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Understanding the Experience of Women Community College Transfer Students

Over the Age of 25 at UCLA

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree Doctor of Education

by

Heather Adams

2018

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Understanding the Experience of Women Community College Transfer Students

Over the Age of 25 at UCLA

by

Heather Adams

Doctor of Education

University of California, Los Angeles, 2018

Professor Robert T. Teranishi, Chair

The individual context and life course of women returning to higher education places them on a unique student development arc—one that does not necessarily align with the residential, youth-culture tradition of large public research universities. With this in mind, the aim of this study was to better understand the personal experiences and ecological dynamics of women transfer students over the age of 25 as they pursued a degree at UCLA. Currently, very little research literature focuses on age, gender, and the transfer student experience within the four-year university context, particularly within the R1 research university environment. This study helps fill this gap in the literature.

I conducted interviews with 30 women to understand the challenges they faced as they juggled multiple roles—including parent, partner, employee, and student—and navigated a university that was not necessarily designed to meet their needs or prepared to engage students who arrived with rich life experience and knowledge. Study participants described major

challenges that arose from traversing multiple roles and responsibilities while they were students. They reported feeling isolated, describing obstacles to their sense of connection that included issues related to navigating an institution set up to serve residential and financially dependent students. Moreover, age and a related sense of disconnect with the majority of other (typically younger) students were significant factors in their college experience.

The women in the study desired to connect with others who shared their collective identity and to engage and develop in the campus environment. Although the women perceived a relative lack of institutional awareness regarding how their needs and experiences might differ from those of younger, residential students, the university did provide some key spaces. In doing so, the university demonstrated that these women and their peers were important and valued by the institution. When the women did have the opportunity to connect with others who shared their collective experience, they felt a strong sense of belonging and believed it enriched their academic experience as a whole. The people on campus who understood the transfer and non-traditional student context and the spaces and places that were designed to address the women's specific needs helped to generate pride and institutional loyalty for the study participants.

The narratives and rich life experiences of the women interviewed for this study provide context and insight that can inform higher education policy and practice, particularly in relation to the post-traditional transfer student experience at the R1 university level. The dissertation includes recommendations for future research, policy, and practice to better serve this community of students. Recommendations for future research include continued investigation of the effect age and gender have on various aspects of the transfer student college experience at four-year universities. Particularly, how age may influence the socio-academic needs and integration of post-traditional students, as well as what impact students over the age of 25 have

on the university community. Broad scale accountability and financial policies that effectively support post-traditional students such as outcomes-based funding, Pell Grant reform, and affordable child-care and housing options are discussed. Lastly, practice that deliberately fosters campus awareness regarding the post-traditional student experience and rallies ongoing university support for the community, such as inclusivity of women students over the age of 25 in the recruitment conversation and materials, staff and faculty professional development, unification of university messaging, and assessing and effectively meeting student need are suggested as immediate solutions to explicitly demonstrate that this community is recognized and valued by the university.

The dissertation of Heather Adams is approved.

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2018

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Education

2012   Concentration in Psychology
                Santa Monica Community College
                Santa Monica, California

2014   Bachelor of Arts (Psychology)
                University of California, Los Angeles

Professional Experience

1994-2014   Professional Actress and Acting Coach
                Los Angeles, California

2014–2015   Transfer Student Program Coordinator
                Bruin Resource Center
                University of California, Los Angeles

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CHAPTER 1:

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Numerous national studies have focused on the significant role community colleges play in higher education access, equity, and success for students who are often referred to as "non-traditional" or "post-traditional," including those over 25 years of age, parents, veterans, those who work while enrolled or who are enrolled part-time, and those from lower socioeconomic status backgrounds (Handel & Williams, 2012; Jones & Kelly, 2007; Levin, 2007; Mathews & Powell, 2016; Soares, Gagliardi, & Nellum, 2017). Many of these studies emphasize the substantial economic and societal importance of these students—particularly women and students of color—successfully transferring from community colleges to four-year universities and completing bachelor's degrees (Handel & Williams, 2012; Jones & Kelly, 2007; Levin, 2007; Mathews & Powell, 2016; Pérez & Ceja, 2010; Reyes, 2011). However, studies exploring the intersection of age, gender, and the unique challenges of transferring and navigating a four-year university are scarce, especially at the research university level (Deutsch & Schmertz, 2011; Packard, Gagnon, LaBelle, Jeffers, & Lynn, 2011; Zhang, Lui, & Hagedorn, 2013). This in spite of the fact that women outnumber men in all higher education sectors and make up the majority of students in all age groups at community colleges, especially those over the age of 25 years (Baime & Baum, 2016; St. Rose & Hill, 2013).

It is important to note at the outset that, throughout this dissertation, I use the terms "post-traditional" and "non-traditional" to refer to students over the age of 25 years. In the current literature, these terms may refer to students with a broad range of characteristics including those related to age, timing of enrollment after high school, financial independence, and parenting status (Aud et al., 2010; Bean & Metzner, 1985; Blumenstyk, 2018; Choy, 2002; Horn, 2006;

Horn & Carroll, 1996; Jinkens, 2009; Kasworm, 2010; Levin, 2007; Soares et al., 2017). This is in contrast to "traditional students," whom researchers define as those who enter four-year universities straight out of high school (commonly between the age of 17–20), and who, for the most part, are able to direct most of their energies toward school and their studies while they attend college (Blumenstyk, 2018; Choy, 2002; Horn, 2006; Horn & Carroll, 1996, Kasworm, 2010; Soares et al., 2017). For reasons I explain in greater detail in Chapter 2, I use the terms "non-traditional" and "post-traditional" interchangeably to refer community college transfer students over the age of 25. Because this categorization is based largely on age, I also sometimes refer to these students as "older."

Students who fall into the post-traditional category are quite distinct from other students. They tend to be women, financially independent, working while in school, and enrolled in pubic community colleges (Baime & Baum, 2016; Soares et al., 2017). The diverse demographics, backgrounds, and multiple life roles they bring to the university are an asset; nevertheless, their life situations can also create major obstacles as they navigate the college process (Gault, Noll, & Reichlin, 2017; Grabowski, 2016; Soares et al., 2017). There is a woeful lack of awareness and institutional practices that address the unique needs of this student community, particularly at the four-year and research university level (Bahr, Toth, Thirolf, & Massé, 2013; Donaldson & Townsend, 2007; Grabowski, 2016; Sims, & Barnett, 2015; Sissel, Hansman, & Kasworm, 2001; Soares et al., 2017). Reports on the college experience of post-traditional learners tend to focus on community colleges, certificate programs, and for-profit universities as a quick fix to the potential career needs of older students, yet they overlook non-traditional transfer students as viable candidates for the academic rigors of the research university environment or four-year

universities in general (Blumenstyk, 2018; Bahr et al., 2013; Donaldson & Townsend, 2007; Sims & Barnett, 2015; Sissel et al., 2001; Soares et al., 2017).

There is a gap in the research literature regarding the experiences of and best practices for female students over the age of 25 who transfer from community colleges to four-year institutions (Bahr et al., 2013; Deutsch & Schmertz, 2011; Sissel et al., 2001; Zhang et al., 2013). Post-traditional students are understudied in general, leading to a lack of understanding of how best to serve those who transfer (Bahr et al., 2013; Deutsch & Schmertz, 2011; Sissel et al., 2001; Zhang et al., 2013). Unless post-traditional students' educational journeys can be sustained through the four-year university process, there will be little impact on their individual academic ambitions or broader national trends (Bahr et al., 2013; Wyatt, 2011; Saunders, 2015; Zhang et al., 2013). The current study adds to the research literature on this large and diverse community of students, with a particular focus on the experiences of women. The primary goal of this work is to increase educator awareness regarding who these students are, what they experience while in school, and how best to support them as they transition to four-year institutions and persist to graduation.

Background of the Problem

College Completion and the Importance of the Post-Traditional Learner

Raising college completion rates has recently been a focus on both the federal and state level because of the large-scale economic and societal implications (Blumenstyk, 2018; Carnevale, Jayasundera, & Gullish, 2016; Complete College America, 2014; Handel & Strempel, 2016). It is projected that, in a few short years, 65% of American jobs will require postsecondary education, with 35% of jobs requiring bachelor's degrees (Backes, Holzer, & Dunlop Velez, 2015; Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2013; Carnevale et al., 2016). Since the recession,

opportunities for those with degrees have increased exponentially—over 95% of jobs created have gone to workers with some college education—while job growth for high school graduates has been virtually non-existent (Carnevale et al., 2016). These trends are expected to continue.

Jobs for those without degrees (or without at least some postsecondary education) are disappearing, making a bachelor's degree essential for those wanting to succeed in the labor market (Backes et al., 2015; Carnevale et al., 2016). Not only will jobs require degrees, but the payout is also telling: The median salary of a full-time employee with a bachelor's degree is $60,000, compared to $36,000 for someone with a high school diploma, and $42,000 for someone with an associate's degree (American Council on Education, 2017). Improving college degree attainment rates can tighten the achievement gap and increase upward mobility for the economically disadvantaged (Backes et al., 2015; Haskins, Holzer, Lerman, 2009; Isaacs, 2007; Jepsen et al., 2014).

College completion rates across the country are not where they need to be, however, in order to meet workforce needs and to meet the projection set a decade ago that 60% of Americans will hold college credentials by 2025 (Mathews, 2012; Matthews & Powell, 2016; Pingel, Parker, & Sisneros, 2016). Currently, fewer than half of 25- to 64-year-olds have credentials beyond a high school diploma (Matthews & Powell, 2016). Nationally, 41% of Americans between the ages of 25 and 64 have at least an associate's degree—9% have completed an associate's degree, 20.7% have completed a bachelor's degree, and 11.9% have earned a graduate or professional degree (Matthews & Powell, 2016). Pingel and colleagues (2016) reported that even if national high school graduation rates were 100%, and all high school students immediately articulated directly to college, states still would fall short of the 60% college attainment goal by 2025.

Current college completion rates mean that roughly 60 million 25- to 64-year-old Americans have completed high school or less, and an additional 36 million have earned college credit but not a degree (Matthews & Powell, 2016; Pingel et al., 2016; Soares et al., 2017). It is this working-age community with some or no college credit that economists, educators, and researchers see as the potential—and truly the vital key—to both national economic vitality and closing the achievement gap (Jones & Kelly, 2007; Matthews & Powell, 2016; Pingel et al., 2016; Soares et al., 2017). These post-traditional learners have become crucial in the national conversation regarding college completion rates, social equity, global economic competitiveness, and the shifting landscape of college and university demographics (Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance [ACSFA], 2011; Bergman, Gross, Berry, & Shuck, 2014; Carnevale & Rose, 2011; Jones & Kelly, 2007; Kasworm, 2014). As I discuss next, community colleges are instrumental in improving degree outcomes and upward social mobility for post-traditional learners (Jenkins & Fink, 2016; Ma, Pender, and Welch, 2016).

Community Colleges and Post-Traditional Students

While there are many higher education sectors to choose from, most students over the age of 25 enroll in public two-year community colleges (Ma & Baum, 2016; Turk & Chen, 2017). With open admissions policies, low tuition, geographic convenience, and many career trajectory options available, community colleges play a crucial role in American higher education and degree access (Handel & Strempel, 2016; Juszkiewicz, 2016; Ma & Baum, 2016). In fact, 42% of all undergraduates are community college students, and the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) reported that 46% of all students who completed degrees at four-year universities had enrolled in a two-year institution at some point in their academic careers (Shapiro, Dundar, Yuan et al., 2014; see also Ma & Baum, 2016).

Community colleges offer a variety of academic and career-focused options such as associate's degrees and workforce certificates. They also continue to be a popular and financially feasible route to baccalaureate attainment, particularly for students of color and low-income, working, and older students (Handel & Williams, 2012; Handel & Strempel, 2016; Hagedorn, 2010; Jenkins & Fink, 2016). While 38% of all undergraduates are over the age of 25, 50% of students at community colleges are 25 or older, and 30% are over 30; the average age of a community college student is 28 years old (Juszkiewicz, 2016; Mullin, 2012; Mullin, 2017; McFarland et al., 2017). Other demographic breakdowns include:

- 60% of community college students are financially independent (Duke-Benfiled, 2015; Juszkiewicz, 2016; Mullin, 2012).

- 41% have incomes under $20,000 (Duke-Benfiled, 2015; Juszkiewicz, 2016; Mullin, 2012).

- 60% work more than 20 hours a week (Duke-Benfiled, 2015; Orozco & Cauthen, 2009), and 22% work full time while they are also full-time students (McFarland et al., 2017; Mullin, 2017).

- Roughly half are from historically marginalized groups; community colleges enroll 52% of all African American students and 57% of all Hispanics nationally (Baine & Baum, 2016; Mullin, 2017).

- 36% are the first in their family to go to college (McFarland et al., 2017; Mullin, 2017).

- 27% are parents, and 17.5% are single parents (Duke-Benfield 2015; McFarland et al., 2017; Mullin, 2012; Mullin, 2017)

- 62% are enrolled part-time (McFarland et al., 2017; Mullin, 2017).

While it is true that not all community college students are post-traditional students, 50% are. So, the trends listed above are common or even more prominent in the post-traditional student community (Blumenstyk, 2018; Juszkiewicz, 2016; McFarland et al., 2017; Mullin, 2017; Soares et al., 2017). Indeed, research shows that 70% of students over 25 years old are employed while enrolled in college (compared to 52% of other undergraduates), and 45% work full time while simultaneously enrolled in classes (Soares et al., 2017). Across all higher education sectors, 60% of non-traditional students are women, 44% are from historically marginalized communities, 48% have dependents, and 25% are single parents (Soares et al., 2017). As they juggle multiple life roles, non-traditional students are often unable to enroll in college full time; thus, the ability to enroll part time at community college is a huge benefit (Soares et al., 2017). Commuting versus living on campus is also a reality for this community; only 2% of non-traditional students live on campus, versus 26% of other students (Soares et al., 2017).

Women post-traditional students. Over the past 25 years, the higher education sector has seen tremendous growth in the number of women completing at least a bachelor's degree and pursuing higher education credentials (Ma et al., 2016; St. Rose & Hill, 2013). Nationally in 2015, 24% of African American women, 18% of Hispanic women, and 45% of White women had at least a bachelor's degree (Ma et al., 2016). According to the American Association of University Women, women now "make up the majority of students in all sectors of higher education" and "outnumber men across all races/ethnicities at community colleges" (St. Rose & Hill, 2013, p. 7). In fact, 60% of students over the age of 25 in all sectors of higher education are women. Community colleges are a terrific access point for working women in general, mothers, and women of color; women often choose this path for the affordability, flexibility, and access to

resources such as childcare that these schools tend to supply, as well as the ability to attend classes online, in the evening, on weekends, or part time (Deutsch & Schmertz, 2011; Packard, Gagnon, & Senas, 2012; Pérez & Ceja, 2009; Reyes, 2011). Overall, 57% of community college students are women, and a full 40% of women in community colleges are over the age of 25 (McFarland et al., 2017; Mullin, 2017; St. Rose & Hill, 2013; Soares et al., 2017).

Not all women undergraduates over the age of 25 attend community college with the intent to transfer to four-year universities. Those who do, however, tend to also be first-generation college students from low-income households and historically underrepresented groups. Moreover, they are often mothers, and are balancing multiple life roles and responsibilities in addition to their school obligations (Deutsch & Schmertz, 2011; Espinosa, 2011; Pérez & Ceja, 2010; Packard et al., 2011; Reyes, 2011; Reyes, 2012; St. Rose & Hill, 2013; Soares et al., 2017). Women non-traditional students tend to have unique, non-linear, and often prolonged educational journeys and are more likely than male students to take time off from their education because of family, economic, and cultural expectation factors (Deutsch & Schmertz, 2011; Chenowith, 2007; Fry, 2002; Pérez & Ceja, 2010; Reyes, 2011; Sweet & Moen, 2007).

Women over the age of 25 are often motivated to go back to school because of a major life transition such as career change, divorce or loss of a spouse, or some other circumstance that adds to the pressure of balancing life roles and postsecondary education attainment (Compton, Cox, & Laanan, 2006; Gault, Noll, & Reichlin Cruse, 2017; Gault, Reichlin, Roman, 2014a; Goldrick-Rab & Sorensen, 2011; Nelson & Froehner, 2013). The Institute for Women's Policy Research reported that in 2012 over a quarter of all undergraduate students (4.8 million students) were raising children, with 2.1 million of these students attending two-year institutions. In fact,

30% of all community college students were also parents (Gault, Reichlin, Reynolds, & Froehner, 2014b; Noll, Reichlin, & Gault, 2017). Gault et al. (2014b) found that women were much more likely to be balancing parenthood and college: Close to three-quarters (71%) of all student parents (and 79.4% of single parents) were women. Single mothers made up 43% of the total student parent population, while single fathers made up just 11% (Gault et al., 2014b; Kruvelis, Cruse, & Gault, 2017). And, of particular relevance to this study, 44% of all single mothers were attending public two-year institutions (Kruvelis et al., 2017).

Students with children are more likely than other students to have low incomes and to be the first in their family to attend college (Miller, Gault, & Thorman 2011; Nelson, Froehner &, Gault, 2013). Eighty-nine percent of single mothers are considered low income, and 63% live at or below the federal poverty level (Kruvelis et al., 2017). Eighty-one percent of single mothers have no income of their own to cover college expenses (Kruvelis et al., 2017). Unfortunately, student parents, particularly those who are single, have low degree attainment—only 31% of single mothers over the age of 25 have a bachelor's degree or higher—and they typically graduate with higher levels of debt then other married and non-parenting students (Kruvelis et al., 2017).

Women returning to higher education after pursuing other life goals may be balancing careers, families, children, commutes, and other life roles (McFarland et al., 2017; Mullin, 2012, 2017; St. Rose & Hill, 2013; Soares et al., 2017). Women more than men tend to acquire the roles of responsibilities of caretaking, parenting, and household management (Gault et al., 2014a; Kruvelis et al., 2017; Ross-Gordon, 1999; Setftersten & Lovegreen, 1998). These added roles and socio-cultural expectations put women students over the age of 25 year in a unique position at a university built for students in a much different life stage. With the growing number of

women over 25 filling community colleges and universities there is an urgency in studying and better understanding this student community (St. Rose & Hill, 2013; Soares et al., 2017).

Transfer and community college completion for post-traditional students. Whereas traditionally aged college students (ages 17–22) may attend college straight out of high school, be financially dependent on their families, live on campus, and be able to dedicate themselves full time to school, this is not the case for most post-traditional students (Lumina Foundation, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c; Soares et al., 2017). As such, flexibility and access are imperative when taking about post-traditional learners. These students are incredibly diverse in their demographics and are distinct from their peers with respect to their backgrounds and life experiences (Blumenstyk, 2018; Baime & Baum 2016; Grabowski, 2016; Soares et al., 2017). Unfortunately, the academic success of non-traditional students and their ability to successfully navigate the college pathway appears to be linked to their conflicting responsibilities and lack of institutional support and preparedness (Blumenstyk, 2018; Grabowski et al., 2016; O'Toole, Stratton, & Wetzel, 2003; Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005).

Current reports paint a bleak picture when it comes to retention and degree completion rates for non-traditional students nationally (Kasworm, 2010; Ma & Baum, 2016; National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2013, 2015). According to the U. S. Census Bureau, in 2016 there were 36 million Americans aged 25 or over who have some college education, but no degree (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016). Eighty-six percent of these post-traditional learners have more than one year of college completed, yet no degree or certificate to show for their efforts (Soares et al., 2017). The American Council on Education (2013) reported that only 33.7% of non-traditional students completed a baccalaureate degree, compared to 54.2% of students who took a more traditional collegiate path (Soares et al., 2017). Choy (2002) found that 50% of non-

traditional students seeking bachelor's degrees were no longer enrolled for any type of degree after three years, compared to only 12% of traditional students pursuing bachelor's degrees (Choy, 2002; NCES, 2013; Shapiro, Dundar, Ziskin et al., 2013).

Furthermore, while 81% of community college students enroll with the intent to transfer and earn a bachelor's degree, national transfer rates vary from 14% to 33% depending on the source and the state (Bailey, Jaggars, & Jensen, 2015; Community College Research Center, 2016; Jenkins & Fink, 2016). Community college transfer students over 25 years of age do well academically once students transfer and establish themselves at a four-year university, particularly for those who transfer to a very selective institution (Jenkins & Fink, 2016; Shapiro, Dundar, Wakhungu, Yuan, & Harrell, 2015; Shapiro, Dundar, Ziskin et al., 2013). But reports also suggest that lower percentages of non-traditional students choose to enroll at select research universities in comparison to students who are more traditional in terms of age, race, and socioeconomic status (Kasworm, 2010; Ma & Baum, 2016; NCES, 2015).

Recent national and local commitments to transfer, such as the March 2018 pledge by University of California (UC) President Janet Napolitano to guarantee UC admission to all academically eligible California community college students, has made more urgent the issue of transfer and bachelor's degree completion (UCOP, 2018). It is vital that educators at two- and four-year universities better understand how to support the transfer community, including the high number of post-traditional learners (Bahr et al., 2013; Wyner, Dane, Jenkins, & Fink, 2016). These students may be the key to universities reaching their degree-attainment goals, but educators and institutions do not appear to fully understand the non-traditional student experience, how to effectively engage this community, the common challenges or barriers to their degree completion, and how student development patterns may differ for this group, nor do

universities seem to be serving this unique demographic successfully (Bergman, Gross, Berry, & Shuck, 2014; Kasworm, 2012; Sissel et al., 2001; Stevens, 2014).

Four-Year Universities and R1 Research Universities

According to the most recent Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education, an R1 research or doctoral university is an institution in the United States that engages in extensive research activity, offers a full range of baccalaureate through doctoral level programs, gives high priority to research, and awards at least 20 research/scholarship doctoral degrees per year. This classification currently includes 115 schools, 81 of which are public universities (Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research [IUCPR], 2015). For example, eight out of the nine University of California schools—including UCLA, UC Berkeley, Irvine, and Davis—are categorized as R1 research universities (IUCPR, 2015).

Public four-year research universities, particularly R1 research universities such as the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), are an important area of focus with respect to post-traditional learners for five reasons. First, the majority of students who transfer in the United States do so from community colleges to public universities. Specifically, 73% of all community college transfer students transfer to public four-year institutions, and 42% go on to complete their bachelor's degree within six years of transferring, with an ultimate reported completion rate of 65% (Jenkins & Fink, 2016; Shapiro, Dundar, Wakhungu et al., 201; Shapiro, Dundar, Ziskin et al., 2013). Second, and related to the first point, public universities offer financially feasible access to degree completion; this is especially relevant given the financial concerns of the non-traditional student community.

Third, many public research universities, such as those within the University of California (UC) system, have made recent pledges to increase the number of transfer students

from local community colleges incrementally over the next few years; likewise, they have committed to finding ways to simplify and streamline the transfer pathway for more fluid access and transfer success, raising enrollment rates at public research universities (Freeling, 2015; McMillian, 2015; UC Office of the President [UCOP], 2014, 2016, 2018). In addition to the societal benefits, the community college community is attractive to public universities looking to diversify their undergraduate student body (Handel & Strempel, 2016; Labov, 2012; National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine [NASEM], 2016; Provasnik & Planty, 2008).

Fourth, matriculation through a public research university ensures a high level of academic rigor. Moreover, more and more fields require bachelor's and master's degrees, making completion significant for many career trajectories. While not all students (or post-traditional students specifically) attend community colleges with the intent to transfer—and some may simply be attending in order to complete an associate's degree or credential or because they enjoy life-long learning—most do view it as a starting point for eventual baccalaureate completion (Bailey, Jaggars, & Jenson, 2015; Handel, 2013; Handel & Strempel, 2016). Students understand that in order to truly control their economic futures in today's global knowledge-based system, baccalaureate credentials provide an important advantage, especially those from selective R1 universities (Bailey, Jaggars, & Jenson, 2015; Handel, 2013; Handel, & Strempel, 2016).

Lastly, as stressed above, the experience of post-traditional students at four-year universities has not been thoroughly explored (Bahr et al., 2013; Wyner et al., 2016). Most post-traditional students take the community college pathway to a degree, and as transfer rates increase, it will be imperative to better understand these students and their needs (Handel & Williams, 2012; Handel & Strempel, 2016; Hagedorn, 2010; Jenkins & Fink, 2016; Soares et al.,

2017). Prior studies have explored the support systems and services available to help students transfer to four-year universities, the issues transfers face, and best practices for serving transfer students in general, but rarely have they examined experiences post-transfer (at the four-year and R1 university level) or the experiences of post-traditional students, and women specifically (Bahr et al., 2013; Handel, 2011; Handel, 2013; Handel & Strempel, 2016; Herrera & Jain, 2013; Kasworm, 2010; Laanan, 2001; Laanan, Starobin, & Eggleston, 2010; Marling, 2013; Rosenberg, 2016).

Purpose of the Study

The individual context and life-course of adult women returning to higher education places them on a unique student development arc—one that does not necessarily align with the residential, youth-culture tradition of large public research universities or conventional student development theories on which many educators and researchers rely (Deil-Amen, 2011; Renn & Arnold, 2003). Traditional student development models assume societal norms in terms of age and gender, and they adhere to an old-fashioned psychosocial developmental spectrum of what it means to be a college student (Bronfenbrenner, 1989; Deil-Amen, 2011; Renn & Arnold, 2003). In so doing, they often exclude the unique experiences and distinctly different developmental phases post-traditional students may go through (Deil-Amen, 2011).

The unique evolution and individual educational journeys of students returning to school later in life require educators to better understand the ecosystem and personal context of their experiences so that these students do not feel marginalized or as though they do not matter or belong (Deutsch & Schmertz, 2011; Kasworm, 2012; Renn & Arnold, 2003; Rosenberg, 2016; Sissel et al., 2001). In order to better serve this important group of students, it is imperative for educators to more thoroughly examine the intersection of gender, age, and the experiences of this

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community as they navigate a research university environment modeled to serve a distinctly different demographic on a markedly different developmental path. As such, the purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of post-traditional women community college transfer students as they pursued a degree at a UCLA.

In order to comprehensively explore the multidimensional experiences of women over age 25 as they matriculated at UCLA, I moved beyond traditional student development theories (typically based on residential, youth-culture tradition and experience). In particular, I used an integrative approach that included the personal and the larger sociocultural perspective nested within a contextualized ecological systems theory frame (Bronfenbrenner, 2001; Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). I investigated the experiences of post-traditional women students using Bronfenbrenner's (2001) ecological systems theory. This framework, which I describe in greater detail in Chapter 2, centers the individual within an interacting social context. It provided a holistic lens through which I could examine what motivated participants, what they got out of the college experience, and what they felt contributed to their success at UCLA, while also giving me the ability to investigate any larger societal systems at play (Bronfenbrenner, 2001). In short, ecological systems theory allowed me to explore the interaction of participants' internal motivation with social, cultural, and (potentially) institutional and environmental factors.

I explored the unique intersection of age, gender, and the undergraduate transfer student experience at a UCLA through the following research question and sub-questions:

What are the ecological dynamics and personal experiences of women transfer students over the age of 25 as they pursue a degree at a four-year public research university?

    a. How do women transfer students over the age of 25 describe their college experiences within the context of their life trajectory?

b. What educational experiences do these women say are most salient in their life trajectories?

c. What networks of community and support are significant to women transfer students over the age of 25 during their time at UCLA?

Overview of Research Design

To gain a deep understanding of the narratives and lived experience of older women transfer students during their time at UCLA, I used qualitative methods, recording the experiences and ecological dynamics of the participants via in-depth interviews. This allowed me to discern rich, detailed findings and incorporate the personal context relevant to each participant. It also allowed for a nuanced exploration of each woman's story—one that more thoroughly included her personal insights regarding UCLA and her life trajectory.

At UCLA in the 2016–2017 academic year, transfer students made up 34% of the incoming undergraduate class and roughly 24% of the entire undergraduate student body (UCLA Academic Planning and Budget [APB], 2018). APB noted that in 2016, of the 7,312 transfer students enrolled 20% of transfers were over the age of 25 representing roughly 5% of the total undergraduate student body (Adam Sugano, personal communication, October 26, 2017). All participants in this study self-identified as women over the age of 25 who transferred to UCLA from a California community college. I interviewed 30 women who had been at UCLA for one full quarter or more and who had therefore already experienced their initial transition to the university.

Public Engagement and Significance

An investigation of the experiences of women transfer students over the age of 25 can assist student services and academic affairs professionals as well as faculty in better supporting

this population. This is particularly true at the 4-year and R1 research university level as little research has been done on college experience and age within this context. Findings from this study will be useful at the local level—within the UCLA and UC—to inform practice, policy, student advising services, and program planning. I will discuss findings with leaders in the UC system to find ways to better support post-traditional women transfer students. I will also share findings and recommendations nationally with educators through publications and presentations at conferences. Other public research universities with large transfer student populations may be interested in the findings to better understand the diverse and shifting student communities on their campuses and the unique college experiences that they have.

CHAPTER 2:

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

To begin understanding the college experience of women transfer students over the age of 25 years old at UCLA, I first offer more detailed definitions of the terms "non-traditional" and "post-traditional" and detail some of the common philosophical issues and demographic changes on college campuses that make this terminology challenging and complex. I investigate issues specific to age, gender, and other intersecting characteristics, as well as the key differences between non-traditional transfer students and traditionally aged transfer and non-transfer students. To better understand the post-traditional student experience, I highlight some of the common obstacles to college completion that non-traditional transfer students face and review institutional practices that address their needs. Lastly, I detail Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1989, 1993, 2005) ecology model of human development and discuss its relevance to understanding the ecological context and personal experiences of older women students at UCLA.

Considering the Terms

In defining a "non-traditional student," researchers use a wide continuum of characteristics that include age, part-time, or commuter student status, and generally stress the intersection of numerous compounded identities (Bean & Metzner; 1985; Choy, 2002; Levin, 2007; Soares et al., 2017). The higher education literature universally identifies as non-traditional any student who is over 24 or 25 years; delays enrollment between high school and college; attends part time; works full time while enrolled; is financially independent, has dependents; is a parent; and/or has earned a GED (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Choy, 2002; Horn, 2006; Horn & Carroll, 1996; Jinkens, 2009; Kasworm 2010; Levin, 2007; NCES, 2013). The definition has frequently incorporated additional demographic identifiers such as transfer

student, commuter student, veteran status, historically underrepresented community status, first-generation college student status, low-income background, returning student, undocumented, and what Soares (2013) labeled "post-traditional learners" (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Choy, 2002; Horn, 2006; Horn & Carroll, 1996; Jinkens, 2009; Kasworm 2010; Levin, 2007; NCES, 2013; Soares et al., 2017). The extensiveness of the term and the interweaving of identities that can potentially fall under the non-traditional student label make it challenging to explore the student experience without incorporating individual context and the unique set of needs that arise with each characteristic. Furthermore, the philosophical issues underlying the conceptualization of "non-traditional" may also reveal why this community of students has been so long underserved.

Many researchers are re-thinking the term altogether; they feel it does not sufficiently include the lived experience of students with such diverse stories and backgrounds, nor is it particularly relevant given that many of the qualities noted above are more and more common among college students. Within the term itself exists an assumption that these students did not take a traditional or "normal" path, thereby labeling them as less likely to meet markers of attainment (Deil-Amen, 2011; Donaldson & Townsend, 2007; Kasworm, 1990; Levin, 2007; Linzmeier, 2014). Moreover, using "non" denotes a deficit in the student, and as Deil-Amen (2011) argued, the term leaves out "the other half" of students by creating an arbitrary "normal" standard of comparison. This becomes acutely relevant when considering the current diversity of the national undergraduate student population, particularly at community colleges, which serve a population rich in life experience (Deil-Amen, 2011; Handel, 2013; Handel & Strempel, 2016; Levin, 2007; Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen, & Person, 2006).

Other terms have been used in attempts to encompass all the subcommunities that the current "non-traditional" label encompasses—terms such a returning, working, re-entry, older, or

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adult students (Hagdorn, 2005; Kasworm 1990; Soares et al., 2017). However, none seems to capture the full scope of experience this group holds. In 2013, Soares and the American Council on Education (ACE), began using the term "post-traditional learners" to describe potential learners over the age of 25 years old and "individuals already in the work force who lack a postsecondary credential yet are determined to pursue further knowledge and skills while balancing work, life, and education responsibilities" (Soares, 2013, pp. 1–2). This term is more reflective of the college demographic today; it sees this student community less as an aberration and more the norm, especially considering the "traditional" 18- to 22-year-old student who is supported by his or her parents and is living on campus is no longer the standard, with only 15% of over 17 million college undergraduates fitting this description (NCES, 2018; Soares et al., 2017). In this study, as I noted in the previous chapter, I use "post-traditional" and "non-traditional" interchangeably—together with "older"— to specifically indicate students over the age of 25 years.

Why Students Over 25?

Thirty-eight percent of all undergraduates are older than 25, and while the majority of them attend community colleges or for-profit institutions, it is important for four-year universities to understand their experiences—especially since these institutions heavily recruit students from community colleges, where the average age is 28 (Lumina Foundation, 2017; UCOP, 2018). As in the current study, Soares et al. (2017) and the ACE defined post-traditional learners predominately by age (students over 25 years old). However, Soares et al. (2017) also used full-time working status, financial independence, and military affiliation as markers of post-traditional standing, as these traits often go hand-in-hand with age and are distinct experiences

that many students under 25 years old may not have encountered (Internal Revenue Service, 2018; Soares et al., 2017).

Being over the age of 25—together with the plethora of formative experiences, qualities, and life circumstances that come with age—makes the post-traditional undergraduate student unique in comparison to other, particularly younger, undergraduates (Blumenstyk, 2018; Hagedorn, 2005; Kasworm, 1990, 2010; Soares, 2013; Soares et al., 2017). Unlike traditionally aged undergraduates (i.e., those typically enrolling in college right out of high school), rarely are post-traditional learners solely fulfilling the role of student while attending college; they usually have other life priorities, such as work and family, that affect their decisions about how they engage in the higher education system (Kasworm, 2008, 2010, 2012; Soares, 2013). It is this unique experience that is understudied at the four-year university level, and thus it is the focus of the current study.

Post-traditional students have multiple identities and have different needs than traditionally aged students do (Blumenstyk, 2018; Hagedorn, 2005; Kasworm 1990, 2005, 2010, 2012; Soares, 2013; Soares et al., 2017). Compared with traditionally aged students, a higher percentage of non-traditional students are women (60% versus 54%) and African American (21% versus 13%), attend college part time (60% versus 23%), and receive Pell grants (45% versus 38%); (Blumenstyk, 2018; see also NCES, 2015; Radwin, Wine, Segel, & Bryan 2013; Soares et al., 2017). A high percentage of non-traditional students are also the first in their families to attend college (NCES, 2015). These students may have pursued other life goals before focusing on their education; they may be military veterans, have careers, or be displaced workers; they may be raising families or have a host of other circumstances that have paused

their academic journeys (Blumenstyk, 2018; Hagedorn, 2005; Kasworm 1990, 2010; Soares et al., 2017).

According to Soares et al.'s (2017) analysis of the National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS, 2012), 70% of post-traditional students were employed while enrolled in school, compared with 52% of other undergraduates; in fact, 45% of those post-traditional learners worked full time. Georgetown University's Center on Education and the Workforce (2015) estimated that 46% of older working students earned wages that put them 200% below the federal poverty level, adding more financial strain and concern to post-traditional student circumstances (Blumenstyk, 2018; Carnevale, Smith, Melton, & Price, 2015).

Post-traditional students may also be supporting other family members. Soares et al. (2017) found that 48% of all post-traditional learners had dependents, and 26% were single parents. As discussed below, this disproportionally affects women and women of color, as they tend to take on more of the parenting role and responsibilities (Gault, Reichlin, & Roman, 2014; Kruvelis, Cruse, & Gault, 2017; Nelson & Froehner, 2013; Soares et al., 2015). In addition, most post-traditional students commute to campus, with only 2% living on campus. Finally, 9% of post-traditional students are connected to the military (Saores et al., 2017).

As I describe in more detail later in this chapter, life circumstances—including low income status, parenting, part-time status, first-generation student status, and other life contexts listed above—can often be obstacles to degree completion (ACSFA, 2011; Bergman et al., 2014; Blumenstyk, 2018; Choy 2002; Kasworm, 2002, 2010, 2012; Kruvelis et al., 2017; Soares, 2013; Soares et al., 2017; Stevens, 2014; Ward, Siegel, & Davenport, 2012; Wyatt, 2011). It is important that higher education institutions and educators better understand the complex life circumstances of post-traditional students, the obstacles to degree completion they face, and the

ways this community can be better supported (Blumenstyk, 2018; Cruse, Eckerson, & Gault, 2018; Kasworm, 2012; Soares et al., 2017). As described in Chapter 1, this is particularly crucial considering the large community of people aged 25 to 65 who do not have college degrees, the significance of degree completion in narrowing the achievement gap, and how essential post-traditional learners and degree completion are to national economic growth and work force demands (Carnevale & Rose, 2011; Jepsen, Troske, & Coomes, 2014; Jones & Kelly, 2007; Pusser et al., 2007; World Bank Report, 2003).

Finally, higher education scholars have not, to this point, thoroughly disaggregated student data by age, particularly at the four-year university and transfer student level (Bahr, 2013; Blumenstyk, 2018; Kasworm, 2010). Consequently, there is very little research that investigates the four-year college experience of students over the age of 25 years (Bahr, 2013; Blumenstyk, 2018; Donaldson & Townsend, 2007; Kasworm, 2010; Zhang et al., 2013). This is important as institutions such as UCLA look to enroll more post-traditional students as transfers. Universities and educators may lack knowledge regarding the unique experiences of post-traditional students and be unprepared to support the unique set of needs these circumstances raise, particularly at four-year universities where the number of post-traditional students has traditionally been lower in number (Blumenstyk, 2018; Kasworm 2010; Soares et al., 2017).

College Experiences of Students Over the Age of 25

There is no one-size-fits-all approach that best meets the needs of or concretely defines the non-traditional student experience. However, it is often agreed upon in the literature that students over 25 have distinct developmental differences from traditionally aged students because of the multiple identities and life experiences they hold (Donaldson & Townsend, 2007; Kasworm, 2010, 2012, 2014; Sims & Barnett, 2015; Soares et al., 2017). Since most post-

traditional students attending universities are transfer students, they experience the general sense

of "culture shock" and adjustment that most transfer students experience as they transition into a

new environment (Hills, 1965; Laanan, 2001, 2007; Laanan et al., 2011; Ishitani, 2008;

Townsend, 2008; Townsend & Wilson, 2006, 2009; UCLA APB, 2016). As such, I further

explore this concept in the section on transfer students below.

The adjustment to a new environment can be especially intense for post-traditional

transfer students, who, prior to transfer, may have been at community colleges where there were

many more students their age, and where the institution more intentionally served their needs

(Kasworm 2010; Markle, 2015; Rosenbaum et al., 2006). The literature on students over the age

of 25 highlights that the challenges to college completion and institutional integration are

different from those faced by younger students and even distinct from the challenges that

traditionally aged transfer students grapple with, despite the similar transition (Blumenstyk,

2018; Choy, 2002; Kasworm, 2010; Laanan, 2007; Townsend, 2008; Soares et al., 2017; UCOP

Transfer Action Team, 2014).

Evaluating current literature on the potential risk factors and barriers associated with

post-traditional student success[1] and degree completion, it appears that risk factors fall into three

categories tied to the post-traditional student experience: time and access issues, financial

obstacles, and institutional and campus climate factors (ACSFA, 2011; Bergman et al., 2014;

Blumenstyk, 2018; Choy, 2002; Kasworm, 2002, 2010, 2012; Soares, 2013; Soares et al., 2017;

Stevens, 2014; Wyatt, 2011). Research suggests that these categories are often interwoven and

dependent on individual circumstances. I explore each individually below.

[1] For the purposes of this literature review, student success is associated with persistence, retention, and degree
completion.

Time and access challenges. As mentioned, students over the age of 25 are often balancing multiple life roles and responsibilities with which traditionally aged students do not contend (Blumenstyk, 2018; Choy, 2002; Kasworm, 2010; Ross-Gordon, 2011; Soares et al., 2017). This helps explain common time and access issues specific to non-traditional students' degree completion and college success. It also provides a clear illustration of just how different the college experience of a student over 25 years old may be from that of an 18- to 22-year-old without the same sort of responsibilities and concerns.

A full 80% of non-traditional students primarily identify themselves as employees first rather than as students, whereas only 3% of traditional students consider themselves primarily employees (Carnevale et al., 2015; Choy, 2002; Kasworm, 2012). While 26% of all undergraduate students are raising dependents, 48% of post-traditional learners have children and 26% percent are single parents (Soares et al., 2017). Relevant to this study is the fact that parenting students make up 30% of the entire community college student body, and 21% of the women are single mothers, compared with 7% of women in four-year institutions (Cruse et al., 2018; Gault et al., 2014b). Work and family time commitments are just two of the main differences that post-traditional learners must navigate.

While some studies indicate that many of these life roles—such as being a parent, spouse, or employee—can be an asset to non-traditional students because of social support and enhanced self-efficacy (Davidson & Holbrook, 2014; Lundberg, McIntire, & Creasman, 2008; Ross-Gordon, 2011), often these roles present extra challenges and stressors in how students allocate their time and finances (Kasworm, 2012; Ross-Gordon, 2011; Stevens, 2014). Traditional students who live on campus may be able to focus purely on academic and social aspects of school, while their non-traditional counterparts must renegotiate the time spent on family, work,

commute, school, and other life commitments every term (Kasworm, 2012). Many institutions, particularly elite research universities, are not structured to provide alternative options for non-traditional students with non-traditional schedules, and this generates a large barrier for those who have not taken, and cannot take, a more traditional educational path (ACSFA, 2011; Stevens, 2014).

Unfortunately, working while in school, parenting status, and part-time status can compromise students' academic success. Often, post-traditional learners may be engaged in all three while attempting to complete a degree (Cruse et al., 2018; Lumina Foundation, 2015c; Soares et al., 2017). Research shows that working long hours while pursuing a degree can negatively affect academic success and outcomes, and only a quarter of part-time students make it to graduation (King, 2003; Kuh et al., 2007; Lumina Foundation, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c; O'Toole, Stratton, & Wetzel, 2003). Research by Miller, Gault, and Thorman (2011) showed that more than 60% of single mothers who were also students reported spending at least 30 hours per week caring for children. And 43% of women at two-year colleges who were parents indicated that dropping out of school was likely given their responsibilities as caretakers (Gault et al., 2017). According to the Lumina Foundation (2015), college students who had work and family obligations were twice as likely to drop out in their first year as compared to students fresh out of high school (Dagar, 2012; Johnson, Rochkind, Ott, & Dupont, 2011; Lumina Foundation 2015b). First-generation college status also disproportionally affects post-traditional learners: Research confirms that it puts them at a higher risk of dropping out of college (Cataldi, Bennett, & Chen, 2018). Not all post-traditional learners are parents, commuters, workers, low income, part time, and/or first generation, but a large number are, and these aspects of their college experience

create time and access obstacles to degree attainment (Blumenstyk, 2018; Kasworm, 1990, 2010; Lumina Foundation, 2015 a, 2015b, 2015c; Soares et al., 2017).

Financial challenges. The many demands on non-traditional students' time unfortunately leads to another common risk factor related to college completion—part-time student status and the financial barriers tied to it (Choy, 2002; Davidson & Holbrook, 2014; Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005). Many undergraduate students attend school part time (40% total) to accommodate work and other life responsibilities (Lumina Foundation, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c). This number increases for non-traditional students, 60% of whom are in school part time, compared to 23% of students ages 18 to 24 years old (Blumenstyk, 2018; NPSAS, 2015). A longitudinal study on risk factors affecting non-traditional students' degree completion found that part-time enrollment significantly deterred college completion (Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005).

Counter to these findings, however, were the findings of a comprehensive, three-year, mixed-methods study on factors influencing non-traditional student persistence at a large public university in the southeastern United States. In a 2015 quantitative analysis, Markle found that, among women, part-time student status actually had a positive effect on persistence in some cases. Among the 494 non-traditional students who completed the survey, two-thirds were women, 81% had children, and 15% were single parents; more than 50% worked part-time, and one-third worked full time while enrolled in 12 units (Markle, 2015). Markle found that women participants who felt conflicted over their work, school, and parenting roles considered withdrawing because they felt their student role might be shortchanging their families and they felt guilty. In contrast, men in the study acknowledged that they had less time to spend with their families but did not mention guilt (Deutsch & Schmertz, 2011; Markle, 2015). Markle's data indicates "that women attending school full-time were 52% less likely to persist that women

attending part-time" (Markle, 2015, p. 264). Specifically, women with higher GPAs and higher

levels of confidence, attending school part-time were more likely to persist (Markle, 2015).

The Markle (2015) study demonstrates that there may be some benefit to women post-

traditional students enrolling in a university part time, particularly if they are balancing work and

family roles. However, there is limited financial assistance for students who do so (Taniguchi &

Kaufman, 2005; Davidson & Holbrook, 2014). While community colleges, for-profit institutions,

and some certificate programs can serve non-traditional students' need for flexible degree and

training programs, most four-year institutions do not provide this option—or, if they do, financial

aid may be limited (Kasworm, 2010; Rosenbaum et al., 2006).

Many non-traditional students in higher education lack financial support and access to

financial advisors (ACSFA, 2011; Bergman et al., 2014; Choy, 2002; Kasworm, 2012). In

student surveys collected by Stokes (2006), 22% of prospective non-traditional students

indicated that they chose *not* to enroll in college because of cost. Despite public higher education

being partially subsidized by state funding, non-traditional students often require additional

support for tuition, fees, transportation, childcare, textbooks, etc. (Kasworm, 2012). At many

higher education institutions there is little financial support for part-time students or full-time

workers, both common characteristics of non-traditional students (Blumenstyk, 2018; Cook &

King, 2003; Kasworm, 2012; Soares et al., 2017).

Working students who enroll in four-year universities that encourage full-time enrollment

may run into difficulties because federal aid disbursements work off the previous year's income,

when the student may have been employed. The process assumes the student is still working and

therefore the estimated tuition cost is based on an income that no longer exists (Blumenstyk,

2018). Not only is financial aid limited for students over 25 years of age, the process and policies

can be confusing and difficult to navigate, leaving students with unclear expectations and inflexible options at both the community college and four-year university level (Blumenstyk, 2018; Campbell, Deil-Amen, & Rios-Aguilar, 2015)

Most federally funded programs are designed to support younger, full-time students who are dependent on their parents and do not take into account the life circumstances of post-traditional students (ACSFA, 2011; Blumenstyk, 2018; Cook & King, 2004; Duke-Benfield, 2015; Kasworm, 2012; Stokes, 2006; Walizer, 2015). Non-traditional students are more than twice as likely be low income than traditional students dependent on their parents (ACSFA, 2011). Often non-traditional students do not apply for student financial aid, and when they do the often have unmet need, that is not covered by financial aid (ACSFA, 2011). Although, at the community college level data points from the Center for Postsecondary and Economic Success reveal that over 90% of independent full-time community college students with income in the bottom three income quartiles (below $28,356), have unmet need in 2011-2012 and the gap averaged around $7,734 annually for the lowest-income students (Duke-Benfield, 2015; Walizer, 2015). Unmet need is higher for students of color as compared to whites students, and students who are parents compared to non-parenting students (Sauders, 2015; Walizer, 2015). Relevant to this study is the reality that the vast majority of single mothers in college (89%) are low income, and 63% live at or below the poverty line (Kruvelis et al., 2017). These funding and financial issues create huge obstacles to degree completion—particularly if combined with a campus environment and structure ill-equipped to address non-traditional student challenges, as I discuss next.

Environmental and institutional adjustment challenges. Post-traditional students who transfer to four-year universities not only experience time and access challenges, financial

strains, and the inter-role conflicts detailed above, they also experience issues of adjustment to a

new environment, navigating a new system, and feeling like an outsider on a campus set up for

traditionally aged students (Laanan, 2001, 2007; Laanan et al., 2010; Ishitani, 2008; Rosenbaum

et al., 2006; Townsend, 2008; Townsend & Wilson, 2006). The factors relevant to non-

traditional student persistence, sense of belonging, and inclusive environment include but are not

limited to outreach/admission procedures; language on campus websites, brochures, and

orientation materials (Kasworm, 2012; Sissel et al., 2001); lack of advising and space on campus

specifically designated for non-traditional students (Kasworm, 2012; Sissel et al., 2001);

curriculum policies and schedules; support services and hours that services are offered; and

teaching styles geared toward traditional students (Kasworm, 2010; Sissel et al., 2001; Stevens,

2014). Additionally, research indicates that staff and faculty attitudes toward and awareness of

post-traditional students' experiences are vital to student success and persistence. Literature on

non-traditional student persistence and best practices particularly emphasizes the importance that

relationships with faculty and staff have in non-traditional student specific retention and sense of

belonging (Davidson & Holbrook, 2014; Donavant, Daniel, & MacKewn, 2013; Kasworm, 2012;

Sissel et al., 2001; Stevens, 2014).

Bergman and colleagues (2014), using the Adult Learner Persistence Study (ALPS) and

Bean and Metzner's (1985) conceptual model of nontraditional student attrition, found that

campus environment, more than student characteristics and external factors, accounted for

negative variations in student persistence. Non-traditional students in extensive qualitative

studies conducted by Kasworm (2010) and Wyatt (2011) reported similar findings. Students

detailed feeling isolated on college campuses, feeling they did not belong or were not welcome,

and being unaware of the support services available to them (Kasworm, 2010; Wyatt, 2011).

Lastly, in a qualitative longitudinal study spanning six regions in the United States, Stevens (2014) found that, despite assurances to prospective students that schools were sensitive to the challenges of non-traditional students, more than 75% of the non-traditional students surveyed felt that systems were not in place to address their needs. This is notable because, in a separate study, Bergman et al. (2014) found that when students felt strongly that the institution was responsive to their needs, their odds of persisting increased by about 63%.

Student involvement and engagement for post-traditional students. One aspect of the four-year college student experience that is particularly absent from the literature is how post-traditional students want to engage with or be involved outside of the classroom. Literature about the post-traditional student community college experience and persistence has assumed that social integration has little effect on non-traditional student persistence (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Brenden, Deil-Amen, & Rios-Aguilar, 2015; Chartrand, 1992; Farabaugh-Dorkins, 1991; Stahl & Pavel, 1992). It was instead presumed that external motivators play a more significant role in post-traditional student persistence. In fact, in a study by Zell (2010), it was discovered that personal sense of purpose—more so than the social aspects of college—was the main driver of motivation and commitment for non-traditional students.

Issues of college student engagement and involvement are often looked at through the lens of "traditional" theories of student persistence (e.g., Astin, 1984; Tinto, 1993) that were based on the experiences of White, 18- to 23-year-old, residential college students taking the "traditional" educational path (Deil-Amen, 2011a, 2011b). Using this as a measure for all students leaves a gap in educators' understanding of how connection, sense of belonging, and integration into the college community work for students who do not share this lived experience (Brenden et al., 2015; Deil-Amen, 2011a, 2011b). This is particularly true when talking about

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students over the age of 25, and about the inclusion of this student experience in the postsecondary research literature (Brenden et al., 2015; Deil-Amen, 2011a, 2011b; Donaldson & Townsend, 2007; Sims & Barnett, 2015). Deil-Amen (2011b) argued that this tendency to rely on traditional models to understand a larger collective has serious consequences. She explained that using traditional models that reflect an old-school "norm of college going that is actually no longer a behavioral norm" fails to serve non-traditional students and assumes a "fictional ideal" of a college student norm that perpetuates inequities in our higher educational system (p. 10).

Despite the reality described above, Deil-Amen (2011b) and Karp, Hughes, and O'Gara (2010) have argued that traditional frameworks can be expanded to include students commonly marginalized by such theories. It is generally agreed upon in the retention and success literature that the more involved students are academically and socially, the more successful they will be and the better their overall experiences will be. This is often extended to include the transfer and non-traditional student experience (Flaga, 2006; Laanan, 2007; Lester, Leonard, & Mathias, 2013). Research suggests, however, that the way in which transfer students engage and build social connections while in college differs from how traditional college students engage on campus; this is particularly true when exploring non-traditional transfer student engagement (Brenden et al., 2015; Deil-Amen, 2011a, 2011b, Deutsch & Schmertz, 2011; Ishitani & McKitrick, 2010; Lester et al., 2013; Markle, 2015; Ross-Gordon, 2011; Townsend & Wilson, 2006; Wyatt, 2011).

For example, a study by Townsend and Wilson (2006) found that transfer students tend to make fewer social connections post-transfer than direct-entry students in the same class standing. Researchers postulated that this was because transfer students are often older, may be struggling with many of the adjustment issues discussed above, and may not live on campus as most direct

entry students do. Thus, they may have a more difficult time finding ways to get involved. In a follow-up study in 2009, Townsend and Wilson found that transfers sought out campus activities that helped to promote their academic integration. When it came to activities that focused on social integration "in terms of the stereotypical college experience" (i.e., those that are often sought out by traditional students), transfers had little interest. Deil-Amen's (20011a, 2011b) findings supported this concept in that non-traditional students, unlike traditionally aged students, viewed purely social relationships with other students as obstacles or distractions.

Interestingly, in a study looking at how transfer students engage on social media, Brenden, Deil-Amen, and Rios-Aguilar (2015) found that students not only self-identified on social media regarding their post-traditional student status, they used social media to connect, identify with, and help support other non-traditional students. The students who were over the age of 25 used inspirational, supportive, and practical information-sharing language to ostensibly build community with others who had shared experiences. While they may or may not have been connecting socially with others in person, they were craving and creating a sense of belonging and community online (Brenden et al., 2015).

Through interviews at a large public research university in the southern United States, Lester et al. (2013) discovered that transfer students were very engaged, yet they viewed engagement differently from how traditional students or researchers might. Specifically, they included involvement outside of the college environment such as familial relationships, community-based work, and organizational involvement. These students felt very connected to and supported by their friends, family members, and networks outside of the university. This was particularly true for older students who had family obligations outside of their college responsibilities (Lester et al., 2013).

While family and outside responsibilities could be barriers to success for non-traditional transfer students, Lester et al. (2013) and other researchers have suggested that when these obligations become support structures and systems, they in fact help transfers flourish in their academic work rather than act as barriers to academic success and intellectual engagement (Deutsch & Schmertz, 2011). Lester et al. (2013) also found that transfers felt that their academic involvement was closely linked with what happened in the classroom and through faculty interactions, challenges within the classroom, or office hours (Lester et al., 2013).

Research on the college experiences of transfer students over the age of 25 at four-year research universities is limited (Kasworm, 2010; Sissel et al., 2001; Zhang et al., 2013). However, it is clear from what does exist that post-traditional learners are distinct from other students in the diversity of demographics, experiences, and enrollment patterns they bring (Kasworm, 2010; Soares et al., 2017). How they engage with the higher educational ecology is significantly different from how younger students maneuver and navigate a campus that is more directly designed for them (Blumenstyk, 2018; Kasworm 2007, 2010; Quinnan, 1997; Sissel et al., 2001). Understanding the time, access, financial, and environmental/institutional challenges of non-traditional students is essential in order for educators to build awareness regarding this important community and to better support these students' success at four-year research universities. While some research has been done on transfer student adjustment and best practices, very little attention has been focused on the unique needs and essential services for women students over age 25 who transfer into research institutions like UCLA.

Why Focus on Women?

From childhood to adulthood, women's lives are impacted by personal and societal perceptions and the cultural context of gender, race, and class (Bannerji, 1992; May, 2008;

Merrill, 1999; Pascall & Cox, 1993; Ross-Gordon, 1999, 2005; Unger & Crawford, 1992). Sex-role socialization and cultural normalization regarding life course expectations and life trajectories are often ingrained and have historically dictated how women may view how they "should" live their lives (May, 2008; Skelton, Francis, & Smulyan, 2006; Unger & Crawford, 1992). Although cultural norms regarding gender and traditional ordering and timing of the life course have changed significantly in the last 30 years (Hostetler, Sweet, & Moen, 2007; Moen, 1996), choosing to obtain a bachelor's degree after the age of 25 is still often viewed as breaking with tradition and expectations including motherhood, marriage, career, and other established life-course norms (Herideen, 1998; Kasworm, 2010; Merriam & Brockett, 2007; Merrill, 1999; Pascall & Cox, 1993; Sperling, 1991; Unger & Crawford, 1992).

As mentioned in Chapter 1, despite the historical marginalization of women in postsecondary education, they currently outnumber men in all higher education sectors (Goldin, Katz, & Kuziemko, 2006; McFarland et al., 2017; May, 2008). Access to education for women and for historically marginalized groups has increased, and community colleges play a significant role in that (Herideen, 1998; Levin, 2007; McFarland et al., 2017; Thomas, 2001). Unfortunately, much of the current research on the college experience and gender focuses on traditionally aged women and does not report on women transfers or the non-traditional students and their experience (Bahr, Toth, Thirolf, & Massé, 2013; Donaldson & Townsend, 2007; Kasworm, 2010; Lin, 2016; Zhang et al., 2013). Sax (2008), in her comprehensive study of gender differences in the undergraduate college experience, uncovered significant variations between the sexes, most notably in the lower intellectual self-confidence and overall self-concept, higher levels of stress, and increased financial concerns of women students. Conley, Kirsch, Dickson, and Bryant (2014) also found that women undergraduates experienced high

levels of psychological distress during transitions and the need for services that promote well-being during this developmental phase. Unfortunately, these two studies did not disaggregate by age or transfer status.

Societal norms and gender structuring shape the college pathway for women over 25 years old and may do so more intently because of the generational and cultural differences between traditionally and non-traditionally age female students (Deutsch & Schmertz, 2011; Levin, 2007). Levin (2007), in writing about community college students, noted that women post-traditional learners are more likely than men to be from historically marginalized communities, low-income, combining work and school, have children and/or be single parents— all potential risk factors to persistence and college completion. These factors, combined with common reasons women and non-traditional students drop out of college (time, finances, family, and institutional/environmental barriers, etc.), as discussed above, highlight the importance of looking at gender and age together in the educational experiences of college students (Levin, 2007; Renn, Dilley, & Prentice, 2003).

Gendered positioning affects women's ability to access and complete school, and women over 25 years old are much more likely to have children than younger students (Cruse et al., 2018; Deutsch & Schmertz, 2011; Ross-Gordon, 1999; Setfersten & Lovegreen, 1998). Women undeniably still shoulder the majority of responsibility of caring for and raising children, as well as other household duties and familial responsibilities such as taking care of other family members (Gault et al., 2014a; Gault et al., 2017; Kruvelis, 2017). Over a quarter of all undergraduates in the United States are parents and, of those, 71% are women—the vast majority of whom are single parents (Gault et al., 2014a; Miller, Gault & Thorman, 2011; Nichols,

Biederman, & Gringle, 2017). In comparison, single fathers make up only 11% of the student/parent community (Gault et al., 2014a; Kruvelis et al., 2017).

Moreover, women of color are much more likely to be balancing parenthood while in school. For example, 47% African American female undergraduate students are parents and 37% are single parents (Gault et al., 2014a; Gault et al., 2017; Noll et al., 2017). Comparatively, 27% of American Indian women, 19% of Hispanic women, 17% of women who are two or more races, 14% of White women, and 7% of Asian/Pacific Islanders are raising children without a spouse or partner while in college (Gault et al., 2014a; Gault et al., 2017; Noll et al., 2017). Women of color who are parents have lower incomes than White students, with 71% of Black student parents and 68% of Hispanic student parents living at or below 200 percent of the poverty level (White student parents are at 49%; Gault et al., 2014a). Almost 88% of single parent students live at or below 200 percent of the federal poverty level (Gault et al., 2014).

While there is very little research on mothers at the four-year university level, we know that 45% of all student parents attend community colleges and 19% percent of student parents enrolled at public and private 4-year institutions (Noll et al., 2017). Among women in community college 21% are single mothers, as compared to only 7% of women at 4-year schools are single mothers (Gault et al., 2014; Noll et al., 2017). Sadly, despite the financial situation of single student mothers, 30% attend for-profit colleges (which are notoriously expensive), making them over three times as likely to do so than women without children (Anderson, Reichlin, & Gault, 2017; Noll et al., 2017). These enrollment trends also mean that single mothers who graduate have higher levels of debt then both non-parent students and married mothers (Noll et al., 2017). Single mothers are unfortunately less likely to achieve degree attainment than married women and women without children. In 2015, only 31% of single mothers age 25 and older had

a bachelor's degree, versus 54% of married mothers and 40% of women overall within the same age range (Kruvelis et al., 2017; Noll et al., 2017). Once enrolled, the completion rate of single mothers versus their peers is low. The Institute for Women's Policy Research reported that in 2017 only 28% of single mothers who entered college earned a degree or certificate within six years, versus 40% of married mothers and 57% of women who did not have children (Kruvelis et al., 2017; Noll et al., 2017).

Most of the literature on the college experiences of women over 25 and/or women with children does not focus on the four-year university experience. In the literature that does exist, the role of family and being a mother comes up again and again as something that motivates students as well as causes stress (Kasworm, 2012; Markle, 2015; Ross-Gordon, 2011; Stevens, 2014). The obstacles for women over 25 years old in college mirror the challenges described above about non-traditional students in general: time, access, financial, and environmental/institutional barriers.

Deutsch and Schmertz (2011) did explore the narratives of women at two women's colleges with specialized programs for older women. Through focus groups, they found that gender shaped the women's educational lives, mostly in the form of motherhood (Deutsch & Schmertz, 2011). Yakaboski (2010) also ran focus groups, this time with single mothers at a rural Midwestern research institution. The mothers in her study desired a stronger sense of support from the staff, faculty, and peers on campus, and they struggled with financial services and programming for daycare.

Markle (2015) looked at what affected non-traditional students' persistence at a large public university over a three-year period. While there was no significant difference in levels of persistence, there were significant differences in the factors that influenced male versus female

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persistence. She focused her study on the multiple life roles that women over 25 hold and the conflicts that can result from balancing these roles. Women with children worried about the impact of school on their role as parents, and this manifested in guilt and higher likelihood of withdrawing, for fear they would be unsuccessful in all the roles they held. Women also felt that their family role intruded on their role as a student. Post-traditional women students who attended university part-time were more likely to persist.

Both men and women non-traditional students in Markle's (2015) study voiced that they did not feel like they fit in at the university, in part because of their age, and that this made them consider withdrawing. Participants believed traditionally aged students did not take school as seriously and seemed to be having an easier time. Markle noted that women post-traditional learners especially felt excluded by younger students because of their age, and also felt they were not respected or were patronized by faculty, specifically when it came to issues of having a family. This is another example of the dissonance women post-traditional learners may grapple with between their own expectations and roles and the expectations (or perceived expectations) of those around them.

Despite a lack of sense of belonging and the paradox of role expectations and age, women in Markle's (2015) study expressed that working toward a degree was transformative for them. Whereas men viewed a degree as a means to an end, women tended to feel that returning to school had symbolic meaning. Working toward their degree at a four-year university represented to them a reclaiming of themselves and their ability to overcome barriers. There is much to be deduced about the student experience of women community college transfers from prior studies. What is needed are studies that look specifically at older women students, to really

isolate the issues they face as they pursue a four-year degree and how universities can adjust and shift to accommodate and support this significant population.

The Transfer Pathway

While the transfer pathway to a bachelor's degree (in this case, attending community college and transferring to a four-year university) has traditionally been less common than university enrollment right out of high school, transfer student status is not typically included in the definition of a non-traditional or post-traditional student (Choy, 2002, Soares et al., 2017). Forty-two percent of all enrolled students and 25% of full-time undergraduate students are enrolled in community college, and 81% of community college students enroll with the intent to transfer, community college is no longer an unusual educational choice (Ma & Baum, 2016). In fact, 53% of students enrolled in community college students are traditionally aged students (18–24 years) and utilize this financially feasible track to bachelor's degree completion (Juszkiewicz, 2016; St. Rose & Hill, 2013). Community colleges are a significant part of the national higher educational landscape and serve as a pathway for low-income, first-generation, historically marginalized, and post-traditional students (Beach, 2011; Handel & Williams, 2012; Handel & Strempel, 2016; Levin, 2007).

Being a transfer student is not equivalent to being a post-traditional student (or vice versa). Nevertheless, most students who enroll in college over the age of 25 do choose to attend community college as a first step and utilize the transfer pathway route; likewise, women enroll in community college more than other higher education sector (Blumenstyk, 2018; Ma & Baum, 2016; NCES, 2015; St. Rose & Hill, 2013; Soares et al., 2017). At UCLA, 20% of students who have transferred in are over the age of 25, and in 2016 only 1 new student over the age of 25 enrolled as a freshman/direct entry student versus 509 new students who came in as transfers (as

noted by the UCLA Office of Academic Planning and Budget's Adam Sugano, in personal communication, October 26, 2017). Additionally, the UCLA Student Affairs Information and Research Office (UCLA SAIRO) reported that, from 2009 to 2013, only four students over the age of 25 enrolled at UCLA as freshman/direct-entry, while 2,186 entered as transfer students during the same period of time (Kristen McKinney, personal communication, August 22, 2016). In California, new UC policies promise to expand the transfer pathway possibilities, which will no doubt increase the number of post-traditional students transferring to the university's campuses (Freeling, 2015; McMillan, 2015; Memorandum of Understanding, 2018). Consequently, the opportunity for post-traditional learners interested in bachelor's degree completion at UC is well-timed.

When using the qualifier of age, the "non-traditional" label may become more applicable at a four-year university where students over 25 years old make up a smaller percentage of the total undergraduate student body. For example, at UCLA, students over the age of 25 make up 5% of the entire undergraduate student population (as noted by the UCLA APB, Adam Sugano, personal communication, October 26, 2017). The current knowledge economy demands postsecondary degrees and a lifelong learning model to ensure national global competitiveness, job security, and increase of income (Carnevale & Rose, 2011; Jepsen, Troske, & Coomes, 2014; Jones & Kelly, 2007; Pusser et al., 2007; World Bank Report, 2003). These shifting workforce demands open up broader student demographics and potential access for non-traditional students to the university transfer pathway.

The transfer process, a student's class standing upon transfer, and other transfer matriculation policies vary by state and university. Thus, for simplicity, I use the California Master Plan and UC transfer articulation process here as an example (UCLA, 2017; UCOP,

2017, 2018). Students who transfer may have enrolled in community college straight out of high school, taken a break in their educational journeys between high school and college, extended their community college enrollment because of part-time student status, experienced other interruptions in their education, and/or attended more than one community college before transferring. Transfer students entering four-year universities from community colleges predominately enroll at either a sophomore or, more frequently, a junior class standing (depending on the school). As such, they enroll in upper division courses their first term and are encouraged to graduate within two to three years of transferring (Townsend, 2008; Handel, 2013; UCLA, 2017).

Direct-entry students, on the other hand, enter four-year universities straight out of high school, are typically between the ages of 17 and 20 when they enter, are generally financially dependent on their parents, tend to live on or near campus, and do not work or only work part time, allowing them to focus solely on their studies while enrolled (Choy, 2002; Horn, 2006; Horn & Carroll, 1996; Kasworm, 1990, 2010). These students traditionally take four to six years to graduate from university, and the curriculum and culture of the campus is designed with them in mind, from events planned, to residence and dining halls, to pedagogy in the classroom (Donaldson & Townsend, 2007; Kasworm, 1990, 2010; Sissel et al., 2001; Zhang et al., 2013).

Transfer students bring a broad diversity of experience to four-year universities (Herrera & Jain, 2013; Sutton, 2016). At UCLA, for example, 41% of transfer students are first-generation college students, roughly 50% come from low socioeconomic households, and 93% come from 105 of California's 114 community colleges (UC Academic Planning and Budget [APB], 2015, 2016; Herrera & Jain, 2013; UCOP Transfer Action Team, 2014). Another key characteristic that differentiates transfer students, particularly those over the age of 25 (as

discussed at length above), is the high probability that they are juggling several other life roles and myriad responsibilities including those of employee, spouse or partner, parent, caregiver, commuter, and/or community member (Choy, 2002; Kasworm, 2010; Ross-Gordon, 2011; UCOP Transfer Action Team, 2014).

The Transfer Student Experience

The experiences of transfer students once they have transferred to a four-year university are, according to Bahr et al. (2013), overlooked, and the research that exists is "sporadic," and "unsystematic" (p. 462). In their literature review on the topic, Bahr and colleagues attempted to pull together the "fragmented body of research literature on the post-transfer transition process of community college students" to four-year universities (p. 501). They found the scholarship to be lacking and uneven in its effective operationalizing of core concepts within the experience; particularly relevant to this study, the literature tended to "homogenize community college transfer students" post-transfer (pp. 501–502). These scholars stressed that future studies should specifically focus on "disentangling the differences in the post-transfer transition process as it varies by student characteristics such as age, race, gender, socioeconomic status, etc." (Bahr et al., 2013, p. 502).

To be sure, specific research on the experience of transfer students over the age of 25 at public research universities is scant. There are, however, studies on the post-transfer academic and psychosocial adjustment of community college transfer students at public universities (Hills, 1965; Laanan, 2001, 2007; Laanan et al., 2010; Ishitani, 2008; Townsend, 2008; Townsend & Wilson, 2006, 2009). There are studies that explore the support systems and services available to help students transfer to four-year universities, the issues they face, and best practices for serving transfer students in general. Rarely, however, do these studies examine the transfer experiences

of students over 25 or women transfer students specifically (Handel, 2011; Handel, 2013; Handel & Strempel, 2016; Herrera & Jain, 2013; Kasworm, 2010; Laanan, 2001; Laanan et al., 2010; Marling, 2013; Rosenberg, 2016). That said, some of these broader studies are worth investigating, as there are some challenges that all transfers likely face, regardless of gender or age (Lannan, 2001; Ishitani, 2008; Townsend, 2008; Townsend & Wilson, 2006, 2009).

Despite the nuanced transferable skills and knowledge accumulated through their life journeys, including the community college experiences they bring with them to their new institutions, literature on transfer students indicates that they often "feel like a freshman again" at their post-transfer institutions; they are unaware of how to maneuver the new system and lack an institutional touchpoint or resources that could help acclimate them and support them in their transitions (Handel, 2013; Handel & Strempel, 2016; Kasworm 1990, 2014; Ross-Gordon, 2011; Townsend, 2008; UCLA SAIRO, 2011). There can also be an adjustment and shock associated with navigating a new environment and with the length of an academic term (Ishitani & McKitrick, 2010; Townsend, 2008). For instance, in California the majority of community colleges are on a 16- to 18-week semester system, whereas much of the UC system, including UCLA, is on a 10-week quarter system.

Unlike direct-entry students who have likely had two years of lower division courses, campus activities, and resources geared toward helping them adjust socially and academically, transfers are often left on their own to navigate a four-year university environment that is unfamiliar and on an accelerated timeline (Laanan, 2001, 2007; Ishitani, 2008; Townsend, 2008; Townsend & Wilson, 2006, 2009). Coming in as juniors, they are expected to hit the ground running, but often they do not have the knowledge, campus savvy, or time they need to fully immerse and plug in to campus life (Ishitani & McKitrick, 2010; Townsend & Wilson 2006,

2009). If they are unable to connect with the appropriate resources or other students with shared experiences, they can be left feeling demoralized and alone (Townsend, 2008; Townsend & Wilson, 2006, 2009).

Townsend and Wilson (2009) conducted interviews with 19 transfer students at a large, public research university in the Midwest. All of them said they were unable to connect academically or adjust during their first term after transfer. Many transfers may feel transfer shock, cultural shock, and other forms of transitional trauma when adjusting to a new academic environment (Hills, 1965; Laanan, 2001, 2007; Laanan et al., 2010; Ishitani, 2008; Townsend, 2008; Townsend & Wilson, 2006). The academic and psychosocial effects of this type of shock are richly detailed in the literature on transfer students (Hills, 1965; Laanan, 2007; Laanan et al., 2010; Ishitani, 2008; Townsend, 2008; Townsend & Wilson, 2006).

As originally defined in 1965 by Hills, "transfer shock" refers to a dip in academic performance and/or a delay in degree completion. Moving beyond academic measures of success, researchers began to look at the psychosocial experiences of transfer students as they entered the four-year environment. Studies have found that in addition to academic factors of adjustment, transfers struggle with social integration, lack of engagement, a misalignment of student expectations with university realities, and a general lack of sense of belonging or sense of place and ownership in their new environment (Grites, 2013; Laanan, 2007, Laanan et al., 2010; Ishitani, 2008; Ishitani & McKitrick, 2010; Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012; Townsend, 2008; Townsend & Wilson, 2006).

In another publication describing her interviews with 19 transfer students, Townsend (2008) observed a paradox in how they wished the university could best support them. On the one hand, they lacked knowledge and confidence in their new surroundings; on the other hand,

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they were clear about not being first-year students and did not like being treated as such (Townsend & Wilson, 2006; Townsend 2008). Kasworm (2014) observed a similar phenomenon with students over the age of 25: They simultaneously wanted to be treated differently by staff and faculty because of their age and life experience, but also wanted to fit in and not be treated as though they did not belong.

Both qualitative and quantitative research has explored various aspects of the transfer student experience, adjustment issues that arise, and college completion pre- and post-transfer (Flaga, 2006; Laanan, 2007; Lester et al., 2013; Ishitani & McKitrick, 2010; Townsend & Wilson, 2006). General consensus centers on a few significant challenges and experiences unique to transfers as they adjust to their new four-year universities—namely, transfer shock, difficulty navigating a new environment, and building a sense of belonging, community, or mattering at the new institution. Institutional practices and services become of vital importance in this respect. I turn to these issues next.

Institutional Best Practices for Transfer and Post-Traditional Students

While the literature regarding best practices specifically for women transfer students over the age of 25 at four-year universities is limited, more attention has been given to best practices for broader groups of students, such as post-traditional students or transfer students more generally. In this section I summarize these practices, first as they relate to older students, and then as they relate to transfer students.

Best Practices for Post-Traditional Students at Four-Year Universities

There is some research available that addresses post-traditional postsecondary students, particularly as national attention has focused on college completion rates (Blumenstyk, 2018; Kasworm, 2010; Soares et al., 2017; Zhang, Lui, & Hagedorn, 2013). There is also a limited

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amount of literature on best practices for individual populations of post-traditional students, such as parents and veteran students at the community college and four-year university level (Caplan, 2011; Elliot, Gonzalez, & Larsen, 2011; Nichols, Biederman, & Gringle, 2017; Long, 2017; Schumacher, 2015), as well as on transfer student best practices (Miller, 2013; Marling, 2013; Pérez & Ceja, 2010; Wyner, Deane, Jenkins, & Fink, 2016). Because of the similarities and overlap between these communities, in this section I suggest some general best practices regarding support for this community to give the reader an idea of what policies and practices are currently in place. These are practices that higher education institutions can adopt to increase post-traditional student completion, success rates, and sense of belonging on college campuses (Bergman et al., 2014; Kasworm, 2012, 2014; Maehl, 2000; Pappas & Jerman, 2014; Schlossberg, 1989a, 1989b, Shapiro, Dundar, Wakhungu, Yuan, & Harrell, 2015; Wyatt, 2011). It should be noted that women post-traditional learners pose a challenge to universities in that they may require specific services such as childcare or require flexibility in their schedules to include work and other responsibilities in order to persist (Deutsch & Schmertz, 2011; Markle, 2015).

Research has shown that both male and female transfer students can feel marginalized and lack a strong sense of belonging to the university—and that age can play a key role in this (Markle, 2015). Post-traditional students feel that institutional policies favor traditionally aged students and that their roles as, for example, employee or parent put them at a disadvantage (Lester et al., 2013; Markle, 2015). Without structures in place that maintain an environment that is inclusive for post-traditional students, they can be left feeling as though they are not important to the university; they may feel isolated and alone, and are less likely to persist past their first

year (Bergman et al., 2014; Davidson & Holbrook, 2014; Kasworm, 2010; Sissel et al., 2001; Stevens, 2014; Wyatt, 2011).

While some community colleges and for-profit schools have aggressively worked to meet the needs of non-traditional students by providing flexible hours, online programs, and alternative options aimed at adult students, most undergraduate programs at public universities continue to be designed for students who attend college full time and have few obligations outside of school (ACSFA, 2011; Kasworm, 2010; Rosenbaum et al., 2006; Stevens, 2014). Course schedules, office hours, time with advice and support staff, resource centers, and other opportunities on campus are primarily offered during standard business hours, with few opportunities for alternative scheduling (ACSFA, 2011; Davidson & Holbrook, 2014; Kasworm, 2010, 2012; Rosenbaum et al., 2006; Stevens, 2014). In addition, Kasworm's (2012) findings support the notion that while institutions may reluctantly acknowledge that some of their undergraduate students are married and have needs that differ from those of most traditional students, few have identified resources to support students with children by providing access to adequate childcare, affordable housing, and commuting options, and few have provided flexibility with course schedules for students balancing multiple responsibilities (Austin, 2006; Choy, 2002; Kasworm, 2012; Kasworm, Polson, & Fishback, 2002; Marine, 2012; Quimby & O'Brien, 2006; Rosenbaum et al., 2006).

Best Practices for Transfer Students at Four-Year Universities

Once again, reflecting the tradition of research universities focusing their attention and services on the needs of the "traditional" college student and the residential student experience, most of the research on best practices focuses broadly on transfer and overlooks services that would more specifically serve post-traditional students. Despite the distinctly unique experiences

transfer student populations bring to the table, many four-year universities only offer services that best serve traditional college students (Grites, 2013; Laanan et al., 2010; Ishitani, 2008; Tobolowsky & Cox, 2013; Townsend, 2008; Townsend & Wilson, 2006). Policies of four-year institutions often do not include transfer students in various programs, courses, or opportunities because of prerequisites and requirements, time constraints, expense, traditional office hours, and matriculation and unit restrictions, among other things. (Grites, 2013; Laanan et al., 2010; Townsend, 2008; Townsend & Wilson, 2006).

The literature on transfer student services suggests a number of best practices including better partnerships and articulation programs between two- and four-year institutions (Ishitani & McKitrick, 2010; Jain, Herrera, Bernal, & Solorzano, 2011; UCOP Transfer Action Team, 2014). Literature addressing what four-year universities can do to better serve transfer populations yields transfer-specific suggestions including advising programs, required orientations, peer mentoring, social and networking events, and informational workshops on a variety of important topics (Grites, 2013; Handel, 2013; Ishitani & McKitrick, 2010; Marling, 2013; Miller, 2013; Townsend, 2008; Townsend & Wilson, 2006; UCOP Transfer Action Team, 2014). The most salient themes that run through the literature on transfer student services at four-year universities are the importance of creating a welcoming and understanding culture and community on campus and the need to deliberately include the transfer population in institutional strategic planning (Grites, 2013; Marling, 2013; Miller, 2013; Jain et al., 2011).

Transfer-receptive culture. Research by Ornelas and Solorzano (2004), Jain et al. (2011), and Herrera and Jain (2013) has identified ways in which colleges and universities can create a transfer-receptive culture to ease transfer shock and create a more fluid transition and welcoming environment for transfer students. Creating a transfer-receptive culture at a four-year

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university requires institutional commitment to not only providing the supports students need to navigate the college and connect with others (in order to create a sense of meaning and belonging), but also guiding students to take the appropriate coursework prior to transfer, and then to apply, enroll, and successfully earn a degree in a timely manner (Jain et al., 2011; Herrera & Jain, 2013). The extent to which four-year universities cultivate a transfer-receptive culture has remained relatively unexplored and unevaluated. Missing from the conversation is whether or not this is synonymous with a "non-traditional-student-receptive culture." Also, important to explore is whether or not there are distinct differences in the needs of traditionally and non-traditionally aged transfer students.

Student centers. One key way to create, build, and buoy a sense of community and support for transfers at large universities is to develop a home-base for students on campus. A transfer-specific resource center can provide students a space where they can immediately connect with others who have had similar, shared experiences, and give the university an opportunity to address and pinpoint the issues significant to this population by providing the centralized guidance transfers need (Handel, 2013; Ishitani & McKitrick, 2010; Miller, 2013; Townsend & Wilson, 2006). In fact, in the 2014 UCOP Transfer Action Team report, a key action item was the creation of transfer centers on all UC campuses.

Transfer student centers can help to build a sense of belonging, mattering, and place for transfer students, particularly since navigating the larger and often decentralized new environment of public research universities tends to be a significant challenge (Handel, 2013; Ishitani & McKitrick, 2010; Miller, 2013; Townsend & Wilson, 2006). Having a one-stop shop, a place to go for all things transfer, helps to make the transition more fluid, less confusing, and more supportive, hopefully limiting culture shock in the new environment.

Most universities and colleges have learning centers open to all students and/or specialized programs and centers for specific student communities. Centers, programs, and institutional agents on campus whose sole purpose is to ensure an equitable campus climate for various student communities is a common best practice particularly in university student affairs departments (Blimling & Whitt, 1999; Brazzell & Reisser, 1999; Patton, 2010; Sandeen & Barr, 2014; Schlossberg, 1989b; Zinger & Cohen, 2010). Individualized centers, programs, and point people with the goal of supporting veterans, parenting, commuter, international, LGBTQ, and undocumented students, as well as cultural groups and other individual student communities are critical tools for building community and supporting students as they navigate the university system (Blimling & Whitt, 1999; Brazzell & Reisser, 1999; Patton, 2010; Sandeen & Barr, 2014; Schlossberg, 1989b; Zinger & Cohen, 2010).

That said, it is vital that transfer and non-traditional student programs and centers reflect an institutional commitment to creating a campus that is inclusive of multidimensional diversity, that the services are not marginalized on campus, and that the institution provides the financial support necessary to sustain services (Deil-Amen, 2011b; Herrera & Jain, 2013; Jain et al., 2011; Sissel et al., 2001). Universities can ask whether or not the center or university has resources for parenting students, commuters, and working students, and whether the staff are prepared to serve the needs of first-generation transfers, veterans, and older students (Austin, 2006; Choy, 2002; Kasworm, 2010, 2012; Kasworm et al., 2002; Marine, 2012; Quimby & O'Brien, 2006). Although a one-stop shop has great advantages for transfer and post-traditional students (as well as other student communities), it must be created with the understanding that there is no universal transfer student experience and have the institutional commitment and recognition to

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sustain the needed services versus just acting as a symbolic gesture to a marginalized community (Deil-Amen, 2011b; Herrera & Jain, 2013; Jain et al., 2011; Sissel et al., 2001).

Conceptual Framework: Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Model

Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1989, 1993, 2005) ecological systems model consists of nested, interconnected environmental contexts that influence a person's growth, understanding, and behavior through their engagement with environments over time. This integrative approach positions the student at the center of the varying ecological contexts in which he or she engages throughout the life span. It is an ideal framework with which to view, and more comprehensively understand, the unique and multilayered experience of women post-traditional transfer students within a university context.

Process-Person-Context-Time Model

Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1993) ecology model consists of interactive systems represented by their basic distance or level of direct influence on an individual over time. The reciprocal interactions and processes between a person, her immediate surroundings, social continuities, and changes over time through the life course, as well as the historical period she is living in, help to form her development within interdependent nested environmental systems (Tudge, Mokrova, Hatfield, & Karnik, 2009). Using Bronfenbrenner's terminology, *microsystems*, *mesosystems*, *exosystems*, and *macrosystems* are "nested, interdependent, dynamic structures ranging from the proximal, consisting of immediate face-to-face settings, to the most distal, comprising broader social contexts such as classes and culture" (Bronfenbrenner, 1993, p. 4). This ecology changes over time for each individual, and this element of time is the *chronosystem*. This creates the inter-reliant *person-process-context-time* dynamic. In short, an

individual's specific (yet unfixed) developmentally instigative characteristics influence the

dynamic ecological process and shape individual development (Bronfenbrenner, 1993).

This dynamic and interconnected relationship between the person, the process of growth

and development, the person's history and culture, and where she is in her life trajectory allows

researchers to view human experience in context and not in a vacuum or a static period of growth

in time (Bronfenbrenner, 1992). It is not only the environment that influences development, but

also the individual and how she interacts with the world around her (Bronfenbrenner, 1992).

Developmentally instigative characteristics. Bronfenbrenner suggested four types of

unfixed developmentally instigative characteristics that influence how an individual will

experience her environment and how the environment might respond to the individual and help

to explain differential outcomes in any given situation (Bronfenbrenner, 1993; Renn & Arnold,

2003). In other words, Bronfenbrenner did not assume that individuals come to their

environment as a blank slate, but that they are changing and dynamic entities, and both the

person and environment exert influence (Poch, 2005). These developmental instigative

characteristics are: (a) an individual's reaction to and interest in exploring her surroundings; (b)

how she engages with her environment; (c) her persistence level and involvement in increasingly

complex tasks/activities; and (d) her belief systems about the world—particularly in how she

views her ability to effect change (Bronfenbrenner, 1993; Renn & Arnold, 2003).

According to Bronfenbrenner (1993), these characteristics may not define how a person

develops; however, they do influence the context and "put a spin" on other forces and influences

in the ecological system or how the system might respond to the person (p. 14). Given the unique

and differing life courses of women over the age of 25 returning to academic careers, the

developmentally instigative characteristics each brings to the table may have distinct influence

on how she experiences her time at UCLA and on her ability or likelihood to acclimate to or thrive in the new environment. Women who have been out of school for years, had careers, raised children, been in the workforce, and/or experienced multiple contextual dynamics may experience the university differently from someone who is younger, living away from home for the first time, and discovering who she is away from her parents. People bring their individual characteristics to every situation and interaction they come in contact with and these "selves" impact how they interact with the proximal and distal environments and cultures of which they are a part.

Microsystems. Microsystems are the immediate, face-to-face settings, environments, activities, roles, and relationships with which a person engages and is involved (Bronfenbrenner, 1993). For students, this could be family, roommates, the classroom, a workforce environment, a spouse or mate, etc.; microsystems vary from student to student, particularly among post-traditional students. The microsystem of a traditional college student living in a residence hall will look very different from the microsystem of a student who is married, commutes, or has children, for instance. Bronfenbrenner (1993) stressed that these settings have "particular physical, social, and symbolic features that invite, permit, or inhibit engagement in sustained, progressively more complex interaction with, and activity in, the immediate environment" (p. 15).

Suárez-Orozco et al. (2015) investigated the experiences and challenges of undocumented students on various types of college campuses, and—while their study population is not directly analogous—their findings provide some useful examples with respect to the various systems within ecology theory. For example, they noted that the microsystems level for undocumented students might include the most basic settings with which a student identifies

(e.g., home, school, work) as well as the most basic interactions and relationships between these microsystems that students may be balancing such as conflicting family/work/school demands, time and financial constraints, or being a first-generation college student.

Mesosystems. At the next level, mesosystems represent the relationships, interactions, links, and overlap of students' microsystems and how these are interrelated or conflicting (Bronfenbrenner, 1993; Renn & Arnold, 2003; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2015). The student and the many microsystems with which she is involved or part of are embedded in interacting mesosystems (Renn & Arnold, 2003). Suárez-Orozco et al. (2015) provided examples of the mesosystem as a system of microsystems. For undocumented students, depending on the environments they were a part of, this included conflicts of time and demands between family, work, and school; feelings of isolation and lack of mattering to the institution; stigma of identity; challenges of working full time while commuting to school; and a scarcity of resources to address these issues.

Mesosystems are particularly relevant when analyzing the experiences of women post-traditional students who may have microsystems with conflicting needs, expectations, norms, and contradictory processes similar to those laid out above for undocumented students (Renn & Arnold, 2003; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2015). For instance, there may be conflict between family commitments and on-campus involvement, study groups, or research opportunities; professors' office hours and work schedules or commute times; family financial issues and school tuition costs; and feelings of isolation and lack of space on campus that feels inclusive.

Exosystems. Microsystems and mesosystems nest within exosystems and may be affected by components of the exosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1993). Exosystems differ from micro- and mesosystems in that they are not systems with which the student has much direct

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control or influence, but that can have a major influence on the systems within which she operates, thus impacting development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1993). Examples of exosystems that could affect the student experience include school procedures and guidelines, federal and state policies, and other large-scale social/political factors. In the Suárez-Orozco et al. (2015) study, issues affecting students on campus—including financial aid and housing policies, deportation and political climate, sanctuary campus status, and safe spaces (or lack thereof)— were exosystem components that had a major impact on students' well-being and sense of mattering on campus.

The exosystems for women post-traditional students could include a spouse's family or work situation, community involvement and responsibilities, and university policies and practices that help or hinder her educational journey. Larger scale exosystems for this community of women could include state guidelines, support of resources such as community colleges, family support services, and other external factors that may have an impact on her college experience. Campus climate and access issues are part of the post-traditional student exosystem, as are whether or not a school offers evening classes, remote office hours, childcare, and other resources that peripherally help with the college experience for those with non-traditional work and family schedules.

Macrosystems. Macrosystems are the most distal level of environmental influence and encompass all the other systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1993; Renn & Arnold, 2003). Macrosystems represent the historical, cultural, and social forces or structures that influence a student's overall understanding of the world (Bronfenbrenner, 1993; Renn & Arnold, 2003). This can include cultural assumptions and expectations having to do with race, gender, and age or social norms and trends or historical events (Renn & Arnold, 2003).

For women over 25 years of age, this could mean personal or familial expectations of motherhood, relationship status, or work duties. These could also encompass cultural interpretation of age and gender having to do with life course norms and what society says women "should be" doing at any point in their lives. Students over 25 years old might be dealing with life expectations that conflict with choosing to return to their academic careers. The culture and subcultures of the era and context the individual interacts with throughout her life will influence her individual outlook and macrosystems (Bronfenbrenner, 2005).

Chronosystems. Intrinsically linked to macrosystems, chronosystems denote the element of time and era (Bronfenbrenner, 1989, 2005). Development is linked to time and therefore the timing and order of a person's life course has major bearing and influence on her development (Bronfenbrenner, 1995; Renn & Arnold, 2003). The chronosystem denotes the combination of the era someone is raised in, when in life she goes through major transitions, the sequencing of events in her life, and other major elements of time.

For post-traditional learners, time can have major implications. The women in this study grew up in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, and each era had distinct and differing expectations for women. They went to college during both the Obama and then Trump administrations, and while they have been at UCLA, major political and social changes have been brewing nationally. This undoubtedly has had an impact on how they view their college experiences—as does the timing of when they are doing it. The college experience is different for a woman returning to school at 44 than for a woman who is 28; different life transitions and choices are at play for each.

Application of Bronfenbrenner's Model

In their 2003 article on college student peer culture, Renn and Arnold proposed applying Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1989, 1993, 2005) ecology model of human development to student

development in order to better understand the impact and process of campus peer culture on learning in higher education. Renn and Arnold (2003) argued that this framework gives researchers the opportunity to more thoroughly understand the interrelated contextual influence and intersections of experience, identity, and psycho-social influence that truly shape student development and growth, particularly when looking at historically underrepresented and non-traditional student populations.

The model's focus is on the interaction of an individual's psychological characteristics and specific contexts or environmental influences, but it does not assume one universal experience, culture, or stage through which development takes place (Bronfenbrenner, 1989). Instead, Bronfenbrenner (1993) focused on the understanding that human development evolves as a person engages with the environment through increasingly complex actions, relationships, or tasks; this development cannot be measured outside of the social context of a person's life (Renn & Arnold, 2003).

All too often, traditional college student development theories make the assumption that there is one universal or traditional norm that constitutes a college student experience, yet this is not the case (Deil-Amen, 2011b; Donaldson & Townsend, 2007; Sims & Barnett, 2015). The ecological systems model allows educators to consider each individual, his or her perceptions, the institution, and the broader culture and context, as well as the reciprocal interactive process and influence of all these factors on the student, using the individual student as the fulcrum, not the assumed experience or developmental level (Bronfenbrenner, 1989; Renn & Arnold, 2003). I employed Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems model to further understand the college experiences of women post-traditional transfer students as they progressed through their educational journeys at UCLA, including the interpersonal dynamics of their college

experiences, the role of the institution, and any sociocultural factors that enriched or hindered their experiences. Bronfenbrenner's model provided the perfect prism through which to view their complex and multifaceted life trajectories. It allowed for an examination of the context and individuality of each participant through a framework that took into consideration all they brought to the college experience.

Summary

Despite the national commitment to transfer, the high number of students over the age of 25 currently attending community colleges, and the economic and social advantages researchers assert will occur as a result of this group achieving baccalaureate completion, the experiences of students over 25 years of age at public four-year universities is overlooked in the literature (Bahr, 2013; Donaldson & Townsend, 2007; Kasworm, 2010, 2012, 2014; Sims & Barnett, 2015). This is particularly true regarding women who transfer from community colleges to research universities (Bahr, 2013; Donaldson & Townsend, 2007; Kasworm, 2010, 2012, 2014; Packard et al., 2011; Reyes, 2011; Rosenburg, 2016; Sims & Barnett, 2015; Starobin, Smith, & Laanan, 2016). Considering the multidimensional diversity of experience that these students bring to campus, it is imperative that educators and student affairs professionals better understand their unique experiences as well as the impact of college on this group in order to learn how universities can best meet their needs.

CHAPTER 3:

RESEARCH METHODS

The current study focused on the college experiences of women students who transferred from community colleges to UCLA and who were over the age of 25 years when they did so. The following research question and sub-questions guided the study:

What are the ecological dynamics and personal experiences of women transfer students over the age of 25 as they pursue a degree at a four-year public research university?

    a. How do women transfer students over the age of 25 describe their college experience within the context of their life trajectory?

    b. What educational experiences do these women say are most salient in their life trajectory?

    c. What networks of community and support are significant to women transfer students over the age of 25 during their time at UCLA?

Research Design

Since the goals of this study were to gain a deep and rich understanding of the experiences of women over the age of 25 years at UCLA, a qualitative approach was the most appropriate (Gilligan, 1982; Olson, 2016; Seidman, 2013; Van Manen, 1990, 2016). Although surveys and other qualitative tools can be used to identify various aspects and challenges of the non-traditional student experience, these methods do not provide a comprehensive understanding of the participants' lived experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Seidman, 2013; Van Manen 2016). A qualitative design using in-depth interviews provided the opportunity to discern rich and detailed findings in order to construct the authentic personal perspective of the women in my

study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Seidman, 2013). This type of comprehensive narrative would not have been achievable through quantitative methods such as surveys and questionnaires alone.

I conducted the study in a two-phase sequential design (Creswell, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This provided the opportunity to collect basic demographic information about the study participants through a short intake form, and then build on this initial data through more in-depth analysis and exploration of subsequent findings collected through 60-minute individual, in-depth interviews with the participants (Creswell, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). "At the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience" (Seidman, 2013, p. 9; Van Manen, 1990). Based on this concept, the purpose of the interviews was to explore individual narratives in order to more intentionally understand the ecological dynamics and personal perspectives of older women transfer students at UCLA. The interviews allowed participants the time to tell their individual stories in greater depth and specificity (Currie & Kelly, 2012; Gilligan, 1982; Seidman, 2013). This design also provided me with the opportunity to thoroughly connect with the participants, build a "conversation with a purpose," and observe behavior in ways I could not have through other methods (Dexter, 1970, p. 136; Maxwell, 2013; Seidman, 2013).

Research Site

This study was conducted at UCLA, a highly selective R1 research university. The state of California and the University of California system have recently made major commitments to supporting the transfer pipeline, transfer student recruitment, and transfer student supports; many of the UC campuses have proportionately large numbers of community college transfer students (University of California Office of the President [UCOP] Transfer Action Team, 2014; UCOP, 2018). These more recent state and local agreements add an urgency to the need for individual

R1 and 4-year universities to better understand the transfer community and all its context. With increased pressure to enroll transfers, better understanding and awareness of the student community will help to ensure institutions can support transfer students success, engagement, and completion. Each year roughly 35% of incoming undergraduates at UCLA (around 3,200 students) are transfer students (UCLA Academic Planning and Budget [UCLA APB], 2016). In the 2016-17 academic year 93% of UCLA transfers come from 105 of the 114 California community colleges (UCLA APB, 2016). While just 5% of the UCLA undergraduate student body is over the age of 25, 20% of transfer students fall into this age demographic (APB, 2018). As discussed in Chapter 1, UCLA's reputation, large transfer population, and public R1 research university characteristics made it an ideal site for this study.

UCLA has a comprehensive network of services available to its students, including a dedicated Transfer Student Center. Both UCLA Academic and Student Affairs departments offer individual and collaborative supports for all students as well as resources that specifically target communities with unique needs such as parenting, Veteran, undocumented, and foster youth students. Appendix A contains an overview select programs and resources that attempt to serve the needs of this diverse group of students.

Sample

All participants in this study self-identified as women over the age of 25 who had transferred to UCLA from a community college and had been at the university for at least one full term; all were attending UCLA or had graduated within the last two years (in 2016 or 2017). Limiting the sample in this way provided me the opportunity to interview individuals who had experienced the academic, sociocultural, and institutional climate of the campus. At the time of the study, students over the age of 25 made up approximately 20% of the UCLA transfer student

community—a total of about 1,489 students, approximately 655 of whom were women.[2] I used email and social media to reach out to these students to gather demographic data and screen potential participants for interest in participating in the study. (These procedures are discussed in detail in a later section.)

Ultimately, a total of 132 potential participants filled out the study intake form, with 112 indicating interest in being contacted for an interview. Post-traditional students tend to have a wide range of life experiences and contextual circumstances; thus, purposeful selection of participants from among this group of 112 was necessary to guarantee both variety and specificity within the community (Maxwell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 2015). I used purposeful sampling to ensure that the final sample was diverse in terms of age, major, previous institution, parent and relationship status, race/ethnicity, income level, and family background (Maxwell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 2015). Taking all of these demographic aspects into account, I contacted 32 women for interviews, from the initial 112 who had expressed interest in participating. Of these, 30 women were ultimately interviewed (two never responded). Key demographic characteristics of the women who filled out the intake form and of the women who were ultimately interviewed are shown in Table 1.

Sixty-three percent of the women interviewed (n=19) were between 30 and 39 years old. The women were quite diverse in terms of racial and ethnic identity: Four were Asian American, four were African American, five were Hispanic, one was Pakistani/Punjabi, six were White; seven women choose multiple options or "other." Twenty-five of the 30 women worked while

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[2] The most current data on enrollment by age and transfer student status available at the time of the study were fall 2016 enrollment data provided by the UCLA Office of Academic Planning and Budget on October 26, 2017; data for the 2017–2018 cohort were not available at the time but were projected to be within the same range.

they were students at UCLA, and the same number commuted to campus. Most of the women (n=18) self-reported an annual household income of under $30,000. While five women were unsure of their parents' educational levels (for a variety of reasons including death, lack of contact, etc.), 17 were the first in their family to attend or complete college, and eight of these women were the first in their families to complete high school. Of the five who were unsure of their parents' education, four were relatively confident when interviewed that their parents had not attended college.

In terms of relationship status, six participants were married and 12 indicated they were in a committed relationship; nine were single; three were divorced or separated. Thirteen of the women were parents; almost all of them (n=12) had children at home, and nine had children under the age of 12. Of the 13 parenting students, two were married, three were separated or divorced, five were single, and three were in committed relationships. The majority of the women I interviewed had been attending UCLA for over a year (n=18), six had graduated within the past two years, and six were first-year transfers who had completed their first quarter at UCLA.

Appendix B contains descriptive information about each of the 30 participants. The reader is encouraged to use this appendix to provide context for the quotes from the women included in Chapters 4 and 5. Note that all names used in the dissertation are pseudonyms.

Table 1.

Demographic Characteristics of Intake Form Respondents and Study Participants

	All Intake Form Respondents (N=132)	Study Participants (N=30)
Age		
26–29 years	44 (33%)	4 (13%)
30–39 years	62 (47%)	19 (63%)
40–49 years	18 (14%)	5 (17%)
50+ years	7 (5%)	2 (7%)
Unanswered/Declined to state	1 (1%)	0 (0%)
Race/Ethnicity		
Asian/Asian American	18 (14%)	4 (13%)
Black/African American	8 (6%)	4 (13%)
Hispanic/Latino	32 (24%)	5 (17%)
Middle Eastern	1 (1%)	1 (3%)
White/Caucasian	44 (33%)	6 (20%)
Multiple race/ethnicity[a]	20 (15%)	6 (20%)
Other[b]	5 (4%)	3 (10%)
Unanswered/Declined to state	4 (3%)	1 (3%)
Annual Income		
Under $30,000	84 (64%)	18 (60%)
$30,000–$45,000	12 (9%)	4 (13%)
$45,001–$60,000	9 (7%)	2 (7%)
$60,001–$75,000	3 (2%)	0 (0%)
Over $75,000	7 (5%)	1 (3%)
Unanswered/Declined to state	17 (13%)	5 (17%)
Relationship Status		
Married	27 (21%)	6 (20%)
Partnership or long-term relationship	46 (35%)	12 (40%)
Separated/Divorced	10 (8%)	3 (10%)
Single	44 (33%)	9 (30%)
Unanswered/Declined to state	5 (4%)	0 (0%)
Parenting Status		
Has child(ren)	41 (31%)	13 (43%)
Does not have child(ren)	89 (67%)	17 (57%)
Unanswered/Declined to state	2 (2%)	0 (0%)
Children Currently in Home[c]		
Yes	n/a	12 (40%)
No	n/a	18 (60%)
First-Generation College Graduate		
Yes	72 (55%)	17 (57%)
No	45 (34%)	8 (27%)
Unanswered/Declined to state/Unsure[d]	15 (14%)	5 (17%)
Employment Status While at UCLA		
Working while in school	97 (74%)	25 (83%)
Not working while in school	33 (25%)	5 (17%)
Unanswered/Declined to State	2 (2%)	0 (0%)

Table 1 continues on next page

	All Intake Form Respondents (N=132)	Study Participants (N=30)
Commuter Status		
Commuter	93 (71%)	25 (83%)
Live on campus	37 (28%)	5 (17%)
Unanswered/Declined to State	2 (2%)	0 (0%)
UCLA Class Standing		
First-year transfer student	35 (27%)	6 (20%)
Second-year transfer student	39 (30%)	13 (43%)
Third-year (or more) transfer student	25 (19%)	5 (17%)
Already graduated from UCLA	32 (24%)	6 (20%)
Withdrew from UCLA without a degree	1 (1%)	0 (0%)

[a] In the final study sample, multiple racial/ethnic identities included Hispanic and African American (n=2); Hispanic and Middle Eastern (n=1); Hispanic and Asian (n=1); Hispanic and American Indian/Alaska Native (n=1); and Asian and American Indian/Alaska Native (n=1).
[b] On the intake form, "other" responses included Armenian; bi-racial Mexican; Chicana; Turkish Cyproit; and Pakistani/Punjabi. In the final study sample, "other" responses included Pakistani/Punjabi; Chicana; and Turkish Cypriot.
[c] This question was not asked on the intake form.
[d] On the intake form, 15 women were unsure of the educational level for one or more parent or left this unanswered; in the final sample, five women were unsure of one or more of their parents' educational level. Although in the interview four of the five communicated that they were positive that neither of their parents had gone to college.

Data Collection

To recruit participants for the study, I prepared an outreach protocol that laid out the purpose of the study, the participant pool I desired, the time commitment, and the financial incentive that would be provided to study participants. Through the UCLA Registrar's Office, I distributed this information via email to all male and female transfer students over the age of 25 (see Appendix C). Information about the study was also included in multiple newsletters and email communications from the Bruin Resource Center (BRC)—a student affairs department on the UCLA campus—that were sent to specific student communities such as parents, veterans, and undocumented students. I also used social media to reach potential participants. In particular, I added posts describing the study to Facebook groups for UCLA transfer students as well as the Facebook group for the Non-Traditional Students Network, an organization for UCLA students over the age of 25 (see Appendix D).

Potential participants were asked to complete a brief study intake form (see Appendix E), provided via a secure link, that asked about basic demographic details as well as interest in being contacted to participate in an interview. All general student contact information used to promote the study was kept confidential and was only available to professional staff; any additional participant information collected via the secure link intake form and interviews was seen only by me and was coded to ensure privacy. More detail on access and outreach efforts is detailed in a subsection below.

Demographic intake form. As noted above, a short and confidential demographic intake form (Appendix E) was sent to all male and female transfer students over the age of 25 at UCLA via email and also promoted through social media and newsletter communication with various student populations on campus. The intake form included a brief description of the study; the questionnaire was administered via a secure link though an online assessment and data collection tool called Baseline. This program provided easy distribution and organization of the online questionnaire and allowed me to collect and analyze basic demographic data confidentially.

The questions on the intake form included student's date of birth, major, previous institution, UCLA class standing, employment status, parenting status, commuter and relationship status, parental level of education, and other demographic information to allow for insight and within-group comparisons of the women participating in the study (Robinson, 2012). Additionally, the intake form asked respondents if they were open to participating in an interview and sharing their individual stories. A $25 Amazon dollar gift card was offered to encourage participation and compensate interviewees for their time. As mentioned above, 112 women ultimately indicated interest in being interviewed, and a subset who signed up via the secure link and fit the participant selection criteria (n=32) were invited to participate in the

interviews. No self-identified male students filled out the in-take form or indicated interest in participation in the study, outreach targeted women students.

Interview sampling and procedure. Interviews allowed me to gather nuanced narratives of the lived college experiences of women transfer students over 25 years old at UCLA and to deeply explore context and their individual perspectives. As noted above, I chose a purposeful sampling strategy to ensure range of diversity in terms of age, major, previous institution, parent and relationship status, race, income level, and family background (Maxwell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 2015). Students in the non-traditional transfer student community are wide-ranging in their life experience and contextual circumstances; there is no "typical" non-traditional student. Therefore, purposeful selection of participants was necessary to guarantee both variety and specificity within the community (Maxwell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 2015).

The interviews allowed me to gather individual students' perspectives on their unique UCLA transfer experiences and to build descriptive narratives about the women and how UCLA fit into their life trajectories. It was important to balance rapport and familiarity with the participants while maintaining a standard of formality and respect. Therefore, I followed a semi-structured interview protocol to both create structure and allow room for deeper exploration of themes that arose during the interviews (Seidman, 2013; see Appendix F). Questions focused on the ecological dynamics, interactions, and support networks the participants perceived during their time to UCLA, as well as their individual journeys to UCLA, how they saw UCLA fitting into their life trajectories, what UCLA meant to them, and what they wished educators knew about their UCLA experiences. I field tested the interview protocol with two female transfer

students before the start of the official study. This helped me condense the protocol and streamline the order and flow of the questions.

Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes. In most cases, interviews were recorded on two recording devices (on an iPhone 6 through the QuickVoice application and via a MacBook, through the Microsoft Word Notebook application) and were held in a private office on campus at the time most convenient to the individual student. In order to accommodate the busy lives and schedules of all the participants, I conducted 12 of the interviews via the video teleconferencing program Zoom Video Communications and conducted two of them off campus in locations of the participants' choosing.

Field notes. In addition to audio recording each interview session, I took observational field notes during and directly after each interview to record any unspoken communication such as body language, facial expressions, inaudible vocalizations or interactions, and other movements that were not picked up by the recording. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) explained that attentive observation during interviews allows the researcher to record behavior that is happening in the moment, and that field notes can often provide "anchored interviewing," allowing the researcher to follow up on subtleties that participants may be unaware of (p. 139).

Data Analysis

I coded and analyzed demographic data from the intake form to detect demographic themes, and this helped form the interview protocol, outreach, and purposeful participant selection detailed above (see Table 1 for full demographic information). In addition, this information informed within-group comparisons and identities of participants when I analyzed final results. I listened to the audio recordings and reviewed field notes after each interview in order to record memos and field notes based on conversations during the sessions, noting any

thoughts and concerns as well as any immediately evident themes or subthemes. All recorded

data were transcribed verbatim through the rev.com service. For accuracy and specificity, I

compared the recordings to the written transcriptions to make any necessary corrections.

The interview protocol addressed overarching themes including overall UCLA

experience; experience with staff, faculty, and students; use of campus resources; feelings of

validation and sense of belonging; barriers and challenges; personal characteristics; the journey

to UCLA; and external factors affecting the college experience. Likewise, I used themes from the

literature on transfer and women students over 25 years of age as a reference to anticipate topics

that might (and ultimately did) arise such as juggling roles and responsibilities, institutional

challenges and barriers, transfer shock, and communities of support (Donaldson & Townsend,

2007; Kasworm, 2010, 2012, 2014; Sims & Barnett, 2015; Soares et al., 2017; Zhang, Lui, &

Hagedorn, 2013).

As discussed in the previous chapter, the Bronfenbrenner ecological systems framework

provided the most significant model from which to organize findings based on students'

proximal and distal environments, interactions, and influences (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1989,

1993, 2005). I developed codes around the five systems provided by the framework:

microsystems, mesosystems, exosystems, macrosystems, and chronosystems. I used these five

systems and Bronfenbrenner's process–person–context–time model to organize themes that

surfaced from the interview data (Bronfenbrenner, 1992, 1993). These themes also aligned with

the interview protocol and current literature on the topic, as I discuss next.

The theme of *microsystems* included the women's immediate daily settings and their

interactions with other students, staff and faculty, family members, and work. This also included

the many roles the women held, the networks and communities of support they found while at

UCLA, and any resources important to their college experience. The *mesosystems* theme included the overlapping of the various microsystems that women in the study were balancing, any challenges they described facing in building community at UCLA, and how they blended the various roles and relationships they held while also being students.

Institutional challenges, the transfer process, university policy, campus environment and climate made up the *exosystems* theme. The theme of *macrosystems*, similar to the exosystems theme, contained subthemes that the women had little direct control or influence over but that affected their experience nonetheless. The macrosystems theme also included larger sociocultural topics such as expectations having to do with race, gender, and age. Lastly, the theme of *chronosystems* provided context for the aspect of time and life-course trajectory and how these women perceived the timing of their educational journey influencing their college experience.

I began thematic analysis early in the interview process, noting general themes and meaningful categories as the process progressed (Maxwell, 2013; Seidman, 2013). As I identified, defined, and coded the themes, I entered them into Microsoft Excel spreadsheets and the qualitative data analysis software program Quirkos. This allowed me to more effectively organize data, record themes within the data, and consolidate themes as their connections became evident. The following dominant themes emerged: managing multiple worlds and responsibilities; the significance of age and gender; institutional obstacles and campus climate; and the spaces, places, and people that formed communities of support for the participants.

Because of the interweaving nature of the Bronfenbrenner ecological framework, I was able to combine themes within the data to create two findings chapters. Chapter 4 details the theme of the multiple worlds and multiple selves that the women reported having to navigate

through the micro- and mesosystems lens and then views this theme more broadly through the dynamic of time (chronosystems) and culture (macro- and chronosystems). Chapter 5 explores the interlinking of ecological dynamics at UCLA and how the women in the study interpreted their environment, as well as how broader institutional policies (exosystems), campus climate (macrosystems), and the timing of the study (macro- and chronosystems) influenced their college experiences.

Access

During the time of the study, I was working at UCLA as the program director of transfer and non-traditional student programing at the UCLA Transfer Student Center. I had developed relationships with other university departments that also work with transfer and non-traditional student communities. As a result, student contact information as well as regular student interaction with students over the age of 25 was readily attainable for the study. The UCLA Transfer Student Center had access to student emails, and all office staff interact daily with non-traditional students in the center, at events, through student support groups, and via other modes of outreach. These other modes include multiple social media platforms, transfer alumni contact lists, relationships with student leaders, student organizations and their members (e.g., Non-Traditional Students Network, Student Veterans Association, Commuter Student Group, Parenting Students of UCLA, etc.), as well as a network of outreach through the Transfer Student Mentor Program and campus social and academic affairs departments.

I talked about the study at length with UCLA leadership (e.g., vice chancellor of student affairs, assistant vice chancellor of student development, director and assistant director of the Bruin Resource Center, and director of UCLA's Center for Community College Partnerships); I had the full support of my supervisors and colleagues in reaching out to the students and other

campus departments and in using campus office space to hold interviews. I also had the

cooperation and support of other campus departments that agreed to reach out to students for the

study, allowing me to broaden the participant pool beyond my own circle. As such, I was able to

include non-traditional students I did not know personally or have contact information for, or

who might have had experiences at UCLA different than those connected to the transfer

resources and student organizations within my purview. This was vital to ensure an inclusive

sampling of non-traditional transfer students who use a variety of UCLA resources.

Ethical Issues and Potential Bias

In order to address relevant ethical issues, I provided a consent form to all potential

interview participants, which included information about the study (Appendix G). Students were

free to participate or not; no coercive measures were used. All received verbal communication

regarding the study, the fact that their participation was completely voluntary, details regarding

the role of the researcher, and the basic process and timeframe of the interviews. They were

informed that they were welcome to leave the study at any time during the interview, and that

they could indicate if they would like the recording device turned off at any point. To ensure

anonymity, I replaced participants' names with pseudonyms. All interview transcripts, notes, and

data remained coded throughout the process, and digital copies were password protected and

only accessed by me.

As a university administrator, former non-traditional transfer student, and the researcher

on this project, I took great care and consideration with my role in this this study and any

assumptions and beliefs that I may have had about the non-traditional student experience, or that

students may have had about my role on campus. Because of my role and personal experience as

a non-traditional transfer student, and because I have worked as an advocate for transfers and

non-traditional students and their needs on campus for five years, I may have had a positive bias toward transfer and non-traditional students in this study. However, I made every effort to develop neutral language in the interview protocol and to temper any bias in my behavior and throughout the analysis phase of the study.

Because I am a student affairs staff member, students and potential participants might seek me out to talk about challenges and issues in school and in their lives, or they might come to me for advice and insight about how to navigate the university and make the most of their time at UCLA. Therefore, how I managed my role with participants was vital (Seidman, 2013). I endeavored to create an expectation of formality and respect and resisted fostering too much rapport and familiarity in order to uphold the integrity of the interview process (Seidman, 2013). I was very clear that participation in the study would in no way affect students' grades or status at the university. I did not oversee any of the other participants in any official capacity, nor did I have any oversight over grades for any of the participants. It should be noted that one of the participants was a current employee at the Transfer Student Center. She asked to participate in the interviews and was provided the same information, details, and incentives as the other participants.

<div align="center">**Credibility and Trustworthiness**</div>

While the interview questions were specific to the research questions posed, the main issues of credibility and trustworthiness in this study were likely researcher/participant bias and/or reactivity based on participants' reaction to me as the researcher. To minimize sample bias, my outreach efforts stretched beyond the Transfer Student Center sphere of influence. It was imperative to reach out to other campus gatekeepers in order to safeguard against researcher and participant subjectivity, increase the internal transferability of the data to the broader non-

traditional transfer student population, and ensure reliability and dependability of the data

collection methods. In order to ensure that data collection was open and relatively free of any

prevailing bias or influence, I piloted the demographic questionnaire and interview protocol with

individuals who had similar characteristics to the target population.

I used systematic data analysis such as member checking and peer review to safeguard

against any interpretation error. Member checks on interview transcripts allowed participants to

review the data and confirm what they said, and to add to the content if they wished. I also

sought input, feedback, and peer review (from colleagues in the field) of the data analysis to

confirm and strengthen the analysis. Finally, since this study was qualitative and only covered

one site (UCLA), the findings are not generalizable. However, some themes may be reflected at

similar institutions that recruit and serve transfer populations from community colleges.

Summary

The research methods used for this study were designed to gather rich data that reflects

student perspectives on what influenced their unique college experiences as women transfer

students over 25 years old. The findings may help educators understand the challenges these

students face at research universities and what elements of support can help these women persist

and succeed. The goal of this study was to provide educators and student affairs professionals

with in-depth information on this unexplored college experience and some concrete

understanding of how universities can be more receptive to non-traditional students. The next

two chapters (Chapter 4 and Chapter 5), describe the research findings. Chapter 4 details the

overarching theme of multiple selves and the interwoven worlds of women over 25 years old as

they pursue a degree at UCLA as well as the saliency of age and gender to their educational

journey. Chapter 5 focuses on institutional climate, lack of institutional awareness regarding

post-traditional students, the isolation that the women reported feeling, and the spaces and people

that ultimately helped generate a sense of belonging and connection for the women during their

time at UCLA.

CHAPTER 4:

MULTIPLE SELVES AND INTERWOVEN WORLDS

"I felt that I was two different people a lot of the time….I felt like I was this alien
life walking around (on campus)….It was very isolating….I did feel like I was
leading a very double life….While I was a student, my life was just so, so different
from the majority of the people that I interacted with."

–Isabel, age 39, mother of two

Frankie is 33 years old; she is African American and the mother of four children under

the age of eight. An African American studies major with a minor in visual and performing arts

education, she had to quit her career as a hairstylist in order to be a student at UCLA full time.

Frankie is in her first year at UCLA, having transferred from Los Angeles Southwest College,

and she is the first in her family to go to college. I interviewed Frankie via Zoom video

conferencing on a Saturday afternoon, three of her four kids popping in and out of the frame

throughout the conversation, sometimes draping over their mother while we talked.

Occasionally, Frankie's partner would also quickly and apologetically interject to check on the

kids' schedule and when they would all be able to go to a movie. All the while, Frankie

seamlessly traversed her merging worlds as mother, wife, student, and UCLA study participant.

Juggling these various life roles is a part of what makes the college experience particularly

unique for many women over the age of 25—especially those with children and/or jobs, careers,

partners, and other prominent responsibilities. Frankie summed up perfectly what she and other

participants expressed about the challenges of balancing the various interwoven, and sometimes

conflicting, worlds:

You have so many people pulling you in a lot of different directions.…It's like being in

the matrix, almost like you come to school and it's one world…just a whole different

world, a whole different modality to operate. And then when you go home, it's like, you have to switch that into off mode.…It's kind of difficult navigating between the two worlds because they're so vastly different. They're really completely different.…I feel like if I was younger and hadn't had a partner, it would've been a lot smoother. But, like, once you're set in your ways and you have a routine with your family, just, like, that it's a big risk for you to really be, you know, home because it requires a lot of hours. My kids, well, all over really, I think it does take a toll on our relationship.

Frankie acknowledged that the compounded identity of being a parent, an older student, someone who'd had a career for years, and a community college transfer student at UCLA could often feel ostracizing and isolating, particularly as a woman of color. Yet when she reflected on the intertwining of school, family, work, and her life trajectory, Frankie found the experience overwhelming in its positive influence on her entire family. She said that when the worlds merged, when she stepped back to see the effect, she saw her UCLA experience as shifting the life-trajectory of her whole family, not just herself:

UCLA…it symbolizes the changing in the trajectory of generations for my family.…Things are going to be so different for my children's children's children. Like they, my kids talk about UCLA and they breathe it. Oh, like, my youngest [three-year-old] son, he asked me, "Mommy, are you taking me to school?" The four-year-old said, "No, Mommy's not taking you to school because Mommy goes to school when we go to school." So just hearing them understanding and grasping this every time.…And in the neighborhood, by the family housing, there are a lot of buildings that say UCLA on it and they [the kids] just bust out in eight claps [a UCLA cheer] just like that, every time. It's really changed the trajectory. Like the book I got from AAP [a book given by the

Academic Advancement Program to all first-year UCLA students and discussed at events and in the classroom] that they had us read. I was able to…get a copy for my daughter because she likes reading. So she's reading it. So just I'm able to share a lot of things with them.…It's just completely changed us. It's changed us in dynamics of our conversations and how we operate, and you know, how we look at things and how we critically think. Yeah, I just feel like it really has done a lot to really shape-shift. And I think for me it's helpful for my identity as a person and as a woman just being introduced to these concepts is redefining who I am. I didn't think, I was a feminist but the more…I read and I'm introduced to concepts, like my thinking kind of, you know, lines up with feminist theology. So it's just, yeah…I feel like it's really changed the trajectory of my life and my children's.

The Ecological Dynamics of Navigating Interwoven (Sometimes Mismatched) Worlds

The quote by Isabel at the top of this chapter and Frankie's narrative above emphasize the element of multiple selves and balancing worlds that many of the participants detailed in their interviews. Frankie expressed this theme both through day-to-day interactions she faced as well as within the context of her life-journey and family culture. This chapter combines the theme of multiple worlds and multiple selves through the microsystem and mesosystem lens, and then investigates how the participants in this study described this theme more broadly in relation to expectations of time, age, gender, and culture (macro- and chronosystems). The chapter also highlights the "new" selves participants discovered as a result of their UCLA transfer experience.

As I discussed in Chapter 2, according to Bronfenbrenner's (1977, 2005) ecological systems framework, microsystems incorporate the immediate, day-to-day roles, relations, interactions, and environments with which individuals regularly navigate; mesosystems comprise

the interrelations of the various microsystems or settings an individual engages with at particular points in her life (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 2005); and exosystems include the connections and interactions of an individual's microsystems with settings that do not directly influence, but do have an effect, on daily life such as a spouse's workplace situation, various university policies, and community events or happenings (Bronfenbrenner, 1992, 2005). The discrete effect and the synergy or conflict between these countless systems has a changing force on the individual and her ability to traverse the systems in her life, as well as how she perceives these systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 2005).

As I also described in the previous chapter, educators have traditionally viewed college students through a set of microsystems, mesosystems, and exosystems that revolve around the classroom, social life with students in their age range, residential halls, roommates, and, possibly, on-campus jobs and (peripherally) the students' parents (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Cairns & Cairns, 1995; Renn, 1999, 2003; Renn & Arnold, 2003). These conventional "college student systems" have habitually not included how students like Frankie might be blending career/work, partner/spouse, community responsibilities, family environments and expectations—which all include dynamics such as childcare and parenting, having a partner/spouse (who likely also has a job), a commute, off-campus work, community involvement—or the other "worlds" that students over 25 years old may bring with them to the college experience. As we see in the literature on non-traditional students navigating a college environment (and in the narrative above) women who return to education after the age of 25 certainly bring with them micro- and exosystems that universities traditionally do not recognize (Blumenstyk, 2018; Donaldson & Townsend, 2007; Kasworm, 2010; Soares et al., 2017; Zhang et al., 2013).

Beyond these women's day-to-day lives, the social and cultural expectations of age, gender, race, and where the women are in their life trajectories can create dissonance with the college-going experience. From an ecological perspective, we see the macrosystem, which represents the overarching cultural and subcultural "societal blueprint" in which the individual and the various microsystems each woman interacts with are embedded (Bronfenbrenner, 2005, p. 150). This includes beliefs and patterns of behavior that have been passed on though families, institutions, and other processes of socialization. Likewise, we see the element of time (the chronosystem), both in terms of chronological age but more aptly in terms of her life course, life events, life transitions, and the timing of these developments. It includes the era in which we experience these life events and how they may serve as an impetus for change within the individual (Bronfenbrenner, 1988, 2005). Macrosystems and chronosystems are intricately linked. As individuals change and develop, so do the societies, politics, cultures, communities, and belief systems they are a part of or move through (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Cairns & Cairns, 1995). It is therefore important to evaluate these structures/systems simultaneously.

As will become evident from the discussion of findings in this and the next chapter, all of these issues were at play for the women in this study. Generational differences and dissonance caused by life context and life trajectory expectations came up consistently for the participants as elements of their college experiences that made them feel like outsiders, from a different world. Cultural and familial pressure and their own beliefs about age created a divide in how the women viewed themselves as UCLA students. Both the immediate daily elements of balancing multiple worlds and multiple roles and the larger sociocultural beliefs about being women over 25 years old came up repeatedly in conversations in all of the interviews. With all of this in mind, in this chapter I explore the theme of multiple worlds and multiple selves at both the micro- and-

mesosystem level, as well as more broadly in how the dynamic of time (chronosystems) and culture (macro- and chronosystems) have impacted the college experiences of the women who were interviewed.

Blending Worlds: Being a Good Parent, Partner, Employee, and Student

The day-to-day interactions reported by the study participants varied wildly depending on their level of familial responsibilities, whether or not they worked while in school, their connections and engagement with on- and off-campus entities, their majors, their commute status, whether they had partners, and their life experiences before arriving at UCLA. Nevertheless, one clear theme that arose among participants was the challenge of navigating (and the difficulties of blending) the various microsystems and exosystems with which they were connected. Like Frankie above, the women who participated in this study frequently spoke about feeling as though they were living a double life or existing as multiple selves, pulled in multiple directions.

According to the women interviewed, the mesosystems—and the ability or inability of the systems they were part of to connect or fuse—often caused stress, conflict, and feelings of isolation at the university. They reported a sense of dissonance and separation because of their age and where they were in their life trajectories compared with the majority of the students around them. When they were able to connect with other students who had shared experiences or with faculty and resources specific to their needs, or when they had strong family structures and support systems in place, the pressures were diminished and they described more positive experiences at UCLA. The immediate "worlds" or microsystems that the women found most difficult to navigate and fuse with the college experience were family, work, and interaction with younger students. Also relevant, however, were broader issues of timing and the sociocultural

expectations that come with age and gender. There were also rich stories of women finding themselves (or "new selves") at UCLA.

Navigating being a parent, spouse, partner, and/or engaged family member while in school was a major part of the college experience of the women interviewed. Recall from the previous chapter that, out of the 30 participants, 13 were mothers. Of these, eight had more than one child, and 11 were single mothers. (Three of the 11 single mothers talked about having very committed partners who helped out significantly with the kids and finances.) Six were married, 12 were in committed relationships, nine were single, and three were divorced or separated while in school. Twenty-five of the 30 women commuted to campus, and for 14 of these women, this commute took over an hour each way (and in four cases, participants drove two hours each way to get to UCLA for classes). Twenty-five of the 30 women also worked while in school full time, and 20 women (seven of whom were also parents) worked 20 hours or more a week. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that juggling and traversing being a student, partner, employee, and/or a good parent and family member was, overwhelmingly, a collective theme.

Parenting as a Student/Being a Student While Parenting[3]

According to Gabriela, a mother of seven children, balance is the key. She conceded that her experience blending her worlds might have been different and "a whole lot easier" if she "didn't have kids and was a lot younger." Gabriela explained that the responsibilities she had as a mother—in addition to her two part time jobs—made time management and utilization of the resources available to her imperative to her success as a student. She used the term "balance"

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[3] Often it is assumed that students put their identity as students above all else. This leads to labels that prioritize that role (e.g., student-parents). The section headings in this chapter represent an attempt to turn those assumptions around and emphasize that this may not always be the case. Here, for example, being a student may come second to being a parent.

often, and said she must assess each day the time and attention she would need to invest in studying to achieve the best grades she could—all while making sure she had time to spend with her children. School and grades were important investments, but striving to be the best mother she could be was the primary goal. As Gabriela put it, "I have to make sure that I spend time with my children, taking special days or special moments to just invest into them."

Among the 13 mothers in the study, balance was a common theme—in particular, how best to balance time with family and schoolwork. Often the choice was clear, and children came first, as was the case for Elvia and Yadira who had to miss finals to stay home with their sick children, which really had an impact on their grades. This of course frustrated them, but there was no question which "world" and responsibility was more important when situations like this arose. This was especially true for single mothers or those without strong support systems in place to help when conditions called for it. Most of the women interviewed expressed that they had fairly strong family or childcare support to help with children. However, this added an extra element of negotiation of time and family duty to the picture. As Patricia, a 45-year-old divorced mother of three, reflected:

> Probably I would say this to my friends that are young: If you're going to be at school, please don't have children. Have boyfriends you want to marry, marry. But don't have children because it's different responsibilities. And if you want your children to do different stuff than just school, it's like an extra part-time job.…Like we [students with children] have different part-time jobs.…It's different stuff that we have to deal with when you have children. I have three; even though my older son is living by himself, I'm still taking care of him. And so, he got sick. The other day he got sick, and he's come

home. And I make a lot of stuff for him so he got well, but I got sick. And I was like, "Okay, who is taking care of me?"

Women with older children struggled with the balance of being full-time mothers versus full-time students as well. Parker, who was 44 and the mother of a 21- and 23-year-old, made the delineation clear when she said that "first and foremost" she is a mom. She worked hard and "struggled" for 20 years, putting off her own chances at a degree, to make sure her children were set up well: "The fact that I'm doing well in college means nothing if my children are going to be like, tanking in life." This outlook meant however, that when both her children had "massive personal dramas and massive personal situations" that "could change the trajectory of their lives" while she was taking finals and applying to graduate school, that she needed to negotiate and balance her roles so that she could support her children when they most needed her.

The situation was more complicated because she and her son were actually in the same major and graduating from UCLA together. (Another mother, Patricia, was also in this situation.) Parker described the situation:

So, I know everything he's supposed to be doing. It's got to be terrible for him, honestly. It's got to be so bad for him.…We're still in the same major, yeah. We live together. He was living with his girlfriend, and then they broke up, and so like, it became like a huge drama.…I know I'm not supposed to be a helicopter mom. You're supposed to just let them fail. But I need to let them fail after college. Like, "You can do that after college, because if you drop out of college now…it is going to be a very challenging life. And I recognize that at least you'll have the degree to get you through, making your life easier. But without that degree, especially in this world, there is just no way."…I can't just let

them fail, because it means more than just failing now. It means 20 years of suffering, which I've done without a degree.

For those with young children still in school or daycare, the role negotiation revolved around routines and being available for their children on a daily basis. It was clear that being able to engage fully as a student was a major challenge and source of frustration for these participants. Daily routines and responsibilities—such as picking up their children at school, dropping them off at various activities, being around in the evenings and on weekends in order to "be a mom"—got in the way of things like study groups, campus events and programs, and office hours. Even staying 15 minutes after class to talk to a professor became a source of stress or simply impossible. Elvia admitted, "It was my choice to have a child," but she lamented that it was "hard because a person has dreams and goals and they want to succeed completely at what they're doing, but sometimes there's just certain things you can't do because your schedule is so strict." For Yadira, the schedule was restrictive and kept her from being able to connect with other students. She would rush to class after dropping her daughters off, and then rush back to pick them up and get them to their activities. Even when she did try to connect with others, she generally could not follow through on plans, which made her feel shut out of the student experience.

On the other hand, many of the mothers talked about moments when their children could connect with them as students (such as Frankie's experience in the beginning narrative), and they were inspired by the sense of unity it provided them. Participants with older children talked about it in terms of their kids helping them out with school and technology, bonding over being in school at the same time, or the role switching that can happen when a child knows something that the parent does not. Similar to Frankie, those with younger children talked about the joy it

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brought them to see their kids doing the UCLA eight-clap, to read a book together on a topic they were studying, or to bring their children to events on campus.

Elvia described bringing her daughter Jade to an event on campus, and how the experience simultaneously made her feel she belonged and also "outed" her as being different from all the other students. She felt like the situation really brought her two worlds crashing together. She explained that it can be isolating to be surrounded by 18-year-olds, and many of the events are in the residential life building, which is located quite a distance from the classroom buildings. However, the actress Diana Guererro was visiting campus and Elvia did not want to miss it. Unfortunately, it was a "first come, first serve" event where people lined up at the door, and Elvia had to pick her daughter up at preschool and come back to campus. She explained:

> I was the only one struggling up the stairs. I had a stroller. It was just like this whole big thing.…It was a good and a bad. They are kind of like, "Oh, she has a child. You can sit in the front. She has a child." No one else had to deal with the stroller situation or didn't have to deal with bringing their child.…I feel like I am the only one that struggles like this.…I was the only parenting one there.…But then it was like, "Oh she has a kid so let's put her in the front."

They ushered Elvia and her daughter ahead of everyone else. Elvia was overwhelmed with emotion. She felt a sense of belonging for being noticed and catered to but also embarrassment over getting to go ahead of everyone else. As she said, "it was both good and bad," but mostly it enabled her to have an incredible night with her daughter at UCLA.

A Committed Relationship While a Student/Being a Student in a Committed Relationship

Most traditionally aged students at four-year universities are not in serious long-term, committed relationships or marriages (Cruse, Eckerson, & Gault, 2018; McFarland, 2017) —

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something that brings particular expectations and responsibilities, such as shared accountability, co-habitation, negotiation and obligations of time and choices, etc. Sixty percent or 18 of the women interviewed were either married or in a committed partnership, and, like Frankie in the narrative above, they mentioned the stress that being a student put on this relationship. This was especially true for women in their thirties who did not have children and felt a biological or social clock pushing them to have children (something I discuss in more detail in a sub-section on gender and age below). Six participants talked about having unsupportive partners who felt threatened by their mates going back to school. For the most part, however, participants either talked about their partners being a great support system (detailed more specifically in Chapter 5 which explores findings on the support systems of), as well the fact that there were major challenges around having a mate while also being dedicated to school full time. In this section, I highlight what these women expressed about blending life as students with being married or with committed partners.

Beatriz, who was 35, already had a partner when she started going to UCLA. She also lived more than 55 miles from campus and commuted roughly two hours each way. She described her experience this way:

> I already had a relationship when I came to UCLA, and it's like I'm not just my own person who can make whatever decisions I want. I owe some time and commitment to another person. It's like, "Okay, let me try to give you time and make decisions that are going to be okay for both of us. I may not go study abroad, I may not go away to Washington, DC, for a quarter. But it's because I have to work on this relationship as well.

Some of the aspects of being a student, such as studying abroad or living on campus, are just not part of the world of a student who is married or in a committed relationship. Like Frankie, Beatriz had a supportive mate, yet she found herself in a continual state of compromise, reassessment, and renegotiation—her decisions did not affect her life alone. Beatriz and the other participants in committed relationships talked about the sacrifices made and the stress it put on their partnerships.

As Lesly, who was 50, put it, "My poor husband doesn't get to see me a lot. We have our evenings together. I've carved that out and he appreciates that. But I don't do weekends with him, not while I'm in school, because I just can't." She said that if she were single maybe things would be a little different and she could live on campus and take part in more activities as a student, but she took her responsibilities of being a wife and taking care of the home they owned together seriously. As a result, she did not have a community on campus and her critical resource and support system was her partner. There were similar responses from 12 of the women in committed relationships. Their major source of encouragement tended to be their partners. Balancing the world of being a student with the world of being a supportive mate was precarious to navigate for these women.

Lesly contended that of course this type of gap in worlds can exist elsewhere in life—for instance, between married friends and single friends, or between couples who have kids and those who do not. However, she thought this was an example of how age and being an older student really affected her college experience. Being married can create a divide in how she was able to connect on campus, but as Lesly and others expressed, being married and over 25 years old really makes the chasm clearer. In a later section I explore how the women in the study

reacted to navigating a campus predominately made up of undergraduate students under the age of 22 years (UCLA APB, 2016, 2018).

Tonia unfortunately described something that five other women also mentioned: boyfriends and husbands not understanding their partners desire to return to school. For example, Isabel's husband and Emma's boyfriend saw school as a threat to the relationship. According to the women interviewed the men seemed to have fears associated with their partners gaining an education and then leaving the relationship, as well as the prospect that their partners might be too old to have children by the time they graduated. This dynamic made Emma feel she was forced to choose between her partner, having a life with someone she loved, and her own desires. Hannah ended up breaking up with her long-term boyfriend when she transferred to UCLA, declaring that the main reason for the breakup was her desire to commit to her education.

Isabel described her husband as a "barrier" to success at UCLA. She detailed that her husband and his family held the perspective that work and earning money was what is important. His family also became fairly successful financially without college degrees, so Isabel felt pressure from them to work and not pursue a degree. In her words, "I had to kind of constantly remind him of the long-term outcome of what college could do for our family. That caused a lot of conflict."

Tonia, described feeling as though she had to choose either an education or a job and a family. She lamented not being able to find a partner that supported her ambitions of one day working for the United Nations and she expressed she drew her motivation and inspiration from her female cousin from Mexico who is involved in politics, designed her own home, and was very driven. Tonia compared their similar situations. She felt that they both were missing something in their personal lives, they do not have the emotional support and intimacy that a

person can get from having a partner, yet they both desire that in their lives. However, Tonia felt that because of their independence, self-reliance, and ambition men are intimidated and so she expresses that they continue forward alone, without a partner.

Being a Student Who is an Employee/Being an Employee Who is a Student

One significant difference between the study participants and a more typical undergraduate is that none of the women were reliant on their parents for income, money for school, or living expenses. Moreover, many of them supported family members other than just themselves, their children, and their mates. Prior to enrolling at UCLA nearly all of the women worked full time, with 18 sharing that they thought of this work not just as a job but as a true career. Twenty-five of the 30 women worked while enrolled at UCLA full time, with some working off campus and some able to find jobs on campus. While the number of hours the women worked each week and during breaks and summer varied, 20 of them consistently worked 20 or more hours per week; six had full-time jobs (35–40 hours per week) while enrolled at UCLA. As noted in Chapter 2, three-quarters (73%) had annual incomes under $45,000, and 60% reported incomes under $30,000. More than half of the participants with an income under $30,000 (56%) were parents, and 33% had more than one child to support.

The women talked about their jobs as simply an extension of what was expected in life for someone their age, not as something optional. The theme of learning to manage their time with school, commuting, raising children, and work was interwoven seamlessly into their conversations about daily interactions and the multiple worlds and selves they navigated as students. Each participant talked about the challenges of renegotiating work hours, school hours, commuting hours, and family hours during each 10-week academic quarter and the obstacles this created to fostering routine and consistency (let alone leaving time for any other type of student

involvement or engagement on campus such as doing research, going to office hours, being part of a student organization, or simply attending an on-campus event). This reality left the participants feeling left out of the "student experience" and as though they were missing something that other students who did not have these life negotiations were able to engage in.

Eight of the participants talked about how difficult it was realizing that they would actually have to quit their jobs and careers in order to attend UCLA. While attending community college they were all able to work 40+ hours a week and still take classes in the evenings, on the weekends, or online. Being an employee or full-time worker while going to school was less challenging, as they could make school fit their schedules versus having to rearrange their entire world to fit the school's agenda. The participants had not thought about (or been told) that UCLA classes are, for the most part, scheduled between 9:00am and 5:00pm, and very few evening, weekend, or online classes exist. This adjustment was a shock to them; some tried to continue their full-time work schedules for the first quarter or two and quickly realized that they would not be able to balance the heavy academic load with work and the rest of their lives.

Some of the women did try to balance both their careers and school and found the experience of being a professional and a student almost surreal. Parker, who was 44, a make-up artist, and author, described it as a "huge juxtaposition" being a professional and a student. She gave an example of sitting "on the floor in front of [her] statistics class" on the phone doing an interview for a book she had written that was coming out, while "everyone else is just sitting around waiting for the class to open," talking about parties, homework, and sporting events while she was on the phone with a national magazine.

Emma was 43 and had been a musician for 20 years; attending UCLA meant potentially giving up her career. She was the first person in her family to complete high school and

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community college, but she also valued her career. While it was a challenge to make enough money to live as a musician, and she was good at school and wanted to succeed, Emma did not like having to choose one "world" over the other:

> I don't regret coming here and I hope I can finish, but every day I do think, "I don't know if I'm going to stay for two years. I don't know."…Part of it is that I'm afraid of getting older and wasting or taking two years out of my music career. I'm afraid that people are going to forget my music and, when I come back in two years, no one is going to care anymore. But I mean, we do release music while I'm here, and that's important to me, but I'm very scared of what would happen if I just drop out of the music scene for two years.…I keep thinking, "Is this a problem that I'm not touring for two years?" It could be. You basically make a decision with school to check out of life for two years. So there's some fear involved with that.

The common themes around work were not just about the challenges of navigating various worlds on a day-to-day basis, but also about larger issues of what school meant within their life trajectories, either for their own individual career goals, as with Emma and Parker above, or within the social messages they received. For most of the participants, the sociocultural messages they heard or lived by dictated that getting a job after high school was the expectation, keeping a full-time job was the purpose, and college was not the smart or culturally "correct" move, particularly for those with families to support. Earning money and a strong work ethic were important to these students and to the cultures and macrosystems with which they were raised. While almost all of the participants agreed that they went back to school in an effort to build a better life for themselves and increase income for their families, many were making major sacrifices to do so, in some cases going against cultural or social obligations having to do

with work and age such as providing for and taking care of family, having children, getting married, participating in the workforce, etc.

Isabel knew she was not alone in hearing messages about how she was, at 39, too old to go back to school: "It has a lot to do with being my age. People think you are a certain age, you shouldn't be in college, you should be working." As mentioned above, when Isabel pursued her education, it deeply impacted her marriage, and she and her husband actually separated as she was starting her first quarter at UCLA. Her husband and his family had not gone to college but were successful financially and did not understand why she would want to pursue her education, particularly as a mother of two. She was raised with a similar expectation that a full-time job was "good enough." She found this attitude difficult to navigate and she felt like a burden to her family when she chose to be a student over exclusively being a worker: "I wasn't bringing in a solid income. I wasn't pulling my weight." She and her husband were working on getting back together, but she expressed concern that her desire to now go to graduate school may continue the divisiveness.

Many of the participants repeated similar sentiments, particularly those who came from immigrant families. The cultural expectation was that they would work after high school, particularly if they had children. The message they received while growing up was that women worked to better provide for their partners and their families. Going to college was not the norm and was often not seen as attainable regardless of age, although traditional views of life trajectory and age intensified this message. When Elvia went to community college, her father's first reaction was: "'Why? You're old.' He literally told me, '*Tu tren ha pasado*.' In Spanish, it's like, 'Your train has passed. You need to work because of Jewel [her daughter]. You have a baby, you need to work.' Like, 'Why school?'…Until this day [this is his attitude]."

Elvia had a plan to go to school when she was younger, but her plan did not go as expected because she got pregnant right after high school; now she has a daughter to feed. As she put it, she felt "social pressures" to have a life plan that looked a certain way, and college was not part of that plan. Elvia explained that her parents were immigrants, most of her family had never finished elementary school or junior high, and their attitude was to work hard to move ahead and fit in in a new country. She often felt self-doubt about her own choice to return to school and wondered if her father was right.

Recall that 70% percent of the participants were first in their families to complete college (17 women indicated that they were the first in their family to graduate college on the intake form and 4 additional women confirmed in their interview that they were the first in their family to complete college). Frankie, a first-generation college student who talked about her family's attitude regarding college, reflected many of the other participants. Academics were important to her aunts and uncles who raised her in Alabama (both of Frankie's parents died when she was young). She was expected to do well in high school, but everyone around her worked. Her model of success was to get a job:

> When I think about it, all my aunts that were in the South, either they were entrepreneurs, a hairstylist, or my uncle, he owned like a club, my grandfather was a business owner. Or if they weren't doing that, they had really good jobs like with Mead and Georgia Pacific, because I'm from Alabama. So they worked for those companies for several years and then retired. So I never really saw anybody really go off to college.

Having a family, being in a partnership, and conflicts with work and career were not the only factors that made the women feel separate or like they were in a different world than many of their traditionally aged classmates at UCLA. When the women reflected on where they were

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in their lives and how school fit in, issues of age, gender, and sociocultural expectations associated with time consistently arose. The next section explores the women's perceptions and beliefs about age, gender, and their personal life trajectories. The era that these women were living in and the individual sociocultural expectations they navigated as they pursued their academic careers are examples of macro- and chronosystems.

The Element of Time and the Saliency of Age and Gender

"Someone actually said to me, 'I'm sorry, if I was your age, I'd wanna be married with kids already.'...Things like that. It doesn't affect me, 'cause I'm like, 'Okay, 30 is the new 20' [laughing]....I get asked about kids and marriage a lot."

—Sara, age 30

"I totally felt old. Just felt old all the time. I was like, 'All these kids are 18. I feel old.' And then, just like, I don't have time to waste. I feel like that, in part, is—it's an advantage. But it's also a disadvantage because I didn't have the luxury of messing up, I guess, again."

—Beatriz, age 35

While the women's perceptions of age and gender norms were slightly different based on their parenting status, age, and/or cultural background, the general consensus was that age and gender influenced their college experiences considerably. The intersection of age and gender meant that these women often had to make major choices regarding work/career, parenthood, partnerships, cultural expectations, and their life trajectories—often going against deeply rooted cultural or societal messages. Age was particularly significant, although not always in a negative way. In the following section, I highlight how the participants felt age and timing influenced their time at UCLA and how the social/cultural expectations of gender and time played a part. First I will detail how the women described the timing of their education within their life course,

how age stood out to them while being in school, and what social and cultural pressures the women felt being a student over the age of 25 years.

Life Trajectory and Timing

Participants used two phrases (or variations on two phrases) that stood out when they considered life trajectory and timing as they related to being in college: "life got in the way" and "everyone over 25 has a story." These two expressions indicate a struggle between the path that one is "supposed to take" based on social expectations of gender and age versus the path that the individual ultimately follows. Within the first phrase is the societal message or personal desire to follow a life trajectory that would include college earlier in life, but then things out of the individual's control got in the way.

This was particularly true and salient for the four undocumented students I interviewed. These women had been affected by changes to immigration policies (such as the Dream Act) that helped them continue their education, and also more recently by the uncertainty of policy changes under the Trump administration (Baker, 2017). For example, June's entire family was deported when she graduated from high school, preventing her from going to college at that point as she had intended. And for Zonia and Caitlin, the Dream Act allowed them to live out their lifelong goal of going to college.

These themes also rang true for women like Emma and Lesly, who expressed that they had anticipated having children earlier in their lives and following a much different life path, but had been unable to and therefore had to re-evaluate in their forties. Emma described how she felt coming back to school at the age of 43: "I think about it almost daily. Like, I'm not sure that I made the right choice…because I'm older than everybody else. I feel like it's just too late. Like I should've done this years ago. That's my main feeling." She also talked about feeling as though

she had to choose one life trajectory or another—either become a parent or return to school; have a career or return to school. Specifically, because of age, it was difficult for Emma and others to see how education could merge with other major life course markers.

Other participants where excited to be "older" students coming back to school later in their lives. They stressed the advantages of having perspective, not being afraid of their own opinions, and having more self-discipline and organization. The general consensus among the women was that coming back to school later in life was enriched by the fact that they truly wanted to be there and had worked hard to do so. Even as they acknowledged their age as a difference and occasionally as a barrier, some of the women appreciated that they would not have been ready for school in the same way when they were younger. Some worked to merge their worlds and did not see UCLA as separate from their other worlds, but rather as something to actively bring in to their family and friends' lives.

At the same time, however, participants often felt a stigma about being over 25 years old and in college. As 44-year-old Parker exclaimed when asked how she felt others responded to older students: "Oh my god, of course there's a stigma about older students!" Hannah, age 31, noted, "I think people think it's weird that I'm in school so late. Like…something must've gone wrong, for me to be here at my age." Sandy and Jennifer expressed similar sentiments, often pulling their hoodies over their heads as they walked across campus feeling very aware of their age. As Sandy put it, "Sometimes I walk through campus, and I'm just singing "Creep" [by Radiohead] to myself. I'm like, 'I don't belong here' [lyrics from the song]….Everyone is so young."

Jennifer added that she wished she had gone to school years ago. When she walked across campus she often thought about what she would have done differently had she been at

UCLA 15 years ago; she often correlated the "kids" (as she called them) on campus with her own youth and what her path could have been if her life had taken a different trajectory. She was not sure how to best reconcile these feelings, but knew that being on a college campus at age 37 influenced her perception: "So I don't know if I'm a bit resentful or I think it just puts me in a constant state of reflection that I try not to think about. I'm a little envious [of the younger students' experience]." Whether stigma about age came from others, was a manifestation of individual insecurities, or was an element of time out of sync with an imagined life course, age was salient in the participants' lives. I discuss this in more detail in the next section.

The Salience of Age

Each participant in this study was specifically asked how she perceived age affecting her UCLA experience; therefore, it was not a surprise that the word "age" was brought up 262 times as all 30 participants described their experiences at UCLA. It is clear that being over 25 years old at UCLA was significant for these women in a number of ways. Twenty-one of the 30 participants mentioned they noticed age daily as a student; 19 felt age was a significant barrier to them not fitting in at the university and felt that age was a negative part of their experience in some ways, such as Beatriz expressed at the beginning of this section on page 92. The remaining 11 women either said they did not notice their age often or noticed, but felt it was an asset or viewed it in a positive light similar to Sara in her quote at the beginning of this section (page 92). Even when age was perceived as a negative part of their experience, all but two women talked about great advantages to their age and how it related to their college experience.

Age came up most often when the women were discussing interactions with traditionally aged students, in particular how they felt age acted as a barrier to building community or feeling a sense of belonging on campus. The participants found it difficult to connect with students who

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were younger, in part because they were at such a different place in their lives. As one of the participants put it, the life trajectory and expectations for a woman who is 18 is very different than it is for a woman of 35:

I think it goes back to relating…I have met students in my classes who are 18…and you see them, first day of class, everybody's buying dresses (online during class). It's dresses, talking about parties, talking about guys, talking about drinking, things like that.

She goes on to explain that on the first day of class she is thinking about being late to pick up her daughters, whether or not she can continue to pay for dance class for the kids and being able to finish the reading for her next class. She felt she was living in a very different world then her classmates. Other women, even though they may have noticed the age difference daily, felt inspired and appreciated the difference, even saying that they liked to learn from younger students. The participants also had paradoxical perceptions regarding confidence and insecurity linked to age.

Worlds apart: interactions with younger students. Elvia laughed as she recounted how students reacted when they found out she was 30 years old. She described their jaws dropping and, as she put it, you could "see it in the faces," they look like, "What happened?" She insisted that other students had an assumption that something bad must have happened in order for her to be returning to school, or there was some "story behind it." Elvia was fine with this reaction; she was not ashamed that she has a story, but she was aware of a difference between her and the younger students.

Sometimes the women talked about navigating these different worlds with less conflict or struggle. More often, though, they shared that from their perspective there was really no way to bridge the gap between the two worlds because they were so vastly distinct. The participants

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vacillated in their view of younger students. In this section, I describe how it felt for them to navigate the microsystem of the campus and the classroom with students who were sometimes half their age. Then, I elaborate further in subsequent sections on how the women came to appreciate and learn from their younger counterparts.

As noted above, 21 participants mentioned that they noticed age daily as students and most felt it was a significant barrier to fitting in at UCLA. Many of them reported that this was simply because there was little that a woman over 25 years old has in common with younger students who live on campus, have not worked or had a career, and who are financially dependent on their families. Caitlin (age 27) saw it as a gap:

I have a hard time making friends with the little kids…yeah, little kids. Because I think about the things that I was thinking about when I was 18 to 21, and 22, and I'm like "Oh my God. What the hell was I doing?"…I think there's a huge gap between their mindset and my mindset that I have difficulty connecting with.

Michelle concurred with Caitlin's estimation, as she explained what it was like for her trying to connect with other students. She tried to connect with organizations that centered on identities that she identified with such as the Afrikan Student Union's academic support program and Black Bruin Transfer Success. She said the programs were dominated by younger students, even younger transfers, and really focused on their experience. This was discouraging:

[As a 37-year-old woman], there wasn't a whole lot you can tell me about life or experiences that I pretty much didn't have a grasp on. So you have a 19-year-old trying to explain to me, or you have a 23-year-old trying to explain to me about life. I'm looking at you like, "What?"

Jaclynn, who was 29, shared a story about one of the student advisors at transfer orientation—the main source of connection and information at orientation. Their role is to lead a group of students around for the day, help them get enrolled in classes, and answer any questions the students in their group might have. Often, orientation is a student's first and primary point of contact with UCLA. The student advisors become very important for transfer students, particularly as transfers only have a one-day orientation (versus freshmen, who have a three-day orientation that includes two-night stay on campus to acclimate them and provide them with all the information they need to hit the ground running at UCLA).

In Jaclynn's case, her new student advisor was 19, a sophomore and not a transfer student. Unfortunately, the group that he was in charge of during the transfer orientation consisted of nine women over the age of 21, all transfers, who, needless to say, did not bond with him. Sadly, the story that Jaclynn related is not unusual for non-traditional students. The women had to be led around the university by the sophomore, and sit in his dorm room to wait to sign up for classes, as is protocol. Jaclynn and her cohort felt that their time was being wasted and their questions were not being answered.

Jaclynn had signed up for classes on her own for years at community college. Here, she was frustrated and disappointed, and felt that there was a disconnect. She longed to be treated fairly and get the information she needed. As she put it, they were worlds apart:

> It was just an age thing. Here was this 19-year-old kid.…Nineteen and 25, not technically that far apart, but in terms of life experience, loads apart. And so this 19-year-old kid talking at me and telling [me] what I had to do and what I had to do that day.…There was just a disconnect.…He was like reading off of a script all day, and we could tell, and it was just kind of like, "You just had no interest in being with us that day," and you could

tell from the moment he met us. He was like, "I got stuck with this group." So there was a little bit of that. And so I think just being over 25, you have a little more intuition and you can pick up on things like that…a little more wisdom. And so I think that's what it was. We picked up on it right away, and that just soured the whole day for us.

Alison was 30 years old. She found that she had to remind her roommates and students in her classes of this type of dissimilarity in experience often. When they had a conflict or difference of opinion, she reminded them that she was a full "decade older" than them. As she said, "There's a reason I am 30 right now and going to school. I had a crazy life before I got here." She had to remind herself that the younger students were still "figuring out who they are" and "just moving away from their parents' house for the first time." Alison and others who had lived on their own for years had jobs, careers, and life experiences beyond the dorm room, and for the most part they felt confident in who they were as individuals. While they did not want to take away from the younger students' experience of self-discovery, they found it frustrating when they were confronted with what they saw as naiveté and immaturity.

Other participants talked about these types of experiences in a slightly different way. Some were bemused about the age difference and younger students' lack of awareness, particularly when they would ask them if they wanted to hang out, go to a club, or party with them. Parker (age 44) claimed that all of the younger students reminded her of her own children. She felt she needed to introduce them all to her son so they could be friends. At 33, Frankie described these interactions as "awkward" and "hysterical" because she was generally the only parent and married student in the class, and she felt like everyone's mother. She described herself as "hip" and said many other students might not know her age; she really just felt a responsibility to make sure they were being safe and focusing on school. Both women were both

a bit sarcastic when talking about how younger students asked them to come to parties, to hang out, or get a drink. Parker put it bluntly: "That's not going to happen. Yeah, I'm not going to do that."

"I feel old." University campuses are traditionally set up for younger students, and the majority of undergraduates are under the age of 25. From the pictures on university websites to the events hosted by various departments, the messaging is aimed at them. So, Lesly's sentiment that she and her peers felt "lost in the sea of 20-year-olds," or Beatriz's quote from the beginning of the section about simply feeling old all the time are understandable. Many participants mentioned the assumptions that were made because of their age; student groups and other campus entities tended to disregard them because of their age when recruiting for membership, handing out flyers, or doing outreach. Many told very similar stories about not being viewed as students while on campus: They were often mistaken for a professor, teaching assistant, doctoral student, or parent of another student. Parker described filling out forms and being asked if she was an undergraduate or a graduate student: "I would say 'I'm an undergrad,' and they would be like, 'You mean graduate?' And I'm thinking, 'How do you mix those up? You don't mix up undergrad and grad, you don't forget. 'Oh right, I'm actually…'"

More than half of the participants expressed that they felt they did not fit in at UCLA, and that age specifically played a significant part in that. Simultaneously, participants enjoyed the fact that, as older students, they brought confidence and life lessons with them into the classroom, and that this enriched their college experience, particularly when faculty engaged with and validated it. Highlighted below are the participants' perceptions and belief systems about their age.

The paradox of confidence and self-doubt. As the women talked about the advantages and disadvantages of age and their college experiences, a clear paradox developed. On the one hand, they believed that age provided the advantage of confidence, clarity regarding what they wanted (and the self-reliance to ask for it), and a lack of fear about expressing their opinions, particularly in the classroom. For instance, many women talked about how they were often the most vocal students in class, always raising their hands, asking questions, and providing a perspective that they felt many younger students may not have been able to bring to the conversation.

Many of the participants had worked with professors and in situations at UCLA where they felt validated for what they brought to the table, and they attributed age and life experience to this self-assurance and the faculty–student engagement that came as a result. Paradoxically, most of the women also talked about feeling like impostors, having major self-doubt about their own outlooks and experiences, both in and outside of the classroom. While this lack of sense of belonging may have had to do with aspects other than age—such as first-generation college student status, academic or personal insecurities, or being commuter students—participants consistently attributed these insecurities to age as well. Emma described the insecurity as something that happened during her student orientation, in response to the youth-oriented culture:

> I came here and I just, I got so depressed because I just saw all these pretty young girls, and they all walked around in groups. And I just thought, "Oh my God, I don't fit in. I just don't fit in." It was so depressing to me, and it just brought up a lot of, like, old pain, like a lot of insecurities that I'm just not good enough. It was really painful.

Other participants, including Grace and Jennifer, did not feel as emotionally connected to the youth focus on campus but were clearly working through their own thoughts and feelings about aging. At 51, Grace had recently started going to a therapist to work through some deep-rooted issues about her mother and patterns she felt she was repeating as she aged. Jennifer, 37, said she felt stuck between ages and worlds. She was acutely aware that she was not "young," but also knew she was "not old, but is in the middle age and [that] feels old to them." She admitted to distancing herself because she "feels young at heart," but knew that she was not really able to connect with younger students, nor was she at all interested in engaging and participating in some of the events and activities that traditional students might enjoy. She described herself as being in a kind of "borderland" between worlds.

Jennifer and Grace also framed the expectations that came with age in the classroom. Jennifer explained that she had many people say that because of her "worldly" experience, she must have a lot to contribute, but that she was very insecure about sharing her own opinions and speaking out in class. The classroom felt "nerve-wracking" to her, and because most of the students in the class were younger than she was, and because she feared saying the wrong thing, she stayed silent much of the time. On top of that, she feared that she would make a mistake: "I'm afraid I'm going to say something offensive because I'm in Gender Studies, and I'm a White woman. And part of me being in Gender Studies is trying to figure out what is the right way to say stuff." This insecurity kept Jennifer from fully expressing herself and making the most of her time in the classroom. At the same time, she was finding herself and her identity outside of her previous life and her addiction, so she was developing a freedom and confidence; she felt she knew herself better: "I don't want to be young anymore. I don't want to be a little girl, so immature, rambunctious, and annoyingly irresponsible. I don't want to have that identity

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anymore.…That's why I'm okay sticking to myself when I go to class." She was comfortable with herself and was also working to find her academic self-confidence.

At 52, Grace was slightly older than many of the other participants. She is African American and Hispanic has had a very different experience but shared some similar insecurities. As an African American studies major, she noted others had expectations that she would know certain things about history and culture. She remembered students, and even professors, turning to her in class assuming she must know about the civil rights movement or the 1960s generation—or at the very least have a point of view regarding it all. Grace laughed as she pretended she was another student addressing her in this situation: "You're Black, and you're older than us, so you probably know this. Weren't you there in the sixties?" While she certainly had point of view on the topics, she was nervous to share it; she argued that she was raising four kids over the last 30 years and did not know as much as she wished she did about African American history or politics. She was embarrassed that she did not have all the answers based on her life experience, so she did not raise her hand often.

Changing the narrative. Participants sometimes relished flipping the stigma of age and traditional social norms on their head. At 44 and as a mother of two, Parker was an anthropology major planning to going to business school. She expressed her aspiration to show the world that it is possible to flourish in college after the age of 40:

> I think because I am over 40…I feel like my life is a story. And I need to do well to show that people over 40 can do well in college. Not do well, but can kick ass, you know? Excuse my French.…Age doesn't define who you are, and…I kind of, like, live that thought every day to make sure that I don't fall into like this, the same rhetoric of, you know, you [older students] can't learn, or they're [older students are] slower, or they're

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going to slow down the class, or whatever it is. I feel much more driven.…I'm not really sure if it's because I'm over 40, but I do think about that all the time. Because, like, with my friends, even, they're like, "Wow, that's incredible that you went back to school." I was like, "Why is it? Why? Just because I'm older?" I'm like, 'I don't understand.' Like, 'Why is it so [incredible]?'

Similarly, many participants talked about the enjoyment they had taken from flipping the narrative of what age traditionally dictates. While reflecting on her friends' shock that she would be returning to school at the age of 50—and her own thoughts about how she "should've" gone to school 30 years ago—Lesly described the "old way" of thinking that she grew up with: "You do everything when you're young. You have your family. You retire. And then you die and then that's it." Lesly did not follow that path, and felt that "nothing is really linear anymore, as people leave jobs after a few years and then are on to the next. She explained that perhaps she did not attend college when she "should have," but at the same time she "is doing it now." As she put it, "So, it's never too late as long as you're still breathing. Like, what's holding me back? A lot of it, I think, is societal beliefs."

Many of the women were interested in changing these societal beliefs, even if they had friends and family members or society telling them otherwise. There was a freedom that almost all of the women interviewed expressed about being over 25 and in school on their own terms. While insecurities, impostor syndrome, and feeling like an outsider were real, there were also opportunities for these women to grow, and even opportunities for them to learn from the younger students, as I discuss next.

Appreciating and learning from the "young'uns." Not all participants felt age was an issue or barrier for them. Even many who were distinctly and consistently aware of their age

learned to appreciate and learn from the younger students around them, often working through their own insecurities and judgments. For instance, a number of women expressed that they were clearly aware of their age and the related differences, and while they were not becoming "friends" with students much younger then themselves, they were impressed at how smart, helpful, organized, and "sweet" they were. Emma (age 43) described major insecurities around the fact that "everyone" in class was "at least 20 years younger" than she was. She had learned to appreciate how intelligent and driven the students around her were. Many of the women over 40 talked about feeling motherly to the younger students, to the point of wanting to make sure they were eating and taking care of themselves.

Most of the women in this age group also talked about learning from the younger students, particularly when it came to technology. Parker admitted that she "knows way less about being a student" and "taking notes" than younger students do because she was in school 25 years ago and, as a makeup artist, had been "painting faces" for more than two decades. She wanted to learn from people who were already accomplished as students. She joked, "I literally had no idea…how to wear a backpack. I was like, 'There's too much weight in my backpack. How do you guys walk around with all these books and how do you, like, minimize the books?'" Parker felt that this attitude really added to her success, because she did not see herself as more knowledgeable than other students. (She added that she believed that other student over 25 years old often did make this mistake, probably out of insecurity.) Parker and most of the other women over 40 said that incorporating themselves into the environment and asking questions made their experience better and easier. Michelle was the only woman over 40 who did not explicitly comment about feeling this way.

Eight of the 11 women who mentioned that they either did not notice their age or did not see it as a significantly negative barrier were in their 30s. They attributed their attitude to looking young and to the shifting paradigm of students coming back to school later in life. Deme felt that people, for the most part, did not see an older student as a "surprise factor" anymore. She added that she was impressed by how mature the younger students were and said she did not notice a difference or feel there was a deep chasm between her and the younger students: "I tend to be older than everybody. The friends I'm making are, like, early to mid-twenties, but it's, it's cool because they're so mature and they're so inspiring to me, because I'm 30 and they're acting like they're 30."

Similar to Parker and others described above, Deme wanted to be part of the shift in cultural expectations about when people "should" go to college or change careers. She shared that she is impatient with friends and their resistance to going to college later in life. She claimed that, in this day and age, people have two or three careers and no one "bats an eyelash over it." She continued, noting that the way things are going, people "may not even retire by 65." She exclaimed, "So, it's like even if you were to graduate and start your career at the age of 40, so what?…I get bored after five to 10 years anyway." Deme hoped that this approach would motivate her friends and said that in at least one case it has. So, Deme saw her attitude and example to others as a positive cycle: "It's like a very uplifting cycle because it turns around and motivates me, and that's really huge for me because now I have people joining me that I know on this path."

The construct of age and social ideals of where one "should be" at what age were highly relevant to the women interviewed. The macrosystems in which the women were embedded, the element of time, as well as their own perceptions and belief systems about age all influenced

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how they felt about "being 25 with a backpack." Life trajectory markers having to do with gender also arose. Concepts about marriage, having and taking care of children, and other gendered matters were part of the college experience of women over 25 years of age at UCLA. I turn to these issues in the next section.

Social and Cultural Expectations of Gender…and Age.

Social, cultural, and familial pressures and norms around gender affected the college experience of these women transfer students at UCLA. This was particularly true for the women who did not have children and for those from families with stronger traditional cultural expectations related to gender and age such as Latin and Korean cultures. Whether or not the women planned to have children (an issue that was particularly salient for the women without children in their thirties and forties) and how they planned to provide for their children and be successful mothers and wives while attending school were two major issues that family members had brought up with participants.

"Where are the babies?" As mentioned above, at various points there was an expectation from family, society, and the women themselves that motherhood may be part of their life trajectories (May, 2008; Skelton & Smulyan, 2006; Unger & Crawford, 1992). Seventeen of the 30 women interviewed did not have children, and most of them had something to say about the pressure or expectation they felt to do so. Beatriz, for example, was vehement when asked about whether or not she thought about having children:

C'mon, definitely. I'm 33 and I work for CPS [Child Protective Services] because I love children.…I do feel that pressure of the clock, of like, "Oh, you're supposed to be having children." That might not work out, and it's like, "Oh, yeah. That might not even work out. That might not work out with trying to get a master's and working, and trying to

have a life."…I think that's probably my biggest social pressure. It's like, "Oh, you probably should have a baby soon.…And then, like, not to be stereotypical, but I am a Latina, so my family is very like, "Eeh, when's the grand baby?" It's like, "Uh-huh, there's other stuff I still need to do. I'm sorry guys, I'm not on your time frame. I'm on my time frame. Figure it out."

This pressure to have children versus attend college was especially true for Beatriz when she started her educational journey; there was a "machismo," as she described it. She continued to get the message that as a "girl" she was not supposed to go off to school, study abroad, leave home. Therefore, it took her a while to leave and pursue her postsecondary education.

Other women, from Latin and Korean cultures particularly, echoed Beatriz's experience. Hannah (age 31) joked that she was a lost cause to her very traditional Korean family. "I'm basically like a dead prospect to them at this point," she said nonchalantly, listing all the people in her family who were already married and had children, including her younger brother. She expressed that she definitely felt the pressure, but did not "succumb" to it. She was not really sure that family life was something that she was interested in at this point.

Abigail, 34, was Latina and had told her family that she would not be having children. But then she got married, and this new development had brought the topic up again. While her family was supportive of her decision to attend UCLA, they still asked her about whether she might change her mind about having children. While she was not against the idea, she was happy with her decision to pursue her degree, despite the familial pressure of "when might you have some children?"

On the other hand, Alison, Sal, and Tatiana all did want children and felt the pressure for themselves. They universally talked about feeling the "clock ticking" and wanting to get on with

school so they could eventually have children. Alison saw it as part of being 31—the "normal" age to have children. She said all her friends were posting on Facebook about it: "They're purposefully having children. I literally had like nine friends last quarter have a baby.…Age 30—normal age to have planned babies." Alison was conflicted; she wanted this for herself but she also wanted to go to graduate school.

Sal felt a similar pressure. She was 30 and not married, but was worried about the next steps and the next few years. She talked a lot about "timing" and waiting for the "right time" to have children, but conceded somewhat dolefully that there might in fact not be one. Tatiana, who was 31, wanted to take a medical school track, but also wanted to "settle down" and have and family and kids—but she wanted to get her education done first. She came to the conclusion that, even though she did want to be a doctor, "Med school takes forever, and I don't want to start practicing at 40 and then barely have anything behind me when I'm 45. I wanted to be well established."

Sara was 30. She was Pakistani/Punjabi and her family had, to some extent, turned cultural ideas of gender on their head. All the women in her family were getting a college education, but not the men—and all of the women had returned to school after the age of 25. Sara said she would like to have a family and, despite getting pressure from others about how that ought to look, was confident in the direction she was going. She explained that people asked her all the time whether or not she was married:

> And it's normal, because most people my age are. And I'm like, "No, I'm not." They're like, "Oh, do you want to be?" Like, "You wanna be a doctor. How are you gonna have kids?" I'm like, "If I wanna have kids, I'll do it.…That's it." And they're like, "How are you gonna manage residency? How are you gonna manage med school if you're gonna be

in your thirties?" And I [respond], "First of all, it's none of your business. Secondly, again, you make it work." Even when you are a doctor…it's not gonna be some magical nine-to-five job. You have to make sacrifices and really put yourself in that situation and realize…you're gonna be on call. You're probably gonna be working a lot.

Sara laughed about other people's reactions to her confidence and straight talk about how hard it would be, but she was sure that she would find what would work for her.

Gender norms. The sociocultural norms around having children, getting married, and what career or academic path to take are just some of the examples of the macrosystems and sociocultural beliefs related to the participants' gender. Grace, for example, had raised three kids. No one in her family had gone to college, and culturally she did not have the support she could have used when she told her mother she wanted to be a doctor. She remembered her mother saying, "'Why don't you be a nurse?' I was like, 'Why would I want to be a nurse?' She goes, 'Well, girls are nurses.'" Grace did not pursue it any further, and kept her interest and love of science to herself for years. Even after she decided to go back to school, she did not join any pre-med groups or talk about it with others because it would mean "outing" herself, as she put it. At UCLA, she was an African American Studies major, but admitted she had been slowly working on the biology series and had recently joined a pre-med student organization. As soon as she said it out loud, however, she pulled her turtleneck up over her chin and mouth, as if trying to hide; she asked me to keep it on the "down low," as she was still nervous to admit that she wanted to be a doctor. Cultural and generational gendered ideas about who can and cannot be a doctor had stopped her from pursuing it publicly. Sara (whose experience was detailed above) was not attempting to fit those same social restrictions.

Emma, on the other hand, agonized over having to choose one life path over another. Not only did she feel she had to choose between career or school (as she described above), but she also felt that she had to make a choice between having kids or going to school. She explained that, because she was 44, she felt grief-stricken over going back to school without having had children already. "Doing the math," it was clear to her that she had to choose one over the other because, by the time she graduated, she would be at an age where having children "without some kind of medical help" would be out of the question.

Emma's decision was not simple: By choosing school, Emma was very consciously not choosing other life goals. The issue was complicated further by her long-time boyfriend making it explicitly clear that he would be disappointed if he did not have children. Emma worried daily about whether she made the "right" decision and felt lots of pressure about the issue, particularly when she compared herself to her friends: "The friends I have that are outside of school, when I see their lives, you know…married, they have children, and they have their houses and their jobs and they make pretty good money. And I'm on financial aid. It makes me feel a little bit like a loser. Maybe it's not the right way of looking at it, but that's how I feel."

The cultural and familial pressures Zonia experienced regarding how she ought to behave as a mother and wife provide examples of the influences of the macrosystems and sociocultural beliefs about age and gender in which she is rooted as a Mexican woman with children living in the United States. Zonia was determined to continue her education despite the added cultural pressures she felt from her family—expectations that dictated what her duties as a mother and a wife ought to be. Zonia said she had seen 15 friends drop out of community college when they had children, and her mother-in-law called her "the worst mother" for going to school. She talked about the cultural pressures and common beliefs about marriage that "the woman should

stay at home and give the guy everything, and that as a mother she should not leave her children and should be attentive to them "24/7."

Zonia conceded that this attitude was somewhat generational, and that other people were amazed that she was a parent and also continuing her education. Regardless, she was motivated to prove her mother-in-law wrong. She also wanted to inspire other mothers and show the world that "it is possible to be a good mother, but at the same time be a good student." Zonia planned to continue in the field of quantitative psychology, even though, as she explained, "I've been told I'm going to struggle because it's a dominated male field. And I've seen that with the professors—that they're very self-absorbed in themselves.…I can see the struggle, but I can see myself doing it."

The burdens of gender and age norms were part of the participants' college experiences. Socialization concerning an "ideal" life course pattern or a way it is "supposed to be done" suggest an internalized belief system regarding age, gender, and a "correct" life course. In pursuing a bachelor's degree after the age of 25, all of the participants forged their own life course trajectories, even in the face of various pressures to follow a more homogenized pattern.

Past Selves and New Selves

Two of the women interviewed were former sex workers, and seven had struggled with drug and/or alcohol addiction. Four had experienced homelessness, four talked about some form of abuse in their past, four were undocumented, and four were first-generation immigrants to the United States. At least nine of the women left solid and/or lucrative careers to return to school. These are just a handful of the various past experiences, and "past worlds" this group of women brought with them to UCLA. Each participant had a rich story about who she was before

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becoming a UCLA student, the experiences she brought with her, and how UCLA had changed her.

Jennifer, 37, was a Gender Studies major with a food studies minor, and the mother of a four-year-old. She struggled with addiction for years before pursuing her education. Once a self-described "happy-go-lucky" and "boisterous" young woman, she sunk into addiction and a violent relationship. After getting pregnant and escaping a brutally abusive relationship, Jennifer found school as a solace. After transferring to UCLA, she became the person she always wanted to be:

> The confidence that I've gained.…It's what I've always wanted, to be that confident, independent, strong woman who could hold a conversation and hold her own. I feel like I'm very close to being that person and being on this campus around other smart people and smart women and just in good, safe company. I haven't always put myself in the best situations and around the best people.…UCLA is healthy for me. UCLA is safe. It's allowing me to be the person that I always knew that I could be and that I've always wanted to be. And I feel like I'm finally that person when I'm here. And with that, it's kind of the confidence and seeing the lifestyle that I have with my daughter and that I'm able to have with her. It's all one and the same for me. And I'm not willing to give any of that up because I'm afraid if I lose one part of it, then I'm going to lose all of it.…I feel honored to be here. I don't feel like an irresponsible drug addict anymore. I felt like I held that identity for so long that I just don't want to be identified as that person anymore.…It's a part of me. It's made me who I am, but it's not me. There's more to me. Being at UCLA I've been experiencing what that "more" means, and it's cool.

Grace, 52, was incredibly expressive during her interview, moving her hands, arms, and whole body to communicate how she was feeling and to accentuate her words. She talked about how she—and her mother before her—always stood behind or followed slightly others in the family. It was a way not to be too much trouble or bother, but to be there to serve and support. She lamented, however, that they never stood strongly as individuals or as equals to those they were around. This bothered her. Grace then talked about the importance of getting into UCLA, and what it meant to her and her children in terms of opportunity.

When I asked what UCLA meant to her, Grace's face lit up and her body language indicated an openness and "breaking out" of the previous submission she had described earlier. Using her body and her voice, she acted out two selves: the person hanging onto the edge of the proverbial cliff, "lucky" to be a part of the experience, but not yet fully in it, and the leader, the student standing on the top of the mountain, with others, part of something important:

Jeepers. Now, if I thought UCLA was this high [indicates a medium height with her hands], it's even higher when you're standing on top of it. You know what I mean? I don't know. That, kind of sounds corny.…I thought I was…I just grabbed onto the edge of it [raises her hands up above her head as though hanging onto the edge of a cliff]. "Oh, good. I am here." "But wait, no, honey. You can actually, come up here and stand on top of that. You know?" That's a view. Wow. Standing up here [puts her hands on her hips, pulls her shoulders back, and holds her chest up proudly, looking out and around as if on top a mountain] instead of just [puts her hands up above her head to indicate hanging onto a lower edge and looking up as she was before]. "I made it to UCLA, guys." I'm sorry. That sounds stupid, but that's really what I picture. Now you can stand up and come up here and walk with us at UCLA. You're not the subgroup. You know?

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The women interviewed brought so much to the UCLA experience and took so much from it. While navigating the many worlds they were a part of took planning, negotiation, and adjustment on a day-to-day basis, they generally found the challenge worth it. Even when sociocultural expectations of age and gender or institutional barriers made it challenging—as I describe in the next chapter—the vast majority of the women reported having a transformational experience at UCLA.

CHAPTER 5:

INSTITUTIONAL CLIMATE AND COMMUNITY

"Honestly, it [UCLA] was my safe space. I feel really good here…Coming from a difficult marriage and just staying there. Even though I wasn't living with my ex-husband anymore; I got divorced.…For me it was like a safe space. Because it was a place that I met a lot of really good people that I feel like I was with my family there.…It was my place. I really love it.…Not even in my dreams would I have thought I would go to UCLA. And…to study with my son. While he was there, we took two classes together.…It was so cool."

—Patricia, age 45, mother of three

"The campus climate is crazy. It's crazy. I tell my [partner] all the time.…Campus can be a very racist climate. It's very separatist. I just accepted, like, that's how it is and it can be.…The climate on campus is very political. It's like they are all in a political race. It's not what you know, it's who you know, and you have to play the role. You got to attend certain stuff and look a certain way. You gotta present a certain image. It's all politics on campus. That's what I come to understand it."

—Frankie, 33, mother of four

Thirty-five-year-old Beatriz was a history major with Chicano studies and education minors. A commuter student who transferred from Antelope Valley College, she was the first in her family to finish high school and college. When I asked what UCLA means to her, she said:

Oh UCLA…I love her. I love UCLA like I feel you'd love a family member, where you know she's flawed but you love her anyways because she's yours. I love UCLA in that way where I think UCLA is an amazing school and it has all this potential, but she has little cracks that we need to work on. I do think that sometimes our students of color, our transfer students, our first-generation students—there's all of these extra things that they need that UCLA is not always ready or at the forefront to give. Our commuter students, there's all of these special niches that need help, and I feel like UCLA itself isn't about us [those communities], but the students who are under UCLA are about those things and they're the ones who are trying to fix those things. So, I feel like that's how I love

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UCLA, because she's not just buildings; she is all of those students who are doing all of this work. So, she's flawed but I love her anyways. That's how I love her.

Michelle, who is African American, was 42 at the time of the interview. She was an African American Studies major with a disability studies minor. As a commuter transfer student from Los Angeles City College, she was also the first in her family to go to college. While initially she was unsure she was going to find a place to plug in and make a difference at UCLA, she admits that she became a fervently active student advocate. To her own surprise she found a community, a purpose, and ultimately ended up being a very vocal transfer and post-traditional student champion on campus. She was very honest about the great challenges she faced at UCLA as well as the wonderful support and role she found for herself as a student advocate. Michelle was very descriptive about her unique UCLA experience, as the following two quotes illustrate:

> When I first got there, I was just, I'll say a broad description: I was just a Black student from South Central, older Black student from South Central, looking like Big Momma, very happy and blah blah blah. But then as time went on, people got to know who I really am—formerly incarcerated, I was a sex worker. I was 37 when I got there. I experienced a lot of physical violence due to my environment, and that was a lot of baggage to bring to UCLA.…And then there were folks and people who said, "Well, people need to know about folks like you because you guys don't exist on our campus. And it's important that we shine the light on you to motivate other folks like you who deserve a spot here, to get here. So, voila, that's what happened.…It felt powerful in the moment. For a very brief moment, it felt powerful, because then I got to step away from the shame. But just [as] quickly as I stepped away from the shame, there were people with my own ethnic

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background, my own identity, that went out of their way to just destroy me, try to destroy me because of it. Because I didn't fit the general criteria of what it was to be a Black student at UCLA.…My own story against me. They were trying to use my own story against me to discredit me, to take away from the work that I was doing, a lot of stuff, a lot of stuff. To even criminalize me, if you will. A lot of stuff.

There is a lot that I learned from UCLA, a lot of information that I had no idea existed. And I had a lot of information prior to getting to UCLA, but I didn't have the language to articulate my experience. So it means a lot to me. It's like the key to the box that I had been walking with for years, or having for years. It allowed me to address some of those social issues that I've dealt with, or that I see being dealt with. I don't know. It's like a whole different universe. It can be flat, that universe. In some ways, if you don't get involved, if you don't seek it out, it's pretty flat. It's about grades. It's about grad school. It's about that flat stuff. In some ways, I don't know, I got like the Matrix blue pill, and my eyes were opened to stuff that really makes a difference. It opened my eyes to stuff that really makes a difference, stuff that some folks there at UCLA don't have any idea about, any relation to. And in some ways, I was an ambassador to those folks because, had they had not come in contact with me, they would have no clue about what happens in parts of Los Angeles. They say they represent Los Angeles. I'm like, "Well, what about us?" So it means a lot. UCLA means a lot to me. It does. I'm still really connected with UCLA. I'm still really indebted to UCLA as an institution and some of the departments that are up and running, and the people.

Chapter 5 combines the five systems of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems framework to explore the participant's interpretation of campus climate (macrosystems), institutional policies (exosystems), and the timing of their time at UCLA, and more specifically their educational trajectory (macro- and chronosystems). The women interviewed for this study consistently expressed the obstacle of navigating the university and more specifically the lack of awareness on campus regarding the post-traditional student experience. They described feeling isolated and lonely on campus. However, when they met others with shared experiences or connected with empathetic faculty, staff, and other post-traditional students, they began to develop a sense of ownership, belonging, and mattering at the university. As was revealed in the last chapter, age, parenting status, transfer status, and other elements of the post-traditional student experience accounted for the general sense of isolation these women felt at UCLA. In the current chapter, I explore the campus climate—and specifically elements of racism—and a lack of institutional awareness the women reported feeling, as well as the spaces, places, and people who helped support them and connect them to the university and generate a stronger sense of belonging at UCLA.

Campus Climate

Campus climate issues pertaining to race did not come up universally among participants. However, from the narratives above, it is clear that for some of the women of color, campus climate—and specifically institutional racism and lack of representation of students and faculty of color—was very significant to their UCLA experience. This finding does not fit into any one ecological system but is instead a culmination of ecological dynamics at UCLA. The individual students' specific micro-, meso-, and exosystems, and how they interpreted their environments and experiences, obviously came into play, as did broader institutional policies and limitations

(exosystems), societal and campus politics and views on race (macrosystems), and the timing of the study—that is, during the Trump administration and increasing political divisions revolving around race, class, and political dogma (macro- and chronosystems).

Michelle, Frankie, and Zonia expressed that racism was an issue on campus. Jaclynn, Beatriz, Isabel, and Tatiana, in addition to both Frankie and Zonia, felt isolated in their majors not only because of age or gender, but because of their race specifically. All seven of these women found community and some found a sense of belonging and validation at UCLA despite the issues of climate and lack of inclusivity based on race. The ecological undercurrents of racism were present for them, however. As such, it is imperative to highlight how these women of color experienced the campus climate, to further explore non-traditional student receptivity on campus, and to understand how these women would like to see the campus culture shift.

Race on Campus

The participants were asked about any institutional challenges or external factors that impacted their experiences at UCLA. For the seven women of color mentioned above, race was a salient theme. As a reminder, community colleges are an important educational pathway for women and people of color, 67% of California community college students are from diverse ethnic backgrounds (California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office [CCCCO], 2018). Michelle, for example, experienced institutional racism both subtly and overtly:

> There are some things that go on every single day that are intricately weaved into the system, that are built to hinder students of color. They're specifically based for a specific population. So, in some ways, yes, there were some external factors that prevented me from reaching, to me, in my opinion, my full potential at UCLA. I can say that I tried to chip away at them little by little, but at the end of the day they did their due diligence. I

don't know if I should get specific about the forms of institutional racism. Some of them are even folks from my own ethnic background. There are some administrators that feel like, "You just lucked up and, at the end of the day, it's not about you as a student. It's about how I can continue to meet the numbers of having students who look like you coming to the university." And I get that. There's some administrators who felt like, "It's not about you. It's about my paycheck." And I get that, too. As a person, I get that, too. I don't necessarily agree with it, but I understand. I understand why things are the way they are. Because if it's not important to me to make a difference, then yes, the same foolery will be perpetuated time and time again.

Frankie felt that she was "in a literally snow white world" when she got to UCLA. She had previously been in a summer program for historically marginalized groups and was not prepared to feel so isolated because of race. Often, she was the only Black person in class and there were situations, conversations, and class lessons that she found racist and inconsiderate. Frankie prided herself on the fact that she addressed these situations right away, having a conversation with the professor or student in question. She was baffled by the lack of awareness on campus: "These people are so smart, yet they're like, not conscious. Like, they really haven't, some people really have not had contact with people who are transfers or people that are of color." She noticed there were spaces where she did not feel a warm welcome. Although she had community on campus, these experiences made her feel isolated and like she had to pick an identity and represent African American people and women when she was in those spaces.

Frankie noticed that many African American female students wore head wraps, something she had never done before and found peculiar. However, after being at UCLA for a

while, she too found herself changing her habits and she began to wear head wraps, she explained:

> I never wore these head wraps, and I was like "What are they doing? Everybody here is tied to Africa. This is crazy." But once you get there [UCLA], it's like you're forced into a corner, you know, to identify, to align in solidarity with who you are just because you're the only person of color taking up space. So my hair is definitive, of me, you know, and I feel like I do love extensions and I do want to go back to them.…But it's just you get to a point where you have to be like, you know, I am Black and I don't feel like there is anything wrong with it, wrong about it. And you know, I just am who I am.

Jaclynn and Tatiana also talked about being the only African American people in the classroom and in their majors. Jaclynn was the only person of color in the English department at the time, and she felt demoralized and like there was no place for her there. She took on a double major in Gender Studies because, as she put it, she "needed to feel human again" and thought the Gender Studies department provided a more inviting space because of certain professors and staff. She met other Black students who were English majors who came in through the African American studies department the year after her. They had formed a cohort of sorts and Jaclynn wished she had had this type of community and support. She felt she "had something to prove," being the only person of color in the classroom: "I felt like I couldn't ask for help, because then I'd be perpetuating a stereotype.…I mean, I think about that now, and can use that language now, but in the time I didn't realize that that's what it was."

Tatiana, an African American chemistry major, had a very different experience. She joined a chemistry fraternity, which provided her with a built-in community and cohort of folks with shared interests, which she loved. She knew a lot of people and was very social at UCLA.

Tatiana did share that it would have been "nice if there was something [an organization] for people of color in STEM" while she was there, because it was isolating being the only female African American, and one of the only transfers and people over age 25. At the same time, however, Tatiana saw her status as the only Black woman to graduate from the chemistry and biochemistry department, and the only African American in the entire department at the time, as beneficial:

I think it was helpful because, being the only Black student in my class, my professors all remembered me. And I did happen to do well, so I think that helped. But I think I didn't get lost in the sea. I think I made a good impression, and I thought my professors were all great…if I ever had questions or anything like that. And the students were all great.

Beatriz had loved history courses at her community college, but when she got to UCLA she found the history department to be "super White"; she didn't see her "experience reflected back" at her in any way. A "White man" even taught her Latino history class—she found that department to be very "Eurocentric" and all her "professors were White." She explained that they were great professors, but that there was something missing:

I think sometimes the students of color, and similarly non-traditional [students and] transfer students…at least personally, for myself, I had a really hard time connecting with my professors and being able to go to office hours and build those relationships that I would need later for grad school.…I wasn't being fulfilled within my history department. I branched out to my minors. I minored in Chicano studies and then education, because those were the two departments where I did see myself reflected back, where I had professors of color or people who had been transfer students at one point in their lives, and who understood more of the struggle.

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Like Tatiana, Isabel was not as vocal as the other women about any institutional racism she may have felt at UCLA. She felt personally insecure about her age and the fact that she was the parent of a 20-year-old. However, on campus she felt most "at home" and confident in her Chicano studies courses. Because of her own Chicano background, she explained, she loved being around other Chicanos, sharing cultural experiences, talking in their native language.

The women of color who expressed feeling isolated because of their race or the inherent institutional racism they experienced on campus also found a sense of community on campus. The spaces, places, and people who helped them foster as sense of connection on campus are explored further in the sections below. As I discuss, race was not the only aspect of the college experience that created a sense of isolation for the participants. General institutional awareness regarding post-traditional learners and issues with navigating the university were also problematic.

Institutional Awareness

When asked about institutional obstacles to their success, participants brought up financial and academic struggles, navigating the decentralized campus, and access issues for commuters and those with schedules that did not fit the nine-to-five structure of the university. The obstacles highlighted in the literature on non-traditional transfer students, such as the time, access, financial, and institutional factors highlighted in Chapter 2, were repeated by the women in this study (Bergman et al., 2014; Blumenstyk, 2018; Choy, 2002; Kasworm, 2002, 2010, 2012; Soares et al., 2017; Stevens, 2014; Wyatt, 2011). As were the social and academic adjustment issues such as transfer shock and navigating a system set up for residential students (Hills, 1965; Laanan, 2001, 2007; Laanan et al., 2011; Ishitani, 2008; Townsend, 2008; Townsend & Wilson, 2006). Twenty-five of the 30 participants talked directly about the

challenges of balancing so many responsibilities with so little time. This can be seen in some of the narratives and examples I discuss in Chapter 4, and it was very individual to each student depending on her set of needs and unique situation.

The obstacle that surfaced most often for the women was a lack of institutional awareness concerning non-traditional students. They wished the institution and educators were more aware of them, and that educators, faculty, and the institution more generally had a better understanding and awareness of students over 25 years old and the various experiences they bring to the table. Some of these experiences have already been discussed: being a transfer and having limited time to make the most of the UCLA experience, being a commuter, working while in school, leaving careers to be here, being immigrants, being parents, dealing with being the only person of color in the classroom, and so on.

While there were individuals on campus who were aware and supportive of these unique experiences, the women found that the university as a whole was not. Overall, 19 of the women reported a lack of staff awareness, and 18 reported a lack of faculty awareness. While the women, for the most part, said they individually found spaces and people who helped them feel validated, the overall consensus was that more could have been done to help them feel they mattered and that they were viewed as individuals with rich sources of knowledge and experience.

A Receptive Culture

The lack of awareness regarding non-traditional students seemed evident to the women both in and out of the classroom. They were aware of university policies on diverse topics including how to get a parking permit, where to park on campus, podcasting of courses, office and appointment hours, and a slew of other practices that seemed to not take into consideration

the bulk of the non-traditional student experience. The university bias toward students who live on campus and are immersed in campus culture or have the ease of four-plus years as a student to navigate and find answers to their questions seemed glaring to some of the women.

Many of the women talked specifically about how they wished professors and staff had more awareness that not all students live on or near campus, are supported by their parents, and have nothing on their plate other than school. They reported feeling that there is a general assumption that students are all between 18 and 21 years old. Caitlin and Jennifer said they would love if educators were more attentive to the fact that not all students are "kids" and that there are students who are a "little older and that have more life experiences." Caitlin added, "It would be nice if they were a little more attentive to individual needs instead of a collective thing."

Often the lack of awareness came across in subtle ways. The participants talked about small comments and jokes that implied everyone in the classroom was a certain age. Professors joked that "no one here was alive when…" or "Oh, you 18-year-olds wouldn't remember but…" or "no one in this room will know this…'." Comments like these seem innocuous, but they left the participants feeling alone and isolated in the classroom. Parker remembered being furious at one professor's hurtful comment in class that "monkeys can't learn anything after the age of 40, just like humans." She was offended, but conceded that "people say things like that, so you push through." Beatriz thought it was a lack of awareness on the professor's part about who is actually in the room:

> I think a lot of the times they don't think there's that many of us in the classroom. I'm like, "But, there's quite a few of us, we're not invisible."…I know I'm not the only person in this class who's not 18 [when professors make these types of comments], but

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you feel like you are. You feel like you're the only transfer in the class. You feel like you're the only student who's a transfer, who's an "old-ster," whatever. And then you look around and you're like, "Wait a minute, I think that one's a transfer too." It's just the fact that we are there, but we feel like we're the only ones. I feel like if they knew that we feel like we're the only ones, but there's a bunch of us in there, maybe if they would acknowledge us more. I think that would help.

These subtle comments and undercurrents of bias were not isolated to the classroom. Students noticed that there were not pictures of students like them on campus websites and often had to explain that they were undergraduates rather than staff, graduate students, or parents of younger students. One woman told a story about a friend on a campus tour who was asked what her daughter's major was when, in fact, she was the student and wished the tour guide had been more aware and sensitive to this fact. The women reported that at community colleges there were larger numbers of non-traditional students and the schools tended to be better set up for and welcoming to students over the age of 25 in terms of resources and awareness. At UCLA, it was more difficult to find others with shared experiences inside and outside the classroom, and this was isolating.

Jennifer and Jaclynn believed that educators need to better understand that all students are not the same—that there is not one type of student and, as Jaclynn put it, "You cannot use the same paintbrush for all of the students that you see or come into contact with." Jaclynn wished educators understood that, for transfers and non-traditional students, there is no one answer regarding how to best support the community; there are "so many different intersections" and "nuances" of identity and experience that drive non-traditional transfer students to college and to choose the transfer route. She insisted that "no one goes to school in the same way anymore,"

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and therefore educators should not make blanket assumptions about who is in their classroom: "The preconceived notions about students that you may have, you can't [follow]....You have to look at each student individually. And that's challenging, but that's just the nature of it." Jennifer saw it very similarly:

I just wish people [at UCLA] understood that there is not one type of woman. There's not one type of person. We've all experienced things very differently, whether it's because of our journey here, or how we were raised, or because of our culture, or our age. We all bring to the table something different. We all are different, and because of that, each individual should be handled, should be spoken to differently, and should be understood differently and at a different level. And I think that a lot of times I understand it in [the] classroom setting, where they speak to the group at large. But I think that in the case of one of my professors, everything is so black and white with her. It was one way or it wasn't at all. I don't know how to get the educators to know....I just wish that they understood that we're not all 20. We're not 18, and if we can't do our assignment or if we can't go to class, it's not because we're drunk or we're hung over; it's because life is happening, and it happens a lot. And sometimes it happens so much where I feel guilty even asking or sending another email because it happens so much....And it makes me feel like I'm being irresponsible.

This wish that educators would better understood the needs and uniqueness of the community was particularly true for parenting students. Frankie felt strongly that as a parenting student at UCLA there was no "culture that's receptive to being a parent outside of the parents program [UCLA Students with Dependents Program]." In the classroom, she felt that if she revealed that she was a parent, she would be "ostracized" or the professors might "presume that

you're looking for some kind of outlet or some kind of leverage" in terms of classwork or class load. She admitted she hated to call parenthood a "hindrance," but felt that sometimes it was.

For Emma and Michelle, it was also about the knowledge that they brought to the classroom and the professor not taking advantage of or valuing it. Emma had worked in the music industry for 20 years prior to attending UCLA. She loved the music department professors, but felt she was being treated the same as a 19-year-old student who had no experience with music. She would have loved to put together her own program or put some of her skill and knowledge about the subject to use in the classroom. Unfortunately, she was not provided with such an outlet.

Michelle expressed that it had to do with both the body of knowledge she brought to the table as an older student and also the professors' lack of awareness about how to work with this community. She wished that they all knew more about the "transfer, non-trad experience," as she called it, because she thought it might be out of their "realm of knowledge." Michelle conceded that while some professors were focused on what they knew and what they were teaching, others did have more interest in each and every student and how the course information and the knowledge they were conveying affected "the lives and the experiences of the students that they teach." These were the professors who she valued and felt valued by. Michelle summarized the desire that many participants had regarding institutional awareness of their experience:

In a fairytale world, I wish that, like, there was a booklet, a pamphlet, something to let professors know, or instructors know, that some students, some particular group of students, may need a specific type of assistance. Because if I'm coming to school after 30…there's some knowledge that I have that's in my brain, and some stuff I got to pick up along the way. Now the stuff that I pick up along the way is what I've been using, and

the stuff that I need to learn is what I expect to pick up [at UCLA]. And some professors expect you to already have it.…Me as a non-trad, I've got other stuff going on. I got my family to deal with. I got to go to work. I got all this stuff going on, and sometimes that stuff that you [are] teaching may go to the back burner. So maybe just a sensitivity to non-trad students, or some type of learning information [for educators] about the sensitivities to a non-trad student. Because [otherwise] it leads to non-traditional students ending up at CAPS [Counseling and Psychological Services] because of not having the resources available, not feeling like they fit, not feeling welcome, and professors not having any empathy when it comes to that type of stuff.

Difficulty navigating the university and lack of institutional awareness regarding the rich and diverse experiences these students brought to it were part of the exo- and macrosystems these women maneuvered every day at UCLA. They were also related. For instance, if there was more campus awareness regarding the non-traditional transfer experience, and the campus had a more receptive culture to non-traditional students, would the university be easier to navigate? Unfortunately, the lack of awareness, the decentralized nature of the university—and the fact that the participants already reported that their age, transfer status, parenting status, and commuter and employment status (and sometimes their race)—created a sense of isolation. While it is difficult to say which component of the non-traditional student college experience most caused the women to feel like outsiders, the majority reported that they did feel that way—at least initially—and connecting with various spaces, places, and people on campus helped them foster a stronger sense of connection and community.

Isolation, Impostor Syndrome, Feeling Like an Outsider

Zonia, age 27 and the mother of two, was a transfer commuter student from Cerritos College, and was the first in her family to go to high school and complete both high school and college. She described feeling like an outsider at UCLA:

I see myself so out of place. I mean, outside from all of the things, I feel outside, I don't belong.…They are always having these icebreakers, and everyone's like, "I'm 21. I'm 18." And then I'm like, "I won't say anything about my age," because it feels so uncomfortable. You feel like you don't belong.…So it's one of the conflicting things that I experience. So, I have not had good experiences in my classes when it comes to interactions with students.…It kinda makes me wonder, is it, what is it about me? Is it because of my skin color? Because I'm 27? Because I'm a mother?…Is it because I am undocumented? Is it because so many things? A first-generation student? Is it because I am a community college student? There is just so many factors that could affect it. And to this point, I don't know what it is. But definitely class-wise, faculty-wise…just environment, it feels like I am an outsider. It feels like I have big words on my forehead that says, "transfer student," everything—"27-years"—like everything is in there and people can see that. So, in that case, people try to shut you away too.…I feel so like everyone is within their group and I'm the isolated one. Everyone is with their group, chatting, discussing this and that, politics, and things like that. One of the things I don't talk about is politics because, as an undocumented student, I don't know how that's gonna go towards me. If it's gonna be a backlash, supportive. So that is one of the things I try to stay hidden, as well.…Because I just don't know what to expect. It's kinda like scary. I don't know. Will they be supportive? Will they'll be staring?…Very few people

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know of my situation.…Up to this point, I feel like my UCLA experience hasn't been that great. I very feel outside of the environment, as like for my skin color and everything it's like…I'm not comfortable as much.

As the previous chapter detailed, the ecological dynamics and personal experiences of women transfer students over 25 years old at UCLA were vast and cannot be viewed in isolation. The women in this study described the challenges of blending their past and present lives and responsibilities, confronting social and cultural realities regarding age and gender, and navigating institutional obstacles. It makes sense, then, that they also talked about feeling isolated and feeling like outsiders or impostors on campus. As mentioned, the interweaving of the various micro- and exosystems in an individual's life, and the synergy or conflict between these systems, has an impact on the individual and her ability to traverse the systems, as well as on how she perceives these systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 2005). An inability to foster connections and synergize the systems puts stress on the individual and depending on their personal characteristics and support communities may exacerbate the student's sense of loneliness and lack of connection to the university (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 2005).

Virtually all the participants talked about feeling isolated, as though they did not belong, or about struggling to find a sense of connection on campus. This came up in a number of ways. Nine students explicitly described their experiences with impostor syndrome because of their age and life experience, their first-generation college-going status, the campus environment, the competitiveness of the university, and their challenges connecting with other students. More than half (a total of 18) spoke about feeling isolated and lonely in their experiences on campus. Their sense of belonging and a desire to connect with others with similar experiences came up

consistently with a majority of the participants. Beatriz captured the group's general sentiment regarding sense of belonging at UCLA:

Impostor syndrome is real. The moment I got there I did not think I belonged….My experience throughout the two years was kind of battling the fact that I didn't necessarily completely think that I was a scholar, and then trying to find ways to battle that to think I was.

Others, like Sandy, talked about the lack of connection using terms like "isolation" and "lonely." Sandy was the first in her family to go to college and was working 20-plus hours a week in addition to school; she had experienced both commuting and living close to campus. Even though she loved the academic experience at UCLA, Sandy admitted that it was "extremely rigorous and a little bit lonely." She did not feel like she had a community or a support system on campus, and she longed to connect with others who understood what it was like.

Sandy relied heavily on her boyfriend as a critical source of emotional and social support because she had found it difficult to make friends and connect with others who had shared experiences. She mentioned that she felt plugged-in academically, but that "there's definitely this feeling where you go to campus, you go to class, you eat, you go to your next class, next class, go home," without much social connection or sense of community. She tried to plug in with others who shared her interest in statistics, and liked seeing familiar faces, but she felt isolated because "I couldn't tell you their names….It's funny, you take so many classes in the same major, and…I know that person, that person, that person, and that person, but I couldn't tell you their voices, couldn't tell you their names."

Sandy went on to explain that one of the things that did help her feel less alone was having a space where she could go that was just for her. While she did not visit as much as she

would have liked, just knowing that the UCLA Transfer Student Center existed—and that there were events and resources specifically for transfers—helped her sense of connection and belonging to the university. She mentioned one event for commuters that was hosted every quarter during finals week, explaining that she loved that the university noticed and cared that it might be difficult at this point in the quarter for these students. The event (one of the Commuter Breakfasts hosted by the TSC every quarter) made her feel valued: "I really do appreciate when certain stuff is extended to us specifically as transfers, because that makes me feel like, 'Okay, we do have a place here.' That's really awesome, you know? It helps with that sense of belonging." Sandy's situation captured a universal theme of feeling alone on campus as well as the ways in which these women were able to find their communities of support.

One central solution for the lack of belonging that came up repeatedly for the participants were the spaces, places, and people on and off campus that shaped their networks of community. It was the welcoming spaces and places that felt like home and the connections with students, faculty, staff, or people off campus that noticeably shifted their sense of belonging and seemed to create a more positive experience at UCLA. While the community was different for each student, connecting to others with shared experiences and knowing that there were resources specific to them fostered more connection and confidence that they mattered to the university.

Spaces, Places, and People: Building Community and Sense of Belonging on Campus

Gabriela loved the community she built at UCLA, and felt very much at home on campus. As she put it, "I'm not alone in anything that I do." At 47, she had been told that she stood out in the classroom, and she did not mind that at all; she was proud of her story and where she was in her life. After working through her own recovery from amphetamine addiction and becoming a drug and alcohol counselor, her ultimate goal was to continue on to a PhD program.

Gabriela was a psychology major with a minor in Chicano studies. She was Latina, had seven children, worked 20 hours a week while in school, and commuted to campus. When asked about what type of networks of support she found at UCLA, she detailed where she found community:

I knew that UCLA was very strongly influenced by community, and I find that I feel at home. I love coming to the transfer center because it's my home and you take care of us so well, and I just feel a part of [everything]. I haven't had any feelings where I feel left out. No, let me take that back. I had at first, when I initially had that anxiety attack, and realized my struggle to take a test under pressure. It was 40 minutes for 50 questions of statistics, and I realized I needed [some sort of] accommodations [in order to take this type of exam]. And so I felt then that maybe I didn't belong here. I told myself maybe I wasn't ready for this.…I'm so glad that I took psych education…with an awesome psychology professor. And I spoke to her a little bit about my situation, and she said "Don't say that. You belong here. You're right where you need to be." She reinforced that I can do this.

Gabriella also talked about the friendships she built with students at UCLA: "I have friends here. I also have a [peer] mentor. She's really helpful.…She even walked over with me to the counseling office [that time].…We relate so much, and we even have, like, barbecues on the weekend with the kids." Having a welcoming space on campus to hang out in, interaction with faculty members, and a friendship with another parenting student and transfer mentor where particularly important in helping provide Gabriella with a sense of belonging and providing a support network.

When speaking about how they built a sense of connection, support, and belonging at UCLA, all 30 participants brought up either the desire to connect or the importance of

connecting with community-specific spaces and resources, as well as the importance of connecting with students with shared experiences. Participants described "community-specific resources" as spaces, programs, organizations, groups, and representatives designated specifically for a community of with which they were a part, including transfer, non-traditional, parenting, racial and ethnic, undocumented, students in recovery, veteran, and LGBTQ status. These were also the general categories participants spoke about in terms of connecting with students with shared experiences or identities.

Age and transfer student status were mentioned by far the most in this context. Twenty-seven participants stated that connecting with other students similar to them in age was important, with five out of the 27 wishing they had more opportunities in this regard, and the other 22 stressing the importance and positive impact of the relationships they had with other older students. Twenty-three participants said they felt strongly about transfer-specific resources and identity when connecting with others. While academic department and major are not identities or communities per se, participants also commented that connecting with students in the same major helped them feel a stronger sense of belonging and connection. In fact, 18 of the women felt a strong connection with other students in their major or minor and found community with others who had the same interests.

Five of the 30 participants talked about how they were unable to find community and connection with others based on shared experience at UCLA, although they did indicate a desire for these types of relationships and explained how important they would have been to enriching their UCLA experiences. In two of the five cases, the participants attributed their lack of connection to their mental health and the lack of relevant social supports available to them at UCLA. One student had autism and mentioned the lack of resources available to that specific

community at UCLA, noting that her struggle to connect was not unusual for her. The other student was working with counseling and psychological services and felt very isolated because of her age and mental health status, but wished she had known more students like her at UCLA and had more connections and opportunity to meet others who were over 25 years old.

Of the three other students who said they struggled to find community on campus, one was a relatively new student who lacked knowledge of some of the key supports available to her; she hoped to start plugging in and finding her niche after visiting the Transfer Student Center for the first time. The second student felt comfortable with her community outside of UCLA; while she implied she would not have minded connecting with more students who were over 25 or married like her—thereby creating more community at UCLA—she was satisfied with her situation. The third student was able to find community in a research lab with an incredibly supportive professor. She also utilized resources available to her but continued to feel like an outsider and not welcomed on campus. She viewed her family and children as her support network, even though she would have preferred to have more of a community on campus as well. As I describe in more detail below, even when the women did connect and build community on campus, the most significant network of support was often their family and/or partner.

Clearly not all of the 25 participants who found community at UCLA did so immediately or to the extent that it completely solved any issues of impostor syndrome or isolation. But those who were able to meet other students with shared interests and who felt they had places on campus that welcomed them and validated them did say they felt more connected and more satisfied with their UCLA experience.

Campus Spaces and Places

UCLA has programs, centers, and organizations that focus on the needs of the transfer and non-traditional student communities as well as on the needs of some related subcommunities (e.g., Center for Community College Partnership, Academic Advancement Program, Transfer Summer Program, Transfer Student Center, Transfer Mentor Program, First-To-Go, Students with Dependents Program, Community Programs Office, Undocumented Student Program, Collegiate Recovery Program, Underground Scholars Initiative, Non-Traditional Students Network, Veteran Resource Center, LGBTQ Center, etc.). These resources—many of which are described in Appendix A—did come up often when participants talked about sense of belonging and feeling supported on campus. They helped provide a welcoming environment, a sense of place and belonging, and a hub for students with shared experiences to meet each other and get the information they needed.

Since there is no guidebook or easy way to navigate the university, these community-specific resources provided participants a point of centralization and validation. For instance, Frankie concluded that if she had not gotten the information and support from the Center for Community College Partnerships (CCCP) or the Transfer Student Center, she would have been lost and left to figure it out on her own. She conceded this would have been doable, but difficult within the two-year timeline transfers have—especially when you factor in four children, a commute, and classes. As she said, "Thanks to CCCP and the transfer center…that transition has been a lot smoother. So I think I felt a lot more included. Whereas if those programs were unavailable, I probably would have felt more alienated." Deme, Sandy, and Gabriella all described the transfer center as a comforting place, where they could go to feel more welcomed to the university and to see friends. Abigail concurred, adding that without the "supportive

structures" of the center and the Transfer Summer Program (TSP), she "cannot even imagine what school life at UCLA" would be like; these places were where she was able to build her cohort and community of fellow transfers and students over 25, and the spaces in which she felt welcomed and understood. (More information about TSP is available in Appendix A.)

Beatriz felt strongly about connecting with the resources early in her transfer experience, acknowledging that not all transfers were as fortunate. She and other participants attributed their sense of belonging at UCLA to resources such as the Academic Advancement Program (AAP) and TSP. Beatriz explained:

Without AAP, and without TSP, I don't think I would have felt like I belonged to UCLA at all. But, because I had those things, I knew where my people were. And then I knew where to associate so that I could feel that sense of belonging. I think at UCLA [it] is a little difficult like that for a lot of students, where if they don't make those connections early on—because I had other friends who were transfers who didn't—then they felt like UCLA wasn't as welcoming as they would have liked it to be.

Unfortunately, programs like AAP and TSP are not available to all transfers. These programs are limited in their capacity, target only those from specific socio-economic and historically marginalized communities, and are often difficult to find out about or connect with for students new to campus. For instance, the TSP only offers spots to roughly 150-200 incoming transfers each summer, yet UCLA enrolls roughly 3,200 new transfer students each year and AAP only serves 17% of the UCLA transfer student community (Academic Advancement Program [AAP], 2012). Consequently, students often miss out on this opportunity to start building relationships with others with shared experiences. Beatriz and others connected with the UCLA transfer programs available and in turn enjoyed deep, authentic relationships with other

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transfer and non-traditional students. Because of these spaces and these relationships, Beatriz felt she was able to foster a deeper sense of belonging to UCLA as a whole. She expressed a common sentiment regarding resources for transfer and non-traditional students, and the sense of ownership and belonging they fostered:

I found my community at AAP, and then through them they hooked me up with CCCP, and so I worked for CCCP. And because I worked for CCCP, I really felt like we were doing something positive, and I felt more at home than at UCLA. I felt like UCLA was mine, where maybe other people didn't feel that way. I did feel like I belonged to UCLA, and UCLA belonged to me. I had a responsibility to the campus as well as the campus having a responsibility to its transfer students….I feel like if AAP and CCCP weren't part of my UCLA journey, I wouldn't have felt like UCLA was mine. I wouldn't have felt that piece of ownership.…UCLA is a beautiful campus. It's in an amazing place. But it's nothing without its students. I felt that connection with CCCP and AAP, where they taught me that without the students, the campus is just buildings. It's their activism, their thoughts. The students are what make UCLA amazing. I felt like I learned that through CCCP and AAP.

Participants also mentioned many academic and health and wellness resources as being important, but far less consistently, and the feedback varied on the numerous resources mentioned. The only other spaces on campus that multiple participants mentioned feeling like "home" were the libraries. Eight women described a sense of awe and peace, and a feeling of "I made it to UCLA," whenever they studied in Powell Library or other libraries on campus. When asked where they felt at home on campus, all eight mentioned the calm, splendor, and specialness of the libraries. Four of them said they felt like they were in a Harry Potter movie.

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Getting connected to the spaces and places on campus where they felt appreciated, that provided them valuable information, and where they felt comfortable, the participants were able to begin building relationships with other students. While the physical spaces were important and imperative to their success, it was the people they met that affected their sense of belonging and connection on campus. In the section that follows, I describe the people on and off campus who helped to fuse the support networks of these women.

Support Networks

It was clear that often it was the staff, faculty, and students with whom these women connected who enriched their sense of belonging and helped establish their comfort and confidence at UCLA. In fact, 27 of the 30 women mentioned faculty, with most listing specific professors who had welcomed them and made them feel validated as UCLA students. Twenty-two talked about faculty treating them differently (in a positive way) when they found out they were transfers and/or non-traditional students. This was especially important since so many were struggling with impostor syndrome and a sense of belonging in the classroom particularly. As often, they talked about positive experiences with staff and how important staff members were to their success. Those who had not been able to connect with others said they desired relationships with same-age peers or students who were parents or commuters; those who had made these connections said it was part of what made their experiences at UCLA so positive. Lastly, partners and families lent a huge level of support and uplift to many of the participants. I discuss each of these types of connections in turn.

Faculty and staff. Nearly all of the participants—27 overall—reported having great connections with faculty or feeling very supported by them, which helped improve their UCLA experience. At the same time, however, half of the women also reported negative experiences,

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generally with one or two individuals or in instances specific to various majors. In other words, these experiences did not cloud the participants' overall views of faculty interaction. There existed a bit of a paradox regarding the women's perceptions of the attitudes of faculty however. As mentioned earlier, often the women felt isolated or marginalized by various comments professors made or the lack of awareness the women perceived faculty had regarding the post-traditional student experience. Simultaneously an overwhelming majority of the women also felt supported by and connected to faculty.

For these women both realities existed. In some instances, they felt understood and accepted by faculty and in others they wished faculty (and staff) had a better understanding and regard for the post-traditional student perspective and situation. Some of the negative experiences had to do with feeling intimated by the professors, which I discuss in more detail more below. The general consensus was that inspiration and sense of belonging came largely from professors, particularly who taught ethnic and gender studies courses, as well as from these courses more broadly. Frankie and Grace took African American Studies courses and, as Frankie mentioned:

> I think me taking those courses really solidif[ied] my sense of belonging at UCLA and my purpose there. Because it was just refreshing to see a woman of color. And then I was able to go talk to her, and she's kind of been like a mentor to me.

Other women reported similar connections in the Chicano Studies department. Having professors of color with similar backgrounds provided what Beatriz called "validation" and a sense of place on campus. Jaclynn found this in her Gender Studies minor, which was, for her, simply a more "inviting space" than the English department, which she found isolating as the only African American woman in the major at the time.

Jennifer and Grace looked to the faculty as role models. Jennifer commented, "It's so empowering as a woman to see another woman in that position, and just knowing all this information about their specialty." Grace, while intimidated by some of her professors, looked up to those who had been mentors for her and her grown daughter (who was previously an African American studies major at UCLA). She saw one professor outside of class and laughed as she described her reaction to seeing her:

> I saw her walking, and she was wearing this flowing dress. She didn't know that I saw her, but she was walking, and she looked like the Queen of the Nile or something. I was like, "One day, I want to grow up and be just like her." You know, shoulders back, like she was on a stage. I'm like, "Wow. That's what comes from…believing in yourself, accomplishing something big."…She just had this air. I'm like, "Yeah. One day." But, then I'm like, "Honey, you're probably her age."

The participants talked about how supportive the professors were, providing extra guidance when needed, working with their non-traditional schedules, and arranging Skype or FaceTime office hours when a student could not make regular office hour times. Faculty became mentors in some cases, providing advice about graduate school, sharing articles they knew the student would be interested in, and talking about resources. Sandy called UCLA faculty "approachable" and "easy to talk to," explaining that the environment they set in their classrooms for the most part helped her feel comfortable to speak out in class, ask questions, and approach them outside of class to talk about research.

Participants mentioned that faculty appreciated the life experience that they brought to the table, and in some cases treated them differently when they found out their age or transfer status. Wendy and Sandy each told a story about bringing up a topic in class that the professor

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had never heard mentioned by another student before; in both cases, the professor was surprised and pleased by the exchange, offering it up to the class as an example of bringing life experience to the learning process. Emma, Lesly, and Michelle wished that professors would do this more often, creating an opportunity for students with experience to bring more of themselves and their expertise to the classroom.

Sara loved when a professor's tone would completely change when they found out her age. They would talk to her "completely differently," like a "peer" and an "adult," and in a less "patronizing" way. Sandy had a similar experience in which the professor noted that speaking to her was like chatting with her adult daughter or sister; Sandy said how nice that interaction was and how valued it made her feel. Both students were surprised at how personal the interactions with staff and faculty could be at such a large university.

Some of the parenting students mentioned that when a professor was particularly understanding about bringing a child to class or working around some issue that had to do with parenting, this attitude completely changed their college experience and made them feel incredibly appreciated and respected. Even just the acknowledgement of a professor to a student that they had a child or that they were checking in about the situation made a tremendous difference in how accepted and valued these women felt. For the parenting students, being seen and respected for their situation turned around their college experience significantly.

Conversely, some students felt very intimated by faculty. Isabel felt her fear had to do with power and being intimated by people in power. She felt much more comfortable with fellow students or teaching assistants. Tonia felt that age came into play for her. She felt insecure about the fact that she "should be" further along and could not help but compare herself to them. Grace talked about her insecurity when attending office hours, insisting that she did not want to take up

a professor's time with silly questions. She would sit and listen to other people's questions instead of raising her own. In these situations, she felt like everyone else was "reading Thoreau" and she was "asking about the alphabet" and "what the letter 't' should sound like."

For Michelle, it had more to do with her past and her beliefs about the role faculty should play. It was not until she had worked with staff and gained some student leadership experience that she had the courage to ask professors for guidance. She learned to assert herself and work with staff and faculty toward what she needed. In her words:

> As a Black transfer student from South Central Los Angeles, I didn't have any idea that my education should be important to the faculty, should be important to my facilitators and professors. I didn't know that. I figured that I should be lucky that I'm even here. After a period of time and after gaining some information, I had to assert myself, because my education was all that I had. Given my background, it was all I had. And if I did not finish my undergraduate career, that was it for me. There was no second chances after this.

Twenty-four of the participants said they viewed UCLA staff members as mentors, making comments similar to those about faculty. The women listed staff who worked with specific subcommunities in the transfer, non-traditional student population as huge assets to the UCLA experience. These included the parenting program coordinator, the undocumented program coordinators, Transfer Student Center staff, Collegiate Recovery Program (CRP) staff, and staff in AAP, CCCP, and other programs (see Appendix A). In addition, participants often mentioned academic and departmental advisors as sources of community and support.

Students with shared experiences. All of the participants said they wished they could have met more people like themselves at the university. They often directly linked the fact that

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they had developed relationships with other students with similar experiences to their greater sense of belonging, naming it as part of what made their UCLA experience so special. Alison said that hanging out with like-minded people and those with some life experience really gave her a way to plug in and feel at home at UCLA. She explained that non-traditional students and transfers just have a "different vibe" than younger students. Sara agreed, and while she got along well with traditionally aged students, there was something special about the cohort of students over 25 that she was able to connect with through TSP.

Sara explained that connecting with other older students helped her feel less alone and "out of place" in the experience. One of her biggest fears coming to UCLA was that everyone was going to be so much younger, and that she was not going to be able to connect. As she put it, connecting with students her age helped her sense of belonging a lot; they were her "main community" during her time at UCLA. Although she conceded that hanging out with just students over 25 is self-segregating a bit, she felt they really connected and helped each other through the experience by talking every day, hanging out, and going on hikes or to happy hour. She believed these close relationships were integral to her success at UCLA.

Other women described similar experiences. Elvia thought of it as being around people who were as focused and purposeful as she was, explaining that most older students take their education very seriously and there is an urgency to the experience because of time and family. Grace added to the consensus: "Transfers, non-traditional we're in a different head, altogether.…You want to be here. You mean business when you get here. And I don't know that they [younger students] see it the same…not the same urgency.…They've got [a] different head."

Caitlin thought of it as a "maturity of conversation" and connections that consisted of more than stories over "how they partied all weekend" that younger students seemed to have. Abigail just loved being around other students who understood the unique transfer transition from community college to UCLA. She felt intimidated by and uncomfortable in a new campus and a new space "where everyone is 19, 20," so having the transfer center space to hang out in, and being able to meet other transfers there and even "see a familiar face" helped her UCLA experience "tremendously."

Other participants wished there had been more formalized opportunities to meet other students over 25 throughout the school year. Lesly lamented that she met quite a few at an event at the beginning of the year and then lost touch with them; she would have loved to have created more of a community for herself with other older students so she did not feel so alone, because it is easy to get "lost in the sea of 20year-olds." At 52, Grace did joke that when the non-traditional students got together for events, over 25 "means like 29." There were not as many people over 50 at these types of events. (She also joked that everyone at the events had hair, whereas men in her age group are typically bald.)

This is not to say that all participants felt the same about their non-traditional student identities. Hannah wished there were more transfers and older students in her major (mechanical engineering), because even though she did create community within her major and through intramural sports, she wanted to connect with others who thought more like her. However, she was ambivalent about proudly claiming the non-traditional student title. She mentioned the Non-Traditional Students Network (a student group for students 25 and older) and explained, "It's like almost too in-your-face about how, you know, you're different and your experience is

different." She said she understood the pride in it, but because others at the university did not "get it," it was sometimes easier just to try to blend in.

Parker had a different issue with other non-traditional students. Even though she actually forged some very strong relationships with a group of other students over age 25, she felt that some were not as "aggressive learners" as she was. Her perception was that some were quiet in class or had challenges that kept them from being fully present. She noted that her kids were older, and that some of what she perceived may have been because other students had younger kids and were overloaded with responsibilities.

Another topic that came up among the mothers specifically was the desire for the opportunity to connect with other parenting students. This was particularly true for those with younger children. The women who had children under the age of 11 talked about how critical connecting with other parenting students was for them. Meeting with other mothers made them feel supported and not alone, and kept them sane. They agreed that just knowing that there were supports for parents—and that others understood what they were going through—helped motivate them. As Jennifer put it:

> I could literally just go there and talk about how annoying our kids are being or just say "I'm tired," and they'd get it. And it's not because we're tired because we were up all night, or talking on the phone, or because of a boy. It's because our little kid peed the bed. And that meant you have to take the top sheet off and the pad so that she has the remainder sheet. There's just things that parents know, and it feels good…to go into a room and talk to them, without having to explain in detail, because they get it, or get advice about how…I'll just get advice on how not to lose your mind or how to prioritize.…It's just, that's been a nice community. That's been a very nice community.

While only 11 of the 30 participants were involved in some sort of formal peer mentoring program, 22 stressed the importance of *informal* peer mentoring from other non-traditional and/or parenting students. Indeed, connecting to those with shared experiences was important to this group of women. When Jennifer was asked what helped her excel at UCLA, she claimed it was that fact that she had community and, in her words, "knowing that I have a space here, a few spaces. And I have people who understand me…understand where I've been. It makes me feel comfortable here. It makes me feel a part of the university."

Off-Campus Support Networks

Most non-traditional students live off campus, in family housing or with partners or children. Twenty-five of the participants commuted and lived off campus, 18 were married or in committed relationships, and 13 were mothers. Critical to their UCLA experience were the support and roles of their partners and family members.

Partners. By and large, the women talked about their spouses and partners as their "cheerleaders," their "right hand man," their "biggest support," a "safety net," and explained how they were able to sustain "supportive" and "encouraging environments at home." Participants with partners expressed that their partners unceasingly "buoyed them up" emotionally throughout their UCLA experience. Whether it was celebrating the little moments, like surviving their first UCLA finals week, or helping out with the kids and household responsibilities, partners came up most often as an off-campus community of support. As described in the previous chapter, partners also sometimes brought tension and stress to the experience. However, the participants expressed that their husbands and boyfriends (no one mentioned female partners) really provided them the emotional and social support they needed.

Families and children. Family provided participants with, as Michelle put it, "constant refreshing and reminding" of what was important in life and the fact that they can "succeed and thrive" at UCLA. Twenty of the participants listed family as a support network. This included brothers and sisters, parents, grandparents, and other extended family members such as cousins. Tatiana insisted that if it were not for her sisters, grandmother, and mother "helping to push her through," she would have dropped out.

All of the mothers talked about their children as being a support system. Those with older children found that they were able to help them with technology and computer support, emotional support (in some cases), and even with homework—in particular, Patricia and Parker, who were able to take some courses with their sons who happened to be attending UCLA at the same time. Those with younger children brought up the inspiration and motivation that having children provided them. While families could cause stress too, it was the small "bit of encouragement" that stood out most to the participants. When talking about her mother, Elvia put it simply: "Even though she didn't know what I was doing, it was those little sayings [words of encouragement] that she keeps saying, 'Yes I can.' And, like, my mom said I can, so I can."

When looking at what networks of community and support were significant to the women in this study, is clear that connecting with faculty, university, and community-specific resources, as well as with other students with shared experiences, provided valuable support and validation. In some cases, this helped them gain a sense of belonging at UCLA. It also helped them feel less alone in the experience and take on a sense of ownership of it. Partners and family also provided emotional support, encouragement, and motivation to continue.

CHAPTER 6:

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The aim of this study was to use an ecological systems framework to more comprehensively understand how post-traditional women students experience their time at an R1 university following transfer from a community college. The stories shared in the previous two chapters shed light on how 30 women negotiated their multiple identities and navigated the UCLA environment, including a climate that they did not always feel was designed for them, while simultaneously finding connection and purpose as students. Their narratives show resiliency and an ability to face and defy various institutional and personal challenges.

The stories that these women shared also reveal the rich life experiences and knowledge that they brought to the R1 university campus community. Stories such as these can inform policy and provide educators an opportunity to rethink who they are serving and how they are building infrastructure, classrooms, and social spaces that support the success of these students. Their narratives and the post-traditional college student experience in general can guide the conversation about the students being served at R1 research universities like UCLA and help educators and universities to look beyond numbers on a budget or enrollment sheet. Moreover, the findings can push institutions toward a paradigm shift, a new view of diversity, a multidimensional understanding of diversity that not only includes race and ethnicity, but also age, work patterns, financial status, community, family expectations, first-generation college-going status, the types of institutions students are accessing, and more (Deil-Amen, 2011b).

Much of what I reported from the students' perspective mirrors the existing research on the post-traditional transfer student experience at the four-year university (Donaldson & Townsend, 2007; Ishanti & McKitrick, 2010; Kasworm, 2010, 2012, 2014; Sims & Barnett,

2015). For example, post-traditional learners do not necessarily see themselves as students first, and they tend to feel isolated in the four-year university campus environment. Typical obstacles to their success include issues of navigating an institution set up to serve residential and financially dependent students (Blumenstyk, 2018; Cook & King, 2004; Duke-Benfield, 2015; Laanan, 2001, 2007; Laanan et al., 2010; Ishitani, 2008; Rosenbaum et al., 2006; Townsend, 2008; Townsend & Wilson, 2006). The post-traditional women in this study also talked about the major challenges that arise from traversing multiple roles and responsibilities while simultaneously being students (Deutsch & Schmertz, 2011; Dunkel & Kerpelman, 2006; Kasworm, 2010; Quimby & O'Brien, 2006; Soares et al., 2017).

Somewhat contradictory to certain studies on the topic, social support and collective identity were important for the women in this study. This makes the current findings particularly relevant to student affairs professionals who are looking to support students in these areas (Brenden et al., 2015; Deil-Amen, 20011a, 2011b; Samuels, Beach, & Bierlenin, 2011; Towensend & Wilson, 2006, 2009). Meeting others like them and seeing that they had succeeded and flourished, and connecting with students who had similar experiences, appeared to be instrumental to the women's sense of belonging and mattering at UCLA.

Age and the sense of disconnect between these women's life experiences and those of the majority of the (typically younger) student body were significant to their college experience. At the same time, staff and faculty who understood the challenges unique to their situation and who celebrated and encouraged the expertise and experience that they brought to the classroom and the university helped these women feel they counted and mattered to the university. When staff and faculty did not seem to "get it," or when university policy and practice implied that post-traditional learners should simply adapt to the traditional student environment, the women felt

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isolated and rejected. Spaces and places on campus designed to address their specific needs generated pride and institutional loyalty. By providing these spaces, the university demonstrated that these women and their peers were important to the campus, and this helped validate their college experience.

The narratives in this study support what Soares et al. (2017), Kasworm (1990, 2007a, 2008, 2010; Blumenstyk (2018) and others have pointed out: Post-traditional students tend to make choices regarding how they engage in and integrate into their educational experiences based on complex life priorities and ecosystems that involve family, work, and past experiences. Unfortunately, whether because of traditional institutional provincialism or lack of awareness, UCLA might be missing an opportunity to effectively engage and support the post-traditional community as a whole. Students over the age of 25 bring rich life experiences, an array of roles and complex identities, and a diversity of knowledge and expertise to their college experiences. The women in this study found ways to engage and bring their full selves to the college experience, but wished there had been more opportunities and encouragement from the university to do so. They expressed a desire to connect with other students over 25, to feel less isolated by their age and experience, and to be "seen" and appreciated by staff, faculty, and other students. Multilayered ecosystems influenced how they experienced the university environment, and understanding these systems can help to inform postsecondary education practice and policy (Kasworm, 2007; Soares et al. 2017). I turn to these practical implications later in the chapter. First, there are some limitations to the study that should be acknowledged.

Limitations of the Study

The current findings emerged from the narratives of 30 women. Their stories offer valuable insight into their personal college experiences at UCLA, and this in turn can inform

future practice, policy, and research. It is important to note, however, that interviewing students from only one institution limits the scope and perspective of the study. For example, post-traditional women who transfer to other institutions may encounter other factors that help or hinder their experiences—factors that were not reported in this study. While it is likely that the study's findings are relevant to and reflect much of the post-traditional student experience at other large four-year public research institutions, the results are not generalizable.

Second, despite the diversity and wide range of women interviewed (see Appendix B), interviewing only women and limiting the sample to 30 participants does not provide a great breadth of outlook, and this limits what can be concluded regarding the general post-traditional student body at UCLA. Consider that, in 2016, a total of 1,489 transfer students over the age of 25 were enrolled at UCLA, and 655 of these students were women as noted by the UCLA Office of Academic Planning and Budget (Adam Sugano, personal communication, October 26, 2017). The preceding chapters provided detailed narratives attesting to the fact that the life trajectories and personal experiences of just these 30 women were diverse. A larger sample might have yielded additional themes in the findings. Likewise, men who transfer from community colleges after the age of 25 would likely have some experiences not explored here.

Lastly, as detailed in Chapter 3, there is potential for research bias due to the qualitative nature of the study and my own previous experience as a post-traditional community college transfer student, as well as my position as the program director of the Transfer Student Center at UCLA. I took numerous measures to minimize my own reactivity as well as that of the participants throughout the research process. Nevertheless, this potential source of bias needs to be taken into account.

Implications for Future Research

Broadly speaking, previous research on post-traditional transfer students at the four-year university level has not disaggregated findings by age (Bahr, 2013; Blumenstyk, 2018; Kasworm, 2010). This includes research on student engagement and involvement (although some research exists on older students and classroom engagement), college choice, use of resources, student identity, post-graduation life path, etc. (Blumenstyk, 2018; Brennan et al., 2015; Donavant et al., 2013; Soares et al., 2017). Even literature specifically focused on transfer students at four-year universities rarely disaggregates by age, despite the fact that community college transfers are often older (Bahr, 2013; Blumenstyk, 2018; Juszkiewicz, 2016; Kasworm, 2010). It is therefore very difficult to understand the large-scale impact of university policies and practices on the post-traditional transfer student community. Researchers need more information on enrollment, retention, and graduation patterns, and other key indicators of success regarding these students in the four-year university sector (Bahr, 2013; Blumenstyk, 2018; Kasworm, 2010).

Age was a salient part of the UCLA experience for most of the study participants, and age and transfer status played into feelings of isolation and "otherness" at UCLA. While this has been explored in a few other studies, further research should parse out the saliency of age more generally and on a larger scale, particularly within four-year institutions and the R1 university sector more specifically (Deutsch & Schmertz, 2011; Hagedorn, 2005; Kasworm, 2010, 2014; Zhang et al., 2013). For instance, comparing the college experience of traditionally aged transfers and post-traditional transfers would help educators more thoroughly understand the nuances of the transfer experience based on age. Moreover, there was some indication in the current study that there were differences between the women depending on whether or not they

had children or had passed the age of having children. Thus, differences within and between certain age groups is worthy of further study. Similarly, the college experiences of male versus female post-traditional learners at four-year universities should be explored. This would be particularly interesting through the ecological systems framework to see how the impacts of time, culture, and social expectations affect students of different genders in different ways.

Brenden, Deil-Amen, and Rios-Aguilar (2015) looked at post-traditional students at community colleges and found that they used social media to connect with others. Social integration appears to be important to post-traditional student persistence but, because post-traditional students have multiple demands on their time, how "social interaction" is defined for this community needs more exploration. The current study did not look at social media patterns but did find that when the women connected with other post-traditional students it made a positive difference in their college experience, sense of belonging, and connection to the university. Despite having limited time, the women in the study strongly desired a social integration aspect to the college experience; they wished there had been more opportunities and outlets for social interaction with others who shared their experiences.

The current study—and work by Brendan et al. (2015)—contradicts studies by Samuels, Beach, and Bierlenin (2011) and Donaldson and Graham (2000). The latter studies found that social integration was not significant to post-traditional student persistence and that older students were often not involved in activities outside of family and school. Further exploration of the social integration needs and patterns of post-traditional students at four-year universities should be pursued, particularly with respect to interaction with other older students and its relation to sense of belonging. Exploration of other non-academic factors—engagement, involvement, integration of family life and school, self-confidence, and self-efficacy, for

example—would help educators understand some of the apparent paradoxes that arise with post-traditional students (Kasworm, 2010).

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems framework is an ideal prism through which to view the complex interweaving worlds, life trajectories, and experiences of post-traditional learners (Renn & Arnold, 2003; Tudge et al., 2009). Researchers have used this framework to analyze many postsecondary student communities (Renn, 1999, 2003; Renn & Arnold, 2003; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2015), and a smattering of dissertations have employed this framework to look at specific student communities, including post-traditional students (Alton, 2012; Fratesi, 2010; Kalin, 2017; Masse, 2009; Nowak, 2004; Poch, 2005). Nevertheless, there is more that needs to be explored. Most of these studies have employed qualitative methods and have been done at individual schools, so they are therefore not generalizable beyond the university where they were conducted. Further research on post-traditional students, aspects of the post-traditional student experience, and/or university or community college climate/culture for this group could use the ecological systems framework to more thoroughly deconstruct this unique educational trajectory and the environmental dynamics of post-traditional transfer students.

It would also be worthwhile to explore the issue of college choice as it relates to post-traditional transfers. For example, what makes students over the age of 25 choose a public research university over a private college or other option? This question is particularly important, since 20% of post-traditional students choose to enroll in for-profit institutions (Soares et al., 2017). Researchers should compare post-traditional transfer students at four-year universities to a larger group of similar students who do not apply to or attend four-year universities. This research should explore factors that go into post-traditional students' college choices and their reasons for transferring to public, private, or for-profit schools. It would be especially useful to

compare those who go to elite public universities with similar students who do not apply to these types of institutions, in an effort to better understand post-traditional college students and their decision-making processes regarding where and how to pursue postsecondary education. Further studies should look into what factors distinguish students who complete the transfer process to research universities from those who do not. These studies should explore key demographic variables as well as academic and non-academic factors that influence decisions about where to apply and where to enroll, and psychological factors such as students' academic ambitions and academic self-confidence.

While the current study shows the rich diversity of experience and knowledge post-traditional women transfer students bring to the university, it did not measure how they, in turn, affected the university. Studying the impact of these students on the campus community as well as on faculty, staff, and other students at R1 and other four-year universities is imperative to helping universities understand their value. Future research could look at how this community enriches and influences the student body, the classroom, and the perspectives of staff and faculty, as well as how they add to the multidimensional diversity of the campus climate. This work could provide researchers and educators who are advocating for policy shifts that better support all students more evidence regarding how post-traditional students benefit the campus environment.

<center>**Recommendations for Policy**</center>

Improved Data Sources

As discussed in the previous section, better disaggregation, use, and integration of diverse data will be necessary for any large-scale policy shifts that better support post-traditional learners. With this in mind, federal and state strategy should continue to focus on improving the

Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), which often excludes post-traditional students, as well as Statewide Longitudinal Data Systems. This will allow educators to better understand post-traditional students' educational journeys and outcomes (Soares & Gagliardi, 2018; Soares et al., 2017). Likewise, data that are broken down by key traits such as age and gender will help policymakers and educators more effectively evaluate and identify post-traditional student persistence and completion, as well as provide general understanding for institutional and national reform (Soares et al., 2017).

Broad-Scale Policies

Federal policy can also give universities a push in recruiting post-traditional students more directly. Up until this year, most federal accountability measures only counted graduation rates of first-time, full-time students, thus leaving out the post-traditional learner (Downs, 2018; Blumenstyk, 2018; Soares et al., 2017). Federal accountability policies did not encourage enrollment of the post-traditional transfer community or report the graduation rates of part-time and transfer students, so universities like UCLA may not have spent much time considering them as viable candidates or building the supports needed to help them once they have transferred (Blumenstyk, 2018; Mathews & Powell, 2016; Poulin & Taylor-Straut, 2018; Soares et al., 2017). The recent changes are a huge win for schools that enroll non-traditional students, as they will be able to gather a more representative picture of their graduation outcomes (Poulin & Taylor-Straut, 2018). There are still limits to this new expansion of the data, however: It really only gives a big picture and broad stroke view of student success measures, and it does not fill in details regarding student outcomes across demographic groups, credential types, and what type of institution students spend the majority of their college careers with part-time or full-time status (Carey, 2017; Poulin & Taylor-Straut, 2018).

Another accountability policy designed to support low-income and at-risk students—including post-traditional students—is outcomes-based funding. Supported by the Lumina Foundation, outcomes-based funding encourages colleges and universities to move beyond enrollment and recruitment (which is how funding dollars have traditionally been allocated) and to focus on the common barriers to college completion for at-risk student communities (Competency-Based Education Network [CBEN], 2017; Holly & Fulton, 2017; Mathews & Powell, 2016). Supporters believe that, if designed well, this type of policy will help ensure access and success of students in the transfer pipeline, facilitate post-traditional student college completion, and result in more college graduates overall (CBEN, 2017; Holly & Fulton, 2017; Mathews & Powell, 2016). Combining better use of data with outcomes-based funding would incentivize universities to enhance opportunities for post-traditional students attempting to navigate the postsecondary educational system.

Financial Policies

In terms of large-scale policy change that would directly impact students like the women in this study, addressing financial pressure and related barriers is of utmost importance. Financial barriers were a reality for this group of post-traditional learners at UCLA—particularly the 25 women who were balancing work and school. This is the top concern for most students who drop out or do not complete college (Duke-Benfield, 2015; Johnson, Rochkind, Ott, & DuPont, 2011). Student aid alone is simply not enough to help students fund their postsecondary goals, particularly for post-traditional students and low-income students who may be struggling to meet basic human needs (Duke-Benfield, 2015; Walizer, 2015). Financial aid policies need to take into account adequate support structures for not only tuition and books, but also housing, child

care, transportation, health insurance, and other living expenses (Blumenstyk, 2018; Duke-Benfield, 2015; Soares et al., 2017; Walizer, 2015).

Individual university policies that encourage work–study programs, specialized scholarships, emergency funding for families, and other financial supports for post-traditional students are imperative. UCLA for example, does have an Emergency Crisis Response Team (ECRT), which provides support and guidance to students in economic crisis who either self-identify are have been referred by staff or faculty. This is a vital resource for the post-traditional students on campus. The ECRT provides individualized response to students and works to examine and revise university policies and protocols when needed. More broadly, however, legislative changes are needed to adjust the way that financial aid is distributed (Blumenstyk, 2017; Taliaferro & Duke-Benfield, 2016).

As mentioned previously, current financial aid policies for those who are financially independent are based on formulas that treat income as money they can use to pay tuition costs. They overlook the fact that many students are supporting themselves and their families and assume that income levels stay consistent, despite the fact that many post-traditional students transition from full-time workers to student status (Blumenstyk, 2017; Taliaferro & Duke-Benfield, 2016). Some states' financial aid policies are more inclusive of non-traditional students than others, but state aid is generally targeted to students entering college straight out of high school and is not equally accessible to post-traditional students who have much different life circumstances (Duke-Benfield, 2015). Thus, prioritizing need-based aid, increasing accessibility to aid for post-traditional students, more strategically using state aid in tandem with federal aid, and allowing more flexibility and better timing with respect to when aid is disbursed will

enhance post-traditional students' access to and use of funds (Taliaferro & Duke-Benfield, 2016).

One specific financial policy fix suggested by some is readjustment of the Pell Grant and its application process (Campbell, Deil-Amen, & Rios-Aguilar, 2015; Scott-Clayton, 2017a; Soares et al., 2017; Turk & Chen, 2017; Turner 2017). Despite the fact that the average age of a Pell Grant recipient is 25 and 60% of recipients are financially independent, the Pell Grant has not shifted with these changing student demographics (Blumenstyk, 2018; Scott-Clayton, 2017a). In addition, the Pell Grant has not been adjusted to the pace of inflation and has a complex application process and eligibility formula that do not benefit the students who need these grants the most (Blumenstyk, 2018; Scott-Clayton, 2017a). Because of the complexity of the application process and misperceptions over eligibility, many students do not even access the aid they need (Scott-Clayton, 2017a). Despite the hope that Pell Grants help students in need access and complete college, 45% of first-year Pell Grant recipients have not completed any degree six years later (Scott-Clayton, 2017a).

Reforms are needed to improve efficiency, effectiveness, and equity of the Pell Grant program (Campbell, Deil-Amen, & Rios-Aguilar, 2015; Scott-Clayton, 2017a; Soares et al., 2017). Alignment of the program with changing student demographics, flexibility in full-time/part-time student enrollment, and changes to the application and disbursement schedule would help to fix the current impediments to access for low-income and post-traditional students (Campbell, Deil-Amen, & Rios-Aguilar, 2015; Scott-Clayton, 2017a; Soares et al., 2017). This more flexible approach would allow post-traditional learners additional options when negotiating their expenses and navigating how their educational journeys can fit in to their life trajectories.

Additional reforms to financial policy could include increasing work–study and on-campus job opportunities for post-traditional learners. This would help relieve some of the stress that work and school cause for these students and allow institutions to take advantage of the professional experience and expertise they bring to the university (Blumenstyk, 2018; Taliaferro & Duke-Benfield, 2016). Recent research also suggests that federal work–study programs have a positive impact on persistence and degree completion (Scott-Clayton & Minaya 2016; Scott-Clayton, 2017b). Given the pattern of work-school-commute-parent status that affects so many post-traditional students, providing more opportunities for work–study may provide some needed relief and support.

In response to the financial burdens that post-traditional students face, the Lumina Foundation, the American Council on Education, the Center for Postsecondary and Economic Success, and other education foundations and associations have encouraged Congress to streamline financial aid and state and federal benefits to better meet the needs of students (Duke-Benfield, 2015; Taliaferro & Duke-Benfield, 2016; Soares et al., 2017). Both financial aid and public benefits programs have their own sets of complex rules that are challenging to navigate; often, they are disincentives to post-traditional learners to attend college and/or they impact whether students can attend full or part time (Duke-Benfield, 2015; Taliaferro & Duke-Benfield, 2016). These policies could be more effectively aligned to restructure the process and accessibility of programs in order to better serve post-traditional students (Duke-Benfield, 2015; Taliaferro & Duke-Benfield, 2016). However, aligning efforts will require federal, state, and local levels of government to work together.

Other funding options include private donations and donors, but only a handful of foundations—including the Bernard Osher Foundation, the Charlotte W. Newcombe Foundation,

and the Crankstart Foundation—have scholarships specifically geared toward post-traditional students (Blumenstyk, 2017; Taliaferro & Duke-Benfield, 2016; UCLA Scholarship Resource Center, 2018). Unfortunately, college leaders report that because of lack of awareness and understanding of the post-traditional student community, donors are often hesitant to support them (Blumenstyk, 2018). University development teams need to work deliberately with donors to combat stigma and perceptions regarding transfer and post-traditional students and help them understand they have an opportunity to support these undergraduates who typically have significant financial need. As national and state policies shift to better support and value this community, hopefully national attitude and understanding will shift as well.

Lastly, campus policy initiatives to support post-traditional students should include child care and affordable family housing (Eckerson et al., 2016; Long, 2017; Noll et al., 2017). The Institute for Women's Policy Research reported that, as the number of single mothers on college campuses has grown, the number of campus-based childcare centers has decreased at both community colleges and four-year universities (Eckerson et al., 2016; Noll et al., 2017). Even those campuses that do provide childcare facilities often do not meet students' needs—waiting lists are long (it can take from six months to two years to secure a spot), costs are often prohibitive, and these centers rarely provide weekend and evening care when students may need it most to study and work (Miller, Gault, & Thorman, 2011). Greater access to childcare and affordable housing near campus would likely increase the degree attainment of students who have children—and single mothers particularly—who often drop out or take a break from school because of the demands of being a parent and student (Eckerson et al., 2016; Sykes, Reichlin, & Gault, 2016; Johnson et al., 2011). In fact, campuses that provide childcare assistance have

higher rates of single mothers participating and persisting (Matus-Grossman et al., 2002; Richburg-Hays, 2008; Romo & Segura, 2010; Schumacher, 2015).

Paradigm Shift to Inform Policy

Educators should be encouraged by recent state mandates regarding transfer pathways as well as by national reports guiding community colleges and universities in transfer student success. Unfortunately, however, these guidelines and reports do not consider post-traditional learners, despite the fact that the average age at community colleges is 28. Indeed, institutions are still viewing student and campus policies through a residential, youth-culture oriented lens (Deane et al., 2017; Juszkiewicz, 2016; McFarland et al., 2017; Mullin, 2012, 2017; UCOP, 2018; Wyner et al., 2016). Aspects of the transfer student experience—such as age, employment status, commuter status, marriage and parenting status, part-time status, first-generation college student status, and other post-traditional student indictors—are not mentioned in a recent memorandum of understanding between the California Community Colleges and the UC system that guarantees UC admission to all qualified community college transfer students over the next three years (UCOP, 2018). This was also the case in 2015 when UC unveiled the Transfer Pathways plan to help streamline the community college transfer process (Freeling, 2015).

There is continued state pressure to fill seats and open the door to transfer students, particularly on UC's R1 campuses, with little instruction, guidance, or university capacity to bring transfer students into the university and engage them successfully. It appears policy makers and university leaders may be focused on filling seats as they overlook the important context of the students they are pressuring universities to enroll. Without adequate infrastructure, understanding, awareness, and conversation about the success of the student communities that

are enrolling, is it virtually impossible to create successful, sustainable student supports and culture, particularly for post-traditional students.

As this study has shown, post-traditional women transfer students want and can benefit from the rigorous curriculum offered at R1 and other four-year universities, yet many have been hindered by economic barriers and institutional provincialism. The narratives of the women in this study can help educators understand that what is needed is a paradigm shift. Educators and policymakers must stop seeing transfer students as backfill for enrollment or as numbers on a budget sheet and start thinking about the multidimensional diversity and richness of knowledge and experience post-traditional students bring to the university. From this student-centered perspective, R1 universities can be encouraged to think about post-traditional students differently and come to understand the advantages and assets they bring to the campus culture.

Educators need to understand what post-traditional students bring to the university, why they want to be at the university, and how the university can ensure that they succeed. The world view, maturity, and knowledge that these students typically bring can provide universities an opportunity to shift culture, change policy insularity, and fix the disconnect between policy and actuality. Additionally, these students are motivated to learn, succeed, and complete a bachelor's degree. Post-traditional students may be more aware of the financial implications of student aid and be incentivized to graduate in a shorter amount of time than younger students who do not have the same financial constraints. Therefore, if universities implement appropriate infrastructure and programs designed to support the unique situations of this community, they may actually increase success rates of post-traditional transfer students and graduate them in shorter periods of time which ultimately benefits the university's bottom line.

The narratives of the women in this study help inform many of the key education policies that are being implemented at universities today. They shed light on what it means to transfer from a community college to an R1 university as well as on the fact that these institutions are currently not designed for transfer students—particularly women post-traditional transfer students. It is clear that there is a significant lack of understanding regarding how to best support and engage this community at the R1 university level, or at four-year institutions more generally. What is needed is a paradigm shift concerning this community, from a deficit mentality to an asset mentality (Deil-Amen, 2011b). Highlighting the narratives of students behind the enrollment, completion, and budget numbers can influence this shift, push institutions to value the multidimensional diversity of post-traditional learners, and begin to change the university narrative regarding who is (and should be) served through these institutions.

Recommendations for Practice

Recognition as a Valuable Student Population

UCLA actively recruits at community colleges where women outnumber men and the average age is 28. However, in 2016 women made up only 42.6% of the incoming transfers over 25 years old at UCLA—a total of 217 students (Adam Sugano with UCLA APB, personal communication, October 26, 2017; UCOP, 2014, 2018). The first steps in building a campus that is friendly and accommodating to post-traditional students are acknowledging this community as a strong group of potential students, broadening the definition of who a UCLA student is, and seeing and celebrating women over 25 years of age as dynamic candidates for the rigorous academic experience UCLA provides. Perhaps the simplest and quickest solutions to being more inclusive of this community would be inclusion of post-traditional students in marketing

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materials, website galleries, and student panels in ways that highlight the post-traditional experience as achievable, encouraged, and valued.

On a more interpersonal level, it was clear that the women in this study felt valued and validated when educators recognized and spoke to the unique set of experiences they brought to the university. Paradoxically, age sometimes made them feel isolated or different, but they also appreciated when educators acknowledged that they were on a different life trajectory than traditionally aged students. Institutional awareness, inclusivity, and more comprehensive support of the post-traditional student are all key pieces of institutional practices that better support and guide women transfer students over 25 through the university experience.

Meeting Students' Needs

Another important step to building a post-traditional student-friendly campus is ensuring that the university has awareness regarding the needs of this community and is generating the capacity to support them effectively on campus. This can be as simple as updating online services to include streamlined relevant information, emphasizing key resources, and taking care that the information is clear and concise for students who access it. Many of the participants in this study mentioned that access to information and resources was challenging, particularly within the limited time they had at the university following transfer. The plethora of UCLA resources and information on campus is incredibly decentralized, and communication with transfer students is not cohesively structured. The UCLA Student Affairs division alone has 25 different departments, each with its own programs, activities, and resources; there is no universal messaging, marketing, or outreach to students, let alone specialized outreach to post-traditional women. Improving the way that important information is disseminated would help all students.

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Based on feedback from the participants in this study as well as personal observation, it appears that various UCLA campus resource websites, printed materials, marketing aspects, and social media accounts lack uniformity, consistency, and unity in their messaging. This makes information incredibly unclear and confusing to students. This problem is universal for all transfers and subcommunities within the transfer community who have limited time to navigate and learn the system. Because of the non-uniform content and decentralization of university resources, it is difficult for post-traditional students in general to find and navigate information unless they know where to look. Streamlining information, websites, and communication to students would be an easy fix with direct and immediate impact on students and their access to required resources. Likewise, from what students reported in this study, it is clear that providing more flexible options for advising, office hours, and access to resources would represent another step forward in fostering a more fluid campus ecosystem that better matches the needs of this community. For example, options could include online and telephone advising, after-hours appointments, and a greater ability to make appointments in the first place (versus the common first-come, first-serve advising options currently offered through academic counseling).

While somewhat controversial, both Blumenstyk (2017) and Berg (2005) suggested that there is much that traditional universities and colleges can learn from the for-profit college sector regarding what practices and policies best serve post-traditional learners. For-profit institutions attract post-traditional students because of their "evolving understanding of convenience," accelerated and collaborative degrees, a plethora of online educational supports that are easily accessible, evening and weekend courses, and resources very specific to post-traditional student needs such as daycare, individualized advising, and career mapping (Berg, 2005; Blumenstyk, 2017, p. 31). Universities like UCLA focus a lot of energy and money on conveniences for

residential students (dining halls, state-of-the-art dormitories and lounges, etc.). The university may want to explore innovations in outreach and practice geared toward commuter students, students with families, and other post-traditional learners.

Community Building and Ongoing Support

It was clear from the results of this study that more intentional programming and effort around community building within the post-traditional student body is necessary at UCLA, reflecting yet another potential area for growth and change in supports. UCLA has a student organization for non-traditional students and individual programs for certain subcommunities (parents, veterans, formally incarcerated students, students in recovery, etc.; see Appendix A). However, there is no official university program or collaborative effort among programs that is tasked with reaching out to, on-boarding, and/or supporting post-traditional students during their time at UCLA. All of the participants either wished they had more opportunity to meet others like themselves, or they discussed how significant it would have been to their sense of belonging and overall college experience if they had had more opportunities to connect with other students over 25 years old.

By default, since so many post-traditional students choose the transfer pathway, the Transfer Student Center has become a de facto resource for post-traditional students. But with over 7,250 transfer students and only one professional staff member dedicated to this large community, it is difficult to generate a strong support system. Specialized staff who are focused on the post-traditional student experience could help members of this community connect more easily with one another, avoid some of the isolation the participants reported, and develop a deeper sense of belonging throughout their UCLA experience. Specialized staff and

programming would also help to unify resources and messaging to students, making it easier for post-traditional students to make the most of their time on campus.

Professional Development for Staff and Faculty

Many of the participants expressed a wish that educators at UCLA had more awareness of the post-traditional student experience—one woman even lamented that there wasn't a "booklet" or "pamphlet" for educators to help them gain more understanding regarding who these women were and what they brought with them in terms of life experience, expertise, life course, and the various life roles and responsibilities they participated in as UCLA students. This begs the question, are UCLA staff and faculty prepared to teach and serve both traditional and post-traditional undergraduate students? According to the participants, some are, and others could use some guidance.

Professional development or awareness training in effective approaches to teaching and serving post-traditional students would be helpful for UCLA staff and faculty in efforts to foster a more inclusive and accepting environment. This would require a comprehensive approach and, in some cases, may be seen as a major shift in culture and protocol on campus. However, as pointed out in Chapter 2, prevailing adult education philosophy emphasizes that the way post-traditional students learn and engage is qualitatively different than how younger students learn and engage (Donavant, Daniel, & Mackewn, 2013; Kasworm, 2003; Knowles, 1990; Merriam & Brockett, 2007; Soares et al., 2018). These differences may impact the college experience, retention, and success of post-traditional students within the context of traditional higher education models (Soares et al., 2017). Therefore, educators should be encouraged to work with post-traditional students in ways that serve them more effectively, particularly in mixed-age settings (Donavant et al., 2013).

Awareness and professional development trainings on communities such as veterans, undocumented students, and LGBTQ students already exist for UCLA faculty and staff (see Appendix A). A workshop or training that focuses on UCLA post-traditional transfer students—including common obstacles and hurdles to success and available resources for this community—and that provides a student panel portion so that educators can hear directly from students about their experiences and life trajectories could help them adapt their teaching and support service methods (Donavant et al., 2013).

Assessing Campus Resources and Climate

Yet another achievable positive step forward in practices that support post-traditional students would be a campus-wide needs assessment to identify where gaps in services for post-traditional students exist. Such an effort would help UCLA staff and faculty learn more about the community and how best to help these students with academic and financial concerns, child care, commuter issues, integration of families into the college experience, and other potential impediments to success and sense of belonging. This has yet to be done at UCLA on a campus-wide scale, and it would provide the university with a much more comprehensive evaluation of what works and does not work for this student community. It would also provide more generalizable information that could inform campus practice and policy more broadly.

Institutional awareness becomes particularly imperative when looking at the experiences of some of the women of color in this study who felt isolated not only by their age, gender, and transfer status, but also because of the color of their skin. Empirical studies show that students of color benefit when they have same-race, same-ethnicity faculty members (Hagedorn, Chi, Cepeda, & McLain, 2007; Harris & Bensimon, 2008; Henderson, 2018). As students mentioned in the current study, seeing someone who "looked like them" lead their classes helped them to

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see themselves as leaders and to feel more comfortable and at home in the classroom (Hagedorn, Chi, Cepeda, & McLain, 2007; Harris & Bensimon, 2008; Henderson, 2018).

In conclusion, it is worth noting that there were many students who wanted to tell their story for the current study: Out of roughly 655 women transfers over the age of 25 at UCLA, 132 women responded to the call for participants—this is 20% of women transfers over 25 years old. Notably, this is despite a snafu in which the Registrar's Office sent the study outreach letter without any hyperlinks included. It is clear that post-traditional women transfer students at UCLA wanted to share their experiences and be heard. This indicates a need for us to spend more time studying and better understanding the perspectives of this community.

APPENDIX A:

OVERVIEW OF KEY UCLA RESOURCES

This appendix contains a brief overview of key resources that were available to some or all of the study participants during their time at UCLA.

Academic Advancement Program (AAP)
Website: www.aap.ucla.edu

According to the AAP website, the program has three goals: (a) "to create and administer innovative academic programs for first generation, low-income and students who have been historically underrepresented in higher education"; (b) "to provide academic support for a diverse population of undergraduate students in their pursuit of academic excellence"; and (c) "to promote UCLA access and academic success for high school and community college students across the State's increasingly diverse populations."

Students in AAP receive (among other things) tutoring, academic, personal, and career counseling, mentoring related to graduate and professional school, scholarships, and research opportunities and stipends. The program currently serves about 5,600 students.

Eligibility for membership to AAP is based on socioeconomic, first-generation college student, and historically underrepresented identity status. Students are identified for eligibility through the UCLA application and financial aid process. Students can also apply to AAP by attending an orientation and information session about the program and filling out an application. Not all UCLA transfers are automatically eligible.

The Center for Community College Partnerships and the Transfer Summer Program are part of AAP. Each of these programs is discussed later in the appendix.

Bruin Resource Center (BRC)
Website: www.brc.ucla.edu/

The BRC is a department under the UCLA Student Affairs division. It is an umbrella department that houses programming and resource centers for a variety of student communities. It is the mission of the BRC to support student development, well-being, and academic success, and to foster an inclusive and socially just campus community. The BRC oversees the Transfer Student Center (discussed in its own section below) as well as a variety of other programs and centers, each with its own mission, programming, and events. For example:

- **Bruin Guardian Scholars (BGS)**
  Website: http://www.guardianscholars.ucla.edu/
  BGS provides services, resources, and advising for UCLA students who are current and former foster youth.

- **Bruin Guardian Scholars Academy**

Website: http://www.bgsa.ucla.edu/
Bruin Guardian Scholars Academy provides services and resources for current foster youth looking to apply to UCLA.

- **Collegiate Recovery Program (CRP)**
Website: http://www.collegiaterecovery.ucla.edu/
CRP provides support to UCLA students who are in recovery from substance use or other addictive behaviors.

- **GRIT Peer Couching Program (GRIT)**
Website: http://www.grit.ucla.edu/
GRIT provides peer-to-peer coaching to assist UCLA students with academic and social support.

- **Intergroup Relations Program (IGR)**
Website: http://www.igr.ucla.edu/
IGR works to engage and support the UCLA community on issues of social identity, interpersonal and intergroup relations/conflict, prejudice reduction, and social justice.

- **Students with Dependents Program (SwD)**
Website: http://www.swd.ucla.edu/
SwD provides caring and personalized support to UCLA students who are parents, guardians, and caregivers at the undergraduate, graduate, and professional school level.

- **Undocumented Student Program (USP)**
Website: http://www.usp.ucla.edu/
USP offers caring and personalized support to undergraduate and graduate undocumented students. It is designed to be a welcoming and safe space to help these students navigate UCLA.

- **Veterans Resource Center (VRC)**
Website: http://www.veterans.ucla.edu/
VRC provides caring and personalized support for undergraduate and graduate student veterans in their transition from military service to civilian and college life.

Center for Community College Partnerships (CCCP)
Website: www.aap.ucla.edu/units/cccp/

CCCP is a division of AAP that is responsible for developing and strengthening academic partnerships between UCLA California's community colleges, particularly those with large underrepresented student populations. CCCP works closely with undergraduate admissions at UCLA and local community college staff to provide outreach and recruit prospective transfer students. CCCP facilitates summer bridge programs for specific student communities and oversees a peer mentor program to help prepare students to be competitive for the transfer application process.

Community Programs Office (CPO)
Website: http://www.uclacommunityprograms.org/

CPO is made up of student-initiated and student-run projects that focus on access, retention, and community service. CPO serves historically marginalized groups and offers numerous resources supported by student fees, such as a free computer lab and printing, a test bank (to download previously-taken exams from numerous courses offered at UCLA), a food closet and other food security initiatives for students in need, and multiple student leadership positions.

Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS)
Website: http://www.counseling.ucla.edu/

CAPS is UCLA's student mental health center. CAPS supports students' mental health needs through short-term, one-on-one counselling, psychotherapy, group therapy and workshops, online resources, and campus crisis trainings. They provide 24-hour crisis counseling via phone and community resources and referrals.

First Year Experience (FYE)
Websites: http://www.firstyearexperience.ucla.edu/

FYE helps support new students as they navigate campus resources and transition smoothly to life at UCLA. They do this through events, student ambassadors, online outreach and resources, and campus collaborations. Particular attention is payed to first-generation college students and first-year commuter students who may struggle to navigate and build community.

LGBTQ Center
Website: http://www.lgbt.ucla.edu/
The UCLA LGBTQ Center provides a range of education and advocacy services that support intersectional identity development, unity, wellness, and an open, safe, and inclusive environment for UCLA's LGBTQ community.

Non-Traditional Students Network (NTSN)
Website: https://www.facebook.com/groups/UCLANonTradBruins/

NTSN is a student organization and support system for students returning to higher education after pursuing other life goals. Students who are part of this group are generally over the age of 25, parenting students, veterans, commuters, and more. NTSN facilitates an active Facebook group with over 1,970 members to help build community and connect with others with shared experiences at UCLA. NSTN also hosts social events and workshops that target topics and curricula relevant to this community. Students can connect with the NTSN through social media, student activities fairs in the summer and fall terms, and through connecting the Transfer Student Center which helps facilitate NTSN events an and outreach.

Transfer Student Center (TSC)
Website: http://www.transfers.ucla.edu/

TSC, which is part of the Bruin Resource Center, is UCLA's central hub for all things transfer. As such, it aims to help transfers build community and connect with resources. Its mission is to help UCLA transfer students "hit the ground running" and to make the most of their time at UCLA through programming, events, one-stop advising, referrals, a mentorship program, opportunities to meet other transfer students and build community, multiple social media outlets, and campus advocacy and awareness.

TSC hosts many weekly and quarterly events such as the Transfer Timeline Series (informational workshops on various topics of interest and concern to transfers), commuter events (e.g., commuter breakfasts, study halls, etc.), social events and mixers, and information sessions on academics and professional development.

TSC oversees the **Transfer Mentor Program**, which provides outreach and guidance to new transfers during their first year at UCLA. Each year, 75 transfer mentors are trained to work with two to five mentees each. Pairings are made by major or similar interest or identity. Students opt into this program every summer and can find out about the Program through Transfer Orientation, Transfer Transition events throughout the summer, social media and email outreach form the Transfer Student Center, and through connecting with the Transfer Student Center.

Transfer Success Team (TST)

The TST is a collaborative effort of over 16 campus departments that meet quarterly to further strengthen the institutional support and transfer receptive culture at UCLA. The committee aims support transfer students through centralizing information, resources, and institutionalized student services. TST also works to educate the UCLA community regarding the array of challenges transfer students face, the social and cultural capital that transfers bring to the campus, and how vital their diversity of experiences is to UCLA. Lastly, the TST evaluates unintended institutional barriers to the success and retention of transfer students and proposes systematic solutions to address issues through advocacy and action.

Transfer Summer Program (TSP)
Website: https://www.aap.ucla.edu/units/new-student-programs/#freshman-and-transfer-summer-programs

TSP is a summer program for roughly 200 newly admitted transfer students who are eligible for AAP (TSP's umbrella program). It is a rigorous seven-week academic residential program for new students designed to prepare them for the academic expectations of the quarter system at UCLA and to help them feel more comfortable as UCLA students. It is an immersion program, and all participants live on campus and take three courses during the summer session before the start of their fall term.

Underground Scholars Initiative (USI)
Website: https://www.facebook.com/USI.UCLA/

USI is a student organization that aims to connect formerly incarcerated and system-impacted students with the resources and information they need to succeed. USI hosts quarterly events and a graduation ceremony for formally incarcerated youth, and works closely with the TSC and BRC, as the majority of USI members are transfer students.

APPENDIX B:

DESCRIPTIONS OF THE STUDY PARTICIPANTS

This appendix describes relevant characteristics of the 30 study participants based on their responses to the intake form and comments made during their interviews. All names used are pseudonyms.

Abigail, 34
Abigail transferred from Los Angeles City College and is a philosophy major in her first year at UCLA. She is married, and she self-identified as Hispanic.

Alison, 31
Alison is in her second year at UCLA after transferring from Orange Coast College. She is majoring in astrophysics and geophysics. Alison is in a partnership or long-term relationship. She self-identified as White.

Anita, 27
Anita transferred from MiraCosta College. She is in her second year at UCLA and is majoring in English with a concentration in creative writing. She is in a partnership or long-term relationship and has one child who is nine years old. Anita self-identified as American Indian/Alaska Native and Asian.

Barbara, 31
Barbara is majoring in the mathematics of computation. She is in her third year at UCLA after taking classes at Fullerton College, Cypress College, Saddleback College, and Santa Monica College. She is in a partnership or long-term relationship and self-identified as White.

Beatriz, 35
Beatriz transferred from Antelope Valley College and graduated from UCLA in the 2017 cohort. She majored in history. She is in a partnership or long-term relationship and self-identified as Hispanic.

Caitlin, 27
Caitlin transferred from Pasadena City College and Glendale Community College and is majoring in music history at UCLA. She is in her second year. She is single, and she self-identified as Asian.

Deme, 30
Deme is a psychology major at UCLA. She transferred from Los Angeles Pierce College and is now in her first year at the university. She is single and has a three-year-old child. She self-identified as Middle Eastern.

Elvia, 31

Elvia transferred from Mt. San Antonio College and is now in her second year at UCLA. She is majoring in Chicana/o Studies and African American Studies. She has a four-year-old child, and she is single. She self-identified as Chicana.

Emma, 43

Emma is in her first year at UCLA after transferring from Pasadena City College. She is a music history major. She is in a partnership or long-term relationship, and she self-identified as White.

Frankie, 33

Frankie transferred to UCLA from Los Angles Southwest College and is now an African American Studies major in her first year. She has four children (ages 3, 4, 6, and 8), and she is in a partnership or long-term relationship. She self-identified as African American.

Gabriela, 47

Gabriela transferred from East Los Angeles College and is in her first year at UCLA. She is a pre-psychology major. Gabriela is single and has seven children (ages 10, 11, 12, 17, 20, 22, and 26). She self-identified as Hispanic/Latino.

Grace, 52

Grace is an African American Studies major at UCLA. She is in her second year, after transferring from San Diego Mesa College. She has four children (ages 25, 27, 28, and 29) and is divorced. She self-identified as African American and Hispanic.

Gülfian, 39

Gülfian graduated from UCLA in the 2017 cohort after transferring from Los Angeles City College. She was an anthropology major. She is in a partnership or long-term relationship, and she self-identified as Turkish Cypriot.

Hannah, 31

Hannah transferred to UCLA from Los Angeles Pierce College and is now in her second year at the university. She is a mechanical engineering major. She is single, and she self-identified as Asian.

Isabel, 39

Isabel received her bachelor's degree from UCLA in 2017, after transferring from Moorpark College. She was an anthropology major. has two children (ages 8 and 17), and she is separated. She self-identified as American Indian and Hispanic.

Jaclynn, 29

Jaclyn was an English and gender studies major, and she graduated with the 2016 cohort after transferring from Santa Monica College. Jaclyn is single, and she self-identified as African American.

Jennifer, 37
Jennifer is a Gender Studies major at UCLA. She transferred from Los Angeles Pierce College and East Los Angeles College and is now in her second year at the university. She is single and has a four-year-old child. She self-identified as White.

June, 34
June is a Global Studies major at UCLA. She is in her first year after transferring from City College of San Francisco and Cabrillo College. She is married, and she self-identified as Asian and Hispanic.

Lesly, 50
Lesly transferred to UCLA from Santa Monica College and she is now in her second year. She is a Gender Studies major. Lesly is married. She declined to state her race/ethnicity.

Michelle, 42
Michelle transferred from Los Angeles City College and graduated from UCLA in 2017. She was an African American Studies major. She is married, and she self-identified as African American.

Parker, 44
Parker is an anthropology major at UCLA. She is in her second year after transferring from Glendale Community College and Santa Monica College. She has two children (ages 21 and 23) and is married. She self-identified as Asian/Asian American.

Patricia, 45
Patricia transferred from Los Angeles Southwest College and is in her third year at UCLA, where she is a sociology major. She has three children (ages 12, 16, and 22) and is divorced. She self-identified as Hispanic/Latino.

Sal, 30
Sal transferred to UCLA from Glendale Community College, Los Angeles City College, Los Angeles Valley College, and Santa Monica College, and she is in her first year. She is a Chicana/o Studies major. She is in a partnership or long-term relationship, and she self-identified as Hispanic and Middle Eastern.

Sandy, 32
Sandy is in her second year at UCLA after transferring from Moreno Valley College and Riverside City College. She is double-majoring in statistics and biology. Sandy is in a partnership or long-term relationship, and she self-identified as White.

Sara, 30
Sara is a human biology and society major at UCLA. She is in her second year after transferring from Mt. San Antonio College. She is single, and she self-identified as Pakistani/Punjabi.

Tatiana, 31

Tatiana majored in chemistry at UCLA. She graduated in the 2016 cohort after transferring from Berkeley City College and Laney College. Tatiana is in a partnership or long-term relationship. She self-identified as African American.

Tonia, 34
Tonia transferred to UCLA from Los Angeles Mission College, and she is in her second year. She is a political science and Chicana/o Studies major. Tonia has two children (ages 13 and 17) and is single. She self-identified as African American and Hispanic.

Vera, 36
Vera is in her second year at UCLA after transferring from Los Angeles Valley College and Los Angeles Pierce College. She is double-majoring in financial actuarial math and statistics. Vera has one child (age 10) and is married. She self-identified as White.

Wendy, 35
Wendy is an economics major at UCLA. She transferred from Glendale Community College and is in her second year. She is in a partnership or long-term relationship, and she self-identified as Asian.

Zonia, 27
Zonia is a psychology major at UCLA. She transferred from Cerritos College and is in her third year. Zonia has two children (ages 4 and 7) and is in a partnership or long-term relationship. She self-identified as Hispanic.

APPENDIX C:

OUTREACH PROTOCOL (EMAIL)

Dear UCLA Transfer Student,

This email is being sent to you on behalf of Heather Adams, a doctoral student in the Educational Leadership Program at the University of California, Los Angeles, because, as an undergraduate transfer student, you may meet the criteria to participate in this study regarding your transfer experience at UCLA.

Ms. Adams's research study explores the college experiences of women transfer students over the age of 25 years old. The purpose of this study is to better understand the college experience of this community at UCLA in order to inform educators on how to best serve students. If you are a female transfer student over 25 years old please consider filling out this [secure hyperlink] quick background information questionnaire and participating in an interview. All information collected will be kept confidential and coded to ensure your privacy, and participation in this study is completely voluntary. The interview will take no more than 60 minutes. The sessions will be scheduled at your convenience.

Please fill out this 2-minute questionnaire [secure hyperlink] if you are interested in participating in this project. It is important for UCLA to better understand your college experiences and what resources and experiences helped or hindered your experience at UCLA. The faculty sponsor is Dr. Robert Teranishi from the Educational Leadership Program at the University of California, Los Angeles. Should you have any questions, do not hesitate to reach out to Heather at hadams@saonet.ucla.edu.

Thank you so much for your time and attention to this matter.

Best,

Heather Adams
Transfer and Non-Traditional Programming
UCLA Transfer Student Center, a division of the Bruin Resource Center
hadams@saonet.ucla.edu

APPENDIX D:

OUTREACH PROTOCOL (FLYER AND SOCIAL MEDIA POST)

My name is Heather Adams and I am currently a doctoral student in the Educational Leadership Program at the UCLA Graduate School of Education & Information Studies. I am conducting dissertation research on the college experiences of women transfer students over the age of 25 years old. The purpose of this study is to explore and better understand the college experience of this community at UCLA in order to inform educators on how to better serve students.

If you are a woman transfer student over 25 years old, please fill out this 2-minute questionnaire [secure hyperlink] and participate in a focus group or interview. All information collected will be kept confidential and coded to ensure your privacy, and participation is completely voluntary. Should you have any questions, do not hesitate to reach out to me at hadams@saonet.ucla.edu.

Thank you so much for your time and attention to this matter!

Best,

Heather Adams

Flyer Content

Are you an undergraduate transfer student over the age of 25? Do you wish that educators better understood what the college experience has been like for you? Then this is the study for you!

My name is Heather Adams and I am conducting dissertation research on the college experiences of women transfer students over the age of 25 years at UCLA. If this describes you and you are interested in participating in this study, please fill out this 2-minute questionnaire [secure hyperlink] for more information. It's important for UCLA to better understand your college experiences and what resources and experiences helped or hindered your experience at UCLA. Thank you!

PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHIC INTAKE FORM

(Link was provided in both the outreach email and social media posts.)

Thank you so much for your interest and participation in this study! Again, my name is Heather Adams and I am conducting dissertation research on the college experiences of women transfer students over the age of 25 years at UCLA. If this describes you and you are interested in participating in this study, please fill out this quick questionnaire.

It's important for UCLA to better understand your college experiences and what resources and experiences helped or hindered your experience. If you indicate below that you are interested in participating in an interview, you will be contacted soon with more information. All information detailed in this survey will remain confidential. Thank you very much for your time and attention to this study!

1. What is your name? [text box]

2. Date of birth? [text box]

3. What is your major/s (please list)? [text box]

4. Please list any minor(s) (Leave blank if not applicable)

5. What school/s did you transfer from (please list all that apply)? [text box]

6. What is your class standing at UCLA?
    a. I am a first-year transfer at UCLA (1–3 quarters completed)
    b. I am a second-year transfer at UCLA (3–6 quarters completed)
    c. I am a third-year (or more) transfer at UCLA (6+ quarters completed)
    d. I am a UCLA transfer alumni and graduated in _____ (please list year) [text box]
    e. I am not a transfer student
    f. Other (please explain) [text box]

7. Are you/were you working while in school?
    a. Yes
    b. No
    c. If yes, how many hours a week do you work? [text box]

8. Are you a parent?
    a. Yes
    b. No
    c. If yes, please list your children's ages [text box]

9. What is your relationship status?
   a. Married
   b. Separated
   c. Divorced
   d. In a partnership or long-term relationship
   e. Currently single
   f. Decline to state

10. Are you a commuter student?
   a. Yes
   b. No
   c. If yes, how long does it take you to commute to campus each day? [text box]

11. What is your current annual income:
   a. Under $30,000
   b. $30,001–$45,000
   c. $45,001–$60,000
   d. $60,001–$75,000
   e. Over $75,000
   f. Decline to state

12. What is the highest level of education your parent(s)/guardian(s) have completed?
   a. Mother/Guardian
      i. No high school
      ii. Some high school
      iii. High school diploma or GED
      iv. Some college
      v. Associate's degree
      vi. Bachelor's degree
      vii. Master's degree or higher
      viii. Don't know
   b. Father/Guardian
      i. No high school
      ii. Some high school
      iii. High school diploma or GED
      iv. Some college
      v. Associate's degree
      vi. Bachelor's degree
      vii. Master's degree or higher
      viii. Don't know

13. What is your ethnicity? (Please select all that apply.)
   a. American Indian or Alaskan Native
   b. Asian/Asian American
   c. Pacific Islander
   d. Black or African American

e. Hispanic or Latino
　　　　　f. Middle Eastern
　　　　　g. White/Caucasian
　　　　　h. Other (please specify) [text box]
　　　　　i. Decline to state

　　14. Can I contact you to participate in a 60-minute interview in order to further explore your college experience? Interview participants will receive a $25 gift card. If you are interested, please include your email and phone number through the secure link below. You will be contacted if you fit the study criteria.

Thank you very much for completing this questionnaire. If you have any questions about the questionnaire or study, please do not hesitate to contact Heather Adams at hadams@saonet.ucla.edu.

First, I would like to thank you for your willingness and openness to participating in this study that explores the UCLA college experience of women transfer students. I hope that this study will provide the campus as well as other educators with important information about the experiences of women transfer students over 25 years old in a research university environment.

The interview will last approximately 60 minutes, and will focus on your academic, social, cultural, and personal experiences at UCLA. The session will be digitally record so that I can later transcribe the interview verbatim. The recording will not be shared with anyone else, and all data will be coded and pseudonyms will be used to protect your privacy in the final study. Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and will have no influence on grades or university standing.

If there are points during the conversation at which you would prefer the recorder off, please feel free to simply press the off button on the machine or let the interviewer know. Do you have any questions before we get started? If not, let's begin.

I. Tell me about your UCLA experience.
   a. How would you describe your experiences/interactions at UCLA in general?
      i. Describe your experiences/interactions in the classroom.
      ii. Outside of the classroom.
   b. What have your experiences with other students been like?
      i. Older students vs. younger students—positive/not so positive.
      ii. What kinds of challenges have you faced in interacting with other students?
   c. Experiences with: staff, Faculty, TAs?
      i. Positive experience with a staff/faculty member.
      ii. Think of one faculty/staff member with whom you have connected. How did that relationship come about?
      iii. Not so positive experience with a staff/faculty member.
         1. What kinds of challenges have you faced in interacting with faculty/staff?
   d. What campus resources, if any, did you access or attempt to access?
      i. Where do/did you go when you feel you need assistance or support (academically, personally, socially)?
         1. Who are your main sources of support while at UCLA?
      ii. Were there specific supports relevant to you as a woman, transfer over 25?
         1. What other types of help/support/resources/events do you feel women transfer students need?
         2. What do you think universities can do to better support the educational experiences of women transfer students (over 25)?
   e. Where on campus do you feel most at home?
      i. Where do you find community on campus?

f. Please describe how you have felt validated for who you are and the values you brought to this campus.
  i. Have there been times when you felt you did not belong in college/at UCLA?
    1. If so, why do you think this is?
g. How do you think being a woman over 25 years old specifically has affected your college experience (positive or negative)?
  i. Advantages to being a non-traditional transfer student
  ii. Disadvantages
  iii. Have there been times you feel your age affects the way you are treated at the university? Is age salient in your experience here?
  iv. What do you think are the main differences between traditional and non-traditional transfer students?
h. What has helped propel you forward at UCLA?
i. What challenges (if any) have you encountered continuing your education at UCLA? What if anything has hindered your success/experience?
j. What are some of the differences between your experience at community college and your experience at UCLA?

II. Now let's go back a bit. Describe your journey to UCLA.
  a. Where before UCLA and what led you here?
  b. Why UCLA specifically? What were the alternatives?
  c. Your views of college in general.
    i. What beliefs/influences impacted your decision to pursue higher education?
      1. At what point did you decide that getting a college degree was a priority for you?
      2. How did you come to that decision?
  d. Who had a significant effect on your journey to UCLA?
  e. What barriers/challenges did you face in your journey to UCLA?
  f. What does UCLA mean to you?

III. Now let's talk about other aspects of your life that have influenced your time at UCLA.
  a. Who has had the most significant impact/most supportive at UCLA?
    i. How has this person impacted you during your time here?
  a. Not been as supportive of your academic efforts at UCLA?
  b. How do you think your work/kids/partner/commute affect your experience?
  c. Please describe any external factors not yet mentioned that helped you in achieving your academic and personal goals in college.
    i. Probe for community, church, or other organizations, mentors in their lives, etc.
  d. Please describe any other external factors not yet mentioned that hindered you in achieving your academic and personal goals in college.
  e. What personal characteristics, unique to you, have helped you to persist at UCLA?

    f.   What role(s), if any, do you believe community college played in propelling you forward in your studies and helping you to persist?

    g. What were your expectations of UCLA?

    h. Does the reality match your expectations?

    i.   What does UCLA mean to you?

    j.   How do you see college fitting into your life trajectory?

IV. Is there anything that hasn't been brought up that you think has been important to your experience and success here?

V. I may reach out to do a follow-up interview based on our conversation today. Would you be open to being contacted for a second interview (either in person or perhaps over the phone)?

VI. I will be using code names in my study to protect your privacy. Do you want to choose yours? Is there a name that you love?

APPENDIX G:

INTERVIEW CONSENT FORM

University of California, Los Angeles

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Narratives of Resiliency, Achievement, and Success:
Understanding the College Experience of Women Transfer Students
Over the Age of 25 Years at a Public Research University

Heather Adams, from the Educational Leadership Program in the Graduate School of Education and Information Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), is conducting a research study. You were selected as a possible participant in this study because you are a woman transfer student over the age of 25 years old who has transferred to a research university from a community college. Your participation in this research study is voluntary.

Why is this study being done?
The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of women community college transfer students over the age of 25 years as they pursue a degree at UCLA. This is an understudied group. Considering the diversity of experience that women transfer students bring to university campuses, it is imperative that educators and student affairs professionals better understand the experiences unique to these women and the impact of the college experience on this group in order to learn how universities can best adapt to effectively support all students.

What will happen if I take part in this research study?
If you volunteer to participate in this study, the researcher will ask you to do the following:
 *You will be asked to fill out a brief demographic questionnaire.
 *Participate in one 60-minute interview about the UCLA experience.
 *All sessions will be audio recorded.
 *A $25 gift card will be provided.
 *You may be asked if you are interested in being contacted to participate in a follow-up interview.

How long will I be in the research study?
 *The demographic questionnaire will take two minutes to fill out.
 *Participation in the initial interview will be approximately 60 minutes.
 *If interested and contacted to participate in a follow-up interview, the interview would be no longer than 60 minutes.

Are there any potential risks or discomforts that I can expect from this study?
There are no anticipated risks or discomforts in participating in this study.

Are there any potential benefits if I participate?
You will not directly benefit from your participation in this study.

The results of the research may assist student and academic affairs professionals as well as faculty in better supporting women transfer students over the age of 25 years old at large public research universities. Findings and recommendations from this study may be shared with educators through presentations at conferences and publications. Information will be communicated at a local level within the UCLA and UC community to potentially inform practice, policy, student advising, services, and program planning. Findings may be discussed with leaders in the UC system in order to find ways to better support women transfer students.

Will I be paid for participating?
All interview participants will receive a $25 Amazon gift card.

Will information about me and my participation be kept confidential?
 *Confidentiality is guaranteed.
 *All data collected and used by the researcher will be coded, and pseudonyms will be used to replace participants' names and protect privacy.
 *All copies of interview transcripts, notes, and data will remain coded. Digital copies will be password protected and will only be accessed by the researcher. All data will be destroyed at the end of the study
 *You may refuse to answer any questions that you do not want to answer and still remain in the study.
 *You can leave at any time during the study or request that the audio recorder be turned off at any point during the study.
 *You have the right to review the tapes made as part of the study to determine whether they should be edited or erased in whole or in part.

What are my rights if I take part in this study?
You can choose whether or not you want to be in this study, and you may withdraw your consent and discontinue participation at any time. Participation is completely voluntary.
Whatever decision you make, there will be no penalty to you, and no loss of benefits to which you were otherwise entitled.
You may refuse to answer any questions that you do not want to answer and still remain in the study.

Who can I contact if I have questions about this study?
The research team: If you have any questions, comments, or concerns about the research, you can talk to the one of the researchers. Please contact: Heather Adams, UCLA Doctor of Education Candidate, hadams@saonet.ucla.edu

UCLA Office of the Human Research Protection Program (OHRPP): If you have questions about your rights while taking part in this study, or you have concerns or suggestions and you want to talk to someone other than the researchers about the study, please call the OHRPP at (310) 825-7122 or write to:
 UCLA Office of the Human Research Protection Program
 11000 Kinross Avenue, Suite 211, Box 951694
 Los Angeles, CA 90095-1694

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