Enrolling and Matriculating Adult Learners at A Public Community College in Illinois

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ABSTRACT

ENROLLING AND MATRICULATING ADULT LEARNERS AT A PUBLIC COMMUNITY COLLEGE IN ILLINOIS

Christina J. Coclanis-Loding, Ed.D.
Department of Counseling and Higher Education
Northern Illinois University, 2021
Carrie A. Kortegast, Director

There are 44 million adults over the age of 24 who hold a high school diploma and another 35 million adult who have some college credit but have not earned their college degree. These numbers make adult learners a viable population to attract and matriculate at community colleges. Considering the impact adult learners would have on enrollment in a time when enrollment numbers have been declining and the benefits to the local economies in providing skilled workers, the recruitment of adult learners is essential. This study addresses the gap in the current literature to recruit adult learners.

Interviews with directors of admissions/adult admissions advisors at six community colleges in Illinois led to the following four themes: efforts to enroll adult learners are more difficult than they appear, current practices attempt to insert adult learners into a system built around the traditional student, childcare is a huge obstacle for this population, and leadership pressure on enrollment numbers often changes prioritization.

Keywords: adult learners, nontraditional students
ENROLLING AND MATRICULATING ADULT LEARNERS AT A PUBLIC COMMUNITY COLLEGE IN ILLINOIS

BY
CHRISTINA J. COCLANIS-LODING
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A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

DEPARTMENT OF COUNSELING AND HIGHER EDUCATION

Dissertation Director:
Carrie A. Kortegast
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I have been very fortunate to complete this dissertation under the guidance of my dissertation committee: Dr. Kortegast, Dr. Hu, and Dr. Nyunt. I would like to especially acknowledge my dissertation chair, Dr. Kortegast, whose encouragement and feedback enabled me to complete this research. I am also very fortunate to have support and encouragement from my colleague, Betsy Schnowske.

Finally, I would like to thank Alex, Luke, and Lauren, my children. My graduate pursuit coincided with their high school and college years. It felt at times that we went to school together. I hope I inspired them as much as they inspired me!
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PREFACE

The purpose of this dissertation project was to determine the best practices for attracting and matriculating adult learners to a public community college from the lens of directors of admissions and adult admissions advisors. Using a multi-site case study approach, I researched the experiences of six participants at public community colleges in Illinois. The resulting chapters describe this research project from the proposal stage to a report on the study findings and finally a scholarly reflection of my process.

Chapter One is an artifact from the dissertation proposal defense. The proposal was defended in May 2020. This chapter outlines the framework for this qualitative research which is rooted in Schwandt’s (2000) constructivism to understand the intricacies of recruiting adult learners from the college department directly involved in the process.

Chapter Two is a report of the findings using an academic paper model. This chapter details the procedures that were executed throughout June of 2020 until completion in June of 2021. The research uncovered four findings: 1) the difficulty of recruiting the adult learner population, 2) current practices insert adult learners into a system built around the traditional student, 3) childcare is the largest obstacle, and 4) changes in college leadership affect priorities of the college to recruit adult learners.

Chapter Three is a scholarly reflection of my process and knowledge gained from this research. This chapter explores the need to change the in-person interview format to videoconferencing to overcome the lack of response to participate in the study. This chapter also provides opportunities I discovered for future research and applications to professional practice.
Throughout Barack Obama’s presidency, he challenged the nation to increase the completion rates within all sectors of higher education. The number one reason was to stimulate the economy, and revive the workforce (White House, 2009). Obama’s proposed American Graduation Initiative promised to provide twelve billion dollars in federal aid to community colleges and other adult-serving institutions in order to produce five million additional postsecondary certificates and degrees by the year 2020 (White House, 2009). The Obama Administration understood the shift in the U.S. labor market. The labor market was demanding an employee with greater analytical skills. President Donald Trump continued to advocate for a national investment in workforce development (Smith, 2018). However, the two presidents differed on the delivery of the workforce development. President Obama pushed for overall completion rates, and the Trump Administration advocated for credentials, certifications, or licensure in programs that require less than two years to complete (White House, 2019). In 2020, the Trump Administration’s budget proposal included an overall reduction in the funding for the Department of Education but increases career and technical education funding (White House, 2020). The Trump Administration proposal is supported the importance of providing a skilled workforce.

In 2010, the Center on Education and the Workforce reported that of the 11.6 million jobs created after the Great Recession, 11.4 million of those jobs were filled by a person with a degree. Grawe (2018) stated that the Great Recession created a demographic phenomenon in which there will be a decrease in traditional-age college students by 2026 because people have
delayed having children. The need for more skilled workers, coupled with the decline of traditional-age college students, has prompted a national effort to recruit adult learners. Intertwine historically low unemployment rates and colleges have seen a decline in enrollment rates. Statistics have identified over 80 million high school graduates who have never attended a college or attended at some point but never graduated (Blumenstyk, 2018).

Adult learners are crucial to achieving these goals of increasing the number and rate of college graduates (Complete College America, 2017). Thus, there needs to be greater attention to developing strategies to recruit the adult learner population. Increasing the number of adult learners enrolled in postsecondary education would increase the financial stability of institutions as well as boost the economy through the development of a more skilled workforce. Currently, less than half of the population of 25- to 64-year-olds in the state of Illinois have a postsecondary degree or certificate (Curry, 2019). The state has committed to a goal of 60% of all adults between 25 and 64 years of age to obtain a college certificate or degree by 2025 (ICCB, 2019). The ICCB and the Illinois public community colleges have set benchmarks to ensure Illinois meets workforce demand.

The purpose of this multi-site case study is to explore perceptions of community college directors of admissions on the recruitment and matriculation process for adult learners. The guiding questions are:

1. How do community college directors of admissions perceive the recruitment and matriculation of adult learners aligning with their institutional enrollment priorities?
2. How has their community college supported adult learners in matriculating into their community college?
3. What barriers do community college directors of admissions experience in recruiting adult learners and how have they addressed these barriers?

4. How do community college directors of admissions perceive the importance of increasing the enrollment of adult learners at their institution?

By focusing on directors of admissions and understanding more about how they understand the enrollment process of adult learners, this research will offer best practices to increase the matriculation of this population segment.

**Terminology**

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) defines and supplies data for research. The most popular defining characteristic of a nontraditional student is age (NCES, n.d.). An individual over the age of 24 who often has to balance academics with other roles, including work, family, and financial independence, is categorized as a nontraditional student (NCES, n.d.). Malcolm S. Knowles (1980) was an American educator who adopted the theory that adults learn differently. Knowles’ theory of andragogy is used in higher education curriculum. Knowles distinguished andragogy as the art and science of helping adults learn, versus pedagogy: the art and science of helping children learn. Due to the concept of adult learning and the NCES definition of age, the term “adult learner” is often used interchangeably with the term “nontraditional student” in higher education.

During the course of this research, I use the term “adult learner” as is the practice in higher education. The term “adult learner” is integral to distinguish the special circumstances/support that may be unique to adults. Both terms are interchangeable, and I may incorporate either term based on the author(s) that I am citing.
Literature Review

Data from the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (NSC) reported for the fall of 2017 that the population of adult learners is a viable market. There were 17 million undergraduates in all private and public postsecondary institutions, of which 27% were over the age of 24 (Blumenstyk, 2018). Further data revealed that there are another 44 million adults between the ages of 25 and 64 who only hold a high school diploma, and another 35 million adults have some college credit, but no degree (Blumenstyk, 2018). The numbers are staggering and make the adult population an attractive population to recruit.

The Illinois Board of Higher Education (IBHE) and the ICCB released the Fall 2018 enrollment numbers, which demonstrated a decline (Curry, 2019). This marks the tenth straight year of college enrollment decline in Illinois. Community colleges have suffered the greatest declines (ICCB, 2019). The decline has been attributed to many factors, but most notably, the Illinois budget crisis under ex-Governor Rauner and the number of Illinois students exiting the state to attend college in competing states. In 2017, the percentage of high school graduates leaving Illinois to attend a four-year college rose to 48% (Marek, 2019). Students migrating for their postsecondary education can easily be a major factor attributed to the decline of a traditional-age student in Illinois. More perplexing is the adult learner, who, by definition, is over 24 years old with either a career or children or both tying them to a community. The primary reason(s) for an adult learner failing to matriculate has yet to be determined in Illinois and across the nation.

An Illinois community college, McHenry County College (MCC) enrollment for the last five-year period for ages 25 to 55 has declined 47.1%. Yet 51% percent of the adult population
25 and older has either a high school diploma or some college but no degree. MCC has an opportunity to recruit and enroll over 50% of the county’s population. As a community college administrator and someone who identifies as an adult learner, this project is of special interest to me.

**College-Going Patterns and Barriers for Adult Learners**

The traditional trajectory of the American educational system is through a linear progression. It begins with pre-kindergarten through graduation of twelfth grade, entrance to college the following fall semester, college graduation in four years, culminating in the decision to pursue further education or launch a career. This linear trajectory is often not reality. More often than not, students delay entering college the following semester. In Illinois, six out of ten high school graduates attend college after high school (Advance Illinois, 2019). Only 50% of community college enrollees in Illinois complete within six years (Advance Illinois, 2019). This data does not capture student swirl. The term “student swirl” was first introduced by Alfredo de los Santos and Irene Wright in 1990. Student swirl is an enrollment pattern characterized by multiple transfers and interruptions in college enrollment. The student who is caught in a swirling pattern is more often moving laterally between neighboring community colleges. The effect of the swirl is the increase in the student's grade point average (Kolodner, 2016). The phenomenon of swirling continues to infuse the adult learner population due to other personal responsibilities. The American Council on Education (ACE) in 2017 reported that adult learners' greatest challenge is simultaneously attending college, studying, working, and raising a family. They consequently achieve progress in increments, mostly attending parttime, often stopping and starting or swirling due to time and financial constraints.
Institutional barriers also play a part for the adult learner to complete. The current curriculum and academic structure were created for a first-time, full-time student who just graduated from high school. School is difficult to schedule into a day filled with other commitments. Colleges have a limited number of night and weekend course offerings. This limitation is a daunting challenge to even the most motivated adult learner. Institutional departments (financial aid, advising, registration) that are in place for student support have limited hours during the week and no weekend availability, leaving the adult learner without needed support (Hardin, 2008; Kasworm, 2010).

Another barrier for adult learners, particularly women, is access to childcare. In a study conducted by Genco (2007), both genders responded that their roles at home served as barriers, but it was women who carried the heavier burden of household responsibilities due to them providing the majority of childcare. The Institute for Women's Policy Research reports that one in four adult learners is a single parent. The number of institutions offering childcare is declining, adult learners are forced to rely on family and friends for guidance and support, which affect degree completion (Bergman et al., 2014).

Finally, there are psychological barriers that influence enrollment in postsecondary education for adult learners. Adult learners who have long periods away from academic institutions lack confidence in their abilities to succeed, especially with technology (Blumenstyk, 2018; Goto & Martin, 2009; Kasworm, 2010). Adult learners returning to school are often faced with guilt for taking time away from their families (Blumenstyk, 2018). This same theme continued to be supported in a series of articles by Perkins (2018 a,b), who examined the family and financial constraints of an adult learner thoroughly and urged postsecondary institutions to
consider the non-cognitive challenges for an adult learner. Time management was a top consideration for adult learners due to the guilt of taking time away from their families. Therefore, adult learners tend to look for accelerated programs and year-round programs because they are interested in finishing as soon as possible.

**Priorities for Adult Learners**

In order to attract adult learners, institutions need to better understand the priorities and goals of adult learners in pursuing postsecondary education. A report by Public Agenda with support from the Kresge Foundation examined the attitudes of adults to discover whether they thought a college education had value. The research revealed three priorities for adult students to return to a postsecondary institution: applicable skills, quality teachers, and affordable tuition (Hagelskamp, Schleifer & DiStasi, 2013). Postsecondary institutions who seek to increase enrollment need to incorporate these priorities throughout their departments/polices/procedures, not only through their admissions office.

Adults often rate advancing their careers or the ability to secure a better job as their top priority in pursuing postsecondary education. Unique to the adult learner population compared to the traditional-aged student is that they know what programs will enhance their career or which credentials will advance their salaries. Therefore, it is often the institution's reputation and/or their ability to provide opportunities with employers that is at the forefront of their educational decisions (Ruffalo Noel Levitz, 2018). Ultimately, adult learners want to make sure the education they are getting will provide them with the applicable skills needed to advance their careers (Hagelskamp, et al., 2013).
Intertwined with skill development, adult learners are seeking institutions that offer affordable tuition. Unlike traditional-age students, adult learners are often interested in what their return on investment will be if they pursue a postsecondary degree. Lane stated that return on investment is a topic that institutions could use to attract adult learners (cited by Blumenstyk, 2018). The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (cited by Blumenstyk, 2018) reports that the weekly median salary for a high school graduate is $730, with an unemployment rate of 4.1%. The weekly median salary for an associate degree is $862, with an unemployment rate of 2.8%. Achieving a bachelor's degree can dramatically increase a graduate's weekly median salary to $1,198, with an unemployment rate of 2.2%. Adult learners weigh prospective salaries with the cost of tuition (Blumestyk, 2018), thus often ranking affordable tuition as a priority in their decision to pursue a postsecondary degree (Hagelskamp et al., 2013).

**Strategic Enrollment for Adult Learners**

The concept of strategic enrollment management (SEM) in higher education is an integrated approach to cultivate and sustain enrollment (Hossler & Bontrager, 2015). A SEM plan includes initiatives related to recruitment, admissions, financial aid, information management, marketing, retention, and research. SEM is an integrated system that removes unnecessary barriers, sustains revenue, and creates paths to persistence. The framework of a SEM plan provides student access, best business practices, and institutional planning (American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers, 2020). The focus on SEM has increased for administrators in postsecondary institutions with decreasing state appropriations coupled with decreasing enrollments.
There is not a particular strategic enrollment model that is more successful than another. As experts Hossler and Bontrager (2015) explained, the influences in enrollment strategies are seldom responsive to quick turnarounds and are born out of informed research on demographic trends, price, and factors that influence retention. The important ingredient is the alignment of the plan with the strategies, priorities, culture, and mission of the institution (Hossler & Bontrager, 2015).

An enrollment manager’s responsibility is to promote persistence and completion for students, including anticipating the needs of nontraditional students and adult learners. For instance, adult learners are not always enrolled to pursue a degree or credential (Fincher, 2010) but want to enhance their job skills. Similarly, some adult learners have engaged in “swirling,” where they have started and stopped degree programs at multiple institutions. These different goals and experiences can make it challenging to monitor their retention and progress. Community college enrollment managers must understand the varying needs of adult learners in order to help them pursue postsecondary opportunities at their institutions. One-on-one communication with admission counselors to understand an individual student’s needs and goals is essential to accomplish institutional goals and increase retention rates (Borden, 2004).

Postsecondary institutions face considerable challenges related to admission practices, types of curriculum services and financial aid. In order to meet the needs of adult learners, institutions have had to restructure institutional departments and offerings (Hutchens, 2016). The pool of nontraditional students as prospective students is too large for an institution to ignore. Postsecondary institutions have added first-year experience courses and orientation programs to improve persistence rates. Still, studies indicate that these courses and orientation
programs have little impact on improving the persistence rates of adult learners (Cavote & Kopera-Frye, 2006). In order for these offerings to be more impactful for adult learners, institutions should incorporate money management, time management, and study skills into these courses. These are the factors that lead adult learners to dropout. Another important factor to make orientations more impactful for adult learners is to include families (Deutsch & Schmertz, 2011). Orientations that include families would allow everyone to understand the time commitment required to succeed, hopefully encouraging support for the adult learner. Also, providing childcare for the adult learner to participate in orientation would increase participation, eliminating some of the emotional barriers presented earlier in the research.

**Financing College for Adult Learners**

One of the many factors found in research on students attending college inevitably exposes financial resources as a barrier. Financing for adult learners is even more complicated. The work and family obligations of adult learners often relegate them to part-time student status. This part-time status often reduces their eligibility for financial aid. A student enrolling with less than part-time status renders them ineligible for financial aid (Goldrick-Rab, 2010). Limited access to financial aid is a significant barrier for an adult learner, who is often supporting dependents and/or family members. There is no federal student grant or loan designated for single parents. All parents can use federal student aid to pay childcare costs while the parent is in school. The adult learner will have less aid to pay for the cost of tuition.

Finch (2016) argued that postsecondary institutions need to create specific adult-focused strategies that are proportionate to their adult student body. Finch (2016) maintains that
institutions are not budgeting to support the adult learner enrollment goals of their SEM plan. He continues his argument that state leaders are not budgeting to obtain their educational goals.

Unfortunately, funding sources for all college students, not just adult learners, are an ongoing problem. During the Obama Administration, community colleges were in the spotlight. Under the Trump Administration, there was a decrease in support for higher education, but more for career and technical education certificates. It will take an innovative approach to support adult learners.

**McHenry County College**

McHenry County College (MCC) is a two-year community college in Crystal Lake, Illinois. MCC was one of the few postsecondary institutions that experienced growth in the years 2017, 2018, and 2019 (ICCB, 2019). Contrary to national and state trends, MCC has shown growth in the enrollment of traditional students; however, enrollment rates of nontraditional students have not increased (ICCB, 2019) even though the pool of nontraditional students has grown in the county. The county population census figures indicate that 26% of adults 25 and older have only a high school diploma, and 25% of adults 25 and older have some college but no degree (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018). Individuals with some college no degree have been identified by the National Student Clearing House (NSCRC) as the subgroup most likely to re-enroll to complete their degree (NSCRC, 2019). In Illinois, there are more individuals with some college but no degree than the current population of postsecondary enrollment in the state (U. S Census Bureau, 2018). The NSCRC report also revealed that community colleges were the most common route to returning to college for these students (NSCRC, 2019).
While MCC (2019) saw an increase in students under the age of 24 over the past five years, there was a decline in enrollment of students between the ages of 25 and 55 years old. However, the declines for ages 25-34 were significantly less than the declines in ages 35-55. See Table 1 for an overview of enrollment trends between Fall 2014 and Fall 2019.

### Table 1
MCC Student Enrollment Trends, Fall 2014 to Fall 2019

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<td>&lt;24</td>
<td>4,510</td>
<td>4,478</td>
<td>4,449</td>
<td>5,000</td>
<td>5,158</td>
<td>5,494</td>
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<tr>
<td>25-34</td>
<td>793</td>
<td>751</td>
<td>712</td>
<td>666</td>
<td>688</td>
<td>671</td>
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<tr>
<td>35-55</td>
<td>720</td>
<td>581</td>
<td>540</td>
<td>515</td>
<td>511</td>
<td>492</td>
<td>-31.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>-47.1%</td>
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*Note: McHenry County College, 2019*

In 2019, MCC unveiled its 2019-2024 strategic plan that includes goals to increase the enrollment and retention of adult learners, students of diversity, veterans, and workforce and job-skills-ready students. The goal to increase adult learners aligns with the county census data regarding the larger numbers of potential applicants in McHenry County.

Over the past two years, MCC has developed initiatives and increased services to support adult learners. These new initiatives have included the creation of the adult learner orientation, increasing childcare availability at events, and allowing credits for prior learning. For instance, the orientation for adult learners was held at night in a more compact schedule than the day-long traditional new-student orientation. Childcare was also available during the event, and food was provided.

As orientation is mandatory, there was an online version available, but the staff recommended the face-to-face version for the personal connection. Another initiative to support adult and returning learners was the implementation of credits for prior learning, for example,
Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) for Life Experience. The goal was to provide more supports for adult learners in pursuing their postsecondary education.

The Office of Marketing and Public Relations (OMPR) has created an adult learner version of the MCC View Book of content and pictures focused on adult learners as a recruitment tool. They have also created webpages that link to MCC when certain phrases are entered into a search menu. Additionally, MCC’s strategic enrollment team has also identified the need to collect data by age. At this point, they have been unable to target their marketing to specific population segments. The enrollment team has begun an initiative that will target adult learners who have applied at MCC but have not registered for classes by offering extra support services in hopes of eliminating any barriers. They also plan to expand enrollment opportunities into a one-stop mobile department strategically located within the county.

One of the most ambitious initiatives to support adult learners at MCC is the goal to create an Adult Learner Center. The main function would be to provide outreach to the county residents to recruit them into credit and non-credit programs, explaining the financial aid process, the Free Application for Federal Student Aid, and scholarship opportunities. The idea is to model the Adult Enrollment Center at DePaul University.

While MCC has implemented a number of initiatives to recruit adult learners, there is a need to understand better how to best market and recruit adult learners to MCC. This case study is an effort to understand best practices to market adult learners at other community colleges in the state to make recommendations to improve MCC’s outreach.
Research Design and Methodology

The research approach for this project will be qualitative. The epistemology of this research is rooted in constructivism. Constructivism is grounded in the understanding that knowledge is socially constructed by people actively involved in the research process (Schwandt, 2000). Constructivism also focuses on the idea that researchers should attempt to understand the problem and/or situation from the point of view of those who have lived it (Schwandt, 2000). Therefore, the goal of this study is to understand the marketing of adult learners through interviews with similar postsecondary institutions in the state.

Within the qualitative framework, the specific methodological approach to this research will be a bounded multi-site case study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Case studies are used to understand why things happen in the contextual reality of what is actually occurring (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Yin (2003) stated that case study research is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon. A case study is not intended to analyze an entire organization, but instead to focus indepth on a particular area (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This research will focus on the description and analysis of marketing artifacts and events as well as interview data to understand the phenomenon of recruiting adult learners to public community colleges in the Northern region of Illinois.

The case study approach is appropriate for this research as it will reveal institutional priorities and changes regarding approaches to the same phenomenon of attracting the adult learner population. The use of a bounded system of public community colleges in the same region of the state is meant to limit any great disparities in funding, populations, and institutional size.
Research Sites

The IBHE college district map was used to select the public community colleges in the Northern region of Illinois. The Northern region contains 15 public community colleges in a suburban and/or rural setting. MCC is one of the colleges in the Northern region of Illinois and included as one of the research sites. All directors of admissions at the 15 colleges will be invited to participate in the study in order to maximize information. A list of these institutions is located in Appendix A. The point of saturation is impossible to estimate but will emerge through concurrent analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The City Colleges of Chicago were not considered for this study for two reasons. First, the City Colleges reside within a large metropolitan city, and second, the City Colleges of Chicago have seven campuses, each serving specific programs. The City Colleges of Chicago are structured into what they refer to as college-to-career hubs. Each campus is responsible for one specific employment sector: Harold Washington is the campus for business; Richard J. Daley is the campus for manufacturing; Harry S. Truman is the campus for education, human and natural sciences; Kennedy-King is the campus for hospitality and culinary; Malcolm X is the campus for health sciences; Olive-Harvey is the campus for transportation, distribution, and logistics; and Wilbur Wright is the campus for information technology. This unique system eliminated them for this study in order to strengthen the internal validity of the research.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection will be conducted by interviews and document analysis. Document analysis will focus on institutional websites and will be analyzed prior to the interviews. Semi-structured interviews will be conducted with directors of admissions at the selected community
colleges. The following will provide further information about recruitment strategies, document analysis, and interviews as well as the analysis process.

**Participant Recruitment**

After receiving IRB approval, I will recruit participants via email. I will contact the directors of admissions at the identified 15 community colleges explaining my study and inviting them to participate. If the initial email invite does not initiate a response, I will have the Chief Academic Officer (CAO) at MCC email the CAO’s at the colleges who have not responded to encourage their director of admissions officers to participate as a way to gain leadership support for this study. They will receive no monetary compensation for participating, but I will provide them with a report of the findings from this study. It is difficult to predict when responses from participants will reach redundancy. I estimate that interviews from all 15 community colleges in the Northern region of Illinois will reveal the maximum information needed to determine the best practices to market and recruit adult learners in this region, thus reaching saturation. The saturation point in a study is reached when no additional data or new findings are being revealed (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

**Document Analysis**

Before the interview session with a director of admissions, I will review and collect relevant artifacts from each community college. The artifacts will include college webpages, social media accounts, marketing materials, advertisements, orientation materials, and admissions tracking forms that are specifically directed at adult learners. The artifact review will aid the interview process and supply valuable information pertaining to the institution's commitment towards adult learners. Artifacts will be compared to Columbia Community College
in Missouri, which is one of the top community colleges in the United States for adult learners and is also in the Midwest.

**Interviews**

Interviewing is necessary to discover how people interpret the world around them (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) recommend the semi-structured approach to allow the respondent the opportunity to expound on a topic or present new ideas. For this reason, I will use a semi-structured approach in which there will be a standard set of themes and questions. However, I plan to invite participants to expand upon answers and topics through follow-up questions and encouragement of explanations. Ideally, I hope to conduct the interviews in person at the participant's institution. Nevertheless, logistically, that might not be possible. Therefore, some interviews might be conducted over the telephone or via Zoom.

The interview guide consists of 11 questions (see Appendix A). The interview begins with a couple of rapport-building questions, then focuses on specific areas of artifacts, events, collaboration, and admissions. The semi-structured approach allows the respondent to interject other initiatives or experiences throughout the interview, and there is time set aside at the end for the respondent to add any information they feel is relevant to the adult learner population. Prior to the interview, I will review all artifacts from the specific college to help shape additional questions. This review will provide a baseline for each institution’s efforts to recruit their adult population.

Upon consent of the interviewee, all interviews will be recorded to ensure the accuracy of the interviewer's notes. Protecting confidentiality (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), the individual institutions will be masked in the analysis and presentation of findings. As stated earlier, the
interview guide is created with semi-structured questions to discover the best practices at each research site. Semi-structured interview questions offer flexibility to approach different respondents with the opportunity to further explain the processes that pertain to their institution. The interview audio recordings will be transcribed. Once transcribed, I will review each interview while listening to the audio file to make any necessary edits. This process will be a necessary step to ensure the qualitative reliability of the research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

**Data Analysis**

Immediately after the interviews have been transcribed, I will begin the first cycle of coding by assigning basic, descriptive labels to topics in the transcripts (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). Themes that are anticipated revolve around enrollment trends and use of institutional data, media platforms and the growth of social media, and the measurement tools for events. Not every detail is worthy of consideration but on the most salient portion related to the research questions (Saldaña, 2013). I will determine the code for a “chunk” of data by reading and reflecting on its content or meaning (Miles et al., 2014). This process may be repeated numerous times to ensure every topic is captured and coded. In the second cycle of coding, the data will be reassembled to compare codes, note emerging patterns, and reorganize the data into smaller categories (Saldaña, 2013). It is suspected that, as Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014) mentioned, coding efforts might incorporate more than one method. This research could also lend itself to value coding within the second cycle. Saldaña (2013) conceptualized value coding for an author to utilize its value system into three elements: value, attitude, and belief. The codes will be used to interpret the value of a particular event or marketing tool. The interviews will be coded first, and additional artifacts, such as the institution's website and any additional marketing
artifacts, will be coded second. The synthesized data will be used to determine the best marketing techniques to attract adult learners.

**Trustworthiness**

Researchers have an ethical obligation to minimize misrepresentation and to find the validity of data observed (Stake, 2005). One of the best strategies to strengthen the internal validity of a study is triangulation (Miriam & Tisdell, 2016). Triangulation is using more than one source of data in a study. This case study uses interviews, artifacts obtained from the institution's websites, marketing flyers, and events, which will increase validity.

In addition to triangulation, this study will ensure validity by using respondent validation or member checking. This method requires the researcher to have some of the interview respondents review a preliminary analysis of the actual interview. The respondents should recognize themselves and the experience or recommend feedback to adjust the report (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Coding is a descriptive construct to capture the essence of the data. Coding is an interpretive process (Saldaña, 2013). Ensuring this study is credible, rich and detailed procedures will be documented in this case study in order for other researchers to follow the process, as Gibbs (2007) recommends. A codebook will be created with descriptive definitions of the codes used during the coding process. This process will deter any discrepancies or shifts in the meanings of codes during the coding process (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Finally, it is my first and foremost obligation as a researcher to respect the rights and values for the participants in the study and to acknowledge my connection to this study, which may or may not contribute to the integrity of the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). I am an
administrator at McHenry County College. Student enrollment is not my primary responsibility, but when I speak in the community, I am met by surprise at the programs and flexibility we offer.

**Positionality Statement**

As an associate dean in a community college, I have participated in many recruiting efforts. These efforts have largely focused on dual enrollment. The Dual Credit Quality Act in Illinois allows high school students to take a college course and receive credit at both the college and the high school levels. The Act was designed to reduce college costs for the student, accelerate degree completion, ease the transition to college, and improve degree attainment for underserved student populations. Dual credit has also been a very effective and relatively easy program to increase enrollment at community colleges. I have worked at two community colleges in which the bulk of their recruiting efforts have been through dual credit opportunities. While this has been a quick fix to increase enrollment, I believe that most recruiting efforts using dual credit are now at the saturation point. Each community college district is limited by the number of high schools in its district.

Recruiting efforts need to include multiple populations to sustain a college, but also to reach the completion goals set by the state and federal government to support the economy. I believe, especially in McHenry County, that there is a viable population of adult learners to recruit, as indicated by the census data. While MCC has made tremendous improvements, such as adding adult learner advisers, specific adult-learner orientations, and alternative delivery formats to support an adult learner’s schedule, I believe they fall short in marketing these support
services. As an adult learner myself, I had no idea that my community college offered special programs for adult learners.

Recently, as an administrator, I was able to attend the annual conference for Advance Illinois. Advance Illinois is an independent policy and advocacy organization that, among other things, is propelling the state to achieve its 60% by 2025 goal. During this conference and researching the materials from past conferences, I was surprised to see that neither this advocacy group nor the state has provided marketing support for the 60 by 2025 goal. I am dumbfounded that there is not a statewide campaign to benefit all postsecondary institutions in the wake of this ambitious campaign and the data that shows Illinois students migrating to out-of-state institutions.

**Significance**

Across the United States, community college enrollment, as well as four-year institutions, is declining due to the smaller pool of traditional students. Census figures indicate that the majority of adult learners 25 and older have some college credit or have never attended college. Even more perplexing is the trend that demonstrates this population of students choosing a more expensive four-year institution rather than a community college when they enroll (NSCRC, 2018). This population is key to strengthening and stabilizing the enrollment of community colleges. It is also the key to producing an educated local workforce.

This study will be of special interest to the leadership at MCC but also the county workforce and local politicians. In a report on what colleges do for local economies, economist Jonathan Rothwell estimates state and local benefits are also affected by whether or not alumni remain in the area. Rothwell claims that 68% of two-year attendees remain in the same area after
graduating. His reasoning is based on spending. Gross spending power is twice as much on local goods and services for households with degrees than households with only a high school graduate. Therefore, property, state, and income taxes rise as household education increases (Rothwell, 2015).

The overall question of how to increase enrollment for adult learners is important to sustain all postsecondary institutions. The methods and results will be of interest to lawmakers and educators alike. In order to accomplish this, understanding the adult population is critical. This study will contribute to the literature on how to attract adult learners and improve enrollment rates at a suburban/rural community college.
CHAPTER 2

INCREASING ENROLLMENT: PRACTICES FOR ATTRACTING ADULT LEARNERS AT A COMMUNITY COLLEGE

In 2009, to fuel the global economy, President Obama launched his American Graduation Initiative. The initiative challenged the nation to award five million additional postsecondary certificates and degrees by the year 2020 to create an educated workforce (White House, 2009). Concurrently, during the Great Recession 2008, there was a decline in birth rates which will lead to a decline in traditional-age college students by 2026 (Grawe, 2018). The need for more skilled workers, coupled with the decline of traditional-age college students, instigated an intense national effort in the recruitment and success of adult learners to postsecondary institutions.

The Illinois Board of Higher Education in 2009 adopted the goal to increase the proportion of adults in Illinois with high-quality postsecondary credentials to 60% by the year 2025. In 2019, less than half of the population of 25- to 64-year-olds in the state of Illinois had a postsecondary degree or certificate (Curry, 2019). For 2020, the Illinois Community College Board (ICCB) reported a continued decline in postsecondary enrollment numbers. This marks the tenth straight year of college enrollment decline in Illinois. Community colleges have suffered the greatest declines (AP News, 2019), with the fiscal year 2020 marking the lowest number of credit and non-credit enrollment of the last five years (ICCB, 2020). Adult learners are crucial to achieving these goals of increasing the number and rate of college graduates (Complete College America, 2017). Thus, there needs to be greater attention to developing strategies to recruit the adult learner population.
The purpose of this multi-site case study was to explore the perceptions of Illinois community college directors of admissions on the recruitment and matriculation process for adult learners. The guiding questions were:

1. How do community college directors of admissions perceive the recruitment and matriculation of adult learners aligning with their institutional enrollment priorities?
2. How has their community college supported adult learners in matriculating into their community college?
3. What barriers do community college directors of admissions experience in recruiting adult learners and how have they addressed these barriers?
4. How do community college directors of admissions perceive the importance of increasing the enrollment of adult learners at their institution?

The focus of this research was to understand the recruitment of adult learners from the perspective of directors of admissions to create best practices with the goal of increasing enrollment and matriculation for this population segment.

**Literature Review**

The American education system is designed on a linear trajectory. It begins with pre-kindergarten through graduation of twelfth grade, entrance to college the following fall semester, college graduation in four years, culminating in the decision to pursue further education or launch a career. This linear trajectory based on fall-to-fall admissions is often not reality. The NSCRC reported another year of declining enrollment for higher education. with the decline for community colleges in spring 2021 over 9% (NSCRC, 2021). Trends in community colleges are affected by changes in the economy. The economy and community colleges are still recovering
from the great recession in 2008. The full impact of COVID-19 on the economy and enrollment for all higher education is still not clear. As community colleges are more vulnerable to environmental factors, the previous downward trends are even more alarming. Doug Shapiro, executive director of the NSCRC, has expressed surprise that community colleges are not experiencing any areas of growth (NSCRC, 2021). Usually during a recession, enrollments at a community college would grow due to unemployed students seeking to upskill. Historically, community colleges have augmented their enrollment numbers with dual-credit students. Dual credit defined by ICCB (n.d.) is “an instructional arrangement where an academically qualified student currently enrolled in high school enrolls in a college-level course and, upon successful course completion, earns both college and high school credit.” Dual credit has proven to be a quick and inexpensive population to recruit and bolster enrollment figures for community colleges and the tactic that college leadership has embraced to counteract declining enrollments. The NSCRC has reported a small downward trend in dual credit for Fall 2020 enrollment figures. At this juncture, it is undetermined whether it is due to the pandemic or the saturation point of high school students.

While the population of traditional-aged students is declining, and there has been a small downward trend of dual-credit students, nationally there is a significant population of adults with some college or no college. In Illinois, the demographic data reports 51% of the population are available to recruit. Adult learners are often described as a student over the age of 24. Adult learners are often balancing academics with other roles, including work and family (NCES, n.d.). The term “adult learner” is often used interchangeably with the term “nontraditional student” in higher education.
The American Council on Education (ACE) in 2017 reported that adult learners' greatest challenge is simultaneously attending college, studying, working, and raising a family. Adult learners consequently achieve progress in increments, mostly attending part-time due to time and financial constraints. Family obligations and finances are two of the factors most often reported as the reason for their nontraditional college attendance patterns (Blumenstyk, 2018).

Another barrier for adult learners, particularly women, is access to childcare. In a study conducted by Genco (2007), women and men both responded that their roles at home served as barriers to pursuing their education. However, women reported a heavier burden of household responsibilities due to them providing the majority of childcare. Furthermore, the Institute for Women's Policy Research (2018) reported that one in four adult learners is a single parent. Nationally, the level of on-campus childcare centers fulfills only five percent of the demand (IWPR, 2018). The high cost of operationally maintaining a childcare center has resulted in the declining number of on-campus centers. With the number of institutions offering childcare declining, adult learners are often forced to rely on family and friends for childcare support (Bergman et al., 2014). The lack of childcare has an effect on degree completion for adult learners.

Beyond childcare challenges, the academic schedule and structure can be challenging for adult learners. The current curriculum and academic structure were created for a first-time, full-time student who just graduated from high school. Colleges have a limited number of night and weekend course offerings. Adult learners are more likely to be attending part-time and balancing school with work commitments (Forbus et al., 2011). Thus, adult learners often struggle with being able to take courses that fit their schedules.
In order to support adult learners, postsecondary institutions need to create specific adult-focused strategies to both recruit and support adult learners (Finch, 2016). However, institutions’ strategic enrollment management (SEM) plans do not include sufficient funding to support the adult learners (Finch, 2016). Because it is more challenging and expensive to recruit adult learners, institutions often prioritize enrolling traditional-age students and recruiting out of high schools. Institutional SEM plans are born out of informed research and are aligned with the strategies, priorities, culture, and mission of the institution (Hossler & Bontrager, 2015). When resources become scarce, the decision-making process becomes more complex as leaders attempt to make timely decisions balanced with meeting the needs of stakeholders. Thus, with tight resources, institutional commitment to expanding access to postsecondary education for adult learners often falls down the priority list.

Institutional priorities regarding student recruitment are also impacted by institutional leadership and turnover. The average tenure of community college presidents was one to five years (de los Santos & Milliron, 2015), which is a decline from 11-15 years in the mid-1990s. With changing leadership often comes changing priorities, including enrollment goals and outreach. Adult learners often become a population segment that is not a top priority.

Methodology

This qualitative research used a multi-site case study approach (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) to understand the methods and priorities of the recruitment of adult learners at public community colleges in Illinois. A qualitative case study examines a phenomenon in a real-world context within the constraint of a clearly defined bounded system or case (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The recruitment of the participants was conducted through email invitations. Invitations
were sent to all 39 public community colleges in Illinois except for the City Colleges of Chicago. The City Colleges of Chicago were excluded due to their institutional structure of seven campuses designated by specific programs.

A total of six public community colleges in Illinois participated in the study (Table 1). Participants included four Directors of Admissions/Enrollment Services and two Admissions Advisors for adult learners. In an effort to protect the identities and confidentiality of the participants, pseudonyms were assigned (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

**Table 2**
Summary of Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Community College</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Enrollment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Helen Sharpe</td>
<td>Adult Admissions Advisor</td>
<td>Bellevue College</td>
<td>Gilmore, IL</td>
<td>&lt;25,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Max Goodwin</td>
<td>Director of Admissions</td>
<td>Stroger College</td>
<td>Pasture, IL</td>
<td>&lt;15,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lauren Bloom</td>
<td>Adult Admissions Advisor</td>
<td>Condell College</td>
<td>Palm, IL</td>
<td>&lt;2,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evie Reynolds</td>
<td>Director of Admissions</td>
<td>Sherman College</td>
<td>Kurtis, IL</td>
<td>&lt;3,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Georgia Frome</td>
<td>Director of Admissions</td>
<td>North College</td>
<td>Cannon, IL</td>
<td>&lt;8,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dora Kapoor</td>
<td>Director of Admissions</td>
<td>Shephard College</td>
<td>Bounty, IL</td>
<td>&lt;10,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reports the median tenure of workers in the public sector is six and one-half years, and workers specifically in education have five years (U. S. Census Bureau, 2020). The directors in this study were all promoted into their current positions
within the last 24 months, but all have longevity in higher educations: 9, 14, 18, and 20 years working in higher education. The advisors have a wider range of tenure, 23 years and 2 years in their role. The majority of the participants have been employed in higher education longer than the national median, which provided insight into the pattern of admissions of adult learners.

After participants and sites were identified, a review of institutional websites was conducted. This review was used to collect information on how each college identified and directed adult learners to information pages. The search also looked for any special adult learner orientations or events. The data was used to augment the interview questions and expose any best practices for marketing to the adult learner population. Semi-structured interviews (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) with each participant were collected virtually and lasted between 45 and 90 minutes. Interviews were recorded and transcribed to ensure accuracy. The interview began with several rapport-building questions and then led to focused questions on specific areas of events, collaboration, and admission practices. The semi-structured approach allowed the participants to interject other initiatives or experiences that they felt relevant to the adult learner population.

Data analysis occurred concurrently with data collection (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). After the interviews were transcribed, the first cycle of coding was applied by assigning basic, descriptive labels to topics in the transcripts (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). The coding process was repeated numerous times to ensure every topic was captured and coded. In the second cycle of coding, pattern coding was used. The use of pattern coding identified smaller groupings according to categories, themes, or constructs (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). Pattern coding resulted in four emerging themes for recruiting and matriculating adult learners.
**Trustworthiness**

Several strategies were utilized to enhance the trustworthiness of this study. One of the strategies to strengthen the internal validity of a study is triangulation (Miriam & Tisdell, 2016). Triangulation is using more than one source of data in a study. This case study used interviews, artifacts obtained from the participant's college website, marketing flyers, and events sponsored by the participating college.

In addition to triangulation, this study ensured validity by using respondent validation or member checking. The participant reviewed their transcribed interview prior to coding. Each participant was asked to recommend any feedback, and if feedback was received, the transcript was adjusted and then coded (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Coding is a descriptive construct to capture the essence of the data. Coding is an interpretive process (Saldaña, 2013). Ensuring this study is credible, rich and detailed procedures were documented in this case study in order for other researchers to follow the process, as Gibbs (2007) recommends. A codebook was created with descriptive definitions of the codes used during the coding process. This process attempted to eliminate discrepancies or shifts in the meanings of codes during the coding process (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

**Findings**

Four primary findings emerged from this study: efforts to enroll adult learners, institutional practices that attempt to insert adult learners into a system built around the traditional student, the childcare obstacle, and leadership: pressure on enrollment numbers and prioritization. The following will examine these findings in detail.
Efforts to Enroll Adult Learners

Participants discuss multiple marketing efforts to enroll adult learners. These efforts include mass mailings, billboards, and electronic signage at entrances to the college. However, most of these efforts were constrained to the use of institutional websites. The consensus among all participants indicated that the college website was the greatest asset to marketing, especially among the adult learner population. One effort to connect with adult learners was the live chat function. For instance, Sherman and Bellevue Colleges offered a live chat option on their websites during normal business hours. Other institutions had a computerized interactive agent. Max Goodwin, the director of admissions at Stroger College, shared that adult learners often used the computerized interactive agent on the college website after 10:00 p.m. Goodwin further explained that the admissions team had suspected all along that adult learners were searching for information after hours. Having the data to verify their suspicions, Goodwin shared, "The college redesigned its website to be as user-friendly as possible and embedded a computerized, bilingual interactive agent to answer frequently asked questions." Moreover, Goodwin shared "that adult learners want one point of contact.” In order to meet this need, the computerized agent supplied specific contact names and phone numbers for the prospective student to use during office hours.

Except for Sherman College, all other research sites included specific information for adult learners on institutional websites as well as clearly marked pathways on the admissions page. When asked about recruiting adult learners, Evie Reynolds, the director of admissions at Sherman College, indicated that they “rely heavily on their local Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act [WIOA] office to help direct adult learners to programs at their college."
Besides working through the local WIOA office, all participants acknowledged actively creating partnerships with local community businesses and working with their non-credit Adult Education departments to bridge students to college credit career programs.

Participants discussed a culture shift in postsecondary institutions to combat recruiting issues for different populations. They outlined how their community colleges were incorporating more of a business approach by investing in a customer relationship management system (CRM). Goodwin shared that CRM software “gathers data from multiple channels and stores detailed information on prospective students." This allows them to better target adult learners and other applicants. Similarly, Georgia Frome explained “An advantage of CRM software over traditional methods used to drive enrollment is the focus on those prospective students who are already aware of the school." Being able to better identify prospective students, as Frome and Goodwin indicated, allows for the colleges to better nurture their relationships with interested prospects who are in the consideration phase. An added benefit of a CRM is that it allows the prospects to get to know more about the college as well as the admissions counselors to know more about the prospective student.

Participants also discussed that adult learners are more likely to enroll if there is one point of contact. Goodwin was adamant that “adult learners want to be connected with someone at the institution who understands their situation and not passed from person to person in different college offices." Both Condell and Bellevue Colleges agree with this finding, and Helen Sharpe stated that “Bellevue College addressed this new approach to recruitment by having dedicated adult admissions counselors for this population." Bellevue
College had the most expansive adult admission counselor department. They assign a prospective adult learner based on their age into four categories.

**Institutional Practices that Attempt to Insert Adult Learners into a System Built Around the Traditional Student**

The typical academic calendar for the U.S. educational system is on a fiscal year beginning on July 1\textsuperscript{st} and ending on June 30\textsuperscript{th} of the next year. All operations are planned on a student’s entrance in the fall semester, progression through the spring semester, and with an optional summer semester completing both academic and fiscal years. The creation of the school year actually dates back to when the farming schedule took precedence over everything else (Pedersen, 2012). However, participants discussed how adult learners live on the calendar year and are often dependent upon employee benefits that are tied to a particular calendar year.

Four participants discussed the challenges of the academic calendar not aligning with employee benefits packages. Sharpe stated that “an adult learner makes their financial decisions based on the results of their annual employee review and their tuition reimbursement benefit.” Participants discussed the enrollment pattern trend for adult learners in which they were more likely to start programs in spring semesters. This trend often aligned with employee benefit packages that begin during the fiscal year. Dora Kapoor, Shephard College director of admissions, reported that their adult learner population is not interested in applying for loans or scholarships. She indicated that “adult learners are funding their education through a tuition reimbursement program from their employer, as they look for certificates and degrees that increase their salary.” Thus, adult learners are looking for programs that align with their employee benefits.
Participants agreed that adult learners were searching for quick and direct pathways to degree and certificate completion. However, Kapoor stated, “Most prerequisite courses are offered in the fall semester, causing a barrier to an adult learner enrolling in the spring semester." Another scheduling barrier for adult learners is course formats. Goodwin indicated, "It would be more attractive to the adult learner population to offer 8-week or 12-week courses” than the traditional 16-week format. He suggested that shorter course formats would “enable adult students to complete faster or enroll in two classes per semester while only concentrating on one class for an 8-week period.” Similarly, Sharpe recommended that community colleges need to adopt a more cohort-centered block schedule for adult learners. Sharpe emphasized that “adult learners plan their schedules through completion when talking to admission counselors, not semester by semester."

Lastly, all participants indicated that adult learners preferred face-to-face instruction or hybrid formats that combined face-to-face instruction with online learning rather than fully online courses. Kapoor stated that in her experience, "adult learners are overwhelmed with returning to college, and online further alienates them from the support of the instructor and classmates." Kapoor, Reynolds, and Frome expressed similar sentiments as they felt that this was an important point because several for-profit colleges that continue to use television advertising, touting the flexibility of online classes, using adults as models in the advertising. Sharpe reported many of the adult students at Bellevue have "dropped out of an online program to seek face-to-face instruction by enrolling at Bellevue.” Lauren Bloom, adult admission advisor at Condell College, agreed that adult learners “overwhelming” prefer the face-to-face mode of instruction.
Childcare Obstacle

Participants identified childcare as a barrier for adult learners enrolling at their institutions. Only half of the research sites provided childcare, which is consistent with the declining number of childcare centers nationally. The remaining half of participants have never offered childcare options or have had to close them because of cost. For instance, Sharpe from Bellevue stated that childcare centers are just too expensive to run and usually operate at a loss. Sharpe referred to the State of Illinois two-year budget impasse during which colleges saw little support. According to Sharpe, “The childcare center was one of the first departments cut from Bellevue's budget.” Similarly, Goodwin stated that Stroger had continued their childcare center, “but its potential closure is always discussed at the beginning of each budget cycle.”

North College continues to operate their childcare center, but Frome explained the reasons she believes other colleges have decided to close theirs. Childcare centers are regulated by the Illinois Department of Public Health plus an accrediting body. Frome indicated that both the regulations and accreditation agencies dictate the qualifications and teacher-to-student ratio, which adds to the expense of staffing. Frome offered that the childcare fees do not cover the cost of employee salaries, payroll taxes, liability insurance, and other expenses. The college's budget is then affected to cover the additional cost. Frome shared that “colleges mitigate the cost of operating a childcare center by limiting the hours of operation to coincide with the class hours that draw the largest student population on campus." Hence, the hours of operation for the childcare centers are primarily during the day. For instance, the hours of operation for the three colleges that offered childcare were 7:30 a.m. until 5:30 p.m. (Stroger), 7:00 a.m. until 6:00 p.m.
(Shephard), and 7:50 a.m. until 4:50 p.m. (North). These hours of operation do not align with the needs of adult learners who are more likely to take classes after work, at night, or on weekends.

Childcare was expressed as a known barrier. However, participants indicated that their institution struggled to find solutions to assist adult learners with children in overcoming this barrier. For instance, Reynolds stated that "Sherman has been attempting to partner with local private centers with no success." North has chosen to continue operating and financially supporting its childcare center, but Stroger has chosen to close their center because of costs. Overall, participants indicated that childcare was a significant barrier in attracting and enrolling adult learners.

**Leadership: Pressure on Enrollment Numbers and Prioritization**

Participants stated that ultimately the direction and priorities regarding student recruitment were the final decision of college leadership. However, participants indicated that a challenge is that leadership at the top keeps changing. As Sharpe stated, the “revolving door of leadership… affects enrollment initiatives." In reviewing participants’ institutional websites, the longest serving president in this study was seven years, followed by six and five years in the role. Three sites had hired new presidents within the last year. As it often takes a minimum of five years to develop a SEM plan and see it through (de los Santos & Milliron, 2015), it is potentially not surprising that participants felt like priorities keep changing.

A change in a president often had a trickle-down effect in leadership along with the organizational chart. This included changing enrollment priorities. For instance, North's president has served five years, but Frome indicated, during the president’s tenure, “he has restructured his leadership team several times." The current structure has two new vice-
presidents and a new director of enrollment services. As the new director of enrollment services, Frome has “experienced a restructuring in her department” and led several initiatives that include attracting adult learners. However, many of these initiatives have been put on hold as the composition of the team has changed, which included adult learner enrollment initiatives. As Sharpe at Bellevue reflected on her 23 years at her institution, “Goals and focus change as presidents and vice-presidents change.” Currently, her institution has experienced an increase in adult learners who represent 50% of the student population, which has, states Sharpe, made “adult learners a priority again.” With that, she was asked to rejoin the SEM team.

An integral role of college leadership is to maintain and grow enrollment to sustain the college. North was the only college in this study that had experienced an increase in enrollment for the past five years. Frome attributed the majority of this growth to new high school partners participating in dual credit programs. Other participants shared that because of declining enrollment, leadership has directed initiatives to increase dual enrollment because it is seen as a quick and easier way to increase numbers. As Goodwin stated, “Leadership reacts to enrollment numbers declining instead of setting initiatives that will sustain the college over time.” The implication is that while dual enrollment might provide short-term enrollment increases, it will not sustain long-term growth. Sharpe, Goodwin, Frome, and Kapoor expressed that their institutions (leadership) has pressed for dual credit but they believe they have reached the point of saturation in their district. “The extra attention to dual credit initiatives have also deterred from other initiatives,” stated Bloom. “Sustained enrollment requires growth from many populations,” according to Kapoor. While participants indicated that increasing access for adult
learners is a priority to them, the adult learners, Sharpe stated, “are not always an initiative of the college due to the changing priorities of college leadership.”

**Discussion**

The purpose of this multi-site case study was to better understand the perceptions regarding the recruitment and matriculation process of adult learners from the lens of directors of admissions. The nature of this work was exploratory as there is very limited information regarding the recruitment and matriculation of adult learners from this perspective. Overall, undergraduate enrollments are down, with community colleges experiencing the largest declines (NSCRC, 2020). Interestingly, enrollment figures were declining before the onset of COVID-19 and have continued to decline throughout the pandemic. Recruitment strategies among the participants in this study have not changed due to the pandemic. The findings of this study revealed that participants believe that adult learners are an important population to sustain their colleges’ enrollment, however often not an institutional enrollment priority. This study highlights the cultural shifts and barriers that need to occur to ensure success in recruiting and matriculating adult learners.

Higher education has experienced a wave of change over the past decade. Building upon the open door policy of community colleges, colleges have redesigned student services to support improved success rates, developed user-friendly websites, and are using data to analyze faculty, student characteristics, enrollment patterns, and grades to name a few of the initiatives (McClenney, 2013). Unfortunately, this research has shown that marketing to certain populations has not changed. The mentality of "If you build it, they will come" is not true. If colleges want to attract prospective students, they have to advertise to them. Unlike traditional-
age students who are recruited through the local high schools within the college district, finding venues to solicit adult learners is more difficult to find and difficult to track. This research revealed that the extent of marketing and advertising to the adult learner population is contained on the college website and through an internet search due to the inability to connect with large groups of adult learners at one time. Marketing specialists report that the trend for higher education is the admissions focused website (American Marketing Association, 2020). In order to create prospective student information, college websites need the ability to capture data at any hour of the day. This data is abstracting for the admissions staff to follow up with the prospective student.

Using interactive websites as a sales tool to produce a pool of interested students builds upon the same business principle that encourages colleges to invest in the use of CRM’s. The CRM is another tool to funnel students who have shown interest in their college. This enables colleges to concentrate their outreach to a prospective student who is interested. Statistically, it increases the likelihood of enrollment.

While locating adult learners was identified as an issue, so was the ability to matriculate these students. Adult learners prefer to begin their college career in the spring semester. This study has shown that adult learners plan on a calendar year that aligns with their work schedule, as opposed to the college academic year. Shifting the operational culture to align as a true open-enrollment institution requires course offerings that are scheduled to increase the ability of any student to begin a college program in either spring or fall semester. Another finding also indicated that deviance from a 16-week semester to an 8-, 10- or 12-week semester would increase enrollment by offering those adult learners who decide to enroll in January the ability to
register for classes in the current spring semester instead of waiting for summer or fall. This finding is supported by earlier research by EAB, which is an education, technology services, and research company. EAB contends that the rigid academic calendar causes many adult learners to stopout. Institutions that continued to use only two main academic terms and an underutilized summer semester to gain credit is the main reason adult learners stopout of college. In response, progressive community colleges have introduced "mini-mesters" or accelerated terms to give adult learners opportunities to accumulate credit. The "mini-mesters" have been shown to increase completion rates over the 16-week traditional semester (EAB, 2020).

One of the biggest challenges for adult learners was childcare. Based on the statistics that one in four undergraduates is a parent, with one in ten being a single parent (Blumenstyk, 2018), colleges that can eliminate or diminish the gap for the availability of childcare during evening courses can increase enrollment. The childcare obstacle may be insurmountable for colleges to solve themselves. The State of Minnesota attempted to tackle this issue through its Postsecondary Child Care Grant. The Child Care Grant program provided financial assistance to students who have children 12 and under, were not receiving assistance under the Minnesota Family Investment Program (MFIP), and who demonstrate financial need for grants to help pay for childcare while pursuing postsecondary education. Minnesota’s eligible institutions included all public colleges and universities, private and non-profit vocational-technical schools (OHE, 2017). While this was not the solution for every adult learner, it is an example of partnerships that can aid in supplementing the cost of childcare. According to IWPR (2018), 22% of students are parents. The childcare obstacle will continue to perpetuate inequality and limit postsecondary access as institutions were designed for traditional students.
The short tenure of college leadership perpetuates the continuation of enrollment priorities to those that reap the quickest reward. Currently, the trend is to attract dual enrollment partnerships (Smith, 2018). Community colleges “are making up for the declines in adult enrollment with dual-enrollment high school students,” explained Davis Jenkins, a senior research associate at the Community College Research Center (Smith, 2018). In Illinois, student enrollment in dual credit programs have increased by 8% in each of the last two years and increased 6.6% in the last 10 years (ICCB, 2021). This trend was reflected in this study. For instance, Sharpe expressed frustration regarding her involvement with the SEM team. Depending on leadership at her college, adult learners were a priority, and she was part of the SEM team. A change in leadership would have her removed from the SEM team as adult learners were not the focus. All participants reported that adult learners and adult admissions advisors' role in the college's SEM plan ebbed and flowed with the changes in college leadership. All the participants felt that if adult learners were a continuous initiative, this population would be able to sustain enrollment instead of focusing on which is easier. The directors of admissions felt that dual credit in Illinois was at the saturation point. They were concerned that the adult learner population has not been cultivated, and the next two to four years will be extremely difficult to attract enrollment. Higher education institutions have to address the constraints of adult learners enrolling in an institution built to support traditional-age students if they truly want to recruit adult learners and increase matriculation.

**Recommendations**

Findings from this study have revealed several key factors to increase the enrollment and matriculation of adult learners. The first is to ensure the college website is admissions focused,
as it is the greatest marketing tool for recruiting adult learners. It would increase interest if the site contained an interactive agent that can answer frequently asked questions and direct potential students to a specific admissions counselor when offices are open. The study revealed that adult learners search for information on the college website after 10:00 p.m. The college website should also include verbiage that identifies adults, adult learners, or returning students to enable browsers to direct inquiries to the specific landing page on the website. This would reduce the frustration of prospective students while searching.

Second, community colleges have to embrace becoming truly open-enrollment institutions and create pathways to begin a college program in the spring semester without the hindrance of the majority of prerequisite offerings occurring in the fall semester. To complement this new trend in scheduling courses, community colleges should also offer more 8-, 10-, and 12-week courses to enable adult learners to acquire more credits. Timing is also important to matriculate the adult learner population for two reasons. When an adult learner finalizes their decision to apply to college, they want to start classes immediately. Therefore, the 8-, 10-, 12-week model provides the flexibility necessary for the adult learner population to begin at any time. Also, working with employers to understand the benefit plans for tuition reimbursement will greatly enhance the scheduling and matriculation of adult learners.

Finally, the childcare obstacle will require input from many stakeholders and a huge commitment from leadership to dedicate financial support to childcare centers, but leadership should commit to SEM initiatives that include adult learners even if there is turnover in leadership. As community college enrollment across the nation is declining, the SEM team
should include staff who are invested in all population segments that are reflected in the county that the college serves.

**Conclusion**

This study sought to better understand the best practices to increase the recruitment and matriculation of the adult population through the lens of directors of admissions. This widely diverse population is critical to sustaining college enrollment and meeting Illinois' goal of increasing the proportion of adults with postsecondary credentials to 60% by the year 2025. Through the directors of admissions and adult admissions advisors in this study, the findings that emerged varied in expenditures, but others required zero investment. Those easy changes require a shift in the philosophy of scheduling courses and structuring semesters and a commitment to adhere to SEM initiatives that involve attracting and encouraging adult learners to matriculate, even during times of leadership turnover.
CHAPTER 3

SCHOLARLY REFLECTION

This research sought to uncover the best practices to enroll and matriculate adult learners from directors of admissions at public community colleges in Illinois. At the beginning of my research project, my focus was on the enrollment and matriculation of adult learners at McHenry County College (MCC). The demographics of McHenry County indicate that over 51% of the county has some college or no college (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018). This very dense population of potential students piqued my curiosity as there appears to be a large emphasis on recruiting dual-credit students. While I feel dual-credit students are an important population, I wanted to investigate how the college recruited the adult learner population since the demographics are not visually represented at MCC. My intent was to do a quantitative study using data from MCC. My initial plan included tracking adult learners from the point of inquiry to application to enrollment for the past five years.

After reviewing websites and the annual reports of the public community colleges in the northern region of Illinois, I discovered inconsistent messaging and very few initiatives specifically directed to the adult learner population. Armed with demographic data, I sought to test my belief in counter-intuitive recruiting practices at community colleges. Through many discussions, drafts, and guidance from my dissertation chair, my research transformed into a qualitative study on the perceptions of directors of admissions to attract and matriculate adult learners.

Initially, I solicited interviews from neighboring community colleges of MCC in Northern Illinois at the beginning of March 2020. The pandemic caused by COVID-19 changed everything. March 20, 2020, Governor Pritzker of Illinois issued an Executive Order to stay at
All colleges were faced with the monumental task of converting and then delivering the curriculum online for the remainder of the semester. At that point in time, the duration of the pandemic and the stay at home order was unknown. As campuses remained closed, colleges had to convert all student support services online as well. Zoom™, Teams™, and other online conference solutions became the new norm. I believe my multiple solicitations for interview requests were ignored, as colleges were struggling with the virtual environment and working remotely. In order to increase participation, I altered my interview process from an in-person format to an online conferencing platform and expanded my request to every public community college in Illinois with the exception of the City Colleges of Chicago.

Slowly, the interviews took place using videoconferencing. The semi-structured interview format (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) guided the conversation while allowing the participants to add their individualized experiences and practices at their college. I found all but one interview participant easy to engage. It was apparent that the pandemic and remote learning had an effect on enrollment, but all the colleges had been experiencing a decline in enrollment prior, except for MCC. MCC has reported an increase in enrollment for the past five years. The gains had been noticed by each interview participant, which was reflected in the questions asked to me about MCC.

It is now over 18 months since the pandemic began. The stay at home order has been lifted, but COVID-19 is still creating havoc around the globe. The disease has crippled the economy, which has led to mass layoffs and unemployment. Contrary to other recessions, which caused enrollment in community colleges to increase, enrollment has continued to fall across the country (Sutton, 2021). Surprisingly, MCC's enrollment continued to increase. I believe this
might have helped me to recruit participants. I found that the participants wanted to ask several questions about MCC’s practices during the interviews and learn what we were doing to increase enrollment at a time where most institutions were declining. In retrospect, this process added another unexpected benefit for me. An informal networking circle was created among several of the participants and myself due to the need to increase enrollment. This group communicates through email periodically to discuss enrollment trends and course delivery methods changed by the pandemic and share information about seminars.

As I reflect on the research process, I realize that my lack of experience made this an arduous experience. I definitely miscalculated the difficulty and length of time it took to secure interviews. Emails are easily disregarded. A personal phone call from my Vice-President of Academic Affairs asking for cooperation was needed to secure my last two interviews. I should have solicited assistance from a member of the college leadership team earlier in the research to aid in securing participants to expedite the process. I would also have requested interviews using videoconferencing as opposed to the initial request of an in-person interview. Regardless of the pandemic, videoconferencing is much easier to use, less intrusive on a participant's workspace/environment, and eliminates wasted time incurred by commuting to each college.

**Applications to Professional Practice**

One of the major components of the mission of a community college is access. This is embodied by the open admissions policy. While community colleges embrace this commitment, there are changes to the processes that have become inherent in higher education that is not adult learner friendly. The four themes uncovered in this research-- the difficulty of recruiting, the systemic obstacles of an institution built around the traditional student, childcare, and changes in
leadership directives-- are consistent with community colleges nationally. In my role as an academic dean, my decisions are driven with student success in mind. For example, I make conscious choices to offer day and evening classes for working students, but before this research, I had never had experience recruiting adult learners or the obstacles they face. Based on the demographic data alone, I assumed the recruitment of adult learners would be easily accomplished. I have discovered through this research that my attempt to accommodate students by offering day and evening classes has little impact on recruiting and matriculating adult learners, and my knowledge of recruiting needed some education.

The timing of this research was perfect as it has greatly impacted my professional practice. I am serving as a member of the SEM team and work on adult learner initiatives. Building on the finding that adult learners plan around a calendar year, the SEM team is collaborating with the academic deans to create schedules with multiple start dates within a semester. The goal is to offer more 8-, 10-, and 12-week classes and to examine the scheduling of prerequisite courses. This team’s focus is to create a schedule with three goals: to allow students to enter at either the fall or spring semester, to have the ability to complete faster, and to provide late-start classes to avoid any student from having to wait a semester to begin their college experience. Another initiative has provided an opportunity to impact the advertisement of college/career pathways. Initially, the development of the pathways began with an entrance in the fall semester and was labeled as such. The pathways are now labeled Sample Semester 1, Sample Semester 2, etc., demonstrating to prospective students that they can begin college any time. Even though my current role is not directly impacted by this research, it has challenged me to analyze the allied health programs I supervise since many adult learners are enrolled in these
programs. Many aspects of these programs (i.e., the application process to these limited-enrollment programs, advising, and scheduling of these classes) are barriers to adult learners. I also have to remember that adult learners “shop” for programs after 10:00 p.m. The program pages for the allied health programs should be redesigned through the eyes of an adult learner to include interactive links to registration and support services and, more importantly, contain a frequently asked questioned (FAQ) section. All program pages should include direct contact information of department chairs for easy reference, building on the finding that adult learners prefer one point of contact.

The research has shown that all the college districts have a dense population of adult learners to recruit and matriculate. The most surprising comment from the directors focused on the fact that the recruitment process is reactive to enrollment figures instead of proactive. Higher education is behind other industries that analyze data for missed opportunities. The business industry gathers data to understand the reasons they have lost customers. Higher education does not gather data on the reason(s) a prospective student fails to matriculate. With the increase in colleges using CRM software to funnel leads of prospective students, it will be a matter of time to see if a more business model can augment enrollment.

**Applications to Research**

This research project was not the journey I had expected, which is not a surprise to the many colleagues who have been through the research process. The largest revelation from this process was the limited empirical research on the recruitment and matriculation practices of adult learners at community colleges. The needs of adult learners are national topics. Through foundations and initiatives such as Complete College America, Achieving the Dream, and the
Lumina Foundation, the focus has been on equitable access and completion of degrees and certificates. There are plenty of articles and books concerning the enrollment patterns and the reasons the adult learner population stops out or never completes, but I found very little scholarly research or best practices for recruiting adult learners, which validates the need for this project.

Another alarming discovery was the lack of participation from directors of admissions. I was amazed at the lack of response from my requests for interviews. I anticipated that this group of professionals would be excited and eager to collaborate on recruiting practices in light of declining enrollments around the state. The effort to acquire interviews and the need to secure the Vice-President of Academics to solidify the last two interviews also caused me concern due to the fact that I had targeted the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO) as my audience. The irony of publishing in an organization of admissions professionals whom I had to cajole into participating in the research was not lost on me and had shook my confidence. I had the opportunity to express my frustration to the president of my college, who was not surprised and encouraged me to remember this experience when I am asked to participate in research!

My dissertation chair was instrumental while I was in the process of data analysis. As a first-time researcher, I was overwhelmed with the results. My chair aided me in the process of coding the data and encouraged me throughout the process as I found this the most challenging part of qualitative research. Regardless, I have gained experience and knowledge while creating a small network of professional directors of admissions. I look forward to using research in my professional role. While the difficulty in soliciting directors of admissions definitely was a limitation, the research provided future research possibilities. Future research topics uncovered
from the research participants: 1) the effect of adult learner recruitment with the expansion of fast-track programs, 2) the effect of adult learner recruitment through the use of apprenticeship roles, and 3) the development of statewide advertising for community colleges/higher education as it appears that Illinois has been counter-marketed by neighboring states.

**Conclusion**

This research demonstrates that community colleges have an opportunity to attract even more students, especially adult learners. In order to achieve this goal, the culture in higher education is slowly adopting more business/sales industry tactics to recruit. Tailored software funnels applicants to direct market. This provides a solution to managing a population that is spread over the college’s district in opposition to marketing to a specific high school. Small shifts in providing schedules that allow entrance in programs in any semester that an adult learner would like to begin is an inexpensive strategy. Unfortunately, the lack of childcare is an obstacle that continues to be a barrier for adult learners. Regulations from governmental agencies make this a very expensive solution for colleges that do not have the budget. The change in leadership, which often contributes to a change in priorities, is uncontrollable as retirements and short tenures have resulted in a shortage of community college presidents (McNair, 2015). Several studies on community college presidents began in 1998, and by 2012 Tekle confirmed that 90% of community college presidents planned to retire in 15 years. This research supplements the revolving door of leadership. The directors of admissions experience the fatigue of changing priorities.
REFERENCES


National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. (2021, March 11). National Student Clearinghouse Research Center’s regular updates on higher education enrollment. https://www.studentclearinghouse.org/blog/overall-spring-college-enrollments-down-nearly-3-nationwide-according-to-early-data/


APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS
The questions listed below will guide the semi-structured interviews with the Directors of Admissions. The participants will be interviewed once during this project.

Introduction/Background on Position:

1. Tell me about your role at the college
2. How long have you been in this position, and what changes have you seen in that time?
3. Do you head the strategic enrollment team at your college? If not, who?

Data Collection:

1. Do you know the approximate age groups of your student enrollment? Do you have a large adult learner population? ….in your county?
2. Do you have an initiative/strategy to recruit adult learners in your SEM plan?
3. Has your college supported adult learners matriculating to your college?
4. Do you feel it is important to attract adult learners?
5. Does your institution have staff that follows up with a student who makes contact, but never enrolls? Do you track this data?

Artifacts:

Before we met, I had a chance to review some of your marketing material for your college, but I couldn’t find……..

6. Does your website have a special designated URL for adult learners?
7. Does your website have a designated page for adult learners?
8. A) What is the most successful tool for marketing adults, web, print, mail that you have used?
   B) How did you measure this?

Events:

9. A) Have you ever held separate events to recruit adult learners?
B) Was it held on campus? If not, where? Or, do you ever hold off-site events for adult learners?

College Departments/Collaboration:

10. A) Does a member from marketing and/or admissions meet with each other regularly?

B) How are needs met/reported between departments?

Advising/Registration:

11. A) How do adult learners register for their first classes? Following semesters?

B) Are there distinct advisors for adult learners?

12. Do Adult Learners have a separate advisor, welcome center, orientation on your campus?

Closing Question:

11. Thank you for your time. Is there anything that has not been asked that you think is important to know about the adult learner population at your institution
Application for Institutional Review of Research

IN INVOLVING HUMAN SUBJECTS

Note: Please complete this form thoroughly keeping in mind that the primary concern is the potential risk (economic, ethical, legal, physical, psychological/emotional, sexual, breach of confidentiality, or other) to the participants. Include attachments of all materials to be used in the investigation (PDF preferred). The Institutional Review Board (IRB) must have enough information about the transactions with the participants to evaluate the risks of participation.

Names and employee IDs for all investigators (Z-IDs for students)
Christina J. Coobanis-Loding z1618911

Status (select all that apply): ☐ Faculty ☒ Graduate Student ☐ Undergraduate Student ☐ Non-NIU Affiliate

Department (main PI):
HESA

Phone (main PI):
847-514-4398

E-mail address (for all investigators):
All communications will occur via NIU email accounts (for all NIU affiliates).
Z1618911@students.niu.edu

Project Title:
Enrolling and Matriculating Adult Learners at a Public Community College

Note: All projects involving human subjects research must receive formal written clearance from the IRB prior to the start of data collection.

Type of Project (Check one)
☐ Departmental Research (faculty/student projects not externally funded and not indicated below)
☒ Graduate Thesis/Dissertation (IRB application should be submitted AFTER proposal defense) The paper
Advisor/Committee Chair (& c-mail): Dr. Carri Kortegaard ckortegaard@niu.edu

☐ DNP Project (Doctor of Nursing Practice)

☐ Undergraduate Project (Senior thesis/capstone, research rookies, independent study)
Advisor/Committee Chair (& c-mail):

☐ Externally Sponsored Research
A complete copy of the grant proposal or contract must accompany this application form for IRB review to take place.

• Source of Funding:

• Title of grant proposal (if different from IRB protocol):

• Name of principal investigator on grant proposal:

• Sponsored Programs Administration file number (or grant number if awarded):
SPA#

☐ Other
Specify:
[1]

Revised 8/2019
Part I. Purpose and Procedures:

1) Describe the purpose of your study and the reason(s) this study is needed. Include any necessary background information and a description of your hypothesis or your research question.

The purpose of this qualitative case study is to explore community college directors of admissions perceptions on the recruitment and matriculation process for adult learners. The guiding questions are:
1. How do community college directors of admissions perceive the recruitment and matriculation of adult learners aligning with their institutional enrollment priorities?
2. How has their community college supported adult learners in matriculating into their community college?
3. What barriers do community college directors of admissions experience in recruiting adult learners, and how have they addressed these barriers?
4. How do community college directors of admissions perceive the importance of increasing the enrollment of adult learners at their institution?

2) The following items will help the IRB reviewers understand the step-by-step procedures of your study:

2A) Explain the participant eligibility and exclusion criteria that will be used.

The Illinois Board of Higher Education college district will be used to select public community colleges in Illinois.

2B) Explain the recruitment procedures (how will participants learn about the study?). If using the snowball technique, please explain who contacts potential participants (other participants or the researcher). Please attach recruitment scripts, flyers, or postings.

The researcher will email the directors of admissions requesting participation in a 60-90 minute interview. If there is no response to initial request, the researcher will enlist the Vice President of Academic Affairs at McHenry County College to request participation through an email to each institution's Vice President of Academic Affairs.

2C) Explain the consent process (verbal and/or written procedures for informing participants of the nature of the study and what they will do). [Please attach all documents (consent, consent, parent permission) that are appropriate for each group of subjects participating in the study. Consent forms should be prepared for adult participants (age 18 or over), Assent forms should be prepared for minor subjects appropriate to their ages, and permission form(s) for parents or legally authorized representatives should also be prepared. For children too young to comprehend a simple explanation of participation, parental permission is sufficient only if the research will provide direct benefit to the subject, a member of the subject's family, or other children with the same condition as the subject.]

There is a written consent. The consent is attached to the application.

2D) Describe the data collection procedures including what data will be collected, how it will be collected (include a description of any interventions to be used), the duration of participation in the study session(s), and how the session(s) will end.

Data collection will be conducted by 60-90 minute semi-structured interview. The interview protocol is attached. Documentation analysis of institutional websites will occur prior to interview.

2E) If applicable, explain the procedures for providing compensation

N/A

2F) If applicable, explain the procedures for debriefing participants. Please attach a debriefing script or sheet

N/A

Reminder: Include copies of all questionnaires, surveys, interview questions, listing of all information/data to be collected, etc. with this application. It is the responsibility of the researcher to obtain any relevant permission for copyrighted materials. If the research involves an oral interview or focus group discussion that could evolve as it progresses, include a list of discussion topics and any "starter" questions for each topic that can reasonably be expected to be covered. If a draft

of a written questionnaire or survey is attached, it should be clearly labeled as such and a final version must be submitted before data collection begins.

**Part II: Research Participants**

3) Participant demographics:

- Gender: All ☑ M ☐ F ☐ Trans M ☐ Trans F ☐ Nonconforming ☐
- Estimated age(s):
  - 25-100
- Are any subjects under age 18? Yes ☐ No ☑
- Potentially vulnerable populations (please indicate if any of the following groups are the target population of the study)
  - Pregnant women & fetuses
  - Pronevers
  - Decisionally impaired/mentally disabled
  - Specific racial or ethnic group(s) (list in box):

  N/A

If any potentially “vulnerable populations” will be the target of the study, be sure to include a response to 2A above explaining eligibility criteria.

- Target number of participants in the entire study (including controls) from start to finish (keep in mind that this is just an estimate of the total):
  - 15

4) Please explain any outside institutional (e.g., schools, hospitals) approval you will need to obtain and how approval will be sought. Provide scripts, letters, or emails providing any information that will be used to obtain needed approvals/permission. It is the responsibility of the researcher to follow all applicable policies of any outside institution(s).

I will obtain IRB approval from McHenry County College as I am an employee.

**Part III: Risk/Benefit assessment**

5) What knowledge/benefit(s) to the field will be gained from the study?

Best practices to enroll and matriculate students over 24 years old at a community college.

6) What direct benefit(s) are there to the participant(s) (if any) from the proposed research? [For example, learning a new skill, psychological insight, teaching experience] [Please note that compensation is NOT considered a direct benefit]

The study will reveal strategies to enroll adult learners at community colleges as well as institutional commitments to supporting adult learners.

7) Describe any potential risks (breach of confidentiality, economic, ethical, legal, physical, political, psychological/emotional, social, etc.) to the subjects posed by the proposed research. (Note: Some studies may have “no reasonably foreseeable risks.”) Investigators are required to report all unexpected and/or adverse events to the IRB. Therefore, it is important that you list all reasonably anticipated risks because unanticipated adverse events may need to be reported by NIU to OHRP.

There are no reasonably foreseeable risks.

8) Federal regulations require that researchers use procedures that minimize any risks to participants. What procedures will be used to minimize each risk and/or deal with the challenge(s) stated in “7” above?

All individualized information will be kept confidential.

9) If support services are required to minimize risk of harm, explain what will be provided (list of services available)

[DeKalb area resource list: https://www.niu.edu/diresearch/compliance/resources/files/Counseling-Resource-DeKalb.pdf
If using this, please include with your application]

[3]

Revised 8/2019
10) How do the potential benefits of the study justify the potential risks to the participants?
The potential to learn more about different community colleges priorities and recruitment strategies to increase the enrollment of adult learners.

Part IV: Consent Document Variations
11) Will audio, video, or film recording be used? Yes ☒ No ☐

If yes, specify the recording format to be used. Audio taping of interview for accuracy.

Please keep in mind that specific consent must be sought in the informed consent document(s) by including a separate signature/date line giving consent for recording. This is in addition to the signature/date line giving consent to participate in the research project.

12) Will this project require the use of consent/assent documents written in a language other than English? Yes ☐ No ☒

Reminder: If non-English documents will be used, please have the document translator provide documentation (email or written) that the translation is equivalent to the English version. [This can be done after the protocol is approved in order to minimize the number of changes needed.]

13) Are you requesting a waiver of a signature on the informed consent document? Yes ☐ No ☒

Please indicate the justification for requesting this waiver:
☐ The only record linking the subject to the research would be the signed consent document and the principal risk of the research would be breach of confidentiality.
☐ The research involves minimal risk to the subjects and involves no procedures for which written consent is normally required outside of the research context (e.g., online surveys).

14) Are you requesting a waiver/alteration of some other aspect of the informed consent document? [This section is particularly relevant for studies involving deception.]
Yes ☒ No ☐

14a) Please explain which aspects of informed consent will be missing or altered along with a justification for the change. Due to COVID and social distancing, I will allow a digital signature on the consent form.

14b) Please explain how the project meets all of the following criteria:

1) The research presents no more than minimal risk of harm to the participants. N/A

2) The waiver/alteration will not adversely affect the rights or welfare of the participants. N/A

3) The research could not practically be carried out without the waiver or alteration. N/A

4) Whenever appropriate, the participants will be provided with additional pertinent information after participation. N/A

15) Will any HIPAA protected health information be collected as part of the data? Yes ☐ No ☒
If yes, describe the procedures for protecting the information.

N/A

[Please provide a copy of your HIPAA disclosure form to be given to participants.]

16) Will any protected school records be collected as part of the data?
   Yes ☐ No ☒

If yes, describe the procedures for protecting the information.

N/A

Part V: Confidentiality and Anonymity

17) Will identifying information be connected to the data, or is there a way to re-identify the data through pseudonym or a code that is kept separate from the data? Yes ☒ (confidential data) No ☐ (anonymous data)

QUALTRICS USERS: You may want to keep your survey anonymous by allowing student participants to access a second Qualtrics survey where they enter their name and student ID if needed. This would require clear instructions in the original survey along with a link to the second survey where they enter the identifiers for course credit or entry into a drawing.

18) If you answered yes to question #17, describe precautions to insure the privacy of the subjects, and the confidentiality of the data, both in your possession and in reports and publications.

The records of this study will be kept strictly confidential. Research records will be kept in a locked filing cabinet, and all electronic information will be coded and secured using a password protected file. For audio recording, the researcher will be the only one with access. Following the completion of the study all electronic data collected as part of this study will be destroyed. I will not include any information in any report I may publish that would make it possible to identify the participants.

19) If you are collecting your data through an on-line survey tool, will the survey instrument collect email and/or IP addresses with the data?
   No ☐ The survey will be set so that email/IP addresses are NOT collected
   (in Qualtrics: within a survey select “survey options” then “anonymize responses” toward the bottom)
   Yes ☒ IP and/or email addresses WILL be collected with the data
   N/A ☒ I am not using an online survey tool.

Please Note: Some electronic survey items may not be accessible to people who use screen readers as a way of accommodating their visual impairments. We recommend that you follow the link below to check the accessibility of your Qualtrics survey items: https://www.qualtrics.com/support/survey-platform/survey-module/survey-tools/check-survey-accessibility/

20) How will the records (data, recordings, and consent forms) be stored? Also indicate how long records will be kept and how and when they will be disposed of.
   [Note: Signed informed consent documents must be maintained for 3 years following completion of the study.]

Research records will be kept in a locked filing cabinet, and all electronic information will be coded and secured using a password protected file. For audio recording, the researcher will be the only one with access. Following the completion of the study all electronic data collected as part of this study will be destroyed.

Part VI: Projects Involving Deception [complete only if your study includes deception]

21) Describe the deception being used. Be sure to clarify whether this is deception by omission (an important aspect of the study is withheld from the participants) or commission (the participant is misled about some aspect of the study) or both. [Complete item 11 if aspects of consent are missing.]

N/A

22) Why is deception a necessary and unavoidable component of the experimental design?

N/A

[5]

Revised 8/2019
23) Debriefing of participants will be:

☐ Immediate (directly following the research session)
☐ Delayed

☐ Full (all aspects of deception will be revealed)
☐ Partial (some aspects of deception will remain unexplained)

  a) If debriefing is delayed, why is the delay necessary, and when will it occur?
  N/A

  b) If debriefing is not full, why is partial debriefing necessary? Would the participant be harmed in any way by full debriefing?
  N/A

  c) If debriefing is partial, will full debriefing occur later?
  N/A

  d) Does the presence of deception increase risk of harm to the participants?
  N/A

  e) Is the respondent free to withdraw his/her data after being fully debriefed?
  N/A

24) Who will provide the debriefing?
  N/A

Reminder: Please include a copy of your debriefing script/sheet with this application.

Part VII: Credit and Compensation
25) If participants will receive course credit for participation, please describe it below.
  N/A

26) If participants will receive some other form of compensation for participation, please describe it below.
  N/A

27) Describe any alternative tasks that will be available for participants to earn the credit or compensation.
  N/A

Part VIII: Conflict of interest
28) Do any of the researchers conducting this study have any potential conflicts of interest?
  [Conflicts of interest may include financial or personal interest, or any condition in which the investigator’s judgment regarding a primary interest may be biased by a secondary interest.] Yes ☐ No ✗

29) If yes to the above question, please describe the nature of the conflict of interest.
  N/A

Part IX: Researcher Qualifications
30) In addition to listing the investigators’ names, indicate their qualifications to carry out the research described in this application.
  Christina J. Coclanis-Loding, candidate for Ed.D

31) State the date of completion of the CITI Human Subjects Protection training program(s) for the individuals [6]

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listed in the question above. The required course is "Social & Behavioral Research - Basic/Refresher, Basic Course. The required CITI training is accessible from the ORCIS website at https://www.niu.edu/divresearch/compliance/human/training/index.shtml. If you have comparable training elsewhere, please include the certification with this application.

[Note: NIU policy requires that research investigators must complete appropriate training before conducting human subjects research.]

Basic completed 3/20/19 and Refresher completed 5/28/20

To be completed by investigator and confirmed by advisor (if student project) and departmental reviewer:

Check the items that are accompanying this completed application form:
1. ☐ Subject recruitment/introductory materials
2. Informed consent documents (select at least one):
   ☐ Consent form for adults (if participants are age 18 or over)
   ☐ Assent form for minors (if participants are under age 18)
3. ☐ Parental permission form (if participants are under age 18)
4. ☐ All surveys, questionnaires, interview questions, or other instruments to be used
5. ☐ Grant proposal SPA/ included on front of application (for externally funded projects)

REQUIRED SIGNATURES: ALL PROJECTS

CERTIFICATION

I certify that I have read and understand the policies and procedures for research projects that involve human subjects and that I intend to comply with Northern Illinois University Policy. Any changes in the approved protocol will be submitted to the IRB for approval prior to those changes being put into practice unless it involves an immediate safety issue for a subject during a procedure. (In such instances, the researcher is required to promptly notify the IRB after the fact.) I also understand that all non-exempt projects require review at least annually.

Christine G. Callahan-Colding 5/22/20

* Investigator(s) Signature(s) Date

Carrie Kortegaard 5/27/2020

* Signature of Faculty Advisor (Student Projects Only) Date

* Signature of Authorized Departmental Reviewer Printed name Date

* PIs (both faculty and students), faculty advisors, and ADRs may choose to send an email statement (or email thread) indicating acknowledgement of the certification statement above in lieu of signatures.

Return this form, together with necessary documentation, to the Office of Research Compliance, Integrity, and Safety at researchcompliance@niu.edu (a single PDF is preferred, but we can work with multiple files and Word documents). For information or additional assistance with the approval process, please call our office at (815) 753-8588 (Lowden Hall, 301) or access the ORCIS web page at https://www.niu.edu/divresearch/compliance/index.shtml

Revised 8/2019