psychology and sociology, really helped me think about the world in a bigger context, outside of myself. And I'd like to think that I am a little more open to whole cultures and peoples and education, just so much more. I just expanded my thinking from out of the home.

Participant 11. I feel like my interactions with people at work, especially the people I meet outside the [LDS] church my interactions are a lot more positive. I think I have a greater understanding of what people in the world are experiencing. I'm more tolerant, I think. So in some ways, I think I'm just more patient and kind with other people. I feel like for me, the more I understand of the world myself, and the more educated I am, the better teacher I am for my kids.

Participant 8. When they start talking about feminist issues, I'm not so quick to just say, "Oh, feminism's bad." I'm a lot more aware of the things that people are talking about

because I've studied it, and I've experienced more of what they're saying. I'm more open-minded to what they're saying and what they're experiencing. I realize that their experience is different than what mine was. I was a traditional mom pretty much from the start. It helps a lot for me to understand others better.

Participant 7. The confidence-boosting has been amazing. I didn't even want to speak in Relief Society before, you know? I thought, "Well, I'm dumb. What do I know?" And not that I know everything now, but just that you've had this experience. To be able to think things, to look and think critically and to discuss things and to put those thoughts on paper and submit those papers for review has been amazing. It's been life-changing!

### **Theme Seven: Participants Valued Higher Education and Wanted to Finish Something They Had Started**

Several participants expressed wanting to finish something they had started. They expressed a sense of "incompletion" and "disappointment" because they had not completed their education and obtained an undergraduate degree. Many said they had emphasized education while raising their children and felt "hypocritical" asking their children to do something they had not yet done themselves.

Beyond the degree, participants placed a high value on the educational process. Many expressed a love of learning while also seeming to recognize what an education might provide in terms of future life possibilities.

Participants shared that they had stopped going to school because of their choice to fulfill the roles of a traditional wife and mother. However, several referenced a prompting [a strong thought in LDS culture] to return to school even though they were still fulfilling those traditional roles. This *prompting* caused them to reconsider the requirements of their role as a traditional

mother and what it might look like to add the role of a nontraditional student to their life experience.

Participant 11. I've always felt disappointed in myself for not . . . I worked too hard to not finish something like that. I was a huge academic. I mean, that was my forte. I first went to school on a BYU academic scholarship. I pushed academics on my kids. I felt like a hypocrite because I hadn't pushed all the way through yet.

Participant 1. A lot of people told me I was crazy. You know, a lot of the moms that didn't finish, and they're like, "you're so old . . . Why would you even?" But for me, it was so much bigger than that. I needed to prove to myself that I could complete something like that. I needed to prove it to my children.

Participant 13. So, the first time I returned back to school I just felt like this need. I needed to return back to school and not really understanding why. There was just a desire and an excitement to . . . learn and look at things that would be of interest. I just felt gaining that education with the hope that one day I would apply that education and be able to use it in serving and working. I was always thinking that maybe it was for some reason that maybe I would need to support my family or maybe something would happen to my husband and I would need to have the education to be a provider. But, as I've gone through the process, I'm coming to understand that a lot of it is just the journey—the experiences, the trials and the blessings of going to school. It's has been a blessing and a rewarding experience for me and for my family.

Participant 4. I felt inspired to return to school. I always wanted to receive a degree—education has always been important to me. In terms of the timing though, I think it was just inspiration. And when I very first started . . . actually, I started years and years ago.

I had my second child and I struggled with postpartum depression and I found that going to school really helped with that. I felt like it gave me a little bit of *me time*, but was a positive way of getting that *me time*. I was building myself and improving myself. I tried a lot of other things like exercise and shopping, which I didn't find fulfilling. But seeking an education was fulfilling.

Participant 8. I left school when I was younger and I always felt like I left something important incomplete in my life. I was just really intellectually bored staying at home with the kids. I really was struggling, and I needed, I was looking for more stimulation. Also, I was sending my kids to school, and I saw that they were getting their degrees and doing what I didn't do. I felt like if I expected them to do it, then I should do it too. I felt like it would be very rewarding for me to go back to school because I loved learning. Also, I anticipated going back to work after my kids were out of the house and I wanted to have more options.

Four other themes that emerged but did not have the significance of the seven articulated themes. These included the idea that the participants seemed to feel their children viewed education in a positive light because of their mother's return to school; participants believed more could be done by institutions to support their educational experience; and participants seemed to feel the label of nontraditional placed them in the position of *other* when they were "just students." Some participants reported that although they felt the stress and challenges inherent in adding another role to their already demanding lives, they were "happier."

## Discussion

Nontraditional women appear to be a student population that is here to stay. The seven themes that emerged from this study provide insight into the experiences and motivations of the traditional woman as she negotiates the addition of the role of the nontraditional student.

The first theme emerged as participants responded to a question about what they would say to another woman who was considering a return to college. Nearly all of the women responded positively and almost always with great energy and enthusiasm that they would tell her to “do it!” Interestingly, this question was asked near the end of the interview, when participants had been asked to share their experiences, including the challenges and difficulties, so there would have seemed to have been time to reflect upon the entirety of their experience. The participants were not naively encouraging their peers with many articulating that it would be difficult, but still “worth it.”

Participants seemed to feel that each woman would find success in the experience, and that the reality of education in today’s world provided the possibility of tailoring the experience to their unique life circumstances. This theme appears to align with the findings of Maria Shriver and the Center for American Progress (2009), who write,

Women’s expanding role in families, industry, the arts, government, politics and other institutions is altering the American landscape. Women are learning they no longer have to shoehorn themselves into one stereotype or another, but they can do so if they choose—or they can make it up as they go along. (p. 13)

Universally, participants seemed to feel that the gain acquired from returning to school far outweighed the sacrifices that would be made.

The findings were in harmony with the findings from Quimby and O'Brien's (2004) study which expressed the choice to return to education can initiate a sense of empowerment as well as an increase in self-confidence and an improvement in future employment opportunities. Lorentzen's (2014) study also endorsed this positive attitude towards pursuing education noting that a sense of hopefulness and determination was manifest in adult females with a desire to achieve their college degree to advance their careers, achieve personal fulfillment, and serve as role models for their families.

The second strong theme expressed by participants was the recognition of their spouse as a significant contributor to their ability to return to school with several participants expressing gratitude for the support of their husbands. Interestingly, the participants expressed the thought that they felt *closer* to their husbands because of the experience, and they seemed to feel that their marriages were stronger as a result of their return to college. Additionally, participants expressed appreciation for the role of *cheerleader* that their husband took on. This role of cheerleader seemed to fulfill a dual purpose—that of supporting the participant while also showing their children that their father was fully committed to their mother's success.

Participants often characterized their experience with their spouse as one of “role negotiation” (Shriver & Center for American Progress, 2009, p. 7), where they, as traditional women would counsel with their husbands to determine how both of them would modify and adapt their more traditional roles to accommodate the new role of nontraditional student as a part of the fabric of their family construct.

Virtually all married couples told pollsters they are negotiating the rules of their relationships, work and family. An overwhelming majority of both men and women said they are sitting down at their kitchen tables to coordinate their family's schedule, duties

and responsibilities, including child care and elder care, at least two to three times a week. We hear loud and clear that the Battle Between the Sexes is over—it was a draw. Now we're engaged in the Negotiation Between the Sexes. (Shriver & Center for American Progress, 2009, p. 7)

Seemingly, the strength of the second theme initially appeared to endorse the third theme where participants saw their families as supportive. However, the complexity of the third theme was manifest as participants also spoke to the challenging reality of that support. Previous research articulated that families could provide support while also being a source of stress for nontraditional female students. Traditional gender roles weighed heavily as nontraditional female students would often feel guilt at leaving their families while they tried to manage multiple roles (Deutsch & Schmertz, 2011). Vaccaro and Lovell (2010) reported that for many women the role of family was integral to their education success. However, they also recognized that the women were consistently balancing multiple roles as they sought to balance the demands of family, work, education and volunteering. The nontraditional female student's academic journey is often influenced by the traditional female roles of caring for family and households (Deutsch & Schmertz, 2011).

Participants sought to not only educate their children on what they would need to do to be supportive, but seemed to also be frequently reminding their children that as a family that support for one another was a reciprocal process. Although many participants mentioned the reality of role strain was *hard* for their children, they also seemed to believe that their children were proud of their mothers for taking on this additional role of nontraditional student. Sweet and Moen (2007) support this theme reporting that although family responsibility often creates delays in degree completion, the support received from family seems to also motivate and inspire

women to persist because of a higher sense of self-esteem. Several studies express the idea that nontraditional women feel the support from their family is the best support (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002; Kirby, Biever, Martinez, & Gomez, 2003; Quimby & O'Brien, 2004).

A surprisingly strong and unexpected theme for the researcher was the fourth theme expressed by participants as an increased spirituality and a strengthened relationship with God. Religious affiliation was never sought during the interview process, although the researcher was often asked if she was *a member*. The researcher interpreted the question as referencing membership in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Additionally, several of the participants referenced LDS church schools or programs such as Brigham Young University, Provo campus, and the Pathways Program, an LDS church developed program to support individuals throughout the world in attaining secondary education on-line, at Brigham Young University, Idaho campus as being particularly supportive. However, during the interviews it was ascertained that while most of the participants attended these schools or participated in these programs to complete their undergraduate degree, not all of them did.

Many participants reported that they had learned to set aside time for personal "scripture study and prayer." Although a few reported they felt they had partially increased in their spirituality because of religiously oriented classes and attending school at a religious institution, most reported a more personal and intimate engagement.

Several of the participants reported they had felt "inspired" (a feeling from God) to return to school even though it might cause them to reevaluate their conceptualization of their role as a traditional woman. Many expressed only being able to do what they were doing because of God's support and love. Frequently, participants mentioned their testimonies (personal beliefs) had been strengthened through the experience. Their reliance upon God had been unexpectedly

increased while they also reported feeling an increased sense of worth and ability because of the reality of the God in their lives.

The researcher had not come across any other studies in the review of the literature to support this theme. This theme could have been biased because all of the participants reported being active members of the LDS church. However, the repetition, and redundancy with which this theme was mentioned confirm its validity. It is certainly a subject that needs further exploration and study.

The fifth theme emerged as participants responded to the question of what had surprised them when they returned to pursue their education. Many of the participants expressed feelings of surprise that they were successful in an academic setting. Traditional women often return to school as nontraditional students with a fear of academic work and a fear of academic failure. However, these concerns might influence them to work harder, access resources and become more engaged with the educational process in order to succeed (Martinez Aleman & Renn, 2002).

Several participants expressed feelings of fear and inadequacy, as they began classes. However, they also reported a greater sense of maturity in understanding what was required to learn the material. Although they expressed great pride in their grades and even shared their GPAs, many still seemed to still feel somewhat insecure in their abilities and capabilities. Research supports this finding showing that nontraditional students often experience discomfort in the classroom that they seem to attribute to a lack of self confidence in their ability to perform and succeed in the classroom (Kasworm, 2005).

Participants seemed to feel that part of their success could be attributed to their maturity. They reported that they now understood what was required to succeed in school. Carney-

Crompton and Tan (2002) also found that nontraditional students performed better in their academics than traditional students, which lead nontraditional students to greater satisfactions and increased self-esteem. Dill and Henley (1998) reported that while role demands for nontraditional female students did cause major role strain, these same students also reported less academic stress, greater satisfaction at school, and even better health when compared to their traditional student counterparts.

In addition to the pride that many participants seemed to feel in reporting “good grades,” participants also seemed to feel they had been personally, positively changed as the emergence of the sixth theme supported a sense of an increasing world view, which included a better understanding and acceptance of difference in other’s beliefs, values and opinions. Lorentzen’s (2014) research supports this finding noting that as a result of their education, adult females are transformed through enhanced confidence as well as a broader knowledge and perspective.

Participants seemed grateful for the opportunity to engage in conversations and learning experiences that had allowed them to look at the world in a different way—with more compassion and understanding and less judgment. In regard to academic environments, women enter institutions, with established sets of epistemological views—how they construct knowledge or choose what they believe (Medina, Banks, Brant, & Champion-Shaw, 2008). As changes are made, women constantly wrestle with unique situations and life events that force them to think and rethink how they define themselves in their daily lives (Huber, 1973).

Participants also seemed to feel benefitted in being able to express and communicate this newfound understanding to their families, allowing the world view of their families to be expanded as well. For women with traditional values the pursuit of higher education later in life

presents an opportunity to forge an identity not solely linked to their family role, while preserving their primary roles of wife/mother and homemaker (Martinez Aleman & Renn, 2002).

Finally, the seventh theme that emerged from the study was the desire expressed by participants to finish something that they had begun. Many participants reported that education was highly valued in their families, and that they had been very supportive of their children's success in their academic endeavors. However, in fulfilling the role of a traditional woman, these same women reported feeling some role conflict, as they appeared to feel that the role of a traditional woman would not allow them to continue with their college educations. Traditional women frequently sacrificed their own immediate educational goals and committed themselves fulltime to their role in the traditional family. Many women choose to interrupt their education and careers to focus their time and attention on the care of children (Betz & Fitzgerald, 1987).

Many expressed the thought that they would return to complete their educations at some time, but when they had first stopped, they did not have a concrete idea of when that might be. Fitzgerald and Harmon (2001) suggest that "the history of women's traditional roles as homemaker and mother continue to influence every aspect of their career choices and adjustments" (p. 215), which includes the continuation of and return to their education.

Participants also expressed a sense of hypocrisy as they encouraged and challenged their children to do something they themselves had not yet done, providing additional motivation to complete what they had not finished. Deutsch and Schmertz's (2011) research supports this theme that some nontraditional women see returning to school as a necessary in their life progression. Their research showed that women returned to school for their children, because of family support, because it was "their turn" and because they wanted to. For those who were mothers, going to school was often equated with being a good role model as they invested in

themselves for personal growth and fulfillment of dreams to be someone better and stronger (Vaccaro & Lovell, 2010). Feelings of self-improvement through gaining additional knowledge in life were valued by women (Shank, Winchell, & Myers, 2001).

This study articulated seven themes expressing the experiences of traditional women as they return to college as nontraditional students to complete their degrees. With the face of secondary education dominated by nontraditional students, educators and institutions would be well served to look again at who makes up the face of higher education. Patterns differ as to how each individual woman adapts and sustains her educational ambitions, and shifts can be observed as to how generations have met this challenge. Just as women acquire education for different reasons, so their uses of education vary (Martinez Aleman & Renn, 2002). Female nontraditional students are increasingly the norm on college campuses and their experiences and motivations are impacting the experience of all students. It is time to indeed, look again at the “new face” in education.

### **Limitations**

The researcher acknowledges some of the limitations of this study. The sample was a sample of convenience, and although the source referrals were varied, they were all in some way due to a relationship with the researcher. All of the women in this study were members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and the religious beliefs, values and tenets of the faith impacted the lens through which the participants framed their experiences. Also, although there was some diversity of ethnicity, it is not reflective of the general population and this study may be biased towards white, European, middle class women and any findings are not generalizable to other groups. In addition, all of the participants were only attending schools in the United States. Only one of the participants was unmarried, and although two had been

previously divorced, the socio-economics of a single parent household, as well as resources in terms of family support could significantly impact the experiences shared.

The researcher also acknowledges the possibility of bias, as she returned to college some 12 years ago as a nontraditional student, who also considers herself to be a traditional woman. However, the presence of redundancy and repetition across the interviews provided the researcher and auditor with agreement for the themes that were articulated and the results are considered valid.

This is only an initial step toward understanding the experience and motivations of a traditional woman as she seeks to add the role of nontraditional student. Hopefully the results of this study will prompt additional research and it will serve as a springboard for others to consider the experience of this dynamically increasing population. Further research will definitely contribute to the findings of this study considering the nature of qualitative research—there is always more to learn.

### **Suggestions for Further Research**

As mentioned when discussed in the fourth theme that emerged from the research, the impact of religious beliefs on the traditional woman as a nontraditional student has little research. It would also be interesting to ascertain how spirituality was impacted for nontraditional male students. In addition, research with women of various faiths might produce findings that would be helpful for traditional women as they return to school as nontraditional students.

Also, because of the import of socio-economic realities, a study of traditional women who were single parents would most likely produce information that would also support the experience of the female nontraditional student. Again, it would be interesting to explore the

experience of the traditional male who is a single parent returning to school as a nontraditional student.

As mentioned previously, there were five other themes that emerged from the study, although they did not have the significance of the seven articulated themes. These included the idea that the participants seemed to feel that their children viewed education in a more positive light because of their mother's return to school; the theme that balancing priorities was an ongoing process where an acceptance of the difficulty of what they were trying seemed to make it more feasible; the thought that institutions were supportive, but participants also believed more could be done to support their experience, which dovetailed with the theme of resistance to the label of a nontraditional student. Participants seemed to feel the moniker placed them in the position of "other" when they were "just students." Finally, it was interesting to note that some participants specifically reported that although they felt the stress and challenges inherent in adding another role to their already demanding lives, they were "happier." Each of these themes could provide prompts for further research.

### **Implications of the Study**

In the first half of the twentieth century, higher education was seen as an impediment to marriage for the traditional woman because it was associated with a career orientation seen as incompatible with the roles of middle-class wife and mother (McClelland, 1992). In the latter half of the twentieth century, attitudes began to slowly change (Eisemann, 2006) although the cultural expectations for what it means to be a mother/wife and homemaker *and* to be an educated woman with an academic degree and the possibility of a career are still frequently perceived as mutually exclusive (McClelland, 1992).

Adult women have been participating in higher education in greater numbers than men in response to changing cultural norms and a greater opportunity for a career with increased earnings. With a set of adult life experiences different from those of the younger traditional age students, the adult female student's educational journey can be influenced by her gendered role, including more responsibility for family caregiving and household tasks than men (Deutsch & Schmertz, 2011). There is general agreement that as adult women students, they are still responsible for their traditional roles of homemakers, where women have been expected to do the majority of domestic work such as cleaning, cooking, taking care of the children, and managing all household duties (Tian, 1996). For many adult women, having to balance multiple roles as caregiver, employee, and homemaker are their priorities in life and surpass their role as students.

The very definition of being a nontraditional student indicates that a woman is juggling multiple roles and responsibilities, stacking the odds against the completion of their degree. Despite the high value placed on higher education and the motivation of many adults and adult women in particular to pursue it, "the challenges present significant hurdles" (Mbilinyi, 2006, p. 4). Due to gendered norms, adult female students are more likely to have greater family responsibilities than men, which can interrupt and delay the completion of the undergraduate degree program (Deutsch & Schmertz, 2011). Most nontraditional female students are balancing their education with multiple roles—many have spouses and most have children, often creating a stressful crisis of loyalty when the various roles collide as the woman tries to blend her academic life and her other life (Evans, 2007). As nontraditional women make the transition back in to higher education, they may experience issues with role definition, priorities and identity (Martinez Aleman & Renn, 2002).

A theory of the right time to enroll in college for adult females emerged within the literature (Brown, 2002; Taniguchi & Kaufmann, 2007). Howell (2004) reports women, and especially those with children, are in a constant balancing act between finding time to study, take care of domestic responsibilities, earn money, and volunteer. However, even in the face of such challenges, Vaccaro and Lovell's (2010) research indicates that the desire to get a college degree gives nontraditional female students the motivation to juggle competing demands from family, work and school.

Brown (2002) suggests the importance of applying adult development and adult learning theories to better understand this "third stage of life" as the expansion of life choices for older adults increases, Eakins (2010) would also argue for the exploration of what she calls "the fifth stage" for women, characterized by an "identity-integrity" crisis when women who had been at home previously return to college. There is a recommendation to explore adult life stages for these women, in order to understand their reengagement with higher education, particularly with regard to changes in the housewife role in recent years. In previous stages there were role models, and the course was familiar. However, traditional women as nontraditional students are "making it up as they go along" (Shriver & Center for American Progress, 2009, p. 7).

Chao and Good (2004) reported hopefulness about the future from female nontraditional students in connection with decision to enroll in college. This sense of hopefulness motivates these women to actively manage their education, career, family, and interpersonal relationships. Motivations such as personal goals and aspirations, self-fulfillment/self-esteem, becoming a role model for their children, as well as improvement in their career status and financial improvement were found in a survey of nontraditional women (Bates & Norton, 2002). "With a sense of hopefulness and determination, adult females are resilient and have a strong desire to achieve

their goal of earning a college degree to advance their careers, achieve personal fulfillment, and serve as a role model for their families” (Lorentzen, 2014, p. ii).

The implications of this study support the need for a more open dialogue about the experience of a traditional woman as she returns to obtain her undergraduate degree as a nontraditional student. The support of family and institutions are integral to both retention and completion for these women as they make up a significant portion of those now attending institutions of higher learning. As Shriver writes, “Back in 1960 President Kennedy talked about the torch being passed to a ‘new generation.’ Well, five decades later, the torch is being passed . . . to a new gender. There’s no doubt in my mind that women will lift that torch. We will carry it. And we will light the way forward” (Shriver & Center for American Progress, 2009, p. 15). Traditional women as nontraditional students need spousal and family support, positive conversations, research, institutional accommodations and reforms, policy adaptations and change to continue on that forward lit path.

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## APPENDIX A

### **Review of the Literature**

The face of higher education has changed dramatically in the past 40+ years. In 2008, more than one third of undergraduate students were over the age of 25, and nearly 25% of those were parents and half of those parents were single parents (Bok, 2015). Additionally, non-traditional student enrollment is expected to increase by another 23% by 2019 (Soares, 2013).

Just over ten years ago women made up 57% of the 17.5 million undergraduate students. In the United States, women constitute the fastest growing segment in the higher learning environment (Snyder, Dillow, & Hoffman, 2008). A review of the literature in five areas informs the research for this study in seeking to better understand the traditional woman's experience as she becomes a nontraditional student in higher education. These areas are a) the definition and rise of the nontraditional student as the new reality of higher education; b) theories for the nontraditional woman in higher education; c) the history of women in higher education in the United States; d) traditional women as nontraditional students; and e) the unique experience and needs of the nontraditional female student.

#### **The Definition and Rise of the Nontraditional Student in Higher Education**

It was during the 1970s that nontraditional programs were developed and mainstreamed for adults who wanted to complete a college education but had difficulty fitting the schedule for the traditional program. "The development of alternative types of academic programs on campuses of all sizes and types has encouraged the nontraditional student to return to complete a college degree" (Spanard, 1990, p. 310). Choy (2002) analyzed the NCES data to determine 73% of all undergraduates in 1999-2000 could be considered nontraditional.

Horn and Carroll's research (1996) with the National Center for Education Statistics suggested that the label of a nontraditional be applied to a student attending higher education who met at least one of the following:

1. Delays enrollment (does not enter post secondary education in the same calendar year of high school graduation)
2. Attends part-time for at least part of the academic year
3. Works full-time (35 hours or more while enrolled)
4. Is considered financially independent for purposes of determining eligibility for financial aid
5. Has dependents other than a spouse (usually children, but may also be caregivers for sick or elderly family members)
6. Is a single parent (either not married or married but separated and has dependents)

Other researchers define the term a bit more simply "nontraditional students are those who are over age 25 and enter postsecondary education for the first time or return to continue postsecondary study begun at an earlier time" (Martinez Aleman & Renn, 2002). For the purposes of this study, the second definition will suffice. The profile of American higher education is changing and the typical college student is no longer aged 18-25 years old who is living on campus with limited family and financial obligations. "Only 16% of those pursuing higher education in the United States now fit that mold" (Mbilinyi, 2006, p. 8).

There are many contributing factors to this change in the college landscape, teased out in research. The US Department of Labor Women's Bureau website [[https://www.dol.gov/wb/stats/stats\\_data.htm#facts](https://www.dol.gov/wb/stats/stats_data.htm#facts)] provides evidence that as unemployment increased dramatically in the first part of the new century many women found themselves

needing some type of formal secondary education or the completion of a bachelor's degree to attain employment. Attendance rates at institutions of higher education rose from 15.3 million to 21 million from 2000-2010 with people over the age of 25 rising 42% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009). Additionally, with the lagging economy, the White House became involved through the implementation of President Barack Obama's Education Reform, which is the single largest bill directed towards schooling since the GI Bill in 1944 (Obama White House, 2016).

This demographic change means big changes for colleges, with considerations such as restructuring admissions requirements, boosting financial aid, exploring more flexibility in transfer credits, competency based education to better reflect life experience as credit and online learning (Williams, 2014). Williams also strongly encouraged institutions to provide remediation courses to students who may not have been exposed to fundamental knowledge, or may have forgotten.

In a 2014 documentary entitled *Courageous Learning*, Herman and Sullivan explored the nontraditional student experience in higher learning in the United States. During the movie, Andrew Kelly of the American Enterprise Institute states,

The reality is that many students don't move straight from high school to college and complete their degrees within four to six years. Some join the military, start working, start a family or simply take more time to figure out what path they want to pursue.

Colleges also need to consider a gender gap as the majority of nontraditional students are more likely to be women. Currently, women are the majority of U.S. college students receiving a bachelor's degree, but in 1960, they made up only 39 percent of the students who were awarded a bachelor's degree (Goldin, Katz, & Kuziemko, 2006). With the increasing enrollment

among women students and the high rates of attrition among nontraditional students in general, institutions of higher education are seeking to create policies that will reflect more realistically the student population in higher education (Horn & Carroll, 1996). The startling reality is that traditional students represent only a small percentage of current undergraduates. The remaining 85 percent are a very diverse group (Soares, 2013).

### **Theories Applied to the Nontraditional Woman in Higher Education**

As women face periods of transition when children begin to leave home, they might begin to reevaluate their situations and their identities. Both internal psychological factors and external social factors may be contributing to the conditions under which a woman may return to her pursuit of higher education. In regard to academic environments, women enter institutions, with established sets of epistemological views—how they construct knowledge or choose what they believe (Medina, Banks, Brant, & Champion-Shaw, 2008). As changes are made, women constantly wrestle with unique situations and life events that force them to think and rethink how they define themselves in their daily lives (Eakins, 2010). New role definitions emerge for adults, especially for women, and their identities change.

**Role exit theory (RET).** Breese and O'Toole (1995) proposed Role Exit Theory (RET) as a means of understanding how women move from one role to another—and specifically from a previous role into that of a student in higher education. RET suggest four types of role exits: (a) an act of nature, such as the death of a partner; (b) expulsion by a group or large collectivity, such as excommunication or banishment; (c) involuntary action, such as a person being fired or left by a partners; and (d) voluntary action, such as a person leaving a partners or initiating a career change. RET is used as a framework to explain how their past experiences (roles) greatly

influence their involvement in campus activities and even the choice of their academic major. A fundamental tenet of RET is that previous roles continue to inform the present experience.

Breese and O'Toole (1995) conducted a qualitative study with women who experience a transition and enrolled in college to compare external factors to internal factors as prompts for entering or reentering higher education. Participants responded to 32 open-ended questions. The format of these questions provided the opportunity for the participants to share what events had led them to college, how they perceived their role as a student, what their experience was as a life-long learner, if their past identities (roles) influenced their decision to enter or reenter higher education and what their plans were post-graduation in terms of changing or improving their circumstances. Seventy-five percent of participants in the study were married or divorced with children under 20 years old, married with no children, divorced and living alone, or single and living with adult relatives. The vast majority of the women were White (92%) and they represented 71 academic majors. The women in the study were categorized into two groups—those who experienced internal or external transitions. Internal transitions were those produced through introspection and self-awareness and included committing to a long-standing goal or self-improvement. External transitions were generated by exterior forces and characterized by a period of disorder.

Breese and O'Toole (1995) found 85% of the women who experienced external life transitions expressed that their lives and roles prior to attending college continued to affect their role as a student and as they moved through their transition. Women who experience external life transition (i.e., divorce, unemployment, illness) expressed feelings of uncertainty, self-doubt, and a loss of self-confidence. In contrast, the researchers found that the women who experienced internal transitions, had few reservations about their abilities, possessed a stronger sense of self

control over their lives, and had the ability to explore other opportunities before entering college (Breese & O'Toole, 1995).

**Adult transition theory.** Several social and psychological factors may influence the experience of the nontraditional student in higher education. Quimby and O'Brien (2006) suggest nontraditional women students, in particular, often underestimate their abilities and lack the self-confidence to be successful in the academic arena, triggering the possibility of psychological distress and anxiety. Understanding how adult women adapt to their new environment and the subsequent challenges and expectations is essential in supporting their successful transition.

Schlossberg's Theory of Adult Transition describes a transition as "any event or non-event that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles" (Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 1995). Schlossberg, Waters, and Goodman (1995) emphasize the role of the woman's perception of the transition, proposing that a transition exists only when the individual woman experiencing it defines it as such. While a transition may be prompted by a single event or nonevent, coping with a transition is a process that may continue over a period of time (Schlossberg et al., 1995) labeled the phases of transitions as moving-in, moving through, and moving out. Adult transition theory does not focus solely on exiting a role; instead it examines the psychological and developmental changes that occur when adults experience a life event involving change. These life events do not necessarily involve leaving a role behind, but may include adding or transitioning into a new role, as many adult students do when they decide to attend college.

Adult transition theory is based upon four categories of adult development that provide a “deeper understanding of adults in transition” (Schlossberg, Lynch, & Chickering, 1989). The four categories are

1. The contextual perspective—emphasizing the social environment of the individual
2. The developmental perspective—highlighting the sequential nature of change during the adult years, consisting of three subtypes: a) age-related, b) stage, c) domain-specific development
3. The lifespan perspective—focusing on the individuality of continuity and change
4. The transitional perspective—emphasizing both cultural components (i.e., social norms and individual life events involving change.)

Transition theories provide insight into the challenges nontraditional women face and reconcile as they enter or reenter higher education. Both Role Exit Theory and Adult Transition Theory recognize the nexus of transition. Role Exit Theory appears to better serve the student who is leaving a previous role, to pursue a new role/identity recognizing the challenges inherent and the positives as well in both external and internal factors prompting transition. Adult Transition Theory appears to allow for the incorporation or addition of roles, on a life continuum, providing the possibility of maintaining multiple roles.

### **A Brief History of Women in Higher Education in the United States**

Historically the education of women in the United States is closely linked to theological and social constructs. Capturing the experience of women in higher education in the United States requires a discussion of history. In the early days of the United States republic, the feminine ideal was embodied in the persona of the Republican Mother. Benjamin Rush, the physician and politician, wrote in *Thoughts Upon Female Education* that

The equal share of every citizen has in liberty and the possible share he may have in the government of our country make it necessary that our ladies should be refined to a certain degree, by a peculiar and suitable education, to concur in instructing their sons in the principles of liberty and government. (cited in Kerber & De Hart, 2004, p. 124)

In other words, the Republican Mother was an educated woman who would not be subject to the criticism reserved for the intellectually competent woman because she placed her education in the service of her family (Kerber & De Hart, 2005).

Additional complexity was provided by positivist, scientific arguments suggesting the weight of the female brain was less than that of a male, and that education would unnecessarily strain the feminine mind. Martha Carey Thomas, who would go on to become president of Bryn Mawr, recalled being struck with terror when she was told that her education would make her pathological invalid (Tittle & Denker, 1980). Thus, in protecting their minds from education, women were also protecting their reproductive organs. Ultimately, women who were advanced in their education were thought to be unsexed (Wood, 2009). Historian Susan Klepp suggests that “On the household level, restricted fertility and high rates of literacy or years of education were persistently linked: the higher the educational attainment of women, the lower fertility rates” (cited in Kerber & De Hart, 2005, p. 125).

War often provided an economic impetus for admitting women to institutions of higher education. During the Civil War there was a marked increase in the number of women attending institutions of higher learning. However, women were invariably pushed aside once the war ended. Reconstruction had generated hope for the educational advancement of women, as women had assumed places in the school and colleges both as students and teachers. Although

before the Civil War, only five institutions admitted women, two of which had all-female student bodies (Solomon, 1985).

In 1873, the retired Harvard Medical school professor, Dr. Edward Clark, wrote in *Sex in Education* that

if women used up their limited energy on studying, they would endanger their female apparatus. Although a female could study and learn, she could not do this *and* retain uninjured health and a future secure from neuralgia, uterine disease, hysteria, and other derangements of the nervous system. (cited in Solomon, 1985, p. 56)

Women were quite literally sent back to the drawing board as teachers in small community schools.

With the dawn of the twentieth century, attitudes began to slowly change, although this could perhaps be attributed more to the increasing reality of economic and political pressures rather than to theological or cultural shifts (Eisenmann, 2006). Franklin College in Pennsylvania had been the first institution to admit women in 1787, although they subsequently discontinued admitting women for financial reasons. Oberlin College was then first to admit women continuously from 1833 to the present. In the late nineteenth century, the “Seven Sisters,” a group of “for women only” colleges, was formed (Bok, 2013).

Women entering college between 1870 and 1910 represented only 2.2 percent of their age cohort (18- to 21-year-old women), but they represented 35% of all college students. By example they illustrated that women could withstand the intellectual rigors of college and remain healthy” (Solomon, 1985) Many women were attending teacher-training colleges in those days although the number of male-to-female undergraduates was about at parity from 1900 to 1930.

The alleged democratization of higher education in the United States facilitated the 1944 Servicemen's Readjustment Act (the G.I. Bill). Female veterans benefited as well, but were such a small minority of the military that the gains that women had made as a percentage of the college population in 1930 were reversed in the 1950s. The highpoint of gender imbalance in college attendance was reached in 1947, and undergraduate men then outnumbered women 2.3 to 1 (Martinez Aleman & Renn, 2002). In the latter part of the twentieth century this decline abated. The relative number of women in higher education has increased ever since the 1950s, with a brief pause in 1960-1975, when many men went to college to avoid being called into military service in the Vietnam War. By 1980, the gender balance in college had returned to its pre-1930 level in the United States, although the levels of college attendance were almost six times higher in 1980 than in the 1920s for both men and women (Martinez Aleman & Renn, 2002).

However, the traditional stereotype of the American college students (i.e., 18-22, enrolled full-time, and living on campus) is no longer the norm. Fewer than one in six students fits this traditional stereotype. Approximately 6 million adults (those over the age of 25), attend college each year. Also, although in the early centuries when higher education was considered to be the domain predominately European and American men, women now constitute the majority (57.5%) of students enrolled in higher education (Niles & Harris-Bowlsbey, 2005).

In 2003, there were 1.35 females for every male who graduated from a four-year college and 1.3 females for every male undergraduate. That contrasts with 1960, when there were 1.6 males for every female graduating from a U.S. four-year college and 1.55 males for every female undergraduate (Francis, 2015). The decline in male-to-female ratios of undergraduates in the past 35 years is real, and not primarily due to changes in the ethnic mix of the college aged

population or to the types of post-secondary institutions they attend (Katz, 1976). Francis (2015) reports that the female share of college students has expanded in all 17- member nations of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development in recent decades, so much so that women now outnumber men in college in almost all rich nations.

### **Women as Nontraditional Students**

Leary (2014) warns that number of educationally underserved women in this country is truly staggering. According to 2010 U.S. Census figures, 76 million adult women do not have a Bachelor's degree. Leary argues that education has the potential to break the cycles of poverty and financial instability that have plagued families for generations. Most returning women are also balancing their education with multiple other roles, many have spouses and most have children often creating a stressful crisis of loyalty when the various roles collide as the women tries to blend her academic life and her "other" life. The Shriver Report (Shriver & Center for American Progress, 2009) advises that the role of women has changed significantly in the past 50 years. Women now represent half of all U.S. workers but hold a disproportionate 62% of minimum wage jobs, according to the Shriver Report (Shriver & Center for American Progress, 2009). The report articulates that almost two-thirds of U.S. jobs will need some form of postsecondary education by 2020.

Current enrollment trends show women outpacing men in enrollment and graduation, among all racial, cultural and ethnic backgrounds. White women are 55% of the White college population, Black women make up 62% of the Black college population, and Hispanic women account for 56% of the Hispanic college population. Asian women outnumbered Asian men in college in 1994 (Nitri, 2001).

The very definition of being a nontraditional student indicates that a woman is juggling multiple roles and responsibilities, stacking the odds against the completion of their degree. Despite the high value placed on higher education and the motivation of many adults and adult women in particular to pursue it, “the challenges present significant hurdles” (Mbilinyi, 2006, p. 4). Due to gendered norms, adult female students are more likely to have greater family responsibilities than men, which can interrupt and delay the completion of the undergraduate degree program (Deutsch & Schmertz, 2011). A theory of the right time to enroll in college for adult females emerged within the literature (Brown, 2002; Taniguchi & Kaufmann, 2007).

Howell (2004) conducted a multi-method research study with the major finding being that as women faced and met challenges, the success they experienced gave them a sense of self-efficacy which they felt positively impacted their academic persistence and achievement. All of the women, and especially those with children, stated that they were in a constant balancing act between finding time to study, take care of domestic responsibilities, earn money, and volunteer. Research shows that women with young children at home appear to have more difficulty completing their degree than women with older children (Jacobs & Berkowitz King, 2002).

For many women, their return to school is delayed by sacrifices made for family concerns. Sweet & Moen (2007) used a mix of quantitative and qualitative research methods to determine the impact the return to school had on the lives of adult female students and their families. The study found that the return to school positively impacted personal satisfaction by providing personal growth and fulfillment. However, there was strong evidence that women who returned to school experienced role conflict, especially when they had dependent children. The roles of parenting, spouse, or other family roles, work responsibilities and even community,

religious and social roles can be exacerbated and when the additional role of nontraditional students is added.

Multiple identities or roles are a part of everyday existence for most people. Each role has its own demands and obligations. The student role becomes one among many for nontraditional students and comes with a number of demands which may be difficult to fulfill (Rowlands, 2010).

Vaccaro and Lovell (2010) conducted a qualitative study to determine how older students, especially women, become and remain engaged in their education. A representative sample of adult female students from Mountain Women's College participated in this study with an overall average age of 42. Findings indicate that although the women in this study consistently faced life challenges, their desire to get a college degree gave them motivation to juggle competing demands from family, work and school. In addition to gaining new skills and knowledge, going to school allowed many of these adult students to *find their voice*. Another finding from this study is that women were investing in themselves for personal growth and fulfillment of dreams to be someone better and stronger. Carney-Crompton and Tan's (2002) research shows that nontraditional students performed better in their academics than traditional students leading to greater satisfaction, increased self-esteem and ego enhancement.

To examine why adult women pursue bachelor's degrees and what value they place on their education, an interview-based study was conducted by Kennedy and Vaughn (2004) with women who earned their bachelor's degree when they were in their late 20s to mid-50s. Participants indicated that they decided to go to college due to economic needs, personal unrest, or the desire for career advancement. Some of the participants had attended a college or university at a traditional age but dropped out after they were wed and remained at home for a

time to care for their children and spouse. Progressing through classes and earning a degree helped these women transform their lives by resolving childhood issues, redefining marital relationships, learning how to accept themselves, establishing important connections, and finding new ways to belong and enhance self-esteem. This study identifies how marriage and family responsibilities can delay completion of a college degree for adult women. The study also identifies the value of college through transformational accounts of enhanced confidence and perspective that changed students' lives.

Nontraditional students are returning for various reasons, including increased demands of skills in the work force, but still have to balance other responsibilities such as work and home (Baptista, 2013). Baptista called for universities to value the characteristics which define a nontraditional student by striving to better support the needs of this growing populations of students through better professional development, prompt and diverse teaching and learning strategies, more class schedule flexibility. Deutsch and Schmertz's (2011) research also showed that nontraditional females students conceptualized returning to college as the opportunity to advance their career goals, feelings a higher demand in the work for college education. They found that others saw their return as a necessary next life-step. Those women reported going back to school for their children and because of family support because it was *their turn* and they wanted to. Nontraditional women appear to view education as an important means for personal development and an avenue for intergenerational social mobility (Nitri, 2001).

Chao and Good (2004) reported in their qualitative study with nontraditional women a core category of hopefulness in connection with decision to enroll in college. This sense of hopefulness motivated the participants' efforts to actively manage their education, career, family, and interpersonal relationships. Motivations such as personal goals and aspirations, self-

fulfillment/self-esteem, becoming a role model for their children, as well as improvement in their career status and financial improvement were found in a survey of nontraditional women (Bates & Norton, 2002).

With a sense of hopefulness and determination, adult females are resilient and have a strong desire to achieve their goal of earning a college degree to advance their careers, achieve personal fulfillment, and serve as a role model for their families. These nontraditional female students look for nontraditional ways of learning that are designed to fit their busy lifestyles. (Lorentzen, 2014, pg. ii).

### **The Traditional Woman as a Nontraditional Student in Higher Education**

Adult women have been participating in higher education in greater numbers than men in response to changing cultural norms and a greater opportunity for a career with increased earnings. With a different set of adult life experiences than the younger traditional age students, the adult female student's educational journey can be influenced by her gendered role, including more responsibility for family caregiving and household tasks than men (Deutsch & Schmertz, 2011). As adult female nontraditional students, they are still responsible for their traditional roles of homemakers, where women have been expected to do the majority of domestic work such as cleaning, cooking, taking care of the children, and managing all household duties (Tian, 1996). For many, having to balance multiple roles as caregiver, employee, and homemaker are their priorities in life and surpass their role as students. They are highly motivated to learn, but the lack of time to fully engage in student-related activities was one of the major challenges that all participants shared (King & Bauer, 1988).

Though family responsibilities may create delays in degree completion for the adult female, the support received from family may motivate and inspire these women to enroll in

college and persist (Sweet & Moen, 2007). For many women, the role of family is at the core of their educational success. Support and inspiration from family gave them strength and motivation to continue their education. For those who were mothers, going to school was often equated with being a good role model (Vaccaro & Lovell, 2010). With a strong drive to get a degree, women are motivated to juggle the competing demands on their time in order to earn their degree (Vaccaro & Lovell, 2010). Dill and Henley's (1998) research showed that while role demands for nontraditional female students caused major role strain, these same students also reported less academic stress, greater satisfaction in school, and better health when compared to their traditional student counterparts. Additionally, researchers also found that the best support for nontraditional women was perceived support from their families (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002; Kirby, Biever, Martinez, & Gomez, 2003; Quimby & O'Brien, 2006). Families could provide both support while also being a source of stress for nontraditional female students. Traditional gender roles weighed heavily as nontraditional female students attempt to manage multiple roles (Deutsch & Schmertz, 2011).

In 2016 women earned a majority of the doctoral degrees awarded in the United States (Perry, 2017). Ryan and Bauman (2016), using data from the United States Census Bureau, showed that today roughly 33% of women hold Bachelor's degrees compared with 32% of men. However, "during the 37-year period, 1976 to 2010, when men were at or below percent completion, women went from 20 percent to 36 percent with a bachelor's degree."

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## APPENDIX B

**Suggested Recruiting Script**

Recruiter: *I heard you are in school working on your under-graduated degree. Did you go to college before, or are you just beginning?*

RESPONSE:

Recruiter (if they are just beginning their studies): *That is wonderful, I wish you well in your studies.*

Recruiter (if they have returned to study): *I have a friend who is conducting a dissertation study at BYU about the experiences of traditional women who are returning to school as non-traditional students. She is looking for study participants and you came to mind. She would be happy to send an email about the study and answer any questions about your participation via email. Would it be okay if I were to give her your email information and have her contact you? If you are not interested, there is no obligation to participate.*

RESPONSE:

Recruiter (if they respond they would like to give their telephone number): *Thank you. I will give her your email and have her contact you.*

Recruiter (if they respond that they would not be interested): *Thank you. I understand if you do not want to participate.*

## APPENDIX C

**Copy of Informed Consent**

Consent to be a Research Subject

**INTRODUCTION**

This research study is being conducted by Candilyn Newell, Abby Sagers and Lyndsie Smith at Brigham Young University to determine the experiences of traditional women as they return to Higher Education as non-traditional students. You were invited to participate because you appear to be a traditional woman who has returned higher education in order to complete your undergraduate degree.

**Procedures**

If you agree to participate in this research study, the following will occur:

- you will be interviewed for approximately thirty-five (35) minutes about your experience as you have returned to complete your undergraduate degree
- the interview will be audio recorded to ensure accuracy in reporting your statements
- the interview will take place via telephone at a time and location convenient for you
- the researcher will provide a written transcription of your interview for your clarifications or corrections
- total time commitment will be approximately 60 minutes

**Risks/Discomforts**

There is minimal risk associated with this research. The interview could possibly touch on sensitive and personal topics that may produce some distress and/or discomfort for participants. The nature of the interview and content questions will not pose more risk than those ordinarily encountered in daily life.

**Benefits**

There will be no direct benefit to you. It is hoped, however, that through your participation researchers may learn about the experiences of non-traditional women as they seek to complete their undergraduate degrees in order to better understand and support these students in the attainment of their educational goals.

**Confidentiality**

The research data will be kept on a password protected device, and only the researchers will have access to the data. At the conclusion of the study, all identifying information will be removed and the audio files will be destroyed.

**Compensation**

Participants will receive a \$40.00, on-line gift card after the written transcription has been returned with any corrections or clarifications to the researcher. Compensation will not be prorated

**Participation**

Participation in this research study is voluntary. You have the right to withdraw at any time or refuse to participate entirely.

**Questions about the Research**

If you have questions regarding this study, you may contact Candilyn Newell at [candilynnewell@gmail.com](mailto:candilynnewell@gmail.com) for further information.

**Questions about Your Rights as Research Participants**

If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant contact IRB Administrator at (801) 422-1461; A-285 ASB, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT 84602; [irb@byu.edu](mailto:irb@byu.edu) or Dr. Aaron Jackson (801) 422-8031; [aaron\\_jackson@byu.edu](mailto:aaron_jackson@byu.edu).

**Statement of Consent**

I have read, understood, and received a copy of the above consent and desire of my own free will to participate in this study.

Name (Printed): \_\_\_\_\_ Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX D

**Supporting Quotes****Theme One: Participants Would Tell a Woman Considering a Return to School to “Do It!”**

Participant 9. I would tell her that it’s hard, but it’s worth it and I would tell her to try to enjoy it for what it is and not get so wrapped up in just the . . . Oh what is the word that I’m looking for? Don’t get wrapped up in just the logistics of it. You know? Try to enjoy it. It’s a fun experience. Something different, and you do grow, but growing’s hard. And . . . So, basically, yeah. Just try to enjoy it. It is hard but it’s going to be worth it when it’s over.

Participant 10. Do it. Although I think we as a society are over-pushing education—like there is only one track; we do not emphasize vocational tracks. I mean we need plumbers and electricians, and other trades, and all those things are education. I don’t think everyone needs to go to college to be educated. An educated woman has many faces!

Participant 13. Do it. It can be hard depending on your circumstances, and the timing and where you choose to attend school. But if you have the desire and love learning it can be very rewarding in multiple ways.

Participant 12. I would definitely tell her to go back to school. I would tell her to make sure that the degree that she decides to get will lead to a job. I have had two friends that went back and they got degrees that did not put them in a job. So, I would say, if you are going to get a degree, you need to have in mind what job that degree will get you. Because if you go back, without that idea what is it going to get you? My friends said, “I don’t care, I just wanted a degree.” I would just make sure that your degree leads to a job. My job is not going to be high paying, but at least I will have good benefits.

Participant 8. I would just say if you can do it, then do it! But I think that somebody who is talking about it or showing an interest or saying “hey, what do you think?” They are thinking about what going back to school could do for them, and in that case I would say ‘do it’! If you have an interest in this, then do it.

### **Theme Two: Participants Saw Spousal Support as Significant in Their Ability to Return to School**

Participant 4. There came a time that I knew that I was ready to go back to school full time, and really make a push to earn a degree, not just dabble in education, and my husband was behind that 100% but at first, it was really hard.

Participant 3. He’s been very supportive. Absolutely 100% supportive!

Participant 13. So, at first, when I had first made the choice to go back to school, it was a little more challenging for him. But he’s always been very supportive of it. I think his concerns were not wanting me to be too stressed out with the demands of being a mother and then of going to school. And I kind of have the tendency to have this perfectionistic personality and so, when I do assignments and class, I do get a little bit stressed out. And I don’t ever miss class. I am there 100% of the time committed, if I’m going to spend the time going to school, then I’m going to try to do my best and get an A. So, I think he was, kind of, knowing my personality traits that kind of worried him a bit, but he’s actually the one who encourages me to go back up after I take a break from school. He notices that with my personality, I’m a social person, and I have a love for learning. Because of that, he knows that I’m actually happier when I’m social and around people and actually learning new things and engaging my mind and those educational activities and things. And so, yeah, he’s been very supportive each time I’ve gone back to school.

Participant 6. All the difference in my opportunities is the man that I married. He has been super supportive, and I mean, I know that there are a lot of women who are single who'll be going back, but there are probably a lot who are married as well and I think that, you know, maybe if there is something that . . . Maybe if there is something that's offered for the men to encourage their spouses to get an education and the kinds of things that that can do for their spouse. I mean, that's my husband. The prophet encouraged . . . President Hinckley said, "Get your education. Get as much education as you can." So my husband has always been encouraging and supportive in education and I think that that's something.

Participant 5. Oh, my husband was very supportive!

### **Theme Three: A Paradox Existed as Participants Reported Their Families Were Supportive But the Reality of That Support Appeared Challenging**

Participant 13. So with having eight children, obviously with different age groups, there are different ages and perspectives and they all have different opinions—even the genders have different opinions. But overall, most of them have been proud that I went back. They seemed to be proud of my desire to learn and they supported me. I think I have a good relationship with my children and we talk openly about their concerns. But we talk openly about it and teaching them that there is a purpose to my education.

Participant 12. They've all been very supportive. They took on extra work around the house so that I could do this. And they know that I am doing this because I want to. They know that if I ever needed to work, I need to have that education to get a good job. Well, I mean, teaching is not really a good job, but to get a job. One of the reasons I chose teaching is because of the hours—the hours match up with my kids' school hours. It works—most of the time.

Participant 11. I think we all kind of help each other. I put my homework and schoolwork away after I get home from school so I can help them with their homework, and cook dinner. I think we just help each other do those things. My husband's family is in town as well. So if I need help picking up kids, or watching them while I need to take a test or something they're helpful.

Participant 7. I think that, you know, the children sometimes felt like "When are you going to be done?" Because, there would be the "Oh I'm sorry, I have to write a paper tonight and I can't go do this," or something like that, you know? And there were several times were my husband would step in and go to New Beginnings [a church youth meeting] because I had something or I had a paper due or something like that. And so I think that there were definitely negotiations that had to happen in order for me to be able to finish, you know. And so the kids had to understand that and work with that.

#### **Theme Four: Participants Felt Their Spirituality Increased When They Returned to School**

Participant 4. I understand the scriptures a lot more because of the principles about language that I am learning in class. So spiritually, I feel much more empowered, because I feel like I understand doctrine better.

Participant 12. I feel I have a lot more spiritual understanding. I feel like I understand better the purpose of our lives and the reasons we do thing from an eternal perspective. I also see the eternal importance of education.

Participant 6. I was listening to a conference talk [LDS general meeting] . . . "In your life, you will have moments, and in those moments, you're working on different things." So, you know, there is a time in your life that you have to focus on different things. I'm making sure that I read my scriptures every day because, you know, life is so quick, and it's more in a rhythm. I'm like,

first thing in the morning, I read my scriptures, I get the kids up and I'm making sure that I do that, so spiritually, I'm more balanced. I'm trying to make sure it gets done because I know what it feels like when I don't get that in. I also listen to conference talks in the car ride to school and back. I feel like there is more of a balance in my life because of this.

Participant 8. I go to BYU-Idaho, and so I have that environment we have at the church schools where all of our secular learning is taught through the Spirit, and then, not to mention the fact, that I've taken all of these religion classes. It's really helped me integrate my secular understanding with spiritual truths. I feel like I'm a better person spiritually, but I'm also better able to fulfill my church callings [religious assignments]. I'm better able to teach within the church. I'm better able to teach my kids. I just feel the Spirit more in my life because I have to rely a lot more on the Spirit as I'm trying to do so many things, and as I rely on the Spirit in my education as well.

### **Theme Five: Participants Were Surprised They Did Well Academically When They Returned to School**

Participant 11. I was surprised how easy it was to get back into school. I'd always been a good student, but a lot of people expected me to do poorly and I didn't. So, that was a nice surprise. I could still focus and do what needs to be done for school.

Participant 1. I was just surprised, I think, just that I could do it. You know? Like, sometimes I surprised myself at how close I was to quitting and just kept going. But every day, I would make it through another day, and so I would be like, "Ok! Well! I made it one more day!"

Participant 13. My grades definitely surprised me! I set out for that 4.0 and just . . . My husband would always just say to me, "Just keep pushing forward. Don't . . . don't look at the grade.

You just do your best. Do everything that's asked. Even if you don't have to, you just always do the extra. And in the end, it pays off." And, dagnabbit! He's right every time. That's been really shocking! You think there's no way to get through this class. There's no way—but you just keep pushing and pushing and pushing and doing it and doing the extra, and it always come out so positive in the end.

Participant 10. Well, here is the whole back-story. When I first applied to go to school at BYU I really felt like it was the right thing and I applied right away. Then I got this letter saying I was rejected! I didn't understand. I just really did not get it because I had felt so strongly prompted to apply. I remember I sent a thank you note to an adviser I had been working with. Then, a couple of days after the rejection letter, I got this letter telling me I had been accepted. I still do not know what happened. I do not know why I was rejected and then accepted. But when I went back to school that first semester I just kept comparing myself to the other students. I know I shouldn't have, but I did, and I just felt really inferior. They were all so smart. But, I just kept doing the work, and then at the end of the first semester I got all A's. But, I sometimes still feel like that rejection is in the back of my mind.

### **Theme Six: Participants Felt Returning to School had Increased Their World View**

Participant 1. It forces you to engage in educational conversation and perhaps that doesn't mean a lot to some people, but when your language has gone in another direction and you're forced to pick it up a notch, you never want to go back. [...] I, oh, everything is so much more interesting and fascinating. I took it slower. I, you know, I enjoyed my journey. I didn't just do the assignments to do the assignments. I did it because it was fascinating, to you know, dig a little deeper. So, I did take longer than most when they did their assignments and . . . But I enjoyed

the journey, and yeah. I still like that my brain was awakened. A little part of me was on snooze.

Participant 3. I love to learn. I absolutely love to learn and I know that that's part of what we are supposed to be doing is always gaining greater knowledge, and so, I have enjoyed the learning part. I have not enjoyed the assignments, the tests and the papers. I haven't enjoyed that part, but I have enjoyed the gaining that greater knowledge. It has been fun. I have met people from all over the world. And right now we are working with groups in one of my business classes where we are meeting once or twice a week. The technology that allows that to happen is unbelievable. I just love it. You know, a lot of people complain about the group work, but I just love it. Three or four semesters ago I worked with a girl in Mexico and we still are connected. So I just love the opportunity to connect with other people throughout the world in this program. When that Mexico earthquake hit, one of my first texts was to her. Her family was affected by it and to be able to talk with her about it and hear what was going on and keep touching base with her was wonderful.

Participant 12. I think education makes me a better person. I feel like when I am doing things that increase my knowledge, I can share that with my family.

Participant 10. I like being on campus and talking with students and learning from them. I think I am more open to ideas and learning.

### **Theme Seven: Participants Valued Higher Education and Wanted to Finish Something They Had Started**

Participant 6. Ok. I had always wanted to finish. I had actually just finished my associate's degree when I had two kids, and then I had twins but I wanted to finish—I wanted to get that Bachelor's degree.

Participant 4. When my children were very young, I just took classes here and there—whatever suited me and was convenient for our family. But there came a time that I knew that I was ready to go back to school full-time and really make a push to earn a degree, not just dabble in education.

Participant 5. There is a time as a young mother that I just put it away, in fact I actually tried to go back as a young mom, and I took a couple classes. I had to put my kids in daycare, and I thought “this is silly - this is ridiculous, I don't need to be doing this at this time in my life.” So I just kind of put it to rest. There was even a point where I said ‘I am never going to do this’. Then five years goes by, and my children grew up and it came to my mind that I should try this again. I knew that I would never really know unless I tried. It was just always something I wanted to do. I was not finished.

Participant 7. I've just always wanted to return, and that's just been high on my list of priorities and this was the first time that it was feasible. You know? I had the opportunity to grow as an individual and to accomplish this, which has been a lifelong dream. It has provided a contentment that nothing else could've provided.