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GRADUATE COLLEGE

PERSISTENCE AMONG ADULT STUDENTS ENROLLED  
IN BUSINESS- AND MINISTRY-RELATED TRACKS  
OF DEGREE-COMPLETION PROGRAMS

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in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

degree of

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By

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PERSISTENCE AMONG ADULT STUDENTS ENROLLED  
IN BUSINESS- AND MINISTRY-RELATED TRACKS  
OF DEGREE-COMPLETION PROGRAMS

A DISSERTATION APPROVED FOR THE  
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP  
AND POLICY STUDIES

BY

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## Acknowledgements

*Education is learning what you didn't even know you didn't know.*

*- Daniel J. Boorstin*

If I have learned anything in the process of obtaining a doctorate, it is that I know so very little and there is so much more to learn, so much that I do not even know I do not know. I have much to learn yet about myself and the motivations behind my actions. I have much yet to discover about education—my own and that of others. I have much left to learn about *how* to seek understanding, *how* to ask questions, *how* to learn. I have much yet to find out about how to be properly grateful for those in whose friendship I have the joy of living.

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## Abstract

Adult degree-completion programs have burgeoned in recent times, particularly in private colleges. Adapting their programs to the specificities of adult learners, they attract ever increasing numbers of people who have been out of college for a length of time and who now want to obtain their college degree. Church-related colleges often offer degrees in business through their degree-completion programs, in addition to their majors in Bible and ministry. This study sought to develop an understanding of the experiences of successful and unsuccessful students in degree-completion programs in Christian colleges, in order to inform policy and practice.

In this study, 22 former students of degree-completion programs offered by three Christian colleges were interviewed using a qualitative approach. This study addressed the questions of their motivations for participation, the triggering events that led to their enrollment, the structure and atmosphere of degree-completion programs that contributed to their persistence or non-persistence, the difficulties they overcame, and finally, the motivations for persistence. The study demonstrated that participants shared many characteristics with the general population of adult learners in the areas of motivations for enrollment and persistence. They differed from the general population in the strong effect that their faith had on motivations for enrollment and particularly on motivations for persistence. These participants placed a great deal more emphasis on personal fulfillment and faith as motivations for both enrollment and persistence than on career-related motivations. Although most of the participants experienced financial pressures because of the costs of their schooling, except for one case, the lack of finances did not stop them from enrolling or persisting.

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

### *Background*

Fueled by sociological and technological changes—*upheavals* would perhaps be a more accurate term—educational activities focused on and designed for adults have burgeoned in recent years. In North America as well as on other continents around the world, more and more adults rejoin the student population every year. They enroll in organized programs or undertake self-directed learning experiences, often acquiring new career-related skills, sometimes seeking a degree or certification, and occasionally learning just for the fun of it (National Center for Educational Statistics, 1998). The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reports that nearly half the adult population of the United States participates in some form of educational endeavor. “Participation in learning activities [by adults] increased from 38 percent of those in the population age 18 and above in 1991 to 48 percent in 1999” (NCES, 2003, p. 1). Educational activities by people aged 18-34 was even higher than the national average; over 60 percent of people of this age group were participating in learning activities in 1999 (NCES, 2003). Growth has been so strong that the adult education enterprise now “spends more dollars than elementary schools, high schools, and postsecondary schools combined” (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999, p. xi). Without a doubt, adult education has become a major, if sometimes under-appreciated, element in American society.

### *Demographic, Social, and Technological Change*

The expansion of adult education may be explained in part by the fact that the demographic base of the United States is changing dramatically. For the first time in history, adults over age 19 comprise more than 70 percent of the population (CensusScope, 2003). The percentage of people under 30 years of age dropped from 50%

in 1980 to less than 43% in the year 2000 (CensusScope, 2003). Furthermore, the percentage of the population over age sixty-five continues to grow.

Sweeping social changes, including the generally rising educational level of the populace, the changing roles of women, larger numbers of people taking early retirement, the expansion of civil rights, increased leisure time, and changing life styles are a second factor influencing the growth of adult learning (Cross, 1981). In past generations it was not uncommon for a person to work in one career field all his or her working life, often in one job at the same company. The Department of Labor says that this is no longer the case. In its longitudinal survey of employment relations, the Bureau of Labor Statistics found that of those adult workers who began a job in 1979, less than two percent were working in the same job in the year 2000 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2003b). It was found that “persons born from 1957 to 1964 held an average of 9.6 jobs from ages 18 to 36” (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2003a, p. 1).

Many adults find that they must continue to learn in order to keep up with the avalanche of technological changes. It is no longer possible for a person to acquire during college the education he or she will need for the rest of life, as past generations did. College has become only the beginning of, perhaps the foundation for, further learning that will take place over the person’s lifetime.

#### *Degree-Completion Programs for Non-Traditional Students*

Because of the greater need for education in a highly technological society, a large number of adults find themselves at a disadvantage because they do not have college degrees. They may have entered college immediately after high school as part of the traditional college age group, but, like many others of their cohort, they left college before completing their studies. Perceiving the need for further education, a substantial

number of these adults re-enter the student population and begin working towards their baccalaureate degree.

According to Aslanian and Brickell (1980), “adults today constitute more than half of all full-time and part-time college students and will make up well over half the total in the years to come” (p. xii). Joined by other adults who never attended college at all, many of these returning students find themselves in traditional classes with students ten, twenty, or even thirty years younger than they. Nonetheless, though they find themselves obligated to balance family and occupational constraints with educational demands, they tend to be successful in their pursuit of knowledge, to the point that their grades are often higher than those of their traditional counterparts (Kaplan & Saltiel, 1997).

In order to respond to the particular needs of this growing number of non-traditional students, colleges have begun offering adult degree-completion programs in addition to traditional classes. These courses are generally offered in compressed formats, in order to better accommodate students’ situations. “As a result, thousands of students have been afforded the opportunity to pursue a baccalaureate or post-baccalaureate degree which otherwise might have been impossible” (Scott & Conrad, 1992, p. 411).

Known variously as degree-completion programs, adult degree programs, adult degree-completion programs, and accelerated adult learning programs, these courses are a relatively new phenomenon in the educational world (Taylor, 2000). They began to develop in the United States in the 1970s as a means to help adult learners who, for whatever reason—work, family obligations, financial constraints, low grades, etc.—did not finish their education and who now felt the need to complete their baccalaureate degree (Mealman & Lawrence, 2000). Cross (1981) remarks that the programs are seen

as “‘second-chance’ programs for people who missed the opportunity for a college education when they were younger or who dropped out of college earlier” (p. 67).

Accelerated degree programs have not only provided a means by which adults can complete their degree, they have also strengthened the colleges offering them. “The implementation of new programs for adult professionals has been the salvation for many small colleges struggling with retrenchment...” (Tweedell, 2000, p. 2). Even though these programs have come under suspicion by educational traditionalists, Tweedell demonstrates that “sound educational theory...undergirds this model of adult education” (p. 2). Indeed, in a broad review of research on intensive courses, Scott and Conrad (1992) reached the conclusion that “intensive courses have been found to yield equivalent—and sometimes superior—learning outcomes in comparison with traditional-length courses” (p. 442).

During the initial years, degree-completion programs were offered principally by private institutions, but demand has been so strong that today both private and public colleges and universities are operating accelerated adult learning programs. A major mid-western state university, for example, by offering courses through an initiative involving colleges and technological training schools, provides at least 28 degree programs from several widely dispersed campuses (Jensen, 1998). Private colleges, particularly church-related institutions, likewise propose a wide variety of courses and degrees. A medium-sized church-related university in the Midwest offers five undergraduate degrees through its accelerated adult learning program, including organizational leadership, family studies and gerontology, and nursing. None of the undergraduate degrees are specifically religious in content. In addition, this institution offers three graduate degree programs in the same format (SNU, 2003). While a few church-related institutions, because of their

tightly defined mission, offer only ministry-related programs (V. Eaton, personal communication, May 28, 2003), others, though they emphasize ministry-related degrees, also offer business- and leadership-related studies (J. Banks, personal communication, February 11, 2003).

### *Problem Statement*

It is a well-known fact that institutions of higher education constantly struggle with the task of retaining students (Newburger & Curry, 2000; Wonacott, 2001; Tinto, 1987). Wlodkowski, Mauldin and Gahn (2001) report that “only 30 percent to 55 percent of the students who enroll in college graduate within five years” (p. 1). Newburger and Curry (2000) report that “about two-thirds [of those who start college] will earn an undergraduate degree ... by the time they are 25 to 29 years old” (p. 1). Of these, 49.8% earn a bachelor’s degree and 14.9% earn an associate’s degree. This means that, at best, about one-third of entering students will leave college before obtaining any degree whatever.

The fact that a significant number of entering students do not complete their degrees subverts the mission of the educational institution from the standpoint of both purpose and survival. Purpose, in the sense that the mission of the college or university is to teach, to impart knowledge, to prepare students to function in their society. How can the institution fulfill its mission if the students do not remain in school? Survival, because a university or college exists for students, who come to be taught, and who, coincidentally, pay the bills. Without students, the institution cannot survive.

Numerous researchers have studied this phenomenon (Tinto, 1987; Bean, 1981; Cofer & Somers, 2001; Gloria & Ho, 2003), but almost all these studies deal with younger students entering college immediately upon or shortly after completion of high

school. The focus of the research has been primarily to determine why these students, who are largely unencumbered by outside responsibilities, do not complete their degrees.

Student attrition is a major problem facing adult educators as well, but very little attention has been given to research focused on the persistence of adult students who re-enter college after having previously left their studies (Tracy-Mumford, 1994). It would seem logical that these “second-chance students” would be strongly committed to completing their studies since they have deliberately chosen to swim against the tide by returning to college. They make a conscious decision to take on a significant educational load in addition to their family and occupational responsibilities, which would seem to indicate strong motivation and goal-commitment. It is obvious, however, that not everyone completes the course. There is very little research available to indicate why that initial motivation and commitment is not strong enough to carry them through to completion.

If there is little research available on adults who re-enter a traditional college setting, research into accelerated adult learning programs is practically non-existent. My personal observations seem to indicate that retention rates of adults in degree-completion programs are higher than among traditional college-age groups, but many adult students still do not accomplish their goal of obtaining a degree. It would be worthwhile to identify elements that are related to persistence or non-persistence among these adult learners. This knowledge would permit educators involved in degree-completion programs to tailor their offerings so as to encourage a higher completion rate among students.

I taught in a church-related college, in an adult degree-completion program that offered a business track in addition to the ministry track. During my time in the program,

I became interested in the rate of completion of its students. My initial observations led me to believe that there was a difference in completion rates among students who were enrolled in the business track as opposed to those who were enrolled in the ministry track. This was confirmed to me in a conversation with the director of the program (J. Banks, personal communication, February 11, 2003). Students enrolled in the business tracks appeared to complete their degrees at a higher rate than did students enrolled in ministry tracks. In conversations with directors of comparable programs in other institutions, I learned that this may be an isolated phenomenon—it is apparently not happening in all similar institutions (R. Upchurch, personal communication, May 28, 2003)—but the paucity of research in this area created an interest and concern among administrators (D. Coleman, personal communications, May 28, 2003; R. Kelley, personal communications, May 28, 2003).

As an instructor who had contact with students enrolled in both tracks, I became curious as to why this phenomenon was apparently happening and whether it was a wide spread trend or an isolated event, unique to the program in which I taught. I reasoned that for any adult to re-enter the student population, with all the accompanying financial pressures, disruptions in family life, and study adjustments, he or she must have made a commitment to a goal. One would assume that the desire to complete one's degree would be at least as high, if not higher, among students involved in ministry-related studies than among other students as a whole. Among those students who were pursuing a ministry-related degree with whom I spoke, almost all articulated a sense of calling in their lives. For them, working towards their degree was an act of spiritual obedience. They had undertaken their course of study in order to serve God and the church more effectively. One would not necessarily expect to find the same sense of calling among students in

business-related degree courses. Yet, in the college in which I taught, fewer of the ministry track students finished their degrees than did those in the business track. I began to consider what factors might be associated with this phenomenon. I became convinced that the situation excites legitimate curiosity and deserves further exploration.

### *Purpose of the Study*

This study will investigate the persistence among adult students enrolled in degree-completion programs in church-related colleges that offer both business- and ministry-related programs. It will attempt to identify elements that appear to be related to the persistence or non-persistence of the two groups of students. The inquiry will attempt to uncover these elements by examining the characteristics and learning experiences of students in the two groups.

The principal focus of the study will be to seek to identify the factors that relate to completion or non-completion of students following the two tracks by looking at the characteristics and learning experiences of the students of each of the two groups. Based on initial observations that indicate an apparent difference in completion rates of students enrolled in the business- and ministry-related tracks, an initial step towards the achievement of the purpose will be to determine the actual degree of difference in rates of persistence among students following the two tracks.

### *Research Questions*

The following research questions will be addressed:

Principle research question:

- What is the extent of the differences in adult degree completion among students enrolled in the two respective tracks of church-related colleges: business and ministry?

- Among students enrolled in adult degree-completion programs, what principle factors in their experiences relate to their persistence in obtaining a degree, either as factors that support their persistence toward obtaining a degree or as factors that hinder it?

Sub-questions:

- \_ What differences exist among adult learners enrolled in the two tracks—business and ministry—with respect to the factors affecting their persistence?
- \_ From the students' perspective, what factors in each of the degree-completion programs, business-related and ministry-related, would have encouraged their persistence?

### *Methodologies*

This study was conducted within the frameworks of systems and evolutionary paradigms. From the perspective of a systems paradigm, all phenomena are interrelated and interdependent. The evolutionary paradigm places emphasis on the processes by which a system changes rather than on a description of the state of a system. As befits these views that favor attention to the complexity and the detail of phenomena, this inquiry will employ a constructivist approach to research. The constructivist, interpretivist paradigm will permit inquiry into critical incidents that marked the participants' lives and influenced their personal, intellectual, and spiritual growth and their decisions related to persistence in the degree-completion program. The specific research techniques will allow participants to give full personal expression to their perception of the events and factors they encountered.

A questionnaire was administered to students who have been enrolled in degree-completion programs in three colleges. This initial group included those who have

completed their degrees as well as those who have not completed their degrees. The students will have been enrolled in either the business-related or ministry-related programs of their respective schools.

The purpose of the questionnaire was to gather information that will permit the selection of participants to be interviewed from the group who indicate their willingness to participate in that way. Participants to be interviewed will include both completers and non-completers. The interviews will focus on the experience of persistence or non-persistence in their degree-completion programs from the students' perspective. The interview protocol will attempt to draw from the participants' experience those elements that were related to their persistence. The goal of the study is to illuminate the experiences of these students as they endeavored to obtain their degrees.

### *Significance of the Study*

There can be little doubt that adult education will continue to grow for the next several years. Almost one-fourth of the population of the United States is between the ages of 30 and 45 (CensusScope, 2003). As this group ages, changes careers, and develops new interests, there will undoubtedly continue to be strong demand for adult educational opportunities. As a part of this, the number of adult degree-completion programs will almost certainly continue to increase, particularly in private and church-related institutions. Whether the programs are perceived as tools for expanded outreach that enable the college to reach a new population of students and thus fulfill more completely its mission, or as a legitimate means to further ensure the financial survival of the institution, it seems probable that more and more colleges will inaugurate such endeavors and that the panoply of degree options offered will expand.

The mission of degree-completion programs is spelled out in their names: their purpose is to help students to *complete* their degrees. If, in fact, the students who enroll do not complete their degrees, the program will have failed in its mission and eventually will no longer be able to attract students. A knowledge of elements that affect students' persistence and an understanding of how students in accelerated adult learning programs experience the programs and how they interpret their experiences would give administrators and instructors tools they could use to produce more effective programs.

The significance of this study is that it represents fundamental research in both practical and theoretical aspects of a foundational question for adult education: What factors are related to persistence among adult students? From a practical perspective, this research is needed to propose a clearer picture of how students' experiences affect their persistence. Having that information in hand will enable administrators, curriculum designers and writers, and instructors to situate their programs, formulate the curriculum, and present the materials in such a way as to enhance those factors that favor persistence. This study is significant from a theoretical perspective because it contributes to the greater body of knowledge about adult student persistence. In particular, it investigates persistence among a group of students enrolled in a type of adult educational program about which very little research has been done.

## CHAPTER TWO: RELATED LITERATURE

### *Introduction*

#### *Purpose of This Chapter*

This chapter will investigate literature published in the recent past that deals with retention among non-traditional adult learners engaged in higher education projects. In particular, it will look at literature concerning the retention of non-traditional students in degree-completion programs. In order to establish the background for the research, first a definition of degree-completion programs will be given and the theoretical framework on which they are founded will be explained. Following that, the chapter will look at what has been published about the characteristics of adult learners in general, and of non-traditional participants in traditional undergraduate programs and in accelerated adult learning programs in particular. It will also explore the literature concerning adult learners in specific situations, from basic and literacy education to traditional undergraduate schooling and on to accelerated adult learning programs.

In addition, the chapter will look at the role of motivation—the motivation both to participate and to persist—among non-traditional students in general and among students in adult degree programs in particular. Finally, it will consider the deterrents that affect adult participation in both traditional courses and accelerated programs. Institutional characteristics and other factors that play a role in retention will be investigated, in addition to strategies that have been developed to enhance persistence. Glesne (1999) encouraged researchers to “cast a wide net” (p. 20), that is, not to limit themselves to their specific topic, nor even to their discipline as they explore the literature published about their topic. It is in this spirit that some material will be presented that does not touch directly on persistence among learners enrolled in degree-completion programs, but

that provides understanding and foundational ideas against which the salient literature may be placed.

### *Degree-Completion Programs*

#### *Definition of Degree-Completion Programs*

The purpose of the overall research reported in this paper is to seek to provide a comprehensive description of the experiences of adults engaged in pursuing their undergraduate degrees through degree-completion programs, particularly as they relate to motivations to persist and to the differences that may exist in the degree of persistence demonstrated by students enrolled in two tracks of the same degree-completion programs. Logic dictates that this type of educational endeavor be clearly defined from the outset. The North Central Association of Colleges and Schools has established this definition: “An adult degree completion program is one that is designed especially to meet the needs of the working adult who, having acquired sixty or more college credit hours during previous enrollments, is returning to school after an extended period of absence to obtain a baccalaureate degree” (Taylor, 2000, p. 2). For their study, Mealman and Lawrence (2000) broadened the definition to include “undergraduate and graduate degree programs which consider the unique learning and developmental needs of working adults” (p. 1). Degree-completion programs are also known as accelerated adult learning programs, adult degree-completion programs, and accelerated degree-completion programs.

From these definitions, one can begin to discern some of the characteristics of degree-completion programs. They (a) are designed for working adults; (b) are a means of completing one’s degree, usually baccalaureate; (c) take into consideration the needs specific to adults as learners; and (d) take into account the life situations of adult students. They “provide formats and learning opportunities that are convenient for students and

accommodate their lifestyles” (Taylor, 2000, p. 5). Early programs focused on developing “practical skills in leadership and management that would have immediate application to the workplace.... A secondary goal was to develop interpersonal skills for self-development” (Mealman and Lawrence, 2000, p. 2). Present degree-completion programs offer a broad range of degree options, though most of them are related to career opportunities (Mealman and Lawrence).

### *Theoretical Frameworks for Degree-Completion Programs*

Theoretical frameworks that underlie adult degree-completion programs include adult learning, experiential learning, and collaborative learning. Mealman and Lawrence (2000) state that, “A major assumption guiding the development of these adult learner programs was that this student population was experience rich and theory poor.... Courses were outcome oriented and competency-based” (p. 2). They add that these programs hold a kinship to the movements of the Open University and the University Without Walls.

In practical terms, that framework translates into courses of study that generally share most, if not all, these characteristics (Mealman and Lawrence, 2000).

1. Classes are offered one time a week, usually at night or on weekends;
2. Students meet in study groups once a week outside class;
3. Classes are held in locations convenient to students’ homes or places of employment (often in hotels or other locations away from a college’s campus);
4. Books are delivered to the classroom (so students did not have to visit campus);
5. Courses are offered in modular units that built on one another;
6. Students completed the courses as a unit or cohort;

7. Courses are compressed: students were expected to participate in group activities outside class and complete normal readings in a shorter time frame.

### *Growth of Degree-Completion Programs*

Though degree-completion programs have been in existence for only a short time, the number of programs and the number of students enrolled in them continue to grow. The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning and American Council on Education found only 100 degree-completion programs in the U.S. in 1983. The number nearly tripled, to 284, in the next ten years (Taylor, 2000).

One of the reasons for the popularity of these programs may be that the length of time involved in completion of the prescribed courses is shorter than it would be in a traditional setting. Degree-completion programs generally pledge that a student starting with at least 60 hours of credit will be able to finish in fewer than 24 months. “The institution’s promise ... is realized through provisions such as establishing alternative class schedules, truncating the traditional semester/quarter time frame, organizing student cohorts, and awarding credit for prior learning experiences....” (Taylor, 2000, p. 2). The prior learning assessment has been and remains a major feature of many accelerated adult learning programs. Students can earn credit for knowledge learned through life experiences by developing a portfolio, containing documentation, essays, etc., of their learning. The emphasis is not on the student’s experiences, but rather on the knowledge he or she has gained from the experiences (Mealman and Lawrence, 2000). Credit awarded for prior learning experiences has played a positive role for both students and for the institutions sponsoring the degree-completion programs. “The nontraditional educational movement, and especially its manifestation in the assessment of prior

learning, has enabled institutions to expand access while providing alternatives to all students, but most notably to adults” (Rose, 1989, p. 211).

### *Who Participates in Adult Learning?*

#### *Characteristics of Adult Learners*

Merriam and Caffarella (1999) present a broad review of research about adult learners. Compared to the general population, adults involved in formal educational programs tend to be better educated, to have higher incomes, to be white, to be employed full-time, and to live in suburbia. DeJoy (1997) confirmed Merriam and Caffarella’s profile, adding that adult learners are more likely female than male and have been out of school for five years. “Surprisingly,” says Tweedell (2000b), “the profile of the adult learner has remained largely unchanged since they were first studied in 1969” (p. 8).

Yet in reality there is no typical adult learner because adult education is such a broad field. Formal adult education ranges from adult literacy to doctoral programs. It includes adult basic education and computer training, for-credit and non-credit classes, one-on-one tutoring and on-line courses, learning directly associated with one’s business or job and learning done just for the fun of gaining new knowledge.

Each year, millions of American adults enroll in some type of formal educational program. The classes they take include “English as a Second Language (ESL), basic skills and preparation for the General Educational Development (GED) exam, job- or career-related courses, vocational training, apprenticeship programs, and formal instruction in a host of other subjects ranging from Bible study to sports and recreation” (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2003, p. 1).

A 25-year old learner studying because she wants to advance to a new position may find herself working with a 65-year old learner who is in the class because he just

always wanted to learn about the subject. A 45-year old woman who finally has the time to study because her children are out of the house may find herself on the same study team as a 27-year old man, recently widowed, who is studying so he can make life better for his kids. One learner may be struggling to learn his a-b-c's, while others are working to get their Ph.D.'s.

They are busy people. "Adult students must juggle competing demands on their time from study, family, work, and other commitments; their learning goals are often different from those of educational institutions and providers; and their needs and aspirations may change during the education process, sometimes as a result of it" (Wonacott, 2001). In her profile of degree-seeking adult learners, Cross (1981) states that, compared to the general population, degree-seekers are a privileged group. Though the majority of them come from working-class backgrounds, many of them hold better jobs and are more highly educated than people the same age in the general population. Most of them are the first in their families to attend college (p. 67).

#### *Adult Learners in Degree-Completion Programs*

The first students sought for accelerated degree-completion programs were people in business, "middle to upper level managers who were academically prepared to complete upper division college level work, highly motivated and self-directed" (Mealman and Lawrence, 2000, p. 2). As accelerated adult learning programs became more common, however, student populations expanded and became more diverse. Mealman and Lawrence point out that the student population was no longer limited to career professionals. This has become one of the strengths of these courses. A taskforce of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools observed that "adult degree-

completion programs provide opportunity and access to students not traditionally served by higher education” (Taylor, 2000, p. 5).

### *Assumptions About Adult Learners*

Malcolm Knowles (1980, 1984) promulgated what has become the most well known theory of adult education: andragogy (Rachal, 2002; Merriam and Caffarella, 1999). Though Knowles borrowed the word from Europe, he infused it with his assumptions about adult learners, and it has evolved in different directions from its continental persona. In andragogy, Knowles posited that adults as learners are different from children or adolescents as learners. He introduced his first four assumptions in 1980, and then added a fifth later. He said that as individuals mature, they change.

1. Their self-concept moves from one of being a dependent personality toward being a self-directed human being;
2. They accumulate a growing reservoir of experience that becomes an increasingly rich resource for learning;
3. Their readiness to learn becomes oriented increasingly to the developmental tasks of their social roles; and
4. Their time perspective changes from one of postponed application of knowledge to immediacy of application, and accordingly, their orientation toward learning shifts from one of subject-centeredness to one of performance-centeredness. (Knowles, 1980, pp. 44-45)
5. Adults are motivated to learn by internal factors rather than external ones. (Knowles, 1984, p. 12)

Though andragogy has been the primary “model of assumptions” about adult education, as Knowles (1980, p. 43) himself called it, Merriam and Caffarella state that it

has “also stimulated more controversy, philosophical debate and critical analysis” (1999, p. 273) than practically any other theory. They go on to add that although its “hold on the field [is] subsiding as more sophisticated analyses of the adult learner as a social being living and learning in a social context take center stage” (p. 276), it nonetheless, remains a “helpful rubric for better understanding adults as learners,” and it is considered to be “good instructional practice for all ages, especially adults” (p. 278).

### *Adults’ Motivations to Participate in Learning*

#### *Motivations to Participate*

“Learners’ motivations for participating in adult education are many, complex, and subject to change” (Merriam and Caffarella, 1999, p. 56). Over the last forty years, several models for student participation have been developed (Boshier 1973; Cross, 1981; Houle, 1961), and although they do not explain everything about motivation to participate in learning activities, they remain helpful to adult educators as they explore the reasons for students’ engagement in education. Educators recognize that student motivation is of supreme importance. “We...know quite enough to be certain that motivational factors have enormous practical influences on the kinds of cognitive activities that underlie human learning” (Howe, 1987, p. 145).

Tweedell (2000a) contends that the motivations that impel adult learners may not be the same as those of traditional students. “Non-traditional students are distinguished from their traditional counterparts by their intense academic and vocational orientation to college” (p. 2).

Based on in-depth interviews, in which he explored the subjects’ history in learning, the factors that impelled them to continue learning, and how they viewed themselves as learners, Houle (1961) proposed a typology of three orientations to explain

adult learners' motivation to pursue further learning: learners are goal-oriented, that is they believe that education will help them achieve an objective; activity-oriented, that is they pursue education because of the activity involved; or learning-oriented, which is to say they desire to learn for the sake of learning. Mealman and Lawrence (2000) state that Houle's research underlines the fact that "adults [are] motivated to pursue education as a means to a larger end, such as a career change, for social interaction and for the love of learning" (p. 3).

Johnstone and Rivera's (1965) broad study revealed three main reasons why adults study: (a) to meet personal goals and gain satisfaction, (b) to prepare for a new occupation, and (c) to advance in a current job. Boshier (1973) postulated in his model that dropout and persistence are related to motivation: "deficiency" motivation that is affected by environmental and social pressures and leads to intra-self incongruence, and "growth" motivation that builds on the inner person and leads to intra-self congruence (p. 257). Morstain and Smart (1974, cited in Merriam and Caffarella, 1999), building on Boshier's work, developed a six-element typology to explain motivation to participate in learning:

1. Social relationships: participants are looking for new friends
2. External expectations: participants are submitting to the wishes of others
3. Social welfare: participants want to serve others
4. Professional advancement: participants want to advance in their job or profession
5. Escape/stimulation: participants want to escape routine and do something different
6. Cognitive interest: participants learn for the sake of learning.

More recently, Fujita-Starck's (1996) study of adult learners enrolled in non-credit continuing education courses at the University of Hawaii confirmed Boshier's (1991) refined seven-factor typology, as defined by the Educational Participation Scale (EPS). Adult learners are motivated to participate by factors related to communication improvement (COM), social contact (SOC), educational preparation (EDUC), professional advancement (ADV), family togetherness (FAM), social stimulation (STIM), and cognitive interest (COG).

Kaplan and Saltiel (1997) advanced the idea that "an adult's decision to return to school is the product of multiple factors. These factors can be grouped into categories of family, work, or personal issues" (p. 17). They define the categories thusly:

Family factors:

- Structural (e.g., death of spouse, divorce, disability, unemployment, remarriage)
- Developmental phases (e.g., role model for children, empty nest, impending retirement)

Work factors:

- Changing pressures (e.g. downsizing, new technology)
- "Hitting the ceiling" (i.e., advancing as far as possible without further schooling)

Personal factors:

- Role responsibility (adults define themselves by their commitments)

It is worthwhile to note the stability in motivations over time. DeJoy's (1997) study of degree-seeking adult learners in an Idaho university, for example, found consistency with Johnstone and Rivera's (1965) research. DeJoy concluded that "over the

course of three decades adult learners continue to participate in adult education for largely the same reasons” (p. 5).

No one model has become the gold standard of motivational research. Certain motivational factors, however, have been shown to be common to all the models.

- Factors related to job or career: The motivation to change jobs or careers or to advance to a higher post appears to be a primary impetus for learning for a large proportion of adult students.

- Factors related to the learner’s family. This is mentioned specifically in some models and allowed for in others. To serve as a role model, to make things better for the family, to make the family proud: adult learners have cited these and other family-related issues as the reason for their participation in educational projects.

While some motivational factors appear to be very common, motivations may differ among adult learners, based on their age, stage of development, family situation, or career situation. Cross (1981), for example, states that, because of their need to get a good job or to advance, younger non-traditional learners are more degree-oriented, but that “the desire for credit or certification declines steadily with increasing age” (p. 92).

DeJoy (1997) found that “transitions across the lifespan [were] also cited as reasons for learning” (p. 6). That is to say that a person may have been contemplating participating in some learning program but had hesitated until a “trigger event” broke the logjam, so to speak, resulting in enrollment. Aslanian and Brickell (1980) state that “most adult decisions to seek educational renewal are clearly and directly related to significant changes in their lives.... Going back to school is less significantly a transition in itself than a consequence of some other change, actual or anticipated, in individual circumstance” (p. ix). In fact, 83 percent of the learners they surveyed cited a change in

their life as the reason they chose to participate in adult education. The most often mentioned life-changing events were career transitions (p. 54).

#### *Motivations to persist*

Researchers note that the motivation to begin a program of study will not necessarily be sufficient motivation to assure persistence to the end. Tweedell (2000a) recognizes the different role of motivation in the two cases, as does Garrison (1997): “Motivation reflects perceived value and anticipated success of learning goals at the time learning is initiated and mediates between context (control) and cognition (responsibility) during the learning process” (Garrison, 1997, p. 26). Tinto (1987), studying traditional college students, found that if students sense an incongruence between their perceived needs and the support system put into place by the institution, they will become less committed to accomplishing their academic goals. Initial motivation will weaken and eventually die if there is a major discrepancy between the student’s perception of personal needs and what the campus is doing to meet those needs. Tweedell (2000a) says that this may be true of students in non-traditional settings as well. If the educational program does not meet the student’s perceived needs, motivation to persist will be diminished significantly.

#### *Motivations to Participate in Degree-Completion Programs*

It appears that adult students who enroll in adult degree completion programs have the same motivations as other adult learners. Tweedell’s (2000a) study supports the findings of studies done by De Joy (1997) and Johnstone and Rivera (1965), which indicate that the most common reasons for which adults in general choose to engage in further education are related to (a) personal goals and satisfaction, (b) preparation for a career change, and (c) advancement in their career. Students in Tweedell’s study were

“interested in finding more personal and career satisfaction” (p. 11). Taylor (2000) supported their position when he noted that the upsurge of interest in degree-completion programs is “apparently a result of the marked increase in the number of working adults who seek to attain new levels of academic achievement—a goal highly related to advancing in their current work environments, preparing for greater job mobility, and/or learning for purposes of enrichment” (p. 1).

### *Models for Motivation to Participate in Learning*

Theory building in adult education has proven to be difficult. There are several reasons for this, as Cross (1981) points out. The broad array of activities carried out under the name of adult education, the marketplace orientation of adult educators, plus the fact that most people involved in adult education are administrators and teachers rather than scholars, all make discussion and formulation of theory more challenging. Several researchers have, nonetheless, proposed models to try to explain motivation for participation among adult learners. Among them are Henry Miller (1967), who proposed his force-field model, Boshier (1973), who suggested his congruency model, Rubenson (1977), who put forward the expectancy-valence model. Cross (1981) says that all of these models share certain common elements. Among other things, all three believe that “participation can be understood through an analysis of the interaction between an individual and his or her environment” (Cross, p. 123). Or, as Boshier (1973) puts it: “both participation and dropout stem from an interaction of internal psychological and external environmental variables” (p. 256). Other common elements are that individuals exercise some control over their actions and destinies, and that “motivation to participate...is the result of the individual’s perception of positive and negative forces in the situation” (Cross, p. 123). In that light, she saw no reason why Tough’s (1979) ideas

on anticipated benefits, which he developed in the domain of self-directed learning, could not also speak to the motivations of students enrolled in adult education classes.

Several other models for participation in adult education have been developed more recently. Cookson's (1986) ISSTAL model emphasizes the social dimension of participation. The letters ISSTAL stand for interdisciplinary, sequential-specificity, time-allocation, life-span. The underlying assumption of his model is "that human behavior is to some extent predictable or determined by certain identifiable and measurable aspects of both the person and environment" (p. 130). Cookson proposed that his model was "of particular relevance for the development of theory and research" because of the "interdisciplinary conceptual framework; [the] sequential specificity of relations among the independent variables; [and the] time allocation life span perspective" (p. 131).

Darkenwald and Merriam's (1982) psychosocial interaction model "emphasizes socio-environmental forces, particularly socioeconomic status [SES]" (p. 142). Pre-adult characteristics, education and socialization prepare the ground for the variables in adulthood. These include SES and "learning press,"—that is, "the extent to which one's total current environment requires or encourages further learning" (p. 143)—and perceived value of adult education and the person's readiness to participate. Though the person may be quite ready to participate, "readiness must be activated by one or more specific stimuli before participation can be expected to occur" (p. 144). This trigger event brings the potential participant into conflict with the barriers to participation. "It is sufficient to note," they add, "that the severity of these barriers is inversely related to SES" (p. 145). Henry and Basile's (1994) decision model considers five factors that affect a student's decision to enroll: reasons for enrolling, sources of information, course attributes, deterrents, and institutional reputation (p. 71). Merriam and Caffarella (1999)

point out that this model “incorporates both motivational factors and deterrents to participation” (p. 65).

All these models focus on adult learners in general. None of them specifically deals with non-traditional students, whether they are studying in traditional educational settings or in the non-traditional setting of degree-completion programs.

Cross (1981) proposed a model that, rather than going into the details of deterrents or incitements to participation, seeks to look at the broad domains that interplay in a student’s decision. Called the chain of response model, it “assumes that participation in a learning activity...is...the result of a chain of responses, each based on an evaluation of the position of the individual in his or her environment” (p. 125). It begins with the individual, considering his or her attitude towards him- or herself, recognizing the effect of life transitions on that person, and taking into account the amount of information available to him or her. It incorporates the person’s attitude towards education, adds in the importance the person attaches to his or her goals and the expectations that participating in an educational program will help reach them, and then gives due respect to both the educational opportunities afforded to the person and the obstacles that would hinder participation.

It is true, as Quigley (1998) points out, that “neither Cookson nor Cross explicitly includes the powerful effects of pre-adult factors such as past educational experiences in their equations” (p. 13). Cross’ (1981) model nonetheless allows such factors to be considered as part of the evaluation of the student’s attitudes towards education. She states in fact that “if adult educators wish to understand why some adults fail to participate in learning opportunities, they need to begin at the beginning of the COR model—with an understanding of the student’s attitude towards education” (p. 130).

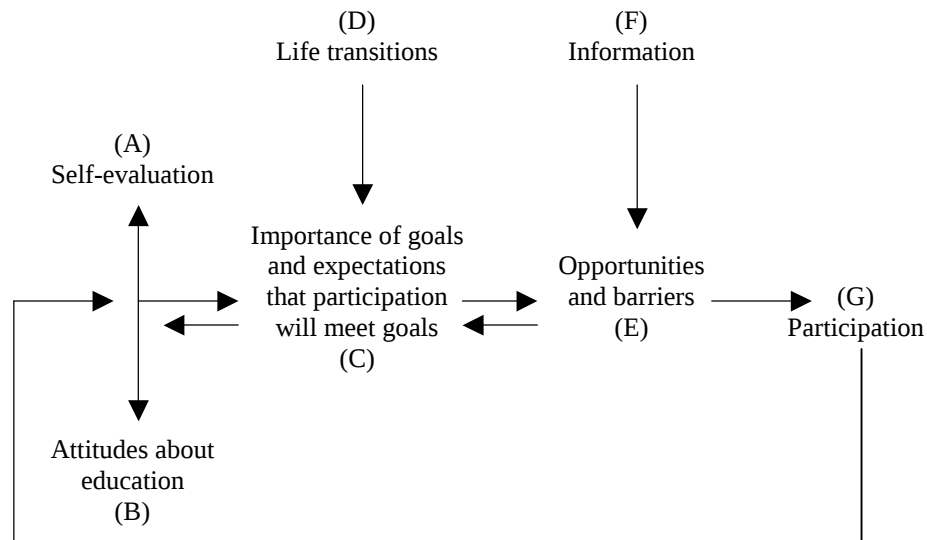


FIGURE 1: Cross' Chain of Response Model (COR)

Cross provides a conceptual image of the factors that play into a student's decision. Other researchers have fleshed out the model by identifying the specific elements that make up these factors, particularly in the areas of life transitions, the importance of goals and expectations, and opportunities and barriers. Although I find all the models worthwhile, I find this model the most helpful because it does paint the broad picture and it permits me to comprehend the interplay that takes place among the factors, which affects the student's decision. It recognizes that decisions are made on the basis of a complex interaction of factors that circumscribe the parameters of potential decisions. I also appreciate it particularly because it takes as its starting point the person of the learner, who is the primary actor in adult education, and points the fundamental role of his or her self-evaluation and attitudes towards education. I identify with this model, as well, because it seems to more closely reflect my own personal journey towards the decision to pursue further education.

### *Deterrents to Participation*

To say that not every adult who could benefit from adult education takes advantage of opportunities that come his or her way is to state the obvious. A question several researchers have addressed is why those most in need of further education do not avail themselves of opportunities to learn. Perhaps part of the reason is that while potential students may have strong motivations to enroll, at the same time they may face formidable deterrents to their participation.

As a result of their national study on motivation, Johnstone and Rivera (1965) developed two categories of deterrents to participation in adult education:

- External, or situational, deterrents, which are external to the person and over which he or she exercises no control. They come out of his or her situation in life.
- Internal, or dispositional, deterrents, such as personal attitudes, lack of confidence, lack of interest (Merriam and Carrarella, 1999; Cross, 1981) and any negative attitudes or unhelpful perceptions the student may have about returning to school that might hinder success (Malhotra, Sizoo, and Chorvat, 1999).

Cross (1981) adopted the terms “situational” and “dispositional” and added a third category: institutional deterrents, consisting of “those practices and procedures [of the institution] that exclude or discourage working adults from participating in education activities” (p. 98). Darkenwald and Merriam (1982) added informational deterrents, which deal with the institution’s failure to communicate and the adult’s failure to seek out information about offered programs.

In their broad 1985 study, Darkenwald and Valentine developed a model of six factors that affect non-participation: lack of (self-)confidence, lack of course relevance, time constraints, low personal priority, cost, and personal problems. This research and

that of Valentine and Darkenwald (1990) is of particular significance because the sample was drawn from the general population rather than from people who had a known involvement with adult education.

After further analysis of the results of their 1985 study, Valentine and Darkenwald (1990) developed a typology of nonparticipating adults, clustering them into five groups:

1. People deterred by personal problems.
2. People deterred by lack of confidence.
3. People deterred by educational costs.
4. People deterred by lack of interest in organized education.
5. People deterred by lack of interest in available courses. (pp. 36-37)

“The two most often cited reasons for nonparticipation are lack of time and lack of money.... ‘Family responsibilities’ was cited as the next most salient barrier” (Merriam and Caffarella, 1999, p. 56). Cross (1981) says that cost and time factors are perceived barriers to participation for one-half of potential adult learners. Job and home responsibilities are a concern of from one-fourth to one-third of them.

### *Persistence and Retention*

#### *Persistence and Retention Among Traditional Students*

“Student attrition is a major problem for American colleges and universities” (Jones and Watson, 1990, p. 1). Low levels of retention can be devastating to an educational organization, because they “affect an institution’s funding, facilities planning, and long-term planning for the curriculum” (p. 3). For that reason, research into the reasons students do not complete their programs of study is constantly being done.

Studies have shown that intention and commitment are two of the determining factors in a traditional student's staying or leaving. Those who persist "tend to have clear intentions when entering.... They tend to be strongly committed to education and career goals and committed to the decision to pursue these goals at the given institution" (Tweedell, 2000a, p. 1). But intention and commitment are affected by the student's interactions on campus. In addition to those two internal factors—intention and commitment—Tinto (1987) suggests four interacting factors in a student's college experience: adjustment, difficulty, incongruence, and isolation. Adjustment deals with the student's social and intellectual adjustment to college; if adjustment is very difficult, the student may withdraw. Difficulty has to do with academic requirements the student is required to meet, which may differ significantly from his or her high school experience. Incongruence "refers...to the mismatch or lack of fit between the needs, interests, and preferences of the individual and those of the institution" (p. 53). Isolation occurs when there is not "sufficient contact between the individual and other members of the social and academic communities of the college" (p. 64). Unable or unwilling to establish close relationships, the student withdraws psychologically and then literally from the college.

If a new traditional undergraduate student encounters too great a gap between his or her previous surroundings and way of life and the new college life, the adjustment may be more than he or she thinks is possible. These difficulties in adjustment may be the product of incongruence, a disparity between what the student expected and what is happening, for example, or a difference between the student's strongly held beliefs and values and those held by either the school or by fellow students. The incongruence may also come from the dissimilarity between the student's commitment to learning and that of his peers. This incongruence is unsettling and may lead to isolation, as the student

withdraws socially and perhaps intellectually from his situation. Social and academic difficulties may be either the product or the cause—or both—of incongruence and isolation. In either case, the student is in danger of leaving the playing field before the game is over.

Tinto (1987) emphasizes that these factors interact in the student's decision-making processes. Speaking of traditional college students, he "posits that there are individual roots of student departure which are affected by interactional elements found within the institutional structure of the college" (Tweedell, 2000a, p. 1). In other words, as Tweedell goes on to say, the decision not to continue in college is ultimately "a personal one, but it occurs within an important social context" (p. 1).

#### *Persistence and Retention Among Non-Traditional Students*

Retention of non-traditional learners is of equal concern among adult educators in "every type of program" according to Tracy-Mumford (1994). "Although the reasons students leave and the strategies for keeping them may differ from adult basic education (ABE) to higher education, the goal of retention is the same: to keep learners in programs until they achieve their goals" (p. 1).

The question one might ask is whether the models for persistence and retention for traditional students are valid for non-traditional students. Bean and Metzger (1985) proposed a model for non-traditional undergraduate student attrition. In their model, which is based on a broad overview of research articles, they propose five categories of factors that are presumed to have a direct effect on a student's decision to drop out of college:

1. Background, including educational goals, ethnicity, residence, etc.

2. Academic variables, including study habits, academic advisement, course availability, etc.
3. Environmental variables, such as finances, hours of employment, family responsibilities, outside encouragement, etc.
4. Academic outcomes, as shown in GPA
5. Psychological outcomes, including utility, satisfaction, goal commitment, and stress. (p. 491)

Bean and Metzner (1985) include social integration variables as well, but indicate that they have only “possible effects” (p. 491).

Tweedell (2000a) says that the models of Bean and Metzner (1985) and Boshier (1973) apply to both non-traditional and traditional students, but only in a traditional college setting. I could find no studies that attempted to apply models for persistence and retention to adult students in a non-traditional setting.

#### *Deterrents to Persistence*

Earlier this paper presented deterrents to participation that are experienced by potential students, which would hinder an adult from taking the first step and starting a learning experience. Once the learner has worked around those obstacles and has begun a program of study, however, he or she will face another set of deterrents that could cause him or her to drop out before completing the program. Malhotra and her associates (1999) found that deterrents to persistence of adult learners in general could be classed into six groups, all of which can be subsumed in Cross’ three categories:

1. Bad experience: past negative educational experiences, lack of self-confidence, etc.; this fits into Cross’ dispositional and institutional factors;

2. Institutional problems: red tape, no transportation, family ambivalence, etc.; these fit into Cross' institutional factor;
3. Insufficient resources: no time, no energy, home responsibilities, etc.; these fit into all three of Cross' categories;
4. Inadequate course offerings: courses unavailable, offered at wrong time, etc.; this also finds a home in all three domains;
5. Unprofitable cost/benefit ratio: strict attendance requirements, dislike of full-time schooling, etc.; these match Cross' institutional and situational categories;
6. Unavailable childcare: no childcare, costs of childcare, etc.; this corresponds to Cross' situational category.

These six variables accounted for 58% of the variance in persistence in the 1999 study by Malhotra and her associates. Students perceived that lack of resources was the most significant obstacle to their continuing to follow the course of study. Lack of resources, therefore—particularly relating to time and money—is seen as a deterrent to both participation and to persistence.

Ryder, Bowman, and Newman's (1994) study of non-traditional students' perceptions of barriers found that the greatest hindrances to degree completion were financial problems and poor academic advising. Contrary to Quigley's (1998) findings, they say that "lack of emotional support from family members and lack of same-age peer group ...[were] not indicated as significant impediments to degree completion"(Ryder et al, 1994, p. 10).

Rather than try to group the factors that hinder persistence, Kaplan and Saltiel (1997) made a more detailed list of deterrents they found in their study:

1. Time management

2. Financial costs of being a student
3. Emotional costs of being a student
4. Work
5. Family obligations
6. Lack of support from people at home or work
7. Shifts in self-perception
8. Loss of connection with other areas of life. (p. 18)

These barriers produce stress; as the course of study progresses, students may perceive them as growing in importance and becoming a greater source of stress. Kaplan and Saltiel (1997) say that “ultimately, the continuous nature of the stresses associated with the educational endeavor coupled with less time for sleep and recreational activities can contribute to the student becoming too depleted to continue” (p. 18).

Another phenomenon that may play a negative role for adult learners in general, in both participation and persistence, is the student’s previous school experience. Quigley (1998) contends that, at least in the arena of adult basic education, “schooling experiences in the formative years have a lifelong effect on learners” (p. 12). This experience would fit into the “bad experience” category of Malhotra and her associates (1999) and into Cross’ (1981) dispositional deterrents. Citing Wikeland, Reder, and Hart-Landsberg’s (1992) study of adult literacy education, Quigley says that undereducated adult

participants and potential participants tend to perceive and experience the adult education programs...as extensions or continuations of the school programs in which they have previously experienced failure, loss of self-esteem, and lack of responsiveness to their personal needs and goals. (p. 12)

It would be interesting to know whether similar prior negative college experiences have the same effect on participants or potential participants in degree-completion programs. Would such experiences predispose the student to dropping out? It appears from the study done by Comings, Parella, and Soricone (1999) that “current realities, rather than past experience, may be more closely associated with whether or not learners persist in programs” (p. 43). They opine that people who have had a powerful negative experience in prior schooling may either drop out very early or not enroll at all in adult education programs.

#### *Other Factors That Affect Persistence*

Researchers have found many factors that affect adult students’ persistence, whether in traditional or non-traditional settings. Kerka, (1995) writing about persistence in adult basic education (ABE) classes, suggested that at least one of the factors in Tinto’s model of traditional undergraduate persistence—social integration—holds true for ABE students. She reported a study by Vann and Hinton (1994) that showed that 84% of completers were members of student “cliques,” whereas 70% of non-completers were loners, isolated from fellow students.

Tweedell (2000a) found another factor that is the same for traditional and non-traditional learners: commitment to learning. “Students are more successful in this non-traditional adult program if they come in with high motivations producing a high level of commitment to the program” (p. 4) she says. Another important factor is the life events the adult learner experiences, expressed through the broader responsibilities and wider relationships adults often have as compared to those of traditional students. Michael and Young (1999), studying a non-traditional graduate study program, found that the students’ lives collide with their studies with great “force and unpredictability” (p. 2).

The life of each individual student in their study was influenced, either negatively or positively, by the events—the crises—through which he or she passed.

Institutional structures and procedures play a role in retention, as well. Johnson and Hartmann (1999) state that “it has been the experience of the authors that academic information systems have developed to meet the needs of institutions in the traditional student. These systems not only ignore the needs of the adult learner, but act as a barrier to supporting their personal quest for education” (p. 4). They identify three barriers within administrative processes that serve to stimulate the withdrawal of non-traditional learners from educational programs: “student entry barriers, student activity tracking barriers and barriers to retention” (p. 4). In their study, they emphasized only the financial barriers to student entry into the program. They recognized, however, that an impediment existed in the tracking of adult students in that particular institution, since the computer program used kept no records on those who were no longer enrolled in the school. Seeking fitting measures to enhance retention, the authors were concerned that the database used at their college did not alert authorities at the first sign of a student’s not enrolling and studying. They state that “appropriate and timely student support is an essential ingredient of an effective adult learning program” (p. 5). “Students come to accelerated degree-completion programs because they perceive them to remove barriers to higher education. Students will persist in these programs if these perceptions are experientially confirmed” Tweedell says (2000a, p. 5).

Whether the adult learner is attempting to accomplish an explicit goal appears to be important, as well. Commenting on a study of persistence among ABE students by Comings et al (1999), Wonacott (2001) states that “adult students reporting a specific goal for adult education activities show increased persistence compared to those without

one” (p. 3). In that study, Comings and his associates (1999) found that having a goal was the second most frequently noted category of support mechanisms. The goal itself (goals ranged from helping one’s child to pursuing a graduate degree, from obtaining citizenship to proving someone wrong) was not the most important point; the critical issue was that the student had a goal toward which to work.

Relationships also provide significant support for persistence. Michael and Young (1999) found that “persistence...is greatly enhanced by the meaningful participation and support of significant others” (p. 2). Unsolicited comments from participants in the study by Comings et al (1999), seem to indicate that “the presence of successful [educational] role models that come from the social circles of learners might provide additional support in helping to sustain motivation and promote persistence” (p. 50). On the other hand, Comings et al found that unsupportive relationships were the second most commonly reported obstacle to completion, exceeded in importance only by life demands. “It appears then, that social connectivity and community...is the key to retention in non-traditional programs” (Tweedell, 2000a, p. 5).

Participants in the study by Comings et al (1999), noted four types of supports:

1. Relationships (support received from family, friends, church community, children, etc.),
2. Goals (that sustained the learner, such as helping one’s children, getting a better job, etc.),
3. Teachers and other students (who encouraged them), and
4. “Positive self” (considering that taking the course was an expression of themselves as persons or an indication of will power, motivation, etc.). (p. 56)

On the basis of Ashar and Skenes' research (1993), it appears that social factors do indeed play a significant role in adults' college success. "Classes that were professionally more homogeneous, and thus socially more integrated, and smaller classes lost fewer students than less socially integrated and larger classes," they said (p. 96). Kerka (1995) agrees, stating that "small groups of peers at the same level of career maturity created a social environment that motivated adult learners to persist. Learning needs alone appeared strong enough to attract adults to the program but not enough to retain them" (p. 4).

For on-campus students, campus support is a key to retention. For non-traditional students, Bean and Metzner (Bean et al, 1985) posit that encouragement from outside the school environment, from community or family perhaps, fills that role. According to Michael and Young (1999), "even self directed students crave continuity and connections, a sense of academic community.... A faculty-student relationship which does not embody the qualities of true mentorship threatens successful completion" (p. 5).

#### *The Role of Cohorts, Small Groups, and Community*

"What can the institution do to encourage higher retention? It appears that giving attention to the social needs of students might be a good place to start... Faculty can play this role to some extent, but it appears more enduring when it comes from within the cohort model" (Tweedell, 2000a, p. 5). Hers is but one of the studies that point out the value to non-traditional students of collaborative learning. This may take any of several forms, including mastery classes, cohorts, and study groups. Bloom (1978) studied mastery classes over several years. He found that the differences between two groups of learners—fast and slow, and good and poor—were overcome in mastery classes, where one of the emphases was collaborative learning. He discovered that favorable learning

conditions occur when learning takes place within a learning community, that is in a situation where “students...become cooperative in helping each other” (p. 565). “Most students become very similar with regard to learning ability, rate of learning, and motivation for further learning when provided with favorable learning conditions” (p. 566), he added.

In her study of a non-traditional adult education graduate program, Cunningham (1996) found that adult graduate students who were members of cohorts were graduated at a much higher rate than students following the same course of study in a traditional classroom (p. 7).

Table 1

*Graduation rates of students in cohorts and not in cohorts*

|                    | In cohorts | Not in cohorts |
|--------------------|------------|----------------|
| European-Americans | 66%        | 55%            |
| African-Americans  | 52%        | 35%            |
| Latino-Americans   | 47%        | 35%            |

This supports Tweedell’s (2000a) contention that “a cohort model utilizing collaborative learning with close student/faculty relations... removes some of the barriers to achievement for ... adult students” (p. 4). In a distance learning context, Horn (1999) found that “community is critical to distance learning” (p. 5) and that its positive effect was shown in the course grades. He added that “for teaching to be effective, profuse communications are necessary to foster community and to put into practice the principles of effective education” (p. 2).

Tweedell (2000a) echoes Horn's emphasis on communication and community when she says that "interactive learning—including cooperative learning, collaborative learning, and learning through discussion—has become a widely respected innovation in learning" (p. 12) and is one of the components of a successful model of adult learning. Interactive learning fulfills Knowles' assumptions in that it is self-directed, makes use of one's experience as a starting point for learning, and can be done in such a way as to provide immediate usefulness, while at the same time responding to students' need for a learning community. "Serious attention needs to be given to the process of building social cohesion within groups," Tweedell (2000a, p. 5) contends. She suggests (a) "good orientation to purposes and practices of study groups," (b) placing periodic "cohesion-building exercises" into the modules, and (c) instruction on how to manage conflicts that might develop within the group (p. 5).

Kehrhahn, Scheckley, and Travers (1999) saw that the institution of research teams and task teams among students, formed around specific research questions or specific tasks, was an effective element in a series of reforms that resulted in a higher retention and completion rate in a non-traditional graduate program. Quigley (1998) suggests additional support techniques that could be added, including groups within classrooms, after-class support groups, mentoring, buddy systems, and volunteer tutors. From all these studies, one can gather that collaborative and cooperative study, in cohorts, mastery classes, long-term in-class groups, study groups that meet after class, or in other forms, contributes to the success of non-traditional students, by providing emotional support and a sense of community.

Ryder et al (1994), in a study of 100 non-traditional students at a medium sized southern university found, however, that the issues of "emotional support from family

members and ...of same age peer group [were not seen] as significant impediments to degree completion” (p. 10). This finding may not be generalizable to the broader non-traditional population, however, as these authors recognized, because of the limited scale of the research (only 100 students, at only one college, all of whom were enrolled at the time of the study).

### *The Importance of Early Follow-up*

Several researchers state that the initial stages of a new learner’s educational experience constitute a critical time in terms of retention. Based on his observations of Adult Basic Education students, Quigley (1998) contends that adult learners are particularly vulnerable to dropping out during the first three weeks of their learning experience, and that follow-up contact is essential during that time. Wonacott (2001) suggests that such elements as cohorts, support groups, work groups, and seminars provide effective opportunities for follow-up contacts (Cunningham, 1996; Kehrhahn et al, 1999).

In their study of traditional college students, Christophel and Gorham (1995) found that motivation “is perceived by students as a personally-owned state, while demotivation is perceived as a teacher-owned problem” (p. 303, cited in Quigley, 1998, p. 13). That is, education providers may have a greater effect in demotivating learners than in motivating them. Quigley (1998) suggests that teachers need to “respond to student needs right away,” what he calls “teacher-immediacy.” “Early verbal connections with new learners are critical in sustaining motivation ... [and] the teacher-learner relationship becomes increasingly important” in maintaining students’ motivation as time passes. “If teacher immediacy is not established early, the odds that students will drop out increase” (p. 14). Quigley calls for both teacher and counselor immediacy—that is,

prompt response to adult learners' needs in order to sustain motivation—particularly in the first three weeks.

### *Retention Among Students in Degree-Completion Programs*

“There is a gap in the literature when it comes to retention of adult students in accelerated degree completion programs” (Tweedell, 2000a, p. 1). Except for Tweedell's study, this writer could find no empirical studies dealing with adult learners enrolled in degree-completion programs.

McCaffrey (1991) published a study he did on persistence among adult students in an external degree program. Degree-completion programs and external degree programs are similar in some respects and would likely appeal to the same group of people, but they are distinct in many ways. The external degree program that McCaffrey studied was organized using exclusively a distance education approach, where students worked essentially alone and had contact with only their professors. With the exception of possible personal contacts during External Degree Weekend, when enrollees visited the campus, all communications were mediated by telephone or electronic media. In contrast, accelerated adult learning programs are taught in classrooms, where the students collaborate with other learners and interact face to face with their professors and fellow students. It will be interesting, nonetheless, to see whether her findings reflect the reality experienced by learners in degree-completion programs.

McCaffrey (1991) investigated the usefulness of Bean and Metzger's (1985) conceptual model of non-traditional undergraduate student attrition among students in an external degree program. Because of the differences in the populations, she modified some of Bean and Metzger's variables and did not include others, performance in high school, for example. Persistence was defined as enrolment in the Fall semester classes

after having been enrolled in the Spring semester. She (McCaffrey, 1991) found that not all of Bean and Metzger's variables had a statistically significant direct effect on either intent to persist or on persistence itself.

1. Having sufficient money to pay for the courses had a direct effect on both intent to persist and persistence. This was the most important variable in terms of causal effect.
2. The student's GPA also had a positive effect on both intent to persist and persistence. Higher grades indicated a greater probability of persistence.
3. Encouragement received from employers had a positive effect on intent to persist.
4. Encouragement from siblings affected intent to persist negatively.
5. Credits completed in the program positively affected persistence.
6. Academic advisement had a negative effect on persistence.
7. The student's intent to persist had a high positive effect on persistence.

#### *Strategies to Improve Persistence and Retention*

Researchers have proposed several ideas to improve retention among adult learners. Some of the suggestions are based on their own research, while others are drawn from the literature. If Quigley (1998) is correct when he says that teacher-immediacy must be established early, it is important that those people who, due to the barriers against which they are struggling, are most susceptible to demotivation be identified as soon as possible in their learning process. Quigley suggests that intake personnel (registrars, counselors, those giving orientation, etc.) watch for cues—such as “skepticism, hostility, hesitancy, and uncertainty” (p. 15)—that would suggest significant dispositional barriers in the student's thinking. As part of Quigley's study, students thus

identified were given an interview during which the Prior Schooling and Self-Perception Inventory was used. Quigley found that placing such “at-risk” learners into settings that gave additional support resulted in a higher rate of completion as compared to similar learners in a typical classroom setting. He used three support mechanisms:

1. “Team support,” in which the teacher was informed of the need for extra support and the counselor visited the student at least weekly;
2. Small classes of five to six students, which allowed greater peer attention;
3. One-on-one tutoring, which assured the greatest amount of attention by a teacher.

It is perhaps noteworthy that “the small group option held the most students the longest. This suggests that increased peer support as well as enhanced teacher support...may provide an ‘absence of negatives’ sufficient for many at-risk learners” (Quigley, 1998, p. 15). Quigley goes on to suggest additional support techniques that could be added, including groups within classrooms, after-class support groups, mentoring, buddy systems, and volunteer tutors.

On the basis of the literature and of their study, Comings et al, (1999) propose four “supports to persistence” (p. 67) that should be built into accelerated adult learning programs:

1. Help the student establish a goal;
2. Help the student develop self-efficacy for the course of study;
3. Help the student manage the positive and negative forces that will come;
4. Help the student make measurable progress toward the goal.

Kaplan and Saltiel (1997) suggest similar actions educators can take to help students achieve success:

1. Show learners how they can achieve their goal.
2. Provide student orientation materials that outline the problems often encountered.
3. Structure the program to mesh with other adult responsibilities.
4. Provide affirmation to the students as they complete sub-goals.
5. Assist in the development of a viable support system among the students. (p. 18)

Since older and younger non-traditional students accord a different degree of importance to obtaining a diploma, DeJoy (1997) suggests emphasizing “the potential to earn a degree and the possible rewards that come with the completion of a college degree (e.g., promotion, new job)” (p. 8) to younger adults (ages 25-34). To the next older cohort (35-44), emphasize that the learner “will be able to fulfill a personal goal, obtain satisfaction and support, and a measure of socializing by interacting with the other learners” (p. 9).

Perhaps the single most eloquent word one could use in the effort to enhance persistence among adult learners is “flexibility.” The “course of an adult student’s ‘academic path’ may be uneven, with many curves, potholes and pit stops” according to Johnson and Hartmann (1999, p. 5). For this reason, adult education programs, including accelerated degree-completion programs, must be ready to accommodate the changes in lifestyle that a return to school inevitably demands.

### *Conclusion*

The subject of retention of non-traditional students in degree-completion programs has received very little attention from researchers. To reiterate Tweedell’s

(2000a) statement: “There is a gap in the literature when it comes to retention of adult students in accelerated degree completion programs” (p. 1).

This paper has identified who adult learners are and some of the prominent characteristics they share. It has presented the thinking about both the motivations and the deterrents that affect how, or even whether, adult learners undertake organized learning programs. Students in degree-completion programs appear to share the identity of the adult learner as shown in the literature, as well as the joys and sorrows common to adult learning.

This paper has also presented a representation of what researchers have been saying about the persistence and retention factor in adult education. Though one might suspect that the reasons for persistence and retention among participants in accelerated adult learning programs will be similar to those of their counterparts in traditional settings, it is not possible to state that with certainty. There is very little research that would give evidence supporting such a statement.

The next chapter will describe the steps taken as I studied persistence among students in degree-completion programs of church-related colleges.

## CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

### *Introduction*

As was seen in the review of the literature, a great deal of study has been done and several theories suggested to explain and even predict persistence among college students. While there is an important body of research among traditional college students, far fewer studies have been undertaken of persistence among adult undergraduate students. It has not been shown that models for persistence of traditional students are necessarily applicable to adults returning to their studies after a hiatus or that strategies for retention of traditional students are effective in encouraging persistence among adult returnees. Furthermore, even though accelerated degree-completion programs are becoming more numerous, very little research has been done with the adult student population enrolled in them. Given the lack of information that is available concerning the experiences of these students, the need for the present study is clear.

### *Rationale for Methods*

#### *Methodology and Methods*

Though the words methodology and methods are related and sometimes used interchangeably, Strauss and Corbin (1998) point out that, in the realm of social research at least, they are not synonymous. These authors define methodology as “a way of thinking about and studying social reality” (p. 3), as opposed to methods, which are simply “a set of procedures and techniques for gathering and analyzing data” (p. 3). Methodology provides “a sense of vision, where it is that the analyst wants to go with the research” (p. 8), while methods are the means by which the researcher brings the vision to fruition. This study will follow the methodology of qualitative research, known by the names of constructivist, interpretivist, relativist, hermeneutical, and naturalistic

investigation. The methods will naturally derive from the assumptions and understandings inherent in that orientation.

Every research orientation is based on certain *paradigms*. A paradigm may be variously defined as “a distillation of what we think about the world (but cannot prove),” a “unique set of ‘basic beliefs’ or metaphysical principles” in which one believes and upon which one acts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 15), or the worldviews or belief systems that guide researchers as they investigate various phenomena (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). The assumptions—the paradigms—underlying the activities of a researcher affect all aspects of his or her research. As Smith (1979) states, “science is more than a method, it is a philosophy.... Behind every methodological principle lurks epistemological, ontological and even axiological commitments” (p. 11). Usher (1996, cited in Glesne, 1999) says that “paradigms are frameworks that function as maps or guides for scientific communities, determining important problems or issues for its members to address and defining acceptable theories or explanations, methods and techniques to solve defined problems” (p. 5). The constructivist orientation of social research, for example, is built upon a foundation that includes assumptions shown in Table 1 (Onweugbuzie, 2000; Goetz and LeCompte, 1984, cited in Tashakkori and Teddlie, 1998; Patton, 1990; Lincoln and Guba, 1985.)

#### *Common Bonds and Predispositions of Naturalistic Research*

Naturalistic research may take one of several forms: phenomenology, grounded theory, case study, or ethnography, for example. Though each of these methods approaches a social phenomenon with a different goal in mind, Moustakas (1994) lists “common bonds” that all the models of qualitative research embrace.

Table 1

*Axioms of qualitative approaches to research*

| <i>Domain</i>   | <i>Having to do with</i>                      | <i>Axiom</i>                                                                                 |
|-----------------|-----------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Ontology        | Nature of reality                             | There are multiple, constructed realities                                                    |
| Epistemology    | Relationship of the knower to the known       | The knower and known are interactive                                                         |
| Axiology        | Role of values in inquiry                     | Inquiry is value-bound                                                                       |
| Rhetoric        | Effective use of words                        | Personal, informal writing illustrates dependence of knower and known and tells story better |
| Generalizations | Ability to apply findings to larger group(s)  | Only time- and context- bound working hypotheses are possible                                |
| Causal Linkages | Linkages of specific actions to causal events | It is impossible to distinguish causes from effects                                          |
| Logic           | How one arrives at conclusions                | Reasoning is from the specific to the general, with hypotheses growing out of knowledge      |

1. Recognizing the value of qualitative designs and methodologies, studies of human experiences that are not approachable through quantitative approaches
2. Focusing on the wholeness of experience rather than solely on its objects or parts
3. Searching for meanings and essences of experience rather than measurements and explanations
4. Obtaining descriptions of experience through first-person accounts in informal and formal conversation and interviews

5. Regarding the data of experience as imperative in understanding human behavior and as evidence for scientific investigations
6. Formulating questions and problems that reflect the interest, involvement, and personal commitment of the researcher
7. Viewing experience and behavior as an integrated and inseparable relationship of subject and object and of parts and whole. (p. 21)

Glesne (1999) presents the resulting predispositions of naturalistic, interpretivist approaches to research using the following table. (Items marked with an asterisk are added by this writer on the basis of class notes (University of Oklahoma, Qualitative Research, 2001)).

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|                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Table 2                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| <i>Predispositions of Interpretivist Modes of Inquiry</i>                                                                                                                                             |
| Assumptions                                                                                                                                                                                           |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reality is socially constructed</li> <li>• Variables are complex, interwoven, and difficult to measure</li> <li>• EMIC (insider's point of view)*</li> </ul> |
| Research purposes                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Contextualization</li> <li>• Understanding</li> <li>• Interpretation</li> </ul>                                                                              |
| Research approach                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• May result in hypotheses and theory</li> <li>• Researcher as instrument</li> <li>• Naturalistic</li> <li>• Inductive</li> </ul>                              |

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- Searches for patterns
- Seeks pluralism, complexity
- Makes minor use of numerical indices
- Descriptive write-up
- Seeks emergence and portrayal\*

#### Role of researcher

- Personal involvement
  - Empathic understanding (p. 6)
- 

#### *Reasons for Choosing a Naturalistic Approach for This Study*

One of the reasons this present study was done was to understand and illuminate the experiences of adult learners in degree-completion programs in regard to persistence or non-persistence. The study was intended to allow the experiences of these adults to inform the research design rather than forcing their experiences into a pre-determined model. Strauss and Corbin (1998) emphasize that the very nature of the research problem may be a reason for choosing qualitative methods.

Research that attempts to understand the meaning or nature of experience of persons ... lends itself to getting out into the field and finding out what people are doing and thinking. Qualitative methods can be used to explore substantive areas about which little is known. (p. 11)

Thus, because of both the exploratory nature of the research question and the fact that little research has been done in this area, a naturalistic, qualitative approach was indicated for this study.

### *The Decision to Persevere*

A learner's decision to persevere in or to discontinue his or her education is a dynamic process rather than a one-time action. The student's environment, culture, educational experiences, personal commitment, and personal relationships do not exist independently. Rather they interact and bear on one another in such a way that students are caught in an on-going and ever-changing social and psychological experience. Qualitative research methods are well suited to investigate such phenomena, since, as Patton (1991) observes,

qualitative methodologies seek direct access to the lived experience of the human actor as he or she understands and deals with ongoing events. The goal is to describe and analyze the activities and reasoning persons use as they engage in organized social interaction. (p. 391)

A qualitative approach allows the researcher to gather data that are more holistic and thus to paint a fuller, richer picture of the phenomenon under examination. Applying this approach to the field of program evaluation, Patton (1987) says that

qualitative methods are particularly oriented toward exploration, discovery, and inductive logic. An evaluation approach is inductive to the extent that the evaluator attempts to make sense of the situation without imposing pre-existing expectations on the program setting. Inductive designs begin with specific observations and build toward general patterns. Categories or dimensions of analysis emerge from open-ended observations as the evaluator comes to understand the existing program patterns. (p. 15)

### *Procedures Followed in the Research*

Data gathering in this study was divided into two distinct phases. An initial mail survey was sent to former students of degree-completion programs in three colleges. This instrument served two purposes: first, to establish a pool of potential interviewees, and second, to elicit background information about students enrolled in degree-completion programs in religious colleges. The survey was followed by a series of interviews with a selected number of students, chosen from among those who indicated their willingness to participate in an interview by means of the signed and returned Informed Consent Form.

### *Attitude of the Researcher*

Although I approached this study with the attitude of a disinterested researcher, I was not uninterested in the findings. Having been associated with a church-related college for a number of years, I observed its degree-completion program and was acquainted with several students who were enrolled in it. I taught one course and had occasion to discuss the subject of student persistence with other professors and with administrators of the program. The number of students who did not persist concerned me. As a result of this exposure, I had a personal as well as an academic desire to discover why students do or do not continue their studies. In particular, as a churchman who is convinced of the importance of education in the ministry, I was eager to discover the reasons behind lack of persistence, particularly among ministerial students, in order to develop measures to mitigate obstacles to persistence and to encourage completion.

### *Initial Steps*

Although they were writing specifically about ethnographic studies, Lincoln and Guba's (1985) planning steps seemed valid and applicable for this research as well. They served as the basic procedural guide for this study.

1. Determine where and from whom data will be collected.
2. Determine successive phases of the inquiry.
3. Determine instrumentation.
4. Plan data collection and recording notes.
5. Plan data analysis procedures.
6. Plan for trustworthiness. (pp. 233-247)

Based on these outlined steps, the researcher made contact with four church-related colleges that sponsor adult degree-completion programs as part of their educational offerings. The names of these colleges were furnished by the administration of a commercial educational company that develops and markets curriculum for degree-completion programs. All four of the colleges used the curriculum from this company. Officials of the colleges were informed of the purpose and structure of the research, and three of the four institutions agreed to participate in the research. They consented to furnish databases of the names and addresses of former students in the degree-completion programs, and to write a letter on their letterhead informing the students of the research and asking them to cooperate in the study.

For the purposes of this study, the three participating colleges shall be known as Hampton College, Denver College, and Trenton College. All three of these colleges are nationally accredited, though none has regional accreditation. The three colleges are organizationally unrelated. The first contacts were made by way of a representative of an educational organization that develops and markets the curriculum for degree-completion programs. He gave me the names of several colleges that fulfilled the criteria of being church-related colleges that sponsored degree-completion programs in which there were both a ministry emphasis and a business and management emphasis. I selected colleges

from different denominational affiliations and in different states in order to ensure diversity of participants.

The three institutions share many common traits. All three of them are Christian colleges whose regular courses of study include Bible and theology classes. All students, even those who do not intend to become ministers or to pursue other church-related careers, are required to take a certain number of these courses. There is one significant difference among them, however. Both Trenton and Denver Colleges are Bible Colleges, whereas Hampton College is a Christian liberal arts college. In both the first two, each student carries a Bible major in addition to whatever other major or minor he or she may pursue. Hampton College does not require that.

#### *Introduction to Hampton College*

Founded in 1959, Hampton College is “a Christian institution of higher education committed to the intellectual, spiritual, social, moral, and physical development of its students. It seeks to prepare students to serve the Lord Jesus Christ, both in the church and in society at large” (College Catalog, 2005, p. 2). Current enrollment stands at 412, including day students, and students enrolled in the degree-completion program and in distance education. Located near the largest metropolitan center in its upper Southwestern state, it draws students from the local area as well as from surrounding states. Prior to the September 11 attacks, a number of international students were enrolled, particularly from Middle Eastern countries.

Hampton offered two tracks in its degree-completion program: Business and Leadership, and Ministry and Leadership. At the time of this writing, all classes in the degree-completion program were offered on-campus only, although in the past classes had been given at sites in two other cities. The degree-completion program was begun in

1999, and at the time of this study, 97 students had been enrolled in the program since its inception. Of that number, 34 had completed their course of study. Nine students from Hampton participated in the interviews.

#### *Introduction to Trenton College*

Located near the Gulf Coast in a Southeastern state, Trenton College has “been known for over seventy years for the very best in Biblical education and ministry preparation. The ministry of [Trenton] College is to equip men and women for ministry through effective biblical, general, and professional education....” (Trinity, 2006). The college was founded in 1932 in a large coastal metropolitan area, but in recent years moved about an hour north of there and built a completely new installation in a semi-rural setting, where palm trees adorn the campus. Trenton is a non-denominational college that draws students from a wide spectrum of both evangelical and main-line Christian denominations. Trenton’s present enrollment totals 200 students, of which 42 are in the degree-completion program.

Trenton’s degree-completion program began operation in 1999. Through the fall of 2005, the program was comprised of three tracks: Counseling and Mediation, Leadership and Ministry, and Management and Ethics. This study concerned itself only with students who had been enrolled in either the Leadership and Ministry or the Management and Ethics sections. Since the inception of the program, a total of 54 students have been graduated from the three tracks combined, out of a total of 158 who were enrolled. Six Trenton students were interviewed.

#### *Introduction to Denver College*

Denver College opened its doors in 1950 as a Bible College “to educate the evangelistic leadership of [its state] and the Southwest” (Dallas, 2005, p. 7). Located on a

22-acre site in the largest metropolitan area of its state, Denver draws students from the local area and from surrounding states. Although Denver states its denominational affiliation clearly, students come from many Christian churches and traditions.

Denver began its adult degree-completion program in 1995 and offers two emphases: Management and Ethics, and Ministry and Leadership. Of the three colleges, Denver has by far the largest program. It offers a broad spectrum of classes, which would theoretically permit a student to take all his or her college courses, from Freshman classes to graduation, through the degree-completion program. It offers classes five nights per week, whereas the other programs meet only once a week. At the time of this study, a total of 342 students had been enrolled in the program, of which 112 had been graduated. I interviewed seven students from Denver.

#### *Initial Survey*

A mailed survey was the first phase of the research. The survey questionnaire served two purposes: first, to gather general information about people who had been enrolled in degree-completion programs in the three cooperating colleges, and, second, to recruit people who would be willing to be interviewed about their experiences as students in these programs. The three participating colleges were asked to furnish a database of students who had been enrolled in their degree-completion programs as of two years prior to this study. Two years was chosen as the cutoff point because, in general, accelerated adult learning programs are designed so that an incoming student can finish the courses in 24 months or less. The databases provided to me, however, included all former students, not just those who had been enrolled during the time period specified. Furthermore, the information in the databases was not always clear as to whether students had completed their program, were still enrolled or had stopped attending. It was impossible therefore to

determine with certainty which students had been enrolled at least two years previously. Consequently the survey instrument and the request for interviewees were sent to all addresses in the database.

Following the guidelines that Dillman (1978, p. 117) developed for mail surveys, the questionnaire was constructed to fit on a single sheet of paper, printed on both sides. In an effort to increase the percentage of response, three weeks prior to sending out the questionnaire packets, I mailed an introductory form letter to each person. This letter, written by the directors of the three degree-completion programs, explained my research plans and encouraged students in their respective programs to participate. Some of those letters were returned as undeliverable because the addressee had moved. If the Post Office furnished a forwarding address, I entered that new address in the database before mailing out the questionnaires; if no forwarding address was given, I removed the name from the mailing list.

After thus modifying the database, I sent out a total of 497 questionnaires. Each questionnaire packet included a cover letter, the questionnaire itself, an Informed Consent Form, and two stamped return envelopes, one for the questionnaire and the other for the Informed Consent Form. There was a 19.9% rate of response from this first mailing.

Modifying slightly Dillman's (1978, p. 177) Total Design Method for mailed questionnaires, I had numbered the return envelopes for the Informed Consent Forms rather than for the questionnaires themselves. This permitted me to accomplish two important steps: to keep the questionnaires anonymous, since they were returned in a separate envelope from the Informed Consent Forms, and, to remove from the mailing list the addresses of those who responded to the questionnaires, in preparation for the second mailing. As I received the numbered envelopes, I removed the corresponding

TABLE 3

*Results of first survey mailing*

| Degree-completion program | Number on list | Bad addresses | Number of letters sent | Valid questionnaires received | Percentage of responses |
|---------------------------|----------------|---------------|------------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------|
| Denver                    | 336            | 57            | 279                    | 26                            | 9.3%                    |
| Trenton                   | 155            | 18            | 137                    | 47                            | 34.3%                   |
| Hampton                   | 99             | 18            | 81                     | 19                            | 23.4%                   |
| Unidentified              |                |               |                        | 7                             |                         |
| Aggregate                 | 590            | 93            | 497                    | 99                            | 19.9%                   |

address from the database. I sent out the second mailing two months after the first, using the revised mailing list. Dillman (1978, p. 183) suggests sending the second mailing three weeks after the first. I was unable to respect that schedule because of the constraints of living overseas. The second mailing included the same items as the first mailing, except that the cover letter was slightly modified to indicate that this was a second mailing, and that the return envelopes for the Informed Consent Forms were not numbered, since no further mailings were anticipated. Table 4 shows the response to this second mailing and

Table 4

*Response to Second Mailing and Overall Responses*

|                | Number of addresses | Undeliverable addresses | Number of letters sent | Number of responses received | Percentage of return |
|----------------|---------------------|-------------------------|------------------------|------------------------------|----------------------|
| First mailing  | 590                 | 93                      | 497                    | 99                           | 19.9%                |
| Second mailing | 411                 | 3                       | 408                    | 43                           | 11.3%                |
| TOTAL          | 590                 | 96                      | 494                    | 142                          | 28.7%                |

the overall rate of return. Dillman's (1978, p. 183) method includes a third mailing, but I was unable to do this because of the expense involved.

This table does not include the nine responses that were excluded from the study. Some of those nine participants already had their degree prior to enrolling in a degree-completion program and thus did not meet the criteria for participation in the research. They had enrolled either to study a particular subject for personal interest or to take a class for recertification as a teacher. Others of the nine returned questionnaires that were incorrectly filled out or were incomplete. Of the 142 valid questionnaires returned, 31 (21.8%) were from people who had not completed their course of study, 95 (66.9%) had completed the program, and 16 (11.3%) were still enrolled. Participants enrolled in the business track of their degree-completion program accounted for 46.8% of respondents, and those in the ministry track, 52.5%. One participant (0.7%) did not indicate which track he or she had followed.

Using SPSS version 11.5.0, I entered the data from the valid questionnaires. Using a word processor, I transcribed the written responses to open-ended questions on the questionnaire for later analysis. Statistical manipulations were limited to frequency tables and descriptive statistics, cross-tabulations, and chi-square correlations. None of the chi-square tests uncovered significant correlations among any of the relationships. The frequency tables and cross-tabulations did however reflect some tendencies reported in earlier research and raised questions for further investigation, which will be treated in the following chapters.

## *Interviews*

### *Identification of Participants*

Participants were asked on the Informed Consent Form whether they would be willing to be interviewed about their experiences in the degree-completion program. If they were willing, they provided their mailing address, telephone number, and email address, if they had access to email. As I received the responses, I sent emails to those who indicated their willingness to be interviewed, asking them to indicate whether they had completed the degree-completion program and which track, business or ministry, they had been enrolled in. Based on their responses, and respecting as much as possible the criteria I had established for choosing participants for this research, the list of interviewees was established.

Gall, Borg, and Gall (1996) indicate that the researcher should make sure that those who are selected be “particularly likely to yield significant insights about the phenomenon of interest” (p. 61). Rubin and Rubin (1995) emphasize that interviewees should meet three requirements. In addition to being knowledgeable about the phenomenon being studied and being willing to participate in an interview, they should represent the gamut of points of view present in the population.

The sample chosen was purposefully selected, that is, participants were chosen, as Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest, to meet a specific need. Gall et al. (1996) emphasize that “in purposeful sampling the goal is to select cases that are likely to be ‘information-rich’ with respect to the purposes of the study” (p. 218). The selection of the sample to be interviewed was based on criterion sampling (Gall et al., 1996; Glesne, 1999). The initial pool of participants—those who completed the survey instrument—consisted of those who had enrolled in a degree-completion program and had finished at least one class,

whether or not they completed the program. Criterion sampling—choosing a sample that fits certain criteria—was used to select the final group of participants, the interviewees. I established the following list of criteria for the selection of the interviewees:

1. Approximately equal numbers of completers and non-completers
2. Approximately equal numbers of men and women
3. Approximately equal numbers of participants from business track and ministry track
4. Approximately equal numbers of participants from each degree-completion program
5. Their availability during the time period available to me to do the interviews
6. Their physical distance from the campus of the college they attended, where most of the interviews would be held.

Of the 142 people who returned the questionnaires, 99 agreed to be interviewed. Of that number, only 12% had not completed the degree-completion program they had been enrolled in. The ratio of completers to non-completers who responded made it impossible to respect the criteria of having approximately equal numbers from these two

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Table 5

*Division of interviewees by college and by track*

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|         | Business Track |         | Ministry Track |         |
|---------|----------------|---------|----------------|---------|
|         | Males          | Females | Males          | Females |
| Hampton | 0              | 4       | 4              | 1       |
| Denver  | 2              | 1       | 1              | 2       |
| Trenton | 1              | 2       | 2              | 2       |

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groups. Table 5 shows the number of participants interviewed from each of the degree-completion programs.

### *Methods of Collecting Data*

Patton (1987) points out the importance of the interview in qualitative research. The strength of qualitative data, he says, is in “direct quotation and careful description” (p.9); direct quotation is best available through an interview. Furthermore, in contrast to quantitative interviews, the data are “open-ended”; that is, they reflect the participant’s experience and interpretation of the event rather than requiring the participant to choose from among descriptions and categories designed by the researcher.

Qualitative data provide depth and detail through direct quotation and careful description of program situations, events, people, interactions, and observed behaviors. The detailed descriptions, direct quotations, and case documentation of qualitative methods are collected as open-ended narrative without attempting to fit program activities or peoples’ experiences into predetermined, standardized categories such as the response choices that constitute typical questionnaires or tests. (Patton, 1987, pp. 9-10)

Although an initial interview protocol was developed, in keeping with the goal of naturalistic research to listen deeply and not to force participants’ responses into a pattern, many questions were formulated as the interviews progressed, based on responses elicited from participants. I attempted to reach theoretical saturation in the interviews, that is, to keep asking questions until no new information was forthcoming from participants.

As the interviews progressed, I recorded observations in a field log, noting tone of voice, inflections, and body language of the interviewees, as well as other salient

information. In addition to the interviews with participants, I also interviewed, by telephone or in person, administrators of the three programs about the structure of the programs, student commitment and retention. These interviews were not recorded, but I made notes on the information received.

I conducted 22 interviews out of 25 that I had scheduled. Two interviews that I had scheduled at Denver College and one at Trenton did not take place. In spite of confirmation emails and phone calls, two participants did not show up at the appointed time and place. The other person was called out of town because of a family emergency. Nineteen of the 22 interviewees had completed their degree-completion program. Of the three who had not finished theirs, one had re-enrolled shortly before the interview took place. The other two did not anticipate re-enrollment at the present time.

Because of the fact that I had to travel from overseas to do the interviews, I could allocate only 22 days to the process. This made it impossible for me to use, as I had originally planned, the constant comparative method as I did the interviews. Although it is generally associated with grounded theory research (Glesne, 1999; Creswell, 1998) rather than phenomenology, the constant comparative method of data analysis is a reflection of one of the distinctive characteristics of qualitative inquiry, which is that it builds on itself as the research develops (Gall et al., 1996; Glesne, 1999). At its core, the constant comparative method of analysis is simply the “process of taking information from data collection and comparing it to emerging categories” (Creswell, 1998, p. 57). That is, as sets of new data are collected, the information gleaned from them is compared to and incorporated into the emerging themes developed from previously gathered data.

Although I started transcribing the first interviews immediately after recording them, it quickly became apparent that it would be impossible to keep up with the pace of

the interviews. I therefore made notes as I interviewed the participants, which I used, in conjunction with the transcriptions that I continued to do, to adapt the interview questions I asked participants, allowing the initial themes that seemed to be emerging to inform subsequent interviews.

Most of the interviews were done on the campus of the college that sponsored the respective degree-completion program. In certain cases, however, at the request of the interviewee, we met at his or her place of work, at a restaurant, or at a public library. One interview was done in the participant's home, and two male participants came to my hotel room for their interviews. The two longest interviews were nearly 90 minutes long, and the shortest ones took about 45 minutes. Most took about one hour.

All interviews were audio recorded. At first I used a digital recorder but soon realized that its limited memory capacity would quickly be surpassed since I was unable to transcribe each interview before I needed to record the next. I reverted, therefore, to a cassette recorder for more than half the interviews. I made notes in a research journal during the interviews to record my observations and to jot down initial ideas for analysis. I also entered in the journal information about the sponsoring colleges and about the degree-completion programs themselves.

In an attempt to do the transcriptions more quickly, I began transcribing them using Dragon Easy Speak, a voice-to-type computer program. The only difference between using a voice-to-type program rather than doing the transcription in the traditional way is that instead of listening to the recording and typing the text, I would listen to the recording and then repeat the text aloud into a microphone connected to the computer. The Easy Speak program would receive the spoken sounds and translate them

into typed text on the computer screen. In principle, the resulting text would be the same as if it had been typed.

I discovered, however, that the voice-to-type program has to learn the voice of the speaker as well as the subject-specific vocabulary he or she is using. Until it has learned the speaker's voice and the unique vocabulary specific to the subject area, it is prone to hear and enter incorrect words. For example, it initially recognized the word "book" as "Polk" and the letters "TJC" as "TJ see." A question about how "tightly did you bond" was transformed into a query about the "digital bond" between classmates. It quickly became apparent to me that I would have to spend a great deal of time tediously correcting all the words the program misunderstood. The program did get better as it became more familiar with my speech patterns, but progress was slow. It was faster and easier for me to revert to traditional transcription methods and type the text, rather than to speak it and then have to correct it. I stopped using the voice-to-type program following the fourth interview. After that, all transcriptions were done in the traditional manner. Not having completed the transcriptions before returning to my home, I engaged a secretary to finish the transcriptions. To facilitate her work, I copied the recordings still on the digital recorder onto a cassette tape, in order to permit her to use a transcription machine.

### *Methods of Data Analysis*

Qualitative analysis is "a nonmathematical process of interpretation, carried out for the purpose of discovering concepts and relationships in raw data and then organizing these into a theoretical explanatory scheme" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 11). Since the data are nonmathematical, and thus not easily quantifiable, detractors of naturalistic researchers have charged that the research produced is not valid. A number of prominent

researchers have dealt with the problems of internal and external validity of data collection techniques used in qualitative research (Gall et al., 1996; Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Lincoln and Guba suggest three techniques for overcoming these problems: prolonged engagement, persistent observation, and triangulation. These three elements are built into the design of this research. Glesne (1999) suggests yet a fourth: “continual alertness to [the researcher’s] own biases, [his or her] own subjectivity” (p. 151).

Although the time involved in the actual collection and analysis of data was less than a year, prolonged engagement and persistent observation was a part of the study since I have been observing a degree-completion program and have been acquainted with the questions of persistence of the students enrolled in it for over six years. In addition, I maintained personal contact with some students who had been enrolled in that degree-completion program. The question of triangulation was treated through the use of multiple sources (students, professors, administrators) and of multiple techniques (questionnaires, interviews, direct observations). In an effort to be alert to my own subjectivity and biases, I noted my comments and my reactions to participants’ responses as part of my research journal.

As I began analysis of the transcribed interviews, the pattern for analysis was broadly based on Cresswell’s (1998) presentation of the tradition of analysis within phenomenology. He identified the approach as “a modification of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method” (p. 147) and states that he sees it being used frequently in phenomenological studies. The procedures may be described as follows:

- The researcher begins with a description of his or her own experience of the phenomenon.

- From the interviews, the researcher finds statements that describe how individuals experienced the topic, lists them out—called *horizontalization*—and ascribes to each of them the same value. The researcher works to develop a list of non-repetitive, non-overlapping statements.
- Statements are grouped into “meaning units,” which the researcher lists out. The researcher then writes a *textual description* of the experience, showing what happened.
- Using *imaginative variation* or *structural description*, the researcher looks for possible meanings and constructs a description of how the phenomenon was experienced.
- The researcher then constructs an overall description of the meaning and the essence of the experience.
- This is followed first for the researcher, then for each participant. (p. 147-150)

Before I began reading the transcribed interviews, I established a working catalog of themes that I expected to find, based on the literature and on the notes I had made during the interviews. I imported the transcribed interviews into NVivo, a computer program designed for qualitative research. NVivo permits a researcher to assign codes to the text and then to separate out all text identified by a specific code. As relationships among categories become apparent, the researcher can branch the codes into families or trees of themes that reflect causal or relational connections. Annotations may be attached to specific portions of text, and field notes may be included. This reduces considerably the amount of effort involved in keeping similarly coded material together in printed form and in separating and then regrouping categories and themes.

I made marginal notes and assigned preliminary codes to text as I read the interviews. In addition, I made notes to myself regarding the new themes that were emerging and possible relationships between them. In order to better fix in my mind the tone of the interviews and the sentiments of participants, I listened several times to the recorded interviews as I read the text, both on-screen and in printed form. This permitted me to correct any possible errors of transcription, as well as to pick up nuances of tone and inflection. Statements about how each participant experienced different aspects of the educational experience of the degree-completion programs were coded and pulled together. Statements within each separate coding group were put together, and then read and re-read, in order to develop the textual description of their experiences. Interviews were read and re-read as units, as were the statements gathered under each code. Finally I began to write a description of the essential meanings, the essence, of the experiences to the participants.

### *Limitations to the Inquiry*

One of the strengths of this study was that participants came from unrelated colleges in three states, two in the Southwest and one in the Southeast. This was also one of the limitations of the study: due to time and financial constraints, I was obliged to limit the time available for travel and for doing the interviews.

All three of the degree-completion programs that I investigated used the same curriculum, which they had purchased from a commercial education company that specializes in accelerated adult education. Adult learners in programs that use a different curriculum might have a different educational experience than did those involved in this research.

This study is also limited by the fact that only two non-completers were interviewed. Although it is possible to describe their experiences and suggest reasons why these two stopped their enrollment, their small number does not give enough data to make broader statements of the reasons other students might not persist.

## CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

### Introduction

This study was begun because of the paucity of research in the area of persistence among adult students enrolled in degree-completion programs. Whereas a large amount of research has been done on persistence and retention among undergraduates, the number of studies into the reasons why adult students do or do not persist is small. Of those studies, very few touch upon persistence among students in degree-completion programs, and in particular among those students enrolled in church-related colleges. Yet, degree-completion programs have been in existence for about 25 years, and the number of programs has mushroomed over the last decade and a half. This study explored the experiences of adult students as they made the decision to enroll in degree-completion programs in Christian colleges, followed the course of study, faced and overcame obstacles in their path, and either completed or left the program. By bringing their experiences to light, it sought to develop a deeper understanding of why students persist in this type of adult educational endeavor.

### Summary of Procedures

The study involved two research procedures. The first was a survey instrument designed to recruit interviewees while gathering background information about students in degree-completion programs in religious colleges. The survey was followed by face-to-face interviews of 22 students from three different degree-completion programs, which had been chosen on the basis of the fact that the program offered both a ministry and a business track. I sought to interview a comparable number of participants in the ministry and business tracks of their respective programs, divided as equally as possible between

men and women. Open-ended questions allowed participants to explore their memories and freely express their motivations and actions.

This chapter will seek to present the educational experiences of these adult learners using the metaphor of a train journey: purchasing the ticket and boarding the train, the engines that pull—and push—the cars, the rail bed that supports them, the situations that can derail the train or at least place it on a side line, and the companions and the atmosphere that prevails in the passenger cars. After explaining my presuppositions and assumptions, this chapter will first present the data gathered from the survey questionnaire. Although statistical manipulations were limited to descriptive statistics, frequencies and chi-square tests, the information coming out of the survey provides a background setting for the interviews that followed. Against that backdrop, participants will then be introduced as they embark on their journey of education.

A train journey begins when one buys a ticket and boards the car. What were the elements that impelled these students to undertake their voyage of discovery? Why were they willing to purchase their tickets—rather expensive tickets, at that—and commit themselves to a trip that would last 18 to 24 months or perhaps even longer? What were their motivations? What made them say, “I must do this.”? Without the green signal indicating that the track is clear, no train can leave the station. What was that signal? Why did the students embark on their journey at that particular point in their lives? Why did they choose to board the train at that time? What were the trigger events that led them to say, “Now is the time to start.”? If the rail bed is not properly built and maintained, the train risks derailment. The structure of the degree-completion program forms the rail bed which supports everything else. How did the structure and format of the program

contribute to or detract from the students' educational experiences? What elements supported their efforts and enabled them to think, "I can do this."?

Depending on one's companions in the railcar, a journey can be lonely or convivial, solitary or collegial. How did the atmosphere in the degree-completion programs help students cope with the pressures of their studies and the speed of the program? What elements contributed to their saying, "I want to continue this journey."? And finally, if the train is long or heavily loaded, a second engine may be attached to give the extra push needed to get it to its destination on schedule. What was the engine that gave the additional thrust the students needed to complete the journey? What were the motivations that propelled them, once they had embarked, to finish the trip in spite of obstacles encountered along the way? What caused them to say, "*I am* going to finish this!"?

### Anticipated Findings

On the basis of the literature and my personal experiences in a degree-completion program, I fully anticipated that the participants would emphasize certain phenomena that affected their educational experiences. One of the principle elements that I expected them to mention was that of time pressure. Previous research has shown that lack of time is a deterrent to persistence among adult learners in general (Malhontra, Sizoo, and Chorvat, 1999; Darkenwald and Valentine, 1985). Adding 12 to 16 hours per week of class and homework time to an adult's schedule that is already full with family, community and career obligations creates a situation that can be both stressful and discouraging.

I further anticipated that the financial investment required by the degree-completion programs would be noted as a major concern in the students' experience. All three of the degree-completion programs were sponsored by relatively small private

colleges. In financial terms, “relatively small private college” translates into “relatively high tuition fees.” Cross (1981) says that cost is a perceived barrier to participation for fully one-half of potential adult learners. In their 1999 study, Malhotra, Sizoo, and Chorvat found that students perceived that lack of resources was the most significant obstacle to their continuing to follow a course of study.

Since all three of the colleges involved in this research are institutions related to churches that would be considered evangelical or conservative, I expected to find that the student population of the degree-completion programs would be composed in large part of people who would identify themselves as Christians and who would have a connection to a local church. I expected nonetheless to find some students who did not attend church and who made no profession of faith in Jesus Christ. My expectation was that the appeal of the degree-completion programs in these institutions would extend beyond the confines of the Christian community, at least as it pertains to the business and management track.

Finally, I was also expecting to find an emphasis on keeping students in cohorts during their time in the degree-completion program. Tweedell (2000) says that educational institutions can encourage greater persistence by responding to the social needs of their students. She contends that “a cohort model utilizing collaborative learning with close student/faculty relations...removes some of the barriers to achievement for ...adult students” (p. 4). I anticipated finding policies in place to encourage keeping a group of students together as much as possible during their whole program, thereby contributing to group cohesiveness and giving additional motivation to all members of the group to finish. Whether these expectations were met will be shown in the discussion of the findings.

I did not begin the research as an uninterested observer. Having been associated with a private church-related college, and having participated in a degree-completion program as an instructor, I have been personally concerned at the number of students who did not persist. I have therefore a personal as well as an academic desire to discover why students do or do not continue their studies. In particular, as a churchman who is convinced of the importance of education in the ministry, I am eager to discover the reasons behind lack of persistence, particularly among ministerial students, in order to develop counter measures.

#### Findings Related to the Initial Survey

The primary purpose of the initial survey questionnaire was not to provide research data that would permit one to draw out valid quantitative findings, but rather to recruit interviewees while gathering background information about students' experiences in degree-completion programs. Although the number of responses, 142, represents a good rate of response (28.7%), the sample was small. The survey did accomplish its primary purpose by generating the final sample for the interviews.

Data from the survey were entered in SPSS version 11.5.0, and written responses to open-ended questions on the questionnaire were transcribed for later analysis. Statistical manipulations were limited to frequency tables and descriptive statistics, cross-tabulations, and chi-square correlations. None of the chi-square tests revealed significant correlations among any of the relationships.

#### *Reasons for Enrollment*

As shown in Table 1, taken as a whole population, respondents to the survey questionnaire most frequently cited obedience to God as the principle reason for their enrolling in the degree-completion programs of these three Christian colleges (47.9%).

Second in importance as motivation for enrollment, they cited a personal reason: to finish what they started (28.2%).

Table 1

*Motivations for enrollment in a degree-completion program*

|                          | Frequency | Percent |
|--------------------------|-----------|---------|
| To obey God's leading    | 68        | 47.9    |
| To finish what I started | 40        | 28.2    |
| To advance in my job     | 14        | 9.9     |
| I love to learn          | 6         | 4.2     |
| Required by my job       | 2         | 1.4     |
| To do better in my job   | 1         | .7      |
| Boss's encouragement     | 1         | .7      |
| Other                    | 10        | 7.0     |
| Total                    | 142       | 100.0   |

A cross-tabulation of the primary reason students enrolled in a degree-completion program and the track which they followed, reveals that for those students enrolled in the business track, faith appears to play a lesser role in their decision to begin the program. Among people following the ministry track, nearly 70% cite obedience to God as the principal motivation behind their enrolling. Among business students, the most often cited reason (39%) was to finish what they had started. It is interesting to note, however, that 24% of business students cited obedience to God as the main reason for their pursuing a degree, while a smaller percentage (19.7%) indicated that advancement in their careers was the most important.

Table 2

*Cross-tabulation of principle motivations for enrollment, according to business- or ministry major*

|                          | Which major? |          |               | Total |
|--------------------------|--------------|----------|---------------|-------|
|                          | Business     | Ministry | Not indicated |       |
| To advance in my job     | 13           | 1        | 0             | 14    |
| To obey God's leading    | 16           | 51       | 1             | 68    |
| To do better in my job   | 0            | 1        | 0             | 1     |
| To finish what I started | 26           | 13       | 1             | 40    |
| Boss's encouragement     | 0            | 1        | 0             | 1     |
| I love to learn          | 4            | 2        | 0             | 6     |
| Required by my job       | 0            | 2        | 0             | 2     |
| Other                    | 7            | 3        | 0             | 10    |
| Total                    | 66           | 74       | 2             | 142   |

The high percentage of the overall group of participants who considered obedience to God as a primary reason for their enrollment is perhaps a reflection of the conservative, evangelical nature of the colleges themselves and of the population of students attracted by them. It is advantageous to understand that business students enrolled in these degree-completion programs know from the beginning that certain Bible and theology courses are integrated into their course of study. Their willingness to participate in Bible classes as part of a business curriculum would, in and of itself, indicate that they are comfortable with a significant spiritual emphasis in their lives. In addition, in spite of the literature that emphasizes the importance of career or job advancement as a major reason for participation in adult education, even the business students in this population considered career advancement less important than both the

personal fulfillment they were seeking through finishing the college they had previously begun and their spiritual obedience to God.

### *Reasons for Perseverance*

As shown in Table 3, as a group, respondents to the questionnaire indicated that for over half of them (54%), the primary motivation for persevering to completion was a personal one: to finish something they had started. When the second most often cited

Table 3

#### *Primary reasons cited for persistence*

|                                | Frequency | Percent |
|--------------------------------|-----------|---------|
| Finish something I had started | 51        | 54.3%   |
| I just wanted to               | 13        | 13.8%   |
| To advance in my job/career    | 12        | 12.8%   |
| I love to learn                | 6         | 6.4%    |
| Spousal encouragement          | 1         | 1.1%    |
| Other                          | 11        | 11.6%   |
| Total                          | 94        | 100%    |
| System                         | 17        |         |
| Total                          | 111       |         |

reason for perseverance, “I just wanted to,” which accounted for 13.8% of respondents, is added to that, it becomes evident that for over two-thirds of these students (68.1%), the principle reasons for perseverance are very personal ones, unrelated to financial concerns. This seems to reflect the reasons for which students enrolled. A college degree may be important economically and socially, but for these students its primary importance is found in the fact that they accomplished a personal goal by achieving it.

This desire for completion appears to be strongly held and enduring, as shown in Table 4. A cross-tabulation of participants who cited “to complete something I started” as their primary reason for enrollment and the actual rate of persistence reveals that 75% of those who began a program for this reason had completed it at the time of the research. Only 15% had dropped out, while 10% were still taking classes. It is interesting to note

Table 4

*Cross-tabulation of completion rates and principle reasons for enrollment*

| First reason given for enrollment | completed in 2 yrs or less | Completed in 2+ years | % who completed | Still enrolled | Did not complete | Total |
|-----------------------------------|----------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------|----------------|------------------|-------|
| To finish what I started          | 24                         | 6                     | 75%             | 4              | 6                | 40    |
| To advance in my job              | 6                          | 4                     | 71.4%           | 0              | 4                | 14    |
| To obey God's leading             | 32                         | 10                    | 61.7%           | 12             | 14               | 68    |
| I love to learn                   | 1                          | 2                     | 50%             | 0              | 3                | 6     |
| To do better in my job            | 0                          | 0                     | 0%              | 0              | 1                | 1     |
| Required by my job                | 0                          | 1                     | 100%            | 0              | 1                | 2     |
| Other                             | 6                          | 2                     | 80%             | 0              | 2                | 10    |
| TOTAL                             | 70                         | 25                    |                 | 16             | 31               | 142   |

that of those who cited obedience to God’s leading as their principal reason for enrollment, a lesser percentage, only 61.7%, had completed their program at this time. It should be noted that Table 4 is based on only the first reason cited for enrollment.

These data seem to indicate that the desire to finish an incomplete chapter in one’s life is one of the major motivations in an adult’s enrolling in a degree-completion program as well as in his or her persistence to graduation.

### *Reasons for Discontinuing Their Studies*

Even though the sample of participants who did not complete their degree-completion program is very small, it is nonetheless interesting to note that the data appear to support the conclusions of other studies regarding the reasons adult students do not persist (Darkenwald and Valentine, 1985; Kaplan and Saltiel, 1997; Ryder, Bowman, and Newman, 1994; Valentine and Darkenwald, 1990). Table 5 shows results of the

Table 5

*Reasons for discontinuing studies (1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> reasons cited)*

|                                   | Frequency cited as<br>1 <sup>st</sup> or 2 <sup>nd</sup> reason | Percent |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------|---------|
| Cost too much                     | 12                                                              | 23.5%   |
| Not enough time to study and work | 11                                                              | 21.6%   |
| Stress in my own life             | 7                                                               | 13.7%   |
| Stress on family                  | 4                                                               | 7.8%    |
| Spouse didn't encourage           | 2                                                               | 3.9%    |
| Other                             | 15                                                              | 29.5%   |
| Total                             | 51                                                              |         |

combined first and second reasons cited by participants for stopping their studies. That is, the figures represent the number of times students cited a particular statement as their number one or number two reason for stopping. The reason thus given most often for not continuing is the cost of the programs and the second is lack of time.

### *Findings Related to the Interviews*

Having made contact with those students who had indicated via the survey instrument their willingness to be interviewed, I chose the participants for the second part

of the study, in approximately equal numbers of men and women and of business- and ministry track students. They were chosen on the basis of their availability during the time allotted to the interviews and their proximity to the campus of their respective colleges. Three of the interviewees had dropped out of their programs and were no longer enrolled when the interviews were scheduled. Between that moment and the day the interview was done, one of the three had re-enrolled and was actively attending classes.

To facilitate the reading of this paper, after the participants are introduced in this section, when they are subsequently mentioned for the first time in each paragraph, I will observe the protocol of identifying the track each of them followed. Students who followed the business track will be identified by a *(B)* and those who were enrolled in the ministry track by an *(M)*. I realize that this will result in some redundancy, but it is my hope that it will make the reading more clear.

### *Motivations for Enrollment*

Even though their experiences were often similar, the 22 participants seemed to fall naturally into three groups on the basis of their prime reason for participating in a degree-completion program. These groups were: career-related motivations, motivations for personal fulfillment, and faith-related motivations. The first group was comprised of six individuals who enrolled because they were hoping to either advance their careers, prepare for an eventual change in careers, or create greater job security. The personal fulfillment group was comprised of ten students who began their degree-completion program studies principally because of the deeply felt desire for personal accomplishment. Finally, the faith-related group was comprised of six students who had enrolled because of a distinct conviction that this was what God wanted them to do.

### *Group 1: Career-Related Motivations for Enrollment*

Of the five women and one man who comprised this group, two worked in government jobs, and four were in the private sector. Job security was the primary interest of only one of them. All the rest were seeking advancement or, in one case, new opportunities, as of yet undefined. Of these six, only one was following the ministry track.

#### *The case of Lea*

Lea graduated from her degree-completion program the same month her daughter graduated from high school. In addition to her salaried job, she is a business woman and is very active in her church, often doing PowerPoint presentations for the services. Half Japanese, she maintains a cordial relationship with her relatives there, in spite of the fact that she doesn't speak Japanese yet, she said. She gave the impression of being self-controlled and reserved, though she was friendly and had an easy laugh. She has always loved reading, studying and learning, so much so that she had taken dozens of college classes, but she had never concerned herself with a degree until a few years ago.

She became concerned when the Pentagon began reviewing whether the military base where she worked would be closed as part of the base realignment and closure program. If the base were to be closed, she would have to get employment elsewhere, she reasoned, but she had been working there 20 years and had no experience in any other kind of work. "So," she said, "at that time I decided: I've got to get the piece of paper." She finished her basics at a state college and then enrolled in the Business and Leadership program at Hampton College.

### *The case of Samuel*

Samuel is a very capable man of 41, single, who has been involved in education of the deaf most of his adult life as teacher and interpreter. He holds the highest certification for his career field and clearly enjoys what he does. In his present job, he translates live telephone/video calls to and from deaf people, and he interprets the Sunday services every week in his church. Active as a preacher, he has traveled widely, especially to Third World countries, in relation to his church. Quick spoken and sure of his opinions and judgments, Samuel sometimes displayed more than a hint of cynicism. In the past he has been a storm chaser, and has done volunteer EMT and fire department work. “I get to run my lights and sirens every now and then. That is my other multiple personality,” he joked.

Samuel has been in and out of college since he graduated from high school but has never managed to get enough of the proper credits together to get a degree. He dropped out of the degree-completion program at Denver College a few years back for financial reasons, but has now re-enrolled and is in his last year of studies in the Ministry and Leadership track. He is not worried about losing his job: it is a highly specialized field for which there is high demand. He is interested in having a degree that is accredited that will serve him as a stepping stone, but he is unsure as to what he will be stepping into: perhaps he will go “back in the classroom and teach a little bit at the college or do some workshops....” All of that is quite vague. What is not vague is that he wants a recognized degree, and that as soon as possible.

### *The case of Naomi*

Naomi loves to laugh. She is a 39-year-old divorced businesswoman and mother of a teenager, an energetic self-starter, who owns and runs a graphic design business in

addition to a separate photography business. She is a vibrant, bubbly person, who gives the impression—a false one, she says—of being totally self-confident and in control. She had become frustrated because her abilities and obvious talents did not count when she wanted to bid for certain jobs: “Even though I had knowledge and on-the-job training, I wasn't able to apply for a lot of jobs that I should have been—and I would have been—qualified for, simply because I didn't have my bachelor's degree.” She enrolled in the Business and Leadership program at Hampton College, and in spite of panic attacks and hyperventilating in math class—“I stink at math. If my checkbook's close, I'm happy!” she said—she completed the program and graduated with honors.

#### *The case of Brianna*

Working two jobs and going to college on the side, it took Brianna ten years to get her Associate's degree. An energetic, expressive 38-year-old Hispanic woman who smiles and laughs easily, she believed in education but could fit in only a very few courses at a time. She kept plodding ahead though, she said, “just because I said I am going to do something instead of doing nothing, and it will add up sometime.” Three years after she received her Associate's degree, her husband left her, and that changed everything. With two children to support, she realized that she had to go back to school and get her degree. She entered the Management and Ethics program at Denver College, even taking three classes at a time when she first started. “I was in a hurry!” she said as she smiled. She graduated from the course and is now teaching kindergarten and taking courses towards her teacher's certification.

#### *The case of Marianne*

Marianne leaves no doubt as to why she enrolled in the Ministry and Ethics degree-completion program at Trenton College: “I did want to make more money.” She

was working as a pharmacy tech at the time and was hoping for advancement. That wasn't the only reason she went back to college, however. "I value education whether you are going to be a shoemaker or glass cutter or [whatever].... I have always been an education enthusiast, and so I took the plunge."

And the water was rough when she dove in. The same month she started her classes, she also started a new job, and her first grandchild was born. She had permanent house guests for 18 months during her studies and no car for five, but she persisted with the same directness she expresses in her speech. Although she faults the college for not doing more to incorporate the adult students into the larger student body, she still holds very good memories of her time there: She brought her class picture to the interview and could name each person in it. She graduated in the first module to complete the program.

#### *The case of Anne*

Anne is an organized, focused person who is active in her church, playing the clown in her church's children's ministry and teaching toddlers. She completed the Business and Leadership program at Hampton. She has worked as a hydraulics mechanic and aircraft technician at a military installation all her adult life. It wasn't until she was hurt in a car wreck that she got serious about completing her degree. She was placed in a supervisory position, and in a very short time she realized that that wasn't where she wanted to stay. She began to work resolutely at pursuing her degree, because she "wanted to have the skills to get a different job, somewhere else."

She enrolled in a program at another college in which students studied four subjects at a time, meeting two nights a week for ten weeks. She followed that course for several semesters, but at one point, she became so overwhelmed that she was ready to quit her studies altogether. Then somebody told her that they could carpool to Hampton.

She checked it out, and what she saw convinced her to enroll: classes met one night a week, plus she got a discount on her tuition. She transferred, and she said, “It was the best experience I have had in college,” she said.

*Summary: Career-related motivations for enrollment*

These six individuals were impelled to enroll in a degree-completion program because of changes in their career situation. Lea faced a potential loss of employment; Samuel was looking towards potential new opportunities. Brianna felt she had no choice: she had to advance in order to take care of her family. Anne did not want to stay in a high-pressure post the rest of her career. Marianne was hoping for a larger salary, and Naomi wanted to be able to bid more jobs. In all cases, they saw that getting their degrees could help them accomplish their goals. The degree-completion program was the route they chose to reach that end.

*Group 2: Motivated by a Desire for Fulfillment*

There were an equal number of men and women in this group, and they were equally divided as to which track they followed in their degree-completion program. Their careers at the time of enrollment ranged from nursing to broadcasting and from law enforcement to food service. Three of them held church-related positions. They all held one thing in common: they felt that somehow they were incomplete without their degrees.

*The case of Tanya*

Tanya was working in the food service industry when she enrolled in the Business and Leadership program at Hampton College at age 34. Her family—she is married and has two children—and her job kept her extremely busy. She had made no plans to return to school, but her sister talked her into it, and two weeks learning about the program, she started classes. She was very clear about why she entered the program, and the reason

was uncomplicated: “I always wanted to complete [my degree].” She did finish the degree-completion program, but since she did not start with the usual number of credit hours, she could not graduate immediately. At the time of the interview, she was taking her last college courses and anticipated receiving her diploma in 2006. She was thrilled that when her family goes camping on vacation during the summer this year, for the first time in a long time, her book bag will contain novels to read and not textbooks to study.

#### *The case of George*

George got into his broadcasting career shortly after high school. He is 38 years old, but the style of his dark hair and his appearance made him look a good bit younger, which fits with his position: he presents a morning children’s radio show five days a week in a major metropolitan area. His conversation is sprinkled with humorous one-liners and asides. He had never finished college because it was not important to have a degree in his profession. Not having one did not hinder his career, and having one would not have furthered it. “The reason I went back [to college],” he said, “was I always promised myself that I would.” George loves his work and is not anticipating a career change at all. Nonetheless, when he completed the Management and Ethics program at Denver College, he also graduated with a minor in ministry and received his teacher certification. Following his graduation, he enrolled in an MBA program.

#### *The case of Harold*

Harold is pastor of a church in the small town where he grew up. Before moving his family back there, he had attended a state university and then a Bible College, but had not accumulated enough hours to graduate. He enrolled in the Ministry and Leadership program at Hampton College within a month after assuming his present pastorate. He was tired of college and busy in his new—and first—pastorate, so he was not really interested

in returning to the classroom right then. But when he was offered a full scholarship, he decided he better take advantage of the opportunity. He did so, he said, because “I wanted to have that bachelor’s degree, that four-year degree. First of all to say I did it! Because it is an accomplishment, and it takes perseverance.” He and his wife have three children.

### *The case of Joseph*

Joseph came to the interview at 6:15 AM dressed in medical scrubs because he was scheduled to attend a surgery afterwards as part of his job as a sales representative for surgical equipment. Although a college degree is not required in his profession, he said that he was getting to the place where he needed to finish his degree in order to provide greater opportunities for his wife and three children. But his primary motivation for enrolling was more personal and internal.

The real reason, the real motivator to go back to school is because it is always that one little area of my life that has kind of haunted me, and that I have been embarrassed about.... My worst nightmare is that when I am having a conversation with colleagues and they say, “So, where did you go to school?” And then I have to give this protracted answer, because I can’t give them the correct answer. That is the biggest motivator for me.

Joseph is capable of incredible commitment and drive: he carried 21 credit hours his last semester so he could graduate from the Business and Leadership program at Trenton College a year earlier than scheduled. He got A’s in every one of those classes, and for two months during that semester, he was the number one sales representative—out of 120 people—for his company.

### *The case of Donna*

Donna had deliberately put off college because of a decision she and her husband made that she would stay at home with their children during their young years. Active in her church, she had worked in its children's department for several years on a part-time basis when she decided to start her college career. Her children were out of elementary school, and the time seemed right. Although she wanted the education in part so she could do a better job working with the children, the main reason for enrolling was that getting her degree was a long-held desire on her part, something she had talked about and thought about for a long time. She completed the Ministry and Leadership program at Hampton College at age 45, and presently serves as the director of children's ministries in a metropolitan church.

### *The case of Susan*

I met Susan in a restaurant at the end of her workday as a paralegal. Married and the mother of two grown sons, she was 50 years old when she enrolled in a degree-completion program. She plays the piano at her church, and she and her husband enjoy boating, gardening, and traveling together. Susan entered college right after high school, then met her future husband, married, and did not re-enroll. She had never lost her desire to finish college, though.

I always thought it would be terrible [to do what I did]. Why would you want to go to college and not graduate? I couldn't believe I was one of those people that did that, that didn't get their degree right out of high school. So, I had always wanted to go back.

Susan is a goal-oriented person who, when she has made a decision, will follow through on it. She completed the Management and Ethics program at Denver College and was graduated with honors.

#### *The case of Charles*

Charles is the 36 year-old pastor of a church in a town near a large metropolitan center. He is married and has three children. Voluble, friendly, and energetic, he is both compassionate and a man of conviction, who is willing to speak out for what he believes. He attended a community college on two different occasions but did not complete his Associate's degree. He worked full-time for a soft drink company and served part-time as a youth pastor while he was following the Ministry and Leadership program of Hampton College. When he entered the program, his third try at college, he said his thoughts were: "This time I'm going to stick it out and I'm going to get there!" In the end, however, he did not complete the program and does not at this time have intentions to re-enroll.

#### *The case of Daniel*

Daniel works for the sheriff's department where he is responsible for the specialist unit that maintains the county jail and oversees the inmate work force. Intending to go into missionary aviation, he went to tech school immediately after high school and earned his aircraft mechanic's license, but he was unable to continue in that field. He still puts his mechanical skills to good use, though, since he owns three vintage cars. He is 46 years old, and he and his wife have four children. He started college when he was 28 years old and was pursuing a computer degree, when a new job brought that to a halt. Daniel explained that his main motivation for entering the degree-completion program was that he wanted to finish his degree, and for him, the Ministry and Leadership program at Trenton was "the ideal opportunity." He had hoped for and

anticipated a pay raise or a promotion in his career because of the degree, as well, but when it became clear that that wasn't going to happen, he nonetheless continued with his studies. His primary, personal motivation to have the degree was strong enough to keep him going to completion.

#### *The case of Virginia*

Virginia is a tall, energetic 37 year-old woman who works with very young children in the Early Head Start program in her county. She entered college after high school, but her mother did not encourage her to continue her studies after her father died. She nonetheless persevered until she received her Associate's degree, then stopped: "I met my husband and found out I didn't need school (laughter)," she said. She always wanted to go back, though, and she kept telling herself that she would. After an unhappy experience in an online program, she enrolled in the Management and Ethics program at Trenton College. She went back to college, she said, for one reason: "I came back to school just because I had always promised myself I would." Now she has promised her elder daughter, who is in middle school, that when she goes for her Master's degree, Virginia will, too.

#### *The case of Jeannette*

At 67 years of age, Jeanette was the oldest of the participants and one of the most energetic and lively! Her introduction to college came when her husband abandoned her and her three children when she was 30. She enrolled in a community college but didn't stay very long. She couldn't keep up with school and work and take care of her children at the same time. She had almost given up on ever going back to school, but the yearning to do so had never left her, she said. "It was a deep, burning desire in my heart." When she heard about Trenton's degree-completion program, she enrolled immediately,

because she had finally found a way to do what she had always wanted to do. She completed the Leadership and Ministry program at Trenton College at age 64, has now completed her Master's degree in counseling and is enrolled in a doctoral program. She serves as Assistant Director in the degree-completion program from which she was graduated.

*Summary: Enrollment for fulfillment*

These individuals had no external reason for pursuing their degree. Their job didn't require it; one was even at the age of retirement. They had got by this long without a degree, and there was no reason to think that they couldn't get by longer. They already had busy lives with their families and work. Why would they seek a degree then? Because for years they had nursed the longing to get it. Because they didn't want to have to keep hiding their little secret any longer. Because they wanted to be complete. The degree-completion program finally gave them the means to accomplish this major life goal, and they took it.

*Group 3: Motivated by their Faith*

Six students enrolled in degree-completion programs for reasons related to their faith. Three of them were going into full-time church ministry as ordained clergy. Two others felt that the Lord was leading them into ministry, but not necessarily as ordained ministers. One was not thinking of ministry when she enrolled; she felt simply that God wanted her to enroll, so she did. All six of these individuals were enrolled in the ministry track of their programs.

*The case of James*

James differs from the other participants in two ways. At age 24, he was the youngest participant in the research, and he entered the degree-completion program

immediately after completing two years at a community college. He had gone to the community college right out of high school, and when he was nearing the end of his time there, he began looking for a four-year college to attend for the rest of his studies. At that point he heard about Hampton College, and rather than enter a residency program, he enrolled immediately in its Ministry and Leadership degree-completion program. His youth pastor at the time was attending that program and talked to James about it, even taking him to class with him on occasion. Going to school one night a week sounded good to James, so he enrolled. Recognizing that (a) he was young, (b) he would be going into ministry, (c) he didn't know much about the Bible or the church, and (d) most of his classmates were experienced church workers, he said that he adopted an attitude of humility: "I ... went in there with the attitude that I [was] going to learn from these teachers as well as these students."

#### *The case of Laura*

Laura is a courageous 57 year-old woman who finished her degree-completion program in August of 2002, but has not been able to obtain her Bachelor's degree. In October of that year, she was in a traffic accident and has not worked since. She has some difficulty walking and is unable to sit for more than ten minutes at a time without experiencing severe headaches. She stood during the entire interview, in which she expressed herself like a storyteller, using dramatic pauses, graphic phrases, conspiratorial whispers, and colorful words. She enrolled in college the first time "for the money," she said. She took basic courses little by little, and then switched to computer science, because she was working at a computer help desk at the time. She was 12 hours short of her Associate's degree, when she dropped that and enrolled in the ministry track at Trenton College. Laura found it difficult to explain exactly why she enrolled there: "I

really don't know how to answer that ... because I was seeking, and I got so much out of the Bible classes here that just opened my eyes. I didn't realize that that was what I was looking for when I came." It was as if she had a spiritual hunger and did not know how to fill it. She specifically prayed about entering the program and was accepted immediately when she applied. She felt like the Lord led her to enroll, though at that time she could not have said why.

### *The case of Jeremy*

When Jeremy, a 46 year-old father of two, enrolled at a local community college after high school, he planned to be a business major, but he switched his major to drama when he discovered that by doing so, he could get a full scholarship and still take his business classes, too. He picked up a large number of hours there and at other colleges, in drama, business, and other fields, but never obtained enough in any one area to graduate. He worked in accounting and was wanting a change, when, in October 1990, he felt God's calling on his life to go into the ministry. He did not want to do that: "That was God's plan; my plan was to become a fire fighter [and] paramedic and retire with a nice pension." In January 1991, he entered the fire fighter academy, but the calling would not go away, so he finally decided that he needed to respond to it. When he talked to his pastor about what he needed to do to become ordained in his church, he found that the first thing was to complete his degree. Jeremy enrolled in the Leadership and Ministry program at Trenton College and completed it in 18 months, in part because of all the credits he had amassed over the years. A man of medium build with a calm nature, he is pastor of a church now and is pursuing his Master's of Divinity degree at a commuter seminary.

### *The case of Jacob*

Like Jeremy, Jacob also enrolled in a degree-completion program because he felt a call of God on his life. He had entered college right out of high school on a band and baseball scholarship but got hurt and could no longer play baseball. “I really just did not want to go to school,” he said. He found a job and got married a year later. College was not part of his plans at the time. He became active in his church, teaching a Sunday School class and working with the children’s program, in addition to playing the drums for three services each weekend. It was when he was ordained as a deacon that he felt the Lord’s calling on his life. He wanted to “know more about the Bible and what God can do, and [to] take it where it might [lead]...,” he said. He saw the degree-completion program at Hampton as an opportunity to accomplish that and to get his degree at the same time.

Active in his community, married and the father of four, Jacob was unable to meet the schedule of the regular class meetings of his degree-completion program due to prior commitments as a member of the local school board. He could therefore take only isolated classes offered by the degree-completion program to the general college population. He completed only three or four classes in the Ministry and Leadership program at Hampton College before stopping.

### *The case of Leanne*

Leanne was poised, confident, articulate and positive as she responded to the interview questions, as befits the role of Associate Pastor that she fills at a church in a major metropolitan area. At age 36, she is married and the mother of three children. Although she said that she had been painfully shy before starting the Ministry and Leadership program at Denver College, she certainly gave no evidence of it during the

interview. She started her college career with three semesters at a major state university, where “the whole experience was just a negative one,” she said, and completed her Associate’s degree at a community college, where she discovered that she had a learning disorder. As soon as she found out how she learned, taking the disorder into account, her grades improved dramatically and she fell in love with school. She did not go beyond her Associate’s degree however.

Her decision to enroll in a degree-completion program was directly related to her call from God into ministry. Through a series of dramatic events one afternoon, she came to realize that God wanted her to do something besides work in the nursery where she was at the time. In the space of a few hours, she took the decision to become a pastor, and to attend Denver College’s Leadership and Ministry program. A woman of action, she had called the college about enrolling before the afternoon was out. She graduated from there with honors and has now completed her Master’s of Divinity at a nearby seminary. She attributed all “[my] accomplishments thus far to the work of the Holy Spirit and a deep-rooted faith. ... Without God acting so strongly in my life, I would still be a shy young woman with really no direction in my life.”

#### *The case of Frank*

For the past 14 years, Frank has earned his living as a realtor. He is 41 years old, married and the father of two small children. He is competent, warm, friendly, understanding, driven by purpose, and very active in his church, which is what led to his enrollment in a degree-completion program. He had begun teaching a Bible class in his church and even preaching occasionally on Sunday nights, but he couldn’t believe he was doing it. He was doing more and more teaching, but he had no education in biblical studies at all, so he began to have a real hunger to go to seminary. He entered Denver’s

Leadership and Ministry program with the goal of getting into seminary. The Bachelor's degree was just the means to reach that end. Since finishing his degree at Denver College, he has graduated from the seminary and is about half-way through a Master's degree in history.

*Summary: Motivated by their faith*

These six students all wanted to receive their degrees, certainly, but achieving that was secondary to a greater objective. They felt that God was leading them to enroll in order to accomplish a higher purpose in their lives. Laura was not fully aware of that purpose when she started, but James, Leanne, and Jeremy were responding to a definite calling to ministry. Jacob and Frank were taking the next most logical step towards whatever ministry lay before them. All of them found in the degree-completion program a means by which they could obey God, and, in the process, achieve their degrees.

*Summary: Motivations for Enrollment*

Whether it was a conviction that developed fully orbed in one afternoon as in the case of Leanne, or the desire that had simmered on the back burner for decades as in Jeanette's case, the motivation towards getting a degree was strong for all the participants. It made no difference if the motivation focused on job security, centered on personal fulfillment, or revolved around obedience to God, the impetus pushed participants in the same direction. Sometimes it was accompanied by disbelief—"I couldn't believe I was one of those people that ... didn't get their degree right out of high school," as Susan, the paralegal, said.—or by shame—"It is always that one little area of my life that has kind of haunted me and that I have been embarrassed about," as Joseph, the surgical equipment representative, stated it.—but the result was the same: the

participants wanted to pursue their degree. And they found in the degree-completion programs a reasonable, feasible way to accomplish that goal.

But if this had been brewing for a long time; if, as Virginia said, they had always promised themselves they would go back to school, what caused them to decide to do it at the time they did? What was the green light that allowed their train of education to leave the station?

### *Events That Triggered Enrollment*

Every participant in this study could point to an event or a series of events that led to enrollment in the degree-completion program. Previous research (DeJoy, 1997; Aslanian & Brickell, 1980) has established that if a person has been contemplating participation in a learning program, changes or transitions in his or her situation are often the mechanisms that break the logjam so to speak and result in enrollment. For some of the participants in this study, that trigger event was the discovery of a feasible way to pursue their degree, or it was simply that the opportunity presented itself and someone encouraged them to do it. For others, it was a spiritual crisis of no small proportions, since it portended long-term engagement in ministry. For some it was the potential change in their jobs that brought them to a decision time, while for others it was change, not in their jobs, but in their family situation. This section will discuss the trigger mechanisms that inspired decisions by the participants, beginning with potential career change, followed by a change in the family situation, finding a feasible plan and structure, scholarship money being made available, and finally, spiritual crisis.

#### *Trigger: Potential Career Change*

Potential career change can be a frightening transition for an adult to envisage, because it carries within it, among other things, the possible loss of a livelihood, which,

to many people, is equivalent to loss of personal value. It disturbs the equilibrium of life because one's career touches every other area of life. It is powerful motivation for adult learning.

*The case of Lea*

For Lea (B) the threat that her job might disappear forced her to look carefully at her plans. She loved studying and going to class—she had been taking college courses little by little for ten years—but she had never bothered to concern herself with a degree.

If it had just been upon me, since I didn't go [to college] right after high school, I don't know that I would have gotten the degree, because ... I lived in an environment at that time when you could advance without it.

The degree didn't assume any importance until it appeared that her employment might be in jeopardy. It was the realization that her stable condition could suddenly become quite unstable that jolted her into action. If the government closed the military base where she had worked for 20 years, she would have to get a job elsewhere, and she had no experience outside government work. "So at that time I decided: I've got to get the piece of paper. I'm going [to classes already], but I've got to buckle down, and I've got to get that paper."

*The case of George*

George felt the impetus to pursue his education at a time when he was simply unsure of his future direction. He had steady employment in broadcasting, but he was uncertain as to whether he would stay at the company where he was or what direction his future might take, so he opted to prepare himself, just in case a change did come. He did not really think he would change careers, but he was not sure. "I didn't really know if I

wanted to go back into broadcasting. So it was a prime time for me to go back to school....”

Both of these participants embarked on their degree completion journey not because of actual change in their career situation, but in preparation for a potential shift, either mandated, as in the case of Lea, or vaguely envisioned, as in George’s case. They were proactive in preparing themselves to respond if and when the time came. Completing their degrees would equip them for any eventuality, and they felt impelled to begin immediately.

#### *Trigger: A Change in the Family Situation*

Members of a family do not exist in isolation. The actions of one member affect the lives of all the others. Changes in the family situation can produce profound effects and trigger momentous decisions. Sometimes, as in the case of Joseph, one member cannot initiate something new until another member of the family has finished something else.

#### *The case of Joseph*

Joseph (B) had a career in sales that did not require a degree. He had always nourished the desire to return to college, but it was not a pressing need. His job was not in danger, but he had received “a nice shot over the bow,” he said, when he had applied for his present job. They had asked whether he would complete his degree if they made it a condition of employment. He was actually eager to start his studies, but there was an impediment that held him in place: his wife was in college in another private university and he had three little boys in private schools. Adding a fifth tuition would have been impossible. As soon as she graduated, the decision for Joseph to enroll took effect almost automatically.

By freeing up the funds, the changes in Joseph's (*B*) family situation made it possible for him to begin his studies. The decision had already been made, essentially, and everything was already in place. Like a runner in a relay race, he was simply waiting for his wife to pass him the baton when she walked off the stage after receiving her diploma.

*Trigger: Scholarship Money Made Available*

Financial considerations play an important role in adults' decisions about education. The availability of scholarship funds can be a determining factor for enrollment and persistence. That was the case for Harold.

*The case of Harold*

Harold (*M*) was one of only two people among the participants who received full tuition scholarship or reimbursement. He had been in a four-year college but had left it to return to his home state to assume the pastorate of a church. He arrived at his new church in March of that year and began the degree-completion program one month later. He did not really desire to go back to college at that moment, but when full scholarship funds were offered, he felt like God had provided the opportunity and that he had to accept them and enroll immediately. Receiving the offer of the scholarship, he told himself, was "a pretty good sign [that] I'd better go back [to school] right now (laughter) while the opportunity's there!" Would he have pursued his degree if the scholarship money had not been made available to him? "Probably later—because I did want my degree—but not at that time," he said. "Emotionally and psychologically, I was not ready to go back to school. But when the scholarship was offered, I couldn't refuse!"

### *Trigger: Discovering a Feasible Plan and Structure*

The stories of some of the participants sounded like a treasure hunt. The goal of having a degree had nestled in the back of their minds sometimes for years. Several of them had tried various means, some of them repeatedly, to accomplish that goal, with only limited success. When they discovered the degree-completion program, their thoughts were: “Eureka! I’ve found a way to do it!” For other participants, the discovery was less intense: they enrolled only as a result of being persuaded to do so. They might not have enrolled at all if a friend or counselor had not cajoled and encouraged them. And for at least one of the participants, the degree-completion program was simply the best of the options available to them.

#### *The case of Brianna*

It had taken Brianna (*B*) ten years, taking one class at a time, to get her Associate’s degree. She wanted to continue, but the road looked interminable. One day at work, she heard about a way she could get to the end of the road quickly. Listening to the radio one morning at work, she repeatedly heard an advertisement for Denver College’s degree-completion program. As she listened, this thought kept running through her mind: “Why, I can do that. I can do that. Four hours, one day a week. ... I can do one night a week, four hours, and get a babysitter.” She was so excited that she contacted the college and enrolled immediately. She began her first classes two weeks later. She had found what she had been looking for: a way to get her degree that she could do.

#### *The case of Jeanette*

Jeanette, nearing retirement age at the time, also started thinking about going back to college because of a radio announcement. As she drove along and listened, all she heard was: “‘One night a week. Two years.’ And I said, ‘I can do that!’” The next day

she called the college and then attended an information session that night. She enrolled immediately and started classes within the month. That was the beginning of her educational career that has led to a Master's degree and course work for her doctorate.

#### *The case of Daniel*

Over the years, Daniel (*M*), the Sheriff's officer, had taken courses at community colleges and even college courses taught in local churches. Although he wasn't advancing quickly, he had never given up on his goal of getting his degree. Over the years he had written to different colleges and looked at their programs, but could never find anything close enough or that fit his schedule. When he heard the radio ad about the degree-completion program at Trenton College, he responded quickly, with no hesitation. He called that very day to enroll. Finally, he had found a way to get his degree that was workable.

#### *The case of Tanya*

If her sister hadn't hounded her, Tanya (*B*) might never have enrolled in a degree-completion program. "I always wanted to complete [my degree]," she said, but working 40 to 70 hours a week in the food service industry gave her little time to think about how she might do it. Her sister kept hammering on "It is just one night a week, one course at a time. We can do this." That appealed to Tanya, so she enrolled and was in class two weeks later. She said that she enrolled because, "I felt I could do this and still maintain my being a wife [and] mom, and working full time." Finally she had found a way to go back to college that she could do.

#### *The case of Anne*

Anne (*B*) needed her degree for job security and advancement. She was so committed to obtaining it that she nearly suffered a nervous breakdown before she began

the degree-completion program. After she was hurt in a car accident, her job situation changed, but not to her liking. She was given a supervisor's job, which was extremely stressful. She entered the adult education program of another college and stayed there several semesters, but the pressure of taking four subjects at a time with each class meeting twice weekly, combined with Christmas festivities one year, flatly overwhelmed her. She began thinking that she could not continue because of what it was doing to her and her family. "I was a nervous wreck, a basket case. ... I became so scared," she remembered. That was when a friend introduced her to the degree-completion program at Hampton, where she quickly enrolled.

#### *The case of Samuel*

Samuel (*M*) has chased a degree through several institutions over the last 20 years and even has a couple of degrees from non-accredited colleges. These looked good until he needed them to apply for a job, he said. Then he found out they did not have any value in the marketplace. He started attending the degree-completion program at Denver College, but not wanting to go into debt, he ran out of money and had to stop. Then he got a new job with a better salary, that was closer to Denver as well. He re-enrolled immediately. For him, the trigger consisted of three questions: Is the college accredited? Is the program available? Can I pay for it? When all three questions were answered affirmatively at Denver College, enrollment was the next step. For Samuel, it was simply the easiest way to get his degree.

#### *The case of Susan*

In Susan's (*B*) case, it was also an accumulation of events that caused her to move ahead with her education. She had always wanted a degree, but she had not pursued it until she did a frank re-appraisal of her self-image on a vacation trip.

All those years I kept saying [that my not having a degree] didn't matter, but I viewed myself as uneducated. ... [Then] I went on a ... vacation with [a friend].... She and I were together for ten days, and I was just amazed. Our vocabulary was different even! I had never viewed myself as an educated person, but being with her all that time, it was like I was educated, and I didn't even realize I was. So I thought, "Well, why don't I have a degree if I am really an educated person?"

With that change of attitude as a backdrop, and with the example of her husband as well—he had gone back to college and changed careers—coupled with the fact that her children were both out of the home, she started back to a community college. Her decision to switch to a degree-completion program came out of her frustration with the community college process. Because the community college would not accept her 30 year-old credits, Susan (*B*) was starting there from scratch as a freshman. Going part-time at night, she said she figured it would take seven years for her to get her degree. When she discovered Denver College, she quickly transferred to the Management and Ethics program, where her credits were accepted, and she was able to finish in less than two years. Finding a do-able program made all the difference to her.

#### *The case of Donna*

Donna (*M*) had completed her Associate's degree in a community college, but she did not continue her schooling immediately. "Financially, I didn't know how in the world that I could pursue a college education," she said. Her pastor began talking to her about Hampton College's new degree-completion program, but she did not see how she could drive the 230 mile round trip to the campus for classes. A few months later, though, Hampton opened a center near where she lived, and she was offered a position in the

program which would largely cover the costs. That was the green light she had been waiting for to enroll.

*The case of Marianne*

For Marianne (B), enrollment in a degree-completion program was her response to an accumulation of changes that had been taking place in her life over a two-year period. She had received her Associate's degree six years before, and then two years before her enrollment, she had taken early retirement from K-Mart. It had been a time of transition, she said, with a lot of stress. Since her job was only part-time, she was looking for a way to get a higher paying position. For that, she needed her degree, but she hadn't found a way to do it until Trenton College inaugurated its degree-completion program. She needed no impetus other than the fact that the program was feasible and available, to cause her to enroll.

*The case of James*

James (M) enrolled in Hampton's degree-completion program basically for the prosaic reason that his youth pastor advised him to do so. He had received his Associate's degree from a community college, and since he was planning to go into ministry, he wanted to attend a Christian college. The format of classes meeting one night a week appealed to him, plus it would be cheaper for him than going to a residential college, because he could live at home. The program was available, and he could meet the financial obligations. That made the program imminently do-able and attractive to him.

*The case of Charles*

Charles (M) knew that the Lord had called him into the ministry, but he might not have enrolled in Hampton's degree-completion program if he had not been strongly encouraged to do so. He was working part-time as youth pastor in a church, and his

pastor “strongly suggested that I continue my education,” Charles said with a grin, and suggested the Hampton program. Added to that strong proposal, the director of the program also visited Charles’ (M) church and talked to him about furthering his education. Then the chairman of the local association of churches, a man Charles knew well and respected, weighed in with his recommendations and encouragement, as well. Charles surrendered to the onslaught and enrolled in the first cohort in the pilot program.

#### *The case of Naomi*

Naomi (B) was a reluctant convert to the degree-completion program. She was a successful business woman in graphic design and photography with no spare time for college classes. She wanted her degree, though, because she realized that she was limited without it. She could not even apply for some jobs because she did not have it. She looked at Hampton’s program, and the one-night-a-week format appealed to her, but what convinced Naomi to enroll was repeated encouragement from the director of the program. It took about a year of encouragement, but “She’s the one that really talked me into it.”

For these participants, finding the degree-completion program was a format they could handle. It was like finding the detailed road map that showed the destination, the route numbers, the estimated time of travel, everything they needed to complete the journey they had embarked on. No more detours and no more construction delays. They packed the car and pulled out of the driveway.

#### *Trigger: A spiritual crisis*

For several of the participants, the pivotal event in their enrolling in the degree-completion program was a spiritual event or series of events. For some of these participants, their motivation to enroll and the trigger event that caused them to move ahead are closely aligned, if not one and the same. All except one of these participants,

Virginia (B), were enrolled in the ministry track. Neither Virginia (B) nor Laura (M) nor Frank (M) anticipated any type of official ministry function, although all of them were active in their churches. Jeremy (M), Leanne (M), and Frank (M) all enrolled for the same reason: a Bachelor's degree was the necessary first step towards seminary. For Jeremy and Leanne, the decision to enroll was intimately tied to their calling to ministry, which was both the motivation that pushed them to enroll and the turning point in their decision to do so.

#### *The case of Jeremy*

Jeremy's (M) decision to enroll in the degree-completion program hinged on his decision to respond to God's calling in his life. He had been called into the ministry in 1990, but decided to pursue another career path, fire fighting. He eventually reached the point that he could no longer ignore God's plan for his life. He talked to his pastor and found out that to become fully ordained, he would have to have a Master of Divinity degree. But he could not even start that without his Bachelor's. "So I knew that in order to fulfill my calling, I needed to get my degree. It was very important," he said.

If that was the trigger event that propelled Jeremy (M) back into college, what brought him to Trenton's degree-completion program was much more mundane. He began working towards his Bachelor's degree in the online program of another college but grew frustrated at the structure, the work load, and the ever-changing details of requirements and credits. It seemed that every time he checked the list of what he needed to graduate, the list had changed. He came to Trenton, and he liked what he heard: There "it was definite that you complete these classes and that is all you needed to do." After having struggled with five classes at a time and a vaguely estimated date of completion at

the other school, Jeremy was delighted to find a program that presented a precise schedule of the classes with a specific timetable for completion.

#### *The case of Leanne*

Leanne (*M*) had the most dramatic experience, one that changed the whole course of her life in the space of one afternoon. Such an experience commanded obedience. Returning from a job interview that had gone badly, she began thinking about her life.

I didn't know what I wanted to do, but I needed to get a grown up job and work.

As I was driving on my way home, I just had this sense that all of the stuff that I enjoyed most in my life revolved around the church. I had always sensed on some level that God was present, but it was real strong at that point. I happened to be just driving past Denver College, in fact.... When I got to [that] exit, I swear that ... billboard was for Denver College saying degree-completion program in religious studies. When I got home, there was a flyer in the mail, and on the radio there was a commercial playing for Denver College.

Religious studies had never interested her before, but at that moment, it became clear to her that her calling was to be a pastor. Furthermore, it was clear that Denver was the college where she was to go study. "There was no question of where I was going to school, or of applying anywhere [else] because I knew that was where God wanted me," she said. She called the school that very afternoon and got enrolled.

#### *The case of Jacob*

Jacob (*M*) was active in his church in several areas. He worked with the children's program, taught a Sunday School class, and played the drums for all the Sunday services. It was when he was ordained as a deacon in his church that he became interested in going back to college. "At that time," he said, "[I] just felt a calling, God's calling, in my life to

go ahead and further my studies in the ministry and see where that took me.” That event became the impetus for his enrollment in Hampton’s degree-completion program. The school board of which he was a member and the degree-completion classes met on the same night, so he could not join the regular program. He began taking courses regardless, in the hope of joining it later. If he had not felt God’s calling on his life, he would not have started at all.

#### *The case of Frank*

Frank (*M*), the realtor, was enjoying a fruitful teaching ministry in his church, but at the same time he was feeling a growing sense of incongruence in his life. In addition to teaching an adult Bible class, he was also preaching some on Sunday nights. He could not get over what was happening. “It was blowing me away that I had no background and grew up [in another tradition], and here I am doing what seems to be fruitful teaching in the Baptist church,” he said.

He dealt with that incongruence by looking logically at the situation: (a) he could teach, (b) he needed more Bible knowledge, (c) seminary was the best place to get that knowledge, (d) he needed a Bachelor’s degree in order to get into seminary. That led him to look for colleges where he could get his Bachelor’s. He found that Denver offered a program that would allow him to get his degree in a relatively short time, and at the same time, give him Bible training. His decision to enroll was easy.

#### *The case of Laura*

Laura (*M*) was attending a community college and was 12 hours shy of her Associate’s degree in computer science when she abruptly changed directions, largely as a result of her daughter’s enthusiasm. Laura was taking college courses at the time in computer science, because of her work, when her daughter and son-in-law began touting

the degree-completion program at Trenton. When they talked to her about it, her first reaction was “I’ll pray about it, and if the door opens up, and I can [enroll], I’ll go.” For her, it was not enough that the program be offered in a Christian college or that her son and daughter-in-law were enthusiastic about it. Her decision hinged on the answer to her prayers.

#### *The case of Virginia*

Before she came to the degree-completion program, Virginia (B) had begun online classes beyond her Associate’s degree, and she did not like them at all. It seemed to her that other class members did not give her the right to express her opinions. Her reaction was completely negative. “If this is what college is like,” she thought, “I want nothing to do with it.” Because of that distressing experience, she had begun to look for other options when she heard about Trenton’s degree-completion program. The decision to enroll, however, was not automatic, though, even if the program was in a setting she liked. Virginia’s faith was the deciding factor: “I prayed about it and that was where I was supposed to be.” That was all it took for her to enroll.

#### *Summary: Events that Triggered Enrollment*

For each of these participants, there was a point of decision at which they felt they had to enroll at that moment. Changes in the family situation—an empty nest, a family member graduating from college—gave the green light to some participants. The possibility of a career change, whether forced or vaguely anticipated, gave the go-ahead to others. For most participants, it was the discovery of a program that was do-able, one that accommodated their needs and fit their schedule, that indicated that it was time to act. For others, it was the sense of a call of God on their lives to which they needed to

respond. They all boarded the train car, as it were, and began their journey towards a degree.

### *A Structure that Supports the Students*

One of the most important elements to ensure that a train reaches its destination in safety is the condition of the rail bed. If the ballast is insufficient or a rail poorly anchored, the train risks being derailed and damaged. In the same way, the structure of a degree-completion program supports all its activities. If the structure and the format, is not adapted to students' needs, learning suffers. Participants in this study pointed out several elements in the organization of their degree-completion programs that attracted them and facilitated their progress, thus encouraging their persistence. Some of them emphasized that the structure and format of the programs encouraged them both to enroll and to continue, because they kept thinking, "I can do this!"

#### *Structure: Classes Once a Week*

"What are the ... positive things about the program? Let me think," Marianne (*B*) said. "One night a week, one night a week, one night a week." For every participant, the fact that the classes met only once a week was an important element. For some, meeting once a week made it possible for them to pursue their education and still continue their careers. "Once a week definitely worked better," George (*B*) said. Meeting two or three times a week would have been too hard with his job schedule, he thought. Frank (*M*) agreed that in his career of realtor, it would have been impossible to attend class more than one night a week because many of his appointments were in the evening. He could write off one night, but not two.

The once-a-week schedule was of great importance to Naomi (*B*) as well. It was the only one she thought would leave her sufficient time to run her two companies and do

all she needed to do. For Harold (*M*), it was the only way he could have fit the program into his schedule. With a new pastorate, small children, and a part-time job as well, he had no other time he could have taken classes. For others, like Marianne (*B*), it was simply the most economical use of their time. Meeting one night a week was a big plus for her because of the time and traffic alone. It was very good time management.

Jeannette (*M*) was also attracted to the degree-completion program specifically because of the fact that “you only do this one night a week. The rest is homework—and there is a lot of homework—but you can do that when you can do it. You don’t have to be in the classroom everyday.”

Going to class only one night a week was the psychological boost for other participants that gave them courage to continue. Jeannette (*M*) remembered telling herself, “Yes, I can do one night a week.... I can do this.” Tanya (*B*) agreed that, for her, this format was what she needed in order to balance her other responsibilities. It seemed like something she could handle; it was much more feasible than trying to juggle multiple courses at the same time. For Marianne (*B*), who had to drive about an hour from her job at the military base to the class site, to schedule more than one night a week for the duration of the studies would have been highly difficult. It would have cast a negative pall over the whole program. For her, “one day is do-able for two years but two days? ... I don’t think it is very do-able.”

#### *Structure: One Subject at a Time*

If going to class only one night a week was attractive, studying only one subject at a time was equally as enticing. For at least one of the participants, Anne (*B*) (*B*), this was the rescue rope thrown to her when she had almost given up hope. She said that she probably would not have persisted to seek her degree if she had had to continue to study

multiple subjects at the same time in her adult studies program. She had previously attended an adult education program in another college where she took four subjects at one time for a ten-week period. The four professors did not know what the others had assigned for homework, and the four finals all came the same week. She had become so overwhelmed one semester that she had decided she couldn't keep going. There was relief in her voice when she said that concentrating on one class at a time was "much, much better."

Being able to focus on only one subject at a time was important for other participants as well. Leanne (*M*), now an Associate Pastor, remembered how this structure enabled her to complete some courses that were particularly difficult for her. She remembered the philosophy class where she said she was "clueless" during most of the lectures. Had she not been able to give herself completely to that one subject, she would not have been able to successfully pass the course.

In that particular class, I just went to the bookstore, and I got *Philosophy for Dummies* and *Philosophy Made Simple*, and I bought all these other books, and I just poured myself into that one [subject]. I didn't have to worry about the fact that I wasn't doing my math homework and science homework and my English homework. I could focus [on that one subject].

Harold (*M*) considered that this ability to focus on and pour his energies into one subject at a time, rather than trying to manage two or three courses for the whole semester, was a positive change from his previous, traditional studies. For Donna (*M*), being able to focus her energies on one class was not only easier; it became a positive motivation and encouragement to continue: "Instead of trying to take two classes together, I knew it was just focusing on one thing at a time. So that kind of gave me some

confidence to help me understand, ‘I can do this.’” That feature was most important for Virginia (B), as well. Psychologically, she was not prepared to continue her studies any other way. She could handle one class at a time, but it was devastating to her to think of trying to do more.

Having to study only one subject at a time made the program reasonable for the participants. They could see themselves successfully completing each course because they could focus their energies on that one subject without being distracted. They could realistically hope to accomplish their goal. Donna (M) summed it up by saying, “I’d make sure [potential students] understood that it is just the one class at a time, and it’s attainable because of that.”

*Structure: Limited Duration*

Depending on the credits a student brings into a degree-completion program, he or she can generally hope to complete the program within 24 months. In the colleges participating in this study, the basic program of approximately 60 credit hours is offered, but if a student does not begin the degree-completion program with a sufficient number of prior credits, supplemental courses are offered. (It is possible in the program offered at Denver College to take all 130 credit hours of courses leading to a Bachelor of Arts or a Bachelor of Science degree through the degree-completion program.) Students may also receive credit for demonstrated competency (CDC), and he or she may take a CLEP test to demonstrate proficiency in a given subject area. The fact that the normal program was already programmed and that it lasted no longer than 24 months was an important element in the thinking of the participants. It had a positive psychological effect on them because it relieved anxiety about which courses they needed to take and when to take them, and because they could see the end of the road even from the time of departure.

Joseph (*B*), for example, simply could not see himself completing his degree if he had to follow a classic pattern of adult studies. He was not prepared to make the kind of investment of his time that it would require. He had calculated that it would have taken him five years or more to get his degree, going to class three nights a week, in a traditional course. That was unacceptable to him: “(a) I can’t create that kind of time [and] (b) I’ve got kids and I am not going to give up that kind of time with my family.” Because of its short duration, the degree-completion program was something “you could get your arms around,” he added. This get-it-over-with plan attracted Frank (*M*) as well. He knew he planned to go to seminary, so he wanted to get his Bachelor’s degree as quickly as he reasonably could. Denver’s program offered him a plan that really appealed to him: “Twenty months of Monday nights, and I would be finished.”

George (*B*) had taken classes at several different community colleges as he moved from place to place in his broadcasting career. He had experienced the uncertainty of not knowing exactly when he would finish, because of doubt as to which courses he should take—“In a university they say, ‘Okay, you need to take 60 hours, and good luck,’” he said. The program at Denver encouraged him because that ambiguity was eliminated and the finish date was set before he started. They told him, “Here is the date from today, if you stay with the program, when you are going to complete....” Jeremy (*M*) had also accumulated a large number of credit hours, but when he enrolled in another program to begin to work seriously on completing his degree, he was frustrated that the list of courses he needed seemed constantly to change. Graduation date was a moving target. One of the major reasons he changed to Trenton College, he said, was that “there was an end in sight.”

For Virginia (*B*), knowing when her series of classes would end became the psychological boost that carried her over the difficult times. She marked off each week's class as it happened, which permitted her to visualize completion. When she reached the end of her rope and wanted to quit, her husband would remind her that she had only so many weeks to go.

I would count down ... I had a little thing like an elementary school kid.... 102 [classes], you started out with because it was two years ... 101 more classes, 100 classes. "Yea, I am down to two digits. I am in the 50s." That is how I got through it.

"Knowing where the end is," as Jeremy (*M*) stated it, contributed to persistence by removing ambiguity about what to do next and by showing students the end of the road and the timetable they would follow to arrive there. Having the end date in mind from the very beginning gave them a target to aim for as they saw it getting closer every week.

#### *Structure: Peers as Classmates*

The *raison d'être* of degree-completion programs is to assist working adults to complete their college degrees. By their nature and purpose, they are not designed to respond to the needs of traditional college students, and very few traditional students were enrolled in the three programs participating in this research. The fact that their fellow students would not be traditional students in their late teens or early twenties was an attraction to the participants in this study. Part of the reason for that was simply the fact that studying with peers made them feel more at ease. Tanya's (*B*) and Laura's (*M*) remarks reflected the sentiments of several of the participants. Laura stated that when she had taken classes at a community college, "I felt out of place, because everyone else was

young.... It was hard.” Tanya said that when she enrolled, “I knew I wanted a smaller environment, and I knew that if it was all adults, I would feel more comfortable than with young students, because I was so much older than the traditional student.”

In addition to making the students feel more at ease, being with a group of peers made possible a greater degree of exchange and interaction because of shared experiences. That broader and deeper interaction was one of the things that Donna (*M*) was looking for when she joined Hampton’s degree-completion program. Before her enrollment, she spent time talking with the director of the program about the other students expected to be in her group. She was looking for an opportunity to share ideas about ministry with people who had experience in it, not theories. For Naomi (*B*), the fact that she was studying in the company of people who “are in the work force, who understood how to do supper, get the kids ready, and get to class,” was a vital thing. They could encourage one another because they understood each other’s situation.

To George (*B*), this was even more important than the speed of finishing a degree-completion program. He said that he knew “a lot of people [who] say that they want to go back, ... [but] that they are intimidated that they would be the only person in there that is their age.” The advantage of the degree-completion program is that students are in class with own peers who can “bring a little bit more to the table” than somebody that is just out of high school.

#### *Summary: A Structure that Supports the Students*

The structure and organization of any educational institution contributes to or impedes the progress of its students. Degree-completion programs are no different. By constructing the rail bed in a way that permits the train to pass unimpeded, the degree-completion programs facilitate the success of adult learners. One night a week class

meetings ease time pressures. One subject at a time permits students to focus without distraction. Learning among peers allows them to feel more at ease and makes use of the contributions they can bring to the class because of their life experience. It contributes to their persistence because it gives them reason to believe that they can accomplish their goal. Tanya (*B*) said that she had tried both the traditional structure and a degree-completion program. For her, adult students were much better served by the degree-completion program. It gave her confidence because “it is something that you feel like you can complete because of the way it is structured.”

### *An Inviting Atmosphere*

The atmosphere created in the classrooms of the degree-completion programs encouraged completion and made the educational experience a positive one for the students. In the same way that the atmosphere created by convivial traveling companions in a train car makes the trip more enjoyable, the camaraderie, some participants called it bonding, that took place among the students in their classes was for most of them a boost to their staying the course. The fact that the professors and staff of the degree-completion programs made themselves available and showed interest in the success of the students to a greater degree than some of them had experienced in other institutions facilitated their studies.

### *Atmosphere: Peer Group was Encouraging*

For some of the participants, studying with their peers not only made them more at ease, but also they received strong and positively crucial encouragement and help from their fellow students. Had they not received that support, their journey through the degree-completion program would have been much more difficult, perhaps even placed in jeopardy. Laura (*M*) gave an example of this. She would almost certainly have had to

drop out of at least one course if she had not received timely help from her classmates. She had surgery and was on crutches, but two friends from class would pick her up for class, help her with her homework, carry her books, take her homework to the printers to be printed, just “whatever it took,” she said.

Generally the support was more directly related to the class itself, such as questions about homework and assignments, or getting together in work groups or study groups. This often expressed itself in telephone calls and emails. Students felt free to call on one another, and they willingly offered their support. Some of the participants developed very close relationships with other class members. During the time of her studies, Brianna (*B*) stayed in “constant contact” with her fellow students, and even though they came from different cultural and denominational backgrounds, but as they worked together on projects and in class, they became like a second family to her. She was especially impressed that that all of them came from different denominational backgrounds, they all accepted one another.

Other participants preferred the word “team” to indicate the force of the relationships within the class. Jeremy (*M*) still stays in touch with some of the students in his cohort because of the bonding that took place during the months of study together. During their time in the program, when the going got tough, he said, they would lean on each other for support. The spirit of being on a team was a positive impetus for Naomi (*B*), as well, in her business classes. She didn’t want to slack off or fail because it would no longer have been uniquely a personal failure; it would have affected everyone because of the team relationship. Being on the same team also meant that she wanted to keep up with what was happening in the lives of her classmates. On class days, she would tell

herself, “I don't want to miss tonight. I've got to go see what so-and-so did this week!” It increased her desire to attend classes every week.

Lea (*B*), another business student, recalled that because of that team atmosphere, it became important to the students that everyone in the class be successful. That became the goal, not just individual success. Laura (*M*) remembered that in her classes, students would get extra handouts and class notes for their colleagues who were absent. “We ... looked out for each other,” she said. “We took care of each other.” Brianna's (*B*) experience, in her business courses, was very similar. She remembered that because all the students were working towards the same goal, conflicts were minimal.

We always helped each other. It was in the same culture, so everybody was working toward the same thing, so there wasn't any conflict or anything as far as the experiences I had, because we all helped each other, we all encouraged each other through prayers, through notes, through emails. [We were] pulling for each other.

Some of the participants did not experience the camaraderie and encouragement to the same degree. For these students, there was certainly a friendship and a willingness to help each other, but it was largely limited to the class. James (*M*), the youngest participant, for example, said that the students in his group had a “classroom friendship.” They would have felt free to call each other for help with homework, he thought, but they never did. In spite of that though, they became what he called “a tight-knit group” just because of spending so much time together each week. A few of the other participants didn't seek out relationships with the other students. Having contact with others outside class was unimportant to them, so they did not act in a way to encourage it. For Samuel (*M*), the sign language interpreter, this was simply a question of his personality and his

focus. He is not a highly interactive person who needs the contacts with his classmates, he said. “I take my notes ... I do what I need to do and turn in the assignments. I am just there to finish.” Building long-term relationships was not part of his focus. Yet Samuel was quick to say that he would not hesitate to call on any one of his classmates if he had a question about an assignment, and that he hoped they would feel free to call him.

Frank (*M*) chose different terms to describe the concern class members had for each other. What developed was more than a team spirit, or even a sense of family, in his thinking. It was simply a friendship and love that made students eager to get to every Monday night’s class.

I don’t know if we so much encouraged each other [in the class], as we just were friendly with one another and made coming to class something to look forward to.... It is hard to say [we were] supportive, but we certainly loved each other [and] we grew together as Christian brothers and sisters. That dynamic made it interesting as opposed to the secular school. There really was a desire to help one another.... [It was] almost like God just chose us and threw us together in that room and said “You all are going to become friendly with one another.” And that was really cool.

The strength of the peer relationships experienced by the participants varied from very strong to almost non-existent. For a majority of the participants, the relationships were strong, and they contributed to making the students feel important as part of a family or team, to giving them immediate and practical help when they had questions about their courses, and to showing them love. In some cases, the fellow students became the cheering section that encouraged participants towards completion of their degrees.

*Atmosphere: Professors and Staff were Available*

If the train car is comfortable and fellow passengers convivial, the journey is less stressful and more enjoyable. If in addition the conductor is friendly and cooperative, the trip takes on the allure of a pleasure outing. Degree-completion programs are not pleasure outings—they require diligent work and a generous amount of time—but the attitudes and actions of the program administrators and professors can reduce frustration significantly and smooth the passage of the students. How did the administrative and teaching staff in these programs contribute to the success of the students?

Participants recalled that both the administrative staff and the professors made an effort to place themselves at the disposal of the students. They adapted their schedules in order to make themselves available and were always ready to answer questions or give counsel. Anne (*B*) was impressed by the professors in her business courses at Hampton. She felt like she could have called any one of them with a question or to get extra help if she needed it, she said. She actually did email some of them between classes, and “they were always very good about replying,” she recalled. Tanya (*B*), another business student, experienced the same thing. In her classes, the professors invited students to email or call them if they ran into problems. Her judgment was “that they just go the extra mile to help the adult get through this.”

George’s (*B*) business professors at Denver took a genuine personal interest in the students and really wanted to see them accomplish what they had started. It seemed to him that their attitude was “What can we do to make it happen?” Brianna (*B*), also in Denver’s management course, and Leanne (*M*), in the ministry track, also experienced that. It seemed to Leanne that her professors more like colleagues rather than adopting the attitude of the keep-your-distance professors she had sat under in community college.

She was surprised to find them so friendly and willing to reach out to the student. Their overriding concern was to make sure the students understood what was being taught, she said. “They were willing to go that extra mile to make sure you got it.” The experience of Joseph (*B*), a business student at Trenton, was the same. He thought that his professors felt a genuine concern for the student and that they were committed to the students’ success. This was especially evident among those instructors—the “vocational professors,” he called them—who were continuing to pursue their career at the same time they were teaching. He felt like they “really, honestly cared about the students.... They were very encouraging and really felt committed to your success....”

Virginia (*B*) also felt that desire on the part of her ministry professors, which was unlike what she had seen in other colleges she had attended. “Here, I felt like they wanted me to succeed. They were there to help me succeed. I wasn’t just a number,” she said. Tanya’s (*B*) professors created a fundamental shift in her attitude toward herself by their interaction with her. One of the frightening things about going back to college for her was that she did not have confidence that she could succeed. The way the professors worked with her made her feel like she could do it.

Laura (*M*) recalled that she was reticent to share her opinions in class, but that she would speak up during breaks when she was with a smaller group. She remembered the boost in her self-esteem that was the result of her ministry professors’ encouraging her to share her opinions with the larger class. It brought about a fundamental shift in her self-image. Her ex-husband had always put her down, telling her that she didn’t make sense and that she was not intelligent. It was different in her classes at Trenton.

[Here] I was encouraged to give my viewpoints.... I could tell them something on break which related to the subject but not open my mouth in class, and they would

say, “Okay, Laura, remember what you said on break. You need to say that [again] because only two or three people heard it.” [That] boosts you up and makes you feel better.

Leanne (*M*), now a confident associate pastor who does public speaking regularly, experienced the same effect. The way her professors drew her out, in spite of her awkwardness and natural desire not to speak, played a major role in transforming her, as well, and preparing her for ministry.

When I started at Denver, I was extremely, painfully shy. ... I didn’t like to talk to people, and I ... would be embarrassed to raise my hand and answer a question.... The professors were very intentional about making sure that everyone talked. And that was important because I don’t know that I would have if they hadn’t encouraged all of us to participate.

The magnitude of the transformation struck her as she was graduating. That was one of the things that impelled her to pursue her education even further. She said the “attitude to succeed that surrounds the program” plus the fact that she had done so well in school gave her the impetus to continue to seminary. “I don’t think I would have gone on to do my Master’s,” she said, “if I hadn’t had that feeling of accomplishment and success.”

Apart from a few “learning hiccups,” as Leanne (*M*) called them—administrative red tape and an occasional misunderstanding or snafu—participants’ contacts with the administration of their programs were positive. Jacob (*M*) recalls that the administration “bent over backwards trying to accommodate me and my schedule.... They did more than their share to try to help me.” Joseph (*B*) felt closer to his advisors than he did his professors. In fact, he said that if any of them called him now asking for help on a

project, he would do anything he could to help them. They were the ones who worked so hard with him adjust his classes so he could graduate a year earlier than planned. Naomi (B) recalled that the administrator of the program was “a huge, huge part” of why she persisted. The administrator worked with her constantly to make sure Naomi knew what she needed to do next and where she needed to be. She was the one who kept Naomi going.

#### *Summary: An Inviting Atmosphere*

The environment engendered by professors who were concerned about students’ success and by the encouragement, camaraderie, and support of classmates, peers who were working towards the same goal, “made coming to class something to look forward to,” as Frank (M) stated it. Tanya (B) agreed with him, saying that the collaboration with other students and the mutual help they gave each other made her look forward to coming to class every week. James (M) said that “If I could go back to school right now I would, because of the experience that I had there.” And Naomi (B) admitted that she missed getting together with her class. “I don’t miss the homework,” she laughed, “but I miss the people, and the learning.” By creating a welcoming, inviting environment that students enjoyed being in and wanted to come back to, and by encouraging strong relationships among students, these degree-completion programs not only enhanced the learning of their students, but they also facilitated their persistence.

#### *The Effect of Faith on Enrollment and Persistence*

Although some of the findings in this section are also shown in other sections, I thought it worthwhile to group together the experiences that showed the impact of their faith on participants’ decision to enroll and to persist. Some of the participants were more active than others in their local churches, but all of them identified themselves as

belonging to a church. Seventeen out of the 22 interviewees specifically mentioned a spiritual factor as part of their experience in the degree-completion program. It touched their class meetings, the relationships with their classmates, and themselves. Some of them enrolled as a direct result of a spiritual crisis: this was the Lord's will for them, so they did it. For some, their faith was what encouraged them to keep going, and the fact that God sustained them is the only explanation they can find for the fact that they were able to complete the program in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds. Faced with the high financial costs of the degree-completion program, several simply put their trust in God and enrolled. Most participants mentioned their faith either as a factor that played a direct role in their schooling or as the background against which their pursuit of their degree played out. To a greater or lesser degree, it was important to almost all of them.

#### *The Effect of Faith: Obedience to the Lord*

For Harold (M), enrolling in a degree-completion program was a response to a leading from the Lord. Having just begun a new pastorate, his first, he really was not interested in going back to college at that moment, but he did not want to disobey God, so when he got the opportunity to enter the degree-completion program with a full scholarship, he interpreted that as a clear signal that he should do it. "So I was following ... the leading of the Lord," he added. "It was clear that that was what he wanted me to do at the time."

Jeremy (M) had a similar experience. He entered the ministry section of the degree-completion program at Trenton because he kept sensing God's leading him there, in spite of the fact that he was enrolled in another college at the time. He recalls that sometimes he would be doing his online homework for the other college, and he would call up the Trenton website and look at their program. Leanne's (M) enrollment involved

a crisis experience that left no room for doubt in her mind: she was to enter the degree-completion program at Denver College. She never investigated any other options because, at the end of a series of events that fateful afternoon, she said, she knew beyond any question that God wanted her in the ministry and that Denver was the first step on that road.

Frank's (*M*) decision to enroll in the ministry program at Denver was predicated not so much on a calling, as such, as on the fact that he sensed a deep desire to study the Bible. He was teaching and preaching with good success in his church, but he had no training for it. He realized that he needed to obtain Bible knowledge to serve as a foundation for his teaching. That ignited his desire to go to seminary, which immediately brought him up against a barrier: he didn't have his undergraduate degree. He began to look for a way to qualify for seminary and to get some Bible training as he was doing it. When he discovered the degree-completion program, he enrolled immediately. His teaching ministry depended on it.

#### *The Effect of Faith: Prayer*

Several participants specifically stated that their decision to enroll was preceded by prayer. They may have liked the program and appreciated the structure, but the final commitment to enroll depended on a response to their prayer for direction. Laura's (*M*) daughter strongly encouraged her to sign up, even though it would mean interrupting her studies in computer science, where she was only 12 hours away from an Associate's degree. Her response was: "I'll pray about it, and if the door opens up and I can come, I'll go." She was accepted very quickly into the ministry track, so she dropped her other studies and enrolled, "and loved every moment of it," she added. Virginia (*B*), who took the business major, took the same tack when she was making her decision to enroll. She

was unhappy in another program she was following, and when a friend told her about Trenton, her first action was prayer. “I prayed about it and that was where I was supposed to be,” she said. So she enrolled. For these participants, prayer for direction was essential because they wanted to obey God’s leading.

#### *The Effect of Faith: Making a Commitment to God*

Their belief that God was leading them and their staunchness to follow that leading also affected participants’ persistence. Jeannette (*M*) recalled that she persisted primarily for one reason: she had made a commitment to herself and to God. Jacob (*M*), who did not complete the program, expressed the pain he felt because he had not followed through on his calling. At the time of his ordination as a deacon in his local church, he had felt God’s calling in his life to further his studies in the ministry. He began taking classes, but stopped after only a few. “I fully feel like that call is still there,” he said, with frustration in his voice. “This is one of those situations where I keep going, ‘Yeah, I know, God, I know. I hear you.’ ... With everything else in my life right now [though], I just don’t know how I can get that done.”

#### *The Effect of Faith: Knowing That God is in Control*

When Virginia (*B*) was in the degree-completion program, she possessed a calm assurance that God was in control. He had placed her in that particular program at that time for a reason, and he would see her through it. When she was going through a difficult time in her courses, she remembered that she would pray for help. “You have got to help me, God,” she would pray. “And he would send somebody along to help me,” she recalled with a smile. Because of her particular situation during the time she was going through the program, Donna’s (*M*) world was in upheaval. It was a stressful time during which she and her family moved from one church to another. Like Virginia (*B*), she was

convinced that God had placed her in the program at that particular moment in order to use the things she was studying to fortify her faith and give her direction. She recalled that a lot of the classes she took during that period helped her work through the emotional and psychological strains she was undergoing at that time. “It was really a God-sent thing for me to be in that program at that time with those particular professors,” she said.

#### *The Effect of Faith: Spiritual Growth*

For several of the participants, the months they passed in the degree-completion program was a time of growth in their spiritual lives. Some of them had not been Christians for very long, and whether they were in the business track or the ministry track, the biblical teaching they received responded to a felt need in their lives. Laura (M), who followed the ministry track, said she felt like the classes were feeding her spiritually and that she just could not get enough of it. Naomi (B), a business major, experienced a period of marked spiritual growth, as well. “My faith just grew beyond anything, especially with [the divorce] I was going through. Talk about faith moving mountains!”

#### *The Effect of Faith: Perseverance*

Their relationship to God, and the assurance that flowed from it, gave the participants a great amount of encouragement to continue. Leanne (M) kept repeating that to herself as well when the pressures increased and the stress began to rise: “I tried to just keep that attitude that God is a part of this, and I am only going to get as much as I can handle.” Anne (B)’s conviction that God wanted her to finish her degree was one of the things that compensated for a lack of support from her spouse and gave her the energy to persevere. Her husband did not support her, and he expected her to continue to do everything around the house that she had done in the past, which meant she did her

homework at football games, when she was waiting for her children at school, and on her lunch hour—any time she could find a moment free.

I really had to set my mind to it and decide this is what I wanted. You can do it no matter what the obstacles are, if that is what God wants you to do, and that is what you want.... If it weren't for both, if it weren't that God wanted me to do it and opened the door wide open for it, I would have never made it either. I knew I was doing what God wanted me to do....

Some of the participants were frankly puzzled as to how they accomplished what they did. Given the obstacles they were facing—time pressures, family responsibilities, obligations at their job, church and community activities—it seemed to them in retrospect an impossible task. Tanya (*B*), who took the business track at Hampton, is an example of that. She felt that, like a juggler using too many balls, she could not keep them all in the air. She gives the credit to God for bringing it all to pass. “There were times when I didn't know how I was going to do it, but somehow I pulled it through.... I have to say it was God, obviously, that ... was my strength.”

In the normal order of things, Joseph (*B*), the surgical equipment salesman taking a business major at Trenton, would have graduated a year later than he did. He experienced an extraordinary thing during his time there, and especially his last semester. He was determined to finish by May 2005. In order to do that, he carried 21 credit hours his last semester, nearly double the normal load of 12 hours the regular degree-completion program classes would have taken during those 19 weeks. For him there is no human explanation that could explain how he made it through. He is in sales, and during the months when he was busiest with college work, his sales actually improved. He said

it felt like he was “in a zone” during the time he was in school. But, he went on, “I think the description goes a lot greater than that. I think what happened was a lot bigger than me.... When I look back now, I don’t know how I did what I did.” During his last semester, when he was carrying 21 credit hours, for two months in a row he was the number one salesman in the company. “So I don’t have any good explanation for it,” he mused, “not a human explanation anyways.”

*Summary: The Effect of Faith*

Their relationship with God played an important role in participants’ enrolling and persisting in their degree-completion programs. Some of them would not have entered the program had they not been convinced that to do so was an act of obedience to God. The atmosphere in the classroom was different because all the students were serious about their faith in Christ. The biblical background against which the subject matter as taught added value to it. The study of the Bible and the accompanying spiritual growth were memorable elements of their voyage through the program. Joseph’s words to describe his time as a business major are significant in this setting: for him, those months of college constituted “a spiritual high.”

*Difficulties to Overcome*

On any train trip, there is always the possibility that the travel will be disrupted or delayed by construction zones. Those zones, which demand extra caution, can be compared to the difficulties that are present in adult education programs in general. Every student experiences time pressures to a greater or lesser degree, depending on his or her abilities and on career and family responsibilities. Tensions within the families of students are brought on by the preoccupations of the student and the lack of available time to deal with issues that may come up. Money is always a question: pay now or pay

later, but the bills must be paid sometime. How students respond to these issues goes a long way toward smoothing their educational experience. What was it in their thinking that gave them the courage to think “I can overcome these!”?

### *Time Pressures*

Time pressures have been cited in previous research as one of the major barriers to participation in adult education (Bean and Metzner, 1985; Boshier, 1973; Darkenwald and Valentine, 1985; Kaplan and Saltiel, 1997; Malhotra et al., 1999; Merriam and Caffarella, 1999; Valentine and Darkenwald, 1990). The high and constant demands on their time resulting from their participation in a degree-completion program and the stresses that this brought on them and their families, were noted by all the participants in this study. Those who did not have children in the home experienced less stress than did those who had family responsibilities. Those who worked part-time or had flexible schedules had an easier time of it than did those who worked a regular 40-hour week.

#### *Time pressures: Balancing life and school*

Finding the right balance among the participants’ various responsibilities was difficult for almost everyone. At times Tanya (*B*) felt like she simply could go no farther. Juggling all her activities was a major source of stress. She was the bill payer in her family and usually worked two jobs. Often she would be up until one or two in the morning typing a paper, then have to get up and go to work the next day. There was no other way she could get everything done. Joseph (*B*) struggled constantly, as well, and it made him feel like he was failing, because he knew he wasn’t giving his best in any domain of his life, neither family, nor work, nor school. To maintain his equilibrium, he found that he had to be willing to accept the best he could do, even knowing that it was not perfect. He said it made him feel like he was being pulled in every direction at once.

I didn't feel that during that time that I could do everything I was supposed to do as a dad, I couldn't do everything I was supposed to do to be a good husband, I couldn't do everything I was supposed to do to be a really good employee, and I wasn't able to give 100% to school. But to survive it, what I tried to do was: do the best I could in those areas given the time that I had, not ignoring any area....

Frank (*M*) didn't think the time required to meet the demands of his classes was too much, when one considered what that the students were trying to accomplish through the degree-completion program. Even so, maintaining stability was not easy because of the multiple appeals being made on his time. He had to finish two years of school, 62 credit hours, and he was to do it in 22 months. It was going at breakneck speed, he said. He found that coping with it made for a lot of late nights.

It was just a matter of how do I find time to be with the family, to be at work and to not cost myself income, take care of physical fitness, be involved in the church and do some reading. So it just became a lot of later nights, after everyone else is in bed, I am writing a paper or reading a book.

#### *Time pressures: Finding Time for homework*

Participants did not consider that in general the homework in their degree-completion program classes was in and of itself difficult. Finding the time to complete it by deadline was the problem. Jeannette (*M*) remembered the stress and frustration of meeting the deadlines. It was demanding, she said: "We had to get everything in *exactly* when we were supposed to get it in." For Virginia (*B*), also, the time constraints were the hard part. She enjoyed doing the homework, but finding the time to put into it that she wanted to put into it was difficult. Jeremy's (*M*) situation was typical of a large proportion of the participants. He was married, had children, and worked a full-time job.

He found that life events intruded constantly, making it difficult to respect the deadlines for homework. He kept running into obstacles such as something happening at work, or perhaps a family emergency, that would pull him away from doing school work. Those unplanned-for situations disrupted his study plans and increased the stress. He discovered that “one of the hardest things [was] just getting the work done and trying to deal with outside influences.”

For Joseph (*B*), getting the homework done required sweeping changes in his life style. He became a hermit some days in order to keep up with his classes. Sometimes he had to do that only one or two nights a week, but other times it took the whole weekend, when he was cramming for his Monday classes. He was not the only one who crammed the week’s homework into the last days before class. On occasion, when he had put things off, Jacob (*M*), too, had to consecrate his whole weekend to finishing his homework, “trying to get everything pushed in at the last moment.” Charles (*M*) said that he attached no stress whatever to the class meetings. His homework, however, gave him late nights and considerable stress, particularly the last night before class, which became “cram night” when he was late finishing his papers.

Some of the participants handled the homework-related time pressures by working on it every spare moment. Anne (*B*) kept her laptop computer with her at all times. “I did most of my homework on my lunch hour or on the weekends. I took it to football games, I took it to whatever my kids were doing.... I tried to do homework wherever I could.” Tanya (*B*) took the same type of approach: “I took it with me everywhere I went,” she said. She really appreciated the fact that the adult program provided a student guide. With that and the textbook, she could work on it wherever she wanted. Having the student guide permitted students to work ahead, since all the

homework questions for the whole five weeks were included in it, along with the readings.

*Time pressures: Having no life outside the degree-completion program*

The degree-completion program is intense, and the homework load is not light. For some of the participants, the work they were doing for their college classes became all consuming, to the point that virtually everything else get pushed aside. Laura (*M*) stated that because of the speed of the program, she dared not allow herself to get behind. That meant spending the necessary time every week to stay current with her homework. She found that she had no time for anything else. “I had no life for 22 months. I did nothing but go to work, come home and do school work.” Brianna (*B*) remembered that during the period of time when she attended Denver’s degree-completion program, she could no longer be involved in activities that she had always done and that were important to her. She went to church but wasn’t actively involved. She did not go to family get-togethers. “I was living in school,” she stated. “That was all; that was my life.”

*Summary: Time pressures*

It hardly seems possible that adding only 16 to 20 hours of class and homework time to a person’s schedule could affect a person’s life so profoundly. The time required to successfully navigate a degree-completion program takes away from families and spouses, from career, from community activities, from relaxation time. There is never any relief from the homework that has to be done. There is always the deadline of next week’s class meeting. How the students—and their families—adjusted and compensated for the repeated absences, the locked office doors, and the unattended baseball and basketball games facilitated or hindered their persistence.

### *Family Pressures*

The lack of free time that participants experienced had repercussions on their family life. In some cases, the choice that mom or dad enroll in the degree-completion program was made by the family as a whole; in others, it was strictly an individual decision. Most families actively supported the parent who was in school, but in a few families, the student was expected to continue to fulfill all his or her responsibilities in the home as if they were not attending college. How did those family pressures express themselves?

One of the effects of having to spend so much time doing homework was that the time available to spend with the family was significantly reduced. In some homes, the time spent studying dramatically reduced the time the couple could spend together, as well. Charles (*M*) said that the stress of his participation in the degree-completion program “probably affected my wife ... more than it affected the kids, simply because she wasn’t able to spend as much time with me as she had been used to before.” The kids would go to bed, he said, but the time he normally would have spent with his wife was consecrated to studying. In the same vein, Joseph (*B*) remembered that he was no longer available to sit with his wife and watch TV with her and do the things she wanted to do in the evenings. He had to lock himself away in the office in order to get his homework done.

Joseph (*B*) also remembered the frustration of the multiplied times when he could not spend time with his boys as he wanted to. Doing homework took precedence, even though it created strains in their relationship. He said that his boys would go into his office “and beg and certainly make a good case for playing with them and doing some things,” but he could not stop to play with them. His voice betrayed his sadness when he

recalled that “dozens and dozens and dozens of times” he had to tell them that he could not because he had to do the homework.

For Anne (*B*), the stress was more related to not being with her children for nearly 48 hours each week. Because of the class schedule, she would not see them from the time they went to bed on Sunday night until she returned from work on Tuesday evening. It was a wrenching adjustment to make. Tanya (*B*) carried a load of guilt with her because she was unable to consecrate time to her children. She said that “I don’t know how many times I heard [my five year old] say, ‘I will be so glad when you get through with school because all you ever do is homework, homework, homework.’” She had to learn to overcome that guilt; otherwise she never would have finished.

In order to compensate for the lack of time with family and the tendency to put other things ahead of them, Jeremy (*M*), a father of two girls, found that he actually had to schedule in family time, just as he would any other appointment. He would “put it in the calendar: This is family time. Don’t answer the phone. Just make the time.” Joseph (*B*) used a similar technique with his family that helped them maintain their family life and equilibrium: They carried on with their traditional activities as much as possible in spite of the time demands of his college courses. They still took family vacations, working around his school schedule, just as they normally did for the kids’ school schedule, he recalled. He and his wife also continued their tradition of Saturday night dates. Continuing a normal routine as much as possible reduced the tensions that might otherwise have been there. Lea (*B*) worked hard as well to reserve some time for family. She disciplined herself to keep Saturday nights free so she could go to a movie with her husband, if he wanted to.

Tanya's (B) participation in the degree-completion program generated some real stress in her marriage, due to the fact that her husband, who never went to college, did not understand either Tanya's desire to have a degree or what she needed to do in order to get it. She said that to her, just having the degree is an accomplishment, while his view is that "Okay, we sacrificed all this time, so what are you going to do with this degree that has made it worth all this sacrificing." Those differences created tensions in their marriage. Jacob (M) also experienced some tensions, because of his wife's lukewarm support. She did not oppose his participation, but her unhappiness showed through in her comments. At that time, she was staying in the home with their children, and Jacob recalled that she made the comment several times that she felt like they no longer had the time to talk or to do anything together. "She just told me several times that she needed to talk to an adult," he said. It is difficult to assess what effect, if any, that had on the fact that Jacob did not complete the program.

Naomi (B), who was rearing a teenage son alone, found a bright side to the fact that her time with him was limited. With a sly grin, she said that "I think my son kind of enjoyed it because I was too tired to keep after him to get things done (laughter)." Donna (M) thought that the fact that her time with her family was limited and that she could not do all the things she normally did, such as washing clothes, making beds, and fixing meals, actually turned out for the better. "As teenagers and almost grown adults, they had to learn to be dependent upon themselves," she said. She thought it was a good "learning experience for them as well."

#### *Summary: Family pressures*

When a person enrolls in a degree-completion program, his or her whole family is implicated. The time and financial pressures have repercussions that touch everyone in

the family. Mediocre family support can weaken the student's resolve to persist, just as strong support can bolster someone who is tired and tempted to stop. Maintaining traditions and reserving time for the family are means of reducing the effect of the pressures on the families of students.

### *Financial pressures*

Financial difficulty is often cited, along with time pressures, as one of the principal reasons students do not persevere in adult education programs (Bean and Metzner, 1985; Boshier, 1973; Darkenwald and Valentine, 1985; Kaplan and Saltiel, 1997; Malhotra et al., 1999; Merriam and Caffarella, 1999; Valentine and Darkenwald, 1990). Because of the relatively high costs of degree-completion programs, particularly those taught in small private colleges such as the ones participating in this study, one might expect to find that the financial commitment of participants in this study was an impediment to their enrollment. Only two of the participants received full reimbursement of their tuition costs. Twelve of them received partial reimbursement, ranging from a few hundred dollars to 75% of their total bill. The other eight received nothing at all in the form of scholarships or reimbursement. Most of them are paying on student loans. Only one of the participants, Samuel (*M*), had stopped attending classes because of finances. He had determined not to take out any loans and had stopped his degree-completion program about two years prior to this study because he could no longer pay the bills as he went. He re-entered the program as soon as a job change gave him enough income to cover the costs.

### *Financial pressures: Not a significant factor in persistence among participants*

Only one of the participants interviewed mentioned financial pressure as a significant factor in either enrollment or persistence. In comparison, among the people

who responded to the survey questionnaire, fully 23% cited high costs as one of the principal reasons they had not continued their studies. Most of the interviewees clearly experienced some stress related to finances during their time in the degree-completion program, but, with only the one exception of Samuel (*M*), they continued their education without interruption. Finances were not a major impediment to their persistence.

Brianna (*B*) is a good example of the attitude many had. Because of her conviction that God was leading her to enroll in the degree-completion program at Denver College, money was not going to make or break the decision. “I didn’t look at the money,” she said. “I mean ... people go to school every day. People finish degrees every year. If they can do it, why can’t I?” She was not unconcerned about the money, but she felt like she was walking through a door that God had opened. And, she added, “[if] I have to pay it back, I’ll pay it back.”

Even for those students who received no scholarship or grant money, and who had to rely solely on student loans, that situation was neither a barrier to participation nor a hindrance to completion. The loans were simply the means by which they got through the program. George (*B*) has accumulated significant student loans. He could have had a small part of his tuition costs paid by his employer, but to him it was not worth going through the hassle. “So I just thought: ‘I’ll just pay for it,’” he said. Then he added, with a grin: “I’ll be on a life-time payment plan, I guess!” Laura (*M*) is in the same situation. She said that she is “paying on a student loan every month at this point, for the next umpteen years,” but that did not deter her from enrolling or persisting. Her attitude going into the courses was that the Lord had placed her there, and that if she was going to do it, she would worry about the finances when she graduated. This was not a blind, unthinking leap into the unknown, but rather a considered decision that having the degree would be

worth the cost. And, “It’s been worth it,” Laura said. “If you pursue nothing, you get nothing.”

Jeremy (*M*), now a student pastor and attending seminary, “had taken out and still [has] quite a few loans,” he said, from both before and during his time in Trenton’s degree-completion program. Although that never stopped his education, he admitted that paying for it has not been easy. His family has had to be very careful about what they spend. They had to cut back on some things and watch the budget closely. Because he is certain that God led him to take the degree-completion program, Jeremy felt confident that he will be able to pay back the loans.

Several of the participants placed emphasis on the fact that God provided the funds for their education, even if it came through their bank account. Jeannette (*M*) remembered the joy she felt as she enrolled in Trenton’s degree-completion program after 30 years of wanting to go back to college but thinking it was impossible. She felt like God had made a way for her to attend when there had seemed to be no way. At the time of enrollment, she received confirmation that God would provide the funds, when she received a sizable check. By that, she said, “[God] showed me that I was going to college [and] he showed me *he* was going to pay for it, which he did.”

*Financial pressures: A cause for concern*

Financial problems were the only thing that ever caused Leanne (*M*) to consider stopping her studies, she said. She and her husband had set a budget, which worked well until an unforeseen expense devastated their plans. It was a major test of their faith.

That first semester we were very confident. We had our budget worked out. We knew when we were going to write the checks. We knew when tuition was due. But when the van broke down, we had no clue how we were going to pay for it.

We didn't even know how we were going to pay for the loan. We were totally going out on faith.

Facing that tuition bill every month brought to the surface her uncertainties about where her commitment to ministry was going to lead. She questioned her decision, wondering what her future might hold. She repeatedly asked herself, "What happens when I get done if I can't do anything with this degree? ... Is this the best thing? Is this degree really valuable?" The financial pressures caused her to call into question her decision to prepare for ministry and whether that had been the right decision, but they were not strong enough to make her abandon her studies. After having graduated and looking back, she said that "It was still worth it. I wish I could have found some scholarship help or [that the] college could have done more to help financially. But I still would have done it—despite the cost—the same way."

*Summary: Financial pressures*

Participants experienced sometimes severe financial pressures brought on by the costs of their schooling. Those who were obliged to contract student loans wished it could have been done some other way; they would prefer not having a large debt hanging over them. Nonetheless, the prevailing sentiment during their time in the degree-completion program was that their commitment to getting their degree was not going to be halted by financial pressures. They considered that the education represented by their degree was well worth the sacrifice. The value of the education outweighed the costs of the loan.

Construction zones are not the only impediments to a train's completing its run on time and without accident. Often, particularly in hilly or mountainous regions, grades are steep and long, a condition that slows the train down considerably. When this is the case,

often a second engine is placed at the end of the train. Working in tandem with the engine in the lead, it adds its thrust when the grade is steep, pushing the cars through and maintaining the speed, so the train can arrive on schedule. If a degree-completion program were compared to a train, the second engines, so to speak, are the motivations for persistence that push the students through the difficult times, when they lose speed and begin to consider stopping altogether.

### *Motivations for persistence*

Degree-completion programs are intense educational programs that require considerable investment of time and effort from the adults who enroll in them, who are already busy with their careers and their family, church, and community responsibilities. They must squeeze their studies into whatever space they can find in their lives, which often means squeezing something else out. Students become weary—there's no three-month vacation each summer in a degree-completion program. As Jeannette (*M*) observed, "Two years is a very long time to just keep on keeping on, like the Energizer Bunny™." Why then do they persist? What motivates them to give up Monday Night Football, weekend outings with the family, throwing a football with their kids, and Sunday afternoon naps for two years, so they can do homework? Why are they willing to say goodnight to their children Sunday night and not see them again until Tuesday evening for 104 weeks in a row, just so they can attend classes? What makes them willing to sit in their car in a snowy parking lot writing a paper while their child is in a class?

An analysis of the experiences of the participants in this study shows that there were five principal motivations that compelled them to continue, even when it would have been easier to stop. To one degree or another, virtually every participant was

motivated to continue to work towards his or her degree for reasons of personal fulfillment. “It is something I ... have always wanted,” was the way Laura (*M*) expressed it. Other participants underlined the fact that once they had made the commitment to the program by enrolling, they simply were not going to quit. Donna’s (*M*) statement was representative of this group.

My attitude towards finishing was: I'm going to start this, and I'm going to finish this unless something happens that is beyond my control. If I would become deathly sick or something like that, that's one thing, but otherwise I'm going to finish the program.

Another motivation that kept participants in the course was the hope for advancement. Brianna (*B*) was clear about this. “I wanted to finish. I wanted to finish and get a promotion [at my job] and go on and use my degree. I didn’t want to have to depend on child support or anything like that.” Others were encouraged and motivated by the fact that they could see the end of the road. Knowing how many more courses they had to take and how many more weeks they had to meet was the boost that got them through their discouraging times. Lastly, several of the participants were motivated to persist for the same reasons they had enrolled: because of their faith. God had had told them to start down the path, which meant they should continue to the end. Jeannette (*M*) remembered that her “motivation [was] that this is what the Lord wanted me to do, that this is where he has put me. I need to do it.”

Participants often mentioned that they had more than one major motivation to persist. Perhaps they had always wanted a degree, and now the calling of God on their lives also pushed them forward. For some, God’s leading was coupled with their personal determination to grit it out regardless of the pain. For others yet, they had a ferocious

determination to complete the course, and that determination was fed by the fact that they could see the end of the road and could mark off one more class meeting each week.

### *Motivations to Persist: Personal Fulfillment*

#### *I want the degree*

For many of the participants, the primary motivation for persistence was to accomplish a goal they had set. Some had nourished the desire to return to college for years, sometimes decades; now they had the occasion to accomplish what they had wanted to do for so long. Although Jeremy (*M*) had also enrolled in part because of his faith—The Lord had called him into ministry, and the degree-completion program was the first step towards ordination as a pastor—the motivation that helped him to overcome the discouraging times and to persist to graduation, was that he wanted, finally, to have his degree. “I just had enormous amounts of credit,” he said. “I had been going to school for so long. I had so much education.... Just pulling it all together [was my goal]. I really wanted to do that and get my degree.”

Like Jeremy (*M*), Naomi (*B*) also had more than one motivation for her studies. She enrolled because of frustration of not getting certain business contracts because she had no degree. But, she said, “It was always my goal to get my degree, always. [I] started out for a little bit different reason, but the end result was the goal, to get that piece of paper.” Daniel (*M*) also was spurred on by two motivations: “The major one probably was just to get it done, to reach that goal. The second one through most of it ... was [that] there should have been that salary incentive at the end.” About half way through the program, Daniel found out that there would be no salary incentive and no job advancement, but that did not stop his education. The deeper motivation, the one that saw

him through, he said, “was more [that] I just needed to get it done [for myself].... [This] was something I was going to do all along.”

Samuel (*M*) could recount a litany of reasons why someone in his situation would not want to go back to college and get his degree: his career is certification-based, he did not need a degree for teaching, there was no financial incentive. So why was he pursuing this degree? He answered, “I am just doing it to get it right now.... It’s an internal [thing]: just [to] have one and be finished....” Virginia’s (*B*) motivation also was simply that she wanted the degree. It was that long-held, personal desire that gave her the strength to stay the course when she was having difficulty. “It was just something that I felt that I really wanted to do,” she said. “It was ... a goal I could check off my life to-do list: ‘Got that one done.’”

*I should have done this long ago*

Susan (*B*) felt that getting her degree was something she was supposed to do that she never did. She had been on the honor roll in high school, and she said that she thought “the expectation was ‘You’ll go to college, and you’ll graduate,’ and I didn’t do that.” She had never forgiven herself for not doing it, so when she got the opportunity to begin again, she was ready with renewed determination. “Once I got back into it and started it, I wasn’t going to stop again, and quote ‘be a failure.’”

For George, the motivations he had that caused him to enroll were the same motivations that encouraged him to continue. When he enrolled, George (*B*) said, “I was excited that I was actually going to have something that I was going to accomplish for myself.” It was something he thought he should have done long before. He said that he felt like a child: “I felt like I was going through kindergarten late.” But once he was in the program, he added, “I couldn’t enroll and then not graduate!” He went on to say that,

“The reason I continued [was] just for myself.... It was just something I wanted to accomplish.”

*It's the dirty little secret*

Joseph also carried his primary motivation all the way through the degree-completion program. When he enrolled, he wanted to erase a secret that he had carried since high school.

The real motivator to go back to school is because it was always that one little area of my life that has kind of haunted me and that I have been embarrassed about.... That is the biggest motivator for me.... This is an embarrassing little part of my life that I had to put behind me, [that] I wanted to fix.

For Jeannette (*M*), the oldest of the participants, her faith played a role in her persistence—she knew that the Lord had opened the door for her to return to college, and she was not going to treat that lightly—but her under-girding motivation was more personal: to accomplish something she had longed to do for decades.

[Not having a degree] was always that dirty little secret. It was a goal that I had set for myself that I had not attained, and I hated it, because when I say I want to do something, I usually get it done. And this was one thing in my life that I desperately wanted to do that I just didn't do.

*Summary: Personal fulfillment*

These participants stated their motivations in slightly different words, but they shared one element: they were motivated by personal reasons, by a desire for personal fulfillment. That may not have been the only motivation for persistence in their program, but it was the dominant one. Something they considered important, a degree, was lacking

in their lives. The desire to possess that degree motivated them to complete their programs in spite of the obstacles they faced.

#### *Motivation to Persist: Career*

Career security or advancement was the primary motivation for persistence for only two people, Lea (B) and Brianna (B). Brianna, working in data entry at the time but now a kindergarten teacher, enrolled with the idea that, “I wanted to finish. I wanted to finish and get a promotion with [my company] and go on and use my degree. I didn’t want to have to depend on child support or anything like that.” That motivation remained with her as she continued through the degree-completion program at Denver College. “I was also in a hurry,” she said, so unlike most students in degree-completion programs who take only one course at a time, she took two or three courses at once for nearly a year before slowing down to the regular pace.

Lea (B) was an eager student but a reluctant degree candidate. “I’m not really degree-oriented,” she remarked. “I mean I’m class-oriented because I love taking classes, and I love [learning] different things,” but getting a degree really did not interest her until her job security was threatened. “At that time I decided: I’ve got to get the piece of paper,” she continued. As she progressed through the program, the idea she carried in her mind was that it was “very important” that she graduate. Protecting her job security was the motivation that carried her through until she completed the course.

Other participants, like Tanya (B), talked about career-related factors as secondary motivators for persistence. Her primary motivation for persistence was the inner drive, the determination to complete the program. There was, however, a part of her motivation that touched on her career. She knew that she did not want to remain in the food service industry where she had worked for the previous five years, and she had come to realize

that “to obtain ...the type of job I would like, I knew that a degree would help me advance in that area. So I was motivated by that.”

Very few of the participants cited job security or advancement as the primary or even secondary motivation for their perseverance. Other motivations were noted much more frequently as having had a greater effect on their persistence.

*Motivation to persist: An end in sight*

*Only 100 classes to go!*

Six participants specifically mentioned that the fact that there was a definite ending date for their studies was in and of itself a motivation to persistence. Because they knew how many months or weeks remained, they could push through difficult times more easily. Enduring the pressures became possible precisely because it was only for a known and limited length of time.

When asked about the hours spent in doing homework, Laura (*M*) admitted it was a lot. But in her no-nonsense manner, she virtually dismissed as irrelevant any consideration that the weekly investment of time was too much. It was of little importance given the short overall time span of the degree-completion program. “If you wanted the degree,” she said, “if you wanted to learn, you had to put the time in. It was only for a short period of time. We are not talking four to six years; we are talking 22 months.”

For Joseph, “graduation was ... my light at the end of the tunnel.” Particularly during his last semester, when he was carrying 21 credit hours, the knowledge that it would all be over in a few months held incredible motivational force.

At the age I am, I can put up with anything for a finite period of time.... I was looking at a handful of months ahead of me, [and] seeing that light at the end of

the tunnel with graduation, and knowing that I would be done. I just wanted to sort of just push through the pain. Push through and finish. That was huge!

Jeremy (*M*) had been collecting credit hours from this college and that for a number of years. When he came to Trenton, one of his major concerns was how long it would take for him to receive his degree. He was delighted when the administrators gave him specific dates. Essentially they told him, “You go through the program, you take the classes in succession and after the end of that, you do have your degree.” After his experiences in other schools, where the list of classes he needed changed regularly, Trenton’s calendar was both a relief and a strong motivation: “At least there was an end in sight,” as he put it. When Susan (*B*) went through downtimes, she said, having a set calendar was encouraging. The motivation that got her back on track in times like that was that she knew when graduation was coming. “Only four more classes,” she told herself. “‘I’ve done this much, I’m not going to quit now....’ Seeing the light at the end of the tunnel, I’d keep reminding myself, ‘You’re almost there. Don’t stop. You’re getting closer. Don’t give up.’”

Virginia (*B*) wanted to have the end in sight from the very beginning. When she began her first classes, she set up her calendar and marked off the weekly classes. “I had a little thing like an elementary school kid.... 101 more classes, 100 classes. Yea, I am down to two digits. I am in the 50s.” When she had times when she was not sure she could continue, her husband would remind her of the calendar and tell her, “You have already put this many weeks in here. You only have this many more to go.” She said that for her it was a big help. “It was an end; it wasn’t going to go on forever.”

*Only three more weeks on this subject!*

For Donna (M), it was not so much the big calendar of 104 weeks, but the five-week period for each class that motivated her. When she was having a difficult time, she would think about the small number of weeks left in that course. Those “little steps,” as she called them, gave her the psychological stamina to continue: “With each class only being five weeks, you knew it was almost over [when it started],” she laughed. This was a motivation to her because it meant that if the subject was one she did not like or one that was hard for her, she had to put forth a strong effort for only a few weeks. “It’s more beneficial to know: ‘I’ve only got to [do] five weeks of this. I have got to do the best I can for five weeks,’” she said, “instead of saying ‘I have got to do the best I can for four months.’” She could stand five weeks of something she did not particularly like or understand; having to do that for 18 weeks would have been another matter entirely. She went on to add: “‘Two weeks and two papers’ is a lot more motivating than [saying] ‘It’s mid term, and I’ve still got seven and a half weeks left to try to figure out what is happening....’” The short time span also permitted her to focus her energies on the one subject being taught. She did not have to worry about other classes and homework, which reduced stress considerably.

*Summary: An end in sight*

For these six participants, at least, knowing a definite end time, to the courses and to the program, was a strong motivational factor in their persistence. They could more easily endure the pressures because they were conscious that they would continue for only a short time.

*Motivation to persist: Determination*

*I've made a commitment*

For several participants, the most powerful motivation towards completion was simply the goal they had set and the commitment they had made. They were prepared to do whatever it took because they were not going to quit, period. James (*M*), for example, felt that he had too much invested to quit. "I didn't want to go into a program half way, and then quit.... You don't want to waste your first three years of college for nothing. That motivated me."

Tanya (*B*) felt like she was going to get only one try at completing her degree. For her, this was her last chance. Her sheer determination to finish was the motivation that carried her along. She had believed that if she didn't finish college this time, she never would, she said, so she was prepared to do whatever it took to make it through. She added that, "[I had] the determination that I am going to complete this. I am going to finish this, no matter what.... Once I made the commitment, I knew that unless there was something out of my control, I would finish it."

*Quit? Never!*

If the idea of quitting surfaced among this group of students, it was immediately rejected. They would not countenance the thought. When asked if she had ever considered quitting, Jeannette (*M*) responded, "NO, NO! You meant quit, quit? No! I am not a quitter. I saw this opportunity laid out before me and there was no way I was going to quit." Marianne (*B*) said that once the decision was made, there was no turning back for her, "short of dying!" Donna's (*M*) attitude towards finishing was: "I'm going to start this, and I'm going to finish this unless something happens that is beyond my control. If I would become deathly sick or something like that, that's one thing, but otherwise I'm

going to finish the program.” Laura (*M*) had the same sort of commitment: “[It] never crossed my mind to quit.... I try to keep a commitment when I make one.”

Getting her degree was something that Virginia (*B*) “wanted to do way back then,” but the motivation that sustained her after she had begun the program was her determination to finish: “Probably what drove me through those difficult times was that ‘I’m going to finish this.’” Her family kept telling her she could do it. She kept telling herself that when she finished, this would no longer be hanging over her head, and that she would not be telling herself that, “You didn’t complete that. You failed on that.”

*Summary: Determination*

These participants were determined that they were going to finish their degree-completion programs, whatever the cost. The decision had been made. They had crossed the Rubicon. Turning back was not acceptable. Keeping that thought in their minds motivated them to continue, even when it would have been easier to stop.

*Motivation to persist: Faith*

For several participants, their faith and commitment to God was an important motivating force for persistence. If they had made a personal commitment to accomplish their goal, they depended on God to help them fulfill it. If they had chosen the path of the degree-completion program, it was because God had led them to do so. In consequence, there was a spiritual component to their studying: learning business math or studying the book of Romans was not a course they had to take, but rather an act of spiritual obedience.

Anne (*B*) recognized that her finishing her business degree had required iron-clad dedication on her part. She had made that decision, but that commitment, by itself, would

not have been sufficient to motivate her to continue. She also needed the assurance that in going through the degree-completion program, she was following God's will for her life.

I really had to set my mind to it and decide this is what I wanted.... [But] if it wasn't that God wanted me to do it and opened the door wide open for it, I would have never made it either. I knew I was doing what God wanted me to do....

For Frank (*M*), stopping his studies was simply not an acceptable idea because he was studying in order to extend his ministry. It was "extremely important" that he finish the course and graduate. The motivation that Jeremy (*M*) kept before him was also his future ministry plans. God had called him into ministry, and this was the first step of obedience to that call. He knew that in order to become a fully ordained pastor in his church, he needed to complete his bachelor's and then his master's degree. "Knowing what I had to do just kept me ... on track. I knew this was what I needed to do," he said.

Donna (*M*) said that the motivation that pushed her to complete her ministry degree was the internal drive to finish. At the same time, that desire to obtain knowledge was not an end in itself. For her, the internal push was born out of her belief that God had a plan for her life. Getting knowledge was a just a part of her realizing God's larger design for her life. "That internal drive was there to finish," she said, "because I wanted the knowledge, and I wanted to be able to help people and to help myself, to reach out, basically just to fulfill his purpose for my life." Jeanette was driven not only by her commitment to finishing her ministry degree, but also by her pledge to God. She could not quit; to do so would have meant breaking her word to God. He had placed her there, and he had provided the funds to pay the fees. When she was discouraged, she stayed for two reasons: "It was a commitment, and it was faith. It was faith believing that this is what *he* wanted me to do."

For Tanya (B) and Virginia (B), both business majors, their belief that God had led them to enroll in the program was a secondary, but still important, motivation to continue. Tanya said that “the inner drive” was the main reason she persevered, but that also, “I felt an obligation to the Lord. I felt like the Lord had brought me to this institution and that he had given me this opportunity.” Consequently, she was compelled to continue. Virginia said that the leading of the Lord was one of the “major factors that led me to complete the program.”

These participants considered that their completing the program and obtaining their degree was more than an exercise in adult education, no matter how important that might be. Their persistence was part of the larger, spiritual picture. It formed a part of their relationship to God. They were obeying God, and so, for them, the only possible outcome was that they persevere.

*Summary: Motivations for persistence*

Whether their primary motivation to persist concerned their personal fulfillment, their career or their faith, whether the principal reason for completing the course was related to their strong determination or to the fact that they could see the end of the road, these participants kept their eyes on the finish line and completed the race. In some cases, one single impetus drove them all the way through. For several others, it was a combination of motivations that gave them stamina and endurance to continue. The momentum and energy built up by the excitement of enrollment would have carried them only so far. The motivations to continue, to finish the course, gave them the impetus to overcome the obstacles and cross the finish line.

### *The Cases of Those Who Did Not Persist*

At the time when the initial surveys were sent out, three people who had not completed their degree-completion program volunteered to be interviewed. In the weeks between the survey and the interviews, one of them, Samuel (*M*), had re-enrolled and was well on his way to completion. This section will look at the two who have not re-enrolled. Both of them were in the ministry track. Interviews with only these two people do not give sufficient data to make defensible statements about their motivations and persistence. This section seeks only to point out possible indicators worthy perhaps of further investigation.

#### *The case of Charles*

Charles (*M*) expressed frustration with himself for not having finished his degree years earlier, when he first started college shortly after high school. He had a good experience in the community college he attended, but he said that “due to lack of committing myself, I stopped going to school....” At that point, he had accumulated about a year’s worth of credit hours. The idea of going to college took a back seat for several years until the inauguration of a center for Hampton’s degree-completion program in a town near Charles’ (*M*) home. He had answered the call to preach, and because his pastor “strongly suggested” that he pursue his education, he enrolled. Although he attended all but one of the courses offered in the degree-completion program, he did not successfully finish. “The only thing that I do regret very much is not finishing some of the finals due to constraints that happened at work and at home which caused me—my actions caused me—not to receive an Associate’s degree.”

He did not turn in the final essay exams in three courses and did not enroll in the last course offered. Had he completed those elements successfully, he would have

received his Associate's degree. To receive a Bachelor's degree, he would have had to take several additional elective classes, because he did not have 60 credit hours when he first entered the program.

On the surface, Charles' (*M*) motivations to enroll and to persist are virtually identical to that of other participants who completed their program. Other participants had enrolled because a program became available and someone encouraged them to attend. Like others, Charles recognized a personal need to complete his degree. His desire to have a degree is clear, as well. "This is what always kept going through my mind when I got down," he said. "'This is ridiculous!' I would say. 'You never finished college. This is something you need to do. You need to move on and finish this coursework.'" He also kept reminding himself that this was his third try at college. He kept telling himself the same thing other participants were repeating to themselves: "This time, I'm going to stick it out, and I'm going to get there!"

What made the difference between Charles (*M*) and the participants who completed their studies? Two paths of inquiry suggest themselves from the analysis of the interview. One is that although Charles is a pastor, he never mentioned his faith in connection with either his enrollment or his continuation. Was there a lack of spiritual commitment, and, if so, was it significant to his not finishing? A second is that in the interview, he mentioned at least twice the fact that he has had trouble making commitments and setting goals, and following through on them. When he spoke of his first experience in college, he said that, "due to lack of committing myself, I stopped going to school...." Later he said that the first course he took in the degree-completion program, entitled *Goals, Priorities, and Attitudes*, taught him a lot about himself. Until that class, he had not understood "the lack of ability that I had to set goals and follow

through with them.” To what degree, if any, did that characteristic play into Charles’ decision to withdraw from the program before completion?

### *The case of Jacob*

By his count, Jacob (*M*) completed only three or four classes in the degree-completion program at Hampton. Because of community obligations, he was unable to join the regular Monday night cohort, so he took individual courses offered by the degree-completion program to the general student population. He was not a part of a cohort, nor was there a schedule in place for each successive course. Jacob had felt God’s calling on his life to further his studies “and see where that took me,” he said. He could have taken the business track and perhaps obtained CLEP credits or credits for demonstrated competency on the basis of his business experience, but his goal was to learn more about the Bible, “and take it where it might,” he said.

Two directions for inquiry also suggest themselves in Jacob’s (*M*) case. One is the long-term goal Jacob had set for himself. Jacob used two phrases that may be significant. He said that he wanted to learn more about God’s word, and “see where that took me.” He wanted to know more about the Bible, and “take it where it might.” These tentative phrases may indicate that Jacob had not firmly set a long-term goal for himself. He wanted to start, yes, but he had no roadmap marked to show him his destination. The second path for inquiry is that Jacob dropped two classes because he had felt completely overwhelmed. His last class was a particularly bad experience. Malhotra, Sizoo, and Chorvat (1999) listed “bad experiences” as one of six types of deterrents to persistence among adult learners that they found. To what degree did the bad experience dishearten Jacob and influence his decision not to continue? He himself intimated that it had had an

influence, when he confided that, “You know, the right class at the right time, and I might still be going.”

### *Summary of Findings*

Although the participants in this study reflect only a small number of adult learners enrolled in degree-completion programs in church-related colleges, this study has addressed the questions of students’ motivations for enrollment, the events that triggered their enrollment at a specific time, the elements of the structure of adult degree-completion programs that may influence persistence, the atmosphere in the classroom and among students, the effect of the students’ faith on their involvement in these programs, the difficulties they dealt with, and their motivations for persistence. Through the use of a train metaphor, the study visualized the elements of adult degree-completion programs that affect the students’ educational journey. Except for the involvement of a strong element of faith, the motivations for enrollment found among these students generally reflect motivations for participation found among adult learners in general. Likewise, the trigger events that impelled them to enroll when they did are similar to events found in other research, with the exception of the role of faith. The structure of the programs and the atmosphere of the courses were appreciated by the students, who judged that they were conducive to their persistence. The difficulties they encountered—time, family, and finances—are reflective of the difficulties found among adult learners as a whole. Their reasons for persisting also were compatible with those found in the general population of adult learners, again with the exception of the strong role of faith. Since these programs were sponsored by Christian colleges, and since all the students were active in their local church, it perhaps should not be surprising that their faith played a role in their education, even among those students not enrolled in the ministry track.

The next chapter will discuss the implications of these findings for degree-completion programs and will give suggestions towards improving persistence.

## CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

### Introduction

For the last quarter of a century, adult learners have been enrolling in adult degree-completion programs in increasing numbers. Designed to take into account adults' unique learning and developmental needs, these programs have grown rapidly over the last decade and a half, particularly in private colleges, both religious and secular. In an effort to bring to light the elements that encourage or hinder persistence in these courses, this study pursued an understanding of the experiences of students enrolled in the business track and the ministry track of degree-completion programs in three Christian colleges.

In this study, 22 former students of degree-completion programs were interviewed regarding their experiences. Using a qualitative approach, the interviews addressed the following questions: What were participants' motivations for enrollment in a degree-completion program? What were the trigger events precipitating their enrollment? What elements in the structure and format of the program hindered or encouraged persistence? How did the atmosphere created in the programs strengthen or weaken their commitment to complete their degrees? What was the impact of their faith on their persistence? What difficulties did they encounter as they progressed through the program? What were their motivations for persisting in their studies? This chapter offers a summary of the findings of this research by addressing each of the research questions enunciated in chapter 1. It also addresses the implications arising from the findings, and suggests areas for further research.

## Summary of Findings

This section will give a summary of the findings by responding to the two research questions posed in chapter 1, as well as to the two sub-questions. Following that, I will discuss the findings I anticipated discovering when I began this study, which are noted in chapter 4, and how those expectations were or were not met.

*First Research Question: What was the Extent of Differences in Completion Rates of Students in the Two Groups—Ministry Track and Business Track?*

The first research question posed in this study concerned the extent of the differences in the rates of completion of the program among students enrolled in the two respective tracks, business and ministry. According to the figures furnished by the administration of the program at Hampton College, the completion rates of the two groups are not the same. Since the inception of their program, students enrolled in the business track have graduated at the rate of 42.8%, while only 33.8% of students in the ministry track completed the courses and obtained their degrees. The number of people who have been enrolled in the ministry major is considerably higher than the number in the business major—nearly double—but the completion rate is nearly 10% smaller. The other two programs did not supply the information needed to calculate the completion rates in their programs. Perhaps part of the reason they did not is, as Johnson and Hartmann (1999) state, academic information systems have been developed to track traditional students, but they are not adapted to meet the needs of the adult learner. Students in degree-completion programs are amalgamated with the traditional student population, in spite of the distinctive structure of their program. Consequently, valid data about their rate of completion were not readily available.

All but two of the participants in this study—that is, 90.9%—had either completed the program or were finishing it when the interviews were done. This percentage is a reflection of the available participant pool, not of the completion rates in the programs. An examination of the experiences of the two who had stopped before completion revealed that they had both experienced particularly discouraging situations in at least one of the courses they had taken. Malhotra, Sizoo, and Chorvat (1999) list “bad experience” as one of the six deterrents to persistence among adult learners that they found. The bad experience of these two participants seemed to sap their energy and remove the desire to continue.

*Second Research Question: What Factors in Students’ Experiences Relate to Persistence?*

The second research question focused on the factors in students’ experiences that related either positively or negatively to their persistence. This study found that several elements had an effect on students’ persistence, including the structure and format of the degree-completion program itself, the pressures students faced as they went through the program, the motivations of the students, and the impact of their faith.

*Structure and format of the degree-completion program*

Students perceived certain facets of the structure of the programs to be beneficial to their perseverance. They universally applauded the format that permitted them to study only one subject at a time and meet only one night a week. This allowed them to focus their energies wholly on one topic, rather than trying to juggle three or four subjects at once. Knowing that the time spans were limited—five weeks for each course, 24 months or less for the whole program—gave the participants the courage to “stick it out,” as one of the participants, Charles (*M*), put it, knowing that they needed to sustain their efforts

for a relatively short period of time. Furthermore, they were more at ease in a classroom of peers than they would have been in a traditional college class, which reduced anxiety and increased their desire to participate. Being with the same group of people from beginning to end, even if it were not officially called a cohort and even if the group that remained together was small, permitted the students to establish supportive relationships and a team spirit that strengthened their resolve to continue. This resonates with the findings of Kerka (1995) and Tweedell (2000a), who said that “a cohort model ... removes some of the barriers to achievement ... for adult students” (p. 4).

#### *Pressures faced by students*

The pressures these participants faced were typical of those endured by adult learners in general: pressures on their time, families, and finances. Almost all of them said that, because of time pressures, the most difficult part of the degree-completion program was balancing their lives between family, career, community, and college. Not being able to participate fully in family life or to spend time with their spouse as they would have wished was discouraging and stressful. Some of the participants expressed the feeling that during the period of their enrollment, their studies were all consuming; they felt that they had no life of their own. Contrary to the literature and even to the initial survey in this study, participants did not consider finances to be an inhibiting factor to their completion. Many of them regretted the “life payment plan” they were on because of their student loans, but their commitment to obtain their degree trumped their financial concerns.

#### *Motivations for persistence*

For these participants, one of the primary motivations for persistence was personal fulfillment. Having lived, sometimes for decades, with the desire to complete

their degree, once they found a mechanism by which they could bring that desire to fruition, they were not about to stop until they had achieved their goal. They wanted to “sit at the big people’s table,” as George (B), a radio personality, put it. Not having gone through this rite of passage when they were younger, they were motivated to complete the course so they could “become adults,” in Leanne’s (M) terms. Closely aligned with that, and sometimes intertwined with it, was the simple, dogged determination that they would not quit. The idea of “I am not a quitter” resonated through their responses. Some of them bristled at the thoughts of stopping. They had begun the program, and they were going to continue to the end, whatever the cost.

Only two participants, one in the ministry track and the other in the business track, spoke of their careers as the primary motivation for persistence, although others mentioned advancement or job security as a secondary motivation. This differs from what is generally seen in the literature, where career advancement is one of the most important factors for participation and persistence by adult students (Johnstone & Rivera, 1965; Kaplan & Saltiel, 1997; Mealman & Lawrence, 2000; Morstain & Smart, 1974; Taylor, 2000). For some others, the limited duration of the courses and of the program itself, mentioned above, actually became a motivation to persist. When the pressure seemed unbearable, having the end in sight enabled them to withstand it. Their thinking was that they had only so many more classes, so they could stay with it for that length of time.

### *The importance of faith*

The faith of the participants played an important role in their studies. Several of them—both ministry and business majors—enrolled primarily because they were convinced that this was what the Lord wanted them to do. Knowing that fact also served to sustain them and to give them the energy to persevere even when they felt like

stopping. They were where God wanted them to be, doing what God wanted them to do. They had made a commitment to God, and they fully intended to keep it.

*Sub-Question 1: What Differences Exist Among Adult Learners Enrolled in the Two Tracks—Business and Ministry—With Respect to the Factors Affecting Their Persistence?*

No great differences emerged between the two groups as to the factors affecting their persistence. A business major was nearly as likely as a ministry major to speak of his or her faith as a primary or secondary motivation for persistence. Participants in the two groups spoke with virtually one voice about fulfillment as a motivating factor for them. The biggest divergence came when career was mentioned as a motivation for persistence. Both those who noted career concerns as their primary motivation were in the business track. I do not believe that this shows a major divergence between the groups, however, for this reason: Two other participants enrolled in the ministry track because it was the essential first step towards becoming fully ordained as a pastor in their church. In their thinking, their persistence was primarily an act of spiritual obedience and a means of fulfilling God's calling in their lives, but it could as easily be attributed to their desire to advance in their career. Aside from the career motivation, no single motivation was held uniquely by members of either group. All the motivations were shared by participants from both groups.

*Sub-Question 2: From the Students' Perspective, What Factors in Each of the Degree-Completion Programs, Business-Related And Ministry-Related, Would Have Encouraged Their Persistence?*

Only two participants had stopped their studies and had not re-enrolled. Neither one of them spoke directly to the question as it is posed. From an analysis of their

interviews, however, two factors emerge that might have encouraged their persistence. One participant became extremely disappointed in himself because he did not turn in the final exams in three courses he took; getting that far behind became an overwhelming discouragement to him, to the point that he did not enroll in the last class in the program. The other student had a particularly bad experience in a science class because the workload was extremely heavy, and he simply could not follow the instructor. This science class was a regular semester-long course condensed into ten weeks of classes. It was not designed as an accelerated course and did not follow the format of other courses in the degree-completion program. By the time this participant withdrew, about half way through the course, only six students remained out of the original 14 who had enrolled.

I believe these experiences suggest at least three points: Facilitating the learning of adults in accelerated programs requires different skills and a different style of instruction from those used in regular college classrooms to teach traditional students. Instructors should be made aware of these differences and should adjust their teaching style accordingly. Secondly, the format and design of each course should take into account the particular strengths and needs of adult learners. A traditional course compressed into a shorter time span will not necessarily fit adult learners. Thirdly, a high degree of follow-up may be necessary in the case of certain students, to prevent them from getting behind, because in an accelerated program it is very difficult to catch up.

Other participants did not talk about what *would have* encouraged persistence but rather what *did* facilitate persistence, such as studying one subject at a time, meeting only once weekly, having a relatively short time from start to finish, having instructors who made themselves available, and studying in an inviting atmosphere. These subjects are discussed above.

## Anticipated Findings

### *Anticipated Findings: Time Pressures*

When I began this study, I expected to find certain factors present in the experiences of the participants. Based on the literature (Kaplan and Saltiel, 1997; Malhotra et al., 1999) and on personal experience as an instructor in a degree-completion program, I expected to find that time pressures, and the resulting pressures on the families of students, were an important obstacle for students to overcome. The interviews revealed that when the participants enrolled, one of the biggest adjustments they had to make was in the use of their time. Time management quickly became a top priority. Keeping a healthy balance of their family, college, community, and career obligations was not easy for any of them.

### *Anticipated Findings: Financial Pressures*

The lack of financial resources has been cited as an important impediment to adults' participation and persistence in educational endeavors (Darkenwald and Valentine, 1995; Valentine and Darkenwald, 1990; Malhotra et al., 1999; Merriam and Caffarella, 1999). Several of the participants in this study experienced financial pressures. Some of them received scholarships or grants, but a majority of them were obligated to take out student loans. They reacted to the financial pressures in this manner: they would have preferred not having the debt, but getting the education and having the degree was well worth whatever it cost them. Their desire to finish their degree was more compelling than was the fear of accumulating debt. Although the administrators of the programs said that the costs are commonly cited to them as a reason for dropping out, one participant noted that he knew of students in his classes who continued their studies even though

they were under great financial pressure. It appeared that, to the participants in this study at least, the value of their education overrode financial concerns.

*Anticipated Findings: A Majority of Christian Students*

I expected to find that the students enrolled in these degree-completion programs be conservative Christians for the most part, because of the colleges involved. I was expecting, however, to find some students, particularly in the business tracks, who would not profess a personal belief in Jesus-Christ as Savior. I was surprised to find no students who did not call themselves Christians and who were not involved in a local church. One of the administrators asked me, “Given our emphasis on the Bible, why would a non-Christian *want* to enroll in our program?” Perhaps she is right. For whatever reason, none of the participants described him- or herself as a non-Christian.

*Anticipated Findings: Emphasis on Cohorts*

Given the positive effects of cohorts on adult learning (Bloom, 1978; Horn, 1999; Kehrhahn, Scheckley, & Travers, 1999; Quigley, 1998; Tweedell, 2000), I expected to find a strong emphasis by the administration of these programs on keeping the same group of people together for the entirety of their courses. Several of the participants said they thought the administration of their program did try to keep the same group together, but none seemed sure that this was in fact the policy. Although some of the participants had attended class with basically the same people for the duration of their enrollment, most participants said that the overall membership of their classes changed with each new course, and that the group that stayed together the whole time was small. Several participants emphasized that the group they were with became a strong support group for them, which contributed to their persistence. One administrator indicated that his program is shifting away from cohorts because of the difficulty of maintaining them in the

face of classes being offered four or five nights a week, and also because some students do not need to take certain classes because they CLEP the course or because they had already taken the course before enrolling in the degree-completion program. It appears that in these three programs at least, the emphasis on cohorts is weak, if it has not been abandoned altogether.

#### *Summary: Anticipated Findings*

My expectations about time and financial pressures were based on the literature and on personal observation. Participants reported time pressures altogether in line with what the literature suggests. The responses of the participants about financial pressures, however, seemed to challenge previous research since, even though the participants experienced financial pressures, their financial situation did not dictate whether they would or would not continue in the program. The total lack of students who were not conservative Christians was foreseeable, perhaps, because of the emphasis on Biblical subjects even within the business track of these programs. As for the cohort system, given the expansion of the degree-completion programs, it may well be impossible to maintain it. It remains to be seen whether this will strengthen or weaken adult learning and persistence.

#### Significance of Findings

##### *Students in degree-completion programs in Christian Colleges are similar to other adult learners*

The findings of this study show that adult students in degree-completion programs in Christian colleges are similar in many ways to their fellow adult students in other adult education programs. They display by their engagement in their studies all the characteristics that Knowles (1980; 1984) suggested as a description of an adult learner.

*They are similar in their characteristics as adult learners*

Knowles (1980, 1984) posited that adult learners move from a self-concept of dependency to one of being self-directed. Participants all saw a void in their lives that only education could fill, and they made the deliberate choice to engage in a program of study that was neither quick nor easy. They saw it as important to their being complete as persons. The reservoir of experience they had accumulated meant they could “bring more to the table,” as George (B) put it. They enjoyed studying in the company of peers as well because they could all share from their pooled experiences. The desire to study subjects that had practical application in their lives was important. Frank recalled that all through his classes, he kept thinking “Wow, this is benefiting me on many different levels!” He was gaining knowledge that would eventually open the door to seminary, but he was also using the knowledge the next Sunday when he taught a class.

Several of the participants said that one of the reasons they had studied was so they could fulfill their role model for their children. Developing themselves so they could better fulfill their social roles was important. Knowles (1984) added that adults find their motivation to learn in internal rather than external factors. A recurring theme in the interviews of the participants was that they had embarked on the course of study because of an internal drive to possess the degree, a hunger to have knowledge. Virtually every one reiterated that one of the strong reasons they enrolled and persisted was that this was something they had always wanted to do.

The experiences of the participants supported two of Houle’s (1961) three orientations of adult learners. None of them mentioned enrolling for the activity involved, but rather because of a goal they had set themselves or because they wanted to learn all they could. Jeannette recalled that her professors got unhappy with her because her

papers were always so long. But, she said, “I was not doing this to show off [or] for extra credit. I was doing it because I was learning.” The desire to learn and the commitment to accomplish their goal were clearly reflected in their actions.

*They are similar in the processes they go through in their decision to participate*

The findings of this study correspond well with Cross’ (1981) Chain of Response Model for participation in adult education activities (see page 27). The importance of each element in the model differed from participant to participant, but the interplay among the elements was evident in the experiences of these students. All of them expressed positive attitudes towards education. Some of them hungered for knowledge. They wished only that they had been able to study years earlier. The process of self-evaluation took different forms. For Susan (*B*), a vacation with a friend that brought to light Susan’s level of education ignited the urgent desire to seek her degree. Others, such as Samuel (*M*), Daniel (*M*), and George (*B*), had taken several courses over the years; they had long ago done an evaluation and found that they wanted and needed an education.

The importance of the participants’ personal goals and of their belief that they could accomplish them through a degree-completion program was clearly brought to light through this study. Garrison (1997) said that motivation is a reflection of the “perceived value and anticipated success of learning goals at the time learning is initiated....” (p. 26). Comings and his associates (1999) pointed out that the goal itself was not the most important point; the critical issue was that the student had a goal toward which to work.

Wonacott (2001) stated that “adult students reporting a specific goal for adult education activities show increased persistence compared to those without one” (p. 3). Every participant who persisted in this study was very clear about the goal he or she had

at the time of enrollment. Life transitions, as well, played their role, whether they were a spouse's graduation from college, the empty nest, a divorce or a career change.

For some of the participants, obtaining the information that a degree-completion program existed was all they needed to begin the program. It was the one thing that had been lacking. In spite of the barriers they all faced—lack of time, family responsibilities, duties at work, financial strain—they enrolled and for the most part persisted.

*Students in Degree-Completion Programs in Christian Colleges Differ From Other Adult Learners*

At the same time, the findings of this study are important in that they point out at least two areas in which students in adult degree-completion programs in Christian colleges differ from fellow adult learners in general. These differences are related, first, to their motivations to complete their studies, and, second, to the impact of their faith on their participation and persistence. I believe these two are inter-related.

*They differ in their motivations for participation and persistence*

Participants in this study differed from their counterparts in the general population in that, for most of them, their primary motivations for persistence were not related to their careers. It is true that six participants, out of a total of 22, listed career-related reasons as their motivation to enroll, but only two participants cited career advancement or job security as their primary motivation to persist. As a reason to either enroll or persist, the overwhelming majority considered career-related issues much less important than their own personal fulfillment and their obedience to God. This was true of students enrolled in both the ministry track and the business track.

Johnston and Rivera (1965) suggested that there were three main reasons adults study: (a) to meet personal goals and gain satisfaction, (b) to prepare for a new

occupation, and (c) to advance in a current job. The findings suggest that for these participants, at least, Johnston and River's first reason is the most important of the three. While a few of the participants in this study did indeed enroll and persist because of career-related reasons, this was not an area of major importance for most of the participants. The motivation that was mentioned over and over was to achieve personal fulfillment or to accomplish a personal goal. Often this was associated with the accomplishment of a faith-related goal, as well.

*They differ in the impact of their faith on their decisions to enroll and persist*

The second difference is that participants' faith in God often played a significant role in their enrollment as well as their persistence. For many of them, enrollment was an act of spiritual obedience to their Lord. They had prayed about their decision and were convinced that the Lord was guiding them to enroll in that program at that time. Furthermore, since the Lord had placed them there, they felt that they had to do the best they could in their studies and that they had to continue to completion. I could find no studies in the body of literature that spoke to the influence of faith on enrollment or persistence, whether among traditional or non-traditional students.

*Interpretation of These Differences*

The fact that many of the participants considered personal fulfillment as the primary motivation for their persistence reaffirms what has been shown in previous research (Johnstone and Rivera, 1965; Kaplan & Saltiel, 1997; Morstain & Smart, 1974). That so few cited career-related concerns as a primary motivation for persistence, however, runs counter current to the literature. I believe this finding is related to the impact of the participants' faith as a motivation to persistence. It seems to me that these

findings may be the result of two factors, one touching on the students themselves, and the second relating to the format and curriculum of the degree-completion programs.

First, these participants were already believers in Jesus Christ before they entered the program. They could have chosen another, non-religious, college for their degree completion; the fact that they chose a conservative Christian college at which to pursue their degrees indicates an openness to, if not a decided interest in, the Bible and spiritual things. The second factor is that the curriculum included several courses of a biblical or theological nature. These classes comprised the major part of the ministry track, of course, but the two tracks shared several core courses, which were largely biblical. All subjects were taught from a biblical worldview, as well. This frequent exposure to a biblical worldview could have the effect of changing one's point of view from a more restricted focus on career to a broader view that would see career as only one element in one's spiritual relationship to God. Students might well have entered the program for career-related reasons, but as they began to see the larger, spiritually framed picture, their faith could have begun to have more of an impact on their thinking. Their career, as well as other aspects of their lives, could have begun to assume a position of lesser importance.

#### Implications for Practice

Although this study was undertaken to investigate the motivations for persistence among students in degree-completion programs, the experiences of the participants indicate domains within these programs that could be strengthened in a way that would enhance students' experience and improve persistence. This section will present implications arising from this study, which are addressed to the administrators of the programs.

### *Choose Instructors Carefully and Provide Training for Them*

The findings in this study support previous research in underlining the fact that adult learners are different from traditional college students (Malcolm Knowles, 1980, 1984; Merriam and Caffarella, 1999; Rachal, 2002). Their experiences give them insights and perspectives that traditional students do not have. “They bring more to the table,” as Frank (*M*), the realtor, said. Participants seemed to think that professors who themselves had occupational experience brought more to the table, as well. Participants repeatedly expressed their appreciation of professors who were pursuing their careers as they taught or who had experience in the field in which they were teaching. It behooves administrators to choose instructors who themselves are working in an occupation, rather than being a full-time professor. This would tend to increase their credibility in the classroom and therefore enhance the learning experience of their students. Furthermore, it would be wise to select instructors who are cognizant of the specificities of adult learners and are willing to adapt their teaching styles to recognize and honor the rich experience adult students have. This may require setting up training seminars for potential faculty members.

### *Develop Curriculum Carefully*

Properly designed curriculum for degree-completion programs takes into account the short time span of the course and the particularities of adult learners. Simply compressing a semester course into a shorter time period does not render it apt for the teaching of adults. Few small colleges have the trained personnel or the financial capabilities to write their own curriculum. It behooves administrators therefore to purchase curriculum designed specifically for adult learners in accelerated degree-

completion programs. It would be wise to resist the temptation to substitute truncated traditional classes in order to make more classes available.

#### *Create an Inviting Atmosphere*

Administrators should encourage an inviting atmosphere in the classroom. This could include having a snack shop open before and after degree-completion program classes, or perhaps providing coffee and tea in the classroom. Allowing students to use a break room, where soft drinks and snacks were available, would be advantageous as well. Having staff available before the class meetings would facilitate contact with the students and assure them of the administration's interest in their success.

#### *Maintain Regular Contact with Students*

Maintaining regular contact with students and monitoring their progress is important. The administration of one of the programs participating in this study kept a display board in the office that showed each student's progress and outlined his or her future schedule. Making sure the students are kept abreast of their up-coming courses and of what they need to do to be ready would remove uncertainty and assure them that the administration is engaged with them in their educational pursuit. Maintaining contact particularly at the transition times between courses seems especially critical. A system to verify that students had submitted their final exams on schedule would permit the administration to make special contact with any student who did not, to help him or her not to slip behind.

#### *Modify Recruitment Efforts*

Among the participants who were interviewed as well as among those who returned the survey questionnaire, the motivations for enrollment and for persistence mentioned most often had to do with personal fulfillment, the accomplishing of a long-

held goal. The motivation of job security or advancement as the primary motivation for enrollment and completion was mentioned far less often. On the basis of that information, it would seem that recruitment of students might be more successful if the degree-completion programs were presented as a means by which the student could accomplish something they have wanted to do for a long time, rather than being touted as a passport to a better job.

### Recommendations for Further Research

Since so little research has been done on persistence among students enrolled in degree-completion programs, many avenues of research are open. In specific relation to this present study, four particular areas for future study suggest themselves.

#### *Research Among Non-Completers*

This study has concerned itself principally with participants' experiences in degree-completion programs and their motivations for persistence. One of its weaknesses is that there were very few participants who had stopped attending classes and were not intending to re-enroll. The small number in that group made it difficult to draw conclusions as to why they did not continue their courses. It would be worthwhile to do a study uniquely among students who had stopped attending their program before completion, in order to identify the motivational and structural factors that contributed to their non-persistence.

#### *Research into the Effect of Cohorts Among Students in Degree-Completion Programs*

Studying with peers was one of the positive elements that facilitated persistence among these participants. For some of them, the fact that they basically had the same people in class with them for the duration of their studies created an atmosphere of teamwork and of success. Yet it appears that the administrations are moving away from

the idea of cohorts. This suggests that research could be done into the effect of cohorts on persistence, particularly as it relates to students in degree-completion programs.

#### *Research into the Impact of Their Faith on Students' Persistence*

In light of the importance participants in this study attached to their faith and its impact on their decisions to enroll and to persist, it would be worthwhile to compare the completion rates of students enrolled in degree-completion programs in Christian and secular colleges, to seek to answer the question of whether the impact of faith increases the rate of persistence among students in accelerated adult learning programs.

#### *Research into the Impact of a Christian Degree-Completion Program on Students' World-Views*

The idea coming out of this study that regular exposure to a Biblical world-view over an extended length of time could have an effect on one's thinking to the point of modifying one's motivations for action suggests that valuable research could be done in this area. If, as Bell Hooks (1994) intimates, knowledge should not be about information only but should have a relation to how one lives, then it should be expected that all education, including that offered in degree-completion programs modify the way students perceive the world and how they relate to it. Research that described the ways in which students' world-views changed during the course of their studies would provide valuable information for curriculum writers, program designers and others involved in the educational process.

#### Summary

Through an investigation into the experiences of a sample of adult learners who had, for the most part, successfully completed a degree-completion programs in a church-related college, this study has brought to light their lived experience and has contributed

to the field of adult education. In particular, it has touched on the areas of persistence and accelerated adult learning, by examining students' motivations to enroll, the format and structure of the programs that contributed to student success, the experiences of students as they overcame difficulties, the impact of their faith within the framework of their studies, and their motivations to persist. Additionally, this study informs administrators of accelerated adult learning programs as they seek to improve their programs. By utilizing the findings of this study and others related to this issue, administrators can put into place policies and structures that will improve the educational experience of adult learners and facilitate their persistence.

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## APPENDIX A: INFORMED CONSENT FORM – SURVEY

### INFORMED CONSENT FORM FOR RESEARCH BEING CONDUCTED UNDER THE AUSPICES OF THE UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA-NORMAN CAMPUS

– Survey –

**INTRODUCTION:** This study is entitled *Persistence among adult students enrolled in business- and ministry-related tracks of degree-completion programs*. The person directing this project is Robert T. Bryan, doctoral candidate, under the guidance of Dr. Irene Karpiak, Professor in the College of Education. This document defines the terms and conditions for consenting to participate in this study.

**DESCRIPTION OF THE STUDY:** More and more adult students are enrolling in degree-completion programs, with the goal of obtaining their college degrees. Unfortunately, not all of them accomplish that goal. This study will investigate the factors associated with completion and non-completion among students following the business- and ministry-related tracks of degree-completion programs in three colleges with the goal of discovering the factors that are different between the two groups.

If you agree to participate, you will be expected to complete and return the enclosed questionnaire, along with this document signed on the back. If you are willing to be interviewed, you should indicate that on the back of this sheet, and give your name and address, etc. The researcher will contact you to set up an appointment for the interview, which will last 60-90 minutes and will be done on your college campus unless you request otherwise. A brief follow-up interview by telephone may follow the face-to-face interview.

**RISKS AND BENEFITS:** No foreseeable risks beyond those present in routine daily life are anticipated in this study. Data will be kept confidential, and the report will protect the identity of participants. The findings of the study will benefit educators and administrators of degree-completion programs by providing them information about student persistence and factors associated with completion or non-completion of degree-completion programs.

**CONDITIONS OF PARTICIPATION:** Participation is voluntary. Refusal to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which the subject is otherwise entitled. Furthermore, the participant may discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which the participant is otherwise entitled.

**AUDIO TAPING OF STUDY ACTIVITIES:** Since this survey element of the research will involve no interviews, there will be no audio taping connected with it.

**CONFIDENTIALITY:** To insure confidentiality, findings will be presented in aggregate form with no identifying information about participants. Direct quotes may be made from questions 6 and 7 of the survey instrument, but since survey responses are anonymous, there will be no way of identifying the person making the statement. The researcher alone will have access to these study records. The study records will be destroyed at the end of the study.

**CONTACTS FOR QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY:** Participants who have questions about the study may contact Robert Bryan, at 918-252-5585 or by email at [rbryan@fwbgo.com](mailto:rbryan@fwbgo.com), or Dr. Irene Karpiak, College of Education, at 405-325-4072, or by email at [ikarpiak@ou.edu](mailto:ikarpiak@ou.edu).

For inquires about rights as a research participant, contact the University of Oklahoma-Norman Campus Institutional Review Board (OU-NC IRB) at 405-25-8110 or [irb@ou.edu](mailto:irb@ou.edu).

PARTICIPANT ASSURANCE: I have read and understand the terms and conditions of this study, and I hereby agree to participate in the above-described research study. [ ] Yes [ ] No  
I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I may withdraw at any time without penalty. [ ] Yes [ ] No

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name of Participant

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

PLEASE SIGN ABOVE if you are willing to assist in the survey portion of this research.  
PLEASE SIGN BELOW ONLY if you are willing to assist by participating in an interview.

In order to complete this research, it is important that I interview several students who have been enrolled in degree-completion programs.

Each person would be interviewed once. If necessary, a second, short follow-up interview may be conducted by phone. Initial interviews will take about 60-90 minutes. The interviewees' identity will be completely protected. I will contact you via phone or email to set up an appointment. Interviews will be held on your college campus, unless you request a different place.

These interviews are the heart of this research. It is crucial that I interview some people who **have** completed the program and some who **have not** completed the program.

If you would be willing to help future students by participating in these interviews about your educational experiences, please complete the following information.

Thank you very much. I really appreciate your willingness to help.

I, the undersigned, am willing to participate in interviews as outlined above.

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

(Please print all information below.)

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_

Home phone \_\_\_\_\_ Cell phone \_\_\_\_\_ Fax \_\_\_\_\_

☐ male ☐ female      Email address \_\_\_\_\_

College attended \_\_\_\_\_

Best time to contact you by telephone: ☐ morning ☐ afternoon ☐ evening

To preserve your anonymity as a participant in the survey, please use the two envelopes provided.

PLEASE RETURN THIS FORM IN THE ENVELOPE MARKED "*Consent Form.*"

PLEASE RETURN THE QUESTIONNAIRE IN THE ENVELOPE MARKED "*Questionnaire.*"

## APPENDIX B: INFORMED CONSENT FORM - INTERVIEW

### INFORMED CONSENT FORM FOR RESEARCH BEING CONDUCTED UNDER THE AUSPICES OF THE UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA-NORMAN CAMPUS

– Interview –

**INTRODUCTION:** This study is entitled *Persistence among adult students enrolled in business- and ministry-related tracks of degree-completion programs*. The person directing this project is Robert T. Bryan, doctoral candidate, under the guidance of Dr. Irene Karpiak, professor. This document defines the terms and conditions for consenting to participate in this study.

**DESCRIPTION OF THE STUDY:** More and more adult students are enrolling in degree-completion programs, with the goal of obtaining their college degrees. Unfortunately not all of them accomplish that goal. This study will investigate the factors associated with completion and non-completion among students following the business- and ministry-related tracks with the goal of discovering the factors that are different between the two groups. Interviews will be conducted on the student's college campus unless he or she requests differently. If you agree to participate in the interview element of this research, you will be expected to participate in an interview of 60-90 minutes. A short follow-up interview may be conducted by phone.

**RISKS AND BENEFITS:** No foreseeable risks, beyond those present in routine daily life, are anticipated in this study. The findings of the study will benefit educators and administrators of degree-completion programs by providing them information about student persistence and factors associated with completion or non-completion of degree-completion programs.

**CONDITIONS OF PARTICIPATION:** Participation is voluntary. Refusal to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which the subject is otherwise entitled. Furthermore, the participant may discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which the participant is otherwise entitled. To participate, you must be 18 years of age or older.

**CONFIDENTIALITY:** To ensure confidentiality, findings will be presented in aggregate form with no identifying information about participants. When direct quotes are used, they will be identified by the pseudonym chosen by the participant. Please indicate whether you are willing to be quoted in the study, using a fictitious name to protect your identity.

- The researcher may record the interview and quote me in the study  
using a fictitious name ☐ YES ☐ NO

The researcher alone will have access to these study records. The audio tapes and study records will be destroyed at the end of the study.

**AUDIO TAPING OF STUDY ACTIVITIES:** To assist with accurate recording of participant responses, both initial face-to-face interviews and follow-up phone interviews may be recorded on an audio recording device. Participants have the right to refuse to allow such taping without penalty. Please select one of the following options.

☐ I consent to the use of audio recording.

☐ I do not consent to the use of audio recording.

**CONTACTS FOR QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY:** Participants who have questions about the study may contact Robert Bryan, at 918-252-5585, or by email at [rbryan@fwbgo.org](mailto:rbryan@fwbgo.org), or Dr. Irene Karpiak, at 405-325-4072, or by email at [ikarpiak@ou.edu](mailto:ikarpiak@ou.edu).

For inquiries about rights as a research participant, contact the University of Oklahoma-Norman Campus Institutional Review Board at 405-325-8110 or [irb@ou.edu](mailto:irb@ou.edu). (Please sign on other side.)

PARTICIPANT ASSURANCE: I have read and understand the terms and conditions of this study, and I hereby agree to participate in the above-described research study. ☐ Yes ☐ No  
I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I may withdraw at any time without penalty.

☐ Yes ☐ No

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Signature of Participant

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Date

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Printed Name of Participant

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Researcher Signature

## APPENDIX C: SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE

### Persistence among adult students in degree-completion programs

1. What are the main reasons you enrolled in the degree-completion program?  
(Please select *ONLY* the top three. Rank them as follows: 1=most important; 2=second in importance; 3=third in importance)
  - ☐ To advance in my job/career
  - ☐ In order to obey God's leading in my life
  - ☐ To do better in my present job
  - ☐ To finish something I had started (i.e. my college education)
  - ☐ My spouse encouraged me to enroll
  - ☐ My employer encouraged me to enroll
  - ☐ I love to learn
  - ☐ It was required by my job
  - ☐ Other: \_\_\_\_\_
2. What is your relationship to the degree-completion program now? (Circle or underline answer)
  - a) I completed the program in two years or less.
  - b) I completed the program in more than two years.
  - c) I am still enrolled.
  - d) I did not complete the program, and I am no longer enrolled.
3. If you answered d) above, what are your plans? (Circle or underline answer)
  - a) I intend to re-enroll in a degree-completion program within a year.
  - b) I intend to re-enroll in a degree-completion program, but I don't know when.
  - c) I am not planning to re-enroll in a degree-completion program.
4. (If you have completed the program.) What are the main reasons you continued to completion?  
(Please select *ONLY* the top three. Rank them as follows: 1=most important; 2=second in importance; 3=third in importance)
  - ☐ To finish something I had started (i.e., my college education)
  - ☐ My spouse encouraged me
  - ☐ My employer encouraged me
  - ☐ It was required so I could keep my job
  - ☐ To advance in my job/career
  - ☐ My friends encouraged me
  - ☐ I just wanted to
  - ☐ I love to learn
  - ☐ Other: \_\_\_\_\_

- (Please select **ONLY** the top three. Rank them as follows: 1=most important; 2=second in importance; 3=third in importance)

6. How would you complete this sentence? "The easiest part of my studies in the degree-completion program was\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_”

7. How would you complete this sentence? “The most difficult part of my studies in the degree-completion program was \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_”

1. none
2. full tuition reimbursement/scholarship
3. 50-99% tuition reimbursement
4. 25-49% tuition reimbursement
5. less than 25% tuition reimbursement
6. other: \_\_\_\_\_

10. How much time each week did you spend studying, NOT counting class time? (*Circle or underline answer*)

| less than | 4-8 hrs | 8-12 hrs | 12-16 hrs | more than |
|-----------|---------|----------|-----------|-----------|
| 4 hours   |         |          |           | 16 hours  |

- |    | less than<br>1 mile | 1-5 miles | 5-10 miles | 10-20 miles<br>or more | 20 miles<br>or more |
|----|---------------------|-----------|------------|------------------------|---------------------|
| 1  | 1                   | 1         | 1          | 1                      | 1                   |
| 2  | 1                   | 1         | 1          | 1                      | 1                   |
| 3  | 1                   | 1         | 1          | 1                      | 1                   |
| 4  | 1                   | 1         | 1          | 1                      | 1                   |
| 5  | 1                   | 1         | 1          | 1                      | 1                   |
| 6  | 1                   | 1         | 1          | 1                      | 1                   |
| 7  | 1                   | 1         | 1          | 1                      | 1                   |
| 8  | 1                   | 1         | 1          | 1                      | 1                   |
| 9  | 1                   | 1         | 1          | 1                      | 1                   |
| 10 | 1                   | 1         | 1          | 1                      | 1                   |
| 11 | 1                   | 1         | 1          | 1                      | 1                   |
| 12 | 1                   | 1         | 1          | 1                      | 1                   |
| 13 | 1                   | 1         | 1          | 1                      | 1                   |
| 14 | 1                   | 1         | 1          | 1                      | 1                   |
| 15 | 1                   | 1         | 1          | 1                      | 1                   |
| 16 | 1                   | 1         | 1          | 1                      | 1                   |
| 17 | 1                   | 1         | 1          | 1                      | 1                   |
| 18 | 1                   | 1         | 1          | 1                      | 1                   |
| 19 | 1                   | 1         | 1          | 1                      | 1                   |
| 20 | 1                   | 1         | 1          | 1                      | 1                   |
| 21 | 1                   | 1         | 1          | 1                      | 1                   |
| 22 | 1                   | 1         | 1          | 1                      | 1                   |
| 23 | 1                   | 1         | 1          | 1                      | 1                   |
| 24 | 1                   | 1         | 1          | 1                      | 1                   |
| 25 | 1                   | 1         | 1          | 1                      | 1                   |
| 26 | 1                   | 1         | 1          | 1                      | 1                   |
| 27 | 1                   | 1         | 1          | 1                      | 1                   |
| 28 | 1                   | 1         | 1          | 1                      | 1                   |
| 29 | 1                   | 1         | 1          | 1                      | 1                   |
| 30 | 1                   | 1         | 1          | 1                      | 1                   |
| 31 | 1                   | 1         | 1          | 1                      | 1                   |
| 32 | 1                   | 1         | 1          | 1                      | 1                   |
| 33 | 1                   | 1         | 1          | 1                      | 1                   |
| 34 | 1                   | 1         | 1          | 1                      | 1                   |
| 35 | 1                   | 1         | 1          | 1                      | 1                   |
| 36 | 1                   | 1         | 1          | 1                      | 1                   |
| 37 | 1                   | 1         | 1          | 1                      | 1                   |
| 38 | 1                   | 1         | 1          | 1                      | 1                   |
| 39 | 1                   | 1         | 1          | 1                      | 1                   |
| 40 | 1                   | 1         | 1          | 1                      | 1                   |
| 41 | 1                   | 1         | 1          | 1                      | 1                   |
| 42 | 1                   | 1         | 1          | 1                      | 1                   |
| 43 | 1                   | 1         | 1          | 1                      | 1                   |
| 44 | 1                   | 1         | 1          | 1                      | 1                   |
| 45 | 1                   | 1         | 1          | 1                      | 1                   |
| 46 | 1                   | 1         | 1          | 1                      | 1                   |
| 47 | 1                   | 1         | 1          | 1                      | 1                   |
| 48 | 1                   | 1         | 1          | 1                      | 1                   |
| 49 | 1                   | 1         | 1          | 1                      | 1                   |
| 50 | 1                   | 1         | 1          | 1                      | 1                   |
| 51 | 1                   | 1         | 1          | 1                      | 1                   |
| 52 | 1                   | 1         | 1          | 1                      | 1                   |
| 53 | 1                   | 1         | 1          | 1                      | 1                   |
| 54 | 1                   | 1         | 1          | 1                      | 1                   |
| 55 | 1                   | 1         | 1          | 1                      | 1                   |
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| 57 | 1                   | 1         | 1          | 1                      | 1                   |
| 58 | 1                   | 1         | 1          | 1                      | 1                   |
| 59 | 1                   | 1         | 1          | 1                      | 1                   |
| 60 | 1                   | 1         | 1          | 1                      | 1                   |
| 61 | 1                   | 1         | 1          | 1                      | 1                   |
| 62 | 1                   | 1         | 1          | 1                      | 1                   |
| 63 | 1                   | 1         | 1          | 1                      | 1                   |
| 64 | 1                   | 1         | 1          | 1                      | 1                   |
| 65 | 1                   | 1         | 1          | 1                      | 1                   |
| 66 | 1                   | 1         | 1          | 1                      | 1                   |
| 67 | 1                   | 1         | 1          | 1                      | 1                   |
| 68 | 1                   | 1         | 1          | 1                      | 1                   |
| 69 | 1                   | 1         | 1          | 1                      | 1                   |
| 70 | 1                   | 1         | 1          | 1                      | 1                   |
| 71 | 1                   | 1         | 1          | 1                      | 1                   |
| 72 | 1                   | 1         | 1          | 1                      | 1                   |
| 73 | 1                   | 1         | 1          | 1                      | 1                   |
| 74 | 1                   | 1         | 1          | 1                      | 1                   |
| 75 | 1                   | 1         | 1          | 1                      | 1                   |
| 76 | 1                   | 1         | 1          | 1                      | 1                   |
| 77 | 1                   | 1         | 1          | 1                      | 1                   |
| 78 | 1                   | 1         | 1          | 1                      | 1                   |
| 79 | 1                   | 1         | 1          | 1                      | 1                   |
| 80 | 1                   | 1         | 1          | 1                      | 1                   |
| 81 | 1</                 |           |            |                        |                     |

|                |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|----------------|--|--|--|--|--|--|--|
| Spouse         |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Father         |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Mother         |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Siblings:<br>↓ |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| M F            |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| M F            |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| M F            |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| M F            |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |

- What is your age? less than 30\_\_\_ 30-39\_\_\_ 40-49\_\_\_ 50 or more\_\_\_
- What is your gender? female\_\_\_ male\_\_\_
- What is your race: Caucasian \_\_\_; African-American \_\_\_; Asian \_\_\_; Native American \_\_\_; Hispanic \_\_\_; Other (*please specify*) \_\_\_\_\_
- What is your religious affiliation? \_\_\_\_\_
- What college did you attend? \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX D: INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. What is your name? Age? Marital status? Number of children?
2. What name would you like to be called in the research report? (This is to protect your anonymity.)
3. What is your religious affiliation?
4. Tell me about your experience in college the first time you went.
  - When did you enter college the first time?
  - What kind of grades did you make at that time?
  - How long did you stay at that time?
  - How long was it between the time you left college and the time you enrolled in the degree completion program?
5. Tell me about your reasons for enrolling in the degree completion program.
6. When you enrolled in the degree completion program, what did you anticipate? (Encourage the participants to include areas such as relationships to other students; to staff; to professors; academic load; stress levels; outcome)
7. Tell me about your orientation time.
8. When you enrolled in the degree completion program, how important was it to you that you graduate? Why?
9. How would you describe the encouragement you received from
  - your spouse
  - other students?
  - your advisors in the degree completion program?
  - your professors?
  - your friends?
  - your employer?
10. Please tell me about any problems you had with finances in your degree completion program studies?
11. Tell me about areas of stress you experienced during your studies.
  - What was your emotional and psychological state when you felt the stress?
  - What are the sources of stress that you can identify?
  - What did you do to get relief from the stress?
12. Tell me about your relationships during your studies with your
  - advisors
  - professors
  - employer
  - fellow students
  - spouse
13. Tell me about your experiences getting back into studying.

14. What were the major problems you faced in your degree completion program studies?
  - What made you want to continue?
  - What made you want to stop?
15. How would you describe your overall experiences in the degree completion program?
16. What kind of grades did you achieve?
17. Tell me about how your attending the degree completion program has affected your
  - family?                      – job?                      – financial situation?
  - self-esteem?                – self-confidence?
18. (for completers) Tell me about the major factors that influenced you to complete the degree-completion program?  
(for non-completers) Tell me about the major factors that influenced you not to complete the degree-completion program.
19. What are your plans now?
20. How do you evaluate your education in the degree-completion program? (Was it worth the cost involved?)
21. What do you estimate to be the total cost of your degree-completion program training?  
(include enrollment and tuition fees, books, supplies, travel, lost wages, babysitters, etc.)
22. Concerning finances, when you enrolled how confident were you that you could pay for the degree-completion program?
23. What did you think of the time required to do your studies and to complete the course?
24. What value do you attach to a person's having a college degree?
  - What value do you attach to *your* having a college degree?
  - When you enrolled in the degree-completion program, what value did you attach to your completing it?
25. How would you describe the availability of the professors and the administrative staff in your experience of the degree-completion program?
26. On average, did your professors seem to understand you and your needs?
27. How would you describe the relationships you had with the people around you during your degree-completion program experience? (including fellow students, staff, professors)
28. Would you do the program again? Why?