DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my deceased parents, Bill and Wendy Dayton who believed deeply in the value of an education and lifelong learning. They instilled in me and my sisters, Jane and Jean, the importance of continuing to learn throughout one’s life and the importance of volunteering. I also dedicate this dissertation to my beloved daughter Molly, her husband Mike, and their son Ty.
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ABSTRACT

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE
GRADUATE SCHOOL EXPERIENCE
OF WOMEN AGE 60 AND OLDER

by

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The experiences of women who graduated with an advanced degree at age 60 and older were the focus of this study. A phenomenological research design was employed allowing their experiences to be uncovered and understood. The question that guided the study was, “What is the essence of the experience of graduate school for women who engage in their studies at age 60 and older?” Purposeful sampling was fundamental to the recruitment and selection of seven, information-rich participants. A semistructured interview-guide ensured collection of information in the same general areas from each interviewee during the two, 1 to 1.5 hour each, interviews. The interviews were audiotape recorded, transcribed, and coded, and themes were developed.

The findings revealed two main themes with six subthemes. The first main theme, Self and Education, revealed the role education played in the women’s lives. Three
subthemes surfaced within this theme: *Desire to learn*, *Self-fulfillment*, and *Reflections on being an older student*. The second main theme, *Experiences with Others*, had to do with the influence or affect other people in their lives had on them and vice versa, as a family member and a student. Three subthemes also surfaced within this theme: *Experiences with faculty*, *Relationships with students*, and *Personal experiences with family and friends*.

Several conclusions were drawn from the analysis of this study. First, an intense desire to learn led to participation in graduate school and, coupled with perseverance, to graduation. Second, education was a personal and solitary journey intended for self-fulfillment. Third, age was considered a positive attribute; waiting until later in life to pursue a degree was seen as enhancing the experience. Fourth, having support from family and faculty was an important factor for success of the older student. Fifth, although during the interviews the age span of the participants was from 63 to 78 years of age, no age-related patterns were observed among the women in this sample with regard to their pursuit of a graduate degree. The implications for practice and research indicate a need to address issues of older adults on campus and to capture their stories.
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Forty is the old age of youth;
Fifty the youth of old age ~Victor Hugo

Taking license with Hugo’s words penned over 100 years ago, the sentiment now might read:

Sixty is the old age of youth;
Seventy the youth of old age ~

Traditionally, the end of middle age had been considered to be the beginning of old age, the time to retire and begin the closing down of life. Retirement from work, thought to accompany the movement from middle age into old age, was considered to be a time to disengage and withdraw from society (Manheimer, 2005). Old age, as deemed by Erickson’s model of life cycle development, was a time to look inward and reflect about life and death. In other words, “old age” was characterized by physical inactivity, introspection, and decreased personal interaction.

Today people are living longer, and those over age 60 are in a new phase of their life cycle referred to as the Third Age (Laslett, 1991). The term identifies a phase of life when older adults have use of discretionary time and are neither obligated by work responsibilities nor debilitated by health issues (Hudson, 1997; Manheimer, 2005). The
Third Age is the time after the second age, adulthood, and before the fourth age or final phase of decrepitude or dependency (Ray, 2005). Rather than being a time for disengagement and solitude, older adulthood now offers new possibilities and opportunities for participation in activities for which there previously was no time (Miller, 1997). Many older adults are rejecting the aging role concept of disengagement and, instead, are planning to continue to participate in activities that fulfill their needs (Jensen, 1999). There is a desire to stay engaged, and “more than professional development or leisure activity, lifelong learning has become essential to engagement in society for all people” (Hori & Cusack, 2006, p. 463).

In the twenty-first century, adjustment to retirement will mean searching for ways to maintain continuity in life, and for some that will be through educational pursuits (Jensen, 1999). Atchley’s (1989) continuity theory asserts that this occurs as an outgrowth of evolution and adaptation based on past successful experiences of preferred activities (Davey, 2001). For an older adult, retirement may become a time of transition when one might seek to further education for self-fulfillment or for leisure experiences (Thompson & Foth, 2003) or seek to further education in preparation for a second or third career if education had been a past successful experience. Baer (2004) found older adults make proactive efforts to develop as they age, perhaps spurred on by the natural drive to self-actualization as reflected in Maslow’s hierarchy of needs.

The cycle of the Third Age is a time that offers opportunities to view life with respect to possible selves. Research by Marcus and Nurius (1986) linking cognition and motivation indicates that possible selves guide actions and development. The notion of possible selves helps guide “decisions about what goals to work on, where to expend time
and effort, what to avoid or resist, and what to abandon” (Smith & Freund, 2002, p. 492). Sneed and Whitbourne (2005) note that a model developed by Marcus and Nurius indicates cognitive self-representation and future goal-directed behavior are intertwined. According to Greene and DeBacker (2004), “evidence suggests that future orientation can be a powerful motivator of current behavior” (p. 92).

*Education in the Lives of Older Adults*

Education today is a vital component in the lives of many older adults. Although the role of education has largely been thought of as an investment that society makes in its youth, the literature shows that education is a lifelong process and a worthwhile investment for all ages, offering many benefits for the older adult. Based on these assumptions, a noticeable change in higher education has been the growing participation of adult learners (Nesbit, 2001). According to the American Association of University Women’s 1999-2000 report, the fastest growing groups of students are adults, ages 40 and older (Reiss, 2000).

*Senior Journal* (2005) offers information on educational attainment specific to the 65 and older age groups:

1. In 2004, 20% of the population, ages 65 to 69, had a bachelor’s degree or higher.
2. Of those ages 70 to 74, 19% had college degrees, and 15% of those over age 75 had college degrees.
3. By 2030, more than 25% of senior citizens are expected to have at least an undergraduate degree.
A better-educated older population means they are more likely to continue to enroll in educational activities. It is predicted that a significant number of older adults with college degrees who are looking for meaningful ways to spend their retirement years will participate in graduate school programs (Thompson & Foth, 2003). A report from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) indicates that for the fall of 2005, there were 72,977 women and men age 65 and older enrolled in undergraduate and graduate degree programs (Knapp, Kelly-Reid, Whitmore, & Miller, 2006).

In addition to meaningful activities, older adults are looking to be challenged mentally to help ensure they continue to perform well cognitively and feel educational activity is one way to counterbalance loses due to aging (Purdie & Boulton-Lewis, 2003). Well-documented reasons to return to graduate school are personal development and self-enrichment (Fuller, 2003; Little, 1995). When learning is for its own sake, education may contribute to a sense of self-esteem and active creativity (Bowman & Burden, 2002). Lives revolve around learning opportunities instead of using learning as peripheral activities (Campbell, 2006). Older adults appreciate the time and opportunity to learn for learning’s sake rather than merely for work requirements (Brillinger & Roy, 2003).

**Implications for Educators and Administrators**

Increasingly, older adults will expect universities to respond to their needs (Merriam, 2005; Nesbit, 2001); their past-perceived passivity has been replaced by the expectation of being informed (Wolf, 1994). They may also be prone to questioning established norms, believing that advanced age and experience give them license to do so (Eisen, 2005). The student and the institution will benefit by “... a more enlightened approach to teaching that recognizes the value of adult experiences
and creates a learning environment that fosters educational enrichment’” (Skouras, 2001, p. 28).

With the traditional student population on a decline, older adult students have been, and continue to be, considered an alternative population to fill the classrooms (Bratrud, 1999). This mirrors the reason women were allowed to attend more undergraduate colleges in the mid 1800s: to meet the financial needs of higher education institutions (Roby, 1972). Men were fighting in the Civil War, and many colleges and universities, needing to generate income, filled the classrooms with female students. Before the Civil War only 10 colleges allowed women to obtain a 4-year undergraduate degree (Roby). The scenario was repeated during World War I when, to generate income, women again were encouraged to attend college (Roby). Today’s older participants, however, should not be considered merely as a way to generate income (Manheimer, 2002).

Treating adult students with a type of academic apartheid where institutions are eager to accept the additional revenues but unwilling to act as if adult students are a significant part of the institution is academically unethical and no longer tolerable. (Pappas & Jerman, 2004, p. 92)

“Educational opportunity is a litmus test of inclusion, and willingness to invest resources in retired adults acknowledges the value of their presence,” (Chairman, 2007, p. 4). Administrations need to ensure that the university setting is supportive and accommodating to older adult learners (Anderson, 1999; Moore & Piland, 1994). Universities need to acknowledge that these older adults wield influence in the form of business acquaintances, money, and voting power and that once enrolled, they will expect
their needs to be met (Manheimer, 2002; Thompson & Foth, 2003).

*Women and Higher Education*

During the decade of the 1980s, females in many colleges and universities began surpassing males in both undergraduate and graduate enrollment (Freeman, 2004). A report by the NCES for 2006-2007 indicates that for all age groups there were 14,478,082 women compared to 10,558,332 men enrolled in undergraduate and graduate programs. In addition, the report indicates that 366,538 women compared to 238,250 men completed a master’s degree, and 30,524 women compared to 30,285 men completed a Ph.D. (Knapp, Kelley-Reid, & Ginder, 2008).

According to Reiss (2000), between 1965 and 1995 the percentage of female Ph.D. students rose from 11% to 39% across all age groups, and by 1998, it rose to 48%, almost a 10% increase in just 3 years. It is projected that through 2013 the number of women earning doctorates will increase 20% but for men will increase less than 1%, perhaps a reflection on the fields of healthcare and education into which women are entering in large numbers (Ebersole, 2004). The trend indicates that adult females will continue enrolling at higher rates than adult males. The “shift in the demographic makeup of colleges and universities should be a catalyst for expanded research involving this population of [adult] learners” (Skouras, 2001, p. 17).

*Purpose of the Study*

The purpose of this qualitative study is to capture, through their reflections, the essence of the academic and social experiences of women who were 60 and older when they graduated with an advanced degree. The women were born either in the 1920s, 1930s, or in the early 1940s. All were born before 1946. Their frames of reference for
life are somewhat different from those of the generations that followed. Their
generations witnessed the advance of technology from, to name a few examples, hand
cranked or rotary-dialed telephones to cell phones, biplanes to jets, and manual
typewriters to computers. However, no assumptions were made that everyone in the
cohort shared similar life experiences.

Research Question

This is a phenomenological study, and the topic of the research focused on the
experiences of women who were age 60 and older during their graduate programs. The
foundational question was meant to reveal the “meaning, structure, and essence of the
lived experience of this phenomenon for this person or group of people” (Patton, 2002,
p.104). The guiding research question was “What is the essence of the graduate school
experience for women who engage in their studies at age 60 and older?” A review of the
literature offered some insight into the phenomena, leading to the development of
interview questions that when answered, would have the potential to generate findings
that would be beneficial to education and perhaps to gerontology as well.

Definition of Terms

*Aging Well:* Adding both satisfaction and years to one’s life, avoiding disease, engaging
in life, and maintaining high physical and cognitive functioning (Rowe & Kahn,
1997).

*Continuity:* The theory of continuity describes an adaptive strategy that guides a
person’s decisions and motivations for future endeavors based on what was done
successfully in the past (Atchley, 1999).
**Essence:** The intrinsic or indispensable properties that serve to characterize or identify something (Berube, et al., 1982, p. 464).

**Lived Experience:** The personal experiences of the research participants (Patton, 2002).

**Life-wide Learning:** Refers to informal learning settings, such as the home, job, church, and family (Findsen, 2006; Pamphilon, 2005).

**Nontraditional Student:** A student older than age 24.

**Older Adult:** For the purposes of this dissertation, the term refers to adults age 60 and older.

**Phenomenology:** An approach to qualitative research focusing on gaining an understanding of the essence of phenomena and associated with Edmund Husserl (Patton, 2002).

**Possible Selves:** The theory of possible selves asserts that by imagining oneself in the future one can organize one’s actions and behaviors. Hoped-for selves are what one strives to achieve while feared selves are what one hopes to avoid (Marcus & Nurius, 1986).

**Recreation Therapist:** Nationally certified therapist who provides treatments and recreation activities for people with disabilities or illnesses (National Therapeutic Recreation Society, 2000).

**Reflexivity:** Requires the engagement of critical self-reflection about one’s biases and predispositions (Johnson, 2000).

**Third Age:** A phase of the adult life cycle after middle age and before old age (Laslett, 1991).
Researcher’s Perspective

During the 20-plus years before becoming a doctoral student, I practiced as a recreation therapist working with many older adults. My professional responsibilities included interviewing women age 60 and older regarding their lives, families, and personal interests. The interviews were conducted to garner the most pertinent information possible to aid in the writing of beneficial treatment goals. Therefore, I brought to this study the experience of having worked with older women.

As a doctoral student I have an understanding of the academic and emotional requirements of obtaining an advanced degree. As a female doctoral student in my later 50s, my personal assumptions were that I could offer empathy toward older females who chose to participate in advanced degree programs and could ask pertinent questions based on personal educational experiences. I did not assume that being close in age would mean I had the same graduate school experiences as the research participants.

Assumptions

It was assumed that the participants had “buy in” to the research study, were open to sharing experiences, placed value on telling their stories, and were willing to complete two interviews. It was also assumed, given the distance of time from some of their experiences that their recalls would be as accurate as possible and the memories not dulled or enhanced. In addition, it was assumed that while certain life experiences might be similar for women in their generational cohort, their experiences as graduate students would be unique.

Delimitations

The focus was on the experiences of women born before 1946 who graduated
with advanced degrees at age 60 and older. Women in the generation referred to as
“baby boomers” were not included because baby boomers in general had more
educational opportunities than pre-baby boomers. The research was conducted in one
southwestern state, although the participants could have attended graduate school in any
state.

Limitations

Limitations to the study were manifested in the retrospective recall of the
participants and the extent to which their recalls were sufficiently valid to produce
coherent stories of the experiences. In addition, the participants were from 60 to 76 years
in age when they received their advanced degree. The wide span of ages may be seen as a
limitation because heterogeneity of the population limits depth of knowledge garnered
about specific age ranges at the time of participation. While this could have been a
limitation, it could also be seen as a strength, offering a greater spectrum of experiences
to the research. The small number of participants interviewed was a limitation to breadth.
This too, however, could be seen as a strength because the small sample allowed for a
certain depth of understanding. The lack of ethnic diversity also could be seen as a
limitation, making questionable the transferability of the study’s conclusions to a more
ethnically diverse population of older women graduate students. It was also the case that
the participants had the financial means or spousal support enabling them to attend
college. This too could be seen as a limitation also making the transferability of the
conclusions an issue. Also, time may be seen as creating certain limitations. Each
participant was required to reduce her graduate school experiences into 2 interviews of 1
to 1.5 hours each. Another way that time may have acted as a limitation regards how
close graduation from the undergraduate program was in time to the master's program because the potential to confuse the experiences may have been greater when the experiences were close together.

Summary

Chapter one introduced the phenomenon of older adults participating in higher education. It also introduced the concepts of continuity and possible selves. People today are living longer, and many with discretionary incomes are choosing to participate in educational activities. Questions arose from the literature about whether universities and colleges are addressing the older learners' unique needs or merely trying to fit them into existing programs. This chapter also presented the purpose of the study, research question, definition of terms, researcher's reflective statement, assumptions, delimitations, and limitations.
CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

A review of the literature revealed there has been a limited number of studies concerning the participation in graduate programs by women 60 years and older. The research has mainly addressed education’s contribution, factors affecting motivation for participation, and barriers to participation for both males and females. There was a dearth of research, however, specifically regarding the experiences of women born before 1946 who completed their advanced degree at age 60 and older. Patton (2002) noted that while a literature review done before data collection might bias the researcher, it could also assist by exposing the gaps or the voids. These voids open the door for further examination of the subject.

Education’s Contributions to Later Life for Older Adults

A study conducted by Little (1995) looked at adults who either attended or completed higher education degree programs at age 70 and older. The study found that older students believed a key to successful aging was staying mentally and physically fit with the ability to learn and the thrill of learning continuing throughout their lives. Rowe and Kahn (1997) defined aging well as adding both satisfaction and years to one’s life and as avoiding disease, engaging in life, and maintaining high physical and cognitive functioning. A study of women ages 66 to 87 found that a factor for satisfaction later in life was education (Glass & Jolly, 1997). The level of the education
was not as important to the participant as was the opportunity to participate, thus, supporting the contribution of education to later life satisfaction (Glass & Jolly).

Duay and Bryan (2006) maintain that learning is indeed an important factor for successful aging and, in difficult times, used as a coping strategy. Also, a sense of well being is achieved through associations with younger students. Chapman (2005) offers an “emerging assumption that a key theme in aging well is the active negotiation of multiple selves in an ongoing, open-ended, and meaningful fashion” (p. 13). Perhaps the concept of aging well should incorporate the older adult’s ability to deal with changes and make sense of them “through their ongoing, open-ended negotiation of selves in later life” (Chapman, p. 15).

Literature focusing on the contributions of higher education participation to later-life development reveals that several pertinent factors play a part: for example, improving self-esteem, enhancing life, keeping old age at a distance, having a sense of caring for others and self, and having the ability to handle grief. The literature points to participation in educational activities as developmental tools for dealing with the changes in one’s life (Merriam & Caffarella, 1991). Also, Dark-Freudeman, West, and Viverito (2006) found that educated older adults with concerns about memory loss try to forestall them through the use of physical and mental exercises.

One concept that has been applied in thinking about learning in late life is possible selves. Frazier, Hooker, Johnson and Kaus (2000) note “possible selves—[are] images of the self in the future that serve to organize and energize action and behavior” (p. 237). Ideas about possible selves offer the older adult an image of what they want to achieve, their hoped-for-selves (Frazier, Johnson, Gonzales, and Kafka, 2002). With the
sense of a possible self, one could visualize a future and promote actions that may help achieve visions or goals (Dark-Freudeman et al., 2006). Possible selves may also offer a view of what one may want to avoid or one's feared-self (Frazier, Hooker et al.). Although one self may strive to achieve while the other self strives to avoid, both selves are considered to be motivating factors for goal setting (Balkan, 2006). Norman and Aron (2003) report that if one has the belief “she or he has control over the attaining (or avoiding) of a particular possible self, motivation relevant to this possible self will be greater” (p. 505).

A similar view is offered through the concept of hopeful thinking, which influences motivation and life transitions. Hopeful thinking is goal-oriented thinking and offers older adults a sense that they can meet their goals (Gray, 2003). “Hope is not an emotion but rather a dynamic cognitive motivational system” (Snyder et al., 2002, p. 820; Snyder et al., 1991) and behaviors with a goal focus are shown in the literature to be a link to life satisfaction and psychological well-being (Balkan, 2006; Gray). A study by Chao and Good (2004) finds that “apparently due to their hopefulness, nontraditional students took active roles in managing their education, employment, family, and interpersonal relationships” (p. 7).

Themes

The overarching themes identified in the literature on older adults in higher education concerned cognitive functions and the positive effects of education, motivational factors for learning, barriers of school environments, programs to engage older adults, equity of access for those of low incomes and/or minorities, and higher education and older adults and the value of life-long learning.
Cognitive Functions

With regard to cognitive functions, “research has demonstrated the remarkable and enduring capacity of the aged brain to make new connections, absorb new information, and acquire new skills” (Mehrotra, 2003, p. 653). In response to enrichments, the brain can remain healthy and continue to develop as we age (Diamond, 2001), and a lessening of the intellectual performance of older adults is generally related to a disease process or to a lack of mental exercise and not merely due to age (Lemieux & Sauve, 1999; Watson, 1998). The health of the brain is dependent on an enriched environment, which is dependent on effort (Campbell, 2006). Activities that may enhance high levels of functioning include extensive reading and participation in educational courses (Thompson & Foth, 2005), and the level of participation in activities appears to be an important variable (Kleiber, 1999; Thompson & Foth).

Although older adults worry about declines in cognitive functioning, issues with memory actually occur across the life span. It is because they are older that they worry about some simple forgetfulness (Reese & Cherry, 2004). The study by Reese and Cherry included young, middle-aged, and older adults and found that both young and middle-aged adults reported more issues with recalling routine information while older adults reported more issues with remembering names. The report of fewer recall problems of some information by older adults might be a result of employing memory management techniques and organizing their environment to aid recall (Reese & Cherry). However, Hess, Hinson, and Statham (2004) found stereotyping might also affect memory performance and possibly the ability to learn by older adults. According to Dark-Freudeman et al. (2006), stereotyping may cause older adults to internalize
negative beliefs about their memory. Dark-Freudeman et al. also found older adults reported a feared possible self with memory loss due to the possibility of cognitive declines caused by dementia.

**Motivation**

Another prominent theme in the literature relates to the motivation of older adults to participate in higher education. Roberson (2003) notes that it is empowering to learn about different topics. Learning, then, generates the motivation to continue to learn (Little, 2003; Mehrotra, 2003) and is said to be addictive: “the more education people have, the more they want, and the more they will get” (Mehrotra, p. 646). In addition, “self-sufficiency, the ability to remain in control of one’s life, is a prime motivator for adult of all ages” (Wolf, 1994, p. 28).

One rationale for attending graduate school for some older adult students was the pursuit of intrinsic interests (Little, 1995). Older adults are also more likely to view personal growth as an aim of the goals they set for themselves (Little). Education participated in for its own sake may enhance life and offer a sense of achievement (Jones, 2000). Some older adults are not interested *per se* in learning just to learn and their purpose for learning is to be able to apply it to their life situations (Crawford, 2004). An advanced degree builds on existing skills and abilities, and the result can be a development of pride in accomplishments and abilities and may lead to enhanced self-esteem. Self-esteem has been identified as one of the motivators for older adults seeking advanced degrees (Little).

Learner motives have been characterized by the terms expressive and instrumental. In addition to cognitive interests, course content continues to be a
motivator for the learner because there must be an interest in the subject matter (Kim & Merriam, 2004). An older adult may choose to take a course to learn something for the long term or to meet a short-term goal. An example would be learning French to read an originally written novel (expressive) or to aid in a trip to France (instrumental) (Manheimer, 1998; Manheimer, Snodgrass, & Moskow-McKenzie, 1995). Adair and Mowesian’s 1993 study found that “instrumental learning may empower participants to manage basic survival needs and maintain a sense of self-effectiveness, whereas expressive learning helps them satisfy their needs related to identity, affiliation, and competence” (as cited in Kim and Merriam, p. 446). Fisher (1998) identifies educational activities as one way to cope and help take control of life and increase confidence as attributes begin to decline. Fenimore’s (1987) study with centenarians indicates that many continued to have a zest for learning. Although the majority of the centenarians she studied identified that their learning occurred through interactions with family and friends, they also identified print and electronic media as offering opportunities to stay current and learn new things.

Motivators for learning by older adults are identified in the literature as cognitive interests, desire to learn, personal growth, satisfaction, fellowship, and enjoyment. The goals that motivate learning appear to change as adults go through life cycles, and motivation for continued learning by older adults may perhaps be more about personal satisfaction than about money (Little, 2003). The stage one’s life is in affects learning and “self-directed learning is often a response to developmental issues of that particular life stage” (Roberson & Merriam, 2005, p. 284). Retaining control of one’s life, or self-sufficiency, may also be a motivator (Wolf, 1994). Clearly, the
motives that spur older adults to seek educational opportunities are complicated and multidimensional (Kim & Merriam, 2004).

**Barriers**

The literature addresses barriers to participation in higher education for older adult learners that include issues with access to student services and programs. Research by McCormack-Weiss (2003) indicates that barriers also include problems with some faculty. In fact, in her research, both traditional-aged students and older students identified lack of support from faculty as the number one barrier. McCormack-Weiss states “even now in the 21st century, it [lack of support] continues to rank as one of the chief causes that students drop out, even for students over 60” (p. 125).

The campus’s nonphysical and physical environments may cause barriers. The physical environment includes the parking lots, sidewalks, buildings, and classrooms (Moore & Piland, 1994) and the issues that can accrue around them, them such as hilly terrain or the effects of adverse weather conditions. McCormack-Weiss found older students with medical or physical problems needed parking close to buildings, better lighting, and more comfortable seating in classrooms. An environment planned for comfort, safety, and accessibility may be important to consider when regarding the older adult student (Moore & Piland). Parking, though, is an issue for many students on most campuses (Moore & Piland). The nonphysical environment includes student services such as financial offices or computer labs that may only be open eight to five during the week, while many graduate programs are offered at night and on weekends. The needs of the older adult students must be met through support services (Thompson & Foth, 2003). Although they may recognize that older students have service needs,
administrators often do not place a focus on them, thus, leaving the needs unmet (McCoy, 1999; Polson, 2003).

In addition, some barriers appear to be an artifact of trying to fit older adult learners into existing programs. According to Manheimer et al. (1995), during the 1970s the differences between educational programs for the younger student and the older student were downplayed so as not to promote ageism. Also, in an effort to eliminate stereotyping, it was considered to be normalizing to have seniors participate in one-size fits all programs although some younger Americans questioned the value of education for older adults. Cooper (1999), based on a suggestion by West (1996), offered that career development rather than personal development might be more socially acceptable for older adult’s participation in higher education. In contrast, a study by Jensen (1999) found little evidence of negative attitudes toward older adults by younger students. Bratrud’s (1999) study suggested it benefited both the older student and the younger student by having intergenerational associations. Literature by Kerka (2003) indicates that, “...a frequent rationale for intergenerational programming is its effectiveness in reducing stereotypes of young and old and improving mutual understanding and trust” (p. 3).

Programs

Suggestions are offered for the development of programs to meet the projected demands of Third Age retirees seeking to continue their education. Faculty, in general, may benefit from understanding the learning needs of the older adult student (Alexander, 1996). Roberson and Merriam (2005) suggest incorporating self-directed learning techniques as one method to help adults address individual learning needs. In
addition, Ross-Gordon (2003) recommends that curriculum development should take into account the student's cultural background to prevent learning barriers. To respect the diversity of each student's culture, "the class should interweave theory and practice," and the professor should select and design "course readings and activities in ways that engage students in reflection, action, and praxis in an integrated way" (Mojab, 2005, p. 78). Likewise, respect of the diversity of learning needs must be given so that students can interpret their experiences and make sense of them (Drago-Severson et al., 2001). This would seem particularly important for the older woman learner who may be seeking either the motivation to participate or validation through participation.

Additional suggestions addressed in the literature are the development of noncredit and for-credit programs to meet the needs of Third Age retirees who are seeking to continue their education. Manheimer (2002) suggests that courses should be short but intense and the programs should have flexible scheduling. Eisen (2005) notes that students based their value of a course not only on content, but also on the educator's ability to adapt her or his teaching style to those of the audience. According to Eisen (1998), some courses should be teacher directed and some learner directed; the course content should be the determining factor for the teaching approach. For example, direct instruction may be the best method for teaching computer skills, but having the students write something of interest rather than merely following the training manual will make learning word processing more relevant (Duay & Bryan, 2006).

Implications relevant for program development for older women may also be inferred from a number of sources. For instance, Kinsel (2005) maintains that many older women are aware that learning continues as they age and as an example quoted
one of her participants: “there’s something else out there to do, to learn” (p. 31). Covan (2005) suggests that women construct meaning in their lives by engaging in a process of reminiscing, or reviewing the past, and of looking ahead. Reiss (2003) suggests that older women tend to be better than traditional-aged female students in interpreting their experiences, and it may be beneficial for institutions to “help women see how the skills they’ve developed in managing, leading, and problem-solving in their lives can be adapted to enhance their academic experience” (p. 39). Armitage’s (2005) study found that maturity was an advantage, and waiting until they were older to return to school was not a disadvantage; rather, it enhanced their graduate school experiences. Additionally, their educational experiences were enhanced by both their life experiences and work experiences. Kanter (2006) maintains that this period of schooling should not to be considered as going back to school but, rather, as using the educational opportunity to move forward.

*Equity of Access*

The higher education of older adults is still a fairly new field. Little data, for example, exist on advanced education for those older adults who have less than adequate resources. The older adult learner in the United States at this time is likely to be a middle-class, educated, and financially secure Caucasian female (Kim & Merriam, 2004). Botelho and Thane note that the class, gender, ethnicity, and historical period in which older adults grew up helped shape their experiences of education and aging (as cited in Bernard, 2001). Unless changes are made to the direction of adult education, older women without sufficient disposable income, or prior education, might continue to be excluded from learning opportunities (Manheimer, 1998). According to Johnson-
Bailey (2002), “despite the good intentions of the field, adult education has not succeeded in accomplishing the lofty goals of empowering those lacking basic skills and in bringing all citizens to the table of equal access and opportunity” (p. 39). Of interest will be whether these tenets hold true for future generations who will have had the benefit of better educational and career opportunities than did women born in the 1920s, 1930s, and early 1940s.

Benefits and Expectations of Higher Education

The literature shows older adults are more commonplace on university campuses today, and statistics indicate more women than men participate in higher education after retirement (Kim & Merriam, 2004). Compared to males, older females often have more diversity in the benefits they seek in returning to higher education, perhaps because men no longer need the achiever role and women can now become achievers or more assertive individuals (Greene & DeBacker, 2004; Wolf, 1998). Additionally, women are found to seek group-learning experiences while men are less likely to do so (Campbell, 2006). Research by Lamb and Brady (2005) questioned why older men, who earlier in life had attained higher levels of education than many women, participated less in educational activities after retirement. This may be because men approach retirement differently than women (Williamson, 2000). Men may want to stay home while women may want to prove themselves, and education often provides women with a successful outlet for such new beginnings (Wolf, 1998). In their early years, the majority of women did not advance educationally as much as men due to the marital duties of home and child rearing. Butler (2002) describes women participating now as “catching up” on educational tasks.
Fuller’s (2003) findings indicate that for students age 55 and older the highest-ranked expected outcome of higher education is self-enrichment, staying academically active is second highest, and respect by society ranks third. Eisen (2005) notes that lifelong learning is becoming a necessity and online opportunities increase its accessibility. With the rapid changes going on in today’s global society and in the personal lives of older adults, it is essential to stay involved, and one method is through lifelong learning and continued education and training opportunities (Eisen, 2005; Elmore, 1999; Hake, 1999).

The literature makes the case “it is clear that education serves preventative, facilitative, remedial, and preparatory functions” (Mehrotra, 2003, p. 654). Indeed the research has shown that education does have beneficial effects on cognition and memory. Education also has the potential to be emancipatory and open up new directions for a life to take (Little, 1995). Baer (2004) notes that the “learning journey of an open-minded woman leads to new destinations and opportunities for her future” (p. 175). Although the motivation to return to school at an older age may not necessarily be for change, change may occur. According to Baer, the study “conclusively demonstrates that an immersion in academic degree work leads to a re-created self at an older age” (p. 175) and that the change may only be realized in hindsight.

There may also be better health benefits for those who are educated because they are more apt to educate themselves on medical conditions, thus, leading to a clearer understanding of issues, treatments, and preventions. Subjectively, older adults feel healthier if they have perceived control over achieving their possible self (Bolkan, 2006). Cusack, Thompson, and Rogers (2003) found there is a correlation between
higher education and better health and that education can be considered a health promoting behavior. Even retired or older baby boomers indicate a high interest in education with subjects of health and fitness (Kerr, 2004). Cole (2000) cites a 1997 National Advisory Group for Continuing Education and Lifelong Learning report concerning continuing education and lifelong learning that explicitly states that the difference in retaining independence and dignity, or waiting for death, is participation in continued learning opportunities.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study was based on the concepts of possible selves and continuity. Together, this framework and seminal sources guided the study and helped shape the interview questions (Creswell, 2003; Gudmundsdottir, 1996). According to Patton (2002), interpreting data through multiple perspectives, or theory triangulation, helps to strengthen a study. In this phenomenological study, the constructs of both of these theories were my lens or perspective. The researcher also remained alert when analyzing data for the possibility that alternate frameworks might be needed to interpret the data.

Marcus and Nurius’ (1986) Theory of Possible Selves asserts that imagining oneself in the future can organize one’s actions and behaviors. Hoped-for selves are what one strives to achieve while feared selves, such as becoming ill or failing, are what one hopes to avoid. The literature suggests an essential element to successful aging is the hoped-for possible self that offers opportunities to meet the older adult’s desire for new experiences, shows motivation, and is related to well being (Smith & Freund, 2002). The notion of possible selves is also about the power of change and its potential
for future growth (Frazier, Hooker et al., 2000). Rossiter (2007) asserts, “although possible selves reflect a future orientation, they are closely connected with both past and present self-concept” (p. 6). According to Norman and Aron (2003) “possible selves are tailored to the individual’s own hopes and fears, but they are also influenced by the social, socio-cultural, and historical context surrounding the individual” (p. 501).

Atchley’s (1999) Theory of Continuity describes an adaptive strategy, based on what was done in the past, which guides a person’s decisions and motivations for future endeavors. Davey’s (2001) study found experiences were drawn from the past to guide choices about which activities would meet the same needs and offer continuity. In other words, if a person felt successful with educational pursuits in the past, she may choose to take educational courses to meet her needs and preserve her sense of well being. The theory puts forward the notion of a successful transition into and through older adulthood, perhaps based on the successful navigation of the educational arena. Continuity is retrospective and reflective, using the past to assess the present (Watters, 1995). The theory of continuity, above all, is about adaptation and change and not merely about the pursuit of activities with similar past successes. Jensen (1999) offers a perspective of Atchley’s (1993) that, “one not only wants to achieve goals but to be able to adjust to the different situations as they arise. By being able to do so, there is a renewed sense of success” (p. 51). As people age, change is inevitable, and past successful experiences give them the confidence to adapt and to traverse these changes successfully. “If choices are based on past successes, the reasonable expectation is that the successful pattern will continue” (Jensen, p. 52).
The theories of continuity and possible selves offer lenses with which to view the phenomenon of the 60+-age woman's participation in graduate programs. Previous research brings to light the issues of education in the lives of older adults and various themes. The focus of this study is the essence of the experience of graduate school for the participating women as revealed in their interviews. It is hoped that the information will add to the body of knowledge about this phenomenon and perhaps be an impetus for older women to return to school.

Synthesis of the Literature

Chapter two presented a review of the literature concerning education and the older adult learner. The literature addressed education's contributions to later-life development including being considered a key to successful aging and aiding in the ability to deal with change and memory issues. The themes identified included cognitive functioning, motivation, barriers, programs, equity of access, and benefits. Gaps in the literature were noted. The benefits of education for the older adult in general were illuminated, as were suggestions for faculty and administrators who work with older adults. The chapter concluded with the study’s theoretical framework based on the concepts of possible selves and continuity.

The fact is that neither researchers, or educators, nor administrators in higher education know what will be the impact of the potential return of millions of baby boomers to campuses. The current trend, as shown in the literature, is that older adults are changing the landscape of colleges and universities and that the majority of those older adults are women. Those working in higher education settings not recognizing this may find their student populations dwindling due to a lack of foresight to meet their needs.
Preparation now will help to ensure a successful transition from working with the traditional aged student and younger adults to the older adult students.
CHAPTER III

METHODS

The purpose of this qualitative study is to capture the essence of the experiences of women who graduated with an advanced degree while in their Third Age, specifically age 60 and older. It is hoped the research will illuminate our understanding of their experiences. Moustakas (1994) indicates that the question for a phenomenological study grows out of an intense interest in the topic and has definite characteristics.

It seeks to reveal more fully the essences and meanings of human experiences; it seeks to uncover the qualitative rather than the quantitative factors in behavior and experience; it engages the total self of the research participant, and sustains personal and passionate involvement; it does not seek to predict or to determine causal relationships; it is illuminated through careful, comprehensive descriptions, vivid and accurate renderings of the experience, rather than measurements, ratings, and scores. (p. 105)

The research for this study sought to reveal the essence of the experiences for these women.

Research Design

This qualitative study provided the means to develop an understanding of the
experiences of older women participating in graduate education. A phenomenological design was chosen for the study because it was deemed the most suitable to help this researcher uncover and understand the experiences of the participants as they revealed them during their interviews. The understanding and meaning making of those experiences were the basis for in-depth interviewing (Seidman, 1998).

The purpose of interviewing, then, is to allow us to enter into the other person’s perspective. Qualitative interviewing begins with the assumption that the perspective of others is meaningful, knowable, and able to be made explicit. We interview to find out what is in and on someone else’s mind, to gather their stories. (Patton, 2002, p. 341)

The use of open-ended, semistandardized interviews was the method for gathering information, and the use of an exploratory design aided in identifying themes (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). This interpretive study relied on the experiences and perceptions of the participants, and the interviews allowed for open-ended responses in hopes the answers would accurately reflect the participant’s viewpoints and capture the deep meaning of their experiences (Marshall & Rossman). The insights gained may advance our understanding of the reality of the experiences of older adult learners and foster positive educational opportunities that help empower female students.

Sample Size and Sampling

Criterion-based sampling was used in limiting the sample to females born before 1946. The specific criteria for selection were that the women graduated with an advanced degree from an accredited college or university at age 60 years or older. Purposeful sampling, based on these criteria was fundamental to the recruitment and selection of
seven information-rich participants. The various methods used to recruit potential participants were through contacts with alumni associations, newspaper ads, Craigslist (an Internet website), personal contacts, and participant recommendations (snowball technique). Although the participants were unable to recommend other women graduates, several did recommend professors who taught in graduate programs.

Once a participant was identified, she was sent an informal e-mail (electronic mail) about the study. After the potential participant responded with interest to the e-mail, she was sent a formal letter (Appendix A) requesting her participation. The letter further explained the study and her expected involvement, the plan to audiotape her interviews, and the written consent form for her to review. The potential participant had a two-week time frame to respond that she would participate, either by mail using an enclosed self-addressed self-stamped envelope or by e-mail. The procedure was modified as a better strategy developed. After receiving and responding to the informal e-mail, the next three potential participants received an e-mail in place of regular mail with attachments containing the explanation of the study, her expected involvement, the plan to audiotape the interviews, and the written consent form. They were proficient with computer skills, as were all the participants, so it worked well as a means of more immediate communication and moved the process along faster than using regular mail. The seventh participant answered an ad that had been placed in a local newspaper, contacted the researcher by phone, and received the initial information during a first telephone conversation. She was then sent the explanation via e-mail with the attachments. An eighth responded to an ad placed on Craigslist, was sent the e-mails, agreed to participate, but did not reply to requests to set up an interview, so was not a participant in the study.
For each person who accepted, a follow-up letter or an e-mail was sent, along with a personal phone call to thank the respondent and to answer any questions she had about the process, and an interview date, time, and location were determined.

Data Collection

Prior to the actual interviews, the questions were piloted with two graduate students who were of the same age range of the intended participants. The questions were then revised. This proved to be a valuable step in the research process. Writing concise questions that elicited the most pertinent information proved to be a difficult task. With the input of the two graduate students, the piloted questions were shortened for clarity.

The interviews were conducted at a place of the participants’ choosing. Two of the participants chose my workplace for their interviews. Three of the participants requested meeting at their offices. One participant requested we meet at her home. One participant requested a site to which she could drive to easily. The local recreation department allowed us the use of one of their meeting rooms.

At each first-time personal meeting, a few minutes were spent talking to establish rapport. A tape recorder was available for use. The research process was explained, and after hearing the explanation, stating her understanding, and agreeing to participate, the interviewee was asked to sign a consent form (Appendix A) and to complete a demographic questionnaire (Appendix B) before the taped interview began. Some of the demographic questions (e.g. ethnicity) were presented in an open-ended manner in order to identify characteristics of each interviewee and the ways by which they categorized themselves (Patton, 2002). Each participant was asked to identify a pseudonym for
herself before the first of the two 1-1.5 hour in-depth interviews began. Three of the participants did not identify a pseudonym until later stating they wanted to give it more thought.

The semistructured interview-guide approach added focus and ensured collection of information in the same general areas from each interviewee. That approach made data collection relatively systematic for each respondent (Patton, 2002). Some of the questions were more open ended, and some were more focused (Appendix C). The last two questions were an invitation to contribute their final thoughts because as Patton (2002) notes, the “truly open-ended question permits those being interviewed to take whatever direction and use whatever words they want to express what they have to say” (p. 354). The semi-structured interview guide allowed for sequencing flexibility, conveying to the interviewee that what she was saying was important and allowing her to carry on with her train of thought. It also allowed for modifications to the core set of questions as appropriate with each interviewee. Keeping the overarching research question in mind concerning the experiences of women who engaged in graduate studies at age 60 and older helped maintain focus during the interviews.

Audio taping the interviews ensured that the data were accurately recorded for analysis. The plan was for the follow-up interview for each participant to be conducted 5 to 10 days after the first one. This was to allow time for the interviewee to reflect on the preceding interview, as suggested by Seidman (1998). The reality was that many of the women had full schedules, and some of the follow-up interviews were not conducted within the 10-day time frame. At the end of the first interview, each participant was given a composition notebook and asked to record any reflections or
memories about her graduate experience that came to mind before the second interview. This technique was used to enhance recall and the ability to offer deeper, richer responses during the second interview. The participants were informed that the journals would be theirs to keep and would not be collected.

After the interview, the researcher’s observations regarding the appearance and demeanor of the interviewee, the mood of the interview, the setting, the time, and any other information deemed pertinent were recorded in a journal. Keeping a regular journal fostered reflection on the content of the interview, as well as ensuring that the process was continuous and the journal entries were made in a timely manner, as suggested by Rossman and Rallis (1998). That allowed for the analysis of personal notes and elaboration on the data while the memory was fresh. Analytic memos were written as ideas and insights occurred and were included as additional data to be analyzed.

As soon as possible after the interview the researcher personally transcribed and printed transcripts of the tapes. The tapes were then replayed as the printed transcripts were read to ensure they were accurately transcribed. Corrections were made as needed. The coding process began by reviewing the transcripts to identify descriptive codes and emerging themes, guiding the development of some follow up interview questions. Areas in need of greater elaboration also aided in the development of questions for the next interview of that participant.

Data Analysis

As data were gathered, a system for color-coding notes and other pertinent information was developed. This aided when “piecing together patterns, defining
categories for data analysis, planning further data collection, and for writing the final product” (Marshall & Rossman, 1999, p. 148). Tape recording the in-depth interviews and transcribing the tapes into word-processed documents allowed the researcher to become intimate with the details of the conversations. The transcripts were printed and coded, and themes were developed, all being fundamental tasks in the analytical process.

“The biggest challenge in making sense of the evidence in this kind of research study is to think about how to capture the essence of the data as it connects to the research question” (Smyth, Hattmen, & Shacklock, 1997, p. 26). Coding the data involved, first, reading the printed transcripts and looking for words or phrases that addressed the research question, highlighting those segments with a marker, writing descriptive words next to the highlighted segments, and then entering the list of descriptive words (codes) on a word document.

Themes were then developed from the data. This was accomplished by making a copy of the highlighted transcripts, cutting out the highlighted segments, then sorting them into piles. All of the chunks of data having the same codes were put into the same pile. The piles were organized by their topics that helped to identify more clearly the themes. An additional step was taken, using a word processing program. The themes identified from cutting out the labeled sections were then located on the computer transcripts, copied, and pasted into word documents based on the themes. Those documents were then saved into computer files. The end result produced computer files based on the actual physical files developed from the manual cut and sort method. This
aided this researcher by providing a printed document based on themes with all the pertinent coded data on it.

This became the method of choice after the first three transcripts had been cut and sorted into piles. Once the transcripts were printed the same highlighting method was used to denote the segments, and the codes were also applied by hand. The modification was made as the segments were located on the computer, copied, and then pasted into the computer files by theme. The step left out was the manual cutting and sorting. The final results were the same. It was beneficial to have used the manual cut and sort method for the first three interviews because it made for a clearer visual picture of the data and emerging themes.

Trustworthiness

A review of the literature revealed gaps that justified researching the topic of a Third Age woman’s experiences in graduate school. A phenomenological study was conducted with possible selves and continuity as the theoretical frameworks and was designed with issues of trustworthiness in mind. Under the umbrella of trustworthiness are credibility (internal validity), transferability (external validity), dependability (reliability), and confirmability (objectivity). According to Patton (1990), as a qualitative researcher I am the research instrument. Therefore, the accuracy, or validity, depends on my skill and competency, and the rigor with which my research was conducted. It was established for the reader that I am a female, older, adult doctoral student, and I employed the use of reflexivity for “introspection and acknowledgement of [my] biases, values, and interests” (Creswell, 2003, p. 182). Throughout the process, I continued to reflect on the interviews and my interactions with the participants.
Researcher bias was a potential threat to validity; the strategy of reflexivity was employed by continuous engagement in critical self-reflection about my biases and predispositions (Johnson, 2000). Being an older graduate student did not mean I necessarily understood what the interviewee experienced during her graduate school program, so careful attention was made to respect how each interviewee framed and structured her responses. The view from the participant’s perspective “should unfold as the participant views it, not as the researcher views it” (Marshall & Rossman, 1999, p. 108). By presenting the views to the reader through the use of rich, thick descriptions, the discussion should convey to the reader the experiences shared by the participant (Creswell, 2003).

Rapport was established by talking informally with each interviewee for a few moments before starting the in-depth interview. I discovered during the first interview that valuable information was offered during the rapport session so I began the tape recorder as soon as the remaining participants signed their consent forms. Generating data through the coding of the taped interviews offered a rich, thick description, ensuring academic rigor by incorporating the transcripts, thoughts from the field notes, the journal entries, and demographic questionnaires.

Credibility

A major criterion of trustworthiness is credibility, similar to internal validity, which ensured the findings and conclusions were credible to the reader. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985) the participants in the study must find the reconstruction of their experiences, or stories, credible. For this study, credibility was established through member checking, which was crucial because it established that the participants agreed
their experiences were reconstructed as they remembered sharing them during the interviews. Member checking is “an activity providing for the direct test of findings and interpretations with the human sources from which they have come – the constructors of the multiple realities being studied” (Lincoln & Guba, p. 301). As a member check, each participant was asked follow up questions during the second interview, based on comments made during the first interview. Also, themes from their transcripts were shared with them, as suggested by Glesne (1999), to ensure thoughts and conversations were accurately represented or reconstructed, which they agreed they were. A final member check was conducted with each participant by e-mail or phone. Again, each participant agreed her thoughts and conversations were accurately represented. When the reader is assured the participants saw the findings as credible, then confidence in the trustworthiness of the study is strengthened.

Transferability

A second criterion of trustworthiness, similar to external validity, is the transferability of the findings to other contexts and settings. It was this researcher’s goal to provide “the thick description necessary to enable someone interested in making a transfer to reach conclusions about whether transfer can be contemplated as a possibility” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 316). Lincoln and Guba give credit to Geertz (1973) for coining the phrase “thick description,” referring to a base of information that provided enough information to allow for transferability by the reader. It is the researcher’s responsibility “in the design phase to develop questions intended to solicit rich, thick description and to use purposeful sampling techniques to identify respondents able and willing to yield rich, thick description” (Butler, 2002, p. 71). Through the in-depth
interviews the researcher was able to offer thick descriptions, thus facilitating transferability. The findings also have some similarities to the findings of other studies regarding the older adult learner and should be relevant for future researchers also looking at older adult female learners and higher education.

**Dependability**

The third criterion for trustworthiness is dependability, similar to reliability. The dependability of the research was addressed in the aforementioned discussions of validity and credibility. The research process, using a semistructured interview-guide, was explained to the reader, and that it allowed the conversations to continue for a few moments if the interviewee got off track, thus not interrupting the flow of the conversation and train of thought. That confirmed to the participant their told experiences were indeed valued. Also, “uniqueness is expected in this type of research since each participant has a storied lifetime” (Jensen, 1999, p. 107). Guba cited one of his earlier works, stating that without validity there can be no reliability and without credibility there can be no dependability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As noted by this researcher, the validity was established through triangulation and credibility through member checking, thus establishing dependability.

**Confirmability**

The fourth criterion of trustworthiness is confirmability, similar to objectivity. The techniques for establishing confirmability for this study included the field notes and the reflective journal kept by the researcher, as suggested by Lincoln & Guba (1985) citing Guba (1981). This was a part of the audit trail of records from the research. “The
The integrity of the final product is rooted both in the words of the participant and in the auditable process by which the researcher arrived at the narrative" (Jensen, 1999, p. 107).

**Ethical Issues**

Approval for the project was obtained from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Texas State University-San Marcos. In accordance with the requirements of the board, the participants were informed of their rights and asked to read and sign an informed consent form. They were advised they could stop the interview at any time and could drop out of the project at any time. Two chose to stop the interview and speak off the record for a few minutes, but none chose to drop out. No participant indicated she felt uncomfortable when being asked about her experiences during her graduate program, and all expressed their willingness to tell their stories. The participants were advised that their information was confidential, and through the use of their chosen pseudonyms, their identities would be protected.

**Summary**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to capture the essence of the graduate school experience of women who graduate at age 60 and older. A phenomenological design was chosen to help uncover and understand the experiences of the participants as revealed by them during their interviews. An open-ended, semistandardized interview guide allowed for the gathering of information, and an exploratory design aided in identifying themes. This interpretive study relied on the experiences and perceptions of the participants. The use of interviews allowed for open-ended responses. Criterion-based sampling limited the participants to women born before 1946, and the seven information-rich participants composed a purposeful sample. After a potential participant was
identified, she was sent information about the study. Once she agreed to participate, a meeting was set during which she signed a consent form, chose a pseudonym to protect her identity, and was interviewed for 1-1.5 hours. A second interview followed within ten days, or as soon as the participant was able to schedule it. The interviews were tape-recorded and personally transcribed, and, then, the data from the transcriptions were coded and themes were developed.

To establish its trustworthiness, the research was conducted with rigor. A major criterion of trustworthiness is credibility, which was established through member checking. A second criterion is transferability, accomplished through the use of questions soliciting rich, thick descriptions, thus enabling readers to reach conclusions about the transferability of the data. Third is dependability. A semistructured interview-guide was employed, allowing the interviewees’ thoughts to flow. In addition, triangulation and member checking established dependability. Fourth, confirmability was established through the audit trail comprised of field notes, the interviewer’s reflective journal, and the transcripts.
CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this qualitative study was to gain an understanding of the experiences of women who graduated with an advanced degree at an older age. The research question guiding this phenomenological study was “What is the essence of the experience of graduate school for women who were 60 years or older when they graduated?” It was hoped the analysis of these findings would assist older adults who may be planning a return to school and the professors and program planners who will be working with them. From the analysis a picture emerges of these interesting women’s lives and academic experiences before and throughout their graduate programs.

Profiles of the Participants

The information gleaned from the demographic questionnaires and personal interviews offers profiles of the women, as revealed by them. Notes from the researcher’s personal journal were used to flesh out some of the details. The information is presented on Table 1 - Participant Profiles: Demographics and Table 2 - Participant Profiles: Education. The participants provided pseudonyms for confidentiality, and the names they chose were Faith, Jo Ann, Jean, Lucille, Deborah, Barbara, and Lea. They ranged in age from 61 to 76 when they graduated with their master’s degree or specialist’s degree and ranged in age from 63 to 78 and at the time of the interviews. Two identified themselves
as Caucasian, two as White, one as White-German-Scot-Irish, one as Anglo-Saxon, and one as Mexican-German. All identified themselves as having a life-long love of learning or a need to know.

There were several interesting commonalities within the group. The majority of the participants followed what would be thought of as traditional paths for women born in the 1920’s to mid 1940’s, which was to marry and raise families. All seven had children, either natural born or stepchildren. Three had a spouse pass away early in marriage, and one had a spouse pass away after 50+ years of marriage. Two are currently widows. All worked outside of the home at some time during marriage. Five worked outside of the home during their degree programs. Six of the seven were married to men with college degrees. Two were married to college professors. Two were married to engineers. Three had parents with college degrees, and four had parents who placed a very high value on education. There were also other interesting commonalities within the group. For instance, two were once school bus drivers. Two speak French fluently. Three were married to men who flew planes. Two married men they met in Hong Kong while living in Asia.

The common thread tying together the stories of these women was the love of learning, as revealed in the essence of their experiences. They returned to school for personal reasons, to enrich their lives and to meet educational goals, although two participants had initially hoped to increase their incomes when earning their first master’s degrees. The results of their achievements were satisfying. One participant reported that it made her marriage stronger because she can now help her husband write scholarly articles. Another established for herself that by finishing two master’s degrees confirmed
that she was, indeed, smart. Still another realized how much she enjoyed formal education and planned to pursue her doctorate. All are extremely proud of themselves. In keeping with the results of other studies of older returning students, such as Fuller’s (2003), the participants in this study did not return to school simply because they were bored or wished to pursue social opportunities. They attended for the challenge, the self-enrichment, and the desire to learn.

The women varied considerably on the age at which they started and finished an undergraduate degree, as well as time between completion of an undergraduate degree and the later-in-life graduate degree, which was the basis for selecting them for this study. Of the seven, Jean was the only participant to earn her undergraduate degree at what is considered to be a traditional age. She earned her master’s degree at age 63. Jo Ann began college at a traditional age, stopped out to raise her family, returned to school in her 40s, and earned her undergraduate degree in her 50s. She then earned two master’s degrees, her first at age 56 and second at age 65. Barbara began her undergraduate degree in her 30s, completed it in her 50s, and graduated with her first master’s degree at age 60 and second at age 64. Lucille began college at a traditional age, stopped out to raise her family, returned to school in her 40s, and graduated in her 50s. She went on to earn a master’s degree at age 59 and an education specialist’s degree at 68. Lea began her undergraduate degree in her mid 50s and graduated in her early 70s. She then graduated at age 76 with her master’s degree. Faith began her undergraduate degree at a traditional age and stopped out to raise her family and work. She completed her undergraduate degree while in her 50s and earned her master’s degree at age 64. Deborah began and
completed her undergraduate degree in her 50s and graduated with her master’s degree at age 61.

Faith, Lea, Lucille, Jo Ann, and Jean attended traditional undergraduate programs. Barbara and Deborah attended a nontraditional undergraduate program designed to serve adults whose access to an education may have been limited by the demands of work or family. To qualify for the nontraditional program, students must be at least 24 years old, or have worked full-time for 4 years, and have at least a General Educational Development or General Equivalency Diploma (GED). Acceptance into the program worked well for Barbara who had earned her GED in her 30s. A unique component of the program was the opportunity to produce a portfolio of prior learning that documented the skills and concepts a student learned through life’s experiences and, then, matched her with particular college courses in hopes of earning college credit. That concept worked well for Deborah, who was able to complete her undergraduate degree in just 2 ½ years.

Faith, Lucille, Jo Ann, and Jean participated in traditional graduate programs while Lea, Barbara, and Deborah participated in nontraditional programs. Barbara’s first master’s degree program was traditional in nature while her second master’s degree program was nontraditional. The nontraditional Master of Liberal Arts (MLA) program in which Lea, Barbara, and Deborah participated was tailored to their specific needs as students, and the course work allowed them to participate in individual, or directed, studies. Deborah described this process as follows:

You meet once a week, or every other week, and you work out a plan for the semester. And you discuss the readings. It was wonderful. You read about stuff that you really want to read. It was great to have somebody who was
knowledgeable to discuss it with. Things you don’t understand they could help you figure it out. And you can write things then clarify your thinking on it. With individual studies you did not do presentations. Just with your [regular] classes. Otherwise you just write papers and you come in to discuss the subject and in a way it’s harder because there are just the two of you in the room. And you have two hours to discuss the subject so you better have a clear idea of what you want to talk about. In a class you can hope that someone else gets up and talks. But in there it’s just you and you’re kind of on the spot so you better be prepared.

Lea said of her experience:

I did a lot of directed studies. Some courses you’re required to be in a regular class and I did all of those of course, but a lot of my work was in directed studies and you sign a contract between you and the professor, or instructor, and he outlines what is expected of you for the semester and dates, and the whole thing. So I had a lot of that.

Barbara also talked about her individual studies in a positive light.

Because [with the] MLA you have your regular main hours you have to put in but there was not really a degree plan. You could pick what ever you were interested in. And liberal arts, this kind of says it already. You just stick your nose in everything you like. And that’s what I really enjoyed. I said wow. I like this one [MLA].
Table 1

Participant Profiles: Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Age at Interview (self-identified)</th>
<th>Ethnicity at Interview</th>
<th>Marital Status at Interview</th>
<th>Work Status at Interview</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Faith</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>Mexican-German</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Retired</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jo Ann</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Full-time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jean</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>Anglo-Saxon</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Retired</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barbara</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Widowed</td>
<td>Full-time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lea</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>White-German-Scot-Irish</td>
<td>Widowed</td>
<td>Retired</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deborah</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Full-time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lucille</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Retired</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Table 2

Participant Profiles: Education

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant &amp; Degree(s)</th>
<th>Age at Undergrad Degree</th>
<th>Age at Graduate Degree</th>
<th>Work Status Grad Degree</th>
<th>Spouse Degree</th>
<th>Parent Degree</th>
<th>Parent’s Value of Education</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Faith MPA</td>
<td>50s</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>Retired</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jo Ann MAT &amp; MEd</td>
<td>50s</td>
<td>56 &amp; 65</td>
<td>Full-time</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Father</td>
<td>Very High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jean MA</td>
<td>20s</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>Part-time</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Both</td>
<td>Very High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barbara MAHS &amp; MLA</td>
<td>50s</td>
<td>60 &amp; 64</td>
<td>Full-time</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lea MLA</td>
<td>70s</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>Full-time</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Very High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deborah MLA</td>
<td>50s</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>Full-time</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Father</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lucille MEd &amp; ED Specialist</td>
<td>50s</td>
<td>59 &amp; 68</td>
<td>Retired</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Very High</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Master of Public Administration - MPA  
Master of Arts in Teaching - MAT  
Master of Education - MEd  
Master of Arts - MA  
Master of Arts in Human Services - MAH  
Master of Liberal Arts - MLA  
Education Specialist (Geriatric Counseling) - EDS
Personal Stories of the Participants

During the interviews the participants offered glimpses into their lives through the stories they shared. It was a pleasure to have conversations with these remarkable women and learn about their lives, their educational dreams, and their future plans. Some of the stories they shared were humorous, some were poignant, some were ordinary, and some were extraordinary. All the stories, in some way, told of experiences that had an impact on their educational choices and decisions, and the participants seemed pleased to have the opportunity to tell their personal stories.

Jean

Jean met for the interviews at a convenient setting arranged by the researcher, as she had requested. She arrived for her first interview with artifacts including a copy of her thesis, a picture of herself at graduation, a letter from the dean of education, and a congratulatory letter on her 4.0 GPA [grade point average]. Jean was a soft-spoken, articulate woman, who laughed often during her conversations. After proudly showing off the artifacts, she began the interview by talking about early-married life and, then, her current husband. During the course of the conversation Jean told the story of her time growing up. “When I was a kid I can remember we had a milkman with a wagon and a horse. It’s sure different [now].” She grew up in another country and moved back and forth several times as a younger person between that country and the United States. She keeps homeland traditions alive by celebrating special occasions with friends and fellow compatriots, most of whom she met in her later years at the university where she worked and earned her advanced degree.
Jean earned her undergraduate degree at what is considered to be a traditional age. Her father had a law degree and practiced law, and her mother had a Bachelor of Arts degree and was a housewife. She noted that both of her parents placed a very high value on education, and it was always assumed that she, too, would go to college. After she graduated, she taught high school for several years and then went to China to teach English at a university. While visiting Hong Kong, she met a college professor who would later become her husband. "Then I went to Hong Kong, and he was in Hong Kong because he had gone there to do a research project. He was having a sabbatical year so we met there, so that was pretty zany." Jean moved back to the United States and before they married, worked in a variety of jobs.

I delivered newspapers for a while. I did a photography job. I did a bunch of different things and actually I feel like that was, in the end, a really neat experience in my life because generally you tend to only get to know one kind of people and I got to know a lot of different people. One of my jobs was a traveling job so I saw every part of Texas and it was interesting.

After they married, she began working in nonfaculty positions at the university where he taught.

I had several different jobs at the university and that’s what I was doing when I thought about really wanting to do the degree. I had for a very long time thought that I’d like to, because my husband is a university professor and I’d gotten to know the university in ways that you really don’t unless you have a spouse that’s there. I like the academic life and I thought maybe I could teach on campus and I think that I would enjoy that more than high school teaching, which is what I did
previously. That teaching in China was at a university but that was a special thing because those were students who knew enough English. But other than that I wasn’t qualified to teach at a university. I wanted to go back to school. I just thought it would be wonderful. When he encouraged me I went just like that. I took one course and did it while I was working part time to sort of see how it would be. And I really loved that course. I remember that I didn’t do real well on one of the papers but I got an A in the course so that motivated me and then my husband said I think you should do this full time now. We were able to afford it at that point and I said ‘yay’ because I really wanted to focus on learning, so that’s what I did.

Jean quit her job to become a full-time student and graduated with her master’s degree at 63.

Faith

Faith’s interview also took place in a convenient room arranged by the researcher as she requested. She arrived with her grandchildren, who promptly left to walk around the campus. Faith dressed professionally, had a commanding personality, and a warm smile. Her work with a labor organization and her take-charge attitude shone through in her conversation. She was very agreeable and pleasant and talked openly about her life. “I had four children, two sons, two daughters, all before the age of 30. By the age of 40 I was divorced.” At one point in her conversation, she asked for the tape recorder to be turned off for a few minutes, which it was, because she wanted to talk about something more personal.
Faith’s family placed a high value on education, but the females were expected to get married and raise their families, the norm for the times. Although she was not able to graduate from college when she was younger, she knew she would earn her degree when the children grew up and left home. Faith began her undergraduate degree at a traditional age, completed the degree in her late 50s, and continued on to earn her master’s degree at age 64. When asked about attending school at an older age, she said:

Because of the fact, see, I was retired so I didn’t have a job I was worried about. My job was coming to school. Just come to school and look good (then she laughed). The first day I walked into class I was totally at ease. I mean everybody was saying, hello how are you? You’re working on your master’s? How far along are you? This was my first class and I was well received by the students, the much younger students. There was no one in anyway not helpful. Not receptive. My experiences were very good experiences.

Faith had definite plans to return to graduate school to pursue her doctorate. When talking about returning to school, she said, “I’ve got the grandson who will be getting his master’s in August. I’ve got to get another degree so they [her grandchildren] have something higher to shoot for.”

Barbara

Barbara arranged for us to meet at her workplace. She was polite, had a nice smile and laugh, a German accent, and quite a story to tell about her life. The stories included her escape from East Berlin and her educational odyssey. She was very matter-of-fact, giving the impression she simply dealt with the hand she was given in life.

Barbara came to the United States from a communist country having finished only eight
grades of school. Neither her family nor her foster mother placed any value on education for females.

In the East (Berlin) where I grew up, my foster mother, she gave me eight years of education and said that’s it. Now you get out of there and bring in some money. So that’s all the education I had. I had eight years of classes and that was it. Apprenticeship like it is in Germany you do for three, four years and you learn a specific job and I didn’t have the chance because my foster mother sent me to the home for hard to raise children after I didn’t come home one night. I was at the train station because I had my period for the first time. I didn’t know what the heck was going on. I thought I did something wrong. Nobody tells you in that generation. Nobody tells you anything about sex or growing into a woman, or body changes, or stuff. Nothing. So she had a little suitcase standing by the door and then took me up to the home for hard to raise children. It was kind of weird times.

When she was older, she escaped from a refugee camp, married an American soldier, had a daughter, and moved to the United States. An education was always an important goal for Barbara because she had a strong desire to know more. She discussed at length the fact that not being allowed to learn as a young girl spurred her on to know more as an adult and to seek a formal education. She needed to provide for her daughter and herself because her husband had died. The need to know and the need to care for her daughter were, thus, two powerful motivators. Barbara went on to earn her GED in her 30s; her undergraduate degree in her 50s; and two master’s degrees, one at age 60 and
one at age 64. At the encouragement of some of her professors, she has written her life’s story and is currently working to have it published.

_Lucille_

Lucille asked that I arrange a meeting place in her town. She was a soft-spoken woman with a pleasant voice and a nice laugh and a rather poignant story to tell. Lucille began college at a traditional age, stopped out to raise her family, returned to school, and graduated at 56. She went on to earn a master’s degree at age 59 and an education specialist’s degree at 68. She gave her father the most credit for instilling a strong sense of the value of an education in her and her siblings. He had to stop going to public school to help on the farm but continued to educate himself by doing his sibling’s homework. “I guess you would call it self-home-schooling,” said Lucille. Because his formal schooling ended early, he made sure his children understood the value of a formal education. Her mother was a homemaker and also valued an education. In turn, Lucille and her husband, who had a degree, instilled a strong sense of the value of an education in their children, and each of their children earned a college degree. Lucille had been married 49 years and stated she was “a homemaker, mother, and stay at home wife for many of those years.”

Lucille began working part-time when her youngest child was four, then eventually full-time when the children got older. She and her husband were very involved in their children’s lives, and she was a school board member for six years. Lucille offered two stories concerning different kinds of losses and the ways she used education as a coping strategy. Her first story had to do with the tragic loss of their son. She was in undergraduate school at the time of the tragedy so stopped out for two semesters but returned to class to help her cope.
Then I went back to school. I was going nuts after we lost our son. That was in '78. He was 21 and was a very accomplished pilot and he and a friend were circling and waiting for traffic on the ground and nobody knows for sure what happened but they dove it in. What we surmise was the clouds had covered over and he was not watching his altimeter that closely because it had been clear and you don’t have to watch the altimeter when it is clear. The clouds had closed in and we kind of figure he was upside down and dove in. Our community lost two wonderful young men. He was 21 and the youngster that was with him had soloed that morning and he was 18. Our son was so excited that we were letting him take the airplane. But, it wasn’t their day.

Her second story had to do with a serious medical issue. In addition to the loss of their son when she was attending undergraduate school, she also had a cerebral vascular accident (stroke). There was a strong desire to get back to her classes because she felt school was the only place she could get help.

After I had that stroke school was the only place that I could go because I had aphasia, gross aphasia. And there’s things worse than death believe me. Aphasia is one of them. I was able to do the ADL’s [activities of daily living] so they let me go home. They told my husband I would be functional. I never did figure out what that was supposed to mean. I didn’t need somebody to come in and take care of me. But, as it happened I had started back to school before that happened and I had things to do with my class work and that happened in January. But then when I went back to school instead of having rehab. I’d never heard of rehab until I was well into my master’s. I didn’t know about it. Nobody had ever mentioned it. I
don’t think the doctors in Chicago were concerned about rehab. They were more concerned about my abilities. I wasn’t long at home and when I learned I couldn’t read or write. It was awful. When I talked to professors at the college they said well why don’t you come back up here and let’s see what we can do to help you. They were my therapists.

Lucille earned her bachelor's degree at age 56, graduating cum laude, and went on to earn two advanced degrees, a master’s at 59 and an education specialist’s at 68. Today, Lucille travels with her spouse, drives, leads a full life, and has considered taking writing classes but not working on another degree. She was very upbeat during her interviews and offered her stories matter-of-factly, giving the impression that participation in educational activities helped her cope.

*Lea*

Lea invited me to her home for both of her interviews. She was pleasant, stylish, and well organized, with several artifacts on the table including her thesis, a notebook with the articles she had written, and a list of things she wanted to bring up during the interviews. Lea started college at 55, earning her undergraduate degree at 71. She then began her master’s degree at 73 and graduated at age 76. Her father died when she was three years old, and her mother, a homemaker, had a strong sense of the value of an education, “Mother encouraged all efforts in education.” Likewise, she and her husband instilled that sense of value in their children and were very active in their education. Her spouse had a degree, and all five children attended college.

Lea raised her family while working full-time, always knowing she would go to college one day and earn her degree. Little did she know, until she got encouragement
from her undergraduate professors, that she would go on to earn her master’s degree. She offered a story that her mother told her, that she told her own children, and that she told to some undergraduate students in need of encouragement. It was her mantra for getting through undergraduate and graduate school.

Young people get discouraged because things are moving so slowly. What I told my children was this. When I was a little girl and we didn’t have a car and we would to go to this particular park, and being kids we would say it’s too far and we’re tired and blah, blah, blah. And my mother, bless her heart, she said this, you’re feeling that way because you are looking at the overall project instead of taking it one step at the time. So what she would have us do, you know there are these squares in the sidewalk and you walk one square at the time and before you know it you’ve walked a block, before you know it you’ve walked two blocks, before you know it you were at the park. In the meantime I get a chance to notice the beautiful weather, the birds, the flowers, and all the beautiful leaves and we can gather the leaves. So we didn’t mind the walk to the park. So when my kids were little I told them the same story. I said look at it this way, always remember it is one square at a time and you get exactly where you want to go. So, mother’s point was well taken.

Lea and I discussed how it fit nicely as a possible title for my dissertation:

The Graduate School Experience of Women After Age 60:

One Square at the Time

Deborah

Deborah asked that the interviews be held at her place of work. She was a very
petite woman with a soft voice and pleasant demeanor but with a take-charge aura about her. Deborah was born in Africa, raised in Europe, and eventually married her first husband, an American she met in Hong Kong. The two moved to the United States, traveled extensively as part of their work, and raised two children. Her father, a civil servant, and her mother, a homemaker, placed a moderate value on education. She stated, “The women in my family didn’t go to college. They worked and they got married and raised a family.” Her son did go to college but her daughter did not, holding true to the family custom. Deborah’s professional occupation required a high level of competency with the written language. When she began her undergraduate program she was in a position to work part time, then take a leave of absence her last year. Although she started the undergraduate program with zero credit hours, she earned her degree in just 2 ½ years at age 57, thanks to the cooperation of her workplace and the non-traditional program she attended. After retirement she started a master’s degree program and graduated at age 61. During her master’s degree program she began teaching college courses.

I had no intentions of teaching. I was retired. I was done. It was fun. So, then all through my graduate school I taught at least one course a semester and got paid as an adjunct. I was going to college and teaching in the undergraduate program, which is not the same as teaching in school with the graduates.

After earning her degree, she taught full-time. At the time of the interview Deborah was in the process of retiring from teaching. She described retirement as liberating. “It is liberating to not have to make a paycheck and be able to choose what you want to do.”
She has future plans to take Spanish lessons and may return to campus to teach in an adjunct position.

*Jo Ann*

Jo Ann asked that the interviews be conducted at her office at 7:30 a.m. This researcher obliged and enjoyed the exuberance this petite woman had at that early hour. She laughed when she spoke, yet at times her voice got very serious when discussing some of the professors or issues she had with school and in her life. She was raised on a military base in another country, and education was a very important aspect of family life. Her father worked in education and had his master’s degree in foreign languages. “My dad never quit learning. He retired and he went back and he got his degree in computers.” Jo Ann began college at a traditional age, stopped out to raise her family, returned to school in her 40s, and graduated in her 50s. She earned two master’s degrees, her first at age 56 and her second at age 65, and said that, unfortunately, neither her mother nor her father was alive to see it. She earned her undergraduate degree in 1995 and her mother passed away in 1994. Jo Ann said at least her mother knew she would get the degree. Jo Ann’s husband also had an advanced degree, and her daughter had her undergraduate degree.

An event in Jo Ann’s earlier married life had a lasting impact on her. To attend a particular university for graduate school, Jo Ann needed to move back to a city where she lived during her first marriage when her husband died. She said,

The only thing that ever kept me from moving here was my first husband’s suicide and him being buried in the cemetery here in town. I thought, oh my God, can I go through this again dredging up all this stuff because this town reminds
me of that and the early '60s. He took me up to the cemetery and said let's just go find it [the grave] and we went through all that and got all that done and I said OK, I'll move here. And we did.

A disappointment for Jo Ann after earning her degrees was that she could not teach as an adjunct in the department where she was employed. She had the classification of administrative assistant, and departmental regulations would not allow it. So she put her teaching plans on hold until after retirement when she hopes to teach as an adjunct.

All of the stories had a common thread that was also the crux of the research: earning an advanced degree at age 60 and older. In addition, each had a supportive spouse or family member, and each had an interesting life story. Other commonalities were mentioned in one of the opening paragraph of this section.

Emergent Themes

Two main themes with six subthemes emerged from the analyses of the data across the interviews. The phenomenological design allowed the researcher to uncover and understand the essence of the women’s experiences as revealed by them. The two main themes were Self and Education and Experiences with Others. Within Self and Education the subthemes were Desire to learn, Self-fulfillment, and Reflections on being an older student. Within Experiences with Others the subthemes were Experiences with faculty, Relationships with students, and Personal experiences with family and friends.

Self and Education

The objective for doing the research was to learn about the experiences of women age 60 and older in graduate programs. The interview questions offered opportunities for the women to talk unabashedly about themselves in the context of the role education
played in their lives. It was evident from the conversations that each woman had a lifelong love of learning and an understanding of the personal importance of education. It was also evident that prior events in their lives had direct impacts on their choosing to continue with their educations and when and where they did so.

* Desire to learn. A lifelong desire to learn was the theme most strongly echoed by each woman. Each participant indicated that she had a strong lifelong desire too earn a college degree or to learn more. One woman put it succinctly, stating that she always wanted to know what else was out there. She was raised in a communist country where an education, much less a college education, was deemed out of reach, yet she dared to want to learn more than communist propaganda. Barbara said,

I wanted to know. I had that in myself that I wanted to know. Like I said I grew up in the east part of Germany and we had mandatory Russian to learn. We had French and English on our report cards and stuff but it was never taught. It was mandatory to learn Russian. Like I said it was a communist country. The whole education system was just to teach us communist principles. That you’re going to be a good communist when you get out of school. That you do community service all the way through school, everything for the communists, for the worker, for the party. So when I escaped from East Germany, in my opinion, at that time I got into myself that there’s got to be something different, there’s got to be something better. I grew up in a time where there was very little to eat. Right after the Second World War I was at a center and we could not read anything from the west. It was forbidden. It was all propaganda for the communist party. Propaganda, propaganda, propaganda. Everything over there in the west was bad.
It was against government you know. So that’s why I said I want to know something else. I want to know what else is out there.

Three of the seven participants had planned their entire adult lives to attend college once their children were no longer dependent on them or their circumstances changed. The week after Lea’s last child left home, she registered for classes, spending the next 16 years pursuing her lifelong goal. She worked full-time while taking classes part-time for 12 years; found it necessary to take a 4-year hiatus; but accomplished her mission, graduating magna cum laude at age 71. She went on to earn her master’s degree at age 77 and has thoughts of getting her doctorate.

I had the usual married life you know, mother, counselor, nurse, chauffeur, psychologist. That’s what mother’s do, all those things. But I had made a vow to myself that when the last of our five graduated from college I was going to go to college. I am very patient but I am extremely tenacious. And so sure enough with all them going through and graduating and when the last one graduated I immediately went the very next week and registered. I was going to do it.

Likewise, Faith had long thought of a finishing her college education.

I retired from the industry with 32 years in that industry. Then I remarried and I said, well, this is something that I’ve always wanted to do so when my youngest child left home it was an opportunity. I got tired of going to the mall shopping. So I decided that it was time to go back and get the degree and my husband was very supportive, for me, and with me and did everything he could for me going back to do the bachelor’s.

She earned her undergraduate degree at age 58 and earned her master’s degree at 67 with
Deborah said she always knew she would get her degree and did so earning her undergraduate degree in 2 ½ years at age 57.

I just wanted to do it. I just always wanted to do it. I wanted to go to college when the time was right. It was just the right time. I was married and I didn’t have financial obligations so I was able to do it.

Deborah earned her master’s degree at age 61 with tentative plans to do a second one.

Although Lucile did not specifically say she had always wanted to finish her degree she did offer that, “basically I was a homemaker and mother. I had a goal. I wanted that degree.” When her youngest child was in her last year of high school Lucille returned to college. She earned her undergraduate degree at age 56. She continued on to earn a master’s degree at age 59 and an education specialist’s degree at age 68.

Barbara’s spouse died when she was in her 30s, leaving her with a daughter to rear. Because of the policies and circumstances of her country of origin, she had only eight years of schooling. She earned her GED, and then began her undergraduate program, saying she realized she would not be able to support herself and her child if she did not do so.

First of all I got to know my husband who was a soldier in Germany. In November 1970 we got married and had a little baby, which was 7 weeks old when we flew over here to America where he got killed in ’73. So I had to fend for myself. So I was a German with an American registration card and my daughter was American so I was by myself. So at that time it was always a wish of mine, because at that time in the East [Berlin] where I grew up, my foster
mother, she gave me 8 years of education and said that’s it. Now you get out of
there and bring in some money. So that’s all the education I had. Literally, after
my husband died I said what am I going to do with the rest of my life? I have to
have a degree. You can’t get nothing without education. Because the jobs you get,
you can forget about it you know.

Barbara went on to earn two master’s degrees, the first at age 60 and the second at
age 64.

Faith definitely plans to pursue a doctorate, and Lea tentatively plans to pursue
one. Jo Ann and Barbara considered pursuing doctorates, but so far both have decided
against doing so, commenting on the time and commitment it would take and the fact that
they are retiring soon. Deborah was giving thought to pursuing a second master’s degree.

I’d really love to do another MLA [Master of Liberal Arts]. I’d love to do one and
I’d love to do one in something completely different. I wouldn’t do it in, I did
creative non-fiction last time and I wouldn’t do that again. I’d do something
different like American History. My knowledge of American History is really
pathetic. I didn’t grow up in this country so we didn’t study American History.
We studied the British Colonies. I’d love to study American History. I’d love to
understand religious studies better you know. I’d love to go take classes in things
like that. I’d like to audit. I don’t think I really want to write the long papers. I
might see if I can’t audit some classes. I don’t need it, another piece of paper. I’m
just through with the formal studying.

Then Deborah added, “but I might do one more master’s degree.”
The sentiments of all the women were that one must have a love of learning and a strong desire to get an education. The love of learning was the pull, or one could say push, that led them to their educational achievements at that time in their lives. When asked why she went back for a specialist’s degree when in her 60s, Lucille said she “loved to learn, it was something to do, and learning has been a passion for me for a long time.” Another sentiment by several of the women was that one must have tenacity to finish a graduate program. In addition, there was a desire to be on a college campus because of the attractive extracurricular offerings, such as lectures and plays. “I love campuses. I’ve worked either in a school [as a teacher] or on a campus most of my life” said Jean. Although each woman articulated how important getting the advanced degree was personally, they also discussed the joy of learning. When referring to graduate school, the women used such terms as “fun” and “enjoyed.” Deborah said, “I got a graduate degree for the fun of it,” and “I really enjoyed it. I kind of wish I could do it again.” Jean also said, “Learning was fun.” And Faith offered this:

I had no problems with the professors. I had no problems with the curriculum. It was fun. It was just a lot of fun. We did some really neat projects. It was just great. I had a very very happy experience.

*Self-fulfillment.* Five of the seven women articulated that they earned their advanced degree just for the sake of it, for the self-satisfaction, and for the personal accomplishment. These women had reached a level of confidence that confirmed they could achieve their goals, and barriers such as family, time, or money would not prevent them from forging ahead with their educational quests. Jean’s sentiment was, “I wanted
to go back to school. I just thought it would be wonderful. It was hard. But I just felt a lot of satisfaction.” Faith offered:

It was just personal. It wasn’t that I needed to go back for anything like that because you know most people want you to go to work for minimum wage. I’m sorry I paid more than that for my education than to work for minimum wage. You know they want your knowledge and all of that. They don’t want to pay any kind of money so I’m not going to tarnish it. It was for me. The next is a Ph.D.

The original goal for Barbara’s earning her first master’s degree was for better pay; however, she completed a second master’s degree for the love of learning. She said of her second master’s degree, “I was not 100% thinking about a career, because I didn’t give myself the kind of illusions with my kind of age that I’m going to find a better paying job.” The goal for Jo Ann was to work on a college campus. “I tried to get on with the university here because I knew if I could be around education, you know, I just wanted to be on this academic calendar. I just love working with students.”

Attending graduate school was an intense, self-reflective time in their lives, and the women said they completed their graduate programs for self-fulfillment. “You do it for yourself” was a sentiment of several participants. Several felt graduate school was one of the best experiences of their lives with one noting that the experiences were sterling. Jean said:

Well, I was thinking about that this morning and I thought how would I characterize my experiences as a graduate student and I think if I just had one or two words I think I would say it was a sterling experience.
The overall focus of getting the degree was on learning, and all of the women indicated that they loved learning, reading, and writing. Several of the women discussed their feelings of satisfaction with participation in the programs. Though the majority of their experiences were positive, there was also an intensity and commitment to being a student. There were struggles with some of the coursework with all believing the struggles made them better students and writers. The women had stated they read everything assigned to them by the professors, and the pressures to do well writing the papers and theses were self-imposed. Faith talked about her preparation for a class.

I grasped the material offered for the fact that I read everything, each little word that was given to us. I made it a point to get my books well in advance and be able to. When class started I had in all probability read the book so all I had to do was go back to chapter one and two and look at my notes. So it was work, there’s no doubt about it. It was work. But it was challenging and I like a challenge. I do.

The word “pride” was expressed by several women when referring to the achievement of earning their master’s degrees, and about their theses in particular. This was evidenced by three of the women bringing artifacts to the interview. Barbara brought her academic transcripts as an aid while she talked about her classes and professors. Lea’s artifacts were her thesis, the articles she had written, and a list of things she wanted to bring up during the interview. Jean also brought artifacts: a graduation photograph, a letter, her GPA commendation, and her thesis.

I brought my thesis just to show you. I am very proud, you know. They bind it beautifully. Look how beautifully it’s bound and this is in the library. You know it will be in the library forever. And that really gives me a big lot of joy because I
know other students will use it. I know not too many probably, but someone will. And maybe someone has already and they'll reference my thesis. It is a very specific topic.

Reflections on being an older student. The subject of age came up during the interviews but was not a major focus of the participants' experiences. Although age was not thought of as an obstacle, it was something that made them different from the younger students because they were usually the only one their age in class. "No one was in my age bracket" was a sentiment noted by several participants although none mentioned feeling old in class. Jean said she felt like just another student.

I was apprehensive you know about being an older student. I thought I was going to stick out like a sore thumb and everybody's going to think I'm different and found that was totally untrue. Once I got into it I was just another student. There weren't a lot of other people my age or close to my age as students. There were a few I guess. I mean in my classes they were all younger kids but it never made a difference. It never did and I loved that. I remember one time somebody telling me at some workshop that I went to that my age is one of my business. I really like that. You should not 'not' do things because of your age. It was a joy for me and once I got into it I was just another student.

Another sentiment was that the older one gets, the more verbal or bold one gets, and younger students do not intimidate one. Jo Ann said:

I think that the older you are in the classroom the more verbal I got. I don't know why. But I was really shy in the '60s, in class. Shy, I wouldn't say anything, ever.
Now it’s like God I can’t shut up. The students, maybe just because I’m a crazy lady, I don’t know, they never gave me a hard time on age, ever, you know. Jo Ann also noted, “Oh, another thing is that you end up being older than all your professors. And that’s like O.K. That’s all right.” Barbara said, “I am very stubborn and independent and I got in the class and saw those young kids in there and I said I don’t care. I’m going to do my thing and they’re going to do their thing.” Barbara went on to offer what she saw as a challenge for the professor with older students.

Elderly people usually have their own experiences and set way of thinking about things and approach to things and how they get their information. I think they kind of take their information in a different way than younger people. They just comprehend it differently. That’s what I think. That’s why sometimes we’re a little bit challenging. I think because to get together with the teachers you know, to see it my way and to see it his way [laugh], that’s difficult. Especially in some subjects I’m thinking wow, that’s the way to look at it.

The women also discussed not having the same outside pressures as younger students, feeling older students have fewer social, work, or life distractions than younger students and are more focused on studies. Jean said:

I was very interested in getting the grade. I really wanted to get an “A”. I know when I was an undergraduate I was into all kind of activities. Although I still did pretty well. Not as well as I did here but I did manage to keep my grades ok but I was focused in a lot of different directions. I just think older students are more focused on the learning and not so many other things. I resisted, I was asked to be in the honor society. They sent me an invitation but I just wanted to stay with my
studies and not get into a bunch of social things. I’ve got other friends and they’ll wait for me to finish. I don’t think I spent nearly as much time socializing. It’s not that important. You’re not trying to impress anybody. You’re just there because it’s wonderful to have the chance. A master’s now for a career is almost necessary and a lot of them [younger students], are being pushed along from behind by family and what not. Me, I was just doing it because I wanted to. That makes a big difference.

 Also, Faith said, “Because of the fact I was retired and I didn’t have a job I was worried about. My job was coming to school.” Lea actually had quite a bit to say about age, but her point was that age does not matter.

 After I graduated only one woman came up to me and said congratulations. It was unspoken but I could tell others were thinking why in the world at your age did you get a master’s [degree]? It’s just a bias that’s out there. Age is not a biological age. Age is what your brain is and your heart. That is age. There is a big age bias. People look at how many years you’ve been on this earth. My grad work I started when I was 73, more or less. I never thought of that. I’m firmly convinced that if you think you’re too old do to do something you’re never too old. Not ever too old and especially brain wise. Don't ever let anybody tell you you are too old to do something because you’re not. The only thing that is going to stop you is yourself. Too many people are too concerned about what other people think. I’ve been blessed with the gift that I don’t give a hoot in Hades what other people think. Only two entities come into that category that I care about and that’s God and myself. I taught my children that. As long as you are comfortable with
yourself, and you'll know when you're not because you've got a conscience, it
doesn't matter what anyone else says or does. It doesn't make a hoot in Hades. A
professor taught me that. It was a throwaway statement and had nothing to do
with the class. You can only be controlled by what other people say about you to
the extent you allow them to control you. You are the control factor. Don't blame
someone else if it bothers you that they said something because you're letting
them control you and make you uncomfortable. I'll never forget that. Don't ever
let anybody tell you you're too old to do something. It's not true. Not once from
my undergrad through my master's did I ever think about my age and as far as I
can tell the people around me didn't either. I didn't make a big deal about it.

Lucille had a somewhat different take on age and the reasons older women return to
school.

Women have been let out of the cage. We have been held back throughout my age
bracket. It must be the culture. Spouses support the woman staying home. We
volunteer to get out, at church, at school. We volunteer counseling, rarely does it
pay. But if a dollar sign is attached to it then it is something else and men do it. I
did a lot of it [volunteering].

For the older adult who may be considering a return to school the women offered
these words of advice: "you can do it," or "just do it." A word of caution, however, came
from Lucille.

If it is just to get an advanced degree then I say go for it. Because, if that's your
motivation you will work for it, but if it's strictly a monetary thing I don't think
they will. I've had too many friends who stopped, saying this is not worth it.
The other words of advice to potential older adult students had to do with graduate school’s being a way to expand horizons and get involved in things of interest.

“Tenaciousness,” “persistence,” and “positive thinking” were words the women felt must be part of the vocabulary of someone’s considering starting or returning to school if she is going to complete her program. Jo Ann offered her comments on the topic.

If they’re thinking about it just do it and be persistent. Persistence is the key.

Don’t quit. Tenacity, just keep going and you’ll do it. Just think positive. And you know if you’ve got a strong enough will, I mean if you’ve got a strong enough desire, you can do it.

Faith felt a user-friendly university helped make completing an education possible.

You can do it. Anybody can do this. It is very very doable. The university is user friendly. This place is so user friendly it is unbelievable. If they don’t come back and get a higher degree it is their own fault. All I can say is shame on you because you can do it. If I can do it anybody can do it.

And Barbara offered, “Don’t ever let anybody discourage you. Stick to your guns. If you want to know something, go for it.”

Experiences with Others

The second main category that emerged from the data analysis centered on Experiences with Others with the subthemes of Experiences with faculty, Relationships with students, and Personal experiences with family and friends. The participants discussed both positive and negative, or disappointing, experiences, but all concluded that the experiences played an integral part in their educational quests.
Experiences with faculty. Responses to questions regarding experiences with faculty were consistently positive in the initial interviews while follow-up questions in the second interviews elicited more information about concerns, issues, and disappointments. There was a slight reluctance on the part of some of the women to say anything negative about either their programs or their professors. The dominant message appeared to be that the women felt their experiences with professors were good ones. The generally positive comments concerning their professors included terms such as “dynamic,” “excellent,” “knowledgeable,” and “confident.” Faith stated, “My professors were dynamic, they were helpful. I was afforded all the courtesies possible.” Lea said, “Well, they were very helpful and very knowledgeable. I was very impressed with their knowledge.” Jean expressed her opinion with, “The ones I had were all confident in their abilities. I really liked all my professors. I thought they were good, some better than others.” Jean also talked about a social relationship with one professor: “I did become socially involved with my thesis advisor and I still am.” And Barbara felt her professors appreciated the older students. When asked about her experiences with professors Deborah offered:

I had some wonderful experiences. The way the individual studies were you meet once a week or every other week. And you work out a plan for the semester. And you work on certain writing. And you discuss the readings. It was wonderful. You read about stuff that you really want to read. It was great to have somebody who was knowledgeable to discuss it with. Things you don’t understand they could help you figure it out. The professors here are really good about meeting with you and doing one on one.
The women felt most of their professors were supportive of them as older students. It was deemed important to have that support in times of stress with classes or personal issues, which in one case involved a spouse’s death during the program. Lea stated:

All of these instructors, gosh they were so good. They just were good. And they were so patient and they worked with you and always available. Always available. You could call them anytime. They always gave out their numbers. If you wanted to meet with them separately they would work something out. It was just a great experience. To me it really was. Of course the Christianity or the kindness of that one instructor was important when I wrote about my husband’s death.

Faith discussed the support she got from her professor when she was not well and the importance of that support in helping her get through a class.

You do this presentation type of thing for your class and I was supposed to have done it the week before and I, just unfortunately I couldn’t make it. I came up here and there was just no way I could make it and I went back home. I told her I would do it next week. I went into her office the next time that the class was going to meet and she said I hate to tell you this but you do not look well. I said no but I’ve got to get my presentation out of the way, which of course you do the presentations on why you chose this project, what were you thinking, you’re suppose to defend it. Anybody’s going to be able to ask you why did you choose it, what did you learn and all this. I mean the kids were great and wonderful to me. Nobody asked me any questions. When we all walked in and were sitting down she [the professor] said I know we’ve all drawn lots and Faith should by
rights go to the end of the line but I’ve made the decision that she will go first and she will be leaving as soon as she finishes.

Before her master’s degree program Lucille had a cerebral vascular accident (stroke). One of her younger professors understood the implications of that and made accommodations so she could take oral tests instead of written ones, which were more difficult for her.

So I took the first test and I flunked it and it was a graduate research course. So I talked to the professor and we talked four or five minutes and he said you know this stuff. I said, but I didn’t get it on paper. He said don’t worry about it so he gave me a B. My recitation, I was one of the better students in the class, but this written question, I got all wrong so in essence he gave me oral tests on both of those tests. It’s not like he gave me an A. He was a very empathetic person. He was so strict, and he was. When he got through with his classes you knew something. On my orals they asked how I felt about professor so and so and I said I liked him and as a matter of fact I learned more from him than I have from some of the older professors. And he’s very fair, very fair. At least I felt he was. If you know what it is, you know what it is. If you don’t you don’t. Well they never did get him fired. Now he’s head of the department. I still think he was one of the better teachers.

Barbara brought her academic transcripts to the second interview. When looking over them beforehand to jog her memory about the classes she had taken she realized, in retrospect, that what she thought were conflicts with professors were not. She said it was then that she realized what her professors were trying to do.
I went and got my transcript printed out and I wanted to jog my memory because you were asking about miscommunication or matters of conflict. There were [conflicts]. But looking back over those classes they were really from my side out. The teachers had to make their point come across. How they would like to see something, or how they would like to prepare or present it, and in my opinion sometimes I said that’s not what I think or not what they do, or how I want to present it. But always by the end of the course I kind of realized what he was trying to get at. The point he’s trying to get across, to teach us.

The professors’ feedback spurred the women to be better students and better writers. Positive feedback was noted as encouraging to the learning process while criticisms and negative feedback were viewed as challenges to overcome. Several of the participants noted that is a powerful way to learn. The challenges from professors motivated the participants to do better and work harder. Jean articulated her appreciation of her professor’s involvement.

She was so positive about my thesis. She really gave me a lot of positive feedback. But I loved her course too, and I learned a lot from her. I know how to express things. I know what order to put things. I just know how. You know that’s always been my forte’. I lost a lot because it’d been years, but I got a lot back, especially from those two people who pushed. Criticism is really good and helpful. If you knew it all to begin with you wouldn’t be here. What would be the point?

Jo Ann had been questioned during her program by one professor who wondered why someone her age would be in school. That comment spurred her on to finish and in the
end he let her know she had done well.

He commented to me back stage while I was getting the cap and gown on. He gave me a hug and said you really did good so that was really the best compliment I ever got was from this man who had wondered why I was there.

Not all of the experiences were positive or ended on a positive note. When the women received poor marks for their work their disappointment was not only in themselves, but also somewhat with the professors' communication. Jo Ann talked about one particular professor's comments regarding an assignment.

He says first of all, I don’t know what to do with you. And I said what are you talking about? He says your paper is awful. I can fail you or I can give you an incomplete and let you finish the paper. Well that’s what I finally said. I said yeah well you can go ahead and give me a D or a C or F or whatever you want and I’ll just retake it. Or, you can give me an incomplete and let me finish the paper. He gave me an incomplete. And so I went to the Writing Center at SLAC [Student Learning Assistance Center] for 2 months and we worked on that thing. Well then I go back in and it’s absolutely beautiful and there’s not a thing wrong with it, I know. And, I go here. He looked at me and he took it and so I waited about a month, a good month, and I didn’t hear anything and I kept watching my incomplete to see if it changed and it wouldn’t. I stopped by his office one day. I said have you had a chance to grade that paper? Well, he wheeled around at me and he said why should I hurry? You told me you’d have that right after Christmas and you didn’t. I lost it. I started tearing up and I said, OK, you know, I was busy. I wanted to make it right and I went to the Writing Center and I took it
back, took it back until I got it to, you know, to a very good paper. And I said, and I’m sorry it took longer than right after Christmas. Because SLAC wasn’t even open then. You know I’m not going to turn this in without SLAC. And so the next day he wrote me, and I saved it [pointed to her computer screen], an e-mail apologizing for exploding at me and said that it was a good paper.

It was obvious from the way she told the story that there can be lasting effects from the interactions a professor has with a student. Another disappointment was with professors’ not placing importance, or value, on the student’s work. One woman stated that she could tell at her defense that one professor had not read her thesis. Jean commented:

When it came to my actual thesis interview he just had a couple of Mickey Mouse questions. It was pretty clear that he hadn’t even read it. So that was kind of disappointing. I thought afterwards that was not quite right for him to not even prepare properly for it.

Another perception expressed by one respondent was that some of the older professors did not take care of the older students the way she thought the professors would. When the older professor questioned Jo Ann’s reasoning for doing the master’s degree program, the implication was “at your age.” Jo Ann said:

Well, there was just one in particular and his attitude towards older students was like “why are you doing this?” It’s sort of like a waste of his time and you can see his favoritisms in the classroom, how he’d latch onto one of the younger ones. I could not get rapport at all and I never ever had gone through that with any other
professor. I think it's his attitude towards older students period. But he's old school. He did not take care of the older students.

Another respondent shared her perception that some professors had to be accommodated. A professor changed the topic of this woman's paper and attempted to get her to change her thesis topic also. Lea noted:

There were times, like towards the end of my grad work, an excellent professor who loved everything we did completely changed my ending paper. I had already picked something in the judicial system and I had all my research lined up and he said, 'No, I don't want you to do that. This is what I want you to do.' So I had to accommodate him and changed that. I thought it was just a tad over the top. But, that is just what you do. And of course when I decided on my actual thesis for my grad work he didn't want me to do that either.

Lea solved that dilemma by choosing another professor to work with on her thesis. Also, one of Deborah's professors wanted her to change her writing style. This incident ended with an understanding on her part and a continued friendship.

I had a struggle with one professor who thought I should write differently than the way I wrote. I guess I had a less academic style than most professors here. I write journalistically. I don't know how not to write [journalistically]. I don't know how not to do that. He thinks his is good writing but I don't agree with him. So we had a little tug of war with that. I've been making a living off of writing so I had a good sense of what I think is good writing and what is bad writing. I guess if you are 20 you've got that same rift, but I've been making a living writing for 40 years you know. It's not like writing is a mystery to me. I have strong opinions
about what I like and don’t like. He kept trying to change my style so I eventually just went along with it for the course. I could write that way. I just don’t want to write that way. It was not going to be a battle that either one of us was going to win. He and I are actually friends though. He comes by all the time and says I really like the newspaper. I guess what it was, was just a journalistic style of writing.

*Relationships with students.* A query specifically asking about interactions with other students did not elicit a lot of discussion during the interviews. Although interactions were important aspects of academic programs, none of the women had placed a focus on developing relationships with other students. The sentiments of several of the women were that the other students were younger and on a different “plane.” Faith said, “I had no one in my age bracket. You had some 30s. You had some 40s. You had maybe one or two that were in their 50s. But nobody in my age bracket.” Deborah said:

I think I was a little intimidating to some people because I had so much experience and was so much older than them. But everyone was very nice. But when you take a break people hang out with their friends you know. They hang out together. It’s just a natural thing. I don’t hang out here with the young professors. I have nothing in common with them. I say hi to them. But everyone was very nice though. We had so many more women than men in our group. They were very nice but just on a different plane [from us].

Some of the women indicated they did have some excellent experiences with the younger students. Lea said, “the younger people taught us different viewpoints.”

Opportunities to interact offered the women a challenge to keep up with, or do better
than, the younger students. Being with younger students was seen as beneficial when the women were accepted as an equal or their ideas were valued. Lea offered:

Well, the young people they were marvelous. I thought they spoke with a lot of knowledge and a lot of depth about the particular situation what ever it may be, and in doing so they taught us a different viewpoint. You can always learn from what you hear, but do you learn to listen. The students held their own, and there were times when I would posit something that was slightly boring to them and we would discuss it and they would finally figure out that there was the possibility that that might be correct. Of course you meet lots of different students taking so many different courses. I found them very intelligent. The age was a lot younger than me. Some were right out of high school and got their college degree and came right into the graduate degree. Some were older and worked in lots of different fields and were taking courses that were going to help them in that particular field. But there’s a lot of enthusiasm there and I attribute that to the overall atmosphere of the college and the degree of the teachers, their level of work. I just found the whole thing very supportive. I didn’t have a problem as an older person getting along with them, or them getting along with me.

And Jean offered her philosophy, something she learned years ago:

I would say so probably. I would say that one of the things is that I really like being around people who are younger than I am because I learned something along time ago that I really love, and it said my age is none of my business. There really is no need to become old in the sense that we use to, because we can stay fit
and that's real important to me and I think that being with younger people and accepted as being an equal was very beneficial and made me feel great. I loved it.

Reminiscing after her first interview, Jean offered, during her second interview, information about a friend she made.

I did make a good friend too. It was another adult student and she was a little but younger than I am. Now I didn't ever study with anyone else as I told you last time, but we use to discuss our courses a lot. We were in several of the same courses and we spent quite a bit of time together and we just got to be friends and did things together.

Lucille noted that in graduate school the age difference was not quite as noticeable as it was in undergraduate school.

By the time we got to the master's level there were enough non-traditional students, some teachers, some therapist, physical therapist, occupational therapist, back taking psychology course to go into a different field of work. You didn’t stand out as quite so different.

The graduate programs for the most part, though, did not foster bonding with younger students. Jo Ann was the only participant to refer to other students in her program as her cohorts, a perception that perhaps was a reflection on the position she held in a department on a college campus that encouraged the communal experience.

Some of the women said that they preferred doing independent studies because they did not have much in common with the younger students. Deborah said:

Except for these two guys in my graduate classes I became friends with it wasn’t that kind of experience where you bond with other people. I did not particularly
enjoy the classes with other people because I was so much older than everybody.

It wasn’t that I minded my age, it’s just that I didn’t have anything in common
with them. I have life experience that’s different from theirs. And my work
experience is different from theirs.

While noting that she needed a quiet environment to concentrate and write Barbara did
say she enjoyed some of the classes with other students.

I could hear their opinion. You get a better grip on the subject. Matter of fact,
that’s what I didn’t like about some of the courses too. We had study groups, you
know. We had to depend on each other that each does his part, you now, and that
was difficult sometimes. You always had one in there that didn’t do their part and
you just had to drag them along because they just didn’t do their part. I didn’t like
that very much, groups, when you have to work together. But in a way you have
to learn it if you’re going to be around people. Professionals some of the time but
those people I don’t know some of them they were not professionals. Like I said
we had to drag them along. Do their work. You know how that is.

*Personal experiences with family and friends.* The third subtheme focusing on
relationships mostly dealt with the support of a spouse or other family members. The
married women felt spousal support was a key to their being able to pursue and finish
their degree. The help spouses provided was emotional, financial, or instrumental (e.g.
helping with the meals or household chores), thus freeing the women to devote their time
and commit themselves to their studies without some of life’s worries or duties. Jean
stated that earning her master’s degree improved her marriage. It did not improve an
already good relationship, but it improved the way she and her husband related academically because she had more confidence in her ability to help with his writings.

What my studies did for me was improve my writing a lot. The first couple of papers I did I got a lot of criticism and I had to learn how to do a focus paper and that sort of thing, which I did not know. One of the neat things that has come out of my degree is that I can now help my husband with his writing in a way that I couldn’t do before. I also hope that I will do some writing of my own but I’ve gotten involved in some other things right now so I’m not doing it but I do help him. You know he’s almost at the point of retirement. I don’t know if he will retire or not. He’s one of those who likes it [work]. I want him to retire so we can do some other stuff. Anyway he’s trying to publish things he’s put off for years. I can really help him now in a way that he notices a lot too. So it [school] really improved my writing. I guess in a way it improved my marriage because of that we can be kind of closer and work together better than we could before. I don’t think it improved our relationship exactly but I think we share a bit more than we did. And I like the fact that he’s writing about a different field, yet I can help him put it down. And that’s kind of neat and he appreciates that too. He got a little payback out of the deal. (Jean chuckled after the comment).

Lucille’s support came in the form of hiring a maid to do the housework and her husband’s preparing the meals while she was in school. Faith talked about how supportive her husband was when she chose to get her bachelor’s degree and again when she chose to get her master’s degree. “I cannot say enough about the support of my spouse who was always there with a cup of hot tea when I was working on a project,
reading, or having a study group over. A regular helpful Hannah.” Barbara, the one long-
time widow, received support from another family member: “My daughter was
supportive. That was the only support I got. I could talk to her.”

Some of the women discussed the financial support they received from their
spouses. Deborah said, “I would not have done it [graduate school] had I still been single
because I couldn’t have afforded it.” For Jean, “It was more his money than mine that
helped me to get through grad school.” Continuing with the subject of money for school,
none of the women deemed it an issue. Lea offered, “I never let cost deter me from what I
want to do.” Barbara mentioned money as an issue only to say that she worked at the
university and did not have to pay the fees. Likewise, although Jo Ann was married, she,
too, mentioned not having to pay fees because she worked at a university. “After a year
of employment you get all your fees waved.” However, Jean did say, “I’d be a perennial
student if I could if it wasn’t so damned expensive.”

The women also discussed the attitude of family and friends toward their doing a
master’s degree program at an older age. All indicated that few family members or
friends were particularly interested or impressed. The exception was Lucille, who
received positive feedback from social acquaintances.

Socially there were many of the women who would comment that I admire you
for doing that. I would say well you can too. No I can’t [she said] and she was a
registered nurse. All you have to do is get up there and get this done. But I would
hear that frequently. The admiration for my going back but they wouldn’t try it no
matter what I’d say.

Deborah commented on friends’ and family’s reactions and on her upcoming
Some of my friends thought I was crazy. Why are you doing this? Why are you sitting up writing papers? They do volunteer stuff and stay busy. I won’t know what to do when I retire. I don’t want to do nothing. I may come back and teach an adjunct class once in awhile. My children thought it was funny. My grandchildren thought it was really weird.

Barbara, noting her mother was in her 90s, said:

My mom said what the hell you doing that for. That’s stupid. I kept telling her I’m doing it for myself. I want to know so I can talk to people about what’s going on in the world. My mom is like that, old school. The woman still stays at home and cooks and stuff.

And Jean commented, “I don’t remember anybody getting all excited about it or anything.” She added, “I think they all thought it was neat that I was doing it but they’re not going to emote a lot like I do.”

Summary of Findings

The seven women in this study had unique and interesting stories to share; the main factor tying them together was the love of learning. Of utmost importance, based on the analysis of the interviews, was the desire for an education. Their parents had instilled in them the value of an education with four growing up in families that placed a very high value on education and one in a family that placed a high value. All of the participants instilled the value of an education in their own families. One participant offered that she planned to earn a Ph.D. to give her grandchildren something for which to aim.

The majority of the women had followed traditional paths of marriage and family.
It would be erroneous to try to “paint” a single picture of the participants’ lives because a myriad of factors affected their lives: for example, spouse’s military service, divorce, children, death, financial obligations, and religious tenets. In general, though, they were satisfied with the lives they led and felt that delaying completion of higher education goals to meet family obligations was a worthwhile sacrifice. The participants discussed waiting until they were “afforded the opportunity,” until “the time was right,” or until “the last child was out of the house” before attending college. One participant referred to being “let out of the cage” as the reason women attended school at an older age, implying that aging offers liberation from obligations. Although the majority of the participants did not have the option to earn a degree earlier in life because of other obligations, none seemed to mind or resent the obligations.

The educational profile of the women indicates that five attended traditional undergraduate programs, two attended nontraditional undergraduate programs and their ages as students and lengths of time to attain degrees varied. One participant earned an undergraduate degree when she was in her 20s, five in their 50s, and one in her 70s. The length of time it took to complete undergraduate degree programs was as short as 2½ years to as long as 16 years. Five attended traditional graduate programs and three attended nontraditional graduate programs. One participant attended both a traditional and a nontraditional graduate program. Two participants earned graduate degrees in their 50s, seven in their 60s, and one in her 70s. Three earned more than one graduate degree. It took from two to four years to complete their graduate degrees.

They described their time in graduate school as intense yet thoroughly enjoyed with several saying their programs were fun. Family support was deemed to be an
important factor in the graduate school experience, and spousal support was a key to their ability to pursue a degree and to graduate. Spouses provided emotional and financial support, and some helped with household chores, allowing the women to devote their time and commit themselves to their studies. Each participant attended college for personal reasons, including challenge, self-enrichment, and desire to learn, but not necessarily because of boredom or the desire to improve financial conditions or enhance social opportunities—though these did come up as factors in the interviews. One participant discussed her retirement and the fact that she had not wanted to spend her time just shopping. Two participants noted their hope that earning their first master’s degrees would increase their potential for earning more money. All of the participants mentioned some social aspect of school, such as having connected with a professor or a student. Although there were some disappointing experiences with professors, by and large, the majority of interactions with faculty were positive, motivating, and deemed important aspects of their programs. Challenges from the professors motivated the participants to work harder. They had positive things to say about younger students, mainly that the younger students valued the participant’s opinions, had interesting points of views, and were helpful. Only one of the participants mentioned being a part of a cohort.

The women made a point of discussing the individuality of their time in the graduate programs and the self-fulfillment. In particular, they were satisfied with their development as students and as writers. All were proud of their accomplishments, and several planned to continue their education, either through taking noncredit courses; pursuing another master’s degree; pursuing a doctorate; or taking advantage of other
outlets, such as earning a pilot’s license. All agreed that one must be tenacious and persistent if one wants to complete a graduate degree at an older age. Participation in this study gave them a voice and an opportunity to share their stories. Their universal lesson is that it is never too late to further one’s education. Their personal stories--testaments to their tenacity and veracity--accentuated the rewards of patience and were honest and heartfelt.
CHAPTER V

DISCUSSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary

People living longer today are opting to participate in activities that help them stay engaged in life; the prediction is many with college degrees will choose to participate in graduate programs (Thompson & Foth, 2003). Older adult students are already fairly commonplace on many university campuses with more women than men participating (Kim & Merriam, 2004). This shift in the demographic makeup of higher education institutions invites research into the phenomenon of older women students. The purpose of this study is to illuminate the experiences of women who participated in graduate programs at age 60 and older.

Literature Review

A review of the literature revealed there have been a limited number of studies specifically regarding the phenomenon. A 1995 study by Little looked at adults who attended or completed higher education degree programs at age 70 and older, and a study by Bratrud (1999) looked at students’ age 60 and older enrolled in undergraduate and graduate programs. However, much of the research that was reviewed addressed cognitive functions, motivations, barriers, programs, equity of access, and the benefits
and expectations of higher education for older adult students, while not investigating the meaning of the experience for students who had graduated.

Regarding cognitive functions, researchers found that older students believed that a key to successful aging was staying mentally and physically fit (Little, 1995). The health of the brain is dependent on an enriched environment, which is dependent on effort (Campbell, 2006), and activities that enhance high levels of functioning may include extensive reading and participation in educational courses (Thompson & Foth, 2005). In addition, an important variable appeared to be the level of participation in activities (Kleiber, 1999; Thompson & Foth). Regarding memory loss, research shows that it actually occurs across the life span but that older adults report a feared possible self with memory loss because of the possibility of cognitive decline related to dementia (Reese & Cherry, 2004). Dark-Freudeman et al. (2006) found stereotyping also caused some older adults to internalize negative beliefs about their memory.

Motivators for older adults to participate in higher education programs were identified as a desire for personal growth, for satisfaction, and for enjoyment. The goals that motivate learning activities appear to change as adults go through the life cycles. For the older adult the motivation is more about personal satisfaction than money (Little, 2003), and there must also be an interest in the subject matter (Kim & Merriam, 2004). Educational activities are a way to cope and help take control of one’s life and increase confidence as attributes began to decline (Fisher, 1998). Mehrotra (2003) notes that people who have an education will want more education and will get more education.
Barriers identified in the literature include issues with faculty, issues of access to student services and the impact of the campus’ physical and non-physical environment, and issues with programs. According to McCormack-Weiss (2003), a chief cause of students of any age dropping out is a lack of faculty support. As for student services, many graduate programs are offered at night and on the weekend, and services such as computer labs, parking, and financial offices were often only open eight to five during the week. The campus physical environment, such as parking lots and classrooms, is also an issue. A study by Moore and Piland (1994) found it is important to the older adult learner to have a comfortable, safe, and accessible environment.

The literature offers suggestions for program development to meet the projected demands of Third Age retirees seeking to continue their education. Faculty should have an understanding of the learning needs of the older adult (Alexander, 1996). Educators are expected to support the view of learner-centered instruction--instructors and learners as mutual partners (Duay & Bryan, 2006; Marceau, 2003)--and incorporate self-directed learning techniques as a method to address individual learning needs (Roberson & Merriam, 2005). For older students to interpret and make sense of their experiences, respect of the student’s diversity of learning needs must be given (Drago-Severson et al., 2001).

Regarding equity of access, demographics show that the older adult learner in the United States currently is likely to be a financially secure Caucasian female (Kim & Merriam, 2004). Concerns are expressed in the literature regarding higher education opportunities for those adults who have less than adequate resources with Johnson-Bailey (2002) noting that education has not yet met its lofty goals of equal access and
opportunity. Manheimer (1998) suggests that older adults without sufficient disposable income or prior education might continue to be excluded from learning opportunities unless changes are made to the direction of adult education.

The expectations from higher education participation expressed by older students are expanding self-enrichment, staying academically active, and earning the respect of society (Fuller, 2003). The perceived passivity of older students has been replaced by their expectation of being informed (Wolf, 1994), and they expect universities to respond to their needs (Merriam, 2005; Nesbit, 2001). We live in a global society and lifelong learning and continued education are means that can help them stay involved (Eisen, 2005; Elmore, 1999; Hake, 1999).

Methodology

This phenomenological qualitative study with a theoretical framework focusing on the concepts of possible selves and continuity was designed with issues of trustworthiness in mind. Various methods were used to recruit potential participants, including contact with personal acquaintances and alumni associations, placement of newspaper ads, participant recommendations, and ads on the Internet-based website Craigslist. Eight women who completed a master’s degree or specialist’s degree at age 60 and older were identified. They received e-mails, regular mail, and personal phone calls requesting participation and explaining the study. Of the eight, seven agreed to participate and constituted the purposeful sample for this study. For the seven, locations for the first of the two 1-1.5 hour interviews were determined. After meeting and building rapport but before the taped interviews began, consent forms (Appendix A) were signed and demographic questionnaires (Appendix B) completed. Participants chose their
pseudonyms either at the first or second interview. The primary method for gathering information was the use of an open-ended, semistandardized interview guide. This approach added focus and ensured collection of information in the same general areas from each interviewee while allowing for flexibility within individual interviews. Each participant was given a composition notebook and asked to record reflections or memories about her graduate experience that came to mind before her second interview. The contents of the journal were shared during the interviews by those women who chose to do so. The journals were not collected and were theirs to keep. The interviews were tape-recorded, ensuring that the data were accurately recorded for analysis, and the researcher transcribed tapes. The transcripts were coded, and themes emerged from the data.

Trustworthiness, or confidence, in the data was established through the process of triangulation, using different data-collection modes (interviews, demographic questionnaires, personal reflective journals, and field notes), and analyzing the interviews through two conceptual lenses. Credibility was established through member checking, crucial because it established the participants’ agreement that their experiences were reconstructed as they remembered sharing them during the interviews. The in-depth interviews enabled the researcher to offer thick descriptions, thus, facilitating transferability. The findings also have similarities to other studies’ findings regarding the older adult learner and should be relevant for future researchers. Dependability was established through triangulation that established validity and through member checking that established credibility. The technique for establishing confirmability for this study
was through triangulation that included, as part of the audit-trail of records, the researchers’ own reflective journal.

Approval for the project was obtained from the IRB at Texas State University-San Marcos. The participants were informed of their rights as research participants, asked to read and sign informed consent forms, and advised that they could stop the interview or drop out of the project at any time. In addition, they were advised that their information would remain confidential and their chosen pseudonyms would protect their identities.

**Key Findings**

Two main themes and six subthemes emerged from the analysis of the data.

(1) Self and Education

(a) Desire to learn: The participants had a deep desire to learn, a love of learning, and a lifelong desire for a formal education.

(b) Self-fulfillment: The participants felt that this was a time in life for them to meet goals and realize dreams.

(c) Reflections on being an older student: Age was not a negative issue for them as students in their graduate programs but, instead, was often seen as an asset.

(2) Experiences with Others

(a) Experiences with faculty: Professors’ positive feedback encouraged them, and criticisms were generally viewed as challenges rather than barriers.

(b) Relationships with students: Younger students offered different points of view in the classroom, and the women felt challenged to keep up with, or do better than, them.
(c) Family and friends: Spousal support was viewed as key to the ability to pursue a degree. Graduate school was not generally a topic of interest and discussion with other family members and friends.

Discussion

This study was specific to women who completed advanced degree programs at age 60 and older. The empirical and theoretical literature addressed issues of older adults’ participating in higher education programs with similarities and differences among those findings and with the findings of this study.

Empirical Literature

The women in this study were found to have an understanding of the importance of learning, to have a strong desire to learn, to have participated in higher education both for personal satisfaction and personal development, and to have tenacity and the drive to persevere. These findings support those of several studies including findings by Duay and Bryan (2006) on successful aging; Davey (2001) on self-fulfillment; Kinsel (2005) on resilience; Fuller (2003), Kerr (2004), Little (1995) and McCormack-Weiss (2003) on adult motivation to participate in higher education for reasons related to personal development and pursuit of dreams. These factors appear to be key to having the aspiration and fortitude to pursue and complete an advanced degree at an older age.

Literature concerning higher education by older adults indicates more women than men participate (Kim & Merriam, 2004). Likewise, Lamb and Brady (2005) found that there were gender gaps in educational participation after retirement with men participating less than women. Several women in this study corroborated these notions by discussing their spouse’s current lack of interest in education and preference for
"puttering" (participation in nonacademic activities). Although seemingly contradictory to the belief that older adults want to stay engaged in life (Miller, 1997), the case very well may be that puttering meets a spouse’s needs because the achiever role is no longer required. The purpose of the study was not to look at the spouses per se, but their role of support was shown to be an important factor in the women’s success.

Although the majority of the participants’ spouses had earned college degrees earlier in life, there was no perceived resentment by the women for having waited until later to pursue their own educational dreams, similar to findings by Hilton (2002). The finding by Armitage (2005) that waiting until later in life to pursue a degree enhanced the graduate school experience was echoed by several of the women. They described it as advantageous not to be hindered by the obligations younger students have, thereby allowing greater concentration on studies. Education has been shown to be a factor in later life satisfaction (Glass & Jolly, 1997), seemingly worth the wait. Waiting can remind one, though, of what was missed as one participant lamented: had she gotten an advanced degree earlier in life, she would have taught college. Being free from the need to work on an advanced degree for vocational purposes afforded the women the opportunity to choose programs that appealed to them intellectually, as discussed by Manheimer (2005). The findings of the participants are similar to Kerrs’ (2004) that almost 50% of older adults entering adult education programs do so for personal reasons rather than for an increased paycheck. Brillinger and Roy (2003), likewise, found that older adults appreciated the time and opportunity to learn for learning’s sake rather than merely for work requirements. The responses by the participants that they earned an advanced degree “just for me” support findings by Little (1995) that the pursuit of
intrinsic interests is a rationale for some older students to attend graduate school. “I want to know what else is out there” was the sentiment of one participant, supporting findings from Kinsel’s (2005) study that older women felt there was something else out there for them to learn.

Two participants discussed liberation although from slightly different angles. One participant discussed her pending retirement and said it will be liberating not having to earn a paycheck and to being able to choose what she wanted to do. She may return to campus to teach part time in an adjunct position, but her future plans are to take Spanish lessons and maybe earn a second MLA degree in American History. The sentiments are similar to Baer’s (2004) that “the learning journey of an open-minded woman leads to new destinations and opportunities for her future” (p. 175) and to Little’s (1995) that education also has the potential to be emancipatory and open up new directions for a life to take. The other participant discussed aging as liberation and referred to older women as being “let out of the cage” and liberated from obligations, therefore able to attend school. The implication of both sentiments is that the perks of aging are choice and opportunity, similar to findings by Davey (2001). “Liberation” per se was not a term used in the literature, but “choice” and “opportunity to participate as one ages” were, such as in Manheimer’s (2005) report that older women with fewer obligations were being afforded the opportunity of choice.

Kim and Merriam’s (2004) research found that the older learner was more influenced by cognitive issues than socialization opportunities and that the higher a persons’ educational level the less socialization was a factor. Participants in this study corroborated Kim’s and Merriam’s findings, stating that they had not placed a focus on
developing relationships with other students. Little (1995) maintained, though, that older adults gain a sense of well being through associations with younger students. The participants noted that they felt like just one of the students, and their age did not matter to the younger students, corroborating this notion. Also, Campbell (2006) found that women seek group-learning experiences. The women corroborated this notion through their choice to participate in degree programs at university settings. Although socialization was not a major factor influencing the women to choose to participate in higher education, it was a positive factor in the overall experience.

Cooper (1999) noted West’s (1996) suggestion that career development might be more socially acceptable for older adult’s participation in higher education rather than personal development. However, the women in this study did not report similar sentiments by younger students in their classes. The findings of this study concurred with Jensen’s (1999) regarding the positive experiences in intergenerational classrooms. With larger numbers of older adults predicted to enter higher education programs, perhaps future studies will find, similar to this study, that younger students are not inclined to express such negative sentiments. The participants in this study did not describe questions concerning their taking degree-oriented courses for personal reasons as part of the discourse with younger students in class. Based on findings from the literature and the responses of the seven participants, the mindsets of younger students do not appear to be a sign of concern to older women as graduate students.

The participants felt that age did not have a negative impact on learning or on their abilities, nor did they feel out of place in the classroom. In other words age was not seen as an issue for them as older students. This supported findings by Bratrud’s (1999)
that intergenerational classroom interactions with younger students kept older students feeling young. Although age was not considered an obstacle, several stated they were usually the only one their age in the class, so it was something that made them different from the younger students. The sentiments of several of the participants were that the older one gets, the more verbal one gets and that younger students are not intimidating. Their responses were consistent with Eisen’s (2005), suggesting age and experience gave them license to question established norms and to speak out.

The literature addressed health issues as concerns for older adults. A study by McCormack-Weiss (2003) found that one reason many older students dropped out of college is health issues. In this study, however, issues of health were not prominent as problems. The participants’ personal and family health issues were not considered to be obstacles they could not overcome. For example, Faith’s health issues forced her to stop out of school for a year, yet she persevered, graduated at age 64, and at 67 is planning to pursue a doctorate. Lea’s husband died of cancer during her master’s degree program, and she, too, persevered, graduated at age 76, and is contemplating pursuing a doctorate. Lea’s professor even helped turn the sad event of her husband’s death into a cathartic assignment, asking her to write about it using excerpts from a daily journal Lea kept throughout his ordeal. During Lucille’s undergraduate program a son died in a plane crash, and she suffered a cerebral vascular accident (stroke). She stated school was her rehabilitation. She, too, persevered, completing her undergraduate degree at age 56, a master’s degree at 59, and an education specialist’s degree at age 68. The participants’ strategies for coping with health issues, or grief, were similar to findings by Little (1995): there is a certain comfort in being a student. Their ability to persevere in educational
activities, despite their health issues, corroborates findings by Cusack, Thompson, and Rogers (2003) that education can be considered a health-promoting behavior.

The literature addressed barriers that included issues with faculty, access to student services, and programs. These issues, also, were not as prominent in responses from the participants, compared to the literature. For instance, a barrier identified by McCormack-Weiss (2003) concerns faculty support and the lack thereof as a chief cause of dropouts. Although lack of support was an issue at times for the participants in this study, the problems with faculty were considered to be, overall, motivators or challenges that could be overcome. One participant stated she realized that what she thought were conflicts with professors were not. This was realized in hindsight when looking at an artifact to jog her memory for her second interview. The positive outlooks of the participants regarding professors were congruent with findings of Armitage (2005): there is less negativity in hindsight. Passage of time may be a reason that some of the women were more positive about faculty interactions during their first interviews. Perhaps reminiscing during the first interview, or journaling afterwards, triggered reflections on the experiences because the second interview tended to elicit more statements about problems or disappointing moments with faculty. For the most part, though, their experiences with professors were described as positive across both sets of interviews.

The participants did not cite as problems issues with services and program structures or delivery that were noted in the literature. A study by McCoy (1999) found that issues arose when some services—such as computer labs, career centers, and dining halls—were available from only eight to five during the week. Other barriers Moore and Piland (1994) found were created by a campus’s physical environment including parking
lots and garages, sidewalks, buildings, and classrooms. Concerns with the participants’ programs were not generally described either. This may in part be explained by the fact that three of the participants attended a program designed specifically to meet the needs of adult students, and the coursework allowed them to participate in individual, or directed, studies tailored to their needs. The findings were similar to those of Ardelt (2000) and Hagedorn and Doyle (1993) regarding the value of specialty programs.

Several participants did mention they would like to take courses such as Spanish or religion as noncredit courses, similar to trends discussed in the literature by Manheimer (2005) for the development of both noncredit and credit programs to meet the demands of retirees seeking to continue their education.

**Theoretical Literature**

The theory of possible selves asserts that imagining oneself in the future allows one to organize personal actions and behaviors (Marcus & Nurius, 1986). This was apparent for the women in this study because they reported that throughout their lives they visualized earning a degree. “Although possible selves reflect a future orientation, they are closely connected with both past and present self-concepts” (Rossiter, 2007, p. 6). Their past self-concepts as students were evidenced by each woman’s declaring that she knew one day she would earn her degree; not one had doubts she would succeed. The literature indicates that an essential element to successful aging is the hoped-for possible self that offers opportunities to meet older adult’s desires for new experiences, shows motivation, and is related to well being (Smith & Freund, 2002). This study corroborated that perspective by finding none of the participants felt old, and none felt age was a deterrent to reaching for dreams. Frazier’s et al. (2000) contention that the notion of
possible selves is about the power of change and its potential for future growth was also congruent with findings of this study. The participants who had waited until later in life to earn an undergraduate degree saw their potential to continue their intellectual growth and so pursued graduate degrees.

The theory of continuity (Atchley, 1999) describes an adaptive strategy, based on what was successfully done in the past, which guides a person’s decisions and motivations for future endeavors. For the majority of the participants in this study, the past as undergraduate students was fairly recent. As for education, the concept implies that those who have an education will seek to further their education as they age, which, in fact, was the case for the participants in this study. This is consistent with Mehrotra’s (2003) contention that the more education you have, the more you will want. The unexpected finding was that the majority of the women had not earned an undergraduate degree until they were 50 years of age or older. As a result of successfully earning undergraduate degrees, each pursued a master’s degree. Three of the participants then continued on to earn a second master’s degree or a specialist’s degree. One participant is pursuing her pilot’s license, and one participant plans to earn her Ph.D. The findings of this study suggest that the concepts of the theory of continuity do indeed apply to the participant learners, and their quest for higher education.

Conclusions

As the population ages and older adults look for ways to spend their time, it is predicted many will choose to participate in educational activities. The literature has shown that past success with educational pursuits will motivate older adults to pursue educational courses to meet their needs and preserve their sense of well being. The theory
of continuity (Atchley, 1999) is about adaptation, change, and growth and not merely about the pursuit of activities with similar past successes. As a person ages, change is inevitable, and past successful experiences give them the confidence to adapt to these changes. In addition, the literature has shown that as a motivating factor, the idea of a possible-self (Markus & Nurius, 1986) perhaps spurs older adults to participate in higher education programs. By imagining oneself in the future, one can organize her or his actions and behaviors to achieve the dream. All of the participants in this study had a dream of earning a college degree and the confidence to earn one and even two master’s degrees. In addition to confidence, they were tenacious and persistent.

It is clear from the findings of this study and from the literature that education plays an important role in the lives of older adults. The challenge facing higher education administrators will be to ensure that their programs meet the needs of older students. Whether it is through the development of noncredit continuing education courses or of undergraduate and graduate courses, administrators need to be supportive and proactive. They also should be very aware of the potential avalanche of baby boomers beginning to retire and looking for educational outlets. Some older adults may want to attend school to learn skills for perhaps another career while others, as the findings of this study suggest, are likely to attend primarily for the love of learning.

From the analysis of this study, several conclusions can be drawn that may benefit those thinking or dreaming of participating in higher education programs. First, an intense desire to learn was primary to keeping the dream of college alive until a time when it could become a reality. Desire, coupled with perseverance, led to success and graduation. Second, seeking a graduate degree was basically a personal, often solitary,
venture intended for self-fulfillment unlike learning arenas such as Elder Hostel programs in which socialization is one of the aims. Third, age was not described as a hindrance or negative issue in the graduate school experience. It was thought of as an advantage; in fact, that waiting until later in life to pursue a degree enhanced the experience. Fourth, having support, particularly from a spouse but also from faculty, was an important factor in success for the older student. Fifth, there were no age-related differences observed among the women in the study regarding their pursuit of a graduate degree although the age span was 63 to 78.

All of the women attended graduate school for basically the same reasons, the love of learning and a desire to know. Times are different now for women than they were for the participants’ mothers. Older women no longer are defined by their age. Their lifestyle, style of dress, and choice of activities no longer fit in earlier preconceptions of what an older woman was supposed to embrace. The women in this study can be described as technologically savvy, driven, mentally strong, and as having a zest for life.

The purpose of this research study was to reveal the essence of the graduate school experience for women graduates’ age 60 and older. At the outset, the foundational question aimed at understanding the experience of the older female graduate student in the classroom and the social interactions with peers and professors on campus. The stories as they were told encompassed more than the aforementioned. Their experiences were more self-revealing and concerned the journey to achieve their lifetime goal of an education. The participants’ stages of life, as viewed by them, offered an opportunity to expand the breadth and depth of their being, and the chosen medium was higher education. The literature indicates the future enrollment of colleges and universities will
include older adults seeking knowledge for the love of learning. Clearly—with an admittedly small and local sample of women but with similar findings to the literature reviewed—the results of this study indicate that older adults plan to stay engaged in life through educational activities mainly for intrinsic reasons, such as personal challenge, self-fulfillment, and accomplishment.

**Implications**

The implications for practice and research based on the literature and results of this study indicate both a need to address issues of older adults on campus and to capture stories of older adults attending programs.

**Practice**

The literature indicates that older students are returning to the college campus and will increase in numbers as baby boomers retire. Manheimers’ (2002) projection that “in all likelihood the demand for educational opportunities will overwhelm current providers in terms of both numbers and range of curricular diversity” (p. 3) should be a wake up call for colleges and universities to examine how the issues are currently addressed. A plan should be enacted to ameliorate, if not eliminate, negative or counterproductive aspects of existing programs to ensure that they will meet the needs of the older adult learner. Particular attention should be paid to ethnic minorities or to those of less than adequate incomes. For example, the development of curriculum should take into account the student’s cultural background to prevent learning barriers (Ross-Gordon, 2003). Faculty should also be aware of the fact that some older students may not have been in a classroom for decades and should be willing to alter assignments. Faculty may find they need to develop new programs, such as incorporating life-wide learning that may enhance
programs and impart more meaning for the older learners. Life-wide learning refers to informal learning settings, such as the home, job, church, and family, as well as various other venues (Findsen, 2006; Pamphilon, 2005).

Research and Theory

Study findings imply the need for further research on the subject. Older adults will be returning to universities in large numbers if predictions are accurate. Research on this subject will aid in understanding the positions that older adults hold in classrooms and on campuses and will help faculty and administrations plan for inclusion and meet the needs of diversity. An additional, yet important, reason to research this population is to capture the stories and lessons from non-baby boomer, older-adult female students. These stories are part of our educational history and should be recorded for the education of future generations.

The results of this study add to the body of knowledge concerning higher education and older-adult women. As one ages and is no longer bound by as many obligations to others, one has opportunities to participate in educational activities, perhaps spurred on by one’s possible self and as a means of continuity in life’s journey. Marcus and Nurius’ (1986) theory of possible selves asserts that one can organize one’s actions and behaviors by imagining one’s future. “Possible selves are tailored to the individual’s own hopes and fears, but they are also influenced by the social, socio-cultural, and historical context surrounding the individual” (Norman & Aron, p. 501). The possible selves the women in this study imagined were as college graduates. The visions fit with Atchley’s (1999) theory of continuity, described as an adaptive strategy, based on past experiences that guides a person’s decisions and motivations for future
endeavors. Having found success with educational pursuits in the past (near or distant), one may choose to take educational courses to meet ones needs and to preserve ones sense of well being. The theory proposes the notion of a successful transition through older adulthood, perhaps based on the successful navigation of the educational arena. This was certainly the case for the women in this study, the majority of whom did not begin their educational journey until later in life and, once they completed their undergraduate degrees, continued on to complete one or more master’s degrees. Change is inevitable as one ages, and later-in-life education may help one traverse these changes with a sense of well being.

Recommendations

The findings of this study yield recommendations for practice and further research on the subject of older adults on the college campus. Older-adult students are becoming more prevalent, and meeting their needs through program adjustments and continued research will benefit all of the stakeholders involved.

Practice

There are several recommendations for practice based on the research findings:

1. Institutions of higher education should support older adult learners by having administrations and faculty examine the program support needs of older adults and develop programs to meet those needs. This would include helping faculty become aware of biases and preconceived ideas they may have about older adults in their classroom, whether they are older faculty or younger faculty. One of the universities attended by three of the participants offers a program that is aimed at
meeting the nontraditional learner's needs, and the participants were pleased that their studies were tailored to their interests.

2. Institutions of higher education should actively recruit older adults for their programs. Intergenerational or age-integrated classes will help reduce stereotyping of both older and younger adults and offer fertile world-view discussions within the classroom. The seven women each spoke about being the only one in their age range in the classroom. Although they did not see age as a problem for themselves, it was something they noticed. Also, they mentioned that they were pleased when the younger students valued their opinions and that they learned from the younger students.

3. Institutions of higher education should explore opportunities to support older adults with less than sufficient incomes to ensure that they are able to participate in educational programs. Several women in the study indicated they understood money could be an issue for older adults by mentioning that had their spouses not paid for school, or had they not worked for a university that waved their fees, they would have been unable to attend.

4. Institutions of higher education should reach out to adults who have the potential to be students, but because of limitations, or perhaps past negative educational experiences, may not have considered earning a college degree. Programs should be developed to educate adults regarding their potential and encourage their participation.
Research

There are several areas of potential research that can add to the body of knowledge concerning the phenomenon of older adults’ participation in graduate studies.

1. For this study, only women who persevered and graduated were interviewed. Perhaps research with a comparison group of women who do not complete programs may give insight into why some finish and some choose not to continue (health reasons aside). Is it the tenacity of the women or the accommodating atmosphere of the program, or both, that give some the impetus to graduate?

2. Only women who completed master’s degree programs were interviewed. Perhaps more research regarding the experiences of students’ age 60 and older in undergraduate or doctoral programs will offer additional insight and help administrations and faculty to understand more fully the older-adult learner and their needs.

3. A comprehensive study that includes interviews or questionnaires to be answered by spouses and/or family members will help us understand the impact participation in an advanced degree program by students’ age 60 and older has on family and the importance of such an impact.

4. A look at older men in graduate programs may give us an understanding of what drives them to participate in higher education programs. Is it the same as for older women?

5. This study looked at a small number of participants, the majority of which were Caucasian. Future research should focus on a larger and more ethnically diverse group of women and women of low incomes.
Final Thoughts

Shifts in the demographic makeup of colleges and universities are occurring as older adults participate in programs at higher rates, the majority of which are women. No longer is higher education viewed primarily as a place for young adults. Colleges and universities are more diverse “age-wise” with students having a myriad of reasons for attending. Based on the literature and the results of this study, many older adults are participating in higher education programs for the love of learning. The implications for administrators to meet the needs of older adult learners may be more pertinent than ever, considering the millions of baby boomers who are beginning to retire. It has been predicted that many with prior educations will return to school, and, if the results of this study are any indication, those who did not have an opportunity to attend college at a traditional age also will participate. The pre-baby boomers on campuses are leading the way. Their stories are important and should be captured for future generations to learn about their endeavors and appreciate their efforts.
APPENDIX A

LETTER OF EXPLANATION

Dear ____________,

You are invited to participate in a study about women who were at least 60 years of age when they completed their graduate degree. The study has been reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board at Texas State University-San Marcos. The title of the project is: A Phenomenological Study of the Graduate School Experience of Women Age 60 and Older. I am the principal investigator and a doctoral student in the Adult, Professional, and Community Education Program at Texas State. My e-mail is jb1564@txstate.edu and my phone number is (512) 268-3839. My research advisor is Dr. Jovita Ross-Gordon and she may be reached at (512) 245-8084 or at jross-gordon@txstate.edu.

The purpose of the study is to learn about women’s experiences during their advanced degree programs. You will be asked to participate in two interviews that will last 1 to 1.5-hours each and will be scheduled approximately 10 days apart. It is hoped that through the reflection process you will experience pleasant memories of your experiences and be able to work through any unresolved issue you may have had. You will be asked to sign a consent form at our first meeting.
before the interview begins. If you would like further information about the study, I will be glad to call and talk with you. Also, please feel free to contact me for answers to any questions you may have about your rights as a research participant. If you do tentatively agree to participate, please return your reply in the self-addressed, self-stamped envelope, or you may e-mail me indicating your interest. I will follow up on your response with a letter and a phone call. Thank you for your time. I look forward to hearing from you.

Judy Burdett, Doctoral Student
Texas State University-San Marcos
APPENDIX B

CONSENT FORM

Please read this consent form and ask any questions you have before agreeing to be in the study.

Introduction: The purpose of this study is to understand the experiences of women who graduated with an advanced degree at age 60 and older.

Procedure: You will be interviewed two times and each interview will be audio taped. Each interview will occur in a natural setting of your choice, last less than 90 minutes, and be spaced approximately 10 days apart.

Risks and Benefits of Participating in the Study: The study has the following risk: You may have some mild anxiety about being interviewed and sharing your story. The benefits are having an opportunity to reflect on your experiences and to add to the body of knowledge about older adult learning.

Confidentiality: The records of this study will be kept in confidence. I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify you in any written report.

Voluntary Nature of the Study: You are being asked to volunteer for this study. You may withdraw at any time and for any reason.

Contacts and Questions: If you have any other questions you may contact me at (512) 268-3839 or at jlb1564@txstate.edu or my research advisor, Dr. Jovita Ross-Gordon at (512) 245-8084 or at jross-gordon@txstate.edu.
Statement of Consent: I have read the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

Name of participant ___________________________ Date _________

Signature of participant ___________________________ Date _________

Name of investigator ___________________________ Date _________
APPENDIX C

DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONS

(1) What were your highest degree and the field of study?
   Degree _______ field __________________________________________

(2) How long did you spend in your advanced degree program?
   Number of years_____ Please check: Part-time____ Full-time________

(3) In what year did you complete your advanced degree?________________

(4) At what age did you complete your advanced degree?________________

(5) Status(s) while working on your degree (please check all that apply)
   Single____ Married____ Widowed____ Divorced____

(6) Employment status during degree program:
   Worked part-time ____ full-time____
   Type of work_______________ Retired_____ how long______________

(7) What year did you complete your undergraduate degree?
   Year __________ Field of study ____________________________________

(8) What is your ethnicity? ____________________________

(9) Did anyone else in your immediate family complete an advanced degree?
    Yes ___ No ___ If yes, who and what degree __________________________

(10) Did your parents work in the field of education? Yes_______ No_______
If yes please explain briefly _____________________________

_________________________________________________

What degrees did they have _____________________________

_________________________________________________

If not, then what were their occupations __________________

_________________________________________________

(11) What value or expectations did your family place on higher education when you were growing up? _____________________________
APPENDIX D

INTERVIEW GUIDE

(1) Before we talk about your experiences in graduate school please tell me briefly about your life before you went back to school.

Prompts: Experiences such as your work in or out of the home, your family, and your social activities.

(2) Please tell me briefly what led you back to school to pursue a graduate degree.

(3) Please tell me about your experiences during your graduate school program.

Prompts: These can include experiences with your family, social experiences both at school and away from school, and your academic experiences with fellow students or professors.

(4) Please tell me about any critical incidents that happened during your graduate studies that stand out in your mind.

Prompts: These can be good experiences, or perhaps unfortunate or negative experiences. What happened, who was involved, how did you feel?
(5) For the benefit of women over 60 who may be considering a return to school please impart any words of wisdom or encouragement you feel would be beneficial to them.

(6) Please add anything else you would like to about your experiences.
REFERENCES


