

THE ROLE OF STRESS IN THE PERSISTENCE INTENTIONS OF
NONTRADITIONAL COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS

by

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to my brother

Joseph "Joey" David Siegel

January 27, 1967 – April 2, 1994

You taught me the true meaning of courage, perseverance, and persistence.

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the role of stress in the persistence intentions of nontraditional community college students by surveying 244 students and interviewing 22 students at a single campus of an urban community college in the Southwest. All participants completed a demographic questionnaire, the Perceived Stress Scale (Cohen, Kamarck, & Mermelstein, 1983), and the Intention to Leave Questionnaire (DeLuca, 2004). From the survey group, 10 students reporting high levels of perceived stress and high intent to leave college, and 12 students reporting high perceived stress and low intent to leave college were selected for in-depth interviews. Interviews explored the stressors of traditional (ages 18-24) and nontraditional (ages 25 and older) students, compared ways high and low intent to leave college students differentially perceived and coped with stress, and examined participant knowledge and utilization of institutional support services.

Survey results revealed significant differences in perceived stress between high and low intent to leave college students, and between female and male students. No significant differences were found between traditional and nontraditional students on the measure of perceived stress. Stressors for traditional and nontraditional community college students were found to be largely similar and related to external demands. Interviews revealed differences in the ways high and low intent students perceived and managed stress; with low intent students appraising stress as more of a challenge and coping through greater utilization of social support and problem-focused coping strategies, while high intent participants perceived stress as more of a threat and were

more likely to report coping deficiencies and greater use of maladaptive strategies. Low intent students were highly committed to completing college despite their stress, whereas high intent students had weak goal commitment and considered leaving college to reduce stress and attend to external demands. Most participants had little knowledge of, or desire to utilize stress support services offered by the community college. The findings suggest the importance of considering appraisals of stress and ways of coping in research on the role of stress in persistence decisions. This study led to the development of eight propositions designed for further testing by community college researchers and practitioners.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

The college years can be very stressful for many. In the contemporary climate of competition and pressure, some students adequately cope with these stresses, but others find that stress becomes unmanageable and interferes with learning. In some cases, these students may even disrupt the learning of others. (Cook Counseling Center, Virginia Tech University)

As the introductory quote from the Virginia Tech counseling center illustrates, unmanageable stress not only impacts the individual college student, but it can boil over and disrupt the entire campus, as in the case of the tragic events of April 16, 2007, when a distraught student, with a history of mental illness, shot and killed 32 members of the Virginia Tech campus community.

While such extreme and devastating cases of acting out behavior are relatively rare, college personnel must learn to recognize the signs and symptoms of the “overwhelmed” student on college campuses. Studies indicate that stress levels among college students have been on the rise over the past 30 years (Robotham & Julian, 2006; Sax, 1997). In a study by Abouserie (1994) of 675 university students, it was found that 88% of the sample was experiencing moderate to severe levels of stress as measured by the Life Stress Questionnaire (Abouserie, 1994).

High levels of stress have been linked to the development of anxiety, depression, impaired cognition and physical ailments (Bergdahl & Bergdahl, 2002; Coppock, 1998; McClary, 1990). Given the increasing rate of “stressed-out” students on college campuses, it should come as no surprise that counseling centers are also seeing increasing

numbers of students suffering from mental health disorders (Coll, 1995; Kadison & DiGeronimo, 2004). Such increased prevalence of mental illness has been attributed to a variety of factors, including the stresses and pressures that college students face in the new millennium, advances in mental health treatment which have allowed students with pre-existing psychological conditions to function sufficiently well to attend college, and passage of legislation such as the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 that increased access to education for disabled persons (Benton, 2006; Durodoye, Harris & Bolden, 2000; Kadison & DiGeronimo, 2004). Whether stress is the source of these mental health issues or whether it exacerbates them, the detrimental impact of stress on the modern college student and the deleterious effects it can have on their educational and life goals need to be addressed.

In order for college students to complete their educational goals, they must successfully navigate many challenges and stressors over the course of their enrollment (Devonport & Lane, 2006). While other factors can contribute to early departure from college, significant stress, if left unmanaged, or coped with in maladaptive ways, can contribute to poor academic performance and student dropout (Bentley, 1982; Bray, Braxton & Sullivan, 1999; DeBerard, Spielmans & Julka, 2004). It is evident from the literature, that nontraditional students have higher attrition rates than traditional students (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Choy, 2002). This is significant because nontraditional students have constituted the largest increase in enrollment in higher education over the past 30 years (Brown, 2002). Due in part to open enrollment, affordability, and flexible class schedules, the sector of higher education that has attracted the largest percentage of

nontraditional students (58.7%) is the community college (Kasworm, 2003). The origins of the current growth in community college enrollment, as well as the meteoric growth of this sector of higher education, have their historical roots in the period following World War II. The passage of such legislation as the GI Bill in 1944 and the Higher Education Act of 1965, as well as the influence of the civil rights and women's movements, served to increase access to higher education and create a more skilled, economically responsive work force. Community colleges currently function as a gateway into higher education for many and have missions that serve both the educational and vocational training needs of the communities in which they reside.

Community college students are more likely to be nontraditional in age, enrollment status, work status, and family and financial responsibilities (Durodoye, Harris & Bolden, 2000). According to Kasworm (2003), of nontraditional students ages 25 or older, 69% are part-time students, 55% are full-time workers and part time students, 23% are full-time workers and full-time students, 56% are married or separated, and 52% have dependent children. Considering that nontraditional students are a demographic with multiple life demands and responsibilities, it may be difficult to understand why these individuals would take on the additional role of "student." A study by the College Board found that most adult students cite "career reasons" as their primary enrollment goal, with enrollment in response to family transitions, leisure needs, and personal enrichment goals following distantly behind (Aslanian, 2001). Kasworm (2003) found that the reasons adult learners attend community colleges are often related to the need to

obtain a credential that will lead to marketable skills, financial support, career stability, and increased life opportunities in the changing economy.

Nontraditional community college students often experience stress related to balancing multiple life roles, such as that of employee, parent, spouse and student (Miller, Pope & Steinman, 2005). Compared with traditional students, nontraditional students report experiencing more stress related to juggling multiple external roles such as family and work (Birchak, 1992; Garrido, 2000), whereas traditional students experience more stress related to the social and academic pressures of school (Birchak, 1992; Kadison & DiGeronimo, 2004; Ross, Niebling & Heckert, 1999). Nontraditional students also report having greater financial concerns and less confidence in their academic abilities than traditional aged students (Benshoff, 1993; Durodoye, Harris & Bolden, 2000; Haggan, 2000). Since the stressors are different for traditional and nontraditional students, it follows that their reasons for departing college may also vary. Interaction with exogenous factors play a much greater role in the departure decisions of nontraditional students than it does for traditional students for whom interaction with the social and academic systems of the institution are much more central to attrition (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Tinto, 1993).

Statement of Problem

The need for this study emerges from the increasing prevalence of stress among college students in general, and the lack of exploration of its impact on nontraditional community college students in particular. (see APPENDIX A for Definition of Terms). There is limited evidence that community college students may enter school experiencing

lower levels of emotional health and higher rates of depression than other groups of college students (Sax, 1997). This finding may be due to the nature of these institutions, which, through open access and flexible educational programs, attract a higher proportion of busy adults with pre-existing life demands and stressors (Elmi, 1998). This trend could be particularly problematic for community colleges which may possess more limited resources to deal with such student issues (Durodoye, Harris & Bolden, 2000; Iskyan, 1993; Sax, 1997; Stuber & Otto, 1995). Since nontraditional students are found in greater numbers in community colleges and have higher attrition rates than other college students (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Tinto, 1993; Zhai & Monzon, 2001), it is of vital importance to gain an understanding of how these students experience stress, and to study the processes that lead to attrition in this population.

In order for the community college to adequately assist nontraditional students in achieving their educational goals, it must be able to identify their unique needs and provide adequate support services to meet those needs. Coll (1995) found that community college student retention is connected to the presence of effective student services. Services that nontraditional students have identified as being beneficial to their continued enrollment include counseling, academic advising, child-care, and relevant workshops (stress, time management, financial aid) offered at times that make them accessible to busy adults (Stolar, 1991).

It is not enough, however, for colleges to offer these services. Students must also be aware of support services and have a willingness to utilize them. Studies indicate that students are not only unaware of many of the services offered by colleges, but that they

may be unwilling to utilize them (Birchak, 1992; Ballenger, 1999; Scott, 2000). When students feel overwhelmed, it is their knowledge of services, belief in the competence of practitioners, and willingness to seek institutional support that ultimately leads them to seek help (Ballenger, 1999; Birchak, 1992, Paradise & Long, 1981). A greater understanding of how to link the factors of knowledge, perception, and utilization of services needs to be gained to insure that those who need help receive it in a timely fashion.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this exploratory study is to gain insight into how nontraditional community college students, defined as those 25 years of age or older, perceive and cope with stress, and to discover how such experiences relate to persistence intentions. This objective will be accomplished primarily through qualitative comparison of a group of high stress students who express high intent to leave college and a group of high stress students who express low intent to leave college. It is hoped that by comparing and contrasting these high stress groups, that a more comprehensive understanding of the role of stress in the persistence intentions of community college students will emerge. In order to give the study fuller context, the researcher will also quantitatively examine whether there are significant differences in overall stress levels between high and low intent to leave students and between traditional and nontraditional students on measures of perceived stress and intent to leave college. The study will also explore the stress-related support needs of students with the purpose of helping inform the practice of community college student affairs professionals.

The researcher will utilize a combination of surveys and semi-structured, in-depth interviews for this study. Such a mixed methodology is well suited to gain a comprehensive understanding, on both the micro and macro level, of the phenomena of stress and attrition. The research will be conducted at a single campus of an urban, multi-campus community college system located in the Southwestern United States.

Significance of the Study

To date, there has been insufficient research on the effects of stress on non-traditional students (Dill & Henley, 1998; Garrido, 2000; Morris, Brooks & May, 2003). While stress has been linked to adverse educational outcomes, there has been little research on the role of stress in the persistence decisions of community college students. Most of the research that has explored the role of stress in college departure has been conducted at four-year colleges (Perrine, 2001; Pritchard & Wilson, 2003; Shields, 2001; Zajacova, Lynch & Espenshade, 2005). In addition, the outcomes achieved in these studies have been mixed, with some research finding higher levels of stress related to increased persistence (Shields, 2001; Sandler, 2002; Zajacova, Lynch & Espenshade, 2005), while other studies have found stress to have a negative impact on persistence (Chartrand, 1992; Perrine, 2001; Sandler, 2001). Since most of the studies of stress in higher education are quantitative in nature (Robotham & Julian, 2006), there is a need for more qualitative research to develop deeper understandings of the stress experiences of community college students and the relationship of such experiences to persistence.

Through this study, the researcher hopes to add to the sparse literature that has examined the role of stress in the persistence decisions of nontraditional community

college students. The researcher also hopes to inform the practice of community college personnel as to the unique stress support needs of this population so that services can be implemented, improved, or continued which could have positive implications for retention.

This study is also intended to educate the community college student audience as to potential avenues of support and coping that they can access to help them deal successfully with stress. In examining the qualitative differences between high-stress students who have intent to persist and those who do not, it is hoped that insights and knowledge will be gained that will be beneficial to nontraditional community college students as they work towards achieving their educational goals. Understanding these differences may also be crucial for best knowing how to serve these students in the community college setting.

Theoretical Frameworks

The researcher will utilize three theoretical frameworks to help understand the ways that nontraditional community college students view and manage stress, as well as how their unique stressors may influence departure decisions.

The researcher will utilize Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) Theory of Cognitive Appraisal. Lazarus and Folkman's theory concerns the process of how individuals interpret and cope with significant events. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) posit that individuals, through a cognitive process of "primary appraisal," assess situations as irrelevant, benign or stressful. If an event is perceived as stressful, the individual can appraise it as threatening, challenging, or both. A situation appraised as a threat concerns

harms or losses that have not yet occurred but that are anticipated and are usually accompanied by negative emotions. Challenge appraisals focus on the potential for gain or growth inherent in an encounter and are usually accompanied by positive feelings. Once a situation is appraised as stressful, whether a challenge or threat, individuals must evaluate their available coping resources and options, through a process known as “secondary appraisal,” to determine how and whether they can manage the stressful event. The mobilization of resources to meet the stressful demand constitutes the coping response. Coping responses of individuals can either be problem-focused (directed at altering the problem that is causing the stress) or emotion-focused (directed at regulating the emotional response to the problem). This framework will be used to help interpret participant perceptions of stress and to explore whether appraisals and subsequent coping play a role in college persistence intentions.

Schlossberg’s Transition Theory (Schlossberg, et al., 1995) will be utilized in an effort to frame the coping strengths and deficits of students. The researcher will examine the aspects of self, situation, support and strategies that help or hinder nontraditional students’ ability to manage stress. “Self” includes personal assets and psychological resources. “Situation” deals with the timing and control one has over events in their lives. “Support” deals with external resources that provide support such as friends, family and institutions. “Strategies” explicitly deal with the coping responses of individuals, and they range from attempting to change the situation, to changing the meaning of the situation, to helping manage the stress after it has occurred. Schlossberg et al.’s (1995)

transition model was selected because it is a developmental model that specifically deals with how adults (i.e. nontraditional students) manage stressful life changes.

The researcher will also utilize Bean and Metzner's (1985) Conceptual Model of Nontraditional Undergraduate Student Attrition. Bean and Metzner's (1985) model examines the significant role of environmental variables in the lives of nontraditional students, and how such demands as finances, hours of employment, and family responsibilities can lead to attrition if not properly managed. The model also considers the impact on persistence decisions of more propitious environmental variables such as outside encouragement and support for college attendance and opportunity for transfer. The environmental variables in Bean and Metzner's (1985) model are posited to impact the psychological outcomes of stress, goal commitment, utility, and satisfaction. These psychological outcomes in turn, are expected to influence intent to leave. The psychological outcome of stress is of particular interest in the current study and is expected to increase intent to leave. Bean and Metzner's (1985) framework will be used as a means of understanding the role of external demands and supports in the persistence intentions of nontraditional community college students.

Borrowing from Bean and Metzner's (1985) model of nontraditional student attrition, the construct of "intent to leave" will be utilized in the current study as a proxy for persistence. While intent to leave college is not the same as actual attrition, it has been found to be a strong predictor of actual persistence decisions (Cabrera, Nora & Castaneda, 1993; Farabaugh-Dorkins, 1991).

Research Questions

For the purposes of exploring the role of stress in intent to leave college, and determining the support needs of community college students, the following research questions were formulated:

1. In a sample of community college students who report experiencing stress, what role does stress play in their intentions to leave college?
 - a. What differences, if any, are there in the stress levels of community college students who have high intent to leave college versus those who have low intent to leave?
 - b. What differences, if any, are there in the stress levels of traditional versus nontraditional community college students?
 - c. What differences, if any, are there in how stress is perceived and managed by community college students who have high intent to leave college versus those who have low intent to leave?
 - d. What differences, if any, are there in how stress is perceived and managed by traditional versus nontraditional community college students?

2. What do community college students who report experiencing stress describe as their institutional support needs?
 - a. What knowledge do students have of stress support services offered by the community college and to what extent do they utilize these services?

- b. What differences, if any, are there in the institutional support needs of traditional versus nontraditional community college students?
- c. What differences, if any, are there in the institutional support needs of those who have high intent to leave college versus those who have low intent to leave college?

Summary

In the increasingly complex world of the new millennium, stress for college students is a relevant and pervasive issue. The life of the nontraditional community college student is seemingly more complex than most given their greater predisposition to balance multiple roles. The nature of how these students experience and manage stress while attempting to complete an educational goal, is the focal point of this study. Some highly stressed students fail to persist, while others appear to overcome, or at least deflect their stressors and stay in school. In this exploratory study, these groups will be compared for insights into how stress can influence departure decisions, have little to no effect on departure, or can motivate one to succeed and continue in school.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF THE RELEVANT LITERATURE

Stress, according to Lazarus and Folkman (1984), is defined as a person's perceptions of the magnitude of environmental risks (challenges, demands, threats) that must be faced, relative to perceptions of his/her personal resources for coping. If a situation is appraised as exceeding one's available coping resources, the individual will experience stress. The effects of stress can be positive and motivating, encouraging growth and change, or they can be overwhelming and toxic, leading to emotional and physical decline. Individual responses to stress vary across situations and are determined by a combination of person and environment factors present in a specific encounter. Factors like imminence of an event, timing in one's life, and availability of coping resources all influence the way a person evaluates and mediates stressful circumstances.

Stress, for college students, whether originating from their interactions with the institution, interactions with the noncollegiate environment, or a combination of both, can have negative outcomes on academic achievement and can be a factor in decisions to leave college (Napoli & Wortman, 1998; Garrido, 2000; Perrine, 2001; Sandler, 2001; Pritchard & Wilson, 2003). The types of stressors that nontraditional students experience are typically different from those of traditional students. Due to their unique stressors, nontraditional community college students have different institutional support needs (Coll, 1995) as well as different reasons for leaving college than traditional-aged students (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Chartrand, 1992).

The following review of relevant literature provides a context for this study by reviewing the current understanding of the causes and effects of stress for both traditional and nontraditional students, explicating appraisal and coping responses to stress in an attempt to understand reasons for differential management of stress across situations, delving into the reasons nontraditional students may voluntarily depart college, and examining the institutional support needs of nontraditional students and the state of stress management services for community college students.

The Effects of Stress

According to Bee (1987), the three outcomes of stress are either no-change, psychosocial or psychological growth, or adverse health and emotional functioning. According to Lazarus and Folkman (1984), major stress can cause some individuals to call upon adaptive resources they did not know were available. Such people seem to grow and gain strength from stress that can be used in subsequent crises. Moderate amounts of stress can be beneficial by helping to motivate and maximize student performance (Moore, Burrows & Dalziel, 1992; McClary, 1990). While some stress is desirable for optimal performance, when stress exceeds one's ability to cope, or if an individual's coping response is maladaptive, stress can have toxic effects. The adverse effects of stress are well known in the research literature. Stress is associated with a variety of physical and mental ailments. High levels of stress can contribute to the development of anxiety, depression, sleep disturbances, irritability and concentration problems (Bergdahl & Bergdahl, 2002; Coppock, 1998). Stress has also been linked to

serious health problems like heart disease, stroke, and immune system response (McClary, 1990).

Stress has been linked to impaired working memory and interference with learning (Iglesias, et al., 2005). In a risk survey by the American College Health Association, students identified stress as having the greatest impact on their academic performance in the previous year (Broderick, 2003). Stress has been shown to negatively impact academic performance among both traditional and nontraditional college students (Garrido, 2000; Napoli & Wortman, 1998; Pritchard & Wilson, 2003). This is important because GPA, as the primary indicator of academic performance, is positively associated with remaining in college (Nora et al., 1996; Zajacova, Lynch & Espenshade, 2005).

The effects of stress can vary across individuals and situations. Some individuals may handle multiple stressors with ease, while others may find stressors to be a major obstacle to goal attainment (Durodoye, Harris & Bolden, 2000). Felsten (2002) notes that stress reactivity, or individual sensitivity to stressors, is a better predictor of depressed mood in college men and women than cumulative stress. In Felsten's (2002) study, it was found that those college students who rate minor stressors as very stressful were more vulnerable to depressed mood. One's ability to minimize or neutralize the negative effects of stress is strongly related to their ability to cope.

Cognitive Appraisal and Coping

According to Krohne (2002), the two concepts that are central to any stress theory are appraisal and coping. In order to survive and flourish, individuals must be able to discriminate between benign and dangerous situations. Through a continuous evaluative

process that Lazarus and Folkman (1984) labeled “cognitive appraisal,” individuals ascertain the meaning and significance of events. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) acknowledged that individuals differ greatly in their vulnerability and sensitivity to certain types of events, as well as their interpretations and responses. The authors describe two types of appraisals for interpreting and dealing with stressful stimuli. Primary appraisal is used by the individual to assess whether an event is irrelevant, positive, or stressful. If an event is appraised as stressful, it can be of three types: harm/loss, threat, or challenge. Harm/loss appraisals involve losses that have already occurred, such as the death of a family member or a serious injury. Threat appraisals focus on potential harms and are usually accompanied by negative emotions such as fear, anxiety, and anger. Challenge appraisals focus on the potential for gain or growth inherent in an encounter, and are accompanied by positive emotions such as eagerness and excitement.

How an individual interprets an event is influenced by what is personally at stake for them in the encounter (commitments and beliefs about control), as well as environmental factors, such as the coping resources they possess and the timing of an event. The level of control a person believes they have in a stressful situation can determine, to a large extent, whether they view the event as a threat or challenge. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) note: “Whether general or specific, illusory or realistic, one's belief in one's ability to control an event influences how that event is appraised and coped with.” (p.77). Factors like imminence, timing, and duration of events influence appraisals. The more imminent an event is, the more urgently one must make an

appraisal. The timing of an event in a person's life, if concurrent with other major stressors, can result in the individual appraising an event as more threatening and overwhelming. Duration is also an important factor in that an acute time-limited stressor such as an exam or minor surgery, will be appraised differently than an event that is chronic and persistent such as poverty.

Once an event is appraised as stressful, the individual must evaluate what can be done to manage their circumstances. Secondary appraisal is described by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) as a "complex evaluative process that takes into account which coping options are available, the likelihood that a given coping option will accomplish what it is supposed to, and the likelihood that one can apply a particular strategy, or set of strategies effectively" (p. 35). After initial appraisals occur, an individual may also reappraise the stressful encounter. Reappraisal, according to Lazarus and Folkman (1984), is a cognitive process that involves modifying an initial appraisal based on new information from the environment or a person's own reactions. Reappraisal can also involve efforts to reinterpret the past more positively or to deal with present harms and threats by viewing them in more benign ways.

Coping is defined as "any response to external life strains that serves to prevent, avoid, or control emotional distress" (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978). Coping resources are very important in one's ability to manage stress. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) define two major types of coping that individuals engage in when they experience stress: Problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping. Problem-focused coping is directed at

altering the situation that is causing distress, while emotion-focused coping attempts to allay the emotions associated with distress.

Problem-focused coping is typically used in situations where the individual feels he or she can bring about a change, whereas emotion-focused coping is employed in situations where the individual may feel nothing can be done to alter the situation. Problem-focused coping consists of planning, seeking solutions, and taking direct action, whereas emotion-focused forms of coping include distancing (efforts to detach oneself), escape/avoidance (wishful thinking, eating, drinking, smoking, sleeping), seeking social support, and positive reappraisal (Folkman & Lazarus, 1988). While problem-focused coping is an active, direct form of dealing with stressful circumstances, emotion-focused coping “acts to reinterpret or redefine a problem situation rather than tackle it directly” (Fleishman, 1984, p. 231).

Universally effective forms of coping are difficult to determine given the unique ways and contexts in which individuals experience stress. While using a greater proportion of problem-focused coping strategies has been linked to better outcomes in the management of stress (Billings & Moos, 1981; Folkman et al., 1986; Folkman & Lazarus, 1988a), using problem-focused strategies in situations that cannot be changed or emotion-focused strategies in situations that can be altered may be maladaptive and can increase stress levels (Abella & Heslin, 1989). Carver, Scheier & Weintraub (1989) found that coping strategies vary over the course of stressful transactions just as they do between situations with differing demands. Fleishman (1984) noted that people cannot be categorized as either problem-focused or emotion-focused copers because individuals

do not exclusively use some types of coping to the exclusion of others. Individuals often use a mix of both problem-focused and emotion-focused techniques, with one often facilitating use of the other (Carver & Scheier, 1994).

Folkman and Lazarus (1988b) note that use of escape-avoidant forms of coping, such as smoking and drinking, are maladaptive and can be harmful. A study by Carver, Scheier & Weintraub (1989) found that college students who believed stressful events were amenable to change engaged in more adaptive coping strategies such as active coping and planning than those who believed their situation was something that had to be accepted. In this same study, it was discovered that men were more likely to use alcohol and drugs to cope than women. Bentley (1982) researched the effects of stress on grades and found that maladaptive coping, and satisfaction in it (acting impulsively, cutting classes, drinking alcohol, exaggerating physical complaints) led to lower grades. Tichy and Means (1990) studied 12 community college nursing programs in Oregon and found that students who experienced the most stress utilized maladaptive, ineffective coping responses such as changes in eating patterns, sleep disturbances, anger, and increased use of alcohol and cigarettes. The nursing students in the study who experienced low to moderate stress employed more positive, adaptive coping techniques including talking with others, praying, physical activity, and meditation.

Folkman and Lazarus (1988b) found that planful problem solving and positive reappraisal contributed to improved emotional state, whereas confrontive coping and distancing appeared to exacerbate the emotional state of participants. A study by McCrae and Costa (1986) asked participants who had experienced significant stress over the past

year to rate the efficacy of coping responses. Participants ranked the most effective coping strategies as faith, seeking help, rational action, self-adaptation (efforts at change that are directed at self rather than the world), expression of feelings, humor, and drawing strength from adversity (method of cognitive restructuring). The least effective coping techniques as rated by the participants were: hostile reactions, indecisiveness, self-blame, wishful thinking, isolation of affect, and passivity.

Social support is considered an important coping resource that can help buffer stress (Constantine, Wilton & Caldwell, 2003, DeLongis, Folkman & Lazarus, 1988; Kahn & Williams, 2003). Dunkel-Schetter, Folkman and Lazarus (1987) found that individuals who used avoidant or confrontive coping had fewer social resources, while those who used more positive strategies, such as positive appraisal, received a great deal more support. The authors reasoned that those who were more positive and adaptive in their coping styles received the added reinforcement of social support to assist them in their coping. Individuals can utilize social resources for both emotional support and for instrumental purposes, such as advice seeking (Carver, Scheier & Weintraub, 1989) Perrine (2001) noted that it is not only objective availability, but perceived availability and satisfaction with one's social support that is an effective mediator of stress. This means that it is not just the quantity of support that matters, but the quality of that support. Research has confirmed that support from trusted, intimate others has the most value in buffering stress (Fry, 1989; Lowenthal & Weiss, 1976).

The greater the number of coping resources one has at their disposal, and the more coping responses they are able to employ, the less likely any given event will result

in stress (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978). McGowan, Gardner & Fletcher (2006) note: “The ability to use a repertoire of coping strategies flexibly is important” in managing stress effectively (p. 97). Research has shown that using problem-focused coping in combination with certain emotion-focused strategies, such as positive reappraisal, can lead to reduced distress (Carver & Scheier, 1994; Folkman et al., 1986; Forsythe & Compas, 1987). These studies illustrate the value of having multiple coping options that can be used in tandem to make one another more effective.

Age-related differences in coping strategies have been found in the literature. Kariv and Heiman (2005) found that in response to academic stress, older students used more task-oriented forms of coping compared to younger students who used more emotion and avoidance based strategies. Studies by Shields (2001) and Birchak (1992) confirm the greater proclivity of nontraditional students to utilize more active, positive forms of coping. In addition to findings of older students using more constructive forms of coping, Hamarat et al. (2001) discovered that beliefs in coping resource efficacy also increase with age.

Self-efficacy

Self-efficacy is an important concept in coping research, as it relates to one’s confidence and belief in their ability to cope and achieve a desired outcome. According to Wiedenfeld et al. (1990), one’s perceived coping self-efficacy acts as a powerful cognitive mediator of stress. People with high self-efficacy often experience lower levels of stress than those with low self-efficacy because when they encounter stress they are able to “relax, divert their attention, calm themselves, and seek support from friends,

family, and others” (Bandura, 1997, p. 4). The belief one has in their ability to cope strongly influences whether they appraise a situation as a threat or challenge. Bandura (1997) notes: “People with high perceived self-efficacy approach difficult tasks as challenges to be mastered rather than threats to be avoided” (p. 5). When one perceives a stressful situation as a challenge that they have the resources to manage, they are more likely to effectively cope with the circumstances.

In the academic realm, self-efficacy has been found to be a stronger predictor of grade point average and accumulation of college credits than perceived stress (Zajacova, Lynch & Espenshade, 2005). Chemers, Hu and Garcia (2001) found that students who enter college with greater confidence (i.e., self-efficacy) in their academic abilities and higher expectations for academic success, actually perform better than their peers. Lent, Brown and Larkin (1984) related high self-efficacy to higher grade performance and longer persistence in one’s major. A study of Latino college students by Torres and Solberg (2001) found that higher levels of academic self-efficacy were associated with lower levels of academic stress and greater intent to persist in college. Devonport and Lane (2006) determined that active coping strategies related to higher levels of self-efficacy for first-year college students, and that lower self-efficacy scores correctly classified over 80% of students at risk for dropout.

Transitions for Adults

Schlossberg, Lynch and Chickering (1989) define a transition as “an event, or nonevent that alters one’s roles, relationships, routines and assumptions” (p. 14).

According to Schlossberg et al. (1989), any transition, whether it is positive or negative,

causes some stress. Stress from a transition can arise from both events and non-events. An event is something that occurs that is an obvious change, such as marriage or high school graduation, while a nonevent is something that was anticipated, but did not occur, such as an expected job promotion or a retirement that does not occur on schedule. Non-events can cause significant despair if the individual places a high value on the event occurring.

Human development is based on the notion of navigating through transitions, or what Erikson (1980) labeled “crises”. Nontraditional students have different developmental needs than traditional students. While the major developmental tasks of adolescents and young adults are primarily related to development of identity and formation of significant and intimate relationships, the developmental expectations of middle and older adults involve developing stable family and occupational roles, and contributing productively to society (Erikson, 1980).

For many nontraditional students, returning to school represents a major life transition and developmental challenge. When adults enter or exit new roles, they often experience more stress than when roles remain constant (Bee, 1987). Fiske and Chiriboga (1990) distinguish between normative transitions, which fall at predictable points in the life course, and nonnormative transitions, which occur unexpectedly. Neugarten, Moore and Lowe (1965), note that there is a normative timetable for the ordering of major life events, and that individuals can be “off-time” or “on-time” relative to these age norms and expectations. Transitions, whether normative or nonnormative, on-time or off-time, challenge a person’s habitual ways of living (Fiske & Chiriboga,

1990). The magnitude of this challenge varies according to the individual and their situation. Returning to school later in life represents a nonnormative transition for many adults and can produce feelings of displacement, inadequacy, and role-confusion. Schlossberg, Lynch and Chickering (1989) assert that “the crisis of identity is reawakened whenever an individual experiences a major transition” (p. 37).

Schlossberg, Waters and Goodman (1995) developed a framework for understanding how adults deal with life transitions. The authors assert that a transition is only a transition if the individual experiencing it defines it as such. A transition, according to the authors, “is not so much a matter of change, as of the individual’s own perception of the change” (p. 28). The significance of an event, or non-event, is based on the degree to which it impacts any of the individual’s roles, relationships, routines, and assumptions. Schlossberg et al.’s model takes into account the balance of assets and liabilities of an individual as they experience change. The balance of assets and liabilities, or resources and deficits, can help determine how well an individual copes with change (Fiske & Chiriboga, 1990). Individuals react to transitions based on their balance of resources to deficits at the time during which the transition occurs. This, according to the authors, may explain why the same person may react differently to different types of changes, or even the same type of change at different times in life. The authors posit that one’s ability to successfully manage a transition depends on the characteristics of Situation, Self, Support and Strategies. These are referred to as the “4 S’s”, and they are the balance of assets and liabilities that a person possesses to cope with transitions.

“Situation” in Schlossberg et al.’s model refers to a person’s circumstances at the time of a transition. Situations vary according to timing (how the transition relates to one’s social clock), the trigger (what set the transition in motion), control (considers the aspects of the situation the person can control), duration (is the transition seen as permanent or temporary), previous experience with a similar transition, concurrent stress (what and how great the stresses are that currently face the individual), and one’s assessment of the situation as positive, negative or benign.

Aspects of the “Self” that influence transitions include personal and demographic characteristics such as ethnicity, socioeconomic status, age and stage of life, and state of physical health. Other factors of self that influence perceptions of change include psychological resources, such as an individual’s outlook on life, feelings of self-efficacy, control, and one’s explanatory style.

“Support” refers to the intimate relationships, family units, networks of friends, and the institutions and communities which a person may access during times of stress. These external supports and options vary for each individual. Of relevance to this study are the institutional supports provided by the community college.

“Strategies” in Schlossberg’s model simply refer to the coping responses an individual employs or is able to employ to deal with the stress of a transition. These strategies may attempt to modify the situation, control the meaning of the problem through cognitive reframing, or help manage stress after it has happened (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978). The choice of strategy depends on the psychological resources (feelings

of self-efficacy, control, and outlook on life) of the individual, and the coping strategies available to them.

Tovar and Simon (2006) tested the constructs of Schlossberg et al's. (1995) transition model on a population of nontraditional community college students on academic probation. The authors note that this model is highly applicable to nontraditional community college students because "unlike traditional-aged four year college students, the intricacy of community college students' lives are more like that of typical, highly complex working adults - for whom Schlossberg's theory was postulated." (p. 550). The findings of the study indicate the utility of the framework, as each of the 4 S's helped elucidate the support needs of probationary students. The authors recommend that counselors use the framework as an intrusive/developmental form of advisement to address probationary student transitional needs. The authors note that using this model with probationary students can help them discover the situation that triggered the academic failure, discover what types of support they have and need, and help them explore and identify what strategies can be employed to resolve probationary status.

Nontraditional Student Stress

Nontraditional community college students experience different types of stress than their traditional-aged residential student counterparts (Coll, 1995). Much of the stress that nontraditional students experience is related to external roles and responsibilities. Nontraditional students often find it difficult to balance multiple roles such as that of employee, parent, and student (Benshoff, 1993). They have considerably more time and role conflicts than traditional students and this is often a source of anxiety

and tension (Dill & Henley, 1998; Morris, Brooks & May, 2003). Kuh (1980) discovered that nontraditional students experienced tension and nervousness related to the number of hours worked while going to school, number of enrolled credit hours, and balancing family responsibilities. Family and work obligations of nontraditional students can translate to school absenteeism, reduced study time, and subsequently lower grade point average (Napoli & Wortman, 1992). In their interaction with the college itself, nontraditional students identified institutional barriers such as factors associated with the administrative process, as well as availability of services, as stress producing (Bojuwoye, 2002).

Many nontraditional students lack confidence in their abilities in the academic setting. Returning students who have been on hiatus from formal learning for several years are particularly vulnerable to stress and anxiety connected to feelings of inadequacy in the school milieu and fear of failure (Benshoff, 1993; Durodoye, Harris & Bolden, 2000; Haggan, 2000). Nontraditional students return to school for several reasons, including career change or changing job requirements; the desire to increase income; life transitions such as marriage, divorce or death; self-fulfillment; or to complete an education started previously (Bauman, et. al, 2004; Benshoff, 1993; Haggan, 2000). Nontraditional students often need help and support from the institution to build up self-confidence in their academic abilities.

Stuber and Otto (1995) found in their year-long study of a Midwestern community college, that those students with families to support often experienced anxiety from financial strain. Many nontraditional students experience a great deal of stress over

financing a college education because they tend to have concurrent financial concerns (Benshoff, 1993). Cooke et al. (2004) found that those students who had financial concerns “possessed higher scores on measures of feeling tense, anxious or nervous, difficulty getting to sleep, and feeling criticized by other people” (p. 63).

Developmentally, the needs and concerns of nontraditional students differ significantly from traditional students. The transition from young to middle adulthood involves navigating a shift from identity and relationship formation to the actualization of family and occupational goals (Erikson, 1980). Birchak (1992) compared sources of stress of nontraditional and traditional-aged students at a small university and found that nontraditional students experienced more strain than traditional students related to hours worked, insufficient time for schoolwork, lack of confidence in academic ability, and marital/family concerns. Traditional students, by comparison, experienced more stress related to social activities and dating relationships.

Traditional Student Stress

The stressors that traditional students encounter once they enter higher education are numerous and in many ways different than those experienced by nontraditional students. Many traditional students who are attending residential institutions must adjust to being away from home for the first time, deal with the pressure of maintaining a high level of academic achievement, and must adjust to a new social environment (Kadison & DiGeronimo, 2004; Ross, Niebling & Heckert, 1999). In a study of undergraduate stress at a mid-sized Midwestern university, the most frequently reported stressors were: change in sleeping habits, change in eating habits, new responsibilities, increased course

workload, roommate conflict, financial difficulties and change in social activities (Ross, Niebling & Heckert, 1999). Other stressors that are unique to traditional students include: pressure from parents, homesickness, missing friends, and maintaining long-distance relationships (Dill & Henley, 1998; Robotham & Julian, 2006; Towbes & Cohen, 1996).

Some students feel enormous pressure to excel academically. This pressure to succeed may be internally driven, but can also be the result of high parental expectations. Achieving high grades in college may be difficult initially because the quality of work and study skills that students developed in high school may be inadequate for the rigors of college (Gohn, Swartz & Donnelly, 2001; Tinto, 1993). Academic demands for college students include grade competition, the need to adapt to new learning environments in terms of increased complexity of material to be learned and greater time and effort required to do so; and the need to constantly self-regulate and to develop better thinking and time management skills (Kariv & Heiman, 2005).

Adjusting socially to college and separating from family and friends at home can exert a great deal of stress on students. This is especially true if a student is leaving behind the comfort and familiarity of his or her support networks. Students often feel they must “fit in” and develop supportive social networks once they get to college. A study of undergraduates at the University of Birmingham by Radcliffe and Lester (2003) discovered that students not only feel the need to meet new people, they feel the need to form meaningful relationships from which they can derive support. From a developmental perspective, students must develop intimate relationships, in the form of

close friendships as well as romantic relationships, in order to avoid isolation (Erikson, 1980). Developing social relationships is seen as a vital part of college adjustment and fulfills an important need for social support. As Gencoz and Ozlale (2004) note in their study on the benefits of social support, “those who feel that there are people on whom they can count when they need help and who also feel that they are being cared for by others, tend to have fewer depression symptoms partly as a function of reduced frequency of experienced life stress” (p. 455).

Social integration is an important facet of healthy and successful college adjustment for traditional students (Tinto, 1987). Illustrating the importance of meaningful outside class interaction, Kuh (1980) found that involvement in out-of-class social activities led to decreased feelings of anxiety. Birchak (1992) found that traditional students at a small university reported experiencing greater stress related to insufficient involvement in extracurricular activities when compared to nontraditional students. Dill and Henley (1998) found that traditional students spent more time with peers and friends and attached greater significance and experienced greater stress related to these social interactions than nontraditional students.

The pressures of developing romantic, intimate relationships may also be very stressful on students as they enter college, especially if such activities conflict with their traditional home values. Students “often feel pressure to be sexually active as a way to find intimacy and a sense of connection in a new environment” (Kadison & DiGeronimo, 2004, p. 18). The goal of making connections at college is often so strong that students may find it difficult to refuse sex for fear it will lead to isolation (Kadison &

Degeronimo, 2004). Romantic relationship problems are often cited by students as major contributors to stress, depression and anxiety.

There are also major developmental tasks which traditional students must navigate in college. The process of development is by nature a stressful one, forged by states of “crisis” and “disequilibrium.” Students must work on developing their identity, achieving emotional independence from family, forming intimate relationships, and developing a sense of purpose via career and vocational goals while in college (Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Erikson, 1980). Tinto (1993) noted that career and identity formation, once crystallized, lead to a greater likelihood of successful completion of college. Bojuwoye (2002) noted that developmental issues which may pose a threat to the individual’s well-being in college include identity, intimacy and separation. The inability to successfully resolve these important developmental tasks can lead to stress, anxiety, depression and isolation.

Misra, et al. (2000) researched the stressors of traditional college students and found that students have different stressors at different points in their college careers. Freshmen in the study experienced stress related to leaving home and adjusting to group living, while sophomores experienced stress related to making decisions about major field of study. Choosing a field of study that is related to a student’s strengths and a viable career path is a major source of stress for many students (Gohn, Swartz & Donnelly, 2001). Seniors in the study had concerns related to obtaining employment and postgraduate training. Freshmen and sophomores in the study experienced higher levels of stress than juniors and seniors and were more reactive to change, conflict, and

frustrations in college. The authors posit that this higher reactivity to stress is the result of freshmen and sophomores not having the problem solving ability, strong social support, or coping skills of older students.

Comparing Perceived Stress Levels: Nontraditional and Traditional Students

While many studies have compared the stressors of nontraditional and traditional students and have examined the frequency, duration, and severity of stressful events for these groups (Bojuwoye, 2002; Dill & Henley, 1998; Lewis, 1995; Murff, 2005), the author could locate few studies which directly compared global levels of perceived stress between these two populations.

Newman (2005) compared perceived levels of stress between traditional and nontraditional students in a sample of community college students and found no statistically significant differences. The author postulated that this may have been due to the fact that many traditional students had extra responsibilities and may therefore have experienced similar stress levels to nontraditional students. The author found that differences in perceived stress only emerged when the presence or absence of children was considered. Newman (2005) questions the practicality of using the age of 25 as a cutoff point when measuring differences in perceived stress between traditional and nontraditional student populations. The author concluded that looking at the individual's number of responsibilities and whether or not they have children at home may be a better means of differentiating stress levels in this population. Pierceall and Keim (2007) similarly found no statistically significant differences in stress levels between traditional

and nontraditional community college students, but they offered no explanation for their findings.

Other studies, while not directly comparing perceived stress between traditional and nontraditional college students, compare perceived stress levels by age. In research conducted by Cohen and Williamson (1988), perceived stress was found to decrease with age. Hamarat et al. (2001) studied perceived stress and coping resources in young, middle, and older adults. The authors found that younger adults (ages 18-40) had the highest levels of perceived stress, with middle adults (ages 41-65) and older adults (65 and older) reporting significantly lower levels of stress. Middle and older adults also reported higher levels of coping resource effectiveness and higher life satisfaction than their younger counterparts. These findings suggest that with life experience comes more effective utilization of available coping resources, leading to better overall management of stress.

Institutional Support Services

Student services are an important avenue of institutional support for students in higher education. Effective and accessible community college support services have been linked to reduced work/student role-conflicts and increased student retention. (Coll, 1995; Hammer, Grigsby & Woods, 1998). In a study of nontraditional community college students who persisted, it was found that they used the career services and the financial aid office more often than those who did not persist (Calloway, 1990). Stolar (1991) researched nontraditional community college students who did not persist and found that 95% of these students had knowledge of support services, yet a majority did

not use them. These same students reported being least satisfied with job placement, financial aid, student activities, and tutoring services, yet 71% did not use the financial aid or job placement services, and 63%-64% of students did not utilize student activities or tutoring.

When nontraditional students were asked to identify services the community college could provide to help them persist, they identified childcare; expanded availability of counselors and academic advisors; more career oriented programs; educational workshops on how to manage time and stress; more flexible course offerings; and more financial aid (Nitzke & Wacker, 2001; Stolar, 1991; Zhai & Monzon, 2001). Unfortunately, as Iskyan (1993) discovered, many colleges and universities do not provide counseling services for non-traditional students, academic advisors are often not available during evening hours or weekends, and child care is usually not provided. There is evidence, however, that even when many of these support services are available, students do not utilize them fully (Stolar, 1991).

Knowledge and Utilization of Stress Support Services

According to Robotham and Julian (2006), students are not necessarily adept at recognizing that they are experiencing stress. In a longitudinal study by Fiske and Chiriboga (1990), it was discovered that people rarely recognize they are under stress. Not only may students have difficulty recognizing that they are experiencing stress, but they also appear to have difficulty seeking help for stress-related problems, as evidenced in an article by Scott (2000) that found that only 3% of the student body at a major university utilized a course offered to help students cope with stress.

There are several reasons why students may not access stress support resources. If nontraditional students are unaware of support services offered, or are unable to access services by virtue of scheduling conflicts with work, or other role demands, then these services will go underutilized or unutilized. Bojuwoye (2002) reports that there is often a paucity of information on institutional support services offered for students. Such information, if more effectively disseminated, can make a difference according to Gelso and McKenzie (1973), who found that those students who received written and oral information about college support services were more likely to seek services than those who received no intervention.

Clearly, not every student who experiences stress is willing to seek help, even if they have knowledge of services. Attitudes are important in determining help-seeking behavior. If a student has a negative opinion of the quality of services offered by the college, they will be less likely to seek assistance (Paradise & Long, 1991). Some students may not access community college support services because seeking help from others, or admitting one suffers from stress, represents a social or cultural stigma, or is a sign of weakness (Ballenger, 1999; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Narikiyo & Kameoka, 1992). Ballenger (1999) learned that students who have more negative attitudes toward seeking help were actually more likely to need support services.

Birchak (1992) found that students at a small university who were reluctant to seek assistance for stress at the counseling center reported the following reasons: they were receiving outside help, they felt that their problems were not serious enough to ask for help, they believed that the problem took care of itself, they felt they could handle the

stressors on their own, and they were too embarrassed to ask for help. Bosmajian and Mattson (1980) found that those who did not seek help at a university counseling center utilized a greater number of social resources to deal with problems than those who sought assistance at the counseling center.

Stress Management Programs

Community colleges can assist students in managing stress, feeling supported, and discovering coping strategies through educational workshops and presentations. (Bauman et al., 2004). This is an important topic to explore because the American Association of Community Colleges survey lists stress management issues as a priority for classes and presentations in almost 90% of responding colleges (Ottenritter, 2002). The existing literature on stress management programs highlight mainly those programs that exist at four-year schools. Of these programs, a majority have not been assessed for efficacy.

Most stress management programs include similar components with variations only in their delivery (lecture and/or experiential) and messenger (student health services, counseling department, academic department). Common stress reduction components in these programs include learning cognitive restructuring, developing time-management skills and problem-solving techniques, learning the importance of rest and proper nutrition, and practicing relaxation techniques such as meditation and guided imagery (Deckro, et al., 2002; Harter, 2000; Iglesias, et al., 2005; La Civita, 1982; Morad, 1987; Rollant, 1993).

Of the stress management programs that have been evaluated, a vast majority were found to be effective. Morad (1987) assessed the effectiveness of a stress

management program on levels of anxiety in students in an associate's degree nursing program and found that stress management trained students rated significantly lower on state anxiety levels than the control group. A stress management program for undergraduates at the University of Buenos Aires (Iglesias et al., 2005) included stress coping resources and training, deep breathing relaxation, guided imagery techniques, cognitive restructuring, and time management techniques. The results of the program suggest that anger and anxiety levels decreased and students learned new cognitive and behavioral skills to manage stressful situations. In a five-week program offered through the Student Health Services at the University of Pittsburgh, students reported a 40% reduction in stress symptoms after practicing breathing and progressive muscle relaxation techniques. Iskyan (1993) investigated the effects of a three-hour orientation program for nontraditional community college students and found that participants' anxiety levels decreased while their coping efficacy increased. This program, sponsored by the counseling center, disseminated information that helped students identify support systems available at the college. Barrios (1997) found that students who received training in self-efficacy and stress management in a Los Angeles community college experienced improved grades and had higher persistence rates when compared to a group that received learning skills training.

Stress and Persistence

The scholarship on the relationship of stress to persistence has seen mixed results. In a study by Zajacova, Lynch & Espenshade (2005) of nontraditional students at a large four-year urban commuter institution, it was discovered that stress did not have a

negative effect on persistence. This unexpected finding, according to the authors, was likely due to the fact that challenge and threat appraisals of stress were not distinguished and analyzed separately for their effects on persistence. Shields (2001) found that students who persisted at a mid-sized commuter university reported higher levels of stress than those who did not persist. The author postulated that persisters may have viewed stress as more of a challenge than a threat, and therefore used more active forms of coping such as help seeking and social support, whereas nonpersisters may have reacted to stress by simply leaving. It is noteworthy, however, that neither Shields (2001) nor Zajacova et al. (2005) provided empirical evidence for their claims that results were due to differential appraisals of stress.

The only attrition study the researcher could locate that empirically differentiated between challenge and threat appraisals of stress was conducted by Daugherty and Lane (1999). In their study of academic and social predictors of college attrition, the authors found that students were significantly more vulnerable to attrition if they perceived college as less of a positive stress challenge during their first week of school. The generalizability and utility of these findings are highly questionable, however, given the specialized location of the study (a military institute) and the nature of the sample (all-male). Stress perceptions for this group are likely to be quite different from that of other higher education student populations.

In other studies, stress was found to play a somewhat more negative or neutral role in persistence decisions. Sandler's (2001) study of nontraditional students at a four-year college found that participants with lower levels of stress exhibited higher levels of

persistence. Perrine (2001) discovered that while nonpersisters at a midsize university reported higher levels of perceived stress than persisters, the difference failed to achieve statistical significance. McCaffrey (1989) found that the impact of stress on persistence decisions did not achieve statistical significance for nontraditional students enrolled in an external degree program. Part of this result, however, may have been due to the nature of the program which did not require the demands of physical class attendance.

While not the same construct as actual persistence, intent to persist is considered a strong predictor of final persistence decisions (Bean & Metzner, 1985). Studies that have examined the role of perceived stress on intent to persist have also yielded mixed results. Sandler (2002) found higher levels of perceived stress related to greater intent to persist for nontraditional students in a four-year college. Sandler speculated that students may have been experiencing the beneficial form of stress known as “eustress.” Conversely, Chartrand (1992) found an absence of stress to have a significant positive effect on intent to continue for nontraditional students at a large university. Part of the difference between findings in both studies may be attributable to the way perceived stress was measured, with Sandler (2002) assessing stress related specifically to the college domain, while Chartrand (1992) measured stress on a global scale. In not measuring global stress, Sandler may have failed to capture those who were experiencing stress related to factors outside of school.

Coping and Persistence

The ways individuals manage stress have been connected in the literature to college persistence. Bray, Braxton and Sullivan (1999) researched the coping styles of

freshmen and found that coping through denial had negative effects on social integration and intent to re-enroll, while positive reinterpretation and growth exerted a positive effect on social integration and had a positive indirect impact on intent to re-enroll. In several other studies, problem-focused coping has been found to relate to increased persistence or intent to persist (LeSure-Lester, 2004; Perrine, 2001; Shields, 2001). Pritchard and Wilson (2003) found that students with intent to persist in college used more positive coping skills than those who intended to drop out. The authors reasoned that “the ability to deal successfully with the multitude of emotional stresses encountered in college life appeared to be an important factor in student retention” (p.25).

A study of academically at-risk college students by Ryland, Riordan and Brack (1994) yielded no significant differences in coping resources between those who persisted and those who did not. It should be noted, however, that the authors simply took an inventory of coping resources without assessing how competently and to what extent participants actually utilized these resources. This is important because research has shown that individuals do not always use the appropriate coping strategies for a given situation, and that using the wrong strategies can actually increase distress (Abella & Heslin, 1989).

Factors Involved in Nontraditional Student Attrition

According to Zhai and Monzon (2001), persistence issues are different for students in two-year schools than they are for those in four-year institutions. Students at community colleges are 10-18% more likely to drop out of college sometime during their first two years than students at four-year colleges with similar backgrounds, aspirations,

and abilities (Dougherty, 1992). Such external factors as number of hours worked per week, family pressure, and financial exigencies may influence the persistence decisions of nontraditional students (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Napoli & Wortman, 1998). Napoli and Wortman (1998) note, that “in attempting to cope with these added demands, community college students are more likely to experience greater strain, leading to a reduced ability to participate and persist in college” (p. 450).

Tyler (1993) defines nontraditional community college students who are “at-risk” of attrition as those who have been out of school for five or more years, have five or more social roles, and who do not participate in class discussions. Recommendations by Tyler (1993) for retaining these at-risk students include small group and cooperative learning exercises designed to increase academic integration and goal commitment through student participation and involvement. Seven risk factors identified by the National Center for Educational Statistics as being associated with a reduced likelihood of persisting through college and earning a degree are: being independent, attending school part-time, working full-time while enrolled, having dependents, being a single parent, delaying entry into college, and not having a traditional high school diploma (Corrigan, 2003). These risk factors for attrition resemble many of the characteristics associated with nontraditional students.

Windham (1995) investigated the personal and academic factors leading to attrition of community college students and discovered that each unit increase in GPA of first term students decreased their odds of dropping out by almost half. In addition, higher math placement scores, and possession of a high school diploma versus a Graduate

Equivalency Diploma (GED) were associated with reduced probability of dropout. Conversely, taking developmental courses were found to have a substantial negative effect on persistence. What these findings indicate is that academic entry characteristics, namely academic preparation, as well as performance once in college, can powerfully impact persistence.

Financial concerns play a prominent role in nontraditional students' persistence decisions (Nitzke & Wacker, 2001). Due to often concurrent financial responsibilities, nontraditional students may find it difficult to pay for college. Inability to afford college invariably leads to attrition. Adult students are more price sensitive than their traditional-aged student counterparts (Hippensteel, St. John & Starkey, 1996). Research on adult community college students by these authors found increased tuition to have a significant negative influence on within-year persistence. The authors discovered that any sudden and large increase in tuition can substantially affect community college attendance. According to the authors, available financial aid was insufficient to offset the negative effects of tuition on within-year persistence of adult community college students.

Availability of financial aid can play an important role in persistence. Nora et al. (1996) found that students who perceived that they could not continue their education without more financial aid were more likely to drop out. Murdock (1987) discovered that financial aid had a stronger effect on persistence for students in community colleges than those at four-year schools, and that such assistance enabled low-income students to persist at rates more comparable to middle and upper income groups.

Low-income students are at greater risk for dropout than middle and upper income students and are more likely to attend community colleges for the shorter programs and lower costs (Corrigan, 2003; King, 2003). King (2003) found that 40% of low income community college freshmen left college without a degree compared with 25% of middle and upper income freshmen. Low-income students often must work more hours, are more likely to attend school part-time, and are more likely to have a family to support, than middle and upper income students (Corrigan, 2003). According to Corrigan (2003) low income students are more likely to be women, minorities, older, and supporting a family.

For minority students in community colleges, barriers to persistence can be great. Rendon (1995) found that among these barriers to successful college completion are low SES, poor academic preparation, lack of clarity in defining academic goals, self-doubt, fear about being perceived as "stupid" or "lazy," and cultural separation (Rendon, 1995). Institutional barriers identified by Rendon (1995) include mostly white faculty and administration, a Euro-centered curriculum, a campus climate often perceived as racist and/or indifferent to minority student need, rising tuition and registration fees, and encouragement of part-time attendance.

Research by Nora, Kraemer and Itzen (1997) on the persistence patterns of nontraditional Hispanic community college students found that those who did not return to college between the spring and fall semester were unable to do so because they had to seek employment, add additional work hours, or they had to give up because they had "far too many responsibilities at home" (p.20). Interestingly, even those students who

expressed intent to return the following semester were unable to do so as a result of external factors. The authors found that support and encouragement from family, friends, peers, and faculty, as well as satisfaction with faculty and instruction, contributed significantly to students' commitments to their institution and their intent to re-enroll the following year. The authors suggest that community colleges should offer students child care services, counseling and financial support to assist them in persisting.

Nontraditional female students are especially prone to dropping out because they often must contend with the added demands and expectations of family and childcare responsibilities. According to a study by Stolar (1991), the highest dropout rate at a community college was among predominantly white, female nontraditional students who attended school on a part-time basis. Reasons these women listed for leaving college included finances, conflicting job hours, parenthood, and personal reasons. Johnson, Schwartz and Bower (2000) found that with the litany of demands on time and energy that many nontraditional female students face, it is often easier for them to make the choice to leave school than it is for them to forsake other responsibilities, such as family and job. This corresponds with the finding by Chartrand (1990) that when an individual experiences conflicting roles, the most salient role, or the role that the person considers most important, is likely to be satisfied first. Internal barriers to success for many nontraditional female students who return to school include guilt and anxiety about placing their own needs above that of family, and a lack of self-confidence related to academic abilities (Benshoff, 1993).

Since nontraditional community college students tend to have little social integration on campus due to outside commitments (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Miller, Pope & Steinmann, 2005), external networks become all the more important and powerful. In some cases, returning adults may experience limited support and social acceptability for their role as students (Bauman, et al., 2004; Benshoff, 1993). Multiple studies indicate that outside encouragement from family, friends and employers can play a significant positive role in persistence decisions (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Cabrera, Nora & Castaneda, 1993; Chartrand, 1992; Sandler, 2001).

Institutional and Goal Commitment

According to Tinto (1993), “intention” and “commitment” are personal dispositions that students enter college with, and each is central, at the individual level, to departure decisions. Individual intentions regarding participation in higher education and attendance at a specific institution are posited to be important predictors of the likelihood of degree completion. Individual levels of commitment, “whether expressed in the form of motivation, drive, or effort, prove to be centrally related to departure from institutions of higher education” (p. 41). Tinto defines goal commitment as a person’s willingness to work toward attainment of educational and occupational goals. Institutional commitment refers to one’s commitment to graduating from a particular institution. The greater one’s institutional and goal commitments, according to Tinto, the more likely they are to persist in college.

According to Bean and Metzner (1985), post matriculation measures of institutional commitment are closely associated with intent to leave. The authors prefer

to use the variable “intent to leave” over “institutional commitment” in their nontraditional student attrition model because they contend that “intent to leave” is a powerful predictor of dropout and “more accurate than institutional commitment for short-term attrition studies.” Bean and Metzner view goal commitment as a psychological variable that is influenced by environmental variables (finances, family responsibilities, hours of employment and outside encouragement), which in turn influences intent to leave.

Studies of the influence of institutional and goal commitment on persistence have yielded mixed results. Cabrera, Nora and Castaneda (1993) found that institutional commitment had the largest effect on intent to persist, whereas goal commitment had a more modest influence. Bean (1980) similarly discovered that institutional commitment was the most important variable related to attrition for both males and females and that goal commitment had a negligible influence on dropout decisions. Farabaugh-Dorkins (1991) found that lower goal commitment was associated with a higher likelihood of attrition. Allen and Nora (1995) also found that goal commitment had a significant impact on persistence behavior. Pascarella and Chapman (1983) found that goal commitment had a greater impact on persistence in two-year schools than institutional commitment did. Pascarella and Terenzini (1983) found that institutional and goal commitment had a compensatory relationship on persistence, with higher goal commitment compensating for lower institutional commitment and vice-versa.

Tinto's Student Integration Model

Perhaps the most influential and well-researched model of student attrition was developed by Tinto (1975, 1987) in an effort to explain the voluntary departure decisions of college students. Tinto's Student Integration Model focused on how the initial institutional and goal commitments of a student can change, over time, as a result of interactions with the academic and social systems of the institution. If there is a lack of congruency between the student's abilities, motivations, and values and the institution's academic and social characteristics, it can lead to weakened institutional and goal commitments, which in turn can lead to early departure from college. Tinto's model was primarily tested on traditional aged, residential students. The model was found to be less applicable to non-residential, nontraditional students, such as those found in greater numbers at community colleges (Borglum & Kubala, 2000; Nora, 1987; Nora, Attinasi & Matonak, 1990).

Missing from Tinto's original model (1975) is the role of external factors in shaping perceptions, commitments and persistence (Bean, 1985). Compared with traditional students, nontraditional students have different experiences in college, including less interaction with peers and faculty, less interaction through extracurricular activities and use of campus services, and more interaction with the external noncollegiate environment (Bean & Metzner, 1985). Due to the time and energy demands of outside engagements, including work and family responsibilities, there are fewer opportunities for nontraditional students to become socially and academically integrated on community college campuses (Tinto, 1993). Kuh (1980) notes, "older

students have little time for and/or interest in most out-of-class activities” (p. 23). The result of this unique “environmental press” of nontraditional students, is that different factors influence their persistence decisions.

Citing the need to create a theoretical model to guide research on nontraditional student attrition, Bean and Metzner (1985) developed a model of student departure that maximized the importance of environmental factors unique to this population.

Conceptual Model of Nontraditional Undergraduate Student Attrition

The major model of persistence that deals with nontraditional students is Bean and Metzner’s (1985) Conceptual Model of Nontraditional Undergraduate Student Attrition. Unlike Tinto’s Student Integration Model (1975, 1987), which emphasizes the importance of academic and social interaction with the institution, Bean and Metzner’s model emphasizes the significance of external, environmental factors on persistence decisions. Bean and Metzner minimize the role of social integration in departure decisions positing that nontraditional students typically have little time for social involvement on campus. For nontraditional students, events in the classroom have a far more consequential influence on attitudes and behavior than extracurricular activities (Kuh, 1980). Bean and Metzner (1985) acknowledge: “While traditional students attend college for both social and academic reasons, for nontraditional students, academic reasons are paramount.”

Bean and Metzner (1985) note that student attrition is analogous to turnover in work organizations and emphasize the importance of behavioral intentions (intent to stay or leave) as predictors of persistence behavior. Their model describes a set of variables

and outcomes that are posited to influence the dropout decisions of nontraditional students. These variables and outcomes include: Academic Variables (study habits, academic advising, absenteeism, major certainty, and course availability); Background and Defining Variables (age, enrollment status, residence, educational goals, high school performance, ethnicity, and gender); Environmental Variables (finances, hours of employment, outside encouragement, family responsibilities, and opportunity to transfer); Psychological Outcomes (utility, satisfaction, goal commitment, and stress); and Intent to Leave.

Intent to leave is used as a variable in Bean and Metzner's model because, according to the authors, it is a strong predictor of persistence in short term attrition studies. Academic variables in Bean and Metzner's model are expected to have indirect effects on dropout through GPA, psychological outcome variables (particularly satisfaction), and through intent to leave. Background and defining variables are included in the model because they are expected to affect how nontraditional students interact with the institution. Environmental variables are presumed to have direct effects on intent to persist and indirect effects on dropout through the psychological outcomes variables.

According to Bean and Metzner (1985), environmental variables are more significant to nontraditional student persistence than academic variables. The authors assert that if academic and environmental variables are both satisfactory for students, they should remain in school, but if both are poor, they are expected to leave. When, however, academic variables are favorable to persistence, but environmental variables are

poor, the student is expected to leave college because they cannot overcome external factors such as inability to afford school or difficulty making childcare arrangements. Conversely, good environmental support, such as encouragement from family and employers to remain in school, can overcome deficiencies in academic variables such as poor academic advising and major uncertainty. According to the authors, environmental variables also influence psychological outcomes, which in turn influence intent to leave.

The psychological outcomes include utility, satisfaction, goal commitment, and stress. Utility, in the model, refers to the students' perception of the usefulness of their education toward employment and personal development. The greater a student's sense of the utility of their education, the more likely they are to persist. Satisfaction is an indicator of the degree to which a student enjoys being a student and feels stimulated by their college courses. Goal commitment is related to the amount of personal importance an individual attaches to graduating from college. Higher goal commitment has been linked to a greater likelihood of persistence. The stress variable measures the extent to which students believe they experience stress from factors both internal and external to college. Outside stress factors, such as work and family demands, have been linked to nontraditional student attrition. The authors propose that stress should increase intent to leave, while utility, satisfaction, and goal commitment, if favorable, should reduce intent to leave. According to Bean and Metzner (1985), psychological outcomes can even lead to college dropout for students with high GPA's, especially if they perceive low levels of utility, satisfaction, or goal commitment, or if they experience high levels of stress.

Tests of the Conceptual Model of Nontraditional Undergraduate Student Attrition

McCaffrey (1989) tested the applicability of Bean and Metzner's (1985) model with a sample of nontraditional students in an external degree program. McCaffrey found that students who were encouraged by family, friends and employers (environmental variables), were more likely to persist in their studies. Those who felt confident that they would be able to finance their education and who did not experience excessive stress from family or work obligations, had a higher likelihood of persistence. Of those who indicated they would not enroll the following semester, the equivalent percentage did not persist, showing the highly predictive level of the variable "intent to leave."

Findings by McCaffrey (1989) for academic variables such as academic advisement and faculty interaction were not statistically significant. The results of this study uphold the importance of external variables, even over that of academic factors, in Bean and Metzner's model. According to Bean and Metzner (1985), environmental support can compensate for weak academic support, but academic support will not compensate for weak environmental support.

Stahl and Pavel (1992) evaluated Bean and Metzner's model by studying data from community college students at a single comprehensive college in an urban multi-campus district. The findings of the study indicated that external variables did not have a negative influence on persistence or performance in college. Students in the sample performed well academically and stayed in school despite the presence of indicators of potential dropout. The authors found that high indicators of academic interference (a measure similar to Bean and Metzner's environmental variables), were positively

associated with retention and academic achievement. One explanation for this finding may be that a majority of students in the sample were younger, unmarried students without children, which approximates a more traditional-aged student population. Reinforcing this explanation, a separate study by Nora, Cabrera, Hagedorn and Pascarella (1996) found that at least for nontraditional minority students, being married reduced the likelihood of persistence by 83%, while having children reduced the likelihood of persistence by 87%. These stark results may have been due to the added pressures and responsibilities that accompany marriage and childrearing, as well as potentially low family support for college attendance.

Stahl and Pavel (1992) also found the relationship of academic achievement to retention to be negative at the community college examined. Essentially, students who performed well academically transferred to other institutions. Bean and Metzner (1985) note that “opportunity to transfer” is an environmental variable that influences persistence decisions. The authors note that four-year institutions do not have this issue, in that students with high grade point averages are more likely to persist.

Metzner and Bean (1987) tested their model on a population of part-time students at a large commuter university, and found that environmental variables did not directly influence dropout decisions. Additionally, the authors discovered that stress and goal commitment had negligible effects on intent to leave and actual dropout. The most powerful predictors of attrition in this study were participant GPA followed by intent to leave. Intent to leave was best predicted by the psychological variables of utility and satisfaction. The more practical a student believed their education to be (utility), and the

more satisfied they were with their role as a student (satisfaction), the lower their intent to leave. It should be noted that only one-third of the students surveyed were 25 or older.

The authors acknowledge that “the effects of some environmental variables may be significant only for a sample of older nontraditional students as opposed to nontraditional students of any age” (p. 33).

Using Bean and Metzner’s (1985) model, Chartrand (1992) studied a group of older nontraditional students (mean age of 32 years) at a large university. A majority of the students in the study were employed outside of the home (84.7%), and either married (39.9%) or divorced/separated (21.1%). The researcher found that outside encouragement from friends and family was related to an absence of distress and increased intent to persist. Institutional commitment and absence of distress were found to have significant effects on intent to continue. Difficulty financing one’s education was found to increase psychological distress, but it did not play a major direct role in persistence decisions in this study. The author found that academic variables were important in persistence decisions, with students’ degree of certainty about major being most directly predictive of intent continue in school. This corroborates a finding by Leppel (2001) that persistence rates of college students were influenced by magnitude of interest in major field and level of goal commitment. Tinto (1993) acknowledges that while initial indecision about field of study may not lead to attrition, extended periods of unresolved major or career intentions can lead to dropout.

As Metzner and Bean (1987) hypothesized, their model appears to have greater applicability to an older nontraditional student population. While the model falls short in

research of predicting nontraditional student attrition with perfect precision, it does provide an excellent framework for understanding the unique collegiate and noncollegiate challenges that can lead to attrition in this population.

Summary

This chapter sought to provide a background for understanding the attrition factors, stress issues, and support needs of nontraditional students. Illuminating the mechanisms of stress and coping, along with the factors that may be involved in nontraditional student attrition provide a rich theoretical backdrop for this study. Insights gained from the review of literature will be utilized in answering the research questions and it is hoped that through the process of answering the research questions, new insights will emerge that will help inform and make contributions to the literature. As the literature review reveals, there are many avenues that are ripe for inquiry, including the relationship of stress to persistence in the study population, the relative levels of stress that traditional and nontraditional students experience, the role of individual appraisals of stress in persistence decisions, and the possible differential support needs of nontraditional and traditional community college students. The results of these areas of inquiry are reported and discussed in chapters 4 and 5 of this study. The next chapter (Chapter 3) presents the methodology and data analysis techniques that were utilized in this research.

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study explored the support needs as well as the role of stress in the persistence intentions of nontraditional community college students. The research questions focused on differences between students with high and low intentions to leave college, as well as traditional and nontraditional students on the basis of stress levels, perceptions and management of stress, and institutional support needs.

A Mixed Methods Approach

According to Rossman and Wilson (1985), mixed methods approaches strengthen the credibility of findings through three main functions: 1) corroboration of findings through convergence of quantitative and qualitative data, 2) elaboration that provides richness and detail for both quantitative and qualitative results, and 3) initiation of further exploration and new interpretations of each data type.

The researcher utilized a mixed methods approach where survey (quantitative) and interview (qualitative) data were collected sequentially (Creswell, 2003; Creswell, Plano & Clark, 2007). Surveys were collected first with the purpose of identifying an interview sample of high stress nontraditional students with high intent to leave college and a high stress sample with low intent to leave. Creswell and Clark (2007) label this mixed-methods approach the “participant selection model” of explanatory design, and recommend it be used in sequential studies where “a researcher needs quantitative information to identify and purposefully select participants for a follow-up, in-depth,

qualitative study” (p. 74). Although this is a mixed methods study, the researcher relied more heavily on the qualitative (interview) findings since understanding why events were perceived as stressful and what role stress may have played in persistence intentions required an in-depth exploration of participant experiences which could be best achieved through qualitative methods (Marshall & Rossman, 1999).

In addition to identifying the interview population, and in accordance with Rossman and Wilson’s (1985) functions of mixed methods approaches, data from surveys were also utilized to “corroborate” and provide “richness and detail” for interview data by comparing the stress levels of students with high and low intent to leave, testing the value of background variables in predicting perceived stress and intent to leave, identifying reasons why students plan to leave college or have left college in the past, and testing for differences in perceived stress levels between traditional and nontraditional students. In this way, surveys were also used in what Greene et al. (1989) describe as a “complimentarity” design, where quantitative and qualitative methods are combined “to measure overlapping but also different facets of a phenomenon, yielding an enriched, elaborated understanding of that phenomenon” (p. 258).

Survey Instruments

Surveys consisted of three short paper and pencil instruments designed to gather demographic information, assess perceived stress levels, and determine persistence intentions of the sample. The first survey is a demographic questionnaire that helped distinguish traditional from nontraditional student populations. The second survey, the Perceived Stress Scale (Cohen, Kamarck & Mermelstein, 1983), measured the degree to

which situations in one's life were appraised as stressful. The third survey, the Intention to Leave Questionnaire (DeLuca, 2004) assesses whether or not a student expects to leave college.

The Demographic Questionnaire (APPENDIX B) was developed by the researcher to collect information on background variables of interest in this study (Bean & Metzner, 1985), and to distinguish between traditional and nontraditional student populations on the basis of age.

The Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) was originally developed by Cohen, Kamarck and Mermelstein (1983) to measure the degree to which respondents find their lives unpredictable, uncontrollable, and overloaded – factors which have been found to be salient components of the experience of stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The PSS was designed for use in community samples with at least a junior high school education. According to the authors, the items are easy to understand, and the response alternatives are simple to grasp. The PSS does not tie appraisal to particular situations, rather it is sensitive to the nonoccurrence of events as well as ongoing life circumstances. It is an economical scale that can be administered in only a few minutes and is easy to score. What makes this measure unique and useful is that it does not look at stress responses to single, or even multiple events, but rather it looks at overall perceptions and appraisals of situations.

The PSS has both high reliability and construct validity. The scale has internal reliability of coefficient alpha = .78 (Cohen, Kamarck & Mermelstein, 1983). The authors determined that the PSS provides better predictive validity than life-event scales

of psychological symptoms, physical symptoms, and utilization of health services. The PSS was found to have the greatest health-related predictive validity within a one to two-month period (Cohen, Kamarck & Mermelstein, 1983). Higher PSS scores have been associated with lower life satisfaction, greater vulnerability to stressful life-event elicited depressive symptoms, greater difficulty quitting smoking, and failure among diabetics to control blood sugar levels. The PSS is not a diagnostic instrument with specific cut-off points for “high,” “medium,” or “low” stress. Rather, it is an instrument designed to compare perceived stress levels within a given population sample. PSS scores are derived by reversing the scores on the four positive items (4, 5, 7 and 8) and then summing across all 10 items (APPENDIX C).

The Intention to Leave Questionnaire was formulated by DeLuca (2004) and is modified by permission of the author in an effort to measure the intent of nontraditional students to leave college and to ascertain their reasons for leaving or having left college in the past. Intent to leave is a measure that is strongly associated with actual dropout behavior (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Cabrera, Nora & Castaneda, 1993; Farabaugh-Dorkins, 1991). The survey is four questions long, with one multiple choice and three yes/no questions (APPENDIX D). The first question inquires as to whether the student has considered leaving college during the past academic year. The survey captures intent to leave along a continuum, from never having thought about leaving college, to thinking about leaving all of the time. Scoring of the Intention to Leave Questionnaire is based on translating each of the multiple choice options (a – d) into numerical form (a = 1; b = 2; c

= 3; d = 4). Scores can range from 1 - 4 points with scores of 1 or 2 indicating low intent to leave college, and scores of 3 or 4 indicating high intent to leave college.

The subsequent questions on the Intention to Leave Questionnaire (DeLuca, 2004) are devised to gather information on students' reasons for leaving college. These questions inquire as to whether a student plans to complete the current semester or enroll next semester. If a student answers "yes" to either of these questions, they are then asked to identify, from a response set, why they intend to leave college. A question about past departure was added by the researcher to gain a fuller sense of the continuum of departure behavior of the study population. Also, based on past research of reasons why nontraditional students leave college (Birchak, 1992; Benschhoff, 1993; Durodoye, Harris & Bolden, 2000; Haggan, 2000), the researcher added "work-related reasons" and "family problems" to the original response set of all questions, and added "transferring to another college or campus" and "graduation" to the response set of reasons for not enrolling the following semester.

Interview Instrument

Berg (2004) describes an interview as "a conversation between two people conversing on one person's perceptions on the events of daily life" (p. 99). One of major advantages of doing interviews is that the "information secured is likely to be more correct than that secured by other techniques, because the interviewer can clear up seemingly inaccurate answers by explaining the questions to the informant" (Miller, 1991, p. 160). Semi-structured interviews will be utilized in this study. Semi-structured interviews typically have a set of predetermined questions and topics that are asked in

systematic order. However, unlike more structured interview formats, the interviewer is allowed the freedom to digress and may go beyond the prepared questions to probe for information that comes up naturally during the course of the interview (Berg, 2004). In addition, questions may be re-ordered and their wording is flexible. Inherent in this methodology is a flexibility that allows the researcher to adjust and reformulate problems based on the process of data collection and analysis (Rossman & Rallis, 2003).

Based on Patton's (2002) typology of interviewer questions, an initial protocol was developed that asked about the behaviors, experiences, feelings/emotions, knowledge, and opinions/values of students related to stress and persistence intentions. These initial questions were developed based on the information sought in the study's research questions, and were designed to expand and elaborate on questions asked in surveys. As suggested by Berg (2004), the interview schedule "should be critically examined by people familiar with the study's subject matter – technical experts, other researchers, or persons fitting the type to be studied" (p.90). With the assistance of the researcher's dissertation chair as well as an acquaintance who is a nontraditional community college student, questions were eliminated, modified and added. As a means of "pre-testing" the interview questions, two initial practice interviews were conducted. This technique is recommended by several researchers of interview design as a means of helping insure the efficacy of the interview, and to determine whether the type of information being sought will actually be obtained (Berg, 2004; Patton, 2002; Wengraf, 2001). The two practice interviews yielded additional refinements and the addition of

two questions related to feelings experienced when stressed, and overall sense of coping ability.

The final semi-structured interview protocol consisted of ten open-ended questions with follow-ups and probes designed to elicit the maximum amount of information and to help clarify and elaborate the answers of participants (APPENDIX E). The interview inquired about stressors, perceptions and feelings related to stress, and methods used to cope with stress. Participants were also asked to discuss their knowledge of stress support services offered by the community college and about their utilization of such services. Since this was an exploratory study and the researcher wanted to be open to anything the participants had to say, the final question asked: “Is there anything else you would like to add?” This question afforded participants the opportunity to conclude the interview by contributing statements that they felt were important to the discourse that may have been left out by the researcher.

Study Setting

In order to study the stress experiences of nontraditional community college students ages 25 and older, a single campus of a multi-campus urban community college in the Southwest was selected for this study. The “Downtown” campus of Sonora Community College (SCC) was selected due to its diverse student population, which consists of 41% ethnic minorities and 53% women. The average age of students at the Downtown campus of SCC is 27 and the median age is 23. Both the average and median ages of students at this campus is higher than that of the other campuses in the district. This is an important distinction since this study seeks to gather information from older,

nontraditional-aged students. As of Fall 2006, the Downtown Campus of SCC enrolled a total 9,023 students of which 6114 (68%) were enrolled part-time. (Sonora Community College Planning and Institutional Research, Fall 2006.)

The Downtown Campus of SCC was selected as the location to conduct this study due to its older demographic and the fact that it is the only campus, in a multi-campus system, which offers a stress management class. In addition to this unique class offering, SCC also offers a series of “Student Success” (STU) classes which help students develop time management and study skills. Classes are taught by SCC counseling staff who are also available to students for individual appointments to discuss personal issues. Both academic advising and personal counseling are done out of SCC’s Advising and Counseling Center. Advisors and counselors at SCC serve primarily discrete roles, with advisors serving a function strictly related to academic advising (major and class selection, degree progress, transfer help), while counselors have a more expansive role to provide “assistance in college procedures, general study skills and personal concerns and crises.” (Sonora Community College website). Since this study also seeks to ascertain the knowledge and utilization that students have of stress management services offered by the community college, it will be of value to determine participant awareness and utilization of these offerings.

Selecting Participants for Inclusion in the Study

Students enrolled in Writing 102 in the Spring 2007 semester were sampled for this study. Writing 102 is a composition class typically taken by degree or certificate seeking students in their second semester of college or higher. The rationale for

recruiting participants in Writing 102 was that these classes have a diverse, multidisciplinary sample of credit seeking individuals who have been in college for at least one semester and who are more likely to have at least some experience with the stress of balancing multiple life roles. As a second semester group of students, they are also more likely to have knowledge of, or have utilized, the stress support resources of the community college. Only those participants who were at least 18 years of age and enrolled at SCC at least part-time were considered for inclusion in this study. As incentive to participate, all individuals who completed surveys and provided their contact information were entered into a raffle to win an Apple iPod music player. The raffle drawing occurred at the conclusion of survey data collection.

Survey participants were asked for consent on the incentive announcement (APPENDIX F) if they were willing to be recruited for an in-depth interview about their stress experiences. Those who were willing to be interviewed, and met the study criteria (25 or older, experiencing high levels of stress as measured by the PSS, and having high or low intent to leave college based on the Intention to Leave Questionnaire) were contacted for interviews. For the interview sample, the researcher attempted to recruit 12 high-intent to leave students, and 12 low-intent to leave students for purposes of comparing and contrasting these groups to gain a more complete understanding of the role of stress in persistence intentions.

Data Collection

Approval for the study was granted by the Human Subjects Committee of the University of Arizona in late February 2007 and from Sonora Institutional Review on

April 10, 2007. As per SCC's protocol for research projects, final permission to conduct the study needed to be obtained from site administrators at the Downtown Campus. The Division Dean of Science and Communication Arts and the Dean of Instruction at SCC granted permission to access their campus immediately following approval from Sonora Institutional Review. Data collection commenced on April 11, 2007.

Collecting the Survey Data

Surveys were collected over a four week period between April and May of 2007. Due to unanticipated low enrollment encountered in Writing 102 classes, survey collection was expanded to include several sections of Writing 101 classes. This adjustment was made with the agreement of the researcher's committee and the approval of both the University of Arizona Human Subjects Committee and Sonora Institutional Review. Collecting surveys from Writing 101 students was an appropriate remedy for this limitation since Writing 101 classes also enroll second-semester, nontraditional degree-seeking students. To distinguish first from second semester Writing 101 students, a question was added to the demographic survey for Writing 101 participants which inquired: "Not counting this semester, how many semesters of college have you completed?" In this regard, the integrity of the target survey population was kept intact.

Survey data were collected from 244 students in Writing 101 and 102 classes. The process of survey administration took an average of 15 minutes and was conducted at either the beginning or end of the class period, depending on the preference of faculty. Before distributing the survey packet, the researcher explained the purpose of the research, the voluntary nature of participation, and guaranteed confidentiality of

participant data and identifying information. Included in the survey packet was an informed consent document and a brightly colored incentive announcement that gave participants the opportunity to provide contact information if they wished to be entered into a raffle for an Apple iPod music player. Participants were also asked to indicate whether or not they were willing to be contacted for a follow-up interview. At the conclusion of survey collection in late May 2007, a raffle for the Apple iPod occurred and the item was sent to the winner.

The low enrollment encountered in Writing 102 may have been due, in part, to having commenced data collection immediately following the college's final class withdrawal deadline. The timing of data collection was unavoidable due to a protracted IRB approval process which involved first obtaining permission from the University of Arizona, then from Sonora Institutional Review and finally from site administrators at the Downtown Campus. Since Sonora Institutional Review required that these approvals occur in sequential order, as opposed to concurrently, the whole process of approval delayed the start of data collection by approximately two months.

Collecting the Interview Data

Some difficulty was encountered in obtaining an adequate interview sample of nontraditional students who met study criteria. This result may have been due to the lower overall numbers of nontraditional students encountered (34.4 %), relative to the total size of the population from which surveys were collected. Since it was problematic to obtain an adequate sample of interview participants from the nontraditional survey group alone, and since traditional students represent a population of interest for purposes

of comparison, it was determined, in conjunction with the researcher's committee, that traditional-aged students (ages 18 -24) would be interviewed as well. Interview protocol revisions were approved by the researcher's committee and by the Institutional Review Boards of both the University of Arizona and Sonora Community College. All interview participants were told of the purpose and risks of the study, were given the opportunity to ask questions, and provided informed consent before interviews began. All selected interview participants who completed the study received a \$15 gift certificate as compensation for their time.

Taking the advice of Miller (1991), who recommends that interviews be kept within a 45-minute time span to insure participant interest and focus, interviews averaged approximately 45-50 minutes and were conducted on-site in a private conference room at the downtown campus of SCC. Interviews were audio taped to insure accuracy, and later transcribed. As recommended by Berg (2004), the researcher first made "small talk" with each participant. The purpose of doing so is to "set the subject at ease and establish a warm and comfortable rapport" (p. 110-111). After conducting each interview, the researcher documented immediate thoughts, impressions and questions for later exploration. The value of this exercise was to preserve an initial, raw analysis and interpretation of the data. According to Patton (2002), "Recording and tracking insights that occur during data collection are part of fieldwork and the beginning of qualitative analysis" (p.436). This process helped the researcher begin to formulate a list of themes, patterns and observations from the data.

Data Analysis

Surveys

All survey data were coded numerically and entered into a Microsoft Excel database where it was organized and prepared for transfer into SPSS 15 for analysis. Descriptive statistics were calculated for the demographic survey and the Intention to Leave Questionnaire (DeLuca, 2004). Percentages, standard deviations, response frequencies and means were calculated and are presented in the next chapter. Raw scores from the Perceived Stress Scale (Cohen, Kamarck & Mermelstein, 1983) were converted into z-scores to determine a cutoff point for high perceived stress of both traditional and nontraditional students. Z-scores are a standard score frequently used to transform psychometric data (Kirk, 1999). In this study, z-scores were used to determine the highest approximately 16% of perceived stress scores. According to Kirk (1999), z scores “should be based on the same or equivalent reference group” (p. 284). Consequently, separate z-scores were calculated for both traditional and nontraditional students.

Independent t-tests were performed to compare the perceived stress levels of: 1) nontraditional and traditional students, and 2) high intent and low intent to leave students. Effect sizes were calculated to determine the magnitude of statistically significant results. Standard multiple regressions were performed to determine if any of the background variables contributed to the prediction of either perceived stress levels or intent to leave college. To determine the level of internal consistency of items on the Perceived Stress Scale for this sample, coefficient alpha was calculated.

Where appropriate, survey answers were combined into more economical categories for purposes of analysis. For example, those who separately identified themselves on the demographic survey as ages “25-29”, “30-39”, “40-49” or “50 years or older” were categorized together as “nontraditional students.” Aggregating the data of all students ages 25-years and older boosted the power of analysis by increasing cell sizes. In a similar vein, those who reported that they “never” thought about leaving college, or that they thought about leaving “once or twice,” were combined into a “low intent” to leave category, while those who thought about leaving college “several times” or “all of the time,” were coded into a “high intent” category for purposes of analysis and comparison.

Interviews

Interviews were transcribed verbatim within a short time after being completed. Analysis of the interview data was a constant and ongoing process from the point of data collection through to multiple examinations of the final transcripts. Since this study is guided by existing conceptual frameworks, while also seeking to develop new theory related to stress and student departure in the community college, the researcher utilized the adaptive theory approach (Layder, 1998) in analyzing the interview data. According to Layder (1998), “The adaptive theory approach has an equal emphasis on the discovery of theory and the employment of prior or extant theory which stand in relation of reciprocal influence to each other” (p. 20).

In the first stage of analysis, the researcher methodically read and re-read through each transcript, imposing some categories from the theoretical frameworks of the study

while developing other categories from themes that emerged from the participants. During this stage of analysis known as “open coding” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), or “provisional coding” (Layder, 1998), conceptually related themes were coded into initial categories in an effort to distill the data into meaningful and parsimonious units of analysis. Comparisons were made between categories to help further develop and organize the data. According to Strauss and Corbin (1998), “closely examining data for both differences and similarities allows for fine discrimination and differentiation among categories” (p. 102). Categories were recorded in the margins of the interview transcripts, and then compiled as the basis for the next level of analysis.

Consistent with Welsh’s (2002) advice to combine the best features of electronic and manual methods of qualitative data analysis, and following a procedure outlined by Bryman (2001), themes from the manual open coding process were entered as “nodes” into NVivo 7 (QSR International, 2006), a qualitative data analysis program. These “nodes” in NVivo 7 (QSR International, 2006) can be thought of as virtual category “file folders” into which the interview data was sorted for purposes of the next stage of analysis, known as “axial coding” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). According to Neuman (1991), during axial coding, the researcher “looks for categories and concepts that cluster together” (p. 423). At this stage, relationships and patterns were examined in the data which led to the creation of new categories, the merging or elimination of old categories, and the development of subcategories. NVivo 7 (QSR International, 2006) allowed all categories under which a segment of data was coded to be viewed at once, which helped

the researcher make connections and examine relationships within and between categories.

Selective coding was the final step of the process of interview data analysis and it involved looking selectively for core themes and concepts and making comparisons between them (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). NVivo7 (QSR International, 2006) allowed for attributes based on age and intent to leave to be assigned to each case in the study, which facilitated the efficient comparison of groups on the major themes. A primary reason this program was selected was due to its ability to facilitate subgroup comparisons such as those contained in this study. Onwuegbuzie and Leech (2007) note that qualitative programs such as NVivo 7 “make it easier for researchers to compare subgroups electronically than by hand” (p. 244). Since this study sought to understand similarities and differences between high and low intent to leave students, as well as between traditional and nontraditional students, core themes were compared and contrasted along these dimensions. The results of this analysis served as the basis for the development of theory that was both rooted in the extant literature and informed by major themes and ideas that emerged from the data (Layder, 1998).

Positionality

Since the qualitative emphasis in this mixed methods study involved the subjective interpretation of the researcher, it is important that the reader is aware of the background and potential biases of the author. According to Patton (2002) it is important that the researcher take ownership of the interpretation of qualitative data as it is a subjective process influenced by his or her “intelligence, experience, and judgment” (p.

467). The researcher has a background in student services as an academic advisor at a four-year college, and has social service experience working as a crisis center clinician. The author has witnessed both the academic and personal stressors of students in the college setting, as well as the extreme distress of individuals of all ages and backgrounds at the crisis center. The observations the researcher has made in his professional life about the causes and effects of stress will help inform this study, but the researcher will take care to remain open to learning from the unique phenomenological experiences of participants. Since the researcher has experience working with both traditional and nontraditional students, this will be of benefit in building rapport with study participants.

It is the researcher's conviction, coming from both a student affairs and social services background, that it is the responsibility of colleges to work with students holistically to help insure their success both academically and in life. This includes the provision of convenient, accessible support services for those students "in-need." The researcher enters the community college as an outsider, which could be advantageous in that it should allow participants to express themselves more freely about their experiences and frustrations at SCC. As a student who is attempting to balance multiple life demands, the author has some sense of the stress that can be experienced under such conditions. Such insight ideally will help the researcher gain a more comprehensive understanding of participant views.

Summary

The researcher undertook this exploratory study in the hopes of gaining a greater understanding of the stress experiences of both traditional and nontraditional students in

the community college setting, and to gain insight into how such experiences relate to departure decisions. By utilizing a mixed methods approach of collecting surveys and semi-structured interviews from this population, it was hoped that a more elaborate understanding of the differences and similarities between high and low intent to leave and traditional and nontraditional students, would be gained. A number of qualitative and quantitative data analysis techniques were employed with the goal of gaining a textured understanding of the experiences of community college students.

While the proposed interview population had to be modified due to conditions encountered in the field, these adjustments created an opportunity for an even more comprehensive level of analysis of community college students as a whole, by allowing for an additional comparison group (traditional students). Since this comparison group already existed in the survey data, the modification of interview population proved to have little impact on the overall research design and, in fact, served to further corroborate survey findings related to traditional and nontraditional-aged students. The findings of this study are presented in the next chapter.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Introduction

In the current chapter, the findings of this sequential mixed-methods study will be presented. Survey results will be presented first, followed by interview results. This follows the research design of the study and the order in which the data was collected. Creswell and Clark (2007) note that the results of multi-phase studies are “typically reported in the sequence of the design” (p. 162). The chapter is organized into four sections that embed major themes that emerged from the data related to the research questions. All four sections will explore differences and similarities in the way high and low-intent to leave students, as well as traditional and nontraditional students, experience and manage stress - and the role such factors play in persistence intentions. In Part One, the study population for surveys and interviews will be described, and survey results will be presented. In Part Two, interview findings will reveal the major sources of stress for students, the positive and negative impact of these stressors, and the manner in which students perceive and manage stress. In Part Three, interview findings related to student knowledge and utilization of stress support services offered by the community college will be discussed. In Part Four, reasons students articulated in interviews for having intentions to leave or stay enrolled in college will be revealed after having gained context from the findings of student stress experiences in Parts One, Two and Three. Since the

goal of this chapter is to gain a truly in-depth understanding of the stress experiences of community college students, direct quotes from students are included.

Part I – Population Defined and Survey Results

Survey Population

Of the 245 surveys distributed to Writing 101 and 102 students at SCC, 244 (99.59%) were returned, with 1 survey being incomplete and not usable beyond the demographic data and PSS score. A total of 74 (30.3%) surveys were collected from Writing 101 students and 170 surveys (69.7%) were collected from Writing 102 students. Of the 74 Writing 101 students, 18 (24.3%) were first semester students, while 56 (75.7%) were in their second semester of college or later. Of the 244 surveys collected, 84 (34.4%) were nontraditional students (ages 25 and older) and 160 (65.6%) were of traditional age (ages 18-24). The gender of survey participants was fairly evenly distributed, with 49.2% female, 41% male, and 9.8% unknown. As is fairly typical of the community college student population, a majority of the survey participants (59%) attended school part-time (Horn & Nevill, 2006). Most students (57.8%) also worked 30 hours or more a week. Balancing out these work and school demands, 20.1% of students had children, 16.8% were married and 27.5% were the sole financial providers for either themselves or their families. The survey sample as a whole appeared to have high educational aspirations with almost 89% aspiring to obtain an Associate's degree or higher. A detailed break-down of the demographic characteristics of the survey sample is contained in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1
Demographic and Background Characteristics of Survey Sample

Characteristic	<i>n</i>	%
<i>Age</i>		
18-24	160	65.6
25-29	37	15.1
30-39	33	13.5
40-49	7	2.9
50+	7	2.9
<i>Class</i>		
Writing 101	74	30.3
Writing 102	170	69.7
<i>Gender</i>		
Male	120	49.2
Female	100	41.0
Unknown	24	9.8
<i>Credits Enrolled</i>		
0-5	48	19.7
6-11	96	39.3
12 or more	100	41.0
<i>Marital Status</i>		
Single, never married	187	76.6
Married	41	16.8
Divorced	11	4.5
Separated	3	1.2
Widowed	1	.4
Unknown	1	.4
<i>Children</i>		
Yes	49	20.1
No	195	79.9
<i>Hours Worked</i>		
Not working	45	18.4
< 20	19	7.8
20-29	39	16.0
30-39	60	24.6
40 or more	81	33.2

(Table 4.1 continues)

(Table 4.1 continued)

Characteristic	<i>n</i>	%
<i>Educational Aspirations</i>		
No plan	18	7.4
Certificate	7	2.9
Associates	24	9.8
Bachelors	91	37.3
Masters and above	104	42.6
<i>Only Financial Provider?</i>		
Yes	67	27.5
No	103	42.2
Not applicable	72	29.5
Not reported	2	.8

Note. N = 244

As expected, nontraditional students had more family responsibilities than traditional aged students (see Table 4.2). Almost half of nontraditional students had children (47.6%) and over a third (35.7%) were married, compared to only 5.6% of traditional students who had children and 6.9% that were married. When it came to work and school demands, however, the responsibilities of traditional and nontraditional students were somewhat more similar (see Table 4.3). While a greater percentage of nontraditional students (64.3%) worked 30 hours or more a week when compared to traditional students (54.4%), it is important to note that the majority of both groups had busy work schedules. Perhaps due to the addition of family responsibilities, a greater percentage of nontraditional students attended school part-time (66.7%) compared to traditional students (55%), but the proportions still represent a majority of each group. This comparable pattern of balancing school and work for both traditional and nontraditional aged community college students is supported in findings by Newman (2005).

Table 4.2
Traditional and Nontraditional Marital and Family Status

<i>Marital Status</i>	<i>Traditional</i>	<i>Nontraditional</i>
Single	91.8% (147)	48.8% (41)
Married	6.9% (11)	35.7% (30)
Divorced	1.3% (2)	10.7% (9)
Separated	-	3.6% (3)
Widowed	-	1.2% (1)
<i>Family Status</i>	<i>Traditional</i>	<i>Nontraditional</i>
Children	5.6% (9)	47.6% (40)
No Children	94.4% (151)	52.4% (44)

Note. Traditional (n = 160); Nontraditional (n = 84)

Table 4.3
Traditional and Nontraditional Employment and School Enrollment Status

<i>Work Status</i>	<i>Traditional</i>	<i>Nontraditional</i>
40 or more hours	26.9% (43)	45.2% (38)
30 – 39 hours	27.5% (44)	19.1% (16)
20 – 29 hours	20.0% (32)	8.3% (7)
< 20 hours	9.4% (15)	4.8% (4)
Not working	16.2% (26)	22.6% (19)
<i>Enrollment Status</i>	<i>Traditional</i>	<i>Nontraditional</i>
0 – 5 credits	20% (32)	19.1% (16)
6 – 11 credits	35% (56)	47.6% (40)
12 or more	45% (72)	33.3% (28)

Note. Traditional (n = 160); Nontraditional (n = 84)

Interview Population

A total of twenty-two interviews were conducted over a three-week period in May of 2007. Eighteen students fit study criteria of having high perceived stress (converted z-scores of +1 or higher) and high intent to leave. Of these high stress/high intent to leave students, 15 indicated they were willing to be contacted for a follow-up interview, from which a group of 10 interviewees was obtained. Four of these participants were traditional-aged and six were nontraditional aged students. While the researcher had

hoped to interview a greater number of high stress/high intent to leave students, it proved difficult to schedule, and in some instances reschedule, with individuals from this group. A total of 36 students met study criteria of high perceived stress and low intent to leave. From this group, 12 interviews were conducted with an equal number of traditional (6) and nontraditional (6) students.

A total of 20 (91%) of the interview participants were female, and 2 (9%) were male. This imbalance in the interview population may be reflective of the survey findings of significant differences in stress levels between male and female students which will be discussed in greater detail in the section on survey results. The ethnic composition of the interview sample was 59% White; 23% Hispanic; 4.5% Black; 9% Mixed Ethnicity; and 4.5% Native American (see Table 4.4).

Table 4.4
Demographic Characteristics of Interview Sample

Characteristic	High Intent	Low Intent
<i>Age</i>		
Traditional	60.0% (6)	50.0% (6)
Nontraditional	40.0% (4)	50.0% (6)
Total	100.0%(10)	100.0%(12)
<i>Gender</i>		
Male	10.0% (1)	8.3% (1)
Female	90.0% (9)	91.7% (11)
Total	100.0% (10)	100.0% (12)
<i>Ethnicity</i>		
White	60.0% (6)	58.4% (7)
Black	-	8.3% (1)
Hispanic	20.0% (2)	25.0% (3)
Native American	10.0% (1)	-
Mixed Ethnicity	10.0% (1)	8.3% (1)
Total	100.0% (10)	100.0% (12)

Note. N = 22

Survey Results

The Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) was shown to have a high level of internal consistency ($\alpha = .89$) for the sample assessed. Descriptive statistics for the PSS and the Intention to Leave Questionnaire can be found in Table 4.5. Survey results did not find statistically significant differences in stress levels between Writing 101 and 102 students. The survey findings also did not reveal statistically significant differences between the perceived stress scores of traditional and nontraditional students (see Table 4.6). This conflicts with some of the research that has found stress to decrease with age (Cohen & Williamson, 1988; Hamarat et al., 2001), but affirms findings by Newman (2005) and Piercall and Keim (2007) of nonsignificant differences between the stress levels of traditional and nontraditional community college students.

Bean and Metzner (1985) posit that background and environmental variables such as age, gender, enrollment status, hours worked, and family responsibilities can impact persistence decisions. The multiple regression analysis used to test the role of these variables in predicting stress and intent to leave revealed that gender was the only background variable in the model that significantly contributed to the prediction of perceived stress levels (see Table 4.7), and that no background or environmental variables predicted intent to leave (see Table 4.8). Only about 11% of the variance in perceived stress was accounted for by the background and environmental variables entered into the regression model. To further explore the relationship of gender to perceived stress, a t-test was conducted to compare mean PSS scores of males and females. The t-test revealed that female students reported significantly higher levels of

perceived stress than male students at the $p < .001$ significance level (see Table 4.6).

This finding is consistent with much of the literature that has shown that female students in both two and four-year schools experience higher levels of stress than male students (Abouserie, 1994; Bojuwoye, 2002; Misra et al., 2000; Pierceall & Keim, 2007).

Twenty-three students (9.4%) reported having high intent to leave, while 220 (90.2%) reported having low intent to leave with 1 (.4%) not reporting. The high intent to leave group in the survey sample experienced significantly higher levels of perceived stress than low intent to leave students at the $p < .001$ level of significance (see Table 4.6) suggesting that stress may have played a role in their persistence intentions.

Table 4.5
Descriptive Statistics for PSS Scores and Intent to Leave

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Minimum	Maximum
PSS Scores	19.24	7.07	0	35
Intent to Leave	1.60	.75	1	4

Table 4.6
Comparisons of Perceived Stress Scores Based on Age, Gender, and Intent to Leave

<i>Age</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>t</i>	η^2
Traditional	19.70	7.07	241	1.54	-
Nontraditional	18.24	6.93			
<i>Gender</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>t</i>	η^2
Female	21.30	7.07	217	4.35*	.08
Male	17.33	6.31			
<i>Intent to Leave</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>t</i>	η^2
Low Intent	18.50	6.74	241	4.94*	.09
High Intent	25.78	6.64			

Note. η^2 of .06 - .13 indicates medium effect size (Cohen, 1988)

* $p < .001$

Table 4.7
The Effects of Background/Environmental Variables on Perceived Stress

	<i>r</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	β	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Age	-.12	-.76	1.15	-.05	-.67	.51
Marital Status	-.11	-.80	.82	-.08	-.97	.33
Gender	.29	4.08	.92	.29	4.43	<.01
Credits	.02	.48	.65	.05	.74	.46
Hours Worked	.04	.31	.33	.07	.92	.36
Children	-.10	-1.00	1.41	-.06	-.71	.48

Note. $R^2 = .11$, $N = 218$, $F(6, 211) = 4.22$, $p = <.01$

PSS Score is dependent variable.

Table 4.8
The Effects of Background/Environmental Variables and Perceived Stress on Intent to Leave

	<i>r</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	β	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Age	-.07	-.03	.57	-.22	-.39	.70
Marital Status	-.01	-.01	.84	-.08	-.10	.92
Gender	.11	.04	.95	.57	.60	.55
Credits	.03	.01	.64	.06	.09	.93
Hours Worked	.08	.08	.33	.35	1.06	.29
Children	-.14	-.01	1.42	-.13	-.09	.93
Perceived Stress	.34	.12	.07	.11	1.64	.10

Note. $R^2 = .03$, $N = 217$, $F(7, 210) = .87$, $p = .53$

Intent to Leave is dependent variable.

Almost all (99.2%) students indicated that they planned to complete the current semester, with 1 participant (.4%) writing in that they were “not sure” and 1 student (.4%) not answering. This finding may be due to the fact that SCC’s final withdrawal deadline had recently passed at the time of survey administration, and students were in the final three weeks of the semester. The story was different regarding plans for returning to SCC the following semester. Forty-nine (20.1%) students indicated that they did not plan to enroll at SCC the following semester. Reasons given for not returning differed for high and low intent students and are listed in Table 4.9. Those with high

intent to leave college most frequently reported that they were not returning to SCC due to financial reasons and personal problems, while those with low intent to leave college most frequently indicated they were not returning to SCC due to transferring to another college or campus. It makes sense that those who have low intent to leave college would leave SCC for mostly transfer reasons as this would indicate a desire to continue one's education. Tinto (1993) distinguishes between institutional departures that are the result of transfer, where individuals "persist" in the higher education system, versus "system departures" where individuals leave higher education completely (p. 17). Tinto (1993) found that 9.3% of two-year college entrants transferred from the community college before the start of their second year, representing some 22.9% of those that left in their first year.

Table 4.9
Reasons for Not Enrolling at SCC the Following Semester

	Frequency of responses	
	High Intent ^a	Low Intent
Financial Reasons	4	4
Academic Reasons	-	-
Work Related	2	2
Family Problems	2	1
Personal Problems	5	2
Transfer	1	32
Graduation	-	2
Other	2 ^b	6

Note. Participants could report multiple reasons. n = 49

a - Not all high intent students reported that they would not re-enroll.

b - Other reasons: 1. Need a break, 2. To get organized.

Almost half of participants (45.1%) had dropped out of college in the past. This pattern of attendance, where students leave the institution and then return, is labeled

“stopping out” in the higher education literature (Bonham & Luckie, 1993). The reasons students gave for leaving in the past (see Table 4.10) are consistent with other studies and reflect the complex external demands of students (Bonham & Luckie, 1993; Michigan State Board of Education, 1990). Personal problems, financial reasons, and work-related reasons were the most frequently reported reasons for past departure. Reasons most frequently cited in the “other” category by students included not being ready for college, having children, and getting married.

Table 4.10
Reasons for Past Departure from College

	<i>f</i>	<i>%</i>
Financial Reasons	42	38.2
Academic Reasons	18	16.3
Work Related	32	29.1
Family Problems	24	21.8
Personal Problems	43	39.1
Other	34	30.9

Note. Participants could report multiple reasons. n = 110

Part I – Summary

The sample studied is somewhat typical of community college student populations (Horn & Nevill, 2006), with a majority attending school part-time and working 30 or more hours a week. While nontraditional students had more family responsibilities than traditional aged students, both groups appeared to have substantial work and school demands which may help explain why there were no significant differences between their stress levels. Women and students with high intent to leave college reported experiencing significantly higher levels of stress than the rest of the

sample. The finding that women were experiencing higher levels of stress than men is consistent with findings in much of the literature (e.g., Bojuwoye, 2002; Pierceall & Keim, 2007). Those with high intent to leave most often reported on surveys that they wanted to dropout due to personal and financial problems. The next section will report through the interview findings, the stressors experienced by these students, and will reveal how they perceived and coped with stress.

Part II – Stress and Coping

Part II of this chapter will reveal major findings from interviews related to the sources of stress for students, the effects of stress, the ways students perceived stress, and ultimately the different ways students coped with stress.

Sources of Stress

The literature describes sources of stress for nontraditional students as primarily emanating from the world outside of school and includes managing finances, work, family, and social responsibilities (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Dill & Henley, 1998; Morris, Brooks & May, 2003). This proved to be the case for traditional-aged students in this study as well, and is consistent with findings by Newman (2005) that both traditional and nontraditional community college students had similar stressors.

Balancing Multiple Roles

While students dealt with a multitude of stressors including job loss, relationships ending, car accidents, and illness, the most common sources of stress for all participants were related to balancing multiple roles and responsibilities that included work, school, family and finances:

Being a full-time student, and then working full-time, and then full-time mom and wife -- that's what's happening that gets me stressed. (BY, low-intent nontraditional student)

I work full-time, I work 40 hours a week, Tuesday through Saturday and I work in a call center so that can be kind of stressful in itself because I constantly have people calling all day long in my ear complaining and yelling and screaming at me for things that are wrong with their account. So that's a stress, and then I leave work and I go to school full-time at night, so that's hard, and just moving out and living on my own, that's stressful -- learning how to manage money and bills. (KV, low-intent traditional student)

Not Enough Time!

Many students described stress in terms of having inadequate time in which to accomplish a multitude of tasks and fulfill an overload of responsibilities. With overlapping demands, some major role or activity often had to be sacrificed, or priorities needed to be rearranged due to finite time, energy and financial resources. Many students made statements about the difficulty of making these choices. This need to negotiate multiple roles and make sacrifices in order to accommodate school was similarly found in research by Kember and Leung (2004) of nontraditional part-time students.

I try to do my best, and I do my best, but because I concentrate on school then I let other things go like my family. I have a husband, I have two children and something that I never get done is the housework and I get stressed. (BY, low-intent nontraditional student)

I don't have much social time. My friends go out and have a drink here and there or you know a lot of drinks, but I can't do that during the semester because if I go out one night, I'm tired the next day or don't feel like doing my homework the next day so I have to force myself not to go out. In a way it's good, but in a way, I'm not doing anything, so it's sort of hard not to have social times. (BC, low-intent traditional student)

Hectic and inflexible schedules often left little discretionary time for students to recuperate, choose leisure activities, or reflect on stressful events. The ability to relax and choose leisure activities are important forms of coping that have been linked to reduced stress (Iwasaki, 2003). Several students complained of the negative consequences of having insufficient free time:

I think you need a break to get -- to kind of breathe it in and do your best. I think you can do a lot better when you have a little bit of free time, a little bit of a break. (FG, low-intent traditional student)

Sometimes you just wanna veg out for a second, you wanna just relax and let it all just kind of come out and just watch "American Idol" or something stupid, but you really should be hitting the books. And it might definitely have a negative affect on you 'cause you're just so stressed out that you need that [outlet], you need to sit there and you need to just do something completely nonrelated or nonproductive. (LC, high-intent traditional student)

Financial Stress

Financial problems were mentioned as a stressor by a majority of participants. Due to such factors as job loss, reduction in hours, past debt, or taking on new responsibilities, several participants spoke of the strain of financial demands. Consistent with the current study, Cooke et al. (2004) found financial concerns to relate to higher levels of stress and anxiety.

I don't have a lot of money right now because I'm trying to buy a new car and my other bills -- I'm falling behind on bills and so it's just my stress level is very high right now (KS, low-intent nontraditional student)

It just worries me that I might not be able to pay my bills and that I might not feel good one week and I'll have to call out and I might get into trouble for that [and could lose my job]. (FS, low-intent nontraditional student)

A financial consequence, or at least the opportunity cost of attending college for some was lost wages. One student spoke of the sacrifice in income that resulted from being in school:

[It's hard] being in school and not being able to make the money that I made, which still wasn't a lot, but just having things taken away and -- not like stuff repossessed, but just kind of ways of living and you know, simple things like not being able to go out on a Friday night, which I rarely did anyway, but now the choice is you gotta stay home for a few weeks, do some work at the house, and make some money. (KB, low-intent nontraditional student)

Other Stressors

In addition to the stress associated with balancing multiple roles and financial difficulties, several participants experienced sudden, acute stressors which triggered new stress and exacerbated existing stress. Job loss, relationships ending, illness, and car accidents were the most frequently reported "other" stressors participants reported in interviews.

Unique Traditional Student Stressors

While stressors for traditional and nontraditional students were largely similar and related to financial issues and balancing school and work roles, there were also sets of unique stressors that each group experienced.

From a developmental perspective, establishing an adult identity and independence from family are important tasks for late adolescent college students to achieve (Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Erikson, 1980). Inability to successfully resolve these tasks can result in stress, despair and confusion (Erikson, 1980). Many traditional

students experienced stress related to transitioning to adult responsibilities and not always being ready for the financial as well as psychological demands of being independent:

When you're going to high school you live at home so you're normally not bombarded with the pressures of stress like the bills and stuff so you don't have to worry about it - all you have to do is kind of focus on school. When you move out on your own that all changes you have to worry about paying the bills, you have to worry about all this and all that, like scheduling extra hours at work takes away from the time you could have been at the library to be studying for the test that you have the next day. (LC, high-intent traditional student)

My dad was like "okay here you go, pay your own rent, do everything else on your own." And I'm just like okay, I've never worked full-time in my entire life and yeah I'm 20, I'm an adult, I know there are people my age doing this and raising families and doing stuff like that but I just felt like my time was to focus on school and then he kinda took that away from me, and so that just adds more stress to try to work and then I don't know.... just everything. (LM, low-intent traditional student)

Another unique stressor that emerged for traditional-aged students was the financial hardship created by factoring parents' income into financial aid award formulas. Federal financial aid guidelines label those under age 24 as "dependents" and gauge award amounts on the expectation that parents will contribute part of their income towards the cost of college attendance. The size of financial aid awards were effectively reduced for some students under the age of 24 who were financially self-reliant and whose parents did not contribute to the cost of their education. For some students this financial aid requirement made it difficult for them to establish financial independence, which is a hallmark of adult identity and the ability to separate from parents (Moore & Hotch, 1981).

Next year I'll be 24 so I'll be able to qualify for more things. Right now they still look at what my mother makes. My mom's a teacher, so we already know she's not making any money, but they look at what she makes as if that is --like she has all this money to give me to help me live. (GG, high-intent traditional student)

That's my problem -- my parents, I guess, make too much money. But I mean there's seven people that were living at my house when I was living there so it's really not that much money when there's that many people. (KV, low-intent traditional student)

Well normally I get financial aid, but this semester, 'cause I guess the financial aid office doesn't let you claim your own tax information, you have to use the parents. And me and my parents talk, but not like -- I 'm not close with them so it's kind of weird to ask for their financial information when I've been supporting myself for so long. And they make a lot of money, so whenever I use their information it's kind of like a 50/50 if I'll get financial aid. (LC, high-intent traditional student)

The specter that at least some students were receiving less financial aid than they required is cause for concern since insufficient financial aid and financial problems have been linked in the literature to college attrition (Cabrera, Nora & Castaneda, 1993; Nora et al., 1996).

Unique Nontraditional Student Stressors

Particularly for nontraditional female students, balancing the family role with school and work demands is associated with increased feelings of role conflict (Home, 1997), guilt and anxiety (Benshoff, 1993), and attrition from college (Johnson, Schwartz & Bower, 2000; Stolar, 1991). Nontraditional students in the current study who were married and/or who had children expressed that they were experiencing stress related to balancing the additional roles of spouse and parent:

I am trying to give attention to the kids and attention to my schooling, my job, myself and I've been pretty stressed right there. [There's only] one of me and there's so many of them it feels like I am being torn apart sometimes between so many different areas. (SS, low-intent nontraditional student)

It really stresses me out... it's hard for me to get any [school] work done when my husband's sitting there going, "well, I haven't seen you all day, where's my time?" Not that he does that, but it's just kind of a feeling you get when you're like "ok, I'm ignoring my family, and I'm ignoring my duties as a wife and maybe I should do this." (EF, high-intent nontraditional student)

Several nontraditional students expressed a lack of confidence in their academic abilities related to mathematics and writing aptitude. This finding is typical of returning adult students who may have taken time away from school in the past to focus on career development and family concerns (Birchak, 1992; Broderick, 2003; Haggan, 2000):

I tested into a higher math than what I was completely capable of, so that was... immediately my first two weeks I didn't think I was gonna make it, you know all these math problems on the board, my head would actually hurt because I just didn't know the string process what was going on I couldn't...it'd just been so long that I'd seen any of that stuff, you know, since high school which was over 10 years [ago]. (KB, low-intent nontraditional student)

When I do my papers I'm stressed, I get stressed out because I'm thinking it's not good enough and I get stuck on trying to come up with more and more ideas and then time's starting to pass and I need to get out of this stress and I can't break away from it. (OH, low-intent nontraditional student)

Some nontraditional students also spoke of feeling chronologically misaligned with their peers. These individuals could be described as "off-time" (Neugarten, Moore & Lowe, 1965), in that their experiences contradicted their age normative expectations with respect to school, career and family. Such a disjuncture can produce stress, which appears to have been the case in the current study:

I see a lot of people that [were] my classmates [in high school] that now are research engineers and they have these great careers. They're done with school. So in ten years, or whatever, as long as it takes me I want to be there too. It doesn't matter, I want to be a professional now and have a career. (BY, low-intent nontraditional student)

I'm 31, and that whole life -- like you should be married and you should have kids and -- that kind of stresses me out from time to time. (DM, high-intent nontraditional student)

The Impact of Stress

Bee (1987) posited that the three expected outcomes of stress are either no-change, psychosocial or psychological growth, or adverse health and emotional functioning. While much of the research on stress has focused its negative effects on physical and emotional health and its detrimental role on academic performance, research has also shown that moderate amounts of stress can be beneficial for performance and motivate individuals to achieve (Moore, Burrows & Dalziel, 1992; McClary, 1990). The positive and negative impact of the stressors participants experienced is the subject of the next section.

Physical Effects of Stress

Physical health and energy are important coping resources for individuals. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) note that "these are among the most pervasive resources in that they are relevant to coping in many, if not all, stressful encounters. A person who is frail, sick, tired, or otherwise debilitated has less energy to expend on coping than a healthy, robust person" (p. 159). Many in the interview sample reported health and energy concerns related to stress:

My doctor says “quit stressing - you’re making yourself sick, you’re making your stomach upset!” When I get worried I tend to either throw-up or I tend to constipate myself. He says "it’s your nerves, you’re doing it to yourself, you need to relax" and the doctor says being sick has a lot to do with stress. (TL, high-intent traditional student)

That’s probably the main thing; I get physical ramifications from stress such as stomach aches, headaches, nausea, all [of] the above. (EF, high-intent nontraditional student)

It got so bad that with the stress of [my relationship ending] and work and school, I actually ended up getting an ulcer from all of that. I mean it was really bad where I couldn’t get up in the morning without throwing up stomach acid or feeling sick to my stomach. That’s how bad it was. (KV, low-intent traditional student)

Most participants spoke of the debilitating, draining effects of stress. Pritchard and Wilson (2003) found that students who had high intent to drop-out of college reported experiencing more fatigue than their peers. In the current study, however, both low and high intent to leave participants reported experiencing physical and emotional fatigue:

By the end of the day I am so exhausted just from dealing with everything, that I mean, I’ll fall asleep doing my homework, because I can’t focus or I’m just so exhausted mentally -- exhausted from trying to push through the day and get everything that I need to get done (KS, low-intent nontraditional student)

[Stress] is just physically exhausting and then mentally exhausting as well, ‘cause you have to be awake and then go to work and go to school and do everything. (LM, low-intent traditional student)

Emotional Effects of Stress

The negative emotional impact of stress is well documented in the literature (Bergdahl & Bergdahl, 2002; Coppock, 1998). Many students reported experiencing anger and increased irritability due to stress. Some students also discussed feelings of

anxiety and depression that were either attributed to stress or were pre-existing conditions that were exacerbated by stress:

[Stress makes me feel] overwhelmed -- anxiety -- huge amounts of anxiety [and] depression. I feel so overwhelmed that I just don't do anything. (DM, high-intent nontraditional student)

It's a pattern where [depression and anxiety] comes from stress, just little things that bother you and you get a little bit anxious about and then it becomes bigger anxiety which leads to a depression which goes into a stronger one. (BC, low-intent traditional student)

Academic Effects of Stress

The impact of stress on school performance was significant for many participants. The impact of life demands and stress have been related in several studies to diminished academic performance (DeBerard, Spielmans & Julka, 2004; Pritchard & Wilson, 2003). For several students in the current study, performance had been satisfactory until a stressful event or series of events adversely impacted their progress:

I felt like last semester I like knocked out my classes, I had amazing grades, front row, raising my hand and then I was really looking forward to this semester being like a snowball effect of that. I thought I was gonna do that if not more and I was completely caught off guard when it seemed like it all just crumbled. I felt like personal issues, things going on in my life affected my schoolwork and affected my performance in school and that's where it became like a huge living disappointment. (GG, high-intent traditional student)

The focus, when I'm stressed out, the focus just isn't there. 'Cause I was stressed out about my Mom, that sucks. I feel like I didn't do as well [in school] not only because of the time [demands] but because of my Mom being sick so that had an affect on all that too. (BC, low-intent traditional student)

Positive Effects of Stress

Some low-intent participants indicated that they needed stress in their lives to feel productive and motivated. These low intent students appeared to thrive on the stress of maintaining busy, hectic schedules.

I love always having something to do; I love always having something to strive for or something that motivates me. So I think that's always -- like going to school so much and working so much -- it gives me something to do and I love to do that because I think that I excel more when I have more to do. That sounds crazy but it's true. (KV, low-intent traditional student)

[Without stress] I just become a lazy person, I just stay home, not do anything, too hot to go outside. So I like it -- I like a challenge. Like at work -- you can ask anybody -- I'd rather have a million tables and be completely busy. If I just have one I just get so bored. (BY, low-intent nontraditional student)

[Stress] keeps me going. It's a lot to deal with but when I don't have anything to do, when I'm not in school, when I don't have to work I don't know what to do with myself. I can't just sit at home all day 'cause I'm always out doing something, whether it's working, or running errands, or at the gym or whatever I'm like, "alright, gotta find something to do." (LM, low-intent traditional student)

In a study of the impact of stress on health and mood, DeLongis, Folkman and Lazarus (1988) similarly found that for one-third of participants, increases in stress were accompanied by improved health and mood. This pattern is consistent with experiencing positive stress, or "eustress," which is the optimal level of stress needed to "motivate individuals to attain higher levels of performance and achievement" (Cloud, 1991). Eustress is associated in the literature with challenge appraisals and the effective management of stress (McGowan, Gardner & Fletcher, 2006; Nelson & Simmons, 2005).

Perceptions of Stress

How an individual appraises a stressful encounter is expected to be the result of an interaction of person factors, such as commitments and goals, and environmental factors such as resources, demands, and the expected duration of a stressor (Lazarus et al., 1985). As part of the process of appraising stressful events, an individual determines whether what they are experiencing is a challenge or a threat. According to Lazarus and Folkman (1984), “challenge appraisals focus on the potential for gain or growth inherent in an encounter and they are characterized by pleasurable emotions such as eagerness, excitement, or exhilaration” (p. 33). Threat appraisals, by contrast, are typified by perceptions of harm and are accompanied by negative emotions such as anxiety, worry, and fear (Scholtz, 2000).

While both high and low intent students experienced threat emotions and negative outcomes from stress, several low-intent students viewed stress as having elements of positive challenge as well, especially as it related to the goal of college completion. Challenge appraisals indicate confidence, that with some effort, one can overcome the demands of a stressful situation (Park & Folkman, 1997). Many low-intent students viewed their stress as temporary and surmountable. Consistent with challenge appraisals, the stress they were experiencing was seen as an opportunity for future growth and gain through school completion. From a developmental perspective, Sanford (1966) notes that experiencing challenge, in the presence of adequate support, is necessary for growth to occur.

So I just feel like all those things that stress me and being so busy I just have to put up with it, I have to be strong. And I also see it as a way that it's gonna be hard, and it's gonna be stressful, and it's gonna drive me nuts and I'm gonna sometimes be like "AHHH!" But in the end it's gonna pay off. So I think about that too. I guess you can call it a way to say "one day I'm not gonna have to do this anymore, I'm gonna be all done with this." (BY, low intent nontraditional student)

I always figure I'll have to struggle now to not struggle later. Instead of slacking off now and then having -- struggling for the rest of my life. So you kind of have to set up now I guess for your future. (FG, low-intent traditional student)

Many high intent students appeared to view stress as predominantly threatening, insoluble and perpetual. The duration of an event is an important factor in how well one is able to cope with stress. Schlossberg et al. (1995) note that uncertainty about the duration of stressful events is associated with the greatest level of stress and adverse emotional effect.

[Stress is] a vicious, vicious cycle. It's like an eating disorder, or alcoholism, it keeps going around and around you know? (GG, high-intent traditional student)

Even if you get a handle on what you're going through right now, next semester when you start you're going to add a whole 'nother set of problems you know what I mean? You're never fully gonna get a handle on stress. (LC, high-intent traditional student)

The negative perceptions of many high intent students about stressful events suggest an external locus of control, which is the belief that external forces, such as luck or fate, control the outcome of events (Weiner, 1986). Evidence of this belief is illustrated in the following statements:

[I feel] like “God do I have bad luck! Is this ever going to change?” I don’t know, I just kinda feel like -- I always tell my boyfriend I feel like like I’m just floating around bouncing here and there like I’m never gonna just keep going forward and I’m just kinda going this way, and this way, and this way -- [I] don’t ever have good direction and now I just feel like sometimes why do I even do it? (TL, high-intent traditional student)

If I’m gonna react, I wanna react to myself instead of all these outside forces all the time. I feel like people... like I’m a puppet and people are just pulling on my strings, my emotional strings, you know? If I’m gonna react to anybody can it be me? Can it be my own thing? (GG, high-intent traditional student)

I just don’t know how to stop [stress]. How do you stop it? Feels like a roller coaster ride, literally that’s what it feels like. (UN, high-intent nontraditional student)

Traditional versus Nontraditional Students

Consistent with survey results, which did not reveal significant differences in perceived stress levels, interviews yielded no major thematic differences in the way traditional and nontraditional students viewed and experienced stress.

Management of Stress

According to the cognitive appraisal of stress and coping theory, whether one appraises a stressful event as a threat, or a challenge, they must mobilize their coping resources in an attempt to meet the demands of the encounter (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). How one perceives stress, whether as a challenge or a threat, is important because such perceptions are posited to influence subsequent coping choices (Lazarus et al., 1985). The authors distinguished between two types of coping responses: emotion-focused coping, which is directed at mediating and relieving the emotions associated with stress; and problem-focused coping, which is directed at managing or altering the

problem that is causing the stress. Emotion-focused forms of coping were used by all participants. This form of coping included such strategies such as emotional venting and seeking social support, as well as avoidant strategies such as exercise and sleeping.

Avoidance Coping

Avoidance, according to Folkman and Lazarus (1988b), is one of the most common ways individuals deal with stress and refers to coping activities that divert attention away from the source of distress. Several participants identified physical activity as an avoidant strategy they used to help them manage stressful situations. Exercise allowed individuals to distance themselves from problems, purge negative emotions, and gain clarity and perspective:

Doin' physical stuff kinda helped me get back in focus, you know...just going for a walk or just kinda stepping away from everything and thinking about it and trying to make sense out of things and how things need to be done and what needs to be done. (KB, low-intent nontraditional student)

I think that running helps a lot with [relieving stress] 'cause it gives you extra focus. It's a time that you can think about all that bottled up stuff and think about what you need to do next, what the next step is. I don't know why, I guess it's doing something with the chemicals in your head too. (BC, low-intent traditional student)

I exercise. Exercise is a big key to relieving a lot of my stress and keeping my depression at a minimum. (KS, low-intent nontraditional student)

Keeping distracted through recreational or work activities was another means of avoidance used by many participants:

If I get down or stressed then I just sort of make myself push that aside and get up and do something, anything. Whether it's go grocery shopping or [doing laundry] -- just anything so I'm not sitting there wallowing in my own self-pity. (BC, low-intent traditional student).

I go do something other than that action, whatever it is, that's causing me stress. I try and take myself away from that and go shopping, or go have a cup of coffee and just relax for an hour or so. I find it easier to deal with things when I've taken myself back and go "ok now I'm back to my normal self, I can do something now." (EF, high-intent nontraditional student)

Other means of avoidant coping most frequently reported by participants included watching TV, reading, writing, and using the internet.

Escape-Avoidance

Some forms of avoidant coping are considered less adaptive. Maladaptive forms of avoidant coping, labeled "escape-avoidance" by Lazarus and Folkman (1984), included alcohol and cigarette use, sleeping, self-isolation, and binge eating. Almost half of participants reported using these strategies, to varying degrees, as a means of coping with stress. These findings correspond with a study by Tichy and Means (1990) of community college nursing students that discovered the most highly stressed participants reported disrupted sleep patterns, and increases in eating, drinking, and smoking.

I find myself drinking a lot because of [stress] (EF, high-intent nontraditional student).

Oh, smoking cigarettes. Yeah that's what I do. But I don't smoke a lot, I really don't. I mean on a bad day, like four cigarettes a day usually. (CW, high-intent traditional student)

I eat things that are high in cholesterol or that are just like fast food and then it just becomes this thing where I feel like the food is helping me -- kinda my way out -- food that's not good for me, not healthy. (BZ, low-intent traditional student)

Several participants coped through sleep and self-isolation. This form of coping was primarily reported by participants who were also experiencing anxiety and depression. This corresponds with research that has found escape-avoidance coping to be associated with symptoms of depression and anxiety (Folkman, et al., 1986).

I just sleep. If I'm so stressed out I'll just go to bed, I don't wanna think about it. I don't... when that first alarm goes off, even though I might not be tired but I know what awaits me is so disgusting that I'm just like "[*expletive*] it, I'll go back to bed." (GG, high-intent traditional student)

[My dad] will criticize [me] and I'll have to deal with it, so that's stressful. So I guess [I feel] anger, I get sad, I get anxiety and then sometimes I'll get depressed, so I'll just go to sleep. And I'll just sleep. I'll go to bed early instead of doing something productive. (LC, high-intent traditional student)

So I just kinda keep myself in my room. [My brothers and sisters] call it the cave. [They say], "get out of your cave, get off the internet!" So they try doing things to make things better, you know like cheer me up. (TL, high-intent traditional student)

Internalization and Venting of Emotions

Internalization of emotions was a maladaptive means of emotion-focused coping reported primarily by traditional students. It is not surprising that this pattern of coping was most often reported by traditional-aged students since learning how to manage emotions is considered a major developmental task of younger college students (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Many of these students described a current or recent pattern of coping where stress was initially internalized, negative feelings built-up, and a dramatic venting of emotion occurred:

I would keep it bottled inside and then I would...too much would go on and I would just explode or like yell at people for no reason or get into an argument or bring up stuff from the past and it was just... it was never any good. (LM, low-intent traditional student)

It would build -- everything would just pile on top of each other and I would just hold it all in and then BOOM! I would explode with one little thing (UM, low-intent traditional student)

I keep it inside. I do, I keep it inside until it just overflows to no end and then I explode. So that's how I handle it, I keep it all in, I don't tell anybody about it and I don't deal with it in a positive manner, it's just building inside, building inside and then all of a sudden it just -- I explode. (UN, high-intent nontraditional student)

While for most this emotional release served a relief function, a few high intent students reported that emotional venting actually made them feel worse

I will just burst out at 'em and just yell at 'em for no reason and that's how I cope with it. Thinking if I outburst then it's gonna release all the garbage that's going on in my life but it causes more, it just causes more. (UN, high-intent nontraditional student)

I kinda don't like to go see therapists 'cause I have a tendency to just falling apart and it's kinda hard to bring myself back up and I kinda feel like I stay the way I am then. Like last time I went before I stopped going a year ago, I kinda just fell apart, I couldn't stop crying -- I felt so helpless. (TL, high-intent traditional female)

According to Carver, Scheier and Weintraub (1989), this adverse outcome of emotional venting is possible if it leads the individual to focus on and become preoccupied with the negative feelings they are experiencing.

Cognitive Reappraisal

Several students spoke of utilizing emotion-focused coping strategies that were cognitively-based such as positive reappraisals. Positive reappraisals, according to

Lazarus and Folkman (1984), function to change the meaning of stressful events and reduce their threat levels.

I had to tell myself that I would be ok if I didn't do well on the last papers. I had to convince myself that just a little bit would help me. So it was hard, but I was able to talk myself into knowing it would be ok if the papers weren't perfect. (BC, low-intent traditional student)

I mean I figure [my job] could be worse, I could be flipping burgers at an In and Out or something. (KV, low-intent traditional student)

Even though [my boss] threatened to write me up the other day, I was like, "well he's just doin' his job, he's just worried about me. He needs me." You know, he's pretty cool. (FS, low-intent nontraditional student)

Students with low intent to leave had a greater tendency to utilize this positive emotion-focused strategy. This is important because emotion-focused strategies such as positive reappraisal and emotional venting can help facilitate the use of more problem-focused strategies by helping the individual view their stress in a more positive light and by releasing emotions that could interfere with problem solving (Carver & Scheier, 1994; Folkman et al., 1986; Forsythe & Compas, 1987; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Some high intent students appeared to struggle to reframe the meaning of stressful events. While they may have had the desire to transform their perceptions, they appeared deficient in the resources and strategies necessary to do so:

I wanna be able to see that car breaking down as more comical instead of just being like, "of course, I'm doomed!" 'cause that's not -- I don't feel like that's a very healthy perception on life. That's just looking -- it's very limited thinking feeling like the universe is against you type of thing. I wanna be able to see I'm working with the universe -- some things go this way and some things go that way, nothing's necessarily good or bad. I'd like to approach it on that balanced level. (GG, high-intent traditional student)

I wish I could be more like [my friend] when it comes [to how she views stress]. 'Cause when she's stressed out she's just so centered. She's like, "yeah my car broke down it sucks." And I'm like "my car broke down I can't believe it!" like it's the end of the world. (LC, high-intent traditional student)

Utilization of Social Support

Social support is described in the literature as an important buffer to stress (Benshoff, 1993; Dill & Henley, 1998; Napoli & Wortman, 1998;). Carver, Scheier and Weintraub (1989) distinguished between two types of social support that individuals seek to help them cope with stress: instrumental support and emotional support. Instrumental support helps the individual cope through the seeking of advice, information, or assistance. Emotional support helps the individual through moral support, sympathy, or understanding.

Several low-intent students reported accessing close, empathic others for practical advice as well as emotional support:

I have a couple of friends that have gone through this and are in school and are pursuing their dreams and I have friends that are just married and have children. So sometimes I do say "oh, you know I have this class, and this is happening." And then I'll get a "well you know what? I used to have this, and this is what I did." Or [I will say] "I have this teacher and I don't understand what he wants me to do" and they usually have some kind of advice because they also dealt with being in school. (BY, low-intent nontraditional student)

I'm really close with my siblings and they always know 100% everything that's going on in my life, like if it has to do with boyfriends, anything, they always know everything. They're the people that I can go to when I'm having problems. (UM, low-intent traditional student)

Some low-intent students indicated that they were currently seeking instrumental and emotional support from outside professionals, such as therapists and doctors, to help

them manage stress, anxiety and depression. These students described the assistance they were receiving as essential to their ability to cope:

I see [a therapist] that kinda helps me work through things and helps me see things I didn't see, and how to deal with things. Before, and I think that's another piece I didn't talk about -- is she's a really, really strong piece in kind of making stress manageable for me. Because before, I would -- when I would say "[*expletive*] all this crap," I really would and maybe just sleep in because I was so -- it would kinda depress me and [I would] just kinda stay in, not do anything, get further behind and dig a deeper hole for myself, which I don't do [now]. (KB, low-intent nontraditional student).

Well I've been seeing a psychologist/therapist for about a year now ever since like the whole thing with my dad and him getting married to his girlfriend and then with my mom's cancer like it just felt like it was getting too much so I go and talk to her like twice a month every other week and that seems to help a lot 'cause you know she helps me give me like insight on like how to deal with the certain things in my life and to kind of take it one by one. (LM, low-intent traditional student).

Not all low-intent students, however, had sufficient external support. The one low-intent student who did not have a positive social network spoke of the negative impact of having inadequate support:

I'm just so alone, I don't have anybody to reach out and touch, I don't have anybody I can trust, it's just horrible. (OH, low-intent nontraditional student).

In contrast to low-intent students, most high-intent students had minimal social support resources. In cases where students did have support, most failed to access this resource because they did not wish to share their feelings of distress with others, they believed they could handle problems on their own, or because they viewed those around them as negative and discouraging.

I try not to talk to people about my stressful issues because I feel like everyone has stress in their life and then if I go around telling them my stress I feel like I'm sharing my stress with them and they have their own stress to worry about so I don't feel like it's their duty to listen to my stressful issues. (LC, high-intent traditional student)

When I go to [my husband] saying, "help me, guide me in things." Instead of talking to me in a manner of, "let's sit down and talk," he gets angry and he starts yelling at me and so why go to him? Why go to that type of support 'cause it just makes things worse. So I don't really have support, I don't. (UN, high-intent nontraditional student)

Given their negative perceptions of support and unwillingness to discuss the stress they were experiencing with others, it is not surprising that most high intent students who possessed social resources did not access them. While Lazarus and Folkman (1984) argue that the mere presence of social support can help buffer individuals from stress, perceptions of the quality of that support also appeared to play a key role. This is in line with research that has shown that perceptions of availability and satisfaction with the quality of one's support are as important as objective availability of support in mediating stress (Fry, 1989; Lowenthal & Weiss, 1976; Perrine, 2001).

Problem-Focused Coping

While all participants utilized emotion-focused forms of coping, many also utilized problem-focused strategies as a means of managing their stress. It is not unusual for individuals to use both problem and emotion-focused coping styles based on situational factors and available coping resources (Fleishman, 1984; Folkman et al., 1986). Utilization of problem-focused coping strategies are associated in the literature with challenge appraisals and more effective management of stress (Billings & Moos,

1981; Lazarus, et al., 1985). These strategies are expected to be used in situations that are viewed as controllable or changeable (Peacock, Wong & Reker, 1993). In the current study, coping through problem-solving, planning, and direct action was most often reported by low-intent students:

I was debating on whether or not to drop my math class and it was a simple enough class to where I thought that I [would be] able to pass it if I stressed out all my resources, and I did. I mean I [sought] lots of help in the class from students that were acing the class and the teacher and I even went to tutoring. (BZ, low-intent traditional student)

I'm gonna work [this summer] and then I'm gonna visit my mom for two weeks and then work some more. So yeah, just kind of saving up. So hopefully next semester if I get into financial trouble again I can have a pool of money ready to help me out. (FG, low-intent traditional student)

Organizing one's time and tasks through lists and schedules was a problem-focused coping strategy used by virtually all low-intent participants. Having perceptions of control over one's time through scheduling, organizing, setting goals and prioritizing has been related to reduced stress, increased problem-solving ability, and improved well-being (Nonis et al., 1998). Given the complaint by almost all students that they had insufficient time to manage all of their demands, such a strategy would appear to be essential to continued college attendance. Low-intent students utilizing this strategy reported that it made stress more manageable:

I structure [my time] 'cause I feel [it] being unstructured, in some cases, make[s] things a little bit more chaotic -- I've learned that in the past because I've just kind of slacked off and then everything just piles up and you have to do everything last minute which is no fun. So I try to structure everything when I get too stressed out. (FG, low-intent traditional student)

I'll write a list and kinda try to go down the list when I remember to make a list, I'll do that - that always works 'cause then I can kind of see what I need to do and check it off and once I check something off it's like wow -- you could feel your shoulders drop a little bit -- so that definitely works (KB, low-intent nontraditional student)

I think that's pretty much how I can cope with everything that's happened is you know -- what's the next step and you write a list and that way you can focus on that list instead of just having so many ideas going through your mind that you can't -- and then you forget something and you can't think. If you prioritize your list that day, then can execute your day, so I think that's a big part of coping. (KS, low-intent nontraditional student)

It is not surprising that low intent students used these strategies most frequently as other research has similarly found a greater tendency of those with low intent to leave college to use more positive, active forms of coping (LeSure-Lester, 2004, Perrine, 2001; Pritchard & Wilson, 2003).

Evolving Coping Strategies

The ability to adjust one's coping strategies, if they prove ineffective, is an important skill in managing stress. McGowan, Gardner & Fletcher (2006) note that "no one strategy or combination of strategies is always effective. The ability to use a repertoire of coping strategies flexibly is important" (p. 97). Several low-intent students reported making positive adjustments to their coping strategies where prior responses had been ineffective:

My first semester when it was during finals, I didn't know how to balance it and I was constantly fighting with my husband about simple stupid things that didn't need to be argued. Anything that I was told I would just make it into a big, huge fight. So then when I was done I took a look back and I said "I'm not going to do this again." The first semester I think I learned how to cope with it. I think I learned how to not take it out on other people because it's not fair. (BY, low-intent nontraditional student)

Now I just learn not to keep things inside and try to talk to people and get different ideas and advice from people on how to manage my stress. I'm still taking summer school and now instead of taking five classes and working full time, I'm only taking three classes. I've learned to adjust myself so that I'm still getting what I need to get done, just not as fast as a pace as I was wanting to go. (KV, low-intent traditional student)

I think I'm better understanding how to control [stress]. It may get more frequent that I don't care, or that -- not necessarily that I don't care but that it's not the end of the world if I get a B or C on a paper, but there would always be times when I would sort of say, "oh, I don't care," and then go back and forth a little bit. I think I'm learning how to maybe control that more (AV, low-intent traditional student)

Such changes are labeled "stress related growth" by Aldwin (2007) and are associated with changes in perspective as well as a greater tendency to use problem-focused coping strategies and cognitive reappraisal. For some students, this shift in coping strategies followed a highly impactful life event:

The biggest thing was when I got really sick [with an ulcer]. That was kind of like the breaking point like, "I can't do this to myself anymore." Because it's impacting not just how I feel or how I view things, but now it's impacting me physically, and so I didn't want to make myself so stressed to the point where I would get sick again, if not worse. So that was probably the biggest breaking point. (KV, low-intent traditional student)

I was a homeless drug addict you know. So it was hard to get me [to the therapist] but there was no other real choice -- it was that or nothing. So that's what got me there and that's what helped me get clean, and now that helps me deal with other problems (KB, low-intent nontraditional student)

Many low-intent students attributed improvements in their ability to cope to significant changes in their coping resource structure in the form of new friends, new relationships, and professional help. Aldwin (2007) notes that it is not only one's willingness to utilize existing resources that leads to stress related growth, but it is also the ability to actively seek out and generate new sources of support.

The past six months I would say I think I've dealt with [stress] a lot better than I have the previous six months before just because I wouldn't deal with it and then I started seeing the therapist or whatnot and then just I guess growing up and just kinda realizing, "well if you don't want to hear it, then don't listen." (LM, low-intent traditional student)

My boyfriend helps me a lot with [stress] because I can talk with him pretty early about this stuff. Before him I guess I would go out and party. I'd go out and drink or go out and do whatever. It didn't really work, but at the time it helps you forget about what's going on. But having somebody that I can talk to early on helps. (BC, low-intent traditional student)

These two good friends of mine recently came into my life within the past year, year and a half. So before that I didn't really have anyone to talk to. [It] kinda makes me wonder how I got along without 'em this whole time. (ES, low-intent nontraditional student)

Beliefs about Coping Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy is defined as the confidence individuals have in their ability to execute courses of action necessary to bring about desired outcomes (Bandura, 1982; Bandura, 1997). Those with positive self-efficacy tend to persist at difficult tasks, believe they can overcome obstacles and control events of importance, and are more likely to view stress as a challenge (Bandura, 1982; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Park & Folkman, 1997). When asked how well they believed they managed stress, many low intent students expressed positive, but tempered views of their coping self-efficacy:

I think I manage stress okay. Like I said sometimes I do let it get to me so bad where I get angry and blame people or yell at people, but at the same time I think I manage stress really well because I still have a job, I still have 4.0 and I'm living on my own just fine so, I think, I think it's sort of like an in-between thing. (KV, low-intent traditional student)

I think [I handle stress] pretty good right now. I still get up in the morning, I still take a shower, I still do all of my normal daily things that I need to do. And I take care of everything else. I make the phone calls that I need to make -- I think I handle it pretty well. I think that if anything else happened right now, I might slump into a huge depression, but on a scale of 1 to 10, 10 being the best, I think about an 8. (KS, low-intent nontraditional student)

Some low-intent students spoke of the context dependent nature of how they managed stress. Since self-efficacy beliefs are task specific, rather than general overarching beliefs (Bandura, 1986), it is understandable that students may have believed they managed stress better in some areas of their lives than others:

I guess it depends what's causing my stress. Like with work I just kind of buckled down and I was like, "okay what I need to do is write down the [sales] numbers that I need to make every day and just focus on that for the day." And so that's what I've been doing since I've been [feeling better] and saying "whatever..." But other things, like when I'm stressed out with homework and stuff, I -- or hopefully not next semester 'cause -- but this semester when everything happened I was just like "oh God I gotta do all this!" And then I would just say "oh screw it I'm not gonna do it." (UM, low-intent traditional student)

I sometimes feel like I cope with stress well because I seek help the right way. Other times I don't feel the need to seek help or I don't know what to do in certain cases so I just choose to keep it inside and kinda think about it and ponder on what I can do and then it just ends up bad. (BZ, low-intent traditional student)

Conversely, a number of high-intent students had negative views of their coping efficacy and described deficiencies in their coping skills. Negative self-efficacy beliefs and perceived coping deficiencies are associated with avoiding difficult tasks, decreased

life satisfaction, increased depression, low aspirations, and weak commitment to goals

(Bandura, 1997; Gignac & Gottlieb, 1996).

[I handle stress] as horribly as I manage money. I'm not good with it at all. I'm good at managing it for the exterior world, but internally I'm terrible at it. (CW, high-intent traditional student)

I don't know how to deal with [stress] -- 'cause I know these situations are gonna come up again and I don't know how to deal with them that I don't make the mistake and start overreacting. (UN, high-intent nontraditional student).

I'm just like "ahh, I can't handle stress." Like whenever stress happens I'll handle it, but I handle it very poorly. (LC, high-intent traditional student)

A number of high intent students appeared to have great difficulty moving forward and recovering from stress. Stress appeared to impede their functioning and in some instances immobilized them. Consistent with low coping self-efficacy, high intent students were more likely to dwell on obstacles, personal deficiencies, and want to give-up (Bandura, 1982; Bandura, 1997):

I can't do this anymore. I can't, I can't do it. I wanna give up, that's literally -- stress just makes me wanna just give up. (UN, high-intent nontraditional student)

[Stress is] really a big burden on my life -- I mean it causes me huge amounts of anxiety and when I get that I just -- I quit, you know? Instead of dealing with the stress I'd rather just -- I'm not going to deal with this, I'm just going to walk away from it. You know if I don't want to deal with it, I won't. Instead of moving forward and learning how to handle it better, no. (CW, high-intent traditional student)

When I think of stress, it's just not being able to do what I wanna do. Not being able to function as well as I know I can -- and that's a hindrance. (GG, high-intent traditional student)

Attempts by some high intent students to plan for a more promising future and use problem-focused-strategies seemed to be thwarted by an "inner critic" which produced

nagging self-doubt about whether they could accomplish their goals. Some high intent students not only appeared to lack the necessary coping skills to execute desired actions, but consistent with weak self-efficacy beliefs, they also lacked confidence that they could control events of importance (Bandura, 1997) and bring about positive changes in their lives:

I feel very stuck. Yes I do. Because when I think of exploring options on how to get out I can do it for a little bit. I'm like, "ok, I can apply for this grant and try to go to this school or try to see if I could work here for the summer." I explore those options for a little bit and then it's like that critic comes up in your head: "Well, you don't really have the money to do that right now and you really should just finish this class right now and do this job and do that", so I kinda like shut myself down before I even have the option of climbing out of it (GG, high-intent traditional student)

It just brought tears to my eyes to think that I could walk through those gates [of the university] this fall. So things like that make me think, "oh gosh, I can do it. I can do it." But in the back of my mind it's always, "I'm gonna quit school, I'm gonna quit school, I'm not gonna do this" (UN, high-intent nontraditional student)

The "inner-critic" that these students spoke of could be indicative of low self-esteem, which has been linked to negative coping tendencies (Folkman et al., 1986; Carver, Scheier & Weintraub, 1989), higher levels of stress (Abouserie, 1994), and is considered a retention barrier for community college students (Rendon, 1995).

Surprisingly, there were some high intent students who had positive views of how they managed stress despite the appearance of coping less than optimally:

I think I handle [stress] pretty well. I find myself drinking a lot because of it, but I feel like when I can put myself outside of the situation I can deal with it a lot better. (EF, high-intent nontraditional student)

I feel like I handle [stress] enough, I feel like I handle it to the surviving point. I'm like, "well, I haven't dropped out of school yet", even though there [were] plenty of times when I was like, "oh God, I can't do this anymore -- Frances take a break!" But I keep going. (GG, high-intent traditional student)

This finding conflicts with much of the research on the benefits of positive self-efficacy (e.g., Bandura, 1997; Zajacova, Lynch & Espenshade, 2005) and could be the result of coping beliefs that were incongruent with actual abilities (Bandura, 1982; Pajares & Miller, 1994), or the use of coping strategies that were incompatible with the requirements of the task (Abella & Heslin, 1989).

Coping Differences between Traditional and Nontraditional Students

While there were no major differences between the ways traditional and nontraditional students coped, traditional students were found to have a greater tendency to internalize stressful emotions, let these emotions build-up, and subsequently vent these emotions through crying and yelling. This could be indicative of these younger students still learning to regulate and manage their emotions, which is a major developmental task of college students according to Chickering and Reisser (1993).

Part II - Summary

While there were similarities in the ways students perceived and coped with stress, there were also fundamental differences between high and low intent students that appeared to moderate the impact of stress on well-being and functioning. Many low-intent students viewed their struggles as leading to opportunities for future growth and

benefit. Low-intent students more often accessed social support, utilized problem-focused strategies, and adjusted ineffective coping strategies.

Conversely, many high-intent students viewed stress as a chronic, long-term threat with little opportunity for growth or gain. Many of these students were unable to adjust their coping strategies in positive ways, and several possessed minimal or negative external support; or they failed to access the social resources they had. Having adequate support and strategies is vital to successfully managing stressful transitions (Schlossberg, et al., 1995). Lazarus and Folkman (1984) note that the more resources a person believes they can employ to counter a troublesome event, the less stress they will experience.

While students utilized multiple resources and strategies to help them cope with stress, few spoke of utilizing institutional resources for stress support. The implications of this may be especially significant for many high-intent students who lacked coping resources and perhaps could benefit most from the support services of SCC. Student awareness and utilization of stress support services offered by SCC will be explored in the next section.

Part III – Stress Support Services

Knowledge and Utilization of Institutional Support Services

This section will examine the interview findings related to the awareness and utilization participants have of institutional support services offered by SCC. This issue is important because effective student support services have been linked to community college student retention (Coll, 1995), and many stress and time management classes offered by colleges have had positive results in reducing stress levels (Morad, 1987;

Iskryan, 1993; Barrios; 1997). Bauman et al. (2004) assert that community colleges can assist students in managing stress by offering workshops and presentations that focus on building coping skills. At this point the reader should be reminded that the services SCC offers for stress support include stress and time management classes through the counseling department, individual counseling for basic stress-related issues, and referral services for more complex emotional health problems.

Knowledge of Services

Consistent with the literature (Bojuwoye, 2002; Scott, 2000), a vast majority of students were unaware of the stress support services offered by SCC. The two students who had an awareness of the stress management and study skills classes offered by the counseling department at SCC had learned of these offerings through friends:

I think they might have a course that works as a elective or one credit. I think they have some stress management classes but funny thing is I know somebody that took that and they had to drop it 'cause they were so stressed out! (GG, high-intent traditional student)

[I know] there are some lower [Student Success classes] where you go and they show you how to study and -- I know one of my friends took 'em. (BY, low-intent nontraditional student)

Utilization of Services

No students had personally utilized stress support services, either in the form of classes offered by the counseling department or through appointments with counselors to discuss personal issues. A few students did, however, utilize academic advising services and characterized their experiences as largely negative and impersonal:

Whenever I go to the counseling office I find that very stressful - holy cow! I remember I went in there when I first started at Sonora, I went in there and I was like "okay I don't know what I'm gonna need to take this semester, I don't know 'cause I just now moved here and I know I need to take classes, but what classes should I take?" So then I talked to -- I was trying to get an appointment with one of the counselors and they handed me a book and they handed me a registration form and they said, "just go through this and here." And they sat me down and they went to the next appointment. That was it, they didn't even... (LC, high-intent traditional student)

I feel like [the academic advising at Sonora] is kind of like the medical system these days: Get in, get out, get your [*expletive*], go. "I have 15 minutes to spare with you. Hi, how are you Jessica? Oh, hi Jamie, how are you?" Like they don't even know your name -- you know what I mean? So, yeah, I feel like they're there to serve a purpose for me. I'm like, "I need to see my transcripts, I need you to tell me what I need to do, thanks, have a great day." That's it. (DM, high-intent nontraditional student)

When students were asked if they would utilize stress support services at SCC if such services were available to them, many participants indicated that they would be unlikely to access these services. Reasons students cited for not utilizing stress support services included inadequate time and insufficient need:

I probably wouldn't have enough time and that would be just another stress to be like: "I have to go to this class now." I don't think I would utilize it very much honestly. (KV, low-intent traditional student)

[I have not] found myself in the need to -- in that big of an emergency at school that I needed to speak to a counselor here. But then again I pay money to go every week to my own [therapist] so I've never really set out to find help outside of that. (KB, low-intent nontraditional student)

I feel like even if I did go to a counselor it's nothing that -- they wouldn't tell me anything that I couldn't do myself, you know I can plan for myself and so I just feel like it's a waste of time almost I guess because I can do that on my own, you know? (FG, low-intent traditional student)

Several students also indicated that they would not utilize stress support services due to concerns of privacy and comfort, as well as the desire to keep personal issues separate from school:

I really don't think I would utilize them to be honest just 'cause I feel like the things I get stressed about are personal things like break-ups or family stuff or work and I'm kind of a private person and so I wouldn't want to come to [Sonora] and talk to [a counselor] about stress or anything like that. (UM, low-intent traditional student)

If I were to deal with some of my emotional problems I'd rather do that in a private setting like in a private medical setting as opposed to an educational institution. I like to keep those things separated in a way. (DW, high-intent traditional student)

I would go to someone that's kind of removed from the situation and then tell them about all my stuff. I just -- I wouldn't feel comfortable talking to somebody [here]. (DM, high-intent nontraditional student)

Of the students who were willing to access services for stress support at SCC, most established conditions, or qualifiers for usage, leaving it unclear as to whether they would actually utilize services:

I would [use the services] if it fit in my schedule. (GG, high-intent traditional student)

I have a pretty good support system with my friends and with a couple of people that I work with, but, I would consider it. I would take advantage of it if I could. I don't feel comfortable talkin' to strangers though unless it was my last resort. But I would maybe think about it. (FS, low-intent nontraditional student)

I might [use stress support services] if I feel overwhelmed, but it's not like I would use them on a regular basis. (SS, low-intent nontraditional student)

Interestingly, the one low-intent student who had minimal social support and was having difficulty managing stress indicated that she would be willing to utilize institutional support services:

[If the services were here at SCC] I would use them. (OH, low-intent nontraditional student.)

Suggestions for Services

When students were asked what services they would like to see offered by SCC, several mentioned services that already existed, such as stress management classes and counseling. This was likely due to their lack of knowledge of these offerings. Other suggestions relayed a desire for support to be provided by those with shared experiences:

I think maybe group meetings with other students that are kind of going through the same things you know where you can at least voice your opinion and get help from other students that are going through similar situations? (UN, high-intent nontraditional student)

Someone who will help you deal with everyday problems that you're going through, maybe someone who was a student who either was currently a student themselves or [has] been a student so they would understand, but who was also trained to counsel other individuals. That'd be awesome. 'Cause it's a lot easier when you're talking to someone who knows what you're going through. Because you know if they can relate to you then it definitely you know that helps a lot. (FS, low-intent nontraditional student)

Maybe group activities where other people are experiencing the same stress and you get to express yourself about what was happening in your life and they get to express themselves and kinda figure out ways to help each other. (BZ, low-intent traditional student)

Faculty Support

While knowledge and utilization of stress support services was limited, interactions with faculty about personal problems and issues were a more common occurrence. Students typically contacted instructors to explain class absences, late assignments, and poor academic performance. Such interactions were portrayed by students as largely positive and in some cases instrumental to their continued enrollment at SCC:

I wasn't really getting into my book the way I should and I'm like reading the chapter on the way -- on the bus ride to class, and trying to let everything absorb and that just became overwhelming and so luckily the professor, I talked to [him] about my situation and he said, "I have no problem with giving you a 'Y' [*no grade*] right now, you're a good student, make it up, get it to me and we'll go ahead and give you a grade." (OH, low-intent nontraditional student)

I got so sick and I was so sure this teacher's not gonna let me come back, most of them don't let you come back. And he was very, "if you think you can catch up, you can do it and come back." He's like, "all you did was miss a movie that was shown and you can go rent it yourself," so I did, and luckily he's a very nice, lenient instructor. (TL, high-intent traditional student)

I wasn't really getting everything done, but [my teacher] was really awesome and he really understood what I was going through and he was just a sweetheart, he just was really nice and he was just like "when you can get it done, get it done." (UM, low-intent traditional student)

The fact that many students communicated their problems to faculty first, may have interesting implications for how the institution can most effectively engage and support students who are overwhelmed. Informal interactions and connections with faculty are also posited to be an important factor in the persistence of community college students (LeSure-Lester, 2004; Pascarella, Smart & Ethington, 1986).

Differences in Institutional Support Needs

There were no major thematic differences between the institutional support needs of high and low intent students. The same followed for traditional and nontraditional students. While traditional-aged students did not speak of having different support needs themselves, some nontraditional students appeared to have negative attitudes and opinions towards what they perceived as the differential stress experiences and support needs of traditional aged students:

[SCC services should be geared toward] people that really deal with everyday life, I'm not talking like a high school person that comes right in out of high school....
(UN, high-intent nontraditional student)

I think [if they had a therapist at SCC] they would be so bombarded with everybody's personal issues and I think a lot of 18 and 19 and 20 year-olds are [dealing with issues like]: "my boyfriend broke up with me" -- they don't have -- I'm not saying that that's not a real issue, I just don't think that that should necessarily overtake your life such as like car accidents and deaths and things of that sort. (KS, low-intent nontraditional student)

I sat there and I watched some of these girls who are like 19 and living at home and didn't work going, "oh my God, I'm so stressed out." I'm like, "I will kill your whole family!" You know what I mean? I work two jobs and I go to school!
(DM, high-intent nontraditional student)

Part III - Summary

Most students had neither knowledge of, nor the desire to access stress support services offered by SCC. Time constraints, privacy concerns, and perceived lack of need were the most frequently mentioned reasons for not accessing services. The avenue that appears to hold the most promise in connecting overwhelmed students to the institution, is faculty, who were seen by many students as the most accessible individuals to discuss their problems with and were viewed as institutional protagonists.

Part IV – Persistence Intentions

Through reporting the many factors that appear to play a role in how participants view and cope with stress, the researcher has developed a contextual background for what will be discussed in the final section. This final section articulates, through the direct words of students who were interviewed -- why they have -- or have not -- thought about leaving college.

Should I Stay or Should I Go?

In Bean and Metzner's (1985) framework of nontraditional student attrition, the construct of intent to leave is posited to be a strong predictor of actual persistence decisions. Environmental variables such as finances, outside encouragement, and family and work responsibilities are expected to influence one's intent to leave most directly through the psychological outcomes of goal commitment, utility, satisfaction and stress. While the environmental variables, and how students perceived and managed them, were the subject of earlier sections of the chapter, the role these factors played in the psychological outcomes of students, and subsequently their persistence intentions, will be revealed in this final section through statements students made about their reasons for staying in school or potentially dropping out.

Those with Low Intent to Leave College

Most low-intent students had strong internal motivation to persist in college and complete a degree despite demanding external factors. Motivation, effort, or drive is indicative of commitment and is central to persistence according to Tinto (1987). Strong

goal commitment has been identified as an important factor in the persistence decisions of community college students (Pascarella & Chapman, 1983). When it came to the goal of completing college, low-intent students viewed their stress as a challenge and were not willing to allow anything to discourage or dissuade them from achieving their objective:

I'm learning to cope with [stress] because regardless of all that happens I'm not finding that I'm dropping out of school. I mean sometimes it's like "ohhh." But there's no way that I will drop out of school I do not care what happens. (BY, low-intent nontraditional student)

I am able to [stay in college]. I mean I'm not gonna say it's easy 'cause it's not easy at all, but I think when you're focused to do something you tend to get it done aside from all the stresses. (KV, low-intent traditional student)

I want it so bad. I want a degree really bad. I've always been taught when you start something you finish it no matter what happens. (KS, low-intent nontraditional student)

Low-intent students were optimistic and excited about the future and were confident that their efforts would yield substantial results. The added stress of trying to complete a degree along with other responsibilities was seen by these individuals as a justifiable and necessary transaction for better life opportunities. They not only had strong goal commitment, they also had positive beliefs in what Bean and Metzner (1985) describe as the utility, or practical value, of their education:

I cannot wait [until] I graduate so I can hopefully find a better job that I can work my way up to eventually become part of an administration of a credit union. I mean seeing the day-to-day work and meeting people who hold jobs that I eventually wanna hold just excites me even more; it makes me wanna get [school] done faster. (KV, low-intent traditional student)

School right now is very important 'cause the way I see it I can either spend the next 7-8 years trying to be what I want to become, or I can spend it wishing that I could be something different than what I am professionally. So I mean dropping out of school is out of the question (BY, low-intent nontraditional student)

There's so many more things that I want for myself then to ever get the thought in my head to quit school and just work at some office or I don't know what people do when they quit school, but I couldn't imagine myself doing things like that -- I want so much more out of life and I know that the key is education, so that's what keeps me in school (UM, low-intent traditional student)

In addition to powerful internal motivation, low-intent participants with children had compelling external reasons to complete school. While the results of research on the impact of family responsibilities on persistence is mixed (Chartrand, 1992; Leppel, 2002; Newman, 2005), in the current study most students viewed having children as an opportunity to role model college attendance and to provide a better life for their families. This motivational effect of having children was similarly found in studies of nontraditional students by Levin (2007) and Leppel (2002).

I think what drives me the most is I'm not responsible only for me, but I'm responsible for my children as well. So they're one of the things that drives me the most 'cause I want them to not only have a good future where I can provide for them and I can afford to pay for their college -- which my parents didn't do -- I have to pay for my own college. But I also want them to see that no matter what situation you're in you can always go back to school and you can always make something of yourself. (BY, low-intent nontraditional student)

With a kid it kinda drove me a little more. I can't ask him to go to college if I don't have a college degree, that's kinda ridiculous you know? It's an example that I really need to set for him and there was no better time than now to go. So here I am. (KB, low intent nontraditional student)

[The reason] I came back to school actually is to be able to better support [my children] and be a better role model. I plan for them all to go to college and continue on and do well for themselves and so I am trying to set the example. (SS, low-intent nontraditional student)

External support for school attendance from family and employers was also an important factor for continued enrollment that was mentioned by several low-intent participants. Bean and Metzner (1985) consider outside encouragement and support to be significant positive environmental variables involved in college persistence.

[My boss] says he's really proud of me that I'm going to school and that I'm getting my life together. He said whatever hours I decide to work were fine with him, he'll try to work with me as best as he can. He's encouraging me to finish school. He's not saying, "oh I wish you weren't at school and you would work more hours." He would rather I spend more time in school than work basically. (FS, low-intent nontraditional student)

My biggest help would probably be my mother-in-law. She is the biggest help. I would not be able -- she's 100% supportive, always there for me, always helping, there with the kids day and night. Doing everything to help me so I could try to focus on school. So she's 100% wonderful. If it wasn't for her I would really be struggling, so she's wonderful. (SS, low-intent nontraditional student)

The main person is my husband. I think if he wasn't -- having children -- if he wasn't there then it would be really hard; harder than it is. I mean he's very supportive and me having to do homework -- he's really, really supportive. (BY, low-intent nontraditional student)

Those with High Intent to Leave College

While balancing multiple responsibilities and dealing with financial problems were identified as stressful for virtually all participants, high-intent students tended to allow these external demands to intrude upon their persistence intentions. Leaving college, if even temporarily, was seen as viable option for several of these students to attend to finances, determine their educational goals, and reduce stress levels:

If I leave [Sonora] this semester that means that I'll have more time to dedicate to all the other issues in my life that are very stressful and try to get a handle on them, like money. [I could] save up more money so that I won't have to worry about taking the time off to make my car payment or I'll have money saved up and then it will also help me reevaluate my major and what I wanna do, where I'm going with this whole college career thing and it'll give me time outside of the college bubble to look at life without all the stresses that come with college. (LC, high-intent traditional student)

If I would be going to appeal [my financial aid] right now, I would probably take the summer off and just try to be a stewardess for a few years and when I feel more responsible and more organized and more willing to do something positive with the debt that I'm putting myself into -- then I'll choose to go back to school. (DW, high-intent traditional student)

A number of high-intent students appeared to have weak goal commitment.

Completing college seemed to be less of a priority compared to other concerns, and may have been the path of least resistance for those seeking to reduce stress. Chartand (1990) found that students with multiple demands are more likely to give up the role or roles that are least salient or central to them.

[I have thought about leaving] 'cause there are times instead of being at class I can actually do something with myself, like taking a nap or watching a TV show that I've been wanting to watch. Something like that. (TL, high-intent traditional student)

[School is] the last thing that I've added to my schedule, so you know, "last one hired, first one fired" kind of deal, you know what I'm saying? (DM, high-intent nontraditional student)

Part IV - Summary

Most low-intent students refused to allow stressful external demands or events to impact their intent to complete college. These individuals were highly motivated and did

not allow stress to inhibit their long range goals and optimism. High intent students were more equivocal and had greater uncertainty as to whether they would, or could continue enrollment due to a combination of weak goal commitment and stressful factors such as financial problems and difficulty balancing multiple demands.

Summary of Findings

Stress for many students interviewed had an adverse impact on their academic performance, physical health, and emotional well-being. While demographic and background variables such as age, marital status, hours worked, presence or absence of children, and number of credit hours were not found to predict stress levels or intent to leave, gender did significantly contribute to predicting stress levels, with female students reporting significantly higher levels of perceived stress than males.

There were no significant differences in levels of perceived stress between traditional and nontraditional students. There were also no major differences in perceptions of stress or coping strategies between traditional and nontraditional students, although traditional students did have a greater tendency to cope through internalization of emotions and subsequent explosive emotional venting.

Stressors for both traditional and nontraditional students in the sample were primarily related to the balancing of multiple roles and responsibilities, such as work, school, friends, and family. Finances were also identified as a major source of stress by most participants. While the stressors of traditional and nontraditional student were mostly alike, some differences did emerge. Nontraditional students more often reported family responsibilities, lack of confidence in school, and feeling “off-time” compared to

peers, while traditional students reported more difficulty with adjusting to adult responsibilities and stress related to the inclusion of parents' income in financial aid formulas.

Several differences were found between high and low intent to leave students, with high intent students reporting significantly higher levels of perceived stress than low intent students. Other differences included low intent students having a tendency to appraise their stressful experiences as more of a challenge, while high intent students viewed their experiences as somewhat more threatening and intractable. Coping strategies used by the interview sample were a mix of emotion-focused and problem-focused strategies, with low intent students reporting greater use of problem-focused strategies, such as time-management and direct action, and high intent students reporting coping deficits and more extensive use of negative, escape-avoidant strategies such as excessive alcohol use and self-isolation. Low intent students had a greater tendency to both possess and access external support resources including family, friends, and professionals. Compared with high intent students, low intent students were more optimistic and realistic in their beliefs about how well they managed stress, and they were more likely to adjust ineffective coping strategies.

While low intent students reported strong commitment and motivation to complete college, most high intent students were equivocal about whether they would continue in college the following semester and were open to the idea of taking time off to reduce stress and dedicate attention to other responsibilities.

Knowledge and utilization of stress support services offered by Sonora Community College (SCC) was minimal. Most students indicated that even if they had known services existed they would not have accessed them. Reasons given for not wanting to use services included privacy concerns, discomfort sharing personal information, time constraints, and lack of need. Students did, however, communicate their problems to faculty, typically to explain absences or to get extensions on late assignments.

In the next chapter the researcher will discuss the results, connecting the findings to existing theory and literature, while developing a set of theoretical propositions for future testing in the community college setting.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Purpose

The purpose of this exploratory study was to gain insight into how nontraditional community college students perceive and cope with stress, to discover how such experiences relate to persistence intentions, and to gain an understanding of the institutional support needs of this population.

This objective was accomplished through a sequential mixed-methods study that utilized surveys to compare the stress levels of community college students with high and low intent to leave college, as well as traditional and nontraditional students. Surveys were also used to identify and recruit an interview sample of students experiencing high levels of perceived stress who reported either high or low intent to leave college. Through in-depth interviews, these groups were compared and contrasted to ascertain their perceptions of stress, coping processes, and knowledge and utilization of institutional stress support services.

The research questions this study sought to answer were as follows:

1. In a sample of community college students who report experiencing stress, what role does stress play in their intentions to leave college?
 - a. What differences, if any, are there in the stress levels of community college students who have high intent to leave college versus those who have low intent to leave?

- b. What differences, if any, are there in the stress levels of traditional versus nontraditional community college students?
 - c. What differences, if any, are there in how stress is perceived and managed by community college students who have high intent to leave college versus those who have low intent to leave?
 - d. What differences, if any, are there in how stress is perceived and managed by traditional versus nontraditional community college students?
2. What do community college students who report experiencing stress describe as their institutional support needs?
- a. What knowledge do students have of stress support services offered by the community college and to what extent do they utilize these services?
 - b. What differences, if any, are there in the institutional support needs of traditional versus nontraditional community college students?
 - c. What differences, if any, are there in the institutional support needs of those who have high intent to leave college versus those who have low intent to leave college?

Frameworks and Propositions

The theoretical frameworks used were Lazarus and Folkman's Theory of Cognitive Appraisal (1984) as a means of understanding students' perceptions of stress and subsequent coping choices; Schlossberg et al.'s (1995) Transition Model to explore the balance of coping assets and liabilities of individuals in the areas of "situation",

“self”, “support”, “strategies”; and Bean and Metzner’s (1985) Nontraditional Student Attrition Model as a means of framing the impact of external demands and psychological outcomes, such as stress, on the persistence intentions of community college students.

According to Lazarus and Folkman (1984), primary appraisals, or perceptions of whether events are stressful, are influenced by an interaction of individual factors, such as commitments and beliefs, and situational factors such as the timing and duration of stressors. Once a person has appraised an event as stressful, whether they consider it a challenge or threat, they must determine what resources they possess to manage the situation. These “secondary” appraisals of one’s coping resources are the foundation for Schlossberg et al.’s (1995) Transition Model, which frame the coping assets and liabilities of individuals in the areas of “situation”, “self”, “support” and “strategies”. If an individual has a greater balance of assets to liabilities in these four areas, or the four “S’s” as Schlossberg et al. (1995) labeled them, they are expected to handle the stress of transitions more successfully. These four areas of resources and deficits are the organizational basis for interpreting the findings of the study and for presenting a set of eight propositions that are grounded in the literature and the findings, but are largely untested in the community college setting and are presented as important considerations for practice and future research.

The chapter begins with a comparison of the resources and deficiencies of high and low intent students within the framework of Schlossberg’s Transition Model (1995). Where there were differences between traditional and nontraditional community college students, they are noted. Major findings are integrated into a concluding section on the

role of stress in persistence intentions as well as the implications of stress and stressors for different vulnerable populations within the community college. This is followed by a discussion of limitations encountered in the study, implications for practice that are based on the eight propositions developed through the study, and suggestions for future research related to stress and persistence in the community college.

Context of Discussion

Research has shown an increasing prevalence of stress, anxiety, and depression in college student populations (Benton, 2006; Kadison & DiGeronimo, 2004; Robotham & Julian, 2006; Sax, 1997), and in light of recent tragic events at Virginia Tech and Northern Illinois University, dealing with student stress, and all of its potential outcomes, takes on great urgency. As a whole, the community college sample studied was experiencing higher levels of perceived stress than a normative sample tested by the authors of the Perceived Stress Scale (Cohen & Williamson, 1988). While caution must be exercised in the interpretation of this finding since the normative sample is over 20 years old, this finding is consistent with other literature that has shown college students to report higher levels of stress than the general population (Cochran & Hale, 1985). All interview participants in the current study, regardless of how they perceived stress or how they were coping, experienced at least some adverse effects from stress. Stress for those in the sample manifested itself in a myriad of overt and covert ways including anxiety, fatigue, depression, irritability and angry outbursts. The situations that appear to have triggered stress for these students are the subject of the first “S” in Schlossberg et al.’s framework: “Situation”.

Situation

According to Schlossberg et al. (1995), aspects of one's situation which can influence the management of stress include the timing and duration of a transition, role changes, and concurrent stressors. Stressors for most students in this study were concurrent and centered around finances and conflicting role demands, particularly related to balancing work, school, social and family life. Concurrent stressors, according to Schlossberg et al. (1995), are expected to have a greater impact on the individual and have been associated with stronger reactions to stress (Fiske & Chiriboga, 1990). Due to busy schedules and competing demands, students spoke of the pressure of having to sacrifice major activities or roles. This is consistent with a study by Kember and Leung (2004) which found that for adult part-time students, sacrifice and negotiation often had to occur in the realms of self, work, family and social life in order to accommodate school attendance. Many students in the current study complained of having to sacrifice leisure activities and much needed "down-time". This finding is unfortunate because leisure activities are important for stress reduction, and beliefs in the value of such strategies have been linked to greater physical and psychological well-being (Iwasaki, 2003).

Consistent with challenge appraisals, low intent students tended to view their stressful situations as resolvable and expressed optimism and confidence that they would be able to put forth the necessary effort to successfully overcome their obstacles. They viewed their stressful situations as justifiable in the interest of achieving their educational goals and many were excited about the future. Perhaps most importantly, from a

situational perspective, they saw their stress as time-limited; as a circumstance that would change for the better once they completed college. The duration of a stressor is considered a pivotal situational factor in how individuals manage change according to Schlossberg et al. (1995). The authors note that individuals are better able to handle stressful transitions that they consider of limited duration.

Unlike low intent students, most high intent students had difficulty viewing their situations as temporary and as leading to positive outcomes. Many spoke of stress as if it were a perpetual, hopeless condition over which they exercised little control. Their resignation and apparent feelings of helplessness suggest an external locus of control, which is the belief that external forces, such as luck or fate, are responsible for outcomes in one's life (Weiner, 1986). Bean and Eaton (2000) suggest that students with an external locus of control are "less likely to be motivated to produce the effort to perform well academically, since he [or she] perceives that the situation is not within his [or her] control" (p. 54). Since many high intent students appeared to view their stress as unending and unchangeable, it is understandable that they might look to the future with trepidation and uncertainty. Schlossberg et al. (1995) notes that uncertainty about the duration of stressful events is "connected with perhaps the greatest degree of stress and negative effect" (p. 56).

While stressors were largely similar between traditional and nontraditional students, some unique differences did emerge. Several traditional-aged students reported having great difficulty adjusting to adult roles and responsibilities. Consistent with the developmental literature, these students appeared to be experiencing upheaval associated

with establishing identity and achieving independence from family (Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Erikson, 1980). What may have contributed to this struggle was the inclusion of parents' income in the calculation of financial aid awards. Economic independence is one of the hallmarks of adult identity and separation from parents (Moore & Hotch, 1981), yet federal financial aid guidelines label those under the age of 24 as "dependents" of their parents, and calculate awards based on the assumption that families will contribute to the cost of college attendance. This proved problematic for some traditional-aged students whose parents were not willing, or able to contribute funds toward their education. As one traditional student said: "My mom's a teacher, so we already know she's not making any money, but they look at what she makes as if that is -- like she has all this money to give me to help me live."

Unique stressors reported by nontraditional students related to school and family. Many nontraditional students reported experiencing stress related to the transition of returning to school later in life. Several spoke of the difficulties of feeling "off-time" with their peers, who they perceived as being at more advanced stages of careers and education. When one's expectations of the appropriate sequence of life events is at odds with the reality of their situation, it can produce strain (Neugarten & Neugarten, 1987). Several nontraditional students, due to extended absences from school, also reported a lack of confidence in their academic skills, particularly related to test-taking, paper writing, and math ability. This finding is consistent with numerous studies of the academic experiences of retuning adult students (Benshoff, 1993; Birchak, 1992; Broderick, 2003; Durodoye, Harris & Bolden, 2000; Haggan, 2000).

Managing family responsibilities, along with other demands, were also reported as stressful by nontraditional students in the interview group. Students with children expressed feelings of guilt and frustration at having insufficient time to devote to their families. Surprisingly, having children did not predict higher levels of stress in the overall survey sample. This conflicts with Newman's (2005) finding of a predictive relationship between the presence of children and perceived stress levels for community college students. One explanation for this discrepancy is that at least for some students, the practical needs of their children were being met by supportive others, which likely helped buffer stress in this domain. Chartrand's (1992) study of nontraditional students similarly found that family responsibilities did not contribute to stress levels, and while the author found this inexplicable, a plausible answer appeared to be her concurrent finding that support from family and friends helped buffer stress. Another explanation lies in the apparent paradoxical nature of stress and having children. While those with children spoke of family demands as being stressful, most also reported that the desire to provide a better life for their families and to role-model college attendance was highly motivational. It should be cautioned that the generalizability of this finding is restricted given the small number of students in the interview population who had children. Aspects of "situation" experienced by participants in this study lead to the first proposition for further investigation.

Proposition 1: Community college students who experience concurrent stressors and who view their situations as insoluble and unending, are more likely to view stress as a threat and are more likely to leave college.

Self

According to the transition framework (Schlossberg et al., 1995) aspects of self that can influence how an individual copes with stress are personal characteristics such as age and gender, and psychological resources such as commitments and outlook on life.

Demographic Characteristics

The only demographic variable measured that predicted stress was gender, with female students experiencing higher levels of stress than males. Much of the research comparing stress levels between male and female students has been conducted at four-year colleges and has found female college students to experience higher levels of stress than males related to academics, role conflict, and interactions with the university (Abouserie, 1994; Bojuwoye, 2002; Iskyan, 1993; Misra et al., 2000; Perrine, 2001). The research on gender differences in stress levels in community college settings is sparse. One such study by Pierceall and Keim (2007) found that female community college students experienced higher levels of stress than males, but the authors failed to explicate why, only stating that their results were supported by another study that was conducted at a university, not a community college. Newman (1995) found there were no differences in stress levels of male and female community college students and reasoned that it was due to their having similar roles and responsibilities. Descriptive data from surveys in the current study did not reveal any major gender differences in marital status, having children, hours worked, or school enrollment status (see Table 5.1).

Table 5.1
Family, Work, and School Responsibilities by Gender

	Male (n=100)	Female (n=120)
Married	16%	18.5%
Have Children	17%	22.5%
Work > 30 hours	59%	57.5%
Work < 30 hours	41%	42.5%
Full-time student	43%	39.2%
Part-time student	57%	60.8%

Despite having similar responsibilities, it is possible that women perceived their roles as more stressful, or that these demands had a greater impact on them. Consistent with this interpretation, Home (1997) found that perceptions of role demands by nontraditional female students were better predictors of stress and role strain than actual role situations. Compared with nontraditional male students, research has found that nontraditional female students tend to report higher levels of stress related to family demands (Gilbert & Holahan, 1982; Iskyan, 1993), are more likely to add new roles such as school and work to existing roles (Gilbert & Holahan, 1982), and are more likely than males to leave college due to stressors external to school (Johnson, Schwartz & Bower, 2000; Stolar, 1991; Tinto, 1993). Despite progress made by women to expand their role in society, expectations regarding traditional family responsibilities appear to still linger. Relating this to college attrition, Tinto (1993) notes that the reasons women leave college “mirror the existence of wider social forces which continue, albeit in diminished fashion, to mold the expectations of people regarding the role women ought to play in society” (p. 77).

Another possible explanation for why women reported experiencing more stress is research which has found that women have a greater tendency than men to disclose when they are experiencing distress (Komiya, Good & Sherrod, 2000; Snell et al., 1989). This greater comfort with communicating problems to others also relates to the emphasis on close relationships and interpersonal connections that are considered central to women's identity formation (Gilligan, 1982; Josselson, 1987). The notion that women were more open and willing to talk about their problems is supported by the greater number of women who were willing to participate in interviews in the current study.

While some research has suggested that gender differences in coping may account for differential stress levels, Aldwin's (2007) extensive review of the literature discovered that the only consistent finding with regard to coping differences is the greater reliance of women on social support. Reliable comparisons of coping strategies based on gender could not be made in the current study due to the limited number of males in the interview sample. These findings lead to a proposition regarding female community college students:

Proposition 2: Female community college students are more likely to perceive high levels of stress from demands outside of school and are more likely than male students to leave college as a result of these demands.

No significant differences in perceived stress levels were found between traditional and nontraditional students. This finding conflicts with research that has shown perceived stress to decrease with age (Cohen & Williamson, 1988; Hamarat et al.,

2001). It should be noted that these studies did not directly compare stress levels of traditional and nontraditional community college students. The findings of the current study are more closely analogous to the outcomes obtained by Newman (2005) and Peirceall and Keim (2007) who found that stress levels in community college students did not differ significantly between traditional and nontraditional students. Newman (2005) reasoned that this finding was due to traditional students having similar responsibilities and stressors to nontraditional students. While nontraditional students did have more family responsibilities, the findings of the current study generally support Newman's (2005) interpretation, as traditional and nontraditional students had similar external demands, particularly related to work and finances. The next proposition is based on the findings of similar stress levels and demands of traditional and nontraditional students.

Proposition 3: Traditional and nontraditional-aged students in the community college are equally as likely to experience high levels of stress related to external demands.

Coping Self-Efficacy Beliefs

Self-efficacy beliefs are related to the level of confidence one has in his or her ability to execute necessary actions to achieve a desired outcome (Bandura, 1982). Low intent students in this study tended to express positive, but tempered views about how well they believed they managed stressful events. Students spoke of being able to manage some situations better than others and of coping skills that were in some instances strong, and in other instances improving or in need of improvement. Rather

than being a fixed trait, judgments of self-efficacy are task and domain specific (Bandura, 1986), which may explain why students believed they managed some situations better than others. Of interest in this study is the finding that low intent students had positive coping self-efficacy beliefs related to college completion. While acknowledging it would be difficult and involve a great deal of effort, low intent students expressed confidence that they would be able to successfully manage their stress in the interest of accomplishing their educational goals. Confidence in one's ability to manage stress is associated with challenge appraisals (Bjork & Cohen, 1993) and reduced emotional distress (Aldwin & Revenson, 1987). Positive self-efficacy in the academic realm has been associated with better academic performance (Chemers, Hu & Garcia, 2001; Zajacova, Lynch & Espenshade, 2005) and higher levels of persistence (Torres & Solberg, 2001). That many low intent students believed they could competently manage their stressors and complete school suggests not only self-efficacy, but also the trait of optimism. Optimists "routinely maintain higher levels of subjective well being during times of stress than do people who are less optimistic" (Scheier & Carver, 1993, p. 27).

Many high intent students reported having little to no confidence in their ability to manage stress. Negative beliefs about coping efficacy may have contributed to a sense that the environment was uncontrollable and threatening. Consistent with findings by Skinner and Brewer (2002), high intent students with low coping expectancies in the current study experienced higher threat appraisals. While several high intent students expressed little confidence in their ability to cope with stress, some expressed the belief that they were managing stress well. This finding is surprising given the apparent

disjuncture between these beliefs and actual coping outcomes. This finding also appears to be at odds with the formidable literature on the benefits of positive self-efficacy beliefs (e.g., Bandura, 1997; Zajacova, Lynch & Espenshade, 2005). One explanation for this finding is that these individuals may have used incongruent strategies, or perhaps they did not competently execute the correct strategies. Mismatching coping strategies with the situation (i.e. using emotion-focused strategies in situations that are changeable or problem-focused strategies in situations that are not changeable) can lead to increased distress (Abella & Heslin, 1989). Another explanation is that students reduced their coping outcome expectations to the extent that handling stress to the point of “barely surviving”, as one high intent student described it, was not only viewed as adequate, but was seen as successful management of stress. Another explanation, which seems most plausible given the difficulties high intent students were having managing stress, is that the coping efficacy beliefs of some students did not match their actual coping abilities. Bandura (1982) notes that “the relationship between actual and self-perceived coping efficacy is far from perfect” (p. 136). According to Bandura (1982), “faulty self-knowledge” or “misjudgment of task requirements” can contribute to this discrepancy (p. 129). Schunk (1996) notes that “High self-efficacy will not produce competent performances when requisite ability, knowledge, or skill is lacking” (p. 5). An example of this mismatch in efficacy beliefs and ability is illustrated in a study by Pajares and Miller (1994) that found a majority of students had a tendency to overestimate their abilities when asked to predict their performance on math tasks.

Hardiness

Some low intent students in this study reported that stress was necessary to keep them motivated and engaged. These individuals appeared to thrive on stress, seeking out new challenges and deliberately adding tasks and responsibilities to already hectic schedules. Moore, Burrows and Dalziel (1992) suggest that a moderate amount of stress is necessary for achievement, productivity and motivation. The findings of this study suggest that the threshold for “moderate” amounts of stress may actually be quite high for some students. These students were likely experiencing eustress, or positive stress (Selye, 1974). Eustress is a positive form of stress that “can provide the extra courage, energy, and drive needed to excel in a demanding career or in the fulfillment of a personal goal.” (Cloud, 1991). While not all low intent students were experiencing positive stress, all appeared able and willing to weather stress in the interest of completing college. That these students were able to tolerate high levels of stress and function satisfactorily suggests the trait of hardiness. Hardiness is a personality factor that consists of having commitment to goals, viewing difficult situations as challenging, and feeling one can control and influence important events in one’s life (Kobasa, 1979). Hardiness to stress has been associated with better physical and emotional health (Kobasa, 1979; Rhodewalt & Zone, 1989), more positive appraisals of stress (Rhodewalt & Zone, 1989), greater use of active coping strategies (Maddi & Hightower, 1999), and an increased likelihood of college persistence (Lifton, Seay & Bushko, 2004).

Goals and Commitments

Low intent students reported that they were highly committed to the goal of completing college. According to Tinto (1987), goal commitment is “a person’s commitment to the educational and occupational goals one holds for oneself.” Goal commitment has been connected to higher intent to persist (Allen & Nora, 1995), and has been found to be an especially important factor in persistence decisions for students in two-year colleges (Pascarella & Chapman, 1983).

Low intent students seemed able to transform the meaning of stress into a challenge when it came to the goal of finishing college. One reason for this apparent transformation may have been that it was consistent with their goals. Several studies support this interpretation. Lowe and Bennett (2003) found that viewing stressful events as consistent with one’s personal goals, or motivationally congruent, is central to positive reappraisal or reframing of otherwise adverse events. Santiago-Rivera, Bernstein and Gard (1995) found that those who consider achievement important have a greater tendency to appraise stress as challenging and use more problem-focused strategies. Stress appeared to have minimal impact on their educational aspirations and their beliefs that they would reach their goals successfully. The strength of their motivation may have helped buffer the effects of stress. Struthers (1995) discovered that motivation, along with coping style, played a significant role in buffering stress in achievement situations. High levels of stress and challenge in the presence of high intrinsic motivation have been associated with high levels of academic achievement (Kahoe & McFarland, 1975).

That low intent students were willing to persist in pursuit of their educational goals despite high levels of stress suggest that it was important and meaningful to them. Novacek and Lazarus (1990) note that commitment connotes effort and striving in the face of distress and obstacles. The authors found that individuals are willing to invest more effort into commitments that are important to them and that they expect to achieve. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) note that “The depth with which a commitment is held determines the amount of effort a person is willing to put forth to ward off threats to that commitment” (p. 61). The obvious paradox, however, is that the greater one’s stake in a goal, the greater is their vulnerability to harm or threat in that area of commitment. In her study of factors related to nontraditional student adjustment, Chartrand (1990) found that those who had a higher commitment to the student role actually experienced higher levels of stress. While the author labeled this an unexpected finding, and attributed it to heavy demands in other role areas, it is not surprising that individuals would experience increased stress in attempting to preserve a high stakes role under the onslaught of competing demands.

As expected, those with high intent to leave were somewhat less certain about whether they would continue in college. External demands and stressors appeared to play a consequential role in their persistence intentions with a break from school seen as a viable option to deal with financial issues, relieve stress, and develop goals for the future. While Sandler (2002) found stress to have a negative impact on goal commitment, it is unclear in the present study whether high intent students had weak goal commitments to begin with or whether stress, along with other factors, eroded initially strong

commitments. Since this study did not measure goal commitment or stress levels of students at college entry, this cannot be answered with certainty, but future studies may wish to longitudinally examine the role of stress on goal commitment.

Some high intent students who considered leaving suggested their hiatus from college would only be temporary. This pattern of intermittent enrollment corresponds with the survey findings that almost half (45%) of participants had dropped out of college at some point in the past. Labeled “stopouts” in the higher education literature, Bonham and Luckie (1993) note that these college students “are persons who have not accomplished their [educational] goals but plan to do so in the future” (p. 258). Reasons cited most frequently for past departure on surveys included personal problems, financial problems and work related issues. These findings correspond with other research on reasons for intermittent patterns of enrollment for community college students, and attest to the complexity of both the internal and external demands in their lives (Bonham & Luckie, 1993; Michigan State Board of Education, 1990). Such enrollment patterns are problematic because they lead to extended graduation times, the depletion of financial aid (Walker, 2006), and a lower probability of earning a degree (Avalos, 1996; Horn, 1998). Even if a student intends to return to the institution, research has shown that students in two-year public colleges who leave before their second year are as likely to dropout as they are to return within five years, and are more likely to permanently leave than students in four-year colleges (Horn, 1998). Findings related to personal values, goals and self-efficacy beliefs form the basis of the next proposition.

Proposition 4: Community college students who experience high levels of stress are more likely to leave college if they lack goal commitment and have negative or unrealistic coping self-efficacy beliefs.

Support

Schlossberg et al.'s (1995) transition framework views support as essential to coping with stressful events. The types of support included in the framework are intimate relationships, networks of friends, family units, and the institutions to which people belong.

Personal and Professional Support

The presence and utilization of social resources appeared to play an important role for participants in how they appraised and coped with stress. As predicted by multiple studies, the greater tendency of low intent students to possess and access social support appears to have acted as a stress buffer and enhanced their ability to cope (DeLongis, Folkman & Lazarus, 1988; Kahn & Williams, 2003; McClary, 1990; Napoli & Wortman, 1998). Family members, friends and outside professionals offered both practical and emotional support in the form of advice, sympathy, and direct aid. Low intent participants who sought professional help from therapists and doctors described this support as critical to helping them learn effective techniques to manage stress, anxiety and depression. For low intent participants with children, utilitarian support from family members in the form of childcare, housework, and financial assistance was identified as essential to their continued enrollment in school. This positive role of outside encouragement and support on college persistence is confirmed by numerous studies

(Bean & Metzner, 1985; Cabrera, Nora & Castaneda, 1993; Chartrand, 1992; Sandler, 2001).

The presence of social support resources may also help explain why low intent students were better able to view their stressful circumstances as challenging. Folkman and Lazarus (1985) posit that social support networks, whether or not the individual draws on them, can influence whether stress is experienced as a challenge or a threat. Mikulincer and Florian (1995), found that individuals with higher challenge appraisals in stressful situations were more likely to seek social support and utilize problem-focused coping strategies. The relationship between greater availability of social support and positive coping efforts is not coincidental. Dunkel-Schetter, Folkman and Lazarus (1987) found that coping is a stronger correlate of social support than person and situational factors. The authors reasoned that positive coping makes it easier for others to offer support, and that this support in turn helps influence the way individuals cope. That many low intent students sought support from close, empathic others, suggests that the quality of support was important to them. McClary (1990) notes that from a developmental perspective, social support originating from trusted, intimate relationships is essential in helping individuals manage stressful life transitions.

High intent students tended to have fewer social support resources, which may have contributed to their views of stress as more threatening. Many of these students were unlikely to access support even in instances where it was available and accessible. While some high intent students mentioned the desire to avoid burdening others as a reason for not accessing support, others perceived that individuals in their lives were

unsupportive, and in some cases antagonistic. Given these attitudes and perceptions, it is understandable why most high intent students did not rely on social support to help them cope with stress. This finding confirms research that has shown that not only objective availability, but perceptions about the availability and quality of support, are important factors in how individuals appraise and cope with stress (Fry, 1989; Lowenthal & Weiss, 1976; Perrine, 2001).

Another reason why some high intent students avoided accessing social support was related to their greater tendency to withdraw from social contact when they experienced stress, anxiety or depression. By avoiding, rather than engaging the social environment, these students had less opportunity to attract support which likely exacerbated their symptoms (Bergdahl & Bergdahl, 2002). That high intent students were less likely to seek outside support to help manage these feelings, and were more likely to isolate themselves corresponds with a study by Karademas and Kalantzi-Azizi (2003) that found that students who appraise stressful events as most threatening, experienced greater psychological symptoms and had a greater likelihood to cope through self-isolation.

Institutional Support

No major differences were found between high and low intent students nor between nontraditional and traditional students in their institutional support needs. Most students who were interviewed reported having minimal knowledge of stress support services offered by Sonora Community College. Unfortunately, this finding is all too common among college student populations (Bojuwoye, 2002; Scott, 2000). Bojuwoye

(2002) found that colleges often provide insufficient information about institutional support services to students. While Gelso and McKenzie (1973) found that students who had more written and oral information about college support services were more likely to use them, the results of the current study suggest that knowledge alone would have been insufficient to bring about utilization of services. Most students in the current study mentioned that even if they had known stress support services existed, they would have been unlikely to use them. Stolar (1991) similarly discovered that awareness is not adequate to bring about utilization of services, especially for those who may be at greatest risk for dropping out of college. While some studies have found that those experiencing higher levels of stress were more willing to seek counseling support (Constantine, Wilton & Caldwell, 2003; Kahn & Williams, 2003), these studies were primarily conducted in four-year, residential colleges where students are likely to have different issues (Coll, 1995) and may have different attitudes towards counseling.

Consistent with multiple studies, reasons students gave for not using services included discomfort with talking to a stranger about personal problems, privacy concerns, embarrassment related to going to the counseling center, insufficient time, and feelings that stress could be managed. (Ballenger, 1999; Birchak, 1992; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Rasor, Grill & Barr, 1999). Given their higher levels of social support, it is understandable why many low intent students may have felt they could manage stress on their own and did not need to access support services from SCC. Constantine, Wilton and Caldwell (2003) found that those who were most satisfied with their social support resources were least willing to seek counseling help. While low intent students likely

could have benefited from services, the finding that high intent students were not willing to utilize services is particularly troublesome. Since high intent students had scarce coping resources they likely would have benefited greatly from the support provided by working individually with counselors and taking stress and time management classes. Research supports the benefit of such institutional resources for stress and anxiety reduction (Broderick, 2003; La Civita, 1982), academic success (Broderick, 2003; DeStefano, Mellot & Petersen, 2001), and student retention (Coll, 1995; DeStefano, Mellot & Petersen, 200; Harter, 2000; Leonard, 2002). The findings related to the utilization of social, professional and institutional support form the basis of the next two propositions.

Proposition 5: Community college students experiencing the highest levels of stress are less likely to access stress support services offered by the institution.

Proposition 6: Community college students who experience high levels of stress and do not seek out personal, professional, or institutional support resources, are more likely to view stress as a threat and are more likely to drop out of college.

While interviewees did not access stress support services from the institution, some did access academic advising services. Most of the students who sought advising characterized the experience as alienating and impersonal. This finding is worrisome because research has shown that students are less likely to seek support services or benefit from them if they have negative opinions about them or believe they are ineffective (Ballenger, 1999; Hammer, Grigsby & Woods, 1998; Paradise & Long, 1981).

While these experiences may have been negative, students did have positive encounters with faculty. Many students reached out to faculty exclusively to let them know they were experiencing problems. While this communication may have been somewhat compulsory to explain absences and get extensions on assignments, faculty appeared to be an important point of institutional contact for students. According to student reports, faculty were generally receptive, helpful and understanding of their needs. Instructors provided this support through the assigning of “Y’s” (no grade) and “W’s” (withdrawals) instead of failing grades, the extension of assignment deadlines, and allowances for students to make-up missed work. The quality of these interactions and perceptions of support are important, as illustrated in a study by LeSure-Lester (2004) who found that for minority community college students, the quality of faculty care and support was an important factor for those persisted. Although not providing a formal stress support service, faculty flexibility appeared to be the most important institutional support need of students. The importance of faculty support leads to the next proposition.

Proposition 7: Faculty flexibility is the most important institutional support need of community college students who are experiencing high levels of stress and it can lead to a greater likelihood of persistence.

Strategies

The final “S” in Schlossberg et al.’s framework is “strategies”, and classifies problem and emotion-focused coping as two ways individuals respond to stressful events.

Problem-focused strategies are aimed at changing the stressful situation; while emotion-focused coping strategies are focused on minimizing emotional distress.

Appraisals of stressful demands have been found to influence subsequent choice of coping strategy (Lazarus et al., 1985). Consistent with the findings of multiple studies, higher challenge appraisals by low intent students were associated with greater use of problem-focused coping strategies and a stronger sense of coping efficacy (McGowan, Gardner & Fletcher, 2006; Mikulincer & Florian, 1995; Peacock, Wong & Reker, 1993; Skinner & Brewer, 2002). Since problem-focused strategies are direct attempts to alter the source of stressful situations, research has found that using a greater proportion of these strategies is related to reduced stress and more positive emotional responses (Billings & Moos, 1981; Folkman et al., 1986; Folkman & Lazarus, 1988; Forsythe & Compas, 1987). The finding that low intent students tended to use a greater proportion of problem-focused strategies also suggests that they perceived their circumstances as changeable and controllable (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Peacock, Wong & Reker, 1993). This interpretation is supported by the finding that many low intent students viewed their stressful circumstances as temporary and surmountable.

Problem-focused strategies used by most low intent participants included direct action, planning, and the seeking of instrumental support, such as advice from therapists and friends. Other research has similarly discovered a greater tendency of those with low intent to leave college to use positive, active coping strategies such as planning and direct action (LeSure-Lester, 2004, Perrine, 2001; Pritchard & Wilson, 2003). Organizing and prioritizing through schedules and lists was the most universally reported problem-

focused strategy used by low intent students. Participants who used this strategy mentioned that it made their stress more manageable. This finding is confirmed by studies that have shown time management strategies such as scheduling, list-making, organizing, and prioritizing reduce stress by giving individuals the perception of control over their time (Esters & Castellanos, 1998; Macan et al., 1990; Nonis et al., 1998). This strategy likely helped students gain a sense of mastery through the imposition of order and structure over chaotic life situations. This interpretation is supported by Moore (1994) who found a positive relationship between self-efficacy beliefs and perceptions of control over time. Since individuals typically focus coping efforts in areas that have the greatest salience or appraised meaning for them (Compas & Orosion, 1993), the finding that virtually all low intent students utilized this strategy suggests that they viewed management of time as critical to achieving their goals. Since continuing in school hinged on the ability to manage multiple and overlapping demands effectively, it is easy to understand why low intent students targeted this stressor in an almost wholesale way.

The finding that some low intent students learned from past experiences and adjusted their coping strategies suggests that development was occurring. Growth and gain, according to Lazarus and Folkman (1984), can be an adaptational outcome of stress. Coping strategies for these students appeared to change as a function of self-reflection and reevaluation of past coping efforts. Consistent with growth, there is evidence that low intent students not only utilized their existing coping resources more fully than high intent students, but that they were also more likely to actively seek out new sources of support and strategies. This is significant because Aldwin (2007) notes that in order for

stress related growth to occur, individuals must not only utilize existing coping resources, but they must also generate and attempt new coping strategies. Similar to the findings of the current study, Gignac and Gottlieb (1996) discovered that caregivers of patients with dementia who reported improved ability to cope with ongoing stressors were able to learn effective strategies through trial and error; the coping process affording them the opportunity for increased self-understanding and development.

That several low intent students appeared to shift their coping strategies also indicates that they were flexible in their ability to cope. In a study of exam related stress, Abella and Heslin (1989) concluded that a flexible coping style that is responsive to the demands and constraints of stressful situations is most adaptive. The finding that most low intent students had sufficient coping resources helps explain some of this ability to adjust. Having a greater repertoire of both problem and emotion-focused coping strategies has been linked to more effective management of stress (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978). It is noteworthy that this “evolving” coping occurred in an environment that was both challenging and supportive for students. Sanford (1966) posits that both ingredients are necessary for developmental change to occur in college students.

In addition to their ability to more effectively adjust strategies that were not working, low intent students may have also used emotion-focused strategies such as positive reappraisal (the positive reframing of past stressful events), and emotional venting in ways that facilitated the use of problem-focused strategies. Several studies have shown that emotion-focused coping can interact with problem focused-coping in positive ways, making one another more effective (Carver & Scheier, 1994; Lazarus &

Folkman, 1984; Folkman et al., 1986; Forsythe & Compas, 1987). Carver and Scheier (1994) note: “Emotion-focused coping can facilitate problem focused coping by removing some of the distress that can hamper problem-focused efforts; similarly problem-focused coping can render the threat less forbidding, thereby diminishing distress emotions” (p.184).

Survey results revealed that high intent students were experiencing significantly higher levels of stress than low intent students. The interview findings suggest reasons for this difference may be related to the ways many high intent students perceived and coped with stress. Several high intent students reported feeling emotionally overwhelmed and deficient in their coping skills. Felsten (2002) found that individuals with perceived deficiencies in coping resources have a tendency to view minor stressors as more threatening and have greater difficulty effectively dealing with stress. Perceptions that one does not have coping options or control in stressful situations has also been associated with decreased life satisfaction and increased depression (Gignac & Gottlieb, 1996).

High intent students were less likely to report using problem-focused strategies and more likely to use maladaptive emotion-focused strategies such as social isolation, sleeping and alcohol consumption. Consistent with the current study, appraisals of stress as threatening have been connected to greater reliance on emotion-focused coping strategies (Carver & Scheier, 1994; Mikulincer & Florian, 1995; Peacock, Wong & Reker, 1993). For some high intent students who tried to utilize problem-focused strategies such as planning for the future, their attempts appeared thwarted by fears of

failure and nagging self-doubt. This lack of confidence in their ability to execute the actions necessary to bring about positive change in their lives is consistent with low self-efficacy. Bandura (1997) notes that people with low self-efficacy “turn inward on their own self-doubts instead of thinking about how to perform successfully. When faced with difficult tasks, they dwell on obstacles, the consequences of failure, and their personal deficiencies” (p. 2). It is also possible that some high intent students were so overwhelmed by stress that it interfered with their ability to cope effectively. Peacock, Wong and Reker (1993) note: “people sometimes fall short of optimal coping because they may react emotionally without thinking through the problem. (p. 70). High levels of threat emotion can interfere with one’s ability to process information and competently problem-solve (Janis & Mann, 1977; Litz et al., 1996). Lazarus and Folkman (1984) note that “The greater the threat, the more primitive, desperate, or regressive emotion-focused forms of coping tend to be and the more limited the range of problem-focused coping” (p. 168).

The finding that almost half of all participants utilized maladaptive escape-avoidance strategies such as smoking, consuming alcohol, sleeping and overeating corresponds with a study by Tichy and Means (1990) of nursing students in several community colleges that found increases in these same behaviors among participants experiencing the highest levels of stress. Of those who reported using alcohol and cigarettes to cope in the current study, high intent students reported more regular episodes of smoking and consuming alcohol in excess, while low intent students tended to report occasional, moderate use. This finding suggests that some high intent students relied

more heavily on alcohol for coping purposes. The findings of this study suggest that many high intent students were emotionally overwhelmed by stress and believed they had little control over their circumstances. Low levels of self-efficacy and greater feelings of harm (anger, disgust, sadness) have been linked to increased use of alcohol (Carver & Scheier, 1994; Von Ah et al., 2004). Excessive alcohol use also has implications for college departure, as LeSure Lester (2004) found that alcohol use was the strongest negative predictor of college persistence decisions for Latino community college students.

High intent students also had a greater tendency to self-isolate as a means of coping with stress, anxiety and depression. Since they were less likely to seek external help and to learn from past coping failures, the seemingly entrenched ways in which they coped, or failed to cope, brought little relief and may have actually added to the anguish they were experiencing. Given the high levels of stress they were experiencing and the apparent difficulties many had in coping, these students likely had to focus their attention on the immediacy of attending to more mundane needs rather than on the lofty goal of college completion. Maslow (1954) suggests that basic needs (self-esteem, financial security, social bonds) must be met before higher order concerns such as self-fulfillment and growth can be addressed. From a retention standpoint, use of negative forms of coping are associated with a higher likelihood of dropping out (Bray, Braxton, & Sullivan, 1999; LeSure-Lester, 2004; Perrine, 2001). As Pritchard and Wilson (2003) note: “the ability to deal successfully with the multitude of emotional stresses encountered in college life appears to be an important factor in student retention” (p.25).

For community college students, this ability to cope must also extend to the world outside of college.

While past studies have determined that older students tend to use more problem-focused forms of coping than younger students due to greater life experience and maturity (Birchak, 1992; Kariv & Heiman, 2005; Morris, Brooks & May, 2003; Shields, 2001), this was not found to be the case in the current study. It should be noted that many of these earlier studies compared the coping strategies of traditional and nontraditional students in four-year schools, not community colleges. This is relevant given the finding in the current study that traditional students at SCC appear to have similar responsibilities and demands to nontraditional students. It is possible that the complexity and similarity of demands placed on younger community college students forced them to develop coping strategies at a pace more closely aligned to nontraditional students. In other words, perhaps development of coping strategies was accelerated by the challenges traditional students experienced. Morris, Brooks and May (2003) suggest the possibility that at least for nontraditional students at a four-year college, having the pressure of multiple responsibilities may have increased their use of problem-focused coping out of necessity. Another explanation that appears to be more strongly supported by the findings and by the literature on appraisals and coping responses (Compas & Orosion, 1993, Lazarus et al., 1985; Santiago-Rivera, Bernstein & Gard, 1995) is that choice of strategies are situationally dependent and based more on individual goals, perceptions, and available coping resources, than on life experience alone.

While coping strategies did not appear to have a discernable age-dependent developmental trajectory, traditional students did report a greater tendency to utilize one form of emotion-focused coping that does have developmental implications: the internalization and subsequent explosive venting of emotions. An explanation for this is found in the literature on college student development which describes the process of learning how to regulate and express emotions, or “Managing Emotions,” as a major developmental task for traditional-aged students (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). It is likely that traditional-aged students in the current study were still learning how to modulate their emotional responses to stress.

Findings related to the coping responses of participants lead to the final proposition.

Proposition 8: Community college students who are flexible in their coping strategies are better able to manage the stress of external demands and are more likely to persist in college than those who have coping deficiencies and who rely on maladaptive coping strategies.

Conclusions

The role of stress in the persistence intentions of community college students is a complex and understudied one. Most studies that have considered the role of stress in persistence decisions have been conducted at four-year colleges and are strictly quantitative inquiries (Chartrand, 1992; Perrine, 2001; Sandler, 2002; Shields, 2001; Zajacova, Lynch & Espenshade, 2005). Bean and Metzner’s (1985) model of

undergraduate student attrition is a unique theoretical framework for use in this type of research because it considers the role of stress in intent to leave college. Despite its obvious applicability to community college populations, however, the model has mostly been tested on nontraditional students in four-year colleges (Chartrand, 1992; Metzner & Bean, 1987).

Bean and Metzner's model (1985) was highly useful as an interpretive frame for the experiences of community college students in this study. Consistent with Bean and Metzner's (1985) model, environmental variables such as finances, outside encouragement, family responsibilities, opportunity for transfer, and work responsibilities impacted the psychological outcomes of stress and goal commitment for students in this study. Outside encouragement and support for college attendance from family members and employers was a positive factor in continued attendance and appeared to moderate and buffer other stressful demands. This support was particularly helpful in the form of advice, emotional support, help with children and household duties, and flexible work schedules. Another factor not included in the model that appeared to play a role in students' ability to persist, was the support and flexibility of faculty. This positive relationship with faculty likely helped students feel more connected to the institution and more academically integrated – factors which have been linked to increased likelihood of persistence (Tinto, 1987). Curiously, while Bean and Metzner (1985) argue that the social aspects of college are less important for nontraditional students than the academic aspects, they include social integration as a variable in their model while excluding academic integration.

As posited by Bean and Metzner (1985), academic performance was less central to persistence intentions than the psychological outcomes of goal commitment, utility and stress. Neither low nor high intent students mentioned that grades were a major consideration in continuing or discontinuing their studies. Where academic performance did appear to play a role was in instances where students jeopardized continuance of financial aid due to poor grades, in which case it contributed to increased stress through the environmental variable of finances. According to survey results, of the environmental variables, opportunity for transfer was the reason cited most often by low intent students for not reenrolling the following semester, while personal problems and financial reasons were most often cited by high intent students. This suggests that at least for high intent students, internal demands, such as stress, anxiety and depression, as well as external demands, contributed most to intentions to leave college.

Bean and Metzner's (1985) model posits that goal commitment and utility should reduce intent to leave, while stress should increase intent to leave. While strong goal commitment and utility, or practical belief in the value of their education, did appear to relate to lower intent to leave, the assumption in Bean and Metzner's model that stress plays a strictly negative role in persistence intentions may be incorrect. The model fails to consider the value of individual appraisals of stress and the possibility that stress may lead to positive outcomes. The findings of this study suggest that high levels of stress, in the presence of strong goal commitment and utility relates to lower intent to leave. It would seem that high levels of goal commitment and utility may have a compensatory effect on stress not predicted by Bean and Metzner's model. While Sandler (2002) found

high levels of stress to have a strictly negative impact on goal commitment for nontraditional students in a four-year college, the results of the current study challenge this outcome. Stress appears to have had little adverse impact on goal commitment for those with low intent to leave, and may have actually helped motivate some students. The impact of stress on goal commitment for high intent students is somewhat less clear. Whether stress weakened initially strong commitments, had no effect, or further eroded existing weak commitments would need to be examined in future longitudinal work that measures stress and goal commitment at several points throughout the academic year.

In Pascarella and Chapman's (1983) study that compared the factors that contribute to persistence in two and four-year college students, they found that goal commitment had the largest positive relationship to persistence for two-year commuter students. This finding suggests that goal commitment is a somewhat more important factor in the persistence decisions of community college students. The results of the current study elucidate why this may have been the case. Navigating through a bombardment of multiple external demands and emerging with the desire to continue college enrollment requires high levels of goal commitment. In Tinto's (1987) words:

Understandably, differences in individual goals and commitments help shape individual responses to the stress of transition. Many students will stick it out even under the most trying conditions, while others will withdraw even under minimal stress. Presumably either lofty goals or strong commitments, or both, will lead individuals to persist in very difficult circumstances (p. 48).

The results of this study help clarify some of the mixed findings in the literature related to stress and persistence. While some studies have found stress to have a negative impact on persistence (Chartrand, 1992; Perrine, 2001; Sandler, 2001), other research has

demonstrated that higher levels of stress relate to increased persistence and intent to persist (Shields, 2001; Sandler, 2002; Zajacova, Lynch & Espenshade, 2005). While some of the researchers who found that higher levels of stress related to increased persistence or intent to persist speculated that this unexpected finding may have been due to participants experiencing eustress (Sandler, 2002) or appraising stress as a challenge (Shields, 2001; Zajacova, Lynch & Espenshade, 2005), these contentions were not supported by empirical evidence. The results of the current study lend empirical support to these interpretations and illustrate the importance of considering how individuals appraise stress when studying its role in persistence decisions.

Lazarus and Folkman (1984) posit that appraisals of stress are influenced by a combination of person and environment factors. In the case of students with low intent to leave, the demands of the environment appear to have been buffered and transformed into challenges by strong goal commitment, positive self-efficacy and adequate outside encouragement and support. That these were the factors that seem to have helped buffer stress related to completion of college is likely no coincidence given their individual and collective roles in persistence in past attrition research. By contrast, most students with high intent to leave college had negative or unrealistic coping efficacy beliefs, minimal support and coping resources, and had weak commitments to college completion, all of which may have played a role in their appraisals of stress as threatening and their decreased likelihood of college completion.

Given the high levels of stress students in the interview sample were experiencing, and the known benefits of stress management classes and counseling on

college retention and stress reduction, it is unfortunate more students did not utilize these services. While SCC offers an array of services designed to support students emotionally and academically, those who may have benefited the most had little knowledge of them and appeared to have little desire to access them. While for some, needs were being met by outside therapists or through social support, for others institutional support resources were among their only options. While many students likely did not have time to access services, other reasons mentioned for not using services have more troubling implications. Students expressed both discomfort in talking to “strangers” and dealing with personal issues at school. One explanation for this discomfort in talking to counselors at school could be fear that their information would not be kept confidential and that it would have consequences for their education. Taken one step further, this could be viewed as distrust of institutional systems. Similar avoidance, suspicion, and stigmatization of institutional and government services has been observed in studies of those with low SES (Canvin et al. 2007) and racial and ethnic minorities (McIntosh, 1987; Narikiyo & Kameoka, 1992; Ogbu, 1992; Ridley, 1984; Sanchez & King, 1986). Research has demonstrated that for Black and Latino college students, underutilization of counseling may also stem from a preference for accessing social support resources (Constantine, Wilton & Caldwell, 2003; LeSure-Lester, 2003) or a greater reliance on religious coping (Ayalon & Young, 2005; LeSure-Lester, 2003) over traditional counseling. Clearly if services offered violate one’s cultural values or preferred style of coping, they are less likely to be utilized. Although a more detailed discussion is beyond the scope of the current study, it is relevant to consider the potential role of these factors

and their implications given the greater proportion of low SES and minority students in the community college sector in general (Horn & Nevill, 2006; King, 2003; Tinto, 1987), and their near parity in the interview sample in particular (40% minority).

Despite the finding that most students in the interview sample would have been unlikely to use services, students did make suggestions for services which revealed an interesting theme. The services some students recommended involved peer support groups and individual support from those who were experiencing similar stressors in their lives (i.e. going to school while balancing other demands). Such a format may have been less threatening to students since it did not directly involve “agents” of the college and would not have singled out individuals as having problems. Since women comprised 91% of the interview sample, it is no surprise that they recommended services that involved collaborative, empathic social support. This emphasis on interpersonal connections is established in the literature as a preferred coping and relational style of women (Arthur & Hiebert, 1994; Carver, Scheier & Weintraub, 1989; Frey, Beesley, & Miller, 2006; Taylor et al., 2000). The support needs of female students are important to consider given the survey findings that they were experiencing significantly higher levels of stress than men, and the fact that women represent 57% of SCC’s district-wide enrollment (Sonora Community College Planning and Institutional Research, Fall 2006), and 59% of community college student enrollment nationwide (Horn & Nevill, 2006).

In addition to findings of gender-related stress, one age-related stressor was particularly problematic in this study. The finding that financially independent students, ages 18 – 23, were effectively receiving reduced financial aid awards due to the

mandated inclusion of parents' income in financial aid formulas, has several troubling implications. According to the U.S. Department of Education, those ages 18 - 23 who do not have children, are not married, are not in the military, or are not attending graduate school, are considered dependents of their parents (Kane, 1999). Financial aid awards for "dependent" students are based on the expectation of a family contribution to the cost of attending college. Implicit in this expectation is the assumption that families value education equally and have discretionary income that they are willing and able to part with. If parents are unwilling, or unable to contribute to the cost of education, as was the case for some in this study, then the magnitude of unmet need (that which is not covered by financial aid or expected family contributions) grows for students. Community college students, who are more likely to be first-generation and come from low SES backgrounds than students in four-year colleges (Horn & Nevill, 2006; Phillippe & Valiga, 2000), may lack the benefits of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1973) that more economically and socially advantaged students possess. Such "capital" is typically transmitted through families that value and have experience with the higher education system, and through school systems that provide adequate college preparation and counseling (Apple, 1990; Hurtado et al., 1997).

Research has shown that due to fewer financial resources, low-income students, who are found in greater concentration in two-year colleges, typically have higher levels of unmet need than more affluent students (King, 2003). This finding is particularly worrisome given the connections in the literature between inadequate financial aid and dropout (Nora et al., 1996). Adequate levels of financial aid may be particularly

important for community college students, as they were found by Murdock (1987) to be an equalizer in the persistence rates of low income students when compared to middle and upper income students. Clearly, federal financial aid policies are not designed to benefit somewhat more “nontraditional” traditional-aged students such as those found in community colleges. As one student in the current study mentioned, it was a policy that was likely to lead her to stop-out of college: “It would almost be worth it to just stop going to school, wait a year, qualify [as an independent student] and then go back.”

It is important to bear in mind that the results of this study only speak to students who were enrolled in college. The unseen toll may be 18 to 23 year-old prospective students who had to delay enrollment due to inadequate financing. Since price, as well as levels of financial aid, can impact college enrollment decisions (Heller, 1996), it is reasonable to infer that there were prospective students who were (at best) temporarily priced out of higher education. While this may have been a transitory effect until they were old enough to receive full financial aid benefits, delaying college entry alone is considered a risk-factor for dropout (Corrigan, 2003). Such funding policies, among other reasons, may be why delayed entrants are more likely to be found in community colleges (Tinto, 1987).

While age may have played a role in financial aid awards, it proved to be an imprecise way to distinguish between traditional and nontraditional students in this study. At least with community college populations, age may not be a good predictor of differences between traditional and nontraditional students. As Newman (2005) suggests, using the age of 25 as a cutoff point between traditional and nontraditional students may

be arbitrary, and researchers should perhaps instead focus on the responsibilities that students have as potential indicators of stress. Looking to the research for precise definitions and parameters for this population offers little clarity, as definitions range from having two or more major life roles in addition to school (Chartrand, 1992); to having one or more characteristics such as delayed enrollment or having dependents (Choy, 2002); to an amalgam of age (over 24), commuter status, part-time college attendance, and a greater concern for academic over social aspects of the institution (Bean & Metzner, 1985). As Choy (2002) notes, “The term ‘nontraditional student’ is not a precise one” (p. 2). In order to best learn how to serve this population, future research needs to continue to refine and understand who this population is and what their needs are, especially in the community college setting. Surprisingly, while no significant differences in either stress levels or institutional support needs were found between these groups, some nontraditional students appeared to have negative attitudes towards what they perceived as the somewhat more “trivial” stressors of traditional students. The origins of these attitudes, if replicable, perhaps need to be explored in future studies.

Study Limitations

Looking back on the study, some limitations emerged which merit discussion. Limitations which may impact the generalizability of findings include the study’s location at a single campus of an urban community college in the Southwest, and the qualitative focus of the study, which only allowed for a limited number of in-depth interviews to be collected. Since the intent of this study was to understand the subjective experience of stress in a sample of community college students, the goal was not to

achieve generalizable results per se, but rather to gain textured insight into the ways these students perceived and coped with stress and how this may have impacted their desire to remain in school.

Restrictions within the data set included the limited number of high stress/high intent students obtained in the sample, even after making an adjustment to include traditional-aged students. One possibility as to why this limitation arose was the timing of the administration of the surveys soon after SCC's final class withdrawal deadline. It is probable that at least some students who were experiencing high levels of stress and who had high intent to leave; had already left. Another possibility for this limitation is that the overall survey group appears to have had high educational aspirations. Just over 89% of students surveyed had the goal of completing an associate's degree or higher, and all of the low intent students who were interviewed reported strong goal commitment as a reason for persisting in college. DeLuca (2004) encountered a similarly small sample of high intent to leave students in her study of the impact of burnout on persistence intentions. She too discovered that her overall study sample had high levels of goal commitment. A final possibility is that the instrument itself did not capture everyone who had high stress and high intent to leave.

Another limitation was the lack of gender diversity in the interview sample. While this was perhaps to be expected given the finding that women were experiencing significantly higher levels of stress than men, another explanation is supported by research that has shown that women are more likely to reveal stress and discuss their problems than males (Altmaier & Rapaport, 1984; Komiya, Good & Sherrod, 2000; Snell

et al., 1989). While the researcher attempted to achieve a gender-diverse interview sample by contacting all males who met study criteria and who had indicated a willingness to be interviewed, some male students either did not respond, or indicated that they had changed their minds about being interviewed.

Another limitation is that the researcher relied on self-report data for both interviews and surveys. Since surveys were administered in a group setting they may have been less vulnerable to report bias than one-on-one interviews. While the researcher took every precaution to insure that students were aware of the confidentiality and anonymity of the proceedings, it is always a possibility that students did not comprehensively portray all the ways they coped, or all of their stressors. While the interviewer prompted for both positive and negative means of coping, it is possible there were items not reported by students which may have been too embarrassing. While it was surprising that some high intent students believed they were coping well, it is possible they wanted to appear to the interviewer to be “holding it together” despite the difficulty of their circumstances. Even with the researcher’s attempts to build rapport, there may have been an underlying suspicion by participants that the researcher was an authority figure who would require them to get help or would report them to the administration. In fact, some students expressed concerns about not wanting to be viewed as “crazy” by the researcher. At those times the researcher paused the interview to reassure students that he was not there to judge them and that all of their information would be kept completely anonymous and would not be passed on to college officials.

A final limitation meriting discussion was the use of intent to leave as a proxy for persistence decisions. While intent to leave has been cited as a strong predictor of actual departure behavior (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Cabrera, Nora & Castaneda, 1993; Farabaugh-Dorkins, 1991), it is still not the same as measuring actual persistence decisions. A remedy for this would have been to collect data from students who had already left college, but since a major goal of this project was to understand the potential role of stress in attrition as a means of informing theory and practice, it was most appropriate to collect data from students while they were actually experiencing stress. As Cabrera, Nora and Castaneda (1993) note, “Focusing on past behavior [actual withdrawal decisions] is futile. It stands to reason that intervention strategies must address those variables that can be manipulated and which have been found to be the strongest predictors of predispositions to leave” (p. 136). While it is clear from the data that those with high intent to leave had not made final decisions about whether they would stay or go, the results did reveal that they were less certain about persisting than students with low intent to leave. It is important to note that the Intention to Leave Questionnaire (DeLuca, 2004) measures intentions by assessing the frequency with which one has considered leaving college. It is possible that frequency of thinking about leaving college is not the same as intent to leave college. Further validation of the instrument should be conducted in future research. An interesting follow-up study would be to see what the actual persistence decisions of students were.

Implications for Practice

The eight propositions formulated throughout this study are the basis for this section on implications for practice. These propositions are designed to be used and tested in current community college practice as a means of assisting distressed students in ways that are mindful and considerate of their expressed support needs. While grounded in the literature and based on the study findings, these propositions will need to be substantiated by further research in the community college setting. The eight propositions are as follows:

Proposition 1: Community college students who experience concurrent stressors and who view their situations as insoluble and unending, are more likely to view stress as a threat and are more likely to leave college.

Proposition 2: Female community college students are more likely to perceive high levels of stress from demands outside of school and are more likely than male students to leave college as a result of these demands.

Proposition 3: Traditional and nontraditional-aged students in the community college are equally as likely to experience high levels of stress related to external demands.

Proposition 4: Community college students who experience high levels of stress are more likely to leave college if they lack goal commitment and have negative or unrealistic coping self-efficacy beliefs.

Proposition 5: Community college students experiencing the highest levels of stress are less likely to access stress support services offered by the institution.

Proposition 6: Community college students who experience high levels of stress and do not seek out personal, professional, or institutional support resources, are more likely to view stress as a threat and are more likely to drop out of college.

Proposition 7: Faculty flexibility is the most important institutional support need of community college students who are experiencing high levels of stress and it can lead to a greater likelihood of persistence.

Proposition 8: Community college students who are flexible in their coping strategies are better able to manage the stress of external demands and are more likely to persist in college than those who have coping deficiencies and who rely on maladaptive coping strategies.

These propositions lead to several implications for practice. The first implication for practice is that institutions must be willing to deliver stress support services in ways that depart from traditional models of offering life skills classes and individual counseling. The results of this study suggest that traditional forms of counseling and stress management classes are unlikely to be utilized by those who may need it the most. Student concerns about privacy and discomfort with talking to college officials suggest that services must be delivered in more subtle ways that do not single out individuals as having problems. It seems logical that if students who may need services the most are not visiting the counselors, or the classes they teach, then the counselors must go to them. Counseling staff could make presentations in classes at critical points throughout the semester (beginning, middle and end) and deliver coping strategies both verbally and in handouts of time and stress management techniques. Counselors could also train students in self-efficacy, which in combination with stress management techniques, has been associated with increased persistence and improved grades (Barrios, 1997). Such a blanket method of service delivery would teach valuable coping skills while not breaching privacy concerns. Counselors' time in class could also be used to promote other services and to survey students for ideas of services they would like to see offered.

Community colleges must also consider greater utilization of students as both a resource for service ideas and for the actual delivery of services. One way this could be

accomplished would be through peer group counseling. Such a format would allow students to connect with one another and develop empathic support networks. College counselors could train peer facilitators to run the groups in a collaborative fashion. There is limited research which indicates that comprehensive programs which include peer group counseling can increase the rate of persistence for community college students and at-risk minority university students (Baron, 1997; Myers & Drevlow, 1982). Such services can help students adjust to the transitions of college and can help them become more socially integrated.

The results of this study suggest that having faculty that are flexible with attendance, deadlines, and grading when stressful life circumstances arise, can make a major difference in whether students are able to persist. Faculty must be trained to recognize the signs and symptoms of overwhelmed students and have knowledge of the services offered by the college so that they can readily pass this information on to distressed students. This training and knowledge should also extend to vital support staff that have routine contact with students, such as academic advisors. Given the itinerant, adjunct nature of a majority of community college faculty (Community College Survey of Student Engagement [CCSSE], 2007), it is especially important for community colleges to have communication and referral plans in place that are coordinated with the counseling department.

Challenge and support are necessary elements of student development (Sanford, 1966). While community colleges can do little to control the challenges that their students experience outside of school, they can focus on providing supportive and intellectually

challenging environments within the institution. Faculty can help make the classroom experience more involving and engaging through implementation of learning communities in which students enroll in several classes together and participate in collaborative learning through group work and discussions (Tinto, 1997). Limited research on learning communities in the community college setting has yielded promising results including the findings of increased student interactions in and out of class, and higher rates of persistence than students in “traditional” classes (Tinto, 2000). Since nontraditional community college students are less likely to have contact with either the social or academic aspects of the institution outside of class, such a format would give students the opportunity to become more socially integrated and academically involved. For students with minimal support resources, the ability to form supportive networks would be invaluable. As part of the curriculum, faculty could also provide opportunities for leisure coping with learning goals incorporated, such as instructional field trips or classes that take place outdoors which would allow students to interact more informally with faculty and with one another. While these opportunities must be structured and intentional to be beneficial, they should also be flexible and organic to meet the needs of this population.

Faculty can also maximize limited classroom time with students by incorporating curriculum topics that stimulate student awareness of stress and encourage dialogue about healthy coping strategies. For example, students in English composition classes could be asked to write short stories about their most stressful experiences, while History classes could assign readings on the benefits of meditation in different cultures, and Science

classes could discuss the physiological and emotional impact of stress. This technique is known as “curriculum infusion,” and it brings real life college issues into the classroom through readings, guest speakers and discussions (Riley & McWilliams, 2007). This form of pedagogy has been linked to increased awareness among college students of issues of health and well-being, knowledge of campus resources, and positive changes in behaviors and attitudes (Riley & McWilliams, 2007).

Beyond this, the role the institution plays in creating barriers and stressors for students must be carefully examined. Research often focuses on the pathology and problems of students without considering how the institution may generate and perpetuate stress for students. As illustrated by the negative, impersonal encounters students had with the advising center at SCC, the institution can have a powerful impact on student stress and anxiety levels. Student encounters with college services need to be positive experiences that help students feel connected to the institution and comfortable accessing its support resources. Personalized and meaningful interactions can be accomplished in short timeframes if an effort is made by student affairs staff to establish rapport and humanize the experience by expressing an interest in students’ educational goals and by inquiring as to how classes are going and how students are feeling.

Community colleges should annually assess student perceptions of support services and of the campus environment through climate surveys and customer service evaluations. Data from these assessments can be used to pinpoint areas where services can be strengthened and can be used to identify ways campuses can work to become more stress-free milieus for diverse student constituencies. Given the nonresidential

nature of most community college campuses, the institution should work to create internal and external physical spaces that are inviting and welcoming to students and that encourage congregation and social interaction.

A final implication, which is perhaps more of a policy recommendation, is that more must be done at the federal level to insure that financially independent low-income students ages 18 to 23 are not further disadvantaged by the de facto reduction of awards that factoring in parent's income creates. Clearly individual situations, rather than the criteria of age alone and the assumption that parents will contribute to the cost of their "dependents" education, need to be considered in the awarding of financial aid.

Future Directions

Future attrition research should continue to examine the role of differential appraisals of stress as well as coping strategies on persistence decisions. In addition, the possible interaction between stress and goal commitment needs to be examined more closely. While the results of this study suggest that strong goal commitments impact appraisals and may moderate stress, attempts should be made to confirm this relationship in future research. Since the impact of stress on goal commitment is somewhat less clear, future research should longitudinally examine the role stress plays, if any, in impacting goal commitment.

As part of future research on persistence intentions, it would be useful to do a follow-up study to see how many high intent students actually left the institution and to see if their reasons for leaving match the reasons they originally gave for having high intent to leave. It would also be interesting in future research to compare high stress/low

intent to leave students with low stress/low intent to leave students to determine why there were differences in stress levels and if their reasons for intending to persist are similar.

One interesting finding that is worthy of future examination are the apparent negative attitudes of nontraditional students toward their traditional-aged counterparts. While the findings of this study illustrate more similarities than differences between age-groups in the community college, some older students perceived that traditional-aged students had less complex, comparatively trivial stress support needs. These attitudes and their mechanisms, if they can be replicated, should be examined further.

Given the front-line status of faculty in the community college as the direct recipients of information from students about their problems, a valuable area of future research would be to determine faculty perceptions of student stress, faculty knowledge of stress support services, and their communication patterns with each other and with the administration surrounding these issues. Of the minimal research that has considered faculty perceptions of student stress, Misra et al. (2000) found that faculty at a university perceived students to be experiencing more stress than did the students themselves. A study of community college faculty perceptions of student stress would be especially interesting in light of the growing presence of part-time, adjunct faculty on community college campuses. Part-time faculty now represent some 67% of community college faculty ranks, often lack office space to meet with students, spend limited time on campus, and are less likely to interact with students outside of class than full-time faculty (CCSSE, 2007).

Since little is known about nontraditional community college student development and the impact the institution has on them (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1998), future studies need to continue to attempt to understand what it means to be a nontraditional student, and not only how these students develop socially and intellectually, but how their coping skills develop in the crucible of managing multiple life demands.

Summary

Ultimately the impact of stress on community college students can be viewed along a continuum for students in this study. For some it acted as a motivator, for some it was a discomfort that they were willing to bear in the interest of achieving their goals, for others it was uncomfortable and difficult to justify, and for still others it was devastating and immobilizing. By no means did high intent students manage all events poorly or low intent students manage all stressors well, but when it came to the goal of completing college, low intent students were resolute and determined to overcome all obstacles to achieve their goals, while high intent students were somewhat less certain about their goals and whether they would, or could continue in college.

APPENDIX A
DEFINITION OF TERMS

Nontraditional Student: A college student who is 25 years of age or older, who in addition to academic responsibilities, typically has external, noncollegiate responsibilities. This term is also interchangeable with *adult student* and *returning student*.

Traditional Student: A college student ages 18-24.

Persistence: Continued enrollment in college until completion of one's personal educational goal.

Dropout: A term that is interchangeable with *attrition*, and is defined as any student who enrolls in college one semester, but does not enroll the next semester and has not completed his or her formally declared program of study (Bean & Metzner, 1985)

Intent to Leave: The expression of one's desire to leave college that is a strong predictor of actual departure decisions. (Bean & Metzner, 1985)

Stressors: Events, problems or pressures that potentially produce stress (Abouserie, 1994).

Stress: A relationship between the person and the environment that is appraised by the person as relevant to his or her well-being and in which the person's resources are taxed or exceeded (Folkman, Lazarus, Gruen, & DeLongis, 1986).

Coping: Cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage (master, reduce or tolerate) specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

APPENDIX B
DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE

Directions: The following questions provide valuable background information. Please read each question carefully and answer to the best of your ability. Please be sure to follow the instructions for each question and to complete the entire questionnaire.

1. What is your current age? (*Circle one*)
 - a. 18 – 24 years
 - b. 25 - 29 years
 - c. 30 - 39 years
 - d. 40 – 49 years
 - e. 50 years or older

2. How many credits are you currently registered for at Sonora Community College? (*Circle one*)
 - a. 0 - 5 credits
 - b. 6 - 11 credits
 - c. 12 credits or more

3. Not counting this semester, how many semesters of college have you completed? (*Circle one*)
 - a. 0 semesters
 - b. 1 semester
 - c. 2 semesters or more

4. Are you currently taking any classes at the University of Arizona? (*Check one*)
 Yes No

5. What is the highest level of education you plan to complete? (*Circle one*)
 - a. No plan
 - b. Certificate for direct employment
 - c. Associates
 - d. Bachelors
 - e. Masters and above

6. What is your marital status? (*Circle one*)
 - a. Single, never married
 - b. Married
 - c. Divorced
 - d. Separated

7. Do you have any children? (*Check one*)

Yes No

8. Are you the only financial provider for your family? (*Check one*)

Yes No Not Applicable

9. What is your current living situation? (*Circle all that apply*)

- a. Live alone
- b. Live with significant other
- c. Live with children
- d. Live with parents
- e. Live with roommate

10. How many hours a week do you work? (*Circle one*)

- a. 40 hours or more
- b. 30 - 39 hours
- c. 20 – 29 hours
- c. Fewer than 20 hours
- d. Not currently working

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APPENDIX C
PERCEIVED STRESS SCALE

Directions: The questions in this scale ask you about your feelings and thoughts **during the last month**. In each case, please indicate with a check mark how often you *felt or thought* a certain way.

1. In the last month, how often have you been upset because of something that happened unexpectedly?

___0=Never ___1=Almost Never ___2=Sometimes ___3=Fairly Often ___4=Very Often

2. In the last month, how often have you felt that you were unable to control the important things in your life?

___0=Never ___1=Almost Never ___2=Sometimes ___3=Fairly Often ___4=Very Often

3. In the last month, how often have you felt nervous and “stressed”?

___0=Never ___1=Almost Never ___2=Sometimes ___3=Fairly Often ___4=Very Often

4. In the last month, how often have you felt confident about your ability to handle your personal problems?

___0=Never ___1=Almost Never ___2=Sometimes ___3=Fairly Often ___4=Very Often

5. In the last month, how often have you felt that things were going your way?

___0=Never ___1=Almost Never ___2=Sometimes ___3=Fairly Often ___4=Very Often

6. In the last month, how often have you found that you could not cope with all the things that you had to do?

___0=Never ___1=Almost Never ___2=Sometimes ___3=Fairly Often ___4=Very Often

7. In the last month, how often have you been able to control irritations in your life?

___0=Never ___1=Almost Never ___2=Sometimes ___3=Fairly Often ___4=Very Often

8. In the last month, how often have you felt that you were on top of things?

___0=Never ___1=Almost Never ___2=Sometimes ___3=Fairly Often ___4=Very Often

9. In the last month, how often have you been angered because of things that happened that were outside of your control?

___0=Never ___1=Almost Never ___2=Sometimes ___3=Fairly Often ___4=Very Often

10. In the last month, how often have you felt difficulties were piling up so high that you could not overcome them?

___0=Never ___1=Almost Never ___2=Sometimes ___3=Fairly Often ___4=Very Often

APPENDIX D
INTENTION TO LEAVE QUESTIONNAIRE (REVISED)

Directions: Please read each question carefully and answer to the best of your ability. Please be sure to follow the instructions for each question and to complete the entire questionnaire.

1. During the past academic year, have you thought about leaving college? (*Circle the answer that best applies*)

1. No, I never thought about it at all
2. Yes, I thought about it once or twice
3. Yes, I thought about it several times
4. Yes, I think about it all of the time

2. Do you plan to complete this semester?**YES** **NO** (*Circle one*)
If **NO**, please indicate why (*Check all that apply*):

- Financial Reasons
 Work Related Reasons
 Academic Reasons
 Family Problems
 Personal Problems
 Other Reasons (please list) _____

3. Do you plan to enroll at this campus next semester? **YES** **NO** (*Circle one*)
If **NO**, please indicate why (*Check all that apply*):

- Financial Reasons
 Work Related Reasons
 Academic Reasons
 Family Problems
 Personal Problems
 Transferring to another college or campus
 Graduating
 Other Reasons (please list) _____

4. Have you ever left college in the past?**YES** **NO** (*Circle one*)
If **YES**, please indicate why (*Check all that apply*):

- Financial Reasons
 Work Related Reasons
 Academic Reasons
 Family Problems
 Personal Problems
 Other Reasons (please list) _____

APPENDIX E
INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Instructions to researcher: Take a moment to build rapport and comfort with participant before beginning interview. Explain that the interview will be recorded to insure accuracy and that their identity will be protected at all times. Remind participant that answering questions and remaining in the study is voluntary. Begin interview with first question and follow up with prompts to gather more information. Limit interview to one hour.

- 1. Thank you for taking the time to fill out the questionnaire in class the other day, I really appreciate it. As a follow up to the survey you completed, could you tell me what stress means to you?**
- 2. Tell me in some detail about the stress you are experiencing or have experienced recently. What are things in your life that you find stressful? (*prompt for stressors that occur both outside and in school*).**
- 3. What feelings do you experience when you are stressed?**
- 4. Describe how well you feel you handle stress.**
- 5. Tell me all of the ways that you deal with stress. (*prompt for both positive and negative means of coping, prompt for resources/assets such as family and social support*).**
- 6. Have you thought about leaving college or have you ever left college in the past? If so, please tell me about this - what were/are some of the reasons? (*prompt for whether stress was a factor or if circumstances were stressful*).**
- 7. If you have not thought about leaving college, tell me some of the reasons you decided to stay.**
- 8. Are you aware of any services the community college offers to students to help them deal with stress? If yes, have you ever utilized any of these services? If so, which ones and how did you hear about them. If not, why not?**
- 9. What services do you wish the community college provided, or provided more of to help you deal with stress?**
- 10. Is there anything else you would like to add?**

APPENDIX F
INCENTIVE ANNOUNCEMENT

Apple iPod RAFFLE and Target Gift Certificate!

Please fill in your contact information if you wish to be entered into a raffle to win an iPod Shuffle music player:

Name (*PLEASE PRINT*):

Phone#:

E-mail address:

Are you willing to be considered for an interview for which you would receive a \$15 Target Gift Certificate if selected?

Yes No

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