"GRASSROOTS EFFORTS OF THE WILLING": AN ACTION RESEARCH CASE STUDY

EXPLORING ADULT PROGRESSION IN A TWO-YEAR COLLEGE

by

DEMETRIX ROSTICK-OWENS

(Under the Direction of Lorilee R. Sandmann)

ABSTRACT

This study explored factors contributing to the academic progression of first-time adult freshmen (FTAF) enrolled in an open-access, two-year college. Three questions guided the research: (1) To what extent do FTAF progress academically in a two-year community college and what factors contribute to their progression?; (2) What are guiding principles that administrators, faculty, and practitioners consider when addressing the academic progression of FTAF?; and (3) What knowledge is gained at the individual, team, and system levels using an action research methodology to examine the progression of FTAF?

The principal investigator and five practitioners of the college moved through action research cycles, including constructing the problem and planning, taking, and evaluating actions. Theories and models related to adult participation in learning and associated barriers, and nontraditional student attrition informed the research. Data were collected through participant interviews, document reviews, student focus groups, and team meeting reflections and notes.

Major findings indicated that (1) FTAF attrition is a function of learner's readiness (or non-readiness) for self-directed learning and the institution's readiness (or non-readiness) to identify and address learner challenges; (2) institutional- and student-level contributions that

promote comprehensive education beyond access serve to facilitate FTAF progression; and (3) using an inquiry method such as Action Research, can reveal system's readiness and willingness to engaging in dynamic change processes. Three conclusions were drawn from the findings: (1) Engaging in systematic research within a two-year college setting can promote deep learning and generate outcomes that are foundational for learner-centered strategies designed to mitigate risks of adult leaner attrition; (2) first-year adult learner attrition is strongly impacted by personal and academic variables, whereas second-year adult learner attrition is strongly impacted by learners' social integration into the college; and (3) the action research framework can be utilized to explore and manage micro-level change within organizations experiencing macro-level disruption.

This study expands Bean and Metzner's (1985) model of nontraditional attrition by adding the factor of student intent to progress and offering five explanations for attrition not due to dropping out. Implications of this study include expanding learning approaches, creating pathways for learner support, and exploring adult learner academic intent.

INDEX WORDS: Progression, Adult learning, Nontraditional students, Action research,
                Two-year college, Andragogy, Academic intent

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DEDICATION

To my husband, William (Sage), and my children, Kennedy and Xavier,

thank you each for your unwavering love, understanding support, and inspiring encouragement

during this journey.

To my mother and father,

thank you both for providing me with a strong foundation for learning by instilling in me the

virtues that have allowed me to seek and reach this monumental goal.

To my siblings, extended family, and friends,

thank you all for keeping me uplifted with your reassuring, motivating, and heartening words

throughout this process.

To my action research sponsor, team members, and participants,

thank you for your tenacity and for going the distance with me as this project and story unfolded.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

"Great attention is being placed on degree attainment within higher education and on the

need to significantly boost the number of adults in the United States with some type of college

credential" (Gast, 2013, p. 17). While the academic progression of learners leading to degree

completion has been a primary focus of higher education's mission, academic credentialing has

emerged as a national priority within the past decade, hastened by President Barack Obama's

introduction of the 2020 degree attainment goal. As explained by the U.S. Department of

Education (US DOE) (2011), the president:

> *set a goal that the nation should once again have the highest proportion of college*
> *graduates in the world by the year 2020. To reach this goal, the U.S. Department of*
> *Education [projected] that the proportion of college graduates in the U.S. [would] need*
> *to increase by 50 percent nationwide by the end of the decade. Translated into additional*
> *degree-holders, eight million more young adults ... [would] need to earn associate and*
> *bachelor's degrees by 2020.* (p. 1)

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (2015), the potential for

postsecondary institutions to prepare more credentialed learners by 2020 is promising since it is

anticipated that 22 million learners will enroll in U.S., public, postsecondary institutions; of this

number, 8.7 million are expected to enroll in public, four-year institutions, and 7.3 million are

predicted to enroll in public, open-access, two-year community colleges (referred to throughout

as *two-year colleges*). These forecasts are made with confidence, as they continue a trajectory of

gains that occurred during the first 14 years of the current millennium. Notably, between 2000

and 2014, increases were seen in overall enrollment in postsecondary education (from 15.3

million to 20.2 million, or 32%), four-year public institutions (from 6.0 million to 8.3 million, or

38%), and public two-year colleges (from 5.7 million to 6.4 million, or 12.3%). Though public four-year institutions saw the greatest enrollment gains—a trend that is likely to continue—it is estimated that by 2020, the gap existing between public two- and four-year college enrollment will shrink to just under 1.4 million as two-year enrollment rises to 7.3 million (NCES, 2015).

Historically, two-year colleges have been viewed as an entryway into higher education for learners since they serve "multiple roles—providing transfer and vocational education, community outreach, and workforce development—while promoting the educational and economic development of individuals and communities" (Ritze, 2006, p. 83). Along with their diverse functionality, two-year colleges have also been recognized for providing flexible enrollment, affordable tuition and fees, and accessible financial aid options for low-income students (American Association of Community Colleges [AACC], 2016a)—all factors viewed favorably by adult learners. In the fall of 2014, the AACC reported that undergraduate enrollments in two-year colleges were dominated by learners classified as adult, based upon their age at the time of matriculation (the average reported age was 28) and their part-time enrollment status (62% were enrolled as part-time students). Though two-year colleges have become instrumental in providing access to higher education for adult learners, the national rate of associate-degree completion has languished just below 11% (795,235 students were awarded degrees in the 2013-2014 academic year). The disproportionate statistical gap between two-year college entry and exit suggests a disparity in the academic demands and needs of learners and the espoused expectations of institutions.

The current study employed an action research (AR) case study methodology to explore the extent of progression in adult learners enrolled in a specific campus (i.e., the east campus) of a two-year college located in the southeastern U.S., referred to pseudonymously as Metro

Atlantis Community College (MACC). Action research is "a form of social inquiry through which members of social groups interact with one another, engage in open dialogue about their intergroup relationships, and collectively participate in a learning process to create social change within their communities" (Glassman, Erdem, Bartholomew, 2013, p. 274).

This chapter provides background on the issue of accountability in two-year colleges within the context of demands for increasing completion rates and then describes the case study site—MACC East—and illustrates the challenges colleges face in retaining students. The chapter concludes with an overview of the study's purpose, guiding questions, and research significance.

Degree Completion in Two-Year Colleges

At the time of the 2020 declaration, 20.4 million students were enrolled in U.S. colleges and universities (NCES, 2013d). Not surprisingly, many of the 20.4 million students could be considered "adult" based upon choice of college environment, attendance status, and age. Seven million students (34.7%) attended two-year public institutions (NCES, 2011a), 7.7 million (37.7%) enrolled as part-time students (US DOE, 2013b), and an over half of the cohort, or 11.4 million (55.6%), were over the age of 22 at the time of attendance (NCES, 2013d).

Unfortunately, while enrollment within two-year colleges was relatively strong in 2009, the rate of completion was meager, with only 8.4% of students (599,817) reportedly earning an associate degree (NCES, 2011). It has been argued that below-average degree completion has contributed to "the large and growing gap between the earnings of Americans of different educational attainment" (Carnevale & Rose, 2011, slide 7) when the U.S. economy is still rebounding following the 2008 great recession. Moreover, the lower-than-average completion rates have also "suggest[ed] that the educational ambitions of many community college students remain largely unmet"; thus, a "[g]rowing number of community colleges have recognized the importance of … improving … completion rates" (Nodine, Venezia, & Bracco, 2011, p. 5).

Metro Atlantis Community College

Metro Atlantis Community College (MACC), the site at the center of this investigation,

falls into this grouping of institutions as the college's administrators have intensified efforts to

enhance learner progression leading to degree completion. A medium-sized, multi-campus, two-

year college located in the southeastern U.S., MACC has operated as an open-access institution

for half a century. In the previous 50 years, the primary institutional mission has been to serve:

> *as a key point of entry for students into higher education in [the state] and ... to support the Strategic Plan of the [state's educational oversight board]. ... [As such, MACC has been] committed to maintaining our role as the major provider of associate degrees and student transfer opportunities in the state.*

The college has striven to "provide relevant, responsive, learner-centered higher education that

facilitates the achievement of academic, professional and personal goals" by engrossing students

in collaborative, problem- and community-based service and research opportunities. The

college's focus on the application of knowledge through teaching, learning, and service has taken

priority over research, a common mission of open-access institutions (Vaughan, 2006).

Compared to the research conducted around four-year institutions, far less attention has been

given to the two-year college experience. In the past three decades, however, the body of

information specific to the context of two-year colleges has grown, evolving as a result of work

undertaken by agencies like the American Association of Community Colleges or the

Community College Research Center (CCRC), or produced in scholarly publications such as the

Community College Journal of Research and Practice (CCJ), *Community College Review*

(CCR), and *New Directions for Community Colleges.*

This research study aimed to contribute to the growing literature around two-year

colleges, particularly in areas focusing on the progression of adult learners. The study was

conducted at the east campus of MACC, which has been in operation for approximately a

decade. Located in a city outside of the metro area, MACC East was selected as the study site because enrollment had steadily declined during the previous five years. At peak enrollments in 2011, MACC boasted a college enrollment approaching 30,000, with a total of 2,700 students enrolled at MACC East. Currently, the enrollment at the college has dropped 33%.

Though MACC's mission of providing a "point of entry for students" has remained unchanged, the national emphasis on and expectancy of degree attainment has prompted college leaders to evaluate its less successful goal of being a "provider of associate degrees." With three-year graduation rates less than 10%, MACC's campuses are vulnerable to public scrutiny for enrolling large numbers of students, mainly adults, who are often lost to attrition. Adding to this pressure is a consolidation with Centura University (CU)[1], a larger four-year institution recognized by the Association of Public and Land Grant Universities for "its exceptional progress with increasing retention toward or completion of a bachelor's degree."

In light of rising petitions for educational accountability, MACC East is faced with the quandary of expanding its mission and proactively enhancing the concept of post-access learner success. Guess (2008) argued that "[d]efining college success is a problem … because institutions of higher learning are so diverse, in terms not only of size, mission and location, but of the types of students who enroll and of their goals once they graduate" (para. 3). As a result, MACC East "extend[s] educational opportunity to a wide range of students with respect to academic preparation and achievement" (Carnegie Classification, 2015b).

 In the midst of MACC's enrollment boom, a significant number of students representing eight ethnic groups (14% of whom were non-U.S. citizens) enrolled in the college. Also included within the student body were students needing learning support (22%) as well as those who were

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[1] Centura University (CU) is a pseudonym used to provide anonymity to the participants and the institution of this action research case study.

classified as adult learners (averaging 26 years in age), freshman (58%), part-time (57%), and first-generation (11%) students. The diversity of its student population has been a testament to MACC's commitment to maintaining an access mission, although the decline in enrollment is a clear signal that student attrition remains problematic. However, considering current calls to increase the graduation rate, MACC needs to begin shifting from an academic environment striving to guarantee access to one that simultaneously endorses the value of progression and degree completion. The question remains, then: How does this change occur?

On one end of the change spectrum are theorists such as Spady (1970), Tinto (1975), and Astin (1984), who have offered student-centered development models for practitioners to explore and identify variables influencing students' decisions to persist or to drop out of college prior to earning a degree. Others such as K. Cross (1981) have provided theoretical frameworks for better understanding the barriers or "obstacle[s] [that prevent] effective learning or … [deter learners from] participating in the first place" (J. Cross, 2004).

On the opposite end of the spectrum are institution-centered options offered as guidance to institutional agents interested in identifying dropout behaviors, establishing retention goals, and outlining criteria, definitions, and data to measure and combat attrition (Wild & Ebbers, 2002). Most recently, agencies such as the Lumina Foundation and Complete College America (CCA) have become unwavering in their commitment to the completion agenda and have positioned their resources to enhance "the proportion of Americans with high-quality degrees, certificates and other credentials to 60 percent by 2025" (Lumina Foundation, 2013, p. 2). While Lumina has funded initiatives related to the completion agenda, CCA has begun challenging long-standing institutional policies, funding structures, plans for academic remediation, positions on full-time enrollment, structured scheduling, and guided pathways to success.

With such drastically differing viewpoints and educational goals existing at the national level, the state agency that governs MACC, the State University Organization (SUO)[2], has responded by creating new goals for completion and announcing new funding structures centering on retention and graduation. Along with other institutional leaders within the system, MACC East's executive administrators have begun strategically reevaluating institutional policies, services, and instruction to ensure each is aligned to the mission of furthering current and establishing new educational experiences that will likely lead to augmented rates of retention and degree completion of students, including adults, enrolled in the institution.

Study Purpose and Research Questions

McIntosh and Rouse (2009) argued that, compared to students at four-year institutions, those enrolled at two-year colleges have lower rates of persistence and completion, often stemming from competing social obligations, academic under-preparedness, and financial challenges. Unfortunately, this has been the case for more than 90% of adult learners enrolling at MACC East between January 2012 and January 2015. Though admission of adult learners remains high, the rate of attrition has been quite low. This is perhaps because little attention has been given to exploring the phenomenon. Therefore, the purpose of this AR case study was to better understand and address the issue of progression of first-time adult freshmen (FTAF) enrolled in an open-access, two-year college. The inquiry also aimed to communicate a framework of strategies others may consider when addressing the issue of FTAF progression within similar contexts. The following research questions guided this study:

1. To what extent do FTAF progress academically in a two-year community college, and what factors contribute to their progression?

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[2] State University Organization (SUO) is a pseudonym used to provide anonymity to the participants and the institution of this action research case study.

2. What are guiding principles that administrators, faculty, and practitioners consider when addressing the academic progression of FTAF?

3. What knowledge is gained at the individual, team, and system levels using an action research methodology to examine the progression of FTAF?

Study Significance

The topic of attrition for adult learners enrolled in open-access, two-year colleges has not been abundantly studied or documented within the literature. However, at a time when two-year colleges are being held accountable, through national and local mandates, for credentialing and graduating students, it is essential for two-year colleges to better understand and address the issue of academic progression. This AR case study added to the existing body of knowledge by exploring: (a) adult-learner readiness and institutional ableness, as they related to progression in a two-year college context, (b) the institutional- and student level- contributions to consider when establishing guiding principles for addressing progression in adult learners, and (c) the outcomes of using an action research framework within a system in revolutionary change, that was no quite ready for the dynamic changes the framework could offer. Working collaboratively with an AR team, engaging participants in reflective interviews, and mining pertinent institutional data provided opportunities for individual, team, and system level knowledge generation.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter examines the literature relevant to the progression of adult learners enrolling as first-time freshmen at two-year institutions. Associated theories and other significant works informing this action research case study are reviewed. The chapter examines the diverse array of barriers adults experience while participating in learning and progressing toward degree completion, and it also appraises Bean and Metzner's (1985) conceptual model of nontraditional undergraduate student attrition along with other models related to academic attrition occurring among older, non- residential, two-year community college students.

The University of Georgia's GALILEO databases were utilized to retrieve scholarly, peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and dissertations. The keywords used to search the database included the following: *community college*, *adult learning*, *nontraditional*, *attrition*, *progression*, *academic variables*, *social variables*, *environmental variables*, and *intent to leave*.

Theoretical Framework

We use a theoretical framework*(s) for a variety of reasons, e.g., because it provides a rationale for the inclusions of some things and exclusions of others; or to provide an orientation to where this* research *comes from and where it must return when the findings are known; or we might use a* theoretical framework to *suggest possible relationships between the variables… [being investigated].*

—Taylor, Beck, & Ainsworth, 2001, p. 170

The theoretical framework for this AR case study comprises the barriers to adult participation in learning (i.e., academic, environmental, and social variables), and the model of

nontraditional attrition (i.e., the process of adult student attrition). Figure 1 illustrates a

conceptual model of the interconnected relationships among the chosen theories.
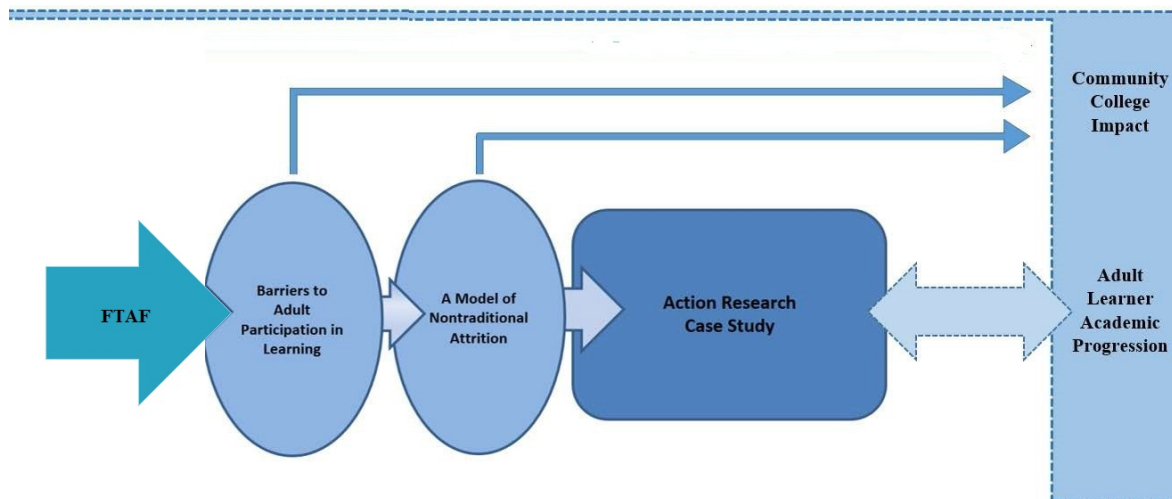
Figure 1. A framework of adult learner progression in community colleges.

One of the largest groups to benefit from increased access to higher education through

community colleges have been learners who identify as adults. Adult learners "have had

experiences in life and in their careers that have broadened their general outlook" and "represent

a variety of characteristics such as (a) delaying enrollment into college following high school or

the completion of a general education diploma (GED), (b) attending college on a part-time basis,

identifying as financially independent (NCES, 2002), (c) being over 24 years of age, (d) working

full time, and (e) often having dependents to support" (Forbus, Newbold, & Mehta, 2011, pp.

109-110). By 2013, 40% (five million) of students enrolled in American community colleges

were, on average, 28 years of age (AACC, 2016a).

The Community College Context

Typically, community colleges (also known as open-access or two-year colleges) are

"publicly funded higher education [institutions] at close-to-home facilities … that welcome all

…, regardless of wealth, heritage, or previous academic experience" (AACC, 2016b). As Ritze (2006) noted "the … community college plays multiple roles—providing transfer and vocational education, community outreach, and workforce development—while promoting the educational and economic development of individuals and communities" (p. 83).

Community colleges in the U.S. date back to 1901, with the founding of Joliet Junior College in Chicago. Initially established as an "experimental postgraduate high school program" (Joliet Junior College, 2012) for girls studying liberal arts, the institution recorded a modest enrollment of six by the end of the first academic year. A century later, the original mission to bring education "close to home" had become reality for nearly 13 million learners (eight million of whom were enrolled in programs yielding academic credit) (AACC, 2009). Additionally, by the end of the 2007-2008 academic year, "20 percent of all undergraduates in national colleges took at least one distance education course" (CCRC, 2016a), bringing college courses into learners' homes via the Internet.

As such, community colleges have become instrumental in increasing access to higher education for many who otherwise may not have been had the opportunity. However, at what cost? The balancing game between access and educational quality are always at play. "Open admissions community colleges face a distinct challenge in maintaining quality while managing enrollments" (Ritze, 2006, p. 84). The admissions process for community colleges, along with low-cost tuition, ease of transferability to four-year institutions, and flexible course scheduling has helped institutions meet and exceed their access missions and enrollment projections. Ritze (2006) suggested that community college leadership endures contention with "the popular notion that institutional quality (as measured by admissions selectivity) [is what] improves students' occupational status and earnings" (p. 84), not access alone.

<center>**Adult Participation in Learning**</center>

Andragogy, or the "art and science of helping adults learn" (Knowles, 1980), is a concept central to understanding and addressing the specific learning needs of adult students. Knowles coined the term and established a set of assumptions he believed explained how students identifying as adults engage in and remain motivated to learn. According to Knowles, adulthood is defined both psychologically and socially. He presumed that a learner could be viewed as an adult to the extent that "the individual perceives herself or himself to be essentially responsible for her or his own life ... [and] … to the extent that the individual [performs] social roles typically assigned by our culture to those it considers to be adults" (Knowles, 1980, p. 24). Knowles incorporated his assumptions of what it means to be an adult into this theory of andragogy and placed value on learning directed by a student's needs and desires. The theory of andragogy assumes that adults (a) possess self-concepts which are independent and self-directed, (a) hold reservoirs of life experiences which add to their learning, (b) engage in academic studies directly related to their changing social roles and interests, (c) participate in learning geared toward the resolution of problems, and (d) have internal motivation and drive which keep them inspired to learn (Knowles, 1980).

Self-Concept and Learning

The ability to direct one's own learning represents the central idea of Knowles' (1980) first assumption regarding one's self-concept of adulthood. Although, the notion of "self-directed learning has been promoted mainly as an adult education tool" (Cunningham, 2010, p. 90), it is a fundamental and necessary component of the adult learner experience. Rogers and Horrocks (2010) explained that the "key concepts of being an adult … are ... being responsible for oneself, for one's deeds and development" (p. 47). Andragogy emphasizes the progression

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toward autonomy and educational responsibility as adults take the lead in developing and

evaluating their own learning experiences (Wilcox, 1996).

The Utility of Education

Equally noteworthy are Knowles' (1980) assertions regarding the reasons why adults

engage in learning activities. Unlike externally motivated students engaged in the compulsory

educational learning process mandated by primary and secondary schools, Knowles theorized

that adults are internally motivated and, therefore, voluntarily engaged in learning activities they

find useful or practical when transitioning into social roles requiring new responsibilities,

knowledge, or skills. Bean and Metzner (1985) defined the concept of utility as a measure of

"students' perceptions of the usefulness of their college education for employment opportunities

(practical value) and personal development" (p. 522).

Therefore, beyond the benefits of learning, Knowles presumed that adults attach other

value to higher education. The usefulness and practicality of education for employment purposes

has been encouraged at both the federal and state levels and, simultaneously, by emerging

markets that demand a diversified skilled workforce; thus, earning a degree remains a viable

means for accessing employment opportunities and acquiring social mobility.

Students who hold an associate degree have stronger annual earnings than those who

have (a) some college and no degree, (b) a high school diploma, or (c) less than a high school

diploma (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015), increasing their lifetime earning potential.

Additionally, students who earn an associate degree are less likely to become unemployed than

students who have acquired less education.

The growing proportion of adult undergraduates has become a significant source of

enrollment and income for numerous institutions at which the number of "traditional age"

students (typically defined as 18 to 22 years of age) is shrinking (Donaldson & Townsend, 2007). Fairchild (2003) presumed that "rather than being a life-encompassing, identity-building experience … higher education … is one activity among many in which adults can participate to meet other specific needs, such as learning a new job-related skill or preparing for a new career altogether" (p. 12). Fairchild's statement points to the stark reality that, for many adult learners, seeking higher education has become an act of utility in a constantly changing environment requiring new knowledge bases and skills. In their seminal work, which yielded a model of attrition focusing on nontraditional undergraduate students, Bean and Metzner (1985) explained utility as a measure of students' "perceptions of the usefulness of their college education for employment opportunities (practical value) and personal development" (p. 522). Cox (2009) and Grubb (2006) also highlighted the primary importance of utility for community college students.

Experience and Readiness to Learn

Echoed in Knowles' (1980) second and third assumptions (regarding accumulated reservoirs of knowledge and the initiation of learning by social changes) is the significance of adults participating in education and experientially applying newly gained knowledge to the resolution of real-world personal problems, such as loss of a job due to the recession.

Experiential learning focuses on a student's process of acquiring new ways of thinking by experiencing an event and spending time reflecting on and thinking about the event before taking action (Kolb & Kolb, 2005).

By engaging in these cycles of learning, adults acquire new knowledge by "grasping and transforming experience[s]" (Kolb, 1984, p. 41). Kelly (1992) affirmed that for collegiate programs with a vocational focus, "experiential learning gives students an opportunity to put their skills to the test in the real world" via "internships, volunteer work, part-time entry-level

jobs, or independent field research" (p. 14). For adults who enter college after having spent time in the workforce, the rich nature of their accumulated knowledge also lends to their personal motivation for learning.

A major barrier to academic progression and degree completion for students enrolling in community colleges is the remediation process. For every 10 students enrolled in a community college, seven need some form of remediation in basic mathematics, English, or reading (Chen, 2016). Even more troubling, only 20% to 40% of students in remediation eventually pass their necessary core classes (Bailey & Cho, 2010), thus laying the foundation for academic attrition. When coupled with financial strains (e.g., losing access to financial aid or needing to work more hours) or academic difficulties (e.g., unsuccessfully completing remediation or failing a large number of courses), students are likely to leave the college prior to earning a degree.

Orientation and Motivation to Learn

While many adult learners enter community colleges for very practical and utilitarian reasons, others deliberately seek educational opportunities to experience personal learning, development, and change. Knowles' (1980) final two assumptions (regarding problem-centered learning and internal motivation) lend credence to the voluntary nature of learning. For many adults, academic learning reaches beyond the border of acquiring one-way knowledge from one's teacher or earning a grade. Instead, "adults are problem-centered and learn best in an environment of realistic problems. The focus of problem-centered learning is to facilitate effective problem-solving skills, self-directed learning, collaboration skills, flexibility, and intrinsic motivation" (Caruth, 2014, p. 5).

Implications of Andragogical Practice

Along with his initial assumptions, Knowles (1996) examined implications of andragogical practice expressing his belief that "certain conditions of learning … are more

conducive to growth and development than others… [as a result of] the learning-teaching

transaction” (p. 69). These implications presume that a trained facilitator could co-create an

optimal learning environment with adult learners which could lead ultimately to the fulfillment

of educational experiences for students. Halx (2010) contended that utilizing a solely

pedagogical perspective with adults has limited advantages since such an approach does “not

address thoroughly the learning needs of the older or more experientially mature students that

populate current-day institutions” (p. 519). Knefelkamp, in an interview documented by

Donnelly-Smith (2011), made similar assertions and challenged the academy to (a) distance itself

from the “assumption that the students [were] eighteen to twenty-two years old,” (b) utilize

“scheduling, technology, and communication to be responsive to adult learners,” and (c) “treat

adult students as colearners” (p. 8) as opposed to passive learners in the classroom.

Both Halx (2010) and Knefelkamp’s (as cited in Donnelly-Smith, 2011) statements

suggest an unwillingness on the part of higher education to embrace adult-learner oriented

practices, even at a time when adult learners are a significant presence on college campuses. The

academy was built upon an instructional pedagogy, predicated on the notion that education is

compulsory, teacher-centered, and content-specific (Halx, 2010), rather than “learner-centered,

collaborative, active, problem-centered … [and led by] … a facilitator who recognizes that

students are learning to meet their life needs, and that the life experiences of the learners make a

valuable contribution” (Kelly, 1992, p. 10).

Barriers to Adult Learning

Although “adult learners are everywhere in higher education, they remain invisible—

hidden in plain sight—and curiously absent from many of the dialogues concerning the purpose

and mission of higher education” (Stokes, 2005, p. 2). Central to this statement is a belief that

students who are older, commute to college, or are enrolled part-time are repeatedly left out of the discourse and programs related to shaping institutional missions and practices. While many traditional institutions may view adopting an adult learner agenda as diverging from the core principles associated with their administrative mission, instructional design, or practice of service, more progressive institutions that understand the value of adult students have begun creating "pathways to degree attainment" by implementing "strategies to enhance the academic [success]" of adult learners (Gast, 2003, p. 17).

Advocates of this adult student focus, such as the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) and the American Council on Education (ACE), (a) promote the benefits of identifying and decreasing the institutional, dispositional, and situational barriers (K. Cross, 1981) that adult learners experience when pursuing and progressing through higher education, and (b) provide institutions with principled strategies to aid adult learners in overcoming educational barriers. The following sections examine the literature surrounding barriers to adult participation in learning and strategies for addressing this issue.

Donaldson and Townsand (2007) asserted that adult learners either become "invisible since traditional-age student experiences are treated as universal" or "are acknowledged but devalued" (p. 37). They observed that even within the literature, adult learners are not widely recognized and are often negatively portrayed "as deficient, problematic, different, or other" by research that "employ[s] traditional-age students and their behavior as the norm and basis for models of retention, academic success, and the collegiate experience" (p. 37). The outer edge positionality of adult learners in the college community represents a barrier that leaves the learner voiceless and "at a social, economic and cultural disadvantage" (Bierema, 2010, p. 141). At each level, adult learners have limited impact on how the institution uses resources,

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establishes social programming, or shapes policies associated with support services, all of which affect their potential for educational growth and persistence.

Within the literature, there exist a multitude of explanations for the lack of persistence and completion among adult learners. In exploring the challenges faced by older learners, K. Cross (1981) offered a conceptual framework that describes adults who participate in learning activities, learners' motivations to participate, and the barriers that deter entry and progression. Cross identified three main types of barriers—situational, dispositional, and institutional—likely to impede learning in adulthood. Following are further conversations about the barriers.

Situational barriers. Whether real or perceived, adult learners may be affected by "situational barriers, [which] are directly associated with the individual" (Fishman, 2010, p. 662). The situational variables faced by students, such as decreased socioeconomic resources, taking an alternate path to postsecondary education (Bozick & DeLuca, 2005), juggling multiple family obligations and roles (i.e., marital responsibilities, dependents), working full- or part-time, or participating in community events (Mercer, 1993), create barriers to engaging with the academic environment and to achieving academic success.

In a study by Engle and Tinto (2008), the researchers noted that "low-income and first-generation … [college students were] less likely to be engaged in the academic and social experiences that foster success in college, such as studying in groups, interacting with faculty and other students, participating in extracurricular activities, and using support services" (p. 3). These forms of academic disengagement have been linked to the on-going situations of students' lived lives which, ultimately, compete for time, attention, and energy. As external responsibilities build and competing commitments intensify, how well learners balance their responsibilities will determine their positive drive to complete their learning process.

Dispositional barriers. In addition to identifying barriers stemming from the situations or the environmental "press" (Murray, 1938)—that is, "high levels of stress" experienced by students in their external environment—K. Cross (1981) recognized that adults face "dispositional barriers [which are] often perceived thoughts" (Fisherman, 2010, p. 662), "personality traits, or personal qualities acquired through early school experiences, concerns about [one's] own ability to succeed, [or the] belief that one is too old to go back to school" (Saar, Taht, & Roosalu, 2014, p. 693). Similar to situational barriers, dispositional barriers are focused on changes directly related to the student, not the institution.

Institutional barriers. The last barrier in Cross's (1971, 1981) series involves the impact of the institution. Institutional barriers can be defined as those which are "erected by learning institutions that exclude or discourage certain groups of learners because of such things as inconvenient schedules, full-time fees for part-time students, restrictive locations and the like" (Cross, 1979, p. 98). Institutional barriers may also "include inflexible course schedules, campus accessibility, complex enrollment procedures, and lack of publicity of … programs for older learners" (Fisherman, 2010, p. 662).

Though "researchers have become increasingly aware of the social and economic factors that contribute to how well [traditional] students transition from secondary to postsecondary institutions" (Stewart, Lim, & Kim, 2015, p. 12), much less is known about the roughly half of postsecondary-bound students who postpone their transition into higher education by one or more years, usually following a stint in the work world. Inquiries into the causes and effects of this delayed entry are limited; however, previous studies support the hypothesis that waiting to enter the college drastically decreases the chances of students remaining in college and progressing toward completion (Bozick & Deluca, 2005; & Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Evidenced-Based Practices to Reduce Barriers

Sheared (2006) reported that many institutions maintain that active participation and interaction in student service events yields positive experiences thought to foster student development, commitment to the institution, and academic persistence. Similarly, the time spent on campus building positive and impactful "social relationships with other students" (Deil-Amen, 2011, p. 68), faculty, and practitioners of the institution are thought to increase a student's feelings of institutional belonging. Both of these assertions are rooted in Tinto's (1993) theory of student departure, a framework offered for understanding student departure in relation to a learner's academic performance, academic and occupational goal accomplishments, and involvement within the academic environment. Deil-Amen (2011) described the subjective process of academic and social integration of traditional-aged college students into their college community through attending lectures and participating in out-of-the classroom social events and activities. Deil-Amen suggested that learners who "are not integrated into the community may experience isolation, or incongruence between their intellectual and social communities" (p. 55), resulting in a lack of engagement and persistence.

Adult learners juggling multiple roles are at higher risk for becoming disengaged and not persisting (Astin, 1984). In addition to their student role, adult learners may also work full- or part-time, be responsible for caring for family members, or be involved in community activities outside of the institution. "[Adult learners] have a greater propensity for maintaining off campus responsibilities which significantly reduces the learner's time attending university social events" (Newbold, Mehta, & Forbus, 2011, p. 149). Further, earlier studies have indicated that adult learners who managed to become engaged and, ultimately, persisted did so under challenging

circumstances and in spite of an institutional system that may not have not been sufficiently prepared to meet their needs (Fairchild, 2003).

Inderbitzin and Storrs (2008) argued that instructors and institutional agents must overcome the inertia of the "dominant learning structure" which facilitates passive learning and replace it with a structure that supports and encourages "discussion and dialogue" (p. 49). Umbach and Wawrzynski (2005) suggest similarly that the "use of encouraging cooperation among students, encouraging active learning, communicating high expectations, encouraging contact between students and faculty, and using active learning techniques" (p. 156) all represent a step in the right direction. While beneficial, such "techniques often take more time and energy to facilitate as instructors and institutional agents are not able to use 'off-the-shelf' products that publishers provide, but must construct their own assignments and ways to assess student learning" (Inderbitzin et al., p. 49). When considering these changes, administrators will need to be ready to commit extra time and resources to implementing this unconventional approach to instruction and information exchange.

Conceptual Model of Nontraditional Student Attrition

"In recent years, the percentage increase in the number of students age 25 and over [enrolling in college] has been larger than the percentage increase in the number of younger students, and this pattern is expected to continue" (NCES, 2011b). Even more challenging are the disappointing six-year outcomes of students over the age of 24, showing lower degree completion at both their starting and transfer institution, lower rates of continuous enrollment, and higher rates of disenrollment (Shapiro, Dunbar, Ziskin, Yuan, & Harrell, 2013). Additional research, from the perspective of adult learners, exploring the factors which impact dropout rates is needed to address these high rates of attrition (Donaldson & Graham, 1999).

With the exception of Bean and Metzner's (1985) work, "few studies have advanced a comprehensive model of community college student attrition or persistence" (Stahl & Pavel, 1992, p. 4). Relying "extensively on past research and review of the literature," Bean and Metzner introduced a conceptual model of nontraditional student attrition, the first to consider the attrition patterns of students entering college who were not identified as traditional by their age, residential status, or responsibilities outside of the collegiate academic environment.

Bean and Metzner's (1985) model was influenced by the seminal higher education attrition research of Spady (1970), Tinto (1975), and Astin (1984). These earlier models acknowledged the complex nature of traditional student attrition, assumed the dropout process to be longitudinal (Astin 1984; Bean & Metzner, 1985; Tinto, 1975), and characterized the variables in an input-environment-output (I-E-O) format (Astin, 1984).

The input, or the student's characteristics (i.e., background, individual attributes, and pre-college experiences), was thought to be developed as the student became involved with the college's academic environment (related to academic performance, intellectual development, goal commitment), and non-academic social environment (related to normative congruence, friendship, satisfaction, institutional commitment) (Spady, 1971; Tinto, 1975). The output, or the intent to remain, graduate, or drop out, was thought to be indirectly related "to the amount of … energy [students devoted] to the academic experience" (Astin, 1984, p. 518).

Moreover, the model suggests that "dropout decisions [are] based primarily on four sets of variables" (p. 490) and mitigating sub-variables, which are similar yet diverge from traditional student attrition models. In the this study, Bean and Metzner's nontraditional model informed the work of the AR team which included selecting the study's sample, defining attrition patterns,

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identifying the factors most likely to influence student academic outcomes, and establishing

interventions to increase awareness of the issue of adult learner attrition (see Table 1).

Table 1

Empirical Studies Influencing Bean and Metzner's (1985) Model

Author	Purpose of Study	Findings	Influence on Bean and Metzner
Astin, 1984	To provide a theory of student development that allowed for a systematic and comprehensive approach to understanding the dropout process of students enrolled in higher education.	Collegiate-level learner outcomes (attrition, persistence, or completion) were influenced by learners' inputs (family background, and individual attributes) and co-curricular involvement with the environment (academic and social involvement).	• Inputs: Background and defining variables • Environment: Academic, Environmental, and Social variables • Outputs: Intent to leave/dropout
Spady, 1970	To better understand the factors contributing to attrition in higher education. The theoretical model of student attrition was introduced to assess related variables that potentially impacted students' dropout decision.	Academic variables (e.g., academic goals, intellectual gains, high grade performance) have a strong impact upon student persistence within the higher education as it allowed students to achieve a greater sense of satisfaction, normative congruence, and social support from the environment.	• Background: Background and defining variables • Academic potential: Academic variables influencing academic outcomes (GPA) • Normative congruence: Environmental and social integration variables impacting psychological outcomes (utility, satisfaction, goal commitment, and stress)

Author	Purpose of Study	Findings	Influence on Bean and Metzner
Tinto, 1975	To explicate the process of student interactions with the academic environment. It was presumed that a student's type of institutional interactions could either promote retention or attrition.	Through the student departure theory (1975), the author hypothesized that student departure was influenced by four variables, including a lack of institutional integration, commitment, normative congruence, or fit, and difficulties with adjusting academically and socially.	• Academic integration and goal commitment: Academic variables influencing academic outcomes (GPA) • Social integration and institutional commitment: • Environmental and social integration variables impacting psychological outcomes (utility, satisfaction, goal commitment, and stress)

The following list, also depicted in Figure 2, includes the attrition variables considered within this study's framework:

(a) Background and defining variables: Age, enrollment status, residence, educational goals, high school performance, ethnicity, and gender.

(b) Academic variables: Study habits, advising, absenteeism, major certainty, and course availability.

(c) Environmental variables: Finances, employment, responsibility, and transfer.

(d) Social integration variables: Memberships, faculty contact, and school friends.

(e) Intent to leave: Academic outcome (GPA) and psychological outcomes (utility, satisfaction, goal commitment, and stress).
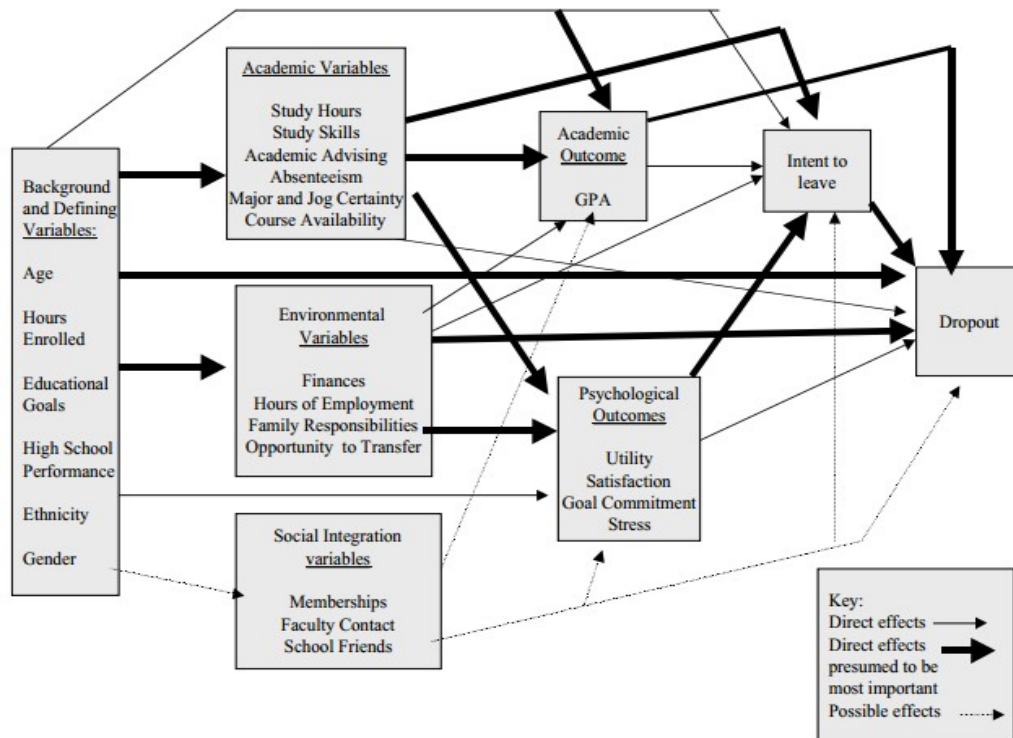
Figure 2. Bean and Metzner (1985) conceptual model of nontraditional student attrition.

Inputs: Background and Defining Variables

Background and defining variables entry characteristics including, "parents' education, socioeconomic status and income, ethnicity, age, gender, marital status including number of children, total previous college credit earned and goal commitment" (Bergman, 2012, p. 52) are accounted for in most attrition models. A student's background, or "prior understandings of self-efficacy and competence in [his or her] adult life worlds" (Kasworm, 2008, p.31), should be considered when a researcher "seeks to explain the longitudinal process that lead differing persons to varying forms of persistence and/or dropout behavior" (Tinto, 1975, p. 93). Bean and Metzner (1985) identified six background variables, four of which were relevant to this study. Those students who progressed to graduation MACC East were older (age), more likely female (gender), had performed well in prior academic experiences (high school or prior education), and

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maintained continuous enrollment (enrollment status) through graduation. Conversely, residency and the educational goals of the students were less relevant to the current study since each student commuted to the non-residential college and each student had degree-seeking status, which placed them on track for earning an associate degree.

Age. Though age is widely used as a variable when establishing parameters for defining the adult identity, an examination of the literature revealed conflicting findings regarding the impact or importance of age on academic attrition (Singell & Stater, 2006). While traditional attrition models discuss the background of students, they do not generally consider the age of students, as these models are intended for new students entering traditional, residential colleges immediately following their secondary completion (ages 18-22). However, with the average college student being over the age of 25 (NCES, 2015) and nearly half attending a two-year college (AACC, 2016c), it is necessary to investigate the connections between age and progression of adult students enrolling in nontraditional college settings.

"Simply being older does not mean an individual will have less time to participate in higher education" (Bergman, 2012, pp. 53-54), though participation could be impacted by the learner's competing responsibilities. Bean and Metzner's (1985) model considers age as an indirect contributor to learner attrition, in that it presumes that the enrollment of older students would be adversely impacted as a result of students' management of their "family responsibilities, hours of employment, and [resulting] higher levels of absenteeism" (p. 494).

Gender. "In 2001 a majority of associate degrees [were] awarded to females in 49 of the 50 states" (Mortenson, 2003, p. 1). Beginning in the 1950s, when the "college participation rate of women increased from 39 percent to 68 percent" (Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek,

2006, p. 18). Not only have women had a higher postsecondary participation than men, women earn 1.5 times as many associate degrees (618,115 to 388,846) (NCES, 2012).

Although women are more likely to achieve successful educational outcomes, understanding "the relationship between gender and retention is complex" and may "vary by environment and course of study" (Hanover Research, 2011, p. 5). Similar to the variable of age, there "is little evidence to indicate that demographic factors [such as gender] directly influence persistence" (Markle, 2015, p. 269). However, gender may indirectly impact progression. Women's level of work and family responsibility, and "the competing demands on their time and money [may] make it difficult for them to complete a certificate or degree or transfer to a four-year college or university" (St. Rose & Hill, 2013, p. 25).

High school performance (or prior collegiate academic experience). It is possible that an adult student's delayed entry into college (Choy, 2002), increases the risk of non-completion. Adult students are often viewed as at-risk, if they are "from backgrounds that are correlated with low levels of postsecondary success, including those who are academically underprepared, from underrepresented minority groups, students with low socioeconomic status, and students who have low levels of parental education" (Karp, 2011, p. 1). Adults can also be at risk when they have inadequate prior educational experiences, individual traits and characteristics that impact cognitive functions, familial challenges which strain their academic process, and difficulties integrating within the college (Miller & Murray, 2005).

According to an analysis by Complete College America (2014), nearly 52% of students enrolling in a two-year college need remediation in the form of completing pre-college english, math, or reading. Over half of incoming two-year college students enter at an academic level

deemed underprepared for college success. Reports indicate that less than a quarter of students earn an associate degree in two years, and less than one-tenth earn degrees in three years.

Despite these facts, "the data on progression provide several insights in directions for reform" of pre-college-level coursework, considering that the "assessments (often called placement tests)" represent a barrier for completion by adding non-credit course sequencing, which is "too complicated and takes too long" for students to exit (Bailey & Cho, 2010, p. 47). Also, Calcagno and Long (2008) argued that "placement into remediation may lower self-esteem and educational expectations, possibly due to a student being stigmatized by peers and faculty, and hence negatively impact[ing] student outcomes" (p. 4).

Enrollment and work hours. Another identified risk factor for adult learner attrition is less-than-full-time enrollment status. In order for students to complete an associate degree in two-years, they must complete a minimum of 30 credit hours per academic year and 15 hours per semester. However, because eight out of 10 "community college students are employed full or part-time" (AACC, 2011), most maintain less-than-full-time status to focus on their "life demands" in lieu of "collegiate involvement beyond the classroom" (Kasworm, 2003, p. 8).

While previous researchers have investigated student outcomes in relationship to enrollment intensity (Stratton, O'Toole, & Wetzel (2007), others have suggested exploring the accumulation of credits and academic momentum are much more valuable in understanding progression and attrition (Attewell, Heil, & Reisel, 2012; O'Toole, Stratton, & Wetzel, 2003).

Environment: Academic, Environmental, and Social Variables

According to Astin (1993), the "environment refers to the various programs, policies, faculty, peers, and educational experiences to which the student is exposed" (p. 7). The collegiate environment also can be described in terms of both the defining characteristics of the

institution and the institution's culture anchored in the student's peer interactions, classroom environment, and physical environment (Fleming, Howard, Perkins, & Pesta, 2005).

Bean and Metzner (1985) identified myriad environmental factors in their nontraditional model which encompass the following types of environment: academic (internal to the college), environmental (non-academic, external to the college), and social (internal, on-campus engagements). While several variables from each of these environmental factors were revealed in the current study (i.e., academic advising, faculty and practitioner interactions, academic performance, and an opportunity to transfer), other variables (i.e., memberships and school friends) were not evident.

Academic variables. Bean and Metzner (1985) presumed that "the academic variables represent the primary way in which adult students interact with the institution" (p. 492). Of the seven academic variables discussed in the nontraditional model, academic advising was the greatest contributor to the academic progression of MACC East's first-time adult freshmen. While there was trace evidence of the influence of student hours and skills, absenteeism, major and job uncertainty, and course availability, the greatest influence on progression to degree completion was the quality of the academic advising received.

Administrative, faculty, and practitioner interactions. The National Academic Advising Association asserted that "it is the people who come face-to-face with students on a regular basis who provide the positive growth experiences for students that enable them to identify their goals and talents and learn how to put them to use" (Noel, Levitz, & Salvri, 1985, p. 17). This is not to imply that only professional advisors serve in this capacity. Other personnel who have prolonged, quality interactions also share in the indirect facilitation of students' positive personal development and growth leading to increased engagement, learning, and success outcomes

(Endo & Harpel, 1982; Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2005). In support of, Tinto (2006) proposed the following five conditions to facilitate the advisement process:

(a) articulating expectations of student success;

(b) providing "clear and consistent" (p. 2) institutional information and advisement;

(c) offering "academic, social and personal support" (p. 3);

(d) treating students as valuable contributors to the academic environment; and,

(e) fostering student learning.

Academic performance, degree completion and transfer. While early models of attrition positioned academic performance and academic (via GPA or grades) as antecedents to academic progression and completion for traditional students, Bean and Metzner (1985) warned that while "college academic performance has been a consistent and powerful predictor of persistence in numerous studies at various types of institutions, …[c]ollege grade average … may be relatively less predictive of persistence for part-time and older commuter students than their more traditional counterparts" (p. 521). Rather, a steady academic momentum, accumulating "30 credit hours by the end of the first year, passing a summer class and completing a college-level English class [was found] to have had the greatest effect on transfer to a four-year institution and associate degree completion" (Davidson, 2015).

Social variables (non-academic). Bean and Metzner (1985) asserted that a student's "perceived (or real) lack of finances, working long hours, lacking encouragement, family responsibilities, and a perceived opportunity to transfer [were] presumed to have direct effects on attrition decisions as well as indirect effects on dropout through the psychological outcome variables" (p. 502). For the great majority of MACC East's FTAF, difficulty with finances was the most prevalent environmental variable, followed by the need to maintain employment, and

the desire to transfer. Unfortunately, too little data were generated to determine the influence outside encouragement and family responsibilities had upon FTAF.

Finances. Financial aid—or the lack thereof—has been identified as a barrier to completion for older students, who may not be eligible for academic scholarships to attend college. The complex nature of applying for and the stringent criteria for being awarded financial aid is daunting for many adult students (Long, 2010), especially those who are first-time attenders or who have returned to college after an extended absence. Faced with the harsh realities of not being awarded financial aid, accompanied by rising tuition costs, and nonacademic financial demands, adult students often drop out of college (Taylor et al., 2011).

Output: Intent to Leave

Early attrition theories and models generated from data following researcher inquiries into the dropout behaviors of traditional-aged students residing on campuses postulated that students who were unable to divest in their familial connections, values, and energies in exchange for physical and psychological engagement and involvement within the college environment were more likely to leave college prior to earning a degree (Astin, 1984; Spady, 1970; Tinto, 1975). These theories and models, however, did not take into consideration learners who maintained familial connections and did not reside on campus while enrolled.

Although Bean and Metzner's model was established in 1985, its philosophical underpinnings are extremely timely for the current American college-going population, of which 40% attended two-year institutions in 2012 (NCES, 2013a), 38% registered as part-time (NCES, 2013a), and 41% were 25 or older (NCES, 2013b). The nontraditional attrition model considers that older, nonresidential students' intent to leave college is motivated in part by the level of the "press" (Murray, 1938), coupled with their perceived "low levels of utility, satisfaction, or goal

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commitment" to the internal academic environment (p. 492). For the current study, utility (the perceived usefulness of a college education), satisfaction (the degree of enjoyment derived from taking on the role of student), and goal commitment (the perceived importance of obtaining a college education) were less pertinent to the attrition and progression of MACC East's FTAF. Instead, the inability to manage the stress stemming from the competing commitments of familial and occupational responsibilities had the most impact upon students' intent to leave the college.

To extend and support the models, theories, and interventions utilized in this research project, a summary of key empirical studies relevant to the work of the AR team was compiled and is presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Summary of Key Empirical Studies

Author(s)	Study Purpose and Summary
Astin, 1984	To provide a theory of student development that allowed for a systematic and comprehensive approach to understanding the dropout process of students enrolled in higher education.
Bailey & Cho, 2010	To substantiate the effectiveness and ineffectiveness of postsecondary remediation and the impact that remediation has on progression in learners who are required to complete developmental learning sequences.
Bean & Metzner, 1985	To study the enrollment of nontraditional undergraduate students and to introduce the conceptual model of nontraditional student attrition, a model created to explain the factors (background, academic variables, environmental variables, social integration, and intent to leave) associated with the dropout process of nontraditional students.

Author(s)	Study Purpose and Summary
Caruth, 2014	To present a 6-point plan for promoting classroom engagement for adult students. The author found that adult students benefitted from learning experiences that facilitated effective problem-solving skills, self-directed learning, collaboration skills, flexibility, and intrinsic motivation.
Deil-Amen, 2011	To investigate the relevance of Tinto's theory of student departure in comprehending the process of persistence, feelings of belonging, and goal accomplishments for adults enrolled in a two-year commuter college. The author found that academic integration was a more significant variable than social interaction and engagement for community college students.
Donaldson & Townsand, 2007	To report the findings of literature in journals of higher education to determine the level of discourse related to adult learners in scholarly literature. The authors found few articles dedicated to discourse focusing on adult undergraduate students.
Fairchild, 2003	To explore the effects of balancing multiples roles and responsibilities on the collegiate-level success for adult learners and to determine if institutions were operationally prepared to assist students with their diverse needs. The author found that a great number of institutions were not sufficiently equipped to take on the diverse needs of their adult student population and suggested that institutions reconsider their provision of student services.
Forbus, Newbold, & Mehta, 2011	To investigate the variables leading to stress on nontraditional learners and their coping skills compared to traditional students. The authors found that nontraditional students, when compared to their traditional counterparts, experienced differing variables leading to stress, including levels of motivation, campus involvement, and participation in social activities.

Author(s)	Study Purpose and Summary
Halx, 2010	Supported the idea of facilitating critical-thinking skill development in undergraduate education through experiential learning techniques. The author found institutions of higher education were woefully lacking in critical teaching and suggested that one method for increasing critical teaching techniques was via introducing adult education methods into the classroom.
Knowles, 1980	Introduced the theory of andragogy (the art and science of helping adults learn) and suggested that adult learning was differentiated from that of children since adults were more apt to be self-directed, hold a reservoir of knowledge, engaged in learning for practical reasons or changing social roles, were problem-solving oriented, and were internally motivated to learn.
Kolb & Kolb, 2005	Investigated then-recent developments in experiential learning theory and research and explored the utility of experiential learning within higher education.
	The authors found that the educational learning space was best benefitted by a universal program of institutional development focused on enhancing experiential learning.
Ritze, 2006	Investigated the role of institutional research in the enrollment management process. The author found institutions that increased the role of institutional research in the enrollment management process were better equipped to identify underrepresented students and address barriers to education.
Spady, 1970	To better understand the factors contributing to attrition in higher education. The theoretical model of student attrition was introduced to assess how related variables, such as family background, academic potential, normative congruence, social integration, satisfaction, and institutional commitment, impacted students' dropout decisions.

Author(s)	Study Purpose and Summary
Tinto, 1975	To explicate the process of student interactions with the academic environment. The author introduced the student departure theory and hypothesized student departure was influenced by lacking institutional integration, commitment, normative congruence, or fit, and difficulties with adjusting academically and socially.
Tinto, 1993	To better understand the different types of student behavior associated with leaving college. The author presumed social and academic integration were integral aspects of students' decision to remain in or depart from the college.
Wilcox, 1996	To convey issues related to adult educators promoting self-directed learning in adult learner. The author found the course materials and practices promoted the development of problem solving and thinking skills.

Summary

The purpose of this chapter was to review the literature associated with the progression of adult learners enrolled at public two-year colleges. The review highlighted adult' learning preferences (Knowles, 1980); the academic, environmental, and social variables thought to impact their intent to leave college (Bean & Metzner, 1985); and the barriers they face while seeking education (Cross, 1981). The literature further indicated that while there has been a plethora of attrition research pertaining to traditional-aged undergraduates attending public four-year institutions, far fewer studies have focused on understanding the processes of academic attrition of adult learners enrolled in other settings like two-year colleges (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Donaldson & Graham, 1999). Therefore, further exploration is needed to generate empirical data that practitioners, administrators, and policymakers framing assessments, policies,

and practices may reference when addressing—in an effort to reduce—the rate of attrition in

adult learners enrolled in public two-year colleges.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

This case study adhered to an action research (AR) case study methodological

framework. The following chapter provides general descriptions of both AR and case study

methods, details the specific design of this study, outlines the demographics of the participants,

and describes the processes used to collect and analyze resulting data. Along with a discussion

concerning the researcher's positionality and subjectivity, the chapter concludes with a

consideration of the study's ethical concerns, trustworthiness, and limitations.

The purpose of this study was to better understand the contributing factors associated

with the academic progression of adult learners who were admitted as first-time adult freshmen

into MACC East. Three questions guided this exploration:

1. To what extent do FTAF progress academically in a two-year community college,

    and what factors contribute to their progression?

2. What are guiding principles that administrators, faculty, and practitioners consider

    when addressing the academic progression of FTAF?

3. What knowledge is gained at the individual, team, and system levels using an action

    research methodology to examine the progression of FTAF?

Action Research Methodology

Action research "is a participatory process concerned with developing practical knowing

in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes. It seeks to bring together action and reflection,

theory and practice, in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions" (Reason &

Bradbury, 2008, p. 4).   Methodologically, action research is "fundamentally … grounded

in a qualitative research paradigm" (Stringer, 2007, p.19), allows for "a systematic way of

thinking through and articulating what you plan to study and how you plan to study it" (Ravitch

& Riggan, 2011, p.3), and brings "greater clarity and understanding of a question, problem or

issue" (Stringer, 2007, p.19). Schein (2008), as cited by Reason & Bradbury (2008), noted that

"the future of action research will depend upon what we mean by that concept and how we show

both academics and practitioners the value of collaboration for learning and helping" (p. 696).

This latter declaration served, in part, as an intent of the current study.

Action research methodology may be particularly helpful to higher education

administrators, faculty, and practitioners who want to bring about organizational change through

continuous collaboration, inquiry, feedback, and reflection (Ravitch & Riggan, 2011, and

Stringer, 2007). Compared to the traditional scientific research method—which is driven by the

researcher's need to gain evidence to support or nullify a hypothesis—AR is guided by

collaboration, exploratory inquiry, "[inclusion] of others' vision … and scrutiny, through which

wider possibilities of understanding can unfold" (McIntosh, 2010, p. 48). Thus, the investigator

or facilitator of an AR project is not the sole expert but rather serves as part of the research team,

relying upon communication with fellow team members to move the project forward.

The AR method also relies upon reflective inquiry, which involves an ongoing

examination, probing, and framing of a specific organizational issue. The intent of the inquiry is

to continuously seek clarity and a deeper understanding of the issue. Effective AR often

comprises first-, second-, and third-person inquiry. First-person inquiry "is typically

characterized as the forms of inquiry and practice that one does on one's own" (Coghlan &

Jacobs, 2005, p. 447); second-person inquiry "addresses [the] ability to inquire into and work

with others on issues of mutual concern"; and third-person inquiry "aims at creating

communities of inquiry, involving people beyond the direct second-person action" (Coghlan &

Brannick, 2014, p. 7).

Ongoing dialogue is also important to AR since it has the potential to produce feedback

that can be used in the "adjustment of processes" (Yalom, 1995, p. 489) within a research study.

Similar to the three perspectives of inquiry, feedback can be organized in three categories,

namely single-, double-, and triple-loop feedback. Single-loop feedback leads to "change in

practice"; double-loop feedback leads to the "transformation of strategy"; and triple-loop

feedback leads to "change in quality of attention" (Torbert & Taylor, 2008, p. 240).

Reflection, or the process by which individuals "recapture, notice and reevaluate their

experience, [and] … turn it into learning" (Boud, Cohen, & Walker, 1993, p. 9), is central to AR.

Learning facilitators as well as other AR team members develop their reflection skills over time

as they engage in practices that elicit deeper considerations and recollections of their, the team's,

and others' experiences (McIntosh, 2010).

Research Design: Action Research Cycles

Action research methodology is an iterative "process alternating between action and

reflection upon the action to initiate further action converging towards improving the situation of

concern" (Sankaran & Dick, 2015, p. 212). These iterations—a "spiral of steps, each of which is

composed of a circle of planning, action and fact-finding about the result of action" (Lewin,

1997[1946], p. 146)—represent the core and thesis cycles. The core and thesis cycles are equally

important in AR methodology; they are bound and strengthened through various phases of the

project, and both cycles are facilitated by continual action and reflection. The core cycle is

actualized through the process of addressing the operational, technical, and structural tasks

associated with a project's progression. The thesis cycle is realized when the action researcher and the AR team achieve meta-learning by reflecting on the issues and outcomes (content), implemented strategies (processes), and underlying assumptions and perspectives (premises) (Mezirow, 1991) associated with the project's unfolding core cycle.

For the purposes of this study, Coghlan and Brannick's (2014) AR cycle was adopted as the methodology to explain how the inquiry at MACC East advanced. According to Coghlan and Brannick, an AR cycle consists of "a pre-step, context and purpose and four basic steps: constructing, planning action, taking action and evaluating action" (p. 9). Figure 3 illustrates the AR cycle adapted for this study.
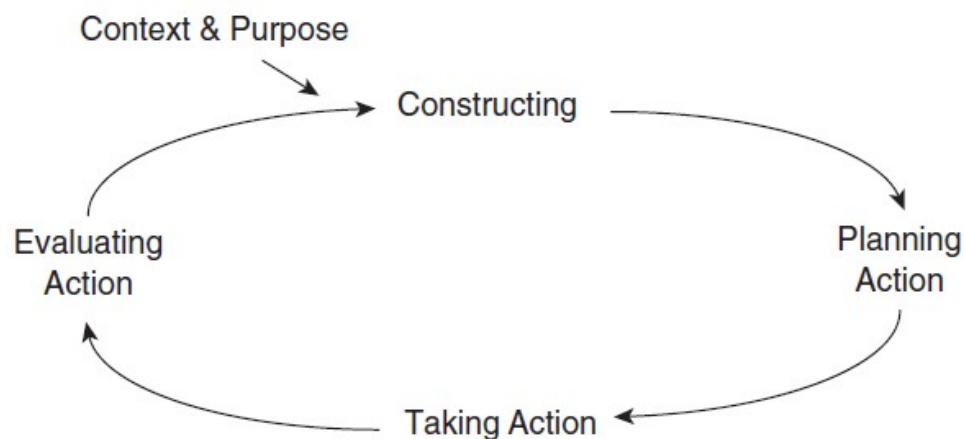
Figure 3. Coghlan and Brannick's (2014) action research cycle.

Case Study Methodology

Case study methodology is one of the most prevalent research methods and offers "an appropriate way to answer broad research questions, by providing [the researcher] with a thorough understanding of how the process develops in [the] case" (Swanboro, 2010, p. 3).

Often combining qualitative and quantitative inquiry (Watkins & Marsick, 1997), "every type of [case study] design include[s] the desire to analyze contextual conditions in relation to the 'case,' contribute to the knowledge of individual, group, organizational, social, political, and related phenomena," and "allow investigators to retain holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events- such as … organizational and managerial processes" (Yin, 2009, p. 4). Routinely, case studies are classified as either single- or multiple-case, "reflect[ing] different design situations," and including "two variants, unitary or multiple units of analysis" (p. 50). In an effort to gain a detailed understanding of the contributing factors associated with the academic progression of FTAF enrolled at MACC East, the current study employed a single-case design with multiple embedded units of analysis (in the forms of academic documents and reports, individual interviews, and team interactions).

In addition to facilitating the exploration of specific social phenomena, the case study methodology benefitted this study in two primary ways. First, it allowed the researcher and the participants within the case to engage collaboratively in identifying the problem, creating a plan to solve the problem, implementing interventions, and assessing the data associated with the study. Instead of one person exploring the topic and interpreting the meaning of the findings, multiple AR team members participated in the generation of knowledge around the progression of adult learners. The diverse perspectives of the team members provided a depth of understanding that could not have been achieved had I attempted to explore this topic alone.

A second benefit of completing this work as an AR case study was the technique supported the evolutionary process of the research. During the preliminary stages, it was impossible to account for unforeseen errors and setbacks caused by inconsistent meeting times, interrupted phases of the research cycle, and the attrition of AR team members.

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Study Participants

The east campus of MACC is one of the smallest of the multiple campuses. Therefore, many of the administrative and service offices operate with only one to four practitioners—well below average staffing levels. The project sponsor (Mr. Jones) and I took this into consideration when determining whom to ask to participate as members of the AR team, so critical to this study. We initially refrained from inviting participants who supervised two or fewer staff members. Also, because of the distance to the nearest campus—nearly 40 miles—we elected to only seek participants from MACC East, recognizing the time constraints and economic hardships that may have arisen for practitioners required to travel from one campus to another.

After considering the parameters of participation, personnel from the following MACC East offices were identified as potential AR team participants: advising and counseling, dean of students, disability services, financial aid, the registrar, and testing services. These practitioners were invited to participate because of their full staffing and ability to work with members of the student body and share specialized knowledge from their functional areas within the college.

Taking into account the hierarchy of each office and the ability of each entity to access data and make decisions, the project sponsor and I invited individuals who held functional positions at either the coordinator or director level. Following institutional research board (IRB) approval of the study from both the University of Georgia (UGA) and MACC East, and utilizing the college's phone directory, we sent a letter of invitation and a participant consent form to the college-issued email address of each potential participant.

The letter provided (a) the project's title, (b) the names and contact information of the primary and co-investigators, (c) the purpose of the study, (d) notification of how they were identified, and (e) the phone number of the IRB chairperson at UGA, who could respond to any

questions or concerns about the rights of participants in the study. Participants were asked to acknowledge receipt of the invitation and all did so as requested. However, citing inadequate time to devote to the process, the financial aid and disability representatives opted out of the project.

The Action Research Team

The final AR team membership consisted of the project sponsor, Elvis Jones[3] (central research office), Dominique Reed (advising and counseling), Martin Aster (dean of students), Delina White (coordinator of testing), and myself, the insider-researcher (enrollment). Each of the team members held varying perspectives, expertise, and knowledge regarding adult learning and persistence. As a result of its diversity, the team was able to tap into multiple levels of learning and problem solving. The following are brief summaries of each member's role on the AR team, also summarized in Table 3.

Elvis Jones. Mr. Jones had been employed at MACC Central for 25 years in various positions. In his role in the central research office, Mr. Jones assisted college representatives with designing their research projects, collecting and analyzing data, and reporting findings. As the project sponsor, Mr. Jones was the first official participant in the study. His support in securing the technical approvals associated with the core cycle of this project, along with his insightful feedback and input regarding the project's design, action planning, implementation, and evaluation were invaluable. Of all of the team members, Mr. Jones was the most even-keeled, rational, and direct in his assessments.

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[3] Pseudonyms are used for AR team members to protect the anonymity of the individuals and institution who participated in this action research case study.+

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Dominique Reed. In his role as associate director of advising and counseling, Mr. Reed was well equipped to understand the personal, developmental, and career issues related to students' academic achievement. Employed at the college for eight years, Mr. Reed's duties included academic and career advising, developmental studies assistance, and program-of-study planning. His role allowed him an ongoing and relational awareness of the current needs, challenges, pressures, and successes students face in managing their multiple obligations. Unfortunately, Mr. Reed left the team at the time of his resignation one year into the project.

Martin Aster. Mr. Aster had been employed at the college for 17 years. As the dean of students, Mr. Aster was an executive-level administrator who oversaw student life and activities, judicial affairs, and health and wellness. While he generally operated as a decision maker in his hands-on work with learners, he had the ability to see student development as a top-down process. Mr. Aster's presence and participation in the study helped keep the team mindful of connecting the project goals with the college's guiding principles of remaining relevant, student-centered, and responsive in light of the development of MACC's students.

Delina White. Ms. White, the coordinator of testing, had managed the campus testing department for 15 years. Since placement testing is required for admission into the college, the testing office personnel frequently are among the first college practitioners whom students meet. Cognizant of this, Ms. White purposefully made those first moments efficient, warm, and meaningful. In addition to her full-time responsibilities within the college and her participation in this project, Ms. White was also a doctoral student who had shared interest in bringing about changes that would advance the success of MACC's students. Ms. White's commitment, and transparency in engaging with the complex issues of progression, challenging our assumptions, and reflecting on the possibilities of our actions were tireless.

Insider-researcher (me). I had managed the enrollment office at MACC East for over a decade. During that time, I had assisted learners with understanding and maneuvering the policies, procedures, and processes of admissions, enrollment, matriculation, and graduation at MACC East. For this project, I continued my primary role with MACC East and added my secondary role of action researcher. My secondary role entailed me working directly with the MACC East AR team, a cross-section of colleagues employed in various positions within MACC. Further, as a result of my insider positionality, I had the benefit of not being viewed as the expert, as an outsider-researcher, such as a consultant might have been seen. Instead, I was able to enter the exploration process as a collaborative peer researcher alongside my colleagues. While I had the task of convening the team, it was determined and articulated that we would collectively investigate, assess, plan, and address the progression dilemma faced by MACC East's FTAF. The benefits of my being an insider in this process were that I understood the culture of the institution, was familiar with the potential team members (and they with me), and had access to the data needed to undergird the research.

While there were benefits to being an insider-researcher, challenges also surfaced. The challenges included managing the strains resulting from my role duality, maintaining the momentum of the project as the team membership shifted and declined, and remaining focused on the purpose of the AR project amidst the backdrop of radical organizational change. Although my research interests in the academic success of FTAF was the substance upon which this study was formed, the AR team, MACC East's participants, and I were able to co-create knowledge to better understand MACC East's progression issues, improve practice, and contribute to the body of knowledge around the subject.

Table 3

MACC Action Research Team Membership

Name*	Gender	Office	Role	Years of Service
Martin Aster	M	Dean of Students	Student Services Dean	17
Elvis Jones	M	Research Analyst	Central Research Office	25
Dominique Reed	M	Advising	Associate Director	8
Delina White	F	Testing	Coordinator of Testing	15
Demetrix Rostick-Owens (Insider-researcher)	F	Enrollment	Campus Registrar	12

Note. * Pseudonyms were used to provide anonymity to the participants and the institution of this action research case study.

Data Collection

Qualitative researchers typically rely on four methods for gathering information: (a) participating in the setting, (b) observing directly, (c) interviewing in depth, and (d) analyzing documents and material culture (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). This study used each of these methods. Additional data were derived from transcribed notes of AR team planning sessions and student focus groups. Table 4 lists each of the data sources in relation to the research questions.

Table 4

Research Questions and Corresponding Data Sources

Research Questions	Data Sources
1. To what extent do FTAF progress academically in a two-year community college, and what factors contribute to their progression?	• Documents: Academic, enrollment, registration, academic advising, and financial aid documents • Adult learner focus group sessions
2. What are guiding principles that administrators, faculty, and practitioners consider when addressing the academic progression of FTAF?	• Adult learner focus group sessions • Participant reflective interviews
3. What knowledge is gained at the individual, team, and system levels using an action research methodology to examine the progression of FTAF?	• AR meetings and interviews • Researcher observation of AR team, journal, and field note reflections

Team Meetings

After gaining support from the project sponsor to explore the topic of adult learner

progression, an IRB was developed and submitted to the IRBs of both MACC East and UGA. In

the one-page IRB proposal, I stated my intention of conducting the current research as an AR

case study, in which I would work with an AR team (including five practitioners of MACC and

MACC East) and the research participants (including MACC East's administrators, faculty,

practitioners, and first-year students) to better understand the progression patterns of enrolled

FTAF. As supplemental documentation to the IRB proposal, I included the informed consent

and described the study's purpose, procedures, benefits, incentives, potential risks and

discomforts, privacy/confidentiality, and voluntary nature. After the IRB approval, participants

were sent a request to record their sessions as well as contact information for the researcher, co-researcher, and the IRB offices of both MACC East and UGA.

Audio-recorded AR team meetings, artifacts, and documents from the meetings served as key sources of data for this study. Once receiving approval to engage in the research, and after the AR team had been seated, I scheduled the first team meeting, which served primarily as a means for determining team members' views regarding the college, their expectations around participating in the research, current issues related to adult learners, and presumed project outcomes. Out of this initial discussion grew the vision, mission statement, and expected goals of the study (see Appendix A).

Over the course of the next year, the AR team focused its efforts on problem construction and action planning. Our earliest tasks included "scanning" internal and external environments to identify existing policies, practices, and initiatives related to adult learners. In order to consistently record our findings, the team drafted a scanning form (a "College Initiatives Information Sheet") for capturing relevant data (see Appendix B). Using this form, the AR team members documented and described the MACC East's initiatives, strategies, techniques, and programs that were providing opportunities for adult learners. The central focus of the scanning task was to encourage the team to collectively identify and articulate the areas within the MACC East system related specifically to the success of adult learners. The results of the scanning raised concerns among the team members about the lack of activities offered by the college, the polarizing views held at MACC East regarding the value of adult learners, and the depth of understanding concerning the services needed to enhance adult learner progression.

Participant Interviews

Generally, immersion in the research setting permits a researcher to hear, see, and begin to experience reality as the participants do (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). As an insider-researcher, I was enveloped by and involved in the MACC East setting on a daily basis.

Throughout the study, the AR team simultaneously produced and collected data through personal reflections within team meetings and one-on-one conversations. However, since we wanted to explore current practices of administrators, faculty, and practitioners (our participants) in relation to adult learners, we felt it important to gain input and insights from them as well.

The AR team used reflective interviews (Roulston, 2010), to access voices concerning adult learner progression. Over a six-week period, 20 one-hour interviews were conducted with internal and external participants of MACC East. The interviews took place either in person or by phone, depending upon each interviewee's preference. Prior to each interview, participants were sent an invitation via email along with a copy of the consent form. If invitees did not respond to the initial email within 14 days, a second and final email was sent.

For those who consented to be interviewed, the logistical details were then worked out to determine the day, time, and location of the interview. The agreed upon meeting time was confirmed immediately (by email), with a reminder sent one day prior. On the day of the interview, each constituent had an opportunity to ask questions about the consent form and the project, was reminded that the interview would be audio recorded, and was advised of his or her ability to stop the interview at any time. During the period when the interviews were conducted, the college was closed on two occasions due to inclement weather. For the participants whose interviews had been scheduled on those days, their respective interview times were rescheduled.

Document Review

In qualitative research, "researchers supplement participant observation, interviewing, and observation with gathering and analyzing documents produced in the course of everyday events or constructed specifically for the research at hand" (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 107). The AR team reviewed MACC's websites, meeting minutes, institutional research data, and archived student records (e.g., admissions, enrollment, registration, and financial aid) to understand the extent of and the factors contributing to MACC East's adult learner progression.

Adult Learner Focus Groups

A focus group—or group interview (Stringer, 2007)—is convened specifically to acquire information regarding a particular topic of interest (Krueger & Casey, 2009). The AR team hosted focus groups with adult students enrolled in a then-new freshman student orientation course to solicit their views about the characteristics of adult learners, the expectations for attending college, the collegiate experience, and their recommendations for making the campus more adult-friendly. The students and instructors of the course were invited to participate in the study; subsequently, two instructors and their students consented to participating. Though the AR team had planned to host four focus group sessions, only three convened as a result of scheduling conflicts. After the final focus groups took place (focus group protocol is included as Appendix D), both instructors agreed to be interviewed concerning their experiences.

<div align="center">

Data Analysis

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Content analysis was selected as the tool for examining and interpreting the data for this study as it provided a means for condensing, interpreting, displaying, and drawing conclusions (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2013), while providing a context for scrutinizing consequential components of the "artifacts of social communication" (Berg, 2007, p. 238). The qualitative

method of content analysis complemented the action research case study as it was equipped to

handle the masses of information generated from the data collection processes (e.g., interview

notes and artifacts, academic and institutional documents, and focus group notes). Along with

selecting the research methodology and identifying the materials to be included in the data

analysis (Krippendorff, 1980; US GAO, 1989), the remainder of the data analysis procedure

included establishing (a) units of analysis, (b) coding procedures and coding categories, (c)

coding the material (first- and second-cycle coding), and (d) analyzing and interpreting the data

results to identify emerging and meaningful patterns (Berg, 2007; Krippendorff, 1980; US GAO,

1989). An overview of the study's data analysis procedures follows.

Units of Analysis, Coding Procedures, and Categories

As mentioned earlier, the study included several units of analysis. For the first research

question, which explored the extent of progression, data were retrieved from academic,

enrollment, registration, advising, and financial aid documents, and from focus group feedback

from adult freshmen who had enrolled in MACC East between January 2012 and January 2015.

With regard to the second research question, concerning the guiding principles considered when

facilitating progression in adult learners, the interviews of administrators, faculty, and

practitioners were mined for data. Finally, the third research question exploring the individual,

team, and system knowledge gained by undertaking an action research case study was shaped by

the personal reflections of the insider-researcher, documented team meetings, and interviews of

administrators, faculty, practitioners, and students. Table 5 summarizes the data analysis

approach in relation to the research questions.

Table 5

Research Questions and Corresponding Data Analysis Approach

Research Questions	Data Analysis Approach
1. To what extent do FTAF progress academically in a two-year community college, and what factors contribute to their progression?	• Coding, including elemental, direct phrase, descriptive, summative, process, evaluation, and in vivo
2. What are guiding principles that administrators, faculty, and practitioners consider when addressing the academic progression of FTAF?	• Coding, including elemental, direct phrase, descriptive, summative, process, evaluation, and in vivo
3. What knowledge is gained at the individual, team, and system levels using an action research methodology to examine the progression of FTAF?	• Coding, including elemental, direct phrase, descriptive, summative, process, evaluation, and in vivo

HyperRESEARCH. With the consent of participants, the team meetings, interviews, document reviews, and focus groups were all recorded, yielding an abundance of electronic data that was transcribed by a professional transcription service. The service produced a raw end-product in Word format documenting the exchanges between interviewers and interviewees. As with most qualitative studies, the raw data were abundant and needed to be condensed into smaller, more feasible datasets prior to analysis. To facilitate the data management process, HyperRESEARCH, a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software package, was used.

HyperRESEARCH was selected over similar products because it provided a simplified tutorial for new users, could integrate multimedia formats (i.e., text, graphics, audio, and video), allowed multiple researchers to work on a case, was user-friendly, and was reasonably priced. Additionally, the document-uploading process was straightforward, making it easy to add the

transcribed records of team meetings, participant interviews, document reviews, and adult learner focus groups. Once the transcribed records were loaded, coding commenced..

Coding Process

From the outset of the data analysis process, the AR team began creating data codes, or "word[s] or short phrase[s] that symbolically [assign] a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data" (Saldana, 2009, p. 3). Saldana (2009) described two types of code cycles:

> First Cycle coding processes range in magnitude from a single word to a full sentence to an entire page of text to a stream of moving images…. Second Cycle coding processes [include] … the exact same units, longer passages of text, and even a reconfiguration of the codes themselves developed thus far. (p. 3).

First-cycle coding. As Saldana (2009) noted, the first-cycle coding process could range from coding a single word, phrase, or sentence to an entire page of text. Each of the coding elements were presented in the current study, resulting in 141 initial codes. The following methods were used to generate the codes from the raw data:

1. Elemental coding (or foundational coding, according to Saldana, 2013)

    (a) Single-word coding- such as *intention* or *retention*.

    (b) Direct-phrase coding- such as *front-end intentions of students.*

    (c) Descriptive coding and code phrases- such as *30 hours and transfer* or *social media is the language of the student*.

    (d) Summative coding- such as *retention is an institution centered concept, while persistence is a student centered process*.

2. Process coding, which represents recognizable actions expressed in the data (Saldana, 2013), resulted in codes such as *intervening at the student level* or *collecting data*.

3. Evaluation coding, which ascribes judgment to the comments (Saldana, 2013) listed in the data, resulted in code phrases such as *retention= institutional goals*, *intervening at the institutional level = retention*, or *persistence = early alert*.

Table 6 lists a portion of the resulting codes according to each first-cycle coding method.

Table 6

First-Cycle Coding Methods and Resulting Codes

Elemental Codes

Single	*Direct Phrase*	*Descriptive*	*Summative*
Action	*Continuous*	*Second-year freshman*	*Adult learners feel left out*
Adult	*Enrollment*	*30 hours to transfer*	*Retention is an institution centered concept, while persistence is student centered*
Attrition	*First to Second retention*	*Social media is the language*	
Barriers	*Front-end intent*	*Counting hours*	
Collaborate	*Grassroots effort of the willing*	*Positive characteristics of adult learners*	
Culture	*Lost to attrition*	*Adult learner needs*	*The college has multiple roles*
Freshman	*Model of practice*	*Adult learner initiatives*	
Graduation	*Purposeful direction*		*Strategies for assisting adult learners should be didactic*
Intention	*Adult friendly campus*	*Adult learner is*	
Intervention		*Different from traditional learners*	
Knowledge			
Learner			*The adult friendly campus is flexible*
Outcomes			
Progression			
Resources			

Process Codes

Comparing themes across the data
Conducting adult learner focus group sessions
Gathering and collecting data
Intervening at the student and institutional levels

Evaluation Codes

Retention is unmet institutional goals
Early alerts are designed to identify students at risk of attrition Lack
of persistence is attrition
Engagement if finding ways to connect

Second-cycle coding. After completing the first-cycle coding, second-cycle coding was initiated using HyperRESEARCH. The intended purpose of the second-cycle coding was to re-code and begin to group the codes into meaningful units (Saldana, 2013). Several rounds of second-cycle coding were undertaken and involved the following progressions:

1. re-reading and re-evaluating the documented codes within the case;

2. determining the accuracy of the coding (e.g., condensing, renaming, re-coding, grouping, re-grouping, or deleting codes where necessary);

3. identifying similar codes for the purpose of grouping and refining;

4. repeating steps 1 to 4 until the production of a final master list of themes/subthemes;

5. creating a coding scheme to be used for organizing and making sense of the data.

Table 7 displays the resulting master codebook and coding scheme.

Table 7

Master Codebook and Coding Scheme

Code	Theme	Sub-Code	Theme
ADL	Adult	CHR	Characteristics
		MDS	Mindset
BRS	Barriers	FLX	Flexibility
		TME	Time
		UPD	Underprepared
FEL	Feeling	ITM	Intimidation
INV	Initiatives	ADV	Advisement
		ENG	Engagement
		EVL	Evaluations
KNW	Knowledge	LNG	Learning
		UND	Understanding
MCE	MACC East	ENV	Environment
		MGP	Mission/Guiding Principles
		RES	Resources
		STC	Structure
OUT	Outcomes	ATR	Attrition
		DCP	Degree completion
		PRG	Progression
RCH	Research	BIA	Bias
		CYP	Cycles and Process
		REF	Reflections
STG	Strategies	AFC	Friendly campus
		COV	Conversations
		SPT	Support
THR	Theory	ADG	Andragogy

Interpreting Emergent Patterns

The data analysis process made it possible to reduce the large quantity of qualitative data into smaller, more manageable parcels that could be further evaluated for deeper understanding as it related to the research process, researcher, participants, and students of MACC East. First- and second-cycle coding facilitated the data coding process, which in turn made it possible for me to make meaning of the presenting data as it related to the established research questions.

The coding process (and my interpretations of it), facilitated my understanding of the:

- range and extent of progression (e.g., attrition, continuous enrollment, and graduation) and the factors (e.g., academic, financial, and personal) contributing to or hindering it (research question 1).

- guiding principles that administrators, faculty, and practitioners considered when addressing FTAF attrition (e.g., institutional attitude) (research question 2).

- knowledge gained at the individual, team, and system levels when using an action research case study methodology (e.g., identifying biases) (research question 3).

Trustworthiness

Maintaining trustworthiness is a valued aspect of research, ensuring that "researchers have rigorously established the veracity, truthfulness, or validity of the information and analysis that have emerged from the research process" (Stringer, 2007, p. 57). As Stake (1995) suggested, trustworthiness can be garnered when researchers present "a substantial body of uncontestable description" (p. 110) validated through triangulation. When engaging in the coding process, the AR team was able to begin to identify key concerns and issues related to adult learners and their progression by analyzing the frequently repeated responses of administrators, faculty, practitioners, and students. Overall, the most prevalent themes included:

- naming the barriers FTAF face when enrolled;

- lacking coordinated institutional success initiatives for FTAF;

- FTAF academic under-preparedness;

- defining or identifying adult learners in a traditional college environment; and,

- first-year attrition in adult learners.

Additionally, a powerful confirmation of the trustworthiness of the current study was the empirical data retrieved from the office of research regarding the FTAF of MACC East which corresponded closely with the sentiments shared by administrators, faculty, practitioners, and students. These data (and findings, discussed further in Chapter 5) supported the supposition that FTAF were routinely challenged by:

- barriers that left them feeling intimidated by or left out of the educational process;

- not having an adequate amount of services and resources provided for facilitating their learning;

- poor secondary and pre-college entry performance;

- feeling invisible within the academic environment; and,

- leaving the college as a result of poor or slow academic pace and performance, or academic and financial restrictions and exclusion.

To further safeguard the trustworthiness of this research, AR team members and I engaged in reflective interviews and member checks to confirm our understanding of the process. The team met on a regular basis, and I took notes during each meeting to document each encounter. Moreover, the notes from our meetings, once completed, were shared with the group via email for review, clarifications, and modifications so that all members remained vigilant and present in the research process. Unfortunately, because the membership of the team changed frequently

and the consistency of the team's meeting times shifted in response, it became increasingly challenging to maintain a diverse view of the research process. This area of concern is elaborated in the next section.

Study Limitations

Though action research case study methodology was a natural choice for understanding more deeply the complexities associated with adult learner progression at a two-year institution, it also presented challenges. Specific concerns associated with the method included the amount of time needed to progress through the multiple iterations of the project, the difficulty of achieving the full democratic participation of the AR team members, and the sensitivity of the method to the project's context.

The Issue of Time

The AR team members—all of whom were employed full-time at the college—volunteered to take part in this project; there were no additional incentives for their involvement. Each participated in this self-forming workgroup out of professional concern and curiosity, and they remained committed for the duration of the study. As such, the time associated with the completion of the project's tasks, including the multiple meetings needed for planning, taking action, and assessing that action, was in addition to their responsibilities at the college.

Although the AR workgroup was sanctioned by MACC East, it was not initiated by the college; therefore, team members needed to seek approval for time away from official

duties. One of the unstated conditions of participation was that it would not interfere with primary job duties. Thus, during peak times at the college, meetings were either forgone or conducted with only the members who were available to meet. Unfortunately, certain members were frequently unable to attend the necessary meetings. This disruption in collective meeting times made it difficult to consistently progress through the phases.

The Issue of Democratic Participation

Stemming from the issue of limited time was the challenge of achieving equitable and democratic participation. When the team met in its entirety, the meetings were run collaboratively, with each member providing input. Yet, to ensure continuity of the process, meetings were, on several occasions, held with less than the full membership. Consequently, equitable participation was not achieved. Instead, the democratic process was often steered by those able to fully commit. Whenever possible, absent team members were kept abreast of updates via email; however, it became emails were not an adequate substitution for participation.

The Issue of Context

In the time since the initiation of the study, MACC East has gone through a period of revolutionary and highly disruptive change, which began when the college became part of a new institutional consolidation. This organizational change resulted in significant attrition among the college's administrators, faculty, practitioners, and students. In retrospect, it seems quite ironic to have been engaged in research exploring the progression of first-time adult learners at a time of organizational depreciation and uncertainty. Nevertheless, there were numerous benefits of the AR process, including team members' familiarization with the systematic AR framework for bringing about practical change, generating awareness and new knowledge regarding the academic progression of FTAF within two-year colleges, and working collaboratively and democratically to better understand the issue and bring about change. It was the team's hope that gaining a deeper understanding of the factors contributing to the progression of adult learners would remain a worthy cause for the institution in its new form and for the advancement of research within two-year colleges.

Researcher Subjectivity

To be subjective is to make one's unseen, protected self the center of inquiry and understanding through reflection and reflexivity, requiring intentional evaluation of one's thoughts, beliefs, convictions, assumptions, and values. In this portion of the document, I provide such reflection.

I have been an adult learner within higher education for 20 years. Although I entered college immediately following my graduation from high school and was classified as a "traditional" student upon entry, I identified as an adult learner. Commuting to the campus to take classes and working to support my educational pursuits made my college experience atypical. Frequently faced with conflicting responsibilities in managing my obligations to family, work, and school, it took me half a year longer to complete my bachelor's degree. I was able to progress due to the support of my family and my personal academic drive, which was further motivated by my desire to become the first in my immediate family to finish college.

In retrospect, it is clear that my personal educational identity, life story, and journey—which have been influenced by a complex set of conditions, supports, challenges, and surprises—helped to engender and encourage my interests in understanding how academic success in adult learners can either be facilitated or hindered. I undertook this study to identify ways to increase opportunities for and decrease barriers to academic success which many of MACC East's adult learners face when determining the direction of their academic pursuits.

CHAPTER 4

CASE STUDY REPORT

While every sector of undergraduate-level enrollment at degree-granting institutions has grown, "the biggest change in who produces postsecondary education has come about through the remarkable growth in community colleges … offer[ing]… two-year associate degrees or shorter certificate programs" (Barrow, Brock, & Rouse, 2013, p. 30). Though this observation seems promising for the future of postsecondary education, the reality is that an increasing number of newly enrolled postsecondary students (many of them adult learners) are either not progressing beyond their first year of college or leaving before completing their degrees. Instead of flourishing academically, adult learners more frequently experience a reduced or stunted level of educational aspiration and motivation or discontinue their enrollment in the institution altogether. The action research team of the east campus of Metro Atlantis Community College convened to explore this phenomenon.

Although the primary purpose of this AR project was to study adult learner retention within the context of a two-year college, the AR team's difficulties enacting the project within and remaining connected to the college soon took precedence. This chapter provides a description of the research site (i.e., MACC East), documents events that occurred during the project's AR phases and cycles, and speaks to the participants' and the team's willingness and non-willingness to carry on our research in the system, which was actively in a state of decline and showed reluctance to support the team's efforts.

The Two-Year College in Context: The Organization

This AR case study was conducted at MACC East, the smallest campus of MACC, a multi-campus, open-access college located outside of a metropolitan area in the southeastern U.S. While the majority of MACC's campuses are situated in densely populated areas that are accessible to students via public transit, car, or by foot, MACC East is situated on 100 acres of undeveloped land in a rural, sparsely populated town with no public transportation and limited accessibility.

Although MACC East is a small, rural campus, it adheres to the college's overall open-access mission, using less selective admissions practices that guarantee access for undergraduate students. Instead of using secondary grade point average (GPA) and standardized test scores to admit students, MACC and its campuses, at a minimum, require students to provide proof of completion of a secondary degree or credentials and to satisfy basic college entry requirements demonstrating skill proficiency in secondary English, reading, and mathematics. These less selective requirements "provide [entry] to education for individuals, many of whom are adults, in [the] service region" (AACC, 2016, para. 2) who have delayed their entry into college due to their roles as parents, caregivers, or spouses, are financially independent, are enrolled part-time or less, and who hold secondary credentials other than a high school diploma (Choy, 2002).

With an enrollment of 21,000 students, MACC is considered a "very large" higher education institution (Carnegie Classification, 2015a). Regrettably, current data show a 10% decline in enrollment from the time of MACC's peak enrollment of nearly 30,000 students, documented in 2011. Though enrollment has decreased, the student population has remained diverse relative to age (ranging from 16 to 84 years), gender, ethnicity, enrollment status, and resident status.

A Decentralized Organizational Structure: Power and Authority

In the early 2000s, the conditions for increasing enrollment in higher education were ripe: Interest rates were low, vast majorities of baby boomers were returning to college, and displaced workers were seeking to modernize their skillset. As a result, MACC experienced a drastic rise in enrollment within all student categories. To accommodate this influx of students, the organizational structure of MACC underwent a transformation, shifting from a heavily centralized model emphasizing "decision making [that was] pulled toward the top of the organization" (Cameron & Smart, 1998, p. 72) to a decentralized model in which power and authority were collectively shared throughout the organization and across the college's five functional divisions (e.g., administrative, academic affairs, student affairs, financial affairs, and institutional advancement). In addition to delineating organizational power and authority, a decentralized model would, it was thought, nurture occupational security, build trust for employers, and prepare employees for the establishment of new lines of influence, cooperation, teamwork, communication, and innovation (Cameron & Smart, 1998). It would also foster efficiency, skill mastery, specialization, and clarity of departmental procedures and protocols of professional practice. According to such a model, with each step down the organizational ladder at MACC, the defined departmental duties become progressively more comprehensive and intently centered upon the engagement of the targeted student population attending each campus.

MACC East: The AR Team's Domain

Though MACC has existed for half a century, MACC East has been open for less than a decade. When MACC East was established in 2007, enrollment was promising, reaching 1,900. At that time, the average student was approximately 23 year of age, enrolled part-time, and registered for evening and weekend classes. Based upon the characteristics described by Choy

(2002), the vast majority of MACC East's population would have been considered adult learners. This comes as little surprise considering that "educational forecasters predict[ed] the enrollment of 'nontraditional' (Cross, 1981) adult learners would far outpace that of traditional students between the ages of 18 and 21" (NCES, 2013c).

The steady pattern of enrollment growth among adult learners at MACC East continued into 2011, when the campus's enrollment swelled to 2,700, thanks largely to the collective and coordinated action of the colleges' leadership, faculty, staff, and students. Indeed, enrollment at MACC East was in full bloom. Unfortunately, by 2014—the beginning of the data collection cycle for this study—enrollment had plunged 30%, from 2,700 to 1,873—lower than the original number when the campus opened. Accompanying the overall enrollment decline were slight changes in the characteristics of learners. Compared with the numbers during peak enrollment, the mean age of students decreased by one year to 22 years of age, the number of students enrolled part-time decreased 20%, and the number of students taking weekend and evening classes decreased by more than 50%.

The simultaneous demographic changes and the regressive patterns of enrollment suggest that, between 2012 and 2014, learners most significantly impacted by attrition were those characteristically defined as adults. Yet, the barriers to degree attainment and the reasons for these learners' departure were not altogether clear. This lack of clarity has proven problematic as the demand for degree completion in higher education has increased and as "state and federal policy makers have pushed for more accountability from colleges and universities" (Cook & Pullaro, 2010, p. iv).

It has become obvious that "faculty and administrators [are struggling to answer] an escalating barrage of questions from public and governmental agencies about the effectiveness of

the educational enterprise" (Wild & Ebbers, 2002, p. 503). Thus, the need to foster institutional understanding and generate responses addressing these struggles—with the goal of enhancing adult learner degree completion—is indisputable.

In answer to the call for greater scrutiny of postsecondary attrition, a cross-section of professional peers at MACC East convened and used the action research framework to systematically and collaboratively (Stringer, 2007) examine adult learners enrolled at the college. Generally, the AR framework involves a series of iterations between the core and thesis cycles of a project (Coghlan & Brannick, 2010); the AR phases and cycles pertinent to this case are discussed in greater detail in the "Case Study Story" section of this chapter, following a review of the participant profiles of the group (which would later become the action research team).

The Action Research Team: Ground-Level Leaders

This project was led by five ground-level leaders. Although, seven employees of MACC East were invited to participate in the research effort to better understand first-time adult freshman progression, two of the seven employees declined immediately to participate, bringing the team membership to five. Along with Mr. Elvis Jones (the project sponsor, director of enrollment, and coordinator of institutional research) and myself (the insider-researcher and coordinator of enrollment), the final AR team members included Martin Aster (director of student affairs), Dominique Reed (coordinator of advising), and Delina White (coordinator of examination). See Table 8 for a brief profile the AR team members.

Table 8

MACC AR Team Member Profiles [4]

Name *	Team Member Profile
Martin Aster, Student Affairs Directors	• Employed by the college for 17+ years • Executive-level administrator • Areas of interest: Student growth and development
Elvis Jones, Enrollment Director/ Research Analyst	• Employed by the college for 25+ years • Project sponsor • Areas of interest: Research design and data collection
Dominique Reed, Advising Coordinator	• Employed by the college for 8+ years • Mid-level manager • Areas of interest: Student advisement and development
Delina White, Examination Coordinator	• Employed by the college for 15+ years • Mid-level manager • Areas of interest: Student pre-collegiate access and entry
Demetrix Rostick-Owens, Enrollment Coordinator	• Employed by the college for 12+ years • Mid-level manager • Areas of interest: Student records and completion

Note. * Pseudonyms were used for MACC employees and their job titles.

Members of the AR team conducted the tasks associated with cultivating this project. As a team, we decided to have face-to-face sessions one or two times per month, two hours at a time, between June 2013 and May 2015, according to the following timeline:

- June 2013 and October 2013: Team-building and problem-exploration phases;

- September 2013 and July 2014: Action-planning phase;

- August 2014 and May 2015: Action-implementation phase; and,

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[4] More detailed AR team member profiles were introduced in Chapter 3, Table 3.

- June 2015 and August 2015: Assessment phase.

It was agreed that participation of each team member was expected; however, in the event our primary work obligations within the institution presented a conflict, missed meetings would be condoned. To avoid lapses of information or decision-making input generated during the meetings, one-on-one meetings, email communications, and debriefing sessions were undertaken to ensure participation of members who were not able to attend the meetings.

Pre-Step and Context: Naming Our General Objective

Typically, AR projects are initiated with a "pre-step [which] involves naming the general objective" (Coghlan & Brannick, 2011, p. 61) and "seeking an understanding of the context of the project" (Coghlan & Brannick, 2014, p. 9). Coghlan and Brannick (2014) explained that the pre-step phase raises such questions as:

> *Why is this project necessary or desirable? ... what are the economic, political, [cultural, structural] and social forces driving change ... [What are the] ... forces ... and the nature of the demands that they make on the system[?] [What is] ... the degree of choice in how the system responds to the forces for change ... [since] the most useful focus for attention is the definition of a desired future state [?].* (p. 9)

Many of the questions posed by Coghlan and Brannick (2014), particularly those concerning the project's objectives (implementing our project), its necessity (articulating the project's importance to the system), and the desired future project state (acceptance of the project by the MACC system), were considered during the entry and contracting phases of this project. There were four distinct entry points, which yielded one viable contract. The initial phases proved important since they provided an opportunity to secure a project sponsor, begin the early stages of problem formation, and clarify the roles of the insider-researcher and the AR team members. Though I entered the AR project with the understanding that it would begin at MACC East and focus on better understanding the progression patterns of adult learners, the project sponsor, the

final group with which I would work, and the intended purpose and outcomes were unclear. The following sections document the project's four pre-step cycles, including reflections about the entry and contracting phases, during which the research site and project sponsor were secured, two pre-entry cycles occurred, and a contract was obtained.

Entry: Engaging the System

During cycle one of the pre-step, or the entry and contracting phases, the AR team members to become involved with our environment (MACC East) by engaging with the study participants (e.g., faculty, practitioners, and students), who offered insights concerning adult learner progression during the interviews and focus groups. Defined generally as "the first set of activities in [the team's] planned change," the pre-step allows the team to "engage further in [the] change program and to commit resources to such a process" (Cummings & Worley, 2014 p. 28). The first step taken within cycle one of this study's pre-step was to confirm the research site (our domain) and to secure a project sponsor (our community activist) and approval from the institutional review board (IRB) offices of MACC East and the University of Georgia (UGA). In March 2012, I began informal discussions with Mr. Jones, a team member who also served as my supervisor in his role as the director of enrollment and, eventually, as coordinator of institutional research. In our initial conversations, Mr. Jones and I spoke about the AR process and my interest in working with adult learners.

As a professional who had committed 25 years of service to MACC, Mr. Jones acknowledged the seminal works of Tinto (1975) and Astin (1980), which suggest that adult learners persist in different ways but are less inclined to become socially integrated into the academic environment due to the obligations of non-academic life. Though Mr. Jones felt that it

might be challenging to implement the AR project at the institution due to its non-residential status, he also expressed his belief that the project had the potential to offer an avenue for:

(a) *understanding and improving aspects of academic success in adult learners*;

(b) *identifying and articulating the social forces influencing the enrollment patterns of MACC East's students, including the declines in enrollments of older adults*; and,

(c) *determining an achievable future state that would prove viable to the continued growth of the campus and progression of learners*.

Mr. Jones agreed to allocate time for the future team to convene as a working group. He also helped to outline the study's purpose and procedures. The preliminary purpose of the study was to use a collaborative inquiry approach to investigate how participants—that is, administrators, faculty, practitioners, and students—at MACC East defined adult learners, identified the progression patterns of these students, and encouraged experiences intended to benefit them. According to the proposed procedures, the team was expected to convene at least once per month for at least 12 months, for one to two hours each meeting.

Fortunately, in his roles, Mr. Jones was able to access MACC's census and enrollment data reports, which he agreed to share with the team. The reports, produced by Mr. Jones, were critical to facilitating the AR team's understanding of FTAF's progression rates and patterns, and proved beneficial to the team in later iterations of the project. Following the initial conversations with Mr. Jones and his verbal agreement to sponsor the project, he submitted letters of support on my behalf to both MACC's and UGA's IRB. Once approval was granted (in July 2012), the research process commenced (see Figure 4).
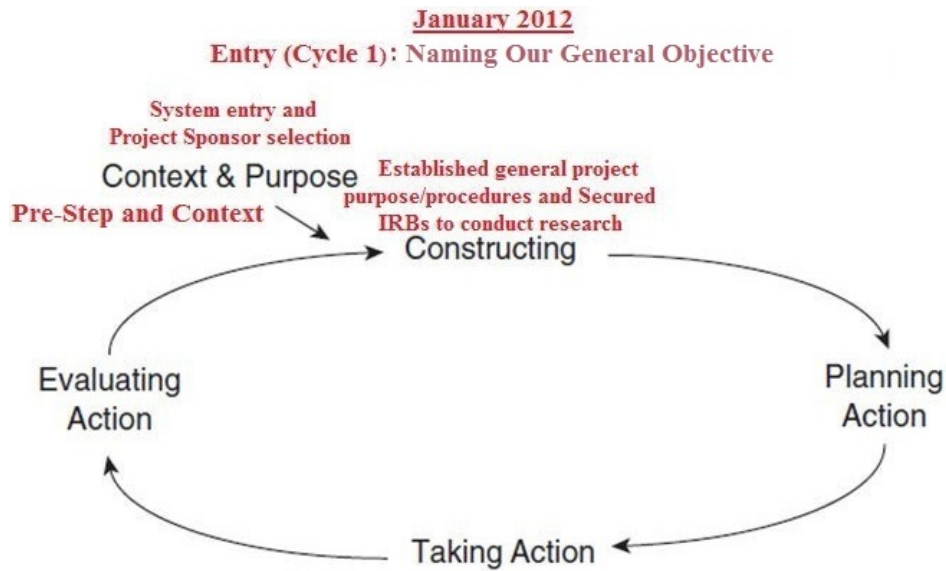
Figure 4. Entry (cycle 1): Naming our general objective, framed by Coghlan and Brannick's (2014) action research cycle.

Contracting with the Program Manager: An Ambivalent Encounter

Relieved to have gained permission to conduct research at MACC East, I took the next few months to engage in casual, unstructured, exploratory conversations with faculty and practitioners of MACC East about the campus's adult learners and the institutional supports provided to them. I had a particularly promising conversation with a faculty member who was serving as the project manager of a new academic program—a medical support professions major—at MACC East. The project manager was interested specifically in addressing the following needs, as captured in my personal journal reflections: (a) creating application requirements and an admissions process, (b) devising an applicant interview process, (c) securing a standardized admissions assessment, (d) designing an instructional format for class structures and, (e) establishing a post-implementation assessment.

Based upon this clearly articulated assessment of needs, it was evident that the project manager had invested quality time in identifying the tasks necessary for the successful development of the medical support program. Though I was intrigued by the potential opportunities afforded by the project, I also felt uncertain about whether I could achieve the primary goals of facilitating the learning process for adult learners through reflective and collaborative practices. I documented my reservations in the following journal entry:

> *While I will work with the ... program, I am much more interested in my original topic focusing on adult learner engagement in public two-year community colleges. I want to contribute to the research on out-of-the classroom adult learner experiences.... I also want to take a collaborative inquiry approach with students and administrators to discover what the adult learners on campus may want to see.... Assisting my institution with having a more substantial or robust presence in promoting adult learner engagement is a top priority of mine. It also would be nice to create a conceptual framework or best practices model in promoting adult learner engagement in the two-year community college setting.*

The longer I thought about the process, the more ambivalence I experienced regarding the project. Despite the fact that establishing the framework for the new program represented a potentially rewarding opportunity, the objectives were primarily programmatic or technical, and did not allow for much room for direct participation or involvement of adult learners or reflective practice to guide the process. My uncertainties grew, leaving me hesitant to move forward. Shortly thereafter, the program manager and I spoke again to share and clarify our concerns. In light of my reservations, the program manager and I decided mutually that conducting an AR project for the purpose of developing the medical support professions major was inadvisable at that time, as the foundation was not generative. Figure 5 offers a visual representation of this cycle.
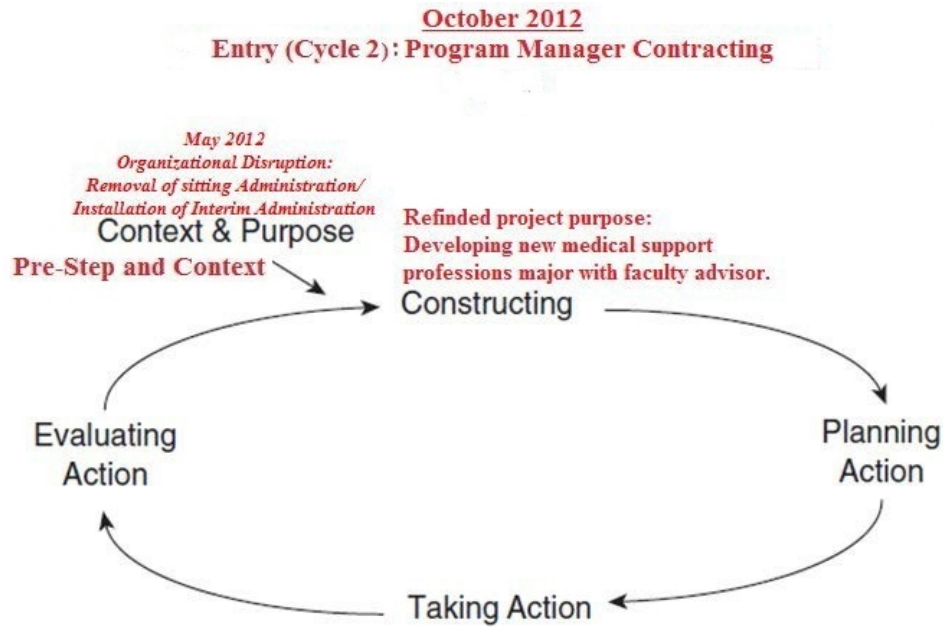
Figure 5. Entry (cycle 2): Project manager contracting, framed by Coghlan and Brannick's (2014) action research cycle.

Return-to-College Contract: A Dissatisfying Encounter

Though the medical support professions major project had ended—or more appropriately had not progressed beyond scratching the surface—it nevertheless provided team members an opportunity to verbalize criteria for advancing the AR study. Furthermore, experiencing the first cycle of the pre-step phase helped to reinforce the central notions that the identified problem would need to be supported by participants and that the outcomes should add directly to the knowledge base around the progression of adult learners.

Acquiring this new knowledge served as preparation for future cycles. Instead of taking on the next project that presented itself, I decided to adopt a more strategic approach to engaging the system. I sought opportunities that would align with: (a) securing institutional support, (b) impacting adult learner progression, and (c) working with team members interested in bringing

about practical change in relation to an existing problem. Aware of the adult learner return-to-college student group at MACC East, I approached the group's two faculty advisors and requested to meet with the members of the program (two faculty advisors, three student leaders, the dean of students, and the director of student life).

In early January 2013, I contacted both of the on-campus return-to-college advisors to begin the process of establishing a meeting time; I also contacted my departmental manager, Mr. Jones, to reconfirm his willingness to serve as the project sponsor for the new engagement. He immediately reconfirmed his willingness and readiness to fulfill that role and reiterated his belief that the engagement should be dedicated in part to *"building academic support towards graduation ... for active adult learners"* (E. Jones, personal communication, January 10, 2013).

Compared to the first project, the return-to-college program was much more heavily entrenched in the system; however, the program's influence was waning. Though I contacted the advisors in early January, I was still awaiting a response by the end of that month. This lack of responsiveness was the first indication that this engagement might prove fatiguing and wearisome because of an unevenness in my and the return-to-college members' enthusiasm and readiness to take part in a collaboration. I recorded my concerns and range of emotions in the following journal entry of January 31, 2013:

> *I am so excited about working with the adult learner return-to-college group, but it is challenging to schedule meetings. I realize that working with this group is a challenge because: ... many of the adult learners work, have families and are struggling to maintain all of their roles.... The group has not fulfilled any of its obligations to present a program for this academic year.... Time is limited.*

I remained interested in working with the group and agreed with the advisors to officially begin interviewing the return-to-college team members in March 2013. Over the course of the next month, three of the seven return-to-college team members agreed to participate in the

interview process. The remaining four members were contacted; however, scheduling did not

permit them to engage in face-to-face meetings. Once again, in less than two months, I was faced

with the non-participation of team members. By that time, I was both bothered and frustrated by

what appeared to be the team's resistance to partaking cooperatively in the necessary steps to

support the project. Cautiously, I used the feedback of the three members interviewed to

compile a final report identifying the group's mission, purpose, strengths, weaknesses,

opportunities, and challenges (see Table 9).

Table 9

Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Challenges for the Return-to-College Group

Areas of Assessment	Comments from Team
Mission and Purpose*	• To cater to the needs of adult learners • To provide a voice for the adult learner • To provide support (educational/peer) for the adult learner to be successful • To holistically help the adult learner • To serve as a sounding board for the adult learner • To serve as a vehicle for increasing learning and skill development for adult learners
Strengths	• The adult learner population is growing at the college. • The club's concept around supporting and guiding the educational experiences of adult learners is ripe for assisting students with: 　• navigating through college; 　• becoming aware of on-campus resources/offices; 　• communicating their needs and desires for growth with faculty and practitioners; 　• overcoming barriers.
Weaknesses	• Unclear roles and responsibilities of the advisor and student leaders; parties are unsure of what is "expected" and "who does what" • Overdependence on the club president/unilateral ownership of the club president. In the absence of the student leader, the club members became inactive in FA 12. • While both the advisor and student leaders agree that this club should be directed by the student leaders, the level of involvement has been described as "imbalanced," which has created a feeling that the advisor and members are "not on the same page." • Communication has been described as "pretty bad" due to the absence of communication, miscommunication, and unclear communication. • Lack of organization (regarding planning leadership meetings)

Areas of Assessment	Comments from Team

Opportunities	• Willingness and need to collaborate more directly with:
	   • advisors (standing meetings with advisor, advisor feedback on programs, collaboration to secure funding and room selections, connection with other faculty on campus);
	   • other [student] groups;
	   • faculty for in-class trainings/information sessions;
	   • dean, student life, and other student services offices to advertise programs;
	   • the community in order to connect students with the community and to bring community organizations onto the campus.

Challenges	• Low campus profile: Although the club has been in existence since fall 2011, it has been described as "new," "elementary," "lacking structure," and "not existing." • Unclear understanding of the funding/budget process and decreased funding: Inability to navigate the budget process causes trouble with securing funds. Also, without funding it will be difficult to provide food/giveaways as incentives for participation in events or to cover the costs of administrative postings, paper surveys, or supplies. • Broken communication: Without communication, frustration increases, accountability decreases, and the club's messages/impacts are diminished.

Note. This information appeared in the previous year's charter/re-charter and constitution paperwork; however, at the time of this meeting, the current year's charter paperwork had not yet been submitted.

The final written report was made available to the entire team and was positively received; yet, the team's lethargy persisted. Over the next several months, the members and I spoke sporadically, planning and making arrangements for implementing the group's social and educational activities. Regrettably, none of the ideas discussed was ever implemented since we never fully developed our team or figured out a way to successfully align our project with the needs of the system. The longer I worked with the group without making progress, the more doubtful I became about the project's objective, the roles and expectations of the team, and the commitment of the participants to grow the organization.

For a second time in roughly seven months, I had entered into an engagement that appeared futile. I was unable to secure a contracting engagement or to further my work beyond

the exploration phases of the project. In both cases, there was much uncertainty regarding

program survival due to unexpected organizational changes. Unlike the first effort, however,

which was stymied by personal uncertainties and ambivalence, the second effort stalled as a

result of the team's inactivity and my further dissatisfaction with the connections I had

established within the system.

There was no way to account for these extraneous variables on the front end of the

project's development. Nevertheless, each instance presented opportunities for my own learning

in action. The experiences also facilitated my ability to rehearse the preliminary phases of AR,

including the processes of engaging participants and initiating exploration of their concerns.

After two failed attempts to secure a contract and preparing for a third, it was easier to:

- articulate my researcher intent for a project that would directly benefit adult learners;

- challenge the false assumptions regarding my role as an insider-researcher;

- reevaluate the magnitude of influence the larger organizational changes in leadership and mission would have upon the project;

- remain mindful of tending to the technical aspects of an engagement (e.g., clarifying mutual goals and purposes, and understanding the influences of the micro- and macro-level contextual factors contributing to the research); and,

- more quickly disengage with participants who wished to proceed with an engagement without an official contract.

Figure 6 offers a visual representation of this cycle.
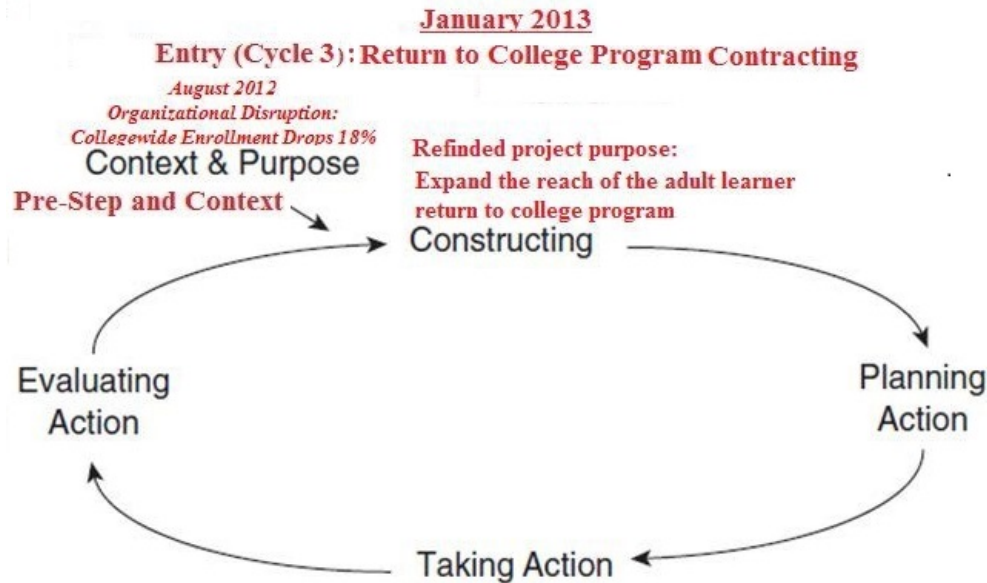
Figure 6. Entry (cycle 3): Return-to-college program contracting, framed by Coghlan and

Brannick's (2014) action research cycle.

AR Team Contract: A Promising but Challenging Encounter

The fourth cycle of the contracting phase, which began in June 2013, centered on

securing a project commitment. Whereas before I failed to secure a project contract prior to my

involvement and had begun working out of eagerness, this time I was more diligent in slowing

down the contract process, identifying team members and sharing the principles of AR with

those individuals. Though I had not proactively sought the guidance of the project sponsor (Mr.

Jones) in the first two pre-step cycles, I was careful not to exclude him in this endeavor. In mid-

June 2013, I sent an email invitation to practitioners within the student affairs division of the

campus inviting them to participate in the AR project. I felt vulnerable revealing this project for

a third time; it was also a challenge asking my peers to become insider-researchers since the

process would require them to "undertake an explicit action research role in addition to the

normal functional roles [they held]" (Holian & Coghlan, 2013, p. 399) within MACC. My hope

of finally moving forward with the exploratory and action phases of this project—along with the possible benefits of establishing a team dedicated to understanding how the college could promote progression among adult learners—kept me motivated. Fortunately, in my role, I had access to peers working in the offices of financial aid, advising, examinations, and the dean of students. After speaking with each of them regarding the project, I sent them a confirmation and consent email in June 2013 informing them of the project's:

- intended purpose—"*to improve the retention/persistence and, potentially, graduation rates of adult learners at [MACC East]*";

- framework—"*participatory action research*"; and,

- goals—to define "*the adult student at MACC*," evaluate "*persistence/retention and graduation rates*," encourage learners' "*out-of-the-classroom experiences*," devise and assess "*experiences for nontraditional learners*," and make "*recommendations to the college community to enhance future planning*."

By the end of the month, the five invitees (profiled earlier in Table 3) accepted the invitation to participate as members of the AR team, completed and returned their consent forms, and committed to actively engaging in the various phases of the AR process.

Introductory meeting. The first AR team meeting was held on July 23, 2013. In addition to myself, only two of the invitees (i.e., the representatives from the financial aid and advising offices) attended the meeting. Three of the remaining invitees, including personnel from the dean of students, examinations, and student support, did not attend. Although the meeting attendance was low, we proceeded with the agenda, highlighting (a) the key people involved in the research, including myself and the project sponsor; (b) aspects of the consent form; (c) the qualitative, practical, participatory nature of the AR methodology and the four main

cycles of the framework (i.e., problem identification, action planning, implementation, and

assessment); and (d) the results of the introductory survey. Prior to the meeting, each participant

completed and returned a 10-question electronic survey. The interview guide presented to the

return-to-college group was also sent to the AR team. Common themes that emerged from the

participants' responses are documented in Table 10.

Table 10

MACC AR Team Introductory Survey

Question	Answer (Common Themes)
Context of the problem	
Q1. How would you define your current role at the college?	• Coordinators of: enrollment, financial aid, advising, examinations, student services, and student affairs
Q2. How would you define the college's out-of-classroom learning environment?	• Ranged from non-existent to supportive • "*There are many opportunities, but it is challenging to get students involved.*" • "*Defining the out-of-classroom experience can be challenging due to the multiple views of the concept.*"
Q3. Do you work with adult learners? If yes, in what capacity?	• "*Yes, we work directly with nontraditional learners in each of our specialty areas.*"
Q4. What resistance (if any) do you find when working with adult learners?	• "*None, adult learners are among our top students.*" • "*time*" • "*maneuvering the bureaucratic process*" • "*resistance*" • "*hesitation from students*"; "*the mentality of 'I can't'*"
Perceived Roles of Team Members	
Q5. What offices are responsible for identifying/assessing/addressing the needs of adult learners, and how do the offices go about this task?	• "*all of our offices*"

Question	Answer (Common Themes)
Q6. What do you expect of your team members?	• *"open mindedness/understanding"* • *"professionalism"* • *"honesty and transparency"* • *"engagement, [giving] 100%, and [doing] their part"* • *"take ownership for their responsibilities"* • *"teamwork"*
Q7. What would you like to gain from participating?	• *"insight on others' perspectives"* • *"a better awareness of how I can help learners succeed"* • *"professional camaraderie"* • *"understanding self-organizing work groups and successful development"* • *"gain better understanding of how MACC can improve experiences for adult learners"* • *"maintain continuous improvement of our practices"* • *"assist learners with obtaining an education"*
Current Project State	
Q8. How would you describe the current state of the learning initiatives offered for adult learners, and how are they assessed?	• *"I have no idea"; "[we are in the] early stages"* • *"limitations—creative initiatives specifically for nontraditional learners are non-existent"* • *"wide range [of] understanding of the project state, programs are not assess/evaluated"*
Future Project State	
Q9. What improvements would you like to make with assessing and addressing initiatives … of nontraditional adult learners?	• *"identify more ways to address/assess learner's needs"* • adjust *"the curriculum to address nontraditional needs"* • *"create themed/connected learning environments for programs"* • *"bring sessions into the classroom/coordinate with faculty"* • *"delegate duties/implementations among the team"*

Question	Answer (Common Themes)
Recommendations for Workgroup Success Q10. What recommendations would you make for the success of the working group/AR team?	• "*communicate, provide feedback (good/bad), remain inquisitive/curious*" • "*make the process efficient, effective, and engaging*" • "*learn from and with others*" • "*assess our actions and make modifications accordingly*" • "*share responsibilities for the AR process*"

The AR team met regularly from late July 2013 through December 2015, with the most intense cycles of the AR project advancing between October 2013 and May 2015. This extended timeline was influenced directly by an unforeseen organizational upheaval resulting from an external directive issued in the 2014-2015 academic year by the State University Organization to consolidate MACC with the University of Centura in order to:

- increase opportunities to raise education attainment levels, accessibility, regional identity, and compatibility;

- avoid duplication of academic programs while optimizing access to instruction;

- create potential for regional development and economies of scale and scope; and,

- streamline administrative services while … improving service level and quality.

Soon after the SUO began making strides toward consolidation, enrollment declined. It appeared that our system was in a freefall: Along with attrition within the student body, administrators, faculty, and practitioners voluntarily and involuntarily (via a reduction-in-force process) began leaving the college. As noted previously, the AR team membership was not immune. In the fall of 2013, Dominique Reed, the advising coordinator, left the college and the

AR team. The remaining team members were in disbelief but were determined as we moved into the constructing phase of the project, depicted in Figure 7.

Figure 7. Entry (cycle 4): Action research team contracting, framed by Coghlan and Brannick's (2014) action research cycle.

Constructing Phase: Listening to the System

After the pre-step phases were completed, the project continued to the first full phase within the core cycle—the constructing phase, "a dialogic activity" in which "the issues are [constructed], however provisionally, as a working theme, on the basis of which action will be planned and taken" (Coghlan & Brannick, 2014, p. 10) from both a practical and a theoretical standpoint. Between August and September 2013, the AR team met to establish the parameters of our engagement and to explore the problem of adult learner progression and retention. The following sections detail the activities comprising the project's construction phase.

Building the Team

At the conclusion of the first construction-phase meeting, the AR team members began considering the parameters for how the working group would maximize the success and benefits of the project. The team agreed unanimously that:

- duties would be shared among, delegated to, and implemented by team members;

- members would remain inquisitive and communicative;

- making the process efficient, effective, and engaging would remain top priorities;

- honesty, transparency, and whole-hearted involvement in the process would be expected from all members;

- members would commit themselves to learning from and with others;

- members would assess their actions and make necessary modifications;

- the group would remain open and receptive to adopting alternate paths to teaching and learning on campus; and,

- attendance, while expected, would be flexible.

With the parameters of the team's expectations and responsibilities clearly designated, the remainder of the meetings around constructing the issue continued through December 2013.

Exploring and Naming the Issue (Problem Identification)

The team used meeting times to identify factors contributing to adult learners' progression. As part of the process, each member was tasked with identifying issues within his or her respective professional area, which would facilitate our process of aiding adult learners. Mr. Jones' provided statistical data, Mr. Reed provided information related to the academic appeals process, Ms. White and Mr. Aster made available information related to the benefits of first-year experience (FYE) classes, and, finally, I was able to access qualitative data related to the self-

identified conditions leading to academic withdrawals. Table 11 outlines the identified issues

and the articulation of those issues by the AR team members.

Table 11

MACC AR Team Identified Issues

Issue Identified by Team Members	Articulation of Issue
Lack of Data Regarding Adult Learner Population	Inability to identify the adult learner population enrolled at MACC East. Reports capturing the demographic, secondary, academic, and financial resource data for the learners enrolled at MACC East would be necessary.
Academic Exclusions	The team became aware that many adult learners were being academically excluded from the institution as a result of multiple terms of poor performance. The team needed to find more information related to the issue in order to devise an early intervention plan for students vulnerable to exclusion.
Academic Withdrawals	The team became aware that many adult learners were initiating course withdrawals from the institution as early as the first semester of matriculation. The team needed to find more details related to the issue in order to devise a plan for intervening earlier with students at risk for academic withdrawals.
First-Year Support	The team became aware that many adult learners were struggling academically in the first year of enrollment, leading to course withdrawals and exclusions. The team needed to find more information related to the issue in order to devise a plan for supporting adult learners during the first three terms of their matriculation.

During the construction phase of this project, the team became a working group that

engaged in discussions and reflections regarding adult learner progression. Through continued

conversations, factors believed to contribute to learner withdrawals or exclusions were identified.

These discoveries helped to engender a narrative to explain the challenges MACC East's adult learners faced. The underlying implications for the team's appraisals were the establishment of plans to better understand the adult learners enrolled at MACC East and to create and implement innovative actions that would both meet students' specific needs and produce measurable outcomes that could be evaluated upon completion (see Figure 8).

Figure 8. Construction phase: Listening to the system, framed by Coghlan and Brannick's (2014) action research cycle.

Planning Phase: Cultivating the System

Following the "exploration of the context and purpose of the project, and construction of the issue" (Coghlan & Brannick, 2014, p. 11) came the planning action phase. During this phase, generally, complexities in problems and settings "often require long-term and large scale strategic planning that … encompass[es] carefully defined inclusive procedures that provide participants with a clear vision of their directions and intentions" (Stringer, 2014, p. 191).

Additionally, the team engaged in conversations to better understand the existing institutional operations that would help the members gather data from students regarding their reasons for leaving the school. The overarching sentiments identified by the team included a recognition, from the learner's perspective, that when adults entered college lacking basic secondary academic skills, their postsecondary experience was often characterized by remediation, poor academic performance, and loss of financial aid benefits. The team also observed within the institution an absence or inconsistency of adult-centric policies, instructional methods, or learning activities. The following sections detail each perspective.

Learner Perspective

1. Feeling underprepared: Adult learners entering college as first-time freshmen were academically underprepared, as confirmed by student registration for non-academic support, pre-college classes.

2. Academic challenges: The poor academic performance of adult learners in college-level classes resulted in the issuance of academic warnings or exclusion.

3. Realizing academic consequences: Poor academic performance created a ripple effect for learners; when students were excluded, withdrew, or had poor academic performance, they oftentimes lost their financial aid and were subsequently lost to attrition within the first three semesters of enrollment.

Institutional Perspective

1. Limited theoretical frameworks: Systematic approaches to incorporating adult learning theory within institutional policies, instruction, and services were lacking.

2. Limited understanding of how adults learn: Strategies for understanding how adults learn and the principles for promoting adult learner success were either lacking or not developed sufficiently.

3. Hearing the adult learner narrative: Opportunities for adult learners to systematically

   voice their concerns or to provide feedback regarding matters that promoted or

   deterred their progression toward completion were often absent.

4. Considering competing commitments of adults: Usage of alternate instructional

   methods or service hours, which might have been more fitting for students who were

   balancing non-academic responsibilities with the requirements for their school work,

   were not applied consistently.

Figure 9 illustrates the planning phase of the AR cycle.

Figure 9. Planning phase: Cultivating the system, framed by Coghlan and Brannick's (2014) action research cycle.

Continuous Planning and Taking Action: Working within the System

To address the identified problems, the AR team members reviewed Knowles' (1980) theory of andragogy before planning our activities. Based on the guiding assumptions and principles of andragogy, we wanted to ensure that our implemented actions were undergirded by a root desire to facilitate and better understand how the academic progression of adult learners at MACC East could be influenced by students' (a) self-concept, (b) intertwining personal and

learning experiences, (c) cognizance of their readiness for learning, (d) orientation to learning,

and (e) motivations for learning. Additionally, the team wanted to determine the extent of adult

learner awareness, as well as the degree to which andragogical theory could be incorporated into

polices, practices, and instruction.

Chosen Actions

A total of six actions, anchored by Knowles' (1980) theory of andragogy, were adopted

by the AR team. A description of each action constructed during this phase of the project

follows.

Action #1: Engaging in a document review of the enrollment, academic, and service

records of FTAF. During the planning period for this action, the team selected the cohort of

freshmen to examine. Since traditional freshmen enrolling in the fall semesters of any given

academic year are already scrutinized as part of MACC's first-time, full-time freshman initiative,

the team chose not to study this group. Instead, the members decided to focus on the progression

patterns of adult students who enrolled as first-time freshmen at MACC East in the spring

semesters of 2012, 2013, and 2014.

In September 2013, I (in my capacity as the insider-action researcher) conferred with the

AR team member who worked in the office of research in order to determine the parameters of

the FTAF report. I sent the following request to the team member:

> *Hi, I am following up with you regarding the new freshmen list we spoke about last week.*
> *As a reminder, the additional information/details we were adding to the list concerned*
> *VA eligibility, Class registration and Cohort information from spring 2012, 2013 and*
> *FALL 2012, 2013.*

The initial FTAF report was issued in October 2014. While there were a total of 509

freshmen enrolled at MACC East, the list was "cleaned" to identify only those students who

were considered to be adult learners, defined as those who had been admitted to the college as

"nontraditional students" or who had entered the college after earning a GED. Adhering to those two criteria yielded an adult population of 81 students whose progression could be evaluated. In addition to the FTAF report issued by the research member, enrollment, financial aid, advising, and testing data were generated via student databases. Content analysis was used to interpret these data and to deepen the team's understanding of adult learners' self-concept, learning experiences, readiness to learn, orientation to learning, and motivations to learn in relation to their experiences of progression and attrition. The planning period for this action began in September 2013 and ended in January 2014.

Action #2: Designing an instructional curriculum using principles of andragogy for selected new freshman orientation classes. The planning period for this action involved the team consulting with the coordinator of the new freshman student orientation class. Two members of the AR team—the insider-action research and the representative from testing— volunteered to design and co-teach two classes in an effort to (a) propose and develop an alternate method of instruction that focused learning outcomes on principles of adult learning and development, and (b) deliver instruction that would incorporate learner experiences, provide a means for practical application of knowledge, and establish a problem-centered learning environment. After the members were granted permission to teach the classes, they proceeded to design the course curriculum, activities, and learning outcomes using andragogical principles. The planning period for this action began in October 2013 and ended in December 2013.

Action #3: Coordinating interviews with participants to better understand the beliefs held by administrators, faculty, and practitioners regarding adult learners and the factors influencing their academic progression. The planning period for this action entailed reviewing the literature associated with adult learning theory, which would help to frame the interview questions. There were several iterations of the drafting cycle associated with finalizing

the interview questions. At the conclusion of the drafting period, the interview guide comprised a total of 19 questions intended to solicit input from interviewees about their (a) role within the college, (b) observations regarding the college's provision of adult learner services, (c) reflections on initiatives fostering the academic progression of adult learners at the college, and (d) perceptions of an adult-learner-focused campus (see Appendix E).

The team decided to send email invitations to all full-time employees of MACC East, sister institutions within the adult learning consortium, and members from the SUO who helped to coordinate adult learning initiatives system-wide. In total, 105 participants were identified. The first email invitation would be distributed at the end of January 2015, and a second reminder would be sent to non-responders in mid-February 2015. Again, the team decided to employ content analysis to examine and organize the data. The planning period for this action began in November 2014 and ended in January 2015.

Action #4: Organizing focus groups with students enrolled in the new freshman student orientation class. During the planning period for this action, the AR team members gained permission from the coordinator and the MACC East instructors of the new freshman student orientation classes to engage their students in focus groups aimed at providing learners with an opportunity to provide feedback on the factors associated with their academic progression. After gaining this consent, the team members sent emails to MACC East instructors and their students inviting them to participate in the focus groups. Of the five instructors teaching, two agreed to participate in the two, one-hour sessions. As an aside, the instructors who did not grant permission for the focus groups did not object to the project itself, but rather, as documented by BL, were unable to "*commit the additional time to participate in [the] study*" since they had already established their syllabi for the current term.

The two instructors who agreed to participate in the focus groups were given consent forms. Both completed and returned them prior to the beginning of the implementation, and each agreed to participate in interviews at the conclusion of the project to share what they "experienced or observed" (Hughes, 2007) regarding the first-year learner focus groups and online learning portal. As suggested by Hughes (2007), "detailed analysis of … incidents enables researchers to identify similarities, differences and patterns and to seek insight into how and why people engage in the activity" (p. 49). The planning period for this action began in January 2015 and ended in March 2015.

Action #5: Introducing an online learner resource center for students enrolled in the new freshman student orientation class. The planning period for this action entailed gaining permission to conduct focus groups from the MACC East instructors teaching the new freshman student orientation classes.   After gaining permission, the insider-action research made a request of MACC's technology office to create an online portal for the AR project which would serve as "*an online learning center for students [to] commune with one another to inquire about academic, financial, social and career supports*" (D. Rostick-Owens, personal communication, March 25, 2015). Once the portal was activated, the insider-action researcher, in consultation with the instructors, began to develop and add content to the site, in the form of discussion boards, learning videos, and digital educational resources.

After the final review of the portal by the insider-action researcher and the instructors, the enrolled students were provided access. Each of the instructors agreed to incorporate the online portal into his or her curriculum and coursework. The planning period for this action began in January 2015 and ended in March 2015.

Action #6: Implementing a student success fair for prospective graduating students.

This planning action entailed the AR team working on a related project—a student success fair—at the request of a MACC East employee who was not involved with the project. Each member of the AR team participated in the success fair because we found the activity conducive to providing a practical learning activity for adult learners that was directly connected to their immediate and long-terms goals of graduating. While each of the members of the AR team participated in the actual activity, two of the AR team members served on the planning committee. According to the project coordinator, the intent of the activity was to allow "*students [to] have some wonderful discussions with various groups of people that [would] help guide them to the goal of graduation*" (personal communication, January 26, 2015). As communicated in a campus-wide email to solicit volunteers, the project coordinator further explained:

> *The focus of this event is "intentional conversations." We want you to talk one-on-one with students about their goals/plans as it pertains to your area.... These conversations are unique to the each student's needs!*

Over the next month, the planning committee scheduled volunteers to participate in the fair. The planning period for this action began in February 2015 and ended in April 2015. Figure 10 provides a visual representation of this phase.
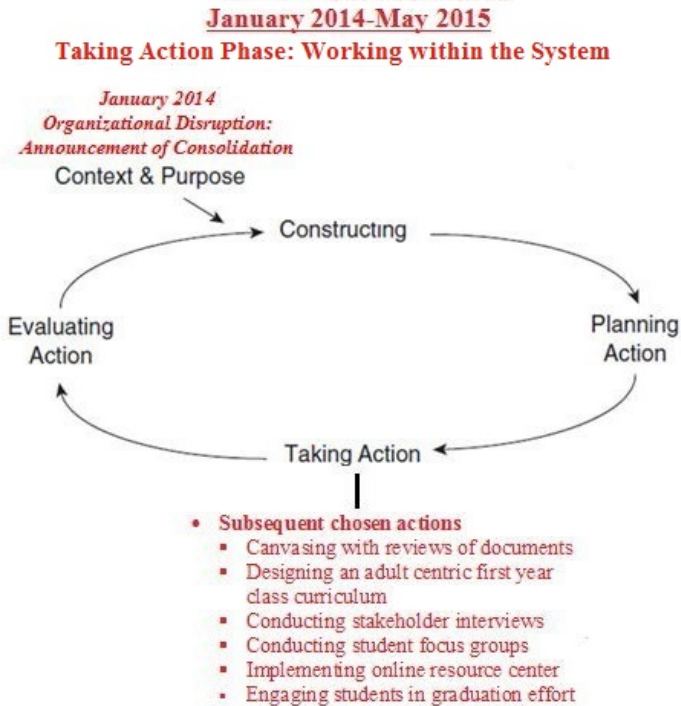
Figure 10. Taking action phase: Working within the system, framed by Coghlan and Brannick's (2014) action research cycle.

Evaluating Action Phase: Assessing Our Efforts

The final phase of the AR cycle was the evaluating action phase, during which the AR team assessed and evaluated the outcomes of the interventions. Tomal (2010) commented that "without taking the evaluation step, the action researcher never knows if the results of the actions were successful or if the problem was resolved" (p. 135). Additionally, the goal of evaluating the actions taken is to determine whether the research engagement should come to an end or be expanded into a new iterative project cycle.

Evaluating Action at MACC East

Although many of the initial conversations regarding the proposed actions for this project took place as early as June 2013, the planning necessary for actualizing the events took between

one and two years to come to fruition. In light of the programmatic requirements associated with institutional research, such as securing IRB approval or project logistics related to collaborating with other offices for data (e.g., the research office) or connecting and meeting with participants, the time commitment required for the project became longer than expected. The following sections offer a chronological review of the actions implemented throughout the course of this study as well as the list of assessments used to evaluate the innovations.

New freshman student orientation classes. The adult-centric freshman orientation class was implemented in January 2014 for first-time, newly enrolled students attending MACC East. The first set of classes, which lasted through April 2015, and the second set, offered August through December 2014, were taught by the original two AR team members who were approved to design and teach the class. The class was taught again between January and December 2015, marking the third and fourth iterations of the class. These iterations were taught by a single instructor, the AR team member from the testing office. The fifth and most recent iteration of the course, began in spring 2015, with the AR team member from the testing office teaching the class. In an attempt to expose others to the curriculum, a new MACC East practitioner was granted permission to co-teach the class with the long-standing AR team member.

The evaluation methods used to assess the process of implementing the new freshman student orientation class included interviews between the insider-researcher and the co-instructors of the class. Interviews were also conducted with the coordinator of the new freshman student orientation classes, who provided a collective view of the implications for designing an adult-centric class, and the newest instructor, who, at the time, was co-teaching with the long-standing instructor.

Review of documents. The review of documents was conducted in January 2015. In the early stages of the review, the AR team examined the technical aspects, or academic variables, thought to contribute to the academic progression of MACC East's adult learners. Accounting for controls of the admission type (FTAF) in October 2014, the following factors were included in the initial freshman report from the research office:

- background information (gender, age, ethnicity, high school GPA, secondary diploma type, standardized test scores);

- socioeconomic status (based upon usage of financial aid in the forms of PELL grants, Veteran Affairs benefits, or the HOPE Scholarships); and,

- collegiate academic performance (learning support requirements, college-level placement, academic GPA, academic standing, and attempted hours).

Additionally, the following items incorporating markers that could explain the adaptive aspects contributing to academic progression were reviewed:

- years of delayed entry after secondary education (calculated by subtracting 18, the average age of the traditional freshman, from the student's age at the time of matriculation);

- ratio of completed collegiate courses (calculated by dividing a student's earned hours by their attempted hours);

- total number of non-successful course completions in the form of course withdrawals (i.e., submission of course withdrawal requests) and unofficial course withdrawals (as determined by a student's completion of a term with only grades of D and F);

- the reasons for withdrawals or transfers provided by students leaving the college; and,

- the communications received by students when seeking on campus assistance.

Content analysis was used to organize and interpret the information associated with the review of documents.

   Interviews. The interviews were initiated in January 2015 and conducted with participants who responded to the email request. The same interview guide was used for each participant. The schedules of interviewees and the preferred format of the interviews were accommodated. The interviewer held individual interviews either in the action researcher's on-campus office, in the participant's on-campus office, or via phone for those who were unable to travel to the MACC East campus. The majority of the interviews were approximately one hour long and were audio taped (with the permission of the interviewee). Content analysis was used to organize and make sense of the information associated with the interviews.

   Focus groups and online portal. Both the focus group and the online portal initiatives were rolled out in March 2015. Since the AR team had determined earlier that there were few avenues for adult learners to systematically share their concerns or to seek practical resources relevant to their academic development, the members advocated strongly for the focus groups and the online portal. While two instructors agreed to participate in a pre- and a post-focus group and to incorporate the online portal into their instructional design, only one was able to fully implement all aspects of the innovation as designed. Content analysis was used to organize and understand the information associated with data gathered from the focus groups and the online portal, while interviews were conducted with the class instructors.

   Student success fair. The success fair was held over the course of two days in mid-April 2015 and involved the collective participation of MACC's administrators, faculty, practitioners, and students. While the goal of the student success fair was to create a space in which learners could engage in meaningful conversations with participants who wanted to aid the learners in

their progression, the event also had practical purposes. Each of the fair's designated

"conversation zones" was staffed deliberately with personnel who could help students

understand how what they were studying or learning could be applied to future endeavors. For

example, faculty spoke with students about connecting their courses and programs of study to

future careers, and financial aid representatives cautioned students about the long-term risks of

accruing debt.

Though many students attended the event, it was difficult to gather feedback from

participants because the AR team failed to create an evaluation mechanism for following up with

students. However, several students who participated in the fair shared their thoughts following

the event, and the coordinator of the fair contributed her input in a post-event interview, thus

helping the team to gain insights into the overall impact of the success fair. The meeting

sessions were transcribed, and the content analysis method was used to organize and evaluate the

data (see Figure 11).
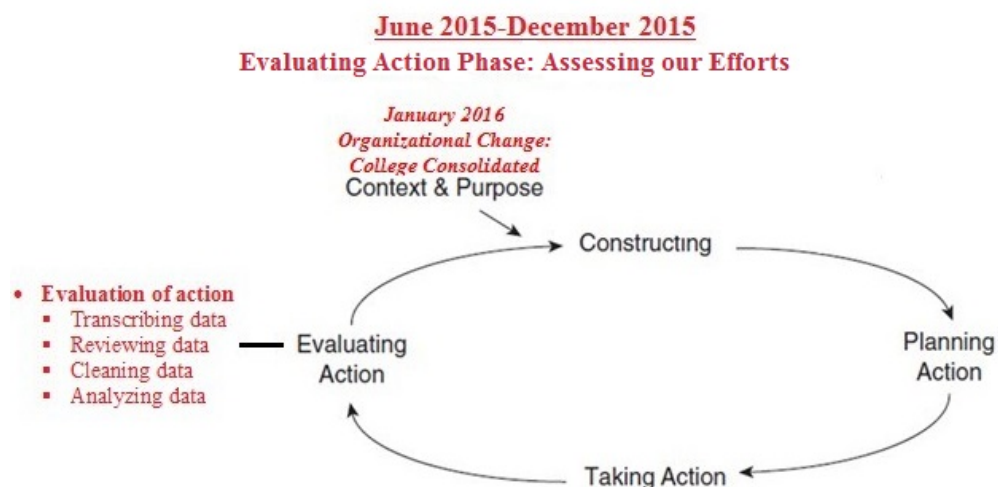
Figure 11. Evaluating action phase: Assessing our efforts, framed by Coghlan and Brannick's

(2014) action research cycle.

Growth and Development

Evaluations of the outcomes showed that the actions taken during this project provided the insider-researcher, AR team members, and the MACC East participants with multiple avenues for understanding the factors contributing to the academic progression of adult learners. The impact was widespread as it challenged the system's willingness and ability to focus more upon and attend to the varying levels of readiness for self-directedness for all learners by systematically (a) considering the implementation of alternate methods of instruction and services undergirded by principles of adult learning, and (b) approaching the institutional need to unite learner educational experiences with practical applications of knowledge.

Unfortunately, the study's results also indicated a disparity in willingness and readiness on the part of the institution based upon the student's level of readiness for self-direction at the time of his or her entry into MACC East. Essentially, it appeared that the college was more readily able to facilitate the learning of FTAF who were already highly self-directed. Therefore, FTAF who had a greater propensity for progressing toward graduation (e.g., strong background, academic performance) were more apt to find support from the college (through advisement, interactions) that reinforced their readiness for self-directedness, resulting in continuous enrollment and progression to graduation. At the same time, however, for FTAF who had a predilection for lower self-directedness, based on the same factors, demonstrated a greater need for assistance in the form of instrumental learning and developmental advisement, and altogether would have benefitted the most from being challenged to extend their level of self-directedness. Moreover, they were both less apt to engage the college and to be engaged and challenged by the college to reach higher levels of self-directedness. It was clear that the college lacked the ability to facilitate learning in this latter group, resulting in greater rates of attrition early. Regrettably,

the FTAF most inclined to needing the two-year college structure were the most adversely impacted.

Although the AR project provided an opportunity to increase understanding of adult learner progression, aspects of the engagement were stalled or delayed by drastic changes resulting from MACC's consolidation with another institution. The consequences of this consolidation included the loss of team members, diminished availability of resources, and a fundamental shift in the institution's focus. The lessons learned and the knowledge gained in relation to the study's research questions and the grassroots efforts of the willing and non-willing are discussed in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 5

FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to better understand the contributing factors associated with the academic progression of adult learners admitted as first-time freshmen into a two-year, associate degree-granting, college. This research also aimed to identify a framework of strategies that administrators, faculty, and practitioners within institutions of higher education might consider when addressing the issue of adult learner progression. Directing this inquiry were the following research questions:

1. To what extent do FTAF progress academically in a two-year community college, and what factors contribute to their progression?

2. What are guiding principles that administrators, faculty, and practitioners consider when addressing the academic progression of FTAF?

3. What knowledge is gained at the individual, team, and system levels using an action research methodology to examine the progression of FTAF?

This chapter describes the findings related to the research questions, which grew out of action research team meetings, participant interviews (face-to-face and phone), student focus groups, document reviews, and feedback from an online learning portal (or module). Table 12 provides an overview of the three research questions along with corresponding themes and subthemes derived from a detailed analysis of the data.

Table 12

Overview of Findings

Research Question	Category	Theme
1. To what extent do FTAF progress academically in a two-year community college, and what factors contribute to their progression?	High challenges, low readiness, and low support	• Lost to Attrition
	Emergent self-directedness and trusting support	• Continuously Enrolled
	Self-directed and supported	• Graduated
2. What are guiding principles that administrators, faculty, and practitioners consider when addressing the academic progression of FTAF?	Guiding principles	Institutional-level principles • Development • Expansion • Alignment Student-level principles • Heterogeneity • Instrumental • Resources
3. What knowledge is gained at the individual, team, and system levels using an action research methodology to examine the progression of FTAF?	Individual knowledge	• Getting in the way: Obstructionists in the making
	Team knowledge	• Rebuffed, discouraged, and disappointed
	System-level learning	• Lacking readiness

Extent of Academic Progression of FTAF (Research Question 1)

Research question one examined the extent of academic progression for first-time adult

freshmen (FTAF) enrolled at a two-year, associate-granting college. The data, suggested

academic progression was enveloped in layers of complexity and keenly influenced by, both, the

FTAF's readiness (e.g., ability, motivation) for directing their own learning and the institution's ableness to identify and match learner's readiness (Grow, 1991).

Grow (1991) surmised the level of readiness could be sufficiently fostered in cases where a learner's abilities and motivations were recognized and appropriately matched via institutional support (in the forms of skillset, mindset, tools, process, instruction, and policies). Conversely, Grow presumed the level of readiness could be discouraged, or impeded- rendering the learner as more dependent, when a learner's abilities and motivations were unrecognized and not appropriately matched via institutional support. Within this study, each of the scenarios was noted as MACC East's FTAF and the institution, demonstrated varying levels of readiness and support, respectively. Students displayed a broad range of readiness, alternating between dependency and, in those rare cases, full self-directedness. The institution showed a narrower range of support that appeared to match, or benefit, the needs of highly self-directed learners, though, it seemed a mismatch for less self-directed FTAF.

The nuanced combinations of both learner readiness and institutional support were captured in the following three overarching categories: (a) attrition, resultant of low self-directedness and low institutional support, (b) continuous enrollment, resultant of emerging self-directedness and institutional support, and (c) graduation, resultant of achieving self-directedness, with institutional support. Items are discussed in detail subsequent to Table 13.

Table 13

Overview of Findings Related to Research Question 1

Research Question	Category	Theme
1. To what extent do FTAF progress academically in a two-year community college, and what factors contribute to their progression?	High challenges, low readiness, and low support	• Lost to Attrition
	Emergent self-directedness and trusting support	• Continuously Enrolled
	Self-directed and supported	• Graduated

High Challenge, Low Readiness, and Low Support

By far, being lost to attrition was the greatest risk to the academic progression of MACC East's FTAF. Learners were identified as being "lost to attrition" if, at the time of data collection, they were: (a) enrolled as degree-seeking, (b) held an academic standing of "good," "warning," or "probation," (c) remained eligible for course registration and continued enrollment, and (d) displayed no evidence or an intent to transfer or graduate from the college.

Within the frames of readiness and support, learners whom were lost to attrition largely entered the college with high levels of social and non-academic challenges (e.g., first-generation status, years of delayed entry into college, and need for financial aid or employment) that were not identified or addressed by the college. In the instances when FTAF had severe social and non-academic challenges, the data informs they were also highly susceptible to low levels of readiness to direct their own learning as evident by low levels of earned hours, slow academic pace, high rates of unearned credits, and elevated rates of official and unofficial withdrawals. The following cases of RM, a 35 year-old, black female and MB, a 28 year-old, white male

highlight the strains faced by FTAF experiencing high levels of challenge, low readiness for

directing their own learning, and low supports provided by the college. Vignettes follow.

RM's story.

RM's transition into college was not smooth. She had applied to the college earlier in the year but did not enroll resulting in her financial aid being denied. RM eventually was able to register for the three classes the next term; however, due to her inability to attend her classes, she earned below-average grades. She left the college soon after.

MB's story.

MB was admitted to the college four weeks prior to the start of the term. He began his college experiences, an unemployed military veteran trading his boots for books. At the time of his entry, MB was actively job hunting. To MB's delight, one month into the term he was offered a job. Unfortunately, the job conflicted with his class schedule. When he realized the quandary he sought advice. He visited the registration office first to ask "questions about transferring to online classes due to [his] job schedule." He also visited his academic advisor to ask about "what [would] happen [to his military education benefits] if he withdrew from all of his classes." He was informed that he would have a financial hold placed on his account and would have to return a portion of the financial aid he had been awarded. After exhausting all of his means for resolving this matter, MB accepted that his only recourse was to withdraw from his classes and return a total of $400 to the college for the debt he had accrued.

RM's and MB's stories represent a narrative common to MACC East's FTAF whom are

at risk for attrition. For students with these types of nonacademic struggles that cause high levels

of challenge and ultimately attrition, their cases highlight areas of mismatch that, ultimately, are

disadvantageous to the progression of adult learners. Following are discussions related to

MACC East's FTAF whom are lost to attrition.

Academic factors contributing to overall attrition. In addition to the interplay of

social and nonacademic factors influencing the overall attrition of MACC's FTAF, the academic

factors contributing to their attrition be grouped into three areas of importance: high levels of

unearned credits, course withdrawals, and unofficial course withdrawals. Ensuing, are detailed

reviews associated with the academic factors viewed as contributing to attrition of MACC East's

FTAF.

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Unearned credits. The difference between the average number of attempted hours and the average number of earned hours of FTAF lost to attrition was 9.6 hours. Given that the average MACC East class is three hours, this suggests that FTAF lost to attrition completed approximately 3.2 courses that did not register as earned credit toward graduation. Unused credits were earned in the form of non-collegiate learning support classes, official course withdrawals, and unofficial course withdrawals.

Non-collegiate learning support classes. At the beginning of the data collection period, students could be admitted to the college having one, two, or three learning support classes. Twenty-six FTAF (44.8%) required to complete one learning support class were lost to attrition within 2.73 terms. Twelve FTAF (20.7 %) required to complete two learning supports classes matriculated for 2.4 terms of enrollment. Two FTAF (3.4%) left the college after 1.5 terms. By comparison, FTAF who began their academic endeavors without any learning support classes progressed on average four semesters.

Official course withdrawals. MACC East students were allowed to officially withdraw from courses, without restriction, by submitting a written request to the registrar's office. The FTAF submitting official withdrawals attempted 25.4 hours for the year but earned only 11, yielding a completion rate of 43.3% and an average GPA of 2.32. Twenty-two FTAF (37.9%) submitted nearly 30 withdrawal requests before they were lost to attrition after 3.6 terms.

Withdrawals due to academic issues. Concerns about being successful in one's coursework and an inability to manage the life-work-education balance appeared to be two major catalysts for withdrawal requests for those lost to attrition. The frustration brought on by not seeing a way to succeed according to one's academic plan seemed to be a catalyst for official course withdrawals. In one instance, a student noted that she withdrew from her class because

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she was "*unable to follow the instructor and was given [an] insufficient amount of information to succeed in [the] course*." Another indicated she withdrew because she was informed that her "*course of study was no longer available at the campus*." As a result, she "*chose to withdraw to further [her] studies somewhere [else]*."

Withdrawals due to personal issues. The intensity of personal circumstances seemed to spur an increase in official course withdrawals. TW, a 24-year-old Black male, submitted a request to be fully withdrawn because he "*was evicted and he was homeless*." Another student, JG, a 37-year-old White male, felt "*unable to keep up with [his] responsibilities as a father, employee and student all at the same time*."

Unofficial course withdrawals. Equally imposing on the FTAF lost to attrition was an increase in unofficial withdrawals. Students were considered unofficially withdrawn if they earned only grades of Ds and Fs for a given term. Twelve FTAF (20.7%) averaged 1.75 terms of unofficial withdrawals before being lost to attrition. This group attempted a total of 21.5 hours but earned a total of 11.8 hours, yielding a 54.7% completion rate and an average 1.50 GPA.

In addition to the research findings indicating a relationship between attrition and high levels of social and non-academic challenges and recognizing the academic factors contributing to FTAF attrition; the study's results emphasized the gradual nature of the attrition process, particularly around processes leading to financial restrictions and exclusions. This was suggestive in the case of OB, a 29 year-old, veteran who demonstrated unsatisfactory performance over successive terms prior to being financially excluded. OB's story follows.

OB's story.

After one full year of enrollment at the college, OB was on his way to not being able to continue his studies at MACC East. Quite unfortunately, OB was able to accomplish a feat no other cohort member did: In his first term he registered for five courses and failed each one. He faired exactly the same in his second term, earning an additional five

grades of F. By the end of the second and final term, OB had earned both a GPA and a completion rate of 0.

As noted in OB's narrative, the attrition process was subtle and resulted in critical academic and financial ramifications. As mandated by federal aid programs (e.g., PELL, Veteran's Affairs, etc.), students who are awarded federal funding must maintain a satisfactory academic progress (SAP) rate of 66.7% or higher. Therefore, for every 10 classes a financial aid recipient attempts, he or she must earn a passing grade in at least seven of those classes to maintain his or her award. Not meeting the conditions of SAP often meant the difference between FTAF remaining enrolled and ultimately becoming financially restricted or excluded from the college.

Twelve FTAF (12.3%) were eventually financially excluded from the college roughly 2.8 terms after enrolling. The FTAF identified as financially restricted or excluded (a) had degree-seeking status, (b) had restrictions or exclusion holds placed on their registration by the institution to limit course registration following the accrual of an unpaid financial balance with the college, (c) were designated as ineligible for course registration until outstanding balances were paid, and (d) provided no evidence of having an intent to transfer or graduate.

Financial factors contributing to overall attrition. The study findings suggested, the factors contributing to the FTAF of MACC East leaving the college as a result of financial exclusions could be categorized into three areas of importance: sustained below-average academic performance, below-average completion rate, and accrued college debt. Ensuing, is a detailed review associated with the factors contributing to the financial exclusion of FTAF.

Sustained below-average academic performance. Generally, MACC East's FTAF who sustained low levels of academic performance over two or more semesters were often unable to achieve or maintain their SAP requirement. For the FTAF who paid their tuition and fees out-of-

pocket (5, or 6.2%), meeting the conditions of SAP was more of a personal endeavor. However, for the vast majority of MACC East's FTAF, the SAP process was an obligatory means for retaining positive financial standing with the college.

Below-average completion rate. The FTAF were financially excluded from the college roughly 2.8 terms into their enrollment. On average, FTAF falling within this subgroup were in their early 30s and were more often female (66.7%) and African American/Black (58.3%). This group of students were commonly enrolled on a part-time basis, taking an average of 7.7 credits per term, and their rate of completion for courses attempted was a mere 33.1%. This below-average completion rate was not surprising: 18.3% of the students' attempted credits were completed with grades of W (7.7%) and F (7.7%), and an average GPA was 1.07.

Accrued college debt. The combination of a below-average pace for progression and underwhelming academic performance made this subgroup of students SAP- ineligible. As mandated, MACC East reassesses original financial aid awards for students and adjusts them based upon the student's amount of time spent in class and the amount of aid originally awarded via tuition, fees, and financial aid refunds. Recalculations resulted in students having to return $100 to $1,100 to the college ($600 on average across the cohort). Over 90% of the debts were sent to collections because the students did not make payments.

Emergent Self-Directedness and Trusting Support (Continuous Enrollment)

While 71.6% of the FTAF cohort were lost to attrition, 21% (17) were continuously enrolled in August 2015. First-time adult freshmen were categorized as "continuously enrolled" if, at the time of the final data collection cycle, they (a) had degree-seeking status, (b) continued registration or remained eligible for course registration, (c) held an academic standing of "good,"

"warning," or "probation," and (d) showed no evidence of being excluded, having an intent to transfer, or graduating from the college.

Again, in keeping with the frames of readiness and support, the findings to clarify the factors contributing to continuous enrollment were viewed through the lenses of the FTAF's level of readiness to direct their own learning and the college's readiness for attending to their needs. Although the group of learners whom remained enrolled in the college appeared to have similar social and non-academic challenges as those whom were lost to attrition (e.g., first-generation status, years of delayed entry into college, age at the time of matriculation, and need for financial aid or employment), their academic trajectory (e.g., continuous enrollment and transferring) along with the factors contributing to their progression differed.

Factor contributing to continuous enrollment or transferring. In addition to the varying levels of self-directedness and the readiness of the system to facilitate their learning, there were supplementary factors contributing to FTAF's decisions for remaining enrolled at MACC East of transferring to another college. Accordingly the factors for remaining continuously enrolled could be assembled into the following four areas of significance: diverse on-campus interactions, obtaining developmental advisement, sustaining academic performance and pace, and seeking academic and personal advisement. In addition to the factors associated with students remaining enrolled, there was one additional factor contributing to FTAF transferring, their purpose for transferring. Discussions of each contributing factor follows.

Diverse on-campus interactions. The 17 still-enrolled FTAF had 29 interactions with practitioners during their terms of enrollment. Students sought guidance regarding financial obligations (2, or 6.9%), desire for graduation (2, or 6.9%), change of major (3, or 10.3%),

academic needs and planning (9, or 31.1%), course withdrawals (5, or 17.2%), understanding of campus processes (6, or 20.7%), and managing academic uncertainties (7, or 24.1%).

The financial obligations of prime concern for FTAF were related to verifications of enrollment needed to continue receiving financial benefits through Department of Labor and to the denial of financial aid. In the case of the latter, CM, a 25-year-old Black female who had earned her high school diploma years before entering college, the denial of her state-based financial aid did not result from earning poor grades but rather because she no longer met the age requirements to receive the award. She had to follow up with the office of financial to explain her circumstances. She had recently separated from her spouse and was receiving state benefits; thus, the loss of her financial aid negatively impacted her ability to remain enrolled. However, as a result of her contact with office, it was determined that she qualified for another form of aid, which was then used to pay for her classes, allowing her to remain enrolled.

Obtaining developmental advisement. In the case of CM, additional "how-to" or development advisement opened up new opportunities for her to remain enrolled at MACC East. The same had held true for other FTAF seeking development advice (6, or 20.7%). In those moments, students had questions about the securing tutoring to help address their academic challenges, approaching an instructor with whom they were having problems, boosting one's GPA by repeating courses, removing holds in order to register for classes, or assessing the appropriateness of instructional formats.

Academic performance and pace. Those FTAF who were still enrolled attempted an average of 54.4 credit hours, while earning an average of 42.2 hours, and attained an average GPA of 3.22. Based upon the FTAFs' hours of completion, only a small portion of students (3, or 17.6%) were just shy of completing the freshman year, having earned nearly 30 hours of

credits. The vast majority of students (12, or 71%) were approaching earning enough credits to complete their second year. Slightly fewer (2, or 12%) had earned enough credits to progress to a third year of matriculation but did not have enough hours to graduate.

Academic and personal advisement. Though first-time adult freshmen who remained enrolled were high academic performers, they also engaged frequently with their advisors around academic planning, managing the multiple responsibilities of their lives, and working through academic uncertainties. For instance, SH, a 23-year-old White female, needed intensive help with academic planning. On several occasions she spoke with her advisor regarding a "*conflict with [her] work hours*." Several months later, she visited her advisor again to discuss her recent "*change of major*" and her "*course schedule*." Her advisor wanted to create a six-semester academic plan for her but found it "*difficult*" because SH rarely enrolled full-time due to work. When SH was near ready to graduate, she found that she had not taken two of her required classes. She again spoke with her advisor, who recommended the option of completing her course requirements via the college level exam program (CLEP).

Other still-enrolled FTAF needed more assistance with managing the responsibilities of their lives. CM, a 25-year-old Black female, found it difficult to remain in her classes because the additional academic requirements conflicted with other responsibilities. CM dropped her online social work class (the introduction course to her major) because it "*required 15 hours of volunteer work*." She stated that she intentionally enrolled in the online class "*during the summer because [she did not] have childcare*," so completing the additional volunteer hours was not expected and could not be accommodated based on her childcare situation.

Another subgroup of still-enrolled FTAF also relied heavily on their advisors to help them work through the uncertainties they were facing as students. Students often felt

discouraged about whether or not they would pass their classes. One student in particular (AM, a 30-year-old Black female) struggled with remaining enrolled. Feeling indecisive, AM visited her advisor for help with her uncertainties.

AM's story.

> *AM entered MACC East 12 years after earning her GED. She began her first term by taking four classes. Though she passed her collegiate level classes, she failed her learning support class. Her second attempt at the class was successful. Soon after, AM began to feel anxious when struggling with a higher level math course. Failing this class could jeopardize her "dreams of becoming a pharmacist." With the help of advisor, she began exploring alternate programs. Engaging with her advisor helped to lift her spirits. Eventually, she found her resolve and got back on the academic trail.*

AM's insightfulness, personal awareness, and willingness to seek help with her decision making were self-directed qualities that allowed her to take charge of her educational journey. In combination with the system's ableness to respond, via the interactions with her academic advisor, AM's learning and levels of self-directedness were reinforced and extended.

Transferred. For over a century, MACC East has held an open-access, transfer mission; therefore, it was expected that some of MACC East's FTAF would be lost to attrition as a result of transferring. Fourteen of the FTAF (17.3%) were identified as "transferred" if, at the time of the final data collection cycle, they (a) had degree-seeking status, (b) had discontinued but still remained eligible for course registration, (c) held an academic standing of "good," "warning," or "probation," and (d) showed no evidence of being excluded or graduated from the college.

Contributing factor: Purpose for transfer. Twenty-two FTAF (37.9%) at MACC East demonstrated an intent to transfer by requesting a transcript from MACC. Of that 22, eight (13.8%) requested that their transcripts be sent to their home address. Because they could have requested the transcripts for a multitude of reasons (i.e., to view grades, have official record, etc.), these students were not considered lost to attrition by transfer. This left 13 students in the group of students who were lost to attrition. It was documented these students transferred to

public and private four-year, technical, in-state, out-of-state, and virtual colleges. The

variability of transfer was credited to the fact that FTAF had differing motivations for

transferring, including (a) finishing their learning support requirements; (b) registering for

classes not offered or available at MACC East; (c) fulfilling an academic goal of transferring;

and (d) satisfying a personal goal of moving out of state to attend a local college.

High academic pace and performance were prominent characteristics of transferring

FTAF, as evidenced by the group's 80.2% course completion rate, low rate of earned grades of

W (3.4%) or F (4.3%), and above-average GPA of 2.94. Likewise, it could be presumed that

FTAF whom elected to transfer were also highly self-directed regarding their academic

progression. KD's story highlights the determination of a student intent on transferring.

KD's story.

KD, a 27-year-old Black female, waited nearly 10 years to enter college to study pre-pharmacy; however, when she began, she hit the ground running. From her first semester to her '9th, KD earned all A's and B's; the only time she earned any other grade was around the time she became pregnant and gave birth to her twins.

KD had her twin babies a few days after the beginning of her sixth semester. A responsible student and parent, she had made plans for the use of a babysitter but later realized that the "child care provider was [no longer] available to help anymore." The balance between her home life and school responsibilities began to be too much for her. She remained in school, but the six months immediately following were rough. Before long, though, she was back in the swing of things. Within the next 12 months, she was again able perform, as evidenced by her improving grades. Soon after, KD transferred to a local four-year institution to pursue her bachelor's degree.

Achieved Self-Directedness and Matching Support (Graduated)

As discussed earlier, 71.6% (58) of MACC East's FTAF left the college prior to earning

a degree, while 21% (17) were still enrolled at the end of the data collection cycle. This left six

remaining FTAF (7.4%) who were counted as part of MACC East's graduating class. Learners

were categorized as "graduated" if, at the end of the data collection cycle, they (a) held degree-

seeking status, (b) applied for graduation, (c) completed a minimum of 18 semester hours of in-

resident credit, (d) achieved a 2.0 GPA for all courses, (e) held an academic standing of "good" or "warning," and (f) cleared all student record holds and financial obligations. With regard to readiness and support, graduating students were seen as reaching their goal of completion by achieving the highest level of self-directedness with the help of matching support from the college.

   Factor contributing to graduation. In addition to achieving high levels of self-directedness, MACC East's FTAF who graduated also benefitted from the institution's readiness and ableness to provide an appropriate level of matching support for graduates. The FTAF's self-directedness and the college's matching support could be bundled into the following areas of importance: high academic performance and self-determination, pro-graduation advisement, and the desire for continued growth. Details of each ensues.

   High academic performance and self-determination. Students in the FTAF cohort who progressed to completion attempted an average of 88.3 hours, while earning an average of 77.7 hours, representing a completion rate of 88%. The small difference in attempted and earned hours along with the attendant high completion rate indicated that graduates stayed on track fairly well, completing almost 9 of every 10 registered classes. In addition to their high complete rate, graduated students (a) achieved high to average passing grades (A, B, and C) on the first attempt of course enrollment, (b) averaged less than one grade of D and F (0.32%), and (c) averaged just over one withdrawal during their respective terms of enrollment (1.16).

   Pro-graduation advisement. Pro-graduation advisement played a significant role in promoting academic progression through completion to FTAF. In fostering this message, advisors employed the following strategies:

- Academic planning, including course mapping and sequencing

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- Pre-transfer advisement, including processes and deadlines

- Manual registrations and schedule adjustments for with errors.

- Encouraging students to take only those courses needed for their academic program.

Desire for continued growth. Each graduating FTAF indicated his or her intent to

transfer, as revealed in transcript requests processed for students. If a student requested an

official transcript to be sent to his or her home address or directly to another college, it was

assumed that the student was intending to transfer. Four-year system schools or those governed

by the same educational board as MACC East were a top transfer destination.

Four FTAF (66.7%) requested transcripts be sent to the system's main institutions. Of the

remaining two first-time adult freshmen who indicated an intent of transfer outside of the system,

one requested a transcript to be sent to his or her home address. Regarding the student (LC) who

had the transcript sent outside of the system, further exploration affirmed that the student had

been enrolled in MACC's pre-nursing career path program (a limited entrance program) and had

selected to transfer to a non-system, private, four-year institution well known for its specific

career-based, bachelor's degree-granting concentration in nursing.

LC's story.

*LC, a biracial female student, entered college as a first-time freshman at the age of 41.
Looking to become an engineer, she knew the exact curriculum needed to complete her
program of study and to earn her associate degree.*

*From her first semester to her last, LC was continuously enrolled. LC earned mostly A's
and a few B's. She had no grades of C, D, F, or W. She also did not have any repeated
courses. To say that she was a stellar student was an understatement. LC was a very
proactive student, and her hard work paid off as she graduated after seven semesters,
finishing with a GPA of 3.91 at the age of 43.*

See Figure 12 for a visual representation of factors discussed in research question 1.
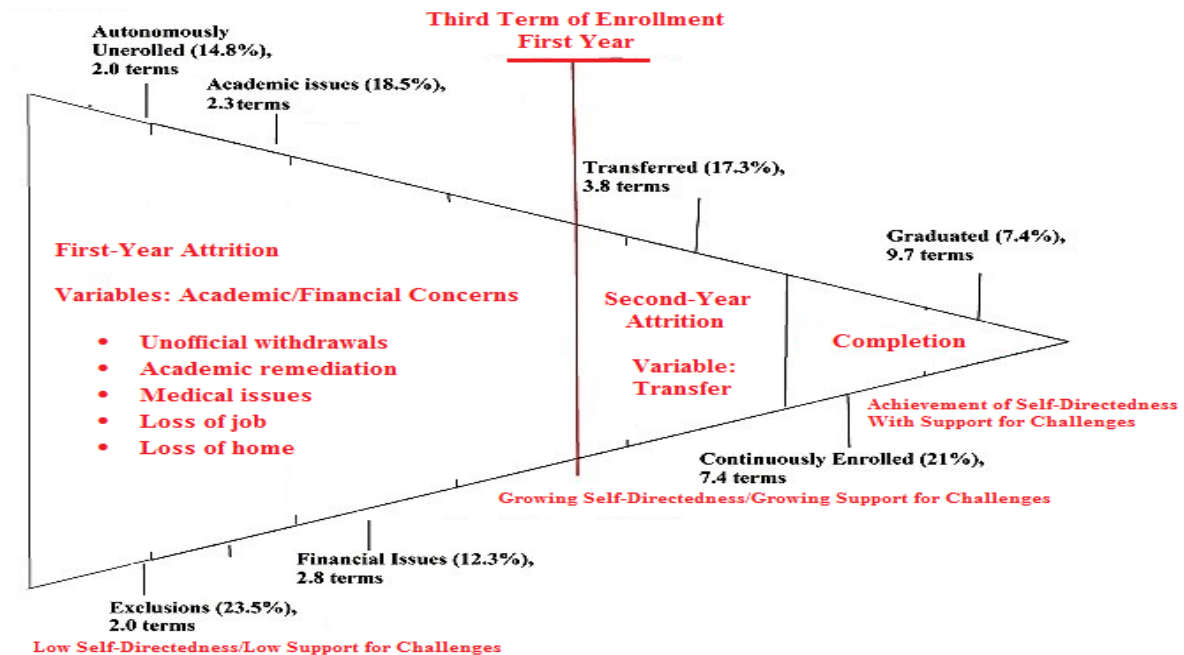
Figure 12. Average FTAF enrollment and extent of progression.

Guiding Principles for Addressing Academic Progression (Research Question 2)

Research question two explored guiding principles that administrators, faculty, and practitioners of a two-year, associate degree-granting college might consider when addressing the issue of academic progression of FTAF. Study participants provided their candid insights into the issue of adult learner progression at MACC East during interviews and focus groups. The private nature of the interviews and the collective spirit of the focus groups encouraged participants to reflect upon their assumptions, beliefs, and perceptions regarding adult learner on-campus experiences and the guiding principles thought to facilitate academic progression.

Data analysis of transcribed notes from study participants produced six guiding principles for consideration- three suggested for the institutional-level and three proposed for the student-level. The three institutional-level guiding principles entailed: developing adult learner programs and initiatives, expanding MACC East's access driven model of practice to include retention and

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graduation, and aligning institutional efforts to promote academic success of adult learners. The

three student-level guiding principles entailed: celebrating the heterogeneity existing within

MACC East's FTAF, nurturing the instrumental components of the adult learning process, and

acknowledging the need for resource allocations FTAF. Table 14 thematically lists the findings

for this research question. Following the display of the findings, is an explication of the resulting

data, organized first by the predominant principle levels (e.g., institutional and student), followed

immediately by a review of the thematic findings associated with each.

Table 14

Overview of Findings Related to Research Question 2

Research Question	Category	Theme
2. What are guiding principles that administrators, faculty, and practitioners consider when addressing the academic progression of FTAF?	Guiding principles	Institutional-level principles • Development • Expansion • Alignment Student-level principles • Heterogeneity • Instrumental • Resources

Institutional-Level Principles

Developing adult learner programs and initiatives, expanding MACC East's access

driven model of practice to include retention and graduation, and aligning institutional efforts to

promote FTAF success were the identified institutional-level principles. Discussions follow.

Development. Participants of the current study shared a rich source of information.

After speaking with a system-level participant, it was clear that the system-level adult learner

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initiatives were in an incipient state, elevated to the fore merely as a response to the national

agenda of graduating more postsecondary students by 2020. Thus, the focus upon adult learners

throughout the system was externally motivated and had very few supporters whom were

enthusiastic about developing programs and initiatives. The exception to this statement was LR,

a system-level coordinator of adult programs whom had the task of organizing system-wide adult

learner initiatives. In response to the following question "*What has been learned by the system*

from participating in the adult learning projects?" LR stated:

> *There has to be a focus on adult learners. The interesting thing is, from this creation of*
> *the adult learning consortium it was really almost like a grassroots effort of the willing,*
> *and there was no system wide push when I first started. We were just the small*
> *department over here doing the work. Then with more national attention on adults and*
> *because of the [national and state completion initiatives] it was realized that the only*
> *way [the state would] be able to meet those goal of graduates needed by 2020 [was] that*
> *adults had to be a focus.*

A similar sentiment was echoed by MS, a MACC employee who was delegated the task of

overseeing the return-to-college program sponsored by the system in addition to her primary

duties at MACC. At the time of our interview, MS had recently taking on this new responsibility

and was beginning to get a sense of the program's purpose and her role within the program. In

MS's understanding, return-to-college program:

> *[was] a part of the overall complete college state program ... [which targeted adults] ...*
> *who, for various reasons … started college and were not able to complete. [T]he*
> *initiative is one in which the [system] schools as well as the technical school collaborate*
> *on this effort to ... make the process seamless for the student to return [to college].*

While it was motivating to learn of the system's and the institution's collaboration to

increase postsecondary access and degree-completion of adults, it was difficult to surmise the

full value of the initiatives as the current programs were not fully developed or consistently

implemented. The data suggested, that at the root of the inconsistencies were varying efforts to

grow and cultivate adult learner initiatives, leaving much of the work to those whom were

fervently passionate about participating in such endeavors. Though, across the board there were

few opportunities for developing initiatives, there were several calls for expanding activities

capable of aiding colleges with advancing their adult learner programs and initiatives.

Expansion. While there could have been numerous manners in which adult learner

programs and initiatives were advanced, the beginning point for the team was to consider

evaluating and expanding the college's model of practice. Although MACC has a triple mission

for providing access, preparing learners to transfer, and readying learners for graduation, the data

suggested the current model was undergirded by the assumption that, culturally, the college was

neither traditionally collegial nor engaging. Instead of being a place where learners intentionally

enrolled to acquire new skills and knowledge or extend their levels of self-directedness, several

participants relegated MACC to a second-choice institution, existing only to provide access into

higher education for students who could not attend elsewhere and who, in the interim of going to

their dream college, attended MACC so they could accumulate enough credits to transfer. There

was an undercurrent of this type of thinking among study participants suggesting that adult

learners had little interest college engagement. As AF, a humanities instructor, stated:

> *The type of culture we have is one in which students want to come in, get what they need,
> and leave.... It's just not that kind of culture. We provide a service to them, [and that
> service is] accessibility…. [The] culture toward learners in general is an extremely
> positive one in that it's, "You're here to learn. You are not here to watch baseball or to be
> going to silly string parties or get free food.*

Though in the past, adult learners primarily attended two-year colleges for purposes of personal

and professional enrichment, the goals of education in the 21st century have taken on decidedly

different roles. Today, students are being pushed to earn their degrees, and adult learners like

KC, a 30-year-old African-American woman, are taking charge of their educational experiences

by creating an exit strategy for earning their degree. Following attendance at a graduation-

centered event, KC stated that her intention for participating in such experiences was to create an

efficient pathway to graduation that would continue to allow her to devote time to her duties as a full-time employee and mother. As KC said:

> *Right now, my graduation date is set for 2017 … my inquiry [at the event] was, "What can I do to move that graduation date up?"… If possible, I'm working on trying to do more credit hours per semester … because right now, I'm just half-time, [taking] six or seven hours per semester.*

KC is a testament to the competing interests and commitments in adult students' lives; however, the mere existence of these competing interests was not enough to disregard the outcomes of ensuring that adult learner programming was included within the model of practice. BG recounted a time in the school's history when the model of practice emphasized making time and space for adult learners to engage. During that period, the college's willingness to encourage adult learners was facilitated by the provision of a dedicated activity period and adult student group which were intended to offer a centralized place and purpose for adults to learn and make connections. BG remarked:

> *We've had … [an adult student] club [at other campuses which] was a very successful club [largely because there was a designated club time]. Because we don't have a particular club time anymore, or a meeting time like we had eight or 10 years ago, adult learners, [who] are very schedule oriented [and open to scheduling]'time to learn about new things, don't necessarily seek it [now].*

Adding to this idea that a model of practice should support the establishment of a dedicated space was the notion that such a model should also be driven by a motivation to fully understand the educational capacities, beyond access, held by adult learners. Some have seen a void in MACC East's model of practice, in that it has not extended expectations for retention and graduation to the adult learner population. NT believed that being intentional in extending expectations regarding the goals of retention and graduation to the adult population could be the catalyst needed to transform MACC East's access goals into a mastery of retention and graduation. He asserted:

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This is where [the college has] a problem [with] our model of practice. We pride ourselves on being an access institution. That's a wonderful thing but that's not all we do. It seemed to me, intellectually, that was our focus. It bears out now as people come around... [that] we [have not been] masterful in retaining or graduating [our students].

Alignment. A fundamental and recurring theme for this research was that those helping adult learners to progress needed to be singularly aligned and purposeful in their efforts to bring about holistic development and growth in FTAF. As it stood, dedicated resources intended for the benefit of adult learners was limited or non-existent. Further reinforcing these prevailing realities was a perception among certain stakeholders that an adult's life, needs, responsibilities, and abilities were no different from traditional students, and therefore such dedicated resources were unnecessary. RJ, an instructor flatly stated:

I don't know that I would offer any different resources to adult learners than I do the rest of the students. I mean, they're students just like everybody else. We call them adult learners. We categorize them differently. I'm not even a 100% sure we should do that— because why?

NT, however, shared an opposing view, passionately advocating for bring adult initiatives to the fore, he exclaimed.

We need to have a purposeful direction toward [the adult learner] in the academic community. We have to [facilitate]. We have to [encourage]. We have to be student-centered. We have to make sure we draw off the aspects of the other two components: retention and graduation. We have to make sure that learning takes place.

Student-Level Principles

Celebrating the heterogeneity existing within MACC East's FTAF, nurturing the instrumental components of the adult learning process, and acknowledging the need for dedicated resources for adult learners were the recognized student-level principles. Discussions regarding each follows, with emphasis provided by excerpts from participants.

Heterogeneity. Often defined by their age, delayed entry into college, work history, familial responsibilities, reasons for seeking postsecondary education, or their level of academic

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focus, adult learners have nevertheless proven to be a diverse, heterogeneous group of students.

When asked to characterize MACC East's FTAF, participants offered an array of responses. NT,

a student development director at MACC East, provided the following comprehensive view:

> *As I see it, if you want to get into the age range, you're talking about the 25 to 30 on up and even older nontraditional student who has been out of school a while or never came to school, are working, raising families, and feel the need to come back to further their education or by nature of promotion they need to do through further education. It's a combination of those kinds of characteristics ...*

PV, a department chair, focused primarily on adultness as representing one's ability to manage

multiple responsibilities. PV commented:

> *I would say typically someone married. Have responsibilities. Already have a job. Working. They're looking for a new career or some way to be advanced in their current career. They're jostling all those things along with having kids, typically.*

QW, an administrative assistant, offered another dimension by addressing the goal-orientated

nature of adult learning:

> *Unlike a traditional or the recent high school graduate who comes and is looking for their fun time, the adult learner is more focused on their courses. ... They are very direct; they want just what is needed, not all the fluff.*

Despite the fact that no single definition of MACC East's adult learner emerged, it was clear

academic, non-academic, and personal factors together impacted how adult learners were

perceived. Age, delayed entry, or family responsibilities alone were not seen as the sole definers

of adult learners; instead, the intertwining nature of these factors played a part in whether or not

learners were perceived as adults. As such, it is much more beneficial to see the complexities

associated with a student's lived experiences. When one can acknowledge the intertwining

nature of the multiple factors associated with the lives of adult learners, one might be able to

design a model of practice that is inclusive of adult learner progression.

     Instrumental learning needs. Observing, exploring, and accepting difference is a

necessary feature for facilitating the progression of adult learners. Far too often, when adult

learners enter the college environment for the first time, it is automatically expected that their life

experiences and successes will inherently translate into the classroom. When asked about the

strengths of adult learners, CH, an instructor, suggested:

> *They're more disciplined. Well, I think they manage their time better, but because they have so many other things going on, that is also a problem for them. I think they have a career path. A lot of them already know where they want to go, which is different than a lot of the traditional college students who're trying to find out what they want to do.*

Another instructor, AF, added:

> *They're quick learners. They're motivated. They understand time and money in a way... not as present to an 18-year-old. Then they just provide a different perspective in the classroom. They've got life experience. I feel like that makes them both interesting and their writing more interesting, and the good influence on classmates. I'm a big fan of peer modeling, and they're good models in many cases.*

While a larger number of MACC East's FTAF were disciplined, motivated, or adept

academically, many were not. For adults who were less "*put together*" or whose life experiences

did not adequately prepare them for academic competence, the chances of being unseen and

pushed to the margins were high, making transition into the college environment challenging.

PV, an adult learner and employee of MACC East, grappled with the overwhelming pressure of

being an older student who felt confident in life but uncertain academically. When asked about

the major barriers to her education, PV conceded:

> *I think somewhat, to a degree, intimidation. I'm sitting in a class. I'm 41 years old. ...You almost felt like eyes are on you because you're the older person. I don't know ... I think more of it is probably self-inflicted. Knowing you should have already done something differently. Knowing that they may be aware of that. ... There's never that "awe factor" or pat on the back.*

Another circumstance causing intimidation among FTAF included technological

inexperience. When asked about the difficulties of FTAF, one interviewer articulated:

> *A lot of times—[there]—is [a] technology gap. Some [adult learners] aren't familiar with the online systems and are really intimidated by them sometimes. So [for instance], a project that a teacher would assign that would just be second nature to a [traditional]*

student, there's that learning curve to first learn how to use the technology and then, of course, complete the assignment per the instructor's specifications.

The process of engaging with the academic environment was rife with challenges for the adult learner. However, participants understood this and asserted that though academic success eludes some due to inability, intimidation, or competence, it would be a mistake to assume broadly that all adult learners were the same and progressed in the same manner. Instead, it was suggested that over a period of time, FTAF, with personalized support, could move past their challenges. DI, an instructor, remarked:

> *I think when they first get started back to school, they have some confidence issues, which I think improve quickly. That just comes from taking the first test ... and seeing that they can indeed do it, and they're probably in the upper half of the grade distribution more often than not. …. I think it's just the perception that they're not going to be ready is the biggest thing at first, but they quickly find out that that's not true.*

Resource allocation: Funds, people, and space. The data affirmed that creating learning spaces for adult learners was necessary. After speaking with representative from two external adult learning consortium institutions, I learned that funding was very viable to accommodating their adult learner initiatives. LR described the funding process:

> *The system supports the institutions particularly through the adult learning [association] to support this work. Part of that is, for instance, as a member of the adult learning [association] you [have available] certain services and funding. Part of that would be like assistance in creating an adult learning resource center which [would] be a place where adult[s] can convene.*

I spoke with two association members, one from a four-year and another from a two-year college. In both cases, system-level funding was used to facilitate activities specific to adult learning and training for practitioners and faculty working with adult learners. Specifically, the programs offered by Southside State University and Urban Central Community College used their funding to:

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- create centers staffed by an advocate "*who over[saw] all [aspects of adult learning process]*" (KE);

- facilitate financial literacy workshops, which served to advise students on "*financial education offered before the adult learner [began] the process...*" (QW);

- conduct adult learning theory trainings so that "*faculty members ... can buy into understanding how to teach and deliver information [that] nontraditional [students are] able to comprehend and learn.*" (NT);

- design adult learner learning communities in which students "*have some type of support ... [or] flexibility when things come up that they don't anticipate,*" (TP);

- offer alternate methods of credit completion in the form of "*more focused certificates that build into two- or four-year degrees*" and skill building (AL); and,

- provide scholarships and grants to help adult learners who "*are paying for [school] out of pocket [reduce their financial burdens so they can remain] focused*" (KE).

Knowledge Gained Through Action Research (Research Question 3)

Reflection and reflexivity are methods that allow individuals to articulate and make meanings from first-, second-, and third-person perspectives around a shared project's (a) process, (b) content, and (c) outcomes (Bens, 2012). In order to better understand my, the team's, and the study participant's reflections emerging from the project's process, content, and outcomes, I reviewed my researcher memos, post-team meeting notes, and the transcripts of participant interviews. Through the examination of these artifacts, I was able to begin making sense of and articulating the individual-, team-, and system-level learning occurring.

At the individual-level, my teammates and I learned our personal biases and preferences, challenges with establishing democratic processes, and mistrust of the system frequently

obstructed our research. At the team level, we came to value continuing our efforts to promote a

collaborative research system and team development, even as our institutional security unraveled

and members opted-out of the project. Lastly, by using the action research framework, we

concluded our system- in its own whirlwind of revolutionary change- had a low level of

readiness to receive and benefit fully from the dynamic functionality afforded by AR. See Table

15 for an overview of the associated findings. Subsequent are related discussions.

Table 15

Overview of Findings Related to Research Question 3

Research Question	Category	Theme
3. What knowledge is gained at the individual, team, and system levels using an action research methodology to examine the progression of FTAF?	Individual knowledge	• Getting in the way: Obstructionists in the making
	Team knowledge	• Rebuffed, discouraged, and disappointed
	System-level learning	• Lacking readiness

Getting in Our Own Way: Obstructionists in the Making (Individual Learning)

To inquire into one's own action is to make the unseen, concealed, and protected self the

center of examination. This level of inquiry allowed us to begin our transformation process from

practitioners to researchers. Our transformations, mirrored Bridges' (1986) patterns for

accepting change as we first surrendered who we were (practitioners, employed by MACC),

before landing in "no man's land," where we "experience[d] ambiguity, confusion, and … a

sense of meaningless," (with the research process) and finally "learn[ed] new skills and

competencies" (becoming scholarly practitioners) (Burke, 2010 p. 111). To say the team was reluctant about how the project would transpire was an understatement. The following excerpts from my journal and the reflections of a team member, demonstrated our reservations and feelings of uncertainty. I reticently expressed:

> *Like anything that unfolds, at first glance it is difficult to know or predict the end results of a process. Perhaps my journey will be like that of an unfolding onion, which lets out a noxious gas that stings the eyes but is quite flavorful when placed with the perfect ingredients. Or, perhaps my journey will unfold like that of a blossoming rosebud which becomes more and more beautiful as the leaves loosen, but then dries out and darkens when further growth becomes impossible.*

My colleague hesitantly shared:

> *There are many opportunities [to impact the lives of adult learners], but [it's very] challenging to get students involved. Also, [we may experience resistance in the forms of] time needed to conduct the project, maneuvering through the bureaucratic process … and helping students overcome the "I can't" mentality.*

After months of reviewing the notes from the project, it was evident the spirit of hesitancy persisted, leaving the team in varying states of activity and inactivity. Though the activity-inactivity-activity cycles prolonged the project beyond the initially estimated 12- month timeline, it was through those cycles that learning occurred. One of the most profound areas of erudition was the recognition that my and the team's appreciation for taking a neutral, or impartial stand, particularly around displaying our system in a negative light frequently encumbered our processes and nullified our abilities to tap into our subjectivities, concerns, and biases regarding this project. Though we engaged in reflective exercises (e.g., reflective interviews, team discussions, and journaling) to understand our biases and preferences, we never openly discussed how our desire to remain impartial to the unraveling of our system, likely interfered with us continuing to be interested, passionate, and motivated about the project. In its own way we became unintentional obstructionists in our choice to not acknowledge the chaos going on in the larger context. Unfortunately, we could not get out of our own way as was

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evident by the amount of time it took for the team to form, the multiple false starts we endured, and the strides we made to remain engaged in our system as the revolutionary aspects of our change unfolded.

Our misgivings eventually lessened permitting us to begin a process of (a) identifying our biases, (b) co-sharing project responsibilities, (c) recognizing equity in participation, (d) learning to depend on one another as a team, (e) balancing the project within a disruptive organizational environment, (f) remaining hopeful, and (g) committing to the research process. The following sections summarizes the team's and my areas of personal learning.

Identifying researcher bias. At the time of this study, I had worked in a results-driven professional environment for over a decade and had become accustomed to assessing situations and determining efficient and effective pathways toward practical solutions. Much of my work had been independent, requiring me to take on the role of expert and information giver. Through earlier reflections, I acknowledged that I am:

> *solutions focused; prefer situations that have straight forward solutions; want immediacy in action and can be a bit impatient; like to take the path of least resistance; appreciate keeping things simple; favor working independently; value my uninterrupted alone time; and, need my own quiet time to rejuvenate.*

Several of my personal preferences, particularly the desire to take immediate action to resolve problems and look for the most efficient solutions, proved contrary to the tenants of AR, advocating working through situational complexities, learning in action, and collaborating on all efforts associated with understanding an issue or problem. While I had presumed I led with a participative approach, in the face of assuming my new roles, I had become resistant and inflexible. Instead of encouraging full participation, I elected to take on the early project tasks (i.e., scheduling meetings, creating the agenda, and leading discussions) without properly

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encouraging active participation from AR team members. Burke (2011) attributed this type of

resistant behavior as wanting to maintain control by noting:

> *change usually involves a shift away from a known situation, with all its familiarity, comfort, and advantages. The people affected are exchanging the known for the unknown, certainty for the uncertainty, existing patterns of behavior and adaption to new patterns, or tried rewards for untested ones.* (p. 111)

Unfortunately, my (and the team's) challenges with assuming our researcher identities

delayed the team's ability to enter into a place of deep learning, reflection, and exploration

during the early project phases. We needed to learn to share the burgeoning responsibilities.

Challenges with sharing responsibilities. While I initially found comfort in taking a

simplified approach to framing the adult learner problem identified by the team, my ability to

make sense of what was occurring was stifled and limited because I was unsure of how to

incorporate my team into the process, even though they were providing me with feedback and

letting me know their interests, as evidenced in the following comments:

> *I want to gain insight into the perspective of others. I aim to increase my level of professional camaraderie. Learning to lead self-organizing workgroups is an area of interest. I strive to enact measure for continuously improving my practice.*

In retrospect, there were missed opportunities for apportioning responsibilities among group

members. As the facilitator, I could have worked more vigorously to help develop the binding

structure of the team, cultivate areas of interest identified by the members, and encourage them

to assume greater accountability for ensuring task completion. My shortsightedness concerning

the research process led to a breakdown in the team's effort to collaborate and made it

increasingly difficult for me to both acknowledge my limitations as a researcher and to seek help.

The following transcript excerpt provides a partial view of my challenge sharing responsibilities

with my team. In closing a team meeting I stated:

> *[Are there] any other items that we didn't discuss that we need to discuss or questions or anything that we didn't cover? What I will do, I have recorded this, so I will share the recording with [Dominique] or we might have to [meet] individually. I don't know*

exactly how [our] schedules are going to work out, but the next time [we meet] hopefully we'll all be here. We'll still keep to the one meeting a month, and I'll try to keep [us to] this time frame, and I will try to [keep our meetings] on Friday because it's quiet around here…. The other part is, depending on how I can formulate what we've said today, hopefully by the next meeting I can have some plans laid out and then we can discuss. …

Reflecting on this matter proved valuable in that I began to understand that my personal preferences and paradigm for creating change, flew in the face of the democratic, collaborative, and team-oriented processes inherent to action research. My point of view was challenging to maintain and made me reconsider the purpose of being a team participant.

We are all participants. While the group was in the forming phase of our development (Tuckman, 1965), not only did I miss opportunities to democratically co-delegate duties within the team, I unintentionally positioned myself as the directive expert and relegated the rest of the team to the position of non-involved participant observers. I failed to facilitate the process; that is, I did not fully "support members in assessing their current skills … [or position them to] build new skills," nor did I "foster leadership in others to facilitate" (Bens, p.7, 2005).

By not encouraging the sharing of responsibilities, the bulk of the planning, goal setting, and organization of meetings fell unnecessarily and inadvisably on me. This became increasingly obvious as the primary work of the AR team's and my individual work functions at MACC East intensified. Working in areas that provide direct services to students, we entered our peak enrollment and registration times at roughly the same time. I was unable to delegate my facilitation duties, not because the team was unable to do the work—the members were quite capable—but because I had not felt comfortable with asking them to take on the extra duties, since they had expressed concern about the resources that may have been needed to make the process successful. The following communication highlights one team member's apprehensions about adding new tasks in light of limited staffing and resources, and also speaks to the very real concern teammates felt about the project becoming overwhelming:

Delina: [Cohort advising is still going on; however,] the one thing that [Dominique] worries about is if we're then asking [staff] to do additional advising, [they won't have the manpower] ... I don't want to do anything that's going to inundate them.... But what does that intervention look like? ... Is it a stern letter and [a mandate] ...to come in, or is it [that students' registration will be] ... restricted to six hours? I don't know.

Elvis: When you start saying that you have to come in, then you have to start thinking about resources [that we don't presently have].

"Expert" implosion leads to team development. Within a month of this meeting, the team member Dominique, referenced in the previous exchange, left the project and the college. A very small group to start, we now comprised a team of four. As a result, this project period felt quite bleak, so much so that I found it increasingly difficult to explore the additional tasks being identified by the team. These difficulties lasted for a few months, during which time my motivation for facilitating the project began to be tested. While communicating updates about the project to my major professor, I recounted:

I am trying to stay hopeful, but am losing steam each day ... At this point should I really be concentrating on retention, or should I be "intervening" ... as recommended, to gather information from constituents about the role of [the college] in the lives of adult learners...? While I would like a more impactful study... that takes impactful action to retain our students, I do not see how I can get this... considering [the] changes of the institution. It seems every direction I have stepped into has come up against major [road]-blocks.

In retrospect, my assuming the role of "expert" also meant that I placed the team's tasks and responsibilities entirely on my shoulders. I had inadvertently created my own burden by not delegating. However, as the team members became more comfortable with providing input and taking the lead concerning the project, it became clear that they had talents and strengths that were keenly different from my own (as the AR facilitator) and that were necessary for us to transform into a more effective team. Derived from the transcribed notes of the AR team's meetings, Table 16 highlights the shared strengths and benefits of each of the remaining team members and the moment each demonstrated their buy-in for co-sharing the project's tasks.

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Table 16

AR Team Members' Strengths and Benefits, Shared Responsibilities, and Knowledge Gained

Name * / Strengths and Benefits	Shared Responsibilities	Knowledge Gained
Martin Aster (Director of Students) Committed to student development and understanding student success	M. Aster sharing his beliefs about the issue of assessing student retention: *Well, I think with retention, we don't ask the students their intention on the front end, so it's very hard for me to understand that we help them meet their expectation. Now, we're meeting the institution's expectations, but I just don't think we ask the students on the front end, What are you intending on doing? Because some students may intend on coming here, taking classes for a semester or two and then transfer. If that's true, if we had their intention on the front end, we would have satisfied their goal...*	• Academic intention is key to understanding and meeting learner expectations. • Institutional expectations for success are different from that of students. • Institutional formulas and definitions designed to gauge academic attrition, retention, or progression do not account for the individuality of learner attrition behavior.
Elvis Jones (Records Director) Skilled and efficient at extracting data from the system and generating reports for the team	E. Jones following up regarding the task of generating a team report: *I gave you the major; ... High school GPA, diploma type, and that will also identify your GED folks, vocational diplomas; ...There are some CPs in there also; the ones before 2011 and 2012. I also have if they took the SAT or ACT. The scores that'll appear on the spreadsheet ... but this is the highest score for the critical reading and for the math, and for the ACT English, and ACT math. Also, if they took the Compass, the same here; it's their Compass English, Compass reading.*	• Pre-collegiate variables influence college-level progression. • Data can be effectively used to explore and better understand student-related issues such as academic progression.

Name * / Strengths and Benefits	Shared Responsibilities	Knowledge Gained
Delina White (Exam Director) Committed to providing collaborative input and implementing the initiated intervention.	D. White speaking about collaborative ways to engage the student body by initiating interventions: *I think we have to market a strategy to where we may [work with faculty]. [We can send] our email to faculty to say please bring your class. We should probably provide a time when either they are in class or on Saturday or something like that. [To encourage student participation] we can [suggest the faculty provide] extra credit or something, if [students] attend … [They can] get credit for participation. I think [we are] going to get more and more benefit out of it, [especially] if [it] can [be tied to engaging]… first time freshmen.* (2014).	• Cross discipline collaboration efforts bolster support for learner initiatives and can serve as a catalyst for adult learner engagement.

Note. * Pseudonyms have been used for participants.

Trusting the process. Over the next several months, the team began implementing the

project interventions. However, the launching of the interventions (internal and external

constituent interviews, student focus groups, and the online learning module) and the project's

introduction to the larger MACC East community filled me with severe doubts and anguish. In

preparation, I reflected on my experience and attempted to see this experience from the

community's perspective. I noted:

> *Partaking in this somewhat private reflection was hard—I can see how participants may elect not to participate and go to these depths with me in my current research, and as a researcher I must be prepared to have multiple methods and strategies to engage and to encourage participants. Likewise, I must be prepared to hear that participants no longer want to engage in the research and understand why. Either way, I as the subject will continuously have to presence myself so that I can respond accordingly.…*

Though I gained confidence around facilitating and managing the project, I was unsure of the reception by the MACC East community, however, to my surprise and relief, the project was well received. A few days into the interviews, I observed in a memo:

> *The first day, I was shocked at the outpouring of support as I had anticipated that I would not get many takers. I also have had mixed feelings as I was tremendously worried that this information would end up in the blogs as a negative action. "However, at this time, I cannot let that fear of "being exposed" (even though I have permission) stop me from getting my information.*

Rebuffed, Discouraged, and Disappointed (Team Learning)

It was interesting to learn that many of the research participants were exceedingly willing to be part of this project and were eager to contribute meaningfully, while we also found others used the interviews as an avenue for voicing their discouragement and disappointment regarding the larger college-wide challenges. The AR members and I learned firsthand that the data collection portion of this project, similar to the team and problem formation portions, would not follow a simple linear path. Instead, once we connected with participants, we were propelled by continuous cycles of smaller internal changes, both planned and unplanned. We also endured additional periods of discontinuity due to changes in the team's composition (losing team members), the college's changing organizational structure (impending consolidation), and the looming uncertainty and doubts felt by AR members.

For months, the team was seemingly incapacitated, rebuffed by the idea of continuing on this journey. Eventually, the project was not moving forward or backward; it was just at a standstill and the team, "the primary work group … serve[ing] as the context and locus for …interface[ing] between the individual and the organization," (Burke, 2011, pp. 113-114) was not putting in any work. During our periods of cessation, we were neither continuing to enhance our skills as scholarly practitioners, nor were we continuing to gain impactful knowledge about working collaboratively in a self-forming team. We discovered a need to find leveled ground for

our work that would entail striving for a collaborative, open system, securing sanctioned involvement, and adopting a team framework built on communication.

Leveled ground. After a hiatus of several months, the AR team meetings and our data gathering processes reconvened. As the project traversed through the various emerging project phases and cycles, so too did we navigate the team development process. The team progressed through five phases of development- forming, storming, norming, performing, and adjourning (Tuckman, 1965). The forming and storming phases of the project, where the team's membership and intended purpose were identified, were quickly entered and exited. The team took much longer, over a year, to enter and exit the norming phase of the project as we were unsure of our roles and responsibilities within the group and how to enact the action research framework. Additionally, as we navigated through the norming phase of the process, we entered into several unsuccessful contracts, refined our team's purpose, and lost team members as the college began institutional consolidation.

Consequently, when the team convened to finalize our project's purpose (of adult learner progression within our system) and design action, implement action, and assess outcomes concerning the problem (during the performing phase), there was uncertainty (as discussed previously) about undertaking the project as well as growing apprehensions about engaging in either reflection or journaling about the process. Leading with the mindset that "successful and productive action research occurs where individual participants have the opportunity to talk extensively about their experiences and perceptions" (Stringer, 2007, p. 87), I suggested to the team that, in addition to speaking about the project during our meetings, we also consider reflecting upon the project by chronicling the events via journaling. To encourage these reflective activities, each of the members was provided a research journal and access to an online

journal. Although team members were openly reflective and transparent in team meetings, none of the team members (outside of myself) engaged actively in the journaling process—which we later discovered was a significant limitation to making sense of and understanding our learning process. With that being said, after several months of implementing and assessing interventions, the team moved into the adjourning, or concluding, project phase in December 2015.

Striving for an open, collaborative system. The current study fostered team collaboration by establishing opportunities for members to express their thoughts and concerns, challenge one another, and call upon each other as the project proceeded. Multiple lines of communication, including email exchanges, phone conversations, and one-on-one interviews were used to cultivate the team's system. The collaborative spirit took root during the first meeting, when the team discussed member expectations, agreed to standard team meetings at least once per month, and reiterated the voluntary nature of the project. Additionally, the team agreed to (a) meet whether or not all members could be present, in order to maintain the momentum of the project, and (b) to incorporate the voices of the absent if at all possible. An example of this latter commitment appears in the following passage describing the process adopted by two team members who engaged in a data mining exercise to begin making sense of the factors contributing to academic struggles. In the absence of the second team member, the first shared the following details in the formal team meeting:

> *[We] looked at the [data], and ... these were some of the top [reasons] why students went on exclusion. ... We wanted to look at those educational competencies [students]... had to learn ... How [these competencies] impacted the learner's decision to persist. How aware they [were] of their goals, their ideas about what their intent [was] for being in college. Their academic skills, [were] they prepared, [were] they coming from high school sufficiently prepared or when they [got] here, [did] they go to class. [We wanted to know if they were] staying in class, [were] they withdrawing from class because the work [was] too difficult. The life school balance, the majority of our students, 90% of them said, "I have to work." By the time you looked at all their information and the fact*

> *that because they work[edI they [couldn't] really engage in the community ... Those [were] ... the ... big blocks of the data that [we] looked at.*

Though well-intentioned, the team was accommodating of absence to a fault. Each time the team met and all members were not present, the pending workload (i.e., engaging with participants or reviewing the data) served as reminder of the restrictions of having less capacity. This presented a serious challenge to the team as we moved into the performing phase. Implementing our plans to interview members of the college, engage students in focus groups and online learning modules, and co-teach a first-year seminar class using an adult-centered approach was labor intensive for the remaining four members. At times, it felt like we would not reach the project's end, and the team struggled to figure out how to keep us on track.

Sanctioned involvement. Outside of myself and the project sponsor, the remaining members of the AR team, all employed by MACC East, were invited to voluntarily participate in this project. While my worries that membership would be small were confirmed, I found those who agreed to contribute were dedicated. Unfortunately, I severely underestimated the challenges the team members would endure. As the MACC East campus administrator noted, we all faced restrictions to our participation "*due to … limited time*" and the invisible pressures members felt in determining if their engagement in the project was sanctioned.

Early in the project, the director of advising shared his apprehensions about becoming involved because he was uncertain whether or not "*this project [was or was] not a MACC East project*" or "*if we [would be] following MACC East's guidelines for a vision.*" Regrettably, I did not query the member more extensively. Instead I provided an answer that was recognizable to me. Since my direct supervisor was also serving as the project sponsor, I had no concerns about having permission to participate and assumed the same to be true for my colleagues. I reassured

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my colleague that "*this project [was] sanctioned by both MACC and the University of Georgia*," and provided him with the names and contact information of the project sponsors.

Several months later, I realized that I had been shortsighted and missed an opportunity to examine the intent of the team member's query, which was to verify who in his direct line of authority had provided permission for him to participate in what essentially amounted to a self-forming, volunteer project. My decision to not include my colleagues' direct supervisors in my participant selection was a teachable moment, as it caused unnecessary tension for team members who found out later their participation in the project was not sanctioned, or, more accurately, was not supported by their supervisors. Very soon after these exchanges, the team member began missing scheduled meetings before eventually recusing himself.

Adopting a framework for team communication. The team continued to face unplanned nonattendance as additional members missed meetings due to competing commitments, such as primary work obligations and responsibilities at MACC East (i.e., conflicting meetings, tasks, etc.). Exploring attrition among adult learners, within the context of MACC East's active phase of second-order change in which the deep structures of the college's identity and purpose were increasingly becoming destabilized, seemed paradoxical and circular. As the team began to speak with participants to better understand why adult learners were leaving the college, we began hearing from interviewees a pervasive narrative that the college was fated, had "*always been under fire*," and that we as the personnel of the college were constantly "*defending ourselves*" due to our lack of "*credibility and leadership*."

What was the team to do with this information? Our project's scope did not pertain to "fixing" the college, but our inquiry into one subject made clear there were other fundamental issues of concern at MACC East. Although the feedback rang true for us as employees, we were

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limited in the actions we could take within the confines of the current project. Even so, while we could not resolve the larger issues being expressed, we could present an alternative narrative through our work on the AR team. This alternative narrative was undergirded by transparency and by receptivity to others. Members of the AR team felt it was important to:

> *(1). Be responsive ... [This was to ensure participants would] keep interest[ed] ... (2). Provide clear communications, ensur[ing] that everything in the wording matches, including ... any attachments which are mentioned... (3). Keep things simple, [and] make it extremely clear... and (4). Be open to clarifying questions [as] some people [were] interested but want[ed] to know more details and want[ed] a discussion prior to making a decision about participating.*

The team intended to keep the framework simple so that we could easily communicate our purpose and goals, especially with participants who were hesitant to partake in the process.

Learning from the gaps. Our intended outcome was to explore more deeply understand the issue of FTAF progression, bring forth existing knowledge at various levels within the organization, and lay the foundation for possible future research. What we anticipated would be a series of inquiry and learning cycles lasting 12 months eventually stretched to 30 months, as a result of an extended storming and norming phases. During this period, there was much organizational insecurity. At times is seemed implausible to continue working on this project, when it was unclear whether or not the organization would remain intact. Team member Dominique Jones left the college as a result, which cause the team to reenter the storming and norming phases.

At times, the project stalled due to team inactivity (particularly during the storming and norming phases), while at other times the tasks associated with the project were simply overwhelming (e.g., during the performing stage). Through it all, the team was able to progress but had to learn to manage the project in an environment filled with increasing uncertainty, unpredictable occupational demands, and competing commitments. The institution's focus on

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decreasing learner attrition was quite intense and required all employees to pay greater attention to retention-boosting actions within their departmental units. These very real demands were a preceding catalyst for challenges related to fueling a collaborative, open system, working through the project with limited team member participation, and addressing an ever-changing narrative of MACC East's organizational struggles. Fortunately, four of the original team members (Elvis Jones, Michal Aster, Delina White, myself) were able to commit for the full duration of the project, which became a test of tenacity and endurance in the face of frequent scheduling conflicts, increased attrition of team members, and mounting unanticipated organizational shifts occurring at MACC East.

Lacking Readiness for the Action Research Process (System Learning)

Culminating this process was the third-person knowledge gained by conducting interviews with MACC East's participants. Through the interviews, the AR team was able to gain a deeper understanding of the issue of adult learner progression from the collective vantage of others. The most valuable lesson emerging from engaging the system in this way was the revelation that the system, in its transient state of uncertainty and impending implosion, lacked a readiness for exploring adult learner progression using the dynamic process of action research. As such, based upon our review of the data, the team offered the following suggestions the college may consider to increase readiness for future endeavors exploring about adult learners and their progressions: (a) expanding the historical views of the adult learner, (b) challenging current rhetoric and pedagogy, (c) identifying adult learner initiatives, and (d) identifying practice and policy implications. Following, each suggestion is further expounded upon.

Expanding the historical views of the adult learner. Historically, students within higher education have been objectively categorized as "adult" based upon their age, delayed entry into college, or their secondary pathways to enrollment. However, throughout this study,

the constituents of MACC East consistently expanded the working definition of "adult learners"

to include more subjective personal characteristics. This expanded definition encompasses

considerations of the learner's motivations, life experiences, academic and non-academic

challenges, nontraditional pathways to education, competing commitments, marital identity,

parental status, enrollment patterns, and personal and academic determination. The following

participant interview excerpts capture identified adult learner qualities.

1. Adult learners have life experience that can make them role models:

   They've got life experience. I feel like that makes them both interesting and their writing more interesting, and the good influence on classmates.

2. Adult learners are not the opposite of traditional students, they are just different:

   [Adult learners are] not fresh out of high school, and I guess I never thought about really how many years that would be, but there's kind of a natural separation ... they may not be ... at least initially involved socially, I think, in a classroom. It doesn't mean that they're being antisocial...

3. Adult learners enter or reenter school of their own volition to achieve life goals:

   [Adult learners] are student[s] who [have] been out of school a while or never came to school a while who are working, raising families, and feel the need to come back to further their education or by nature of promotion they need to do through further education. It's a combination of those kinds of characteristics...

4. Adult learners, individually, carry myriad competing non-academic commitments:

   [There are] definitely ... other responsibilities outside of school so the other roles that they play as spouse or parents, employee at a job and just really having the responsibility of maybe taking care of others beyond their bills even if they're older parents or whatever. Basically being able to juggle all of that. Juggle being in school with their other life responsibilities [is a challenge].

5. Adult learners are ready to learn and have a learning-centered mindset:

   I think the biggest strength of these groups is that they're now ready to focus on school. They're ready to do well. A lot of them are paying for it out of pocket, and when you have to pay for something yourself instead of thinking of some loan in the future, they are focused. They're ready to learn.

For participants, adult-ness was an esoteric construct that comprised a multi-tiered and nuanced

depiction of learners. While objective qualities, such as age, delayed entry, or secondary

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credentials, were used to classify learners as adult, interviewees identified additional subjective

and individuated factors, expanding notions of who MACC East's FTAF were.

Challenging current rhetoric and pedagogy. Without considering the subjective and

individuated characteristics of learners, MACC East is most likely not accounting for all

members of its adult population. As such, the true number of adult learners represented on the

campus at the time of this study was not known. This assumption was shared by one interviewer

who, in the following passage, provides input of what she considered to be a "*singling out*"

process in instruction that intended to "*overinflate*" the value of adult learners:

> *[We] don't have a lot of adult learners on this campus. I think they get singled out in a lot*
> *of their classes, told how wonderful they are and how awesome it is to have adult*
> *learners in classes. They come to my class, especially like the literature class, where*
> *they've heard this for a year already with an overinflated sense of their importance in the*
> *classroom.*

Although such comments were expressed by a minority of interviewed participants, the message

gave me pause to question whether this type of assessment, though tacit, was more prevalent on

the campus than previously known. When re-examining the transcribed comments of

interviewees, I did not find another comment with the same emphasis; rather, I found more

comments acknowledging the limited focus upon adult learners. Participants shared that

programming and resources were not clearly demarcated from those for traditional students.

> LM reverberated this notion of limited campus-wide initiative:

> *I don't think the college provides services directly to the adult learner. The college*
> *provides services to incoming students and perhaps freshman students. Mostly, the*
> *concept of the freshman student is that of the recent high school graduate; therefore,...*
> *the adult student who probably has concerns about childcare, the kinds of times classes*
> *are offered, does not really seem to get specific services for that.*

Despite such perceptions, there were participants who wanted changes in adult learner

engagement, services, and instruction. JK discussed the challenges:

If we want to change this outcome to improve retention... we have to be looking at that work event line going, "How can we teach or change our pedagogy so that we can reach these students and engage these students and keep them around." ... It can be done successfully but our faculty are very busy [and] trying to get them to consider throwing out that Power Point they've used for 20 years and trying something different [is tough].

FG was similarly passionate remarking:

We need to have faculty members who can buy in to understanding how to teach and deliver information according to nontraditional [learners] being able to comprehend and learn. ... We need teachers to expand their thinking about how to deliver their subject matter in such a way that we can learn it....

Identifying adult learner initiatives. While there were very few extensive adult learner initiatives at the college, pockets of innovation were implemented but in an unsystematic manner. Participants identified portfolios, alternative instruction, collaborative work groups, drawing on learners' life experiences, and showing empathy and flexibility as active attempts in creating an adult-friendly environment. Specific comments regarding each follows:

1. Provide alternative methods for course completion—the portfolio:

   Students must be consistently informed about their options for alternative credits.... students may take part in prior learning assessments by building a portfolio ... that demonstrates the learning outcomes of [a previous experience].

2. Alternative in-class instruction:

   The response paper [was] a huge assignment. Students [didn't] know how to write [it]. They [thought] it was just like a journal entry and they [could] write whatever they want[ed]... I taught them how to write a response paper.

3. Creating collaborative group work with diversified group membership:

   If I have more than one adult learner, [I] really spread them out when we do collaborative work. That way they [are less] hesitant.

4. Drawing on life experience:

   I think it just kind of naturally happens. I think that if I know that the student has had some kind of life experience or something and I'm trying to draw them in...

5. Showing empathy and flexibility:

   I ask them to come talk to me and let me go over with them, but often they don't have time … They've got work and kids, and school. They just are spreading

> *themselves too thin. I teach online… and I found that that format works better for a lot of my adult learners, that flexibility.*

Although innovations were sparse, they all shared the spirit of approaching learning from a student-centered perspective. Equally important were the understandings that the process of development in adult learners unfolded over time and could be shaped by the learner's interactions with the college environment.

Summary: The shifting culture. MACC East is the primary adult-serving access institution within the state. Unfortunately, MACC East's retention, and graduation rates are considerably low. Participant feedback offered policy, practice, and service recommendations. Recommended policy changes included provisions to supply adults with financial and human resources to bolster support services and strategies for success beyond access. Practice changes comprised specifications for administrators, faculty, and staff to proactively engage students via the usage of collaborative learning groups, showing empathy and flexibility, and providing an academic environment equipped to support their academic needs and development.

CHAPTER 6

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS

The primary purpose of this study was to better understand and address the contributing factors associated with the academic progression of students admitted as first-time adult freshmen at the east campus of Metro Atlantis Community College, a public, two-year, open-access institution. The following research questions guided this inquiry:

1. To what extent do FTAF progress academically in a two-year community college, and what factors contribute to their progression?

2. What are guiding principles that administrators, faculty, and practitioners consider when addressing the academic progression of FTAF?

3. What knowledge is gained at the individual, team, and system levels using an action research methodology to examine the progression of FTAF?

This chapter summarizes the findings in relation to the research questions; discusses conclusions drawn from the results; considers implications for theory, policy, practice, and future research; and ends with a concluding summary.

Summary of Findings

To better understand and address the issue of adult learner progression at MACC East, a group comprising five employees volunteered to engage in an exploratory action research case study. Over the course of the 30-month study, the AR team examined adult learner progression at MACC, gaining knowledge concerning the factors contributing to the extent of FTAF progression (e.g., attrition, continuous enrollment, and/or graduation), individual- and student-

level guiding principles that should be considered when addressing academic progression, and

the challenges the AR team experienced planning for and implementing the project's objectives.

Data for this case were gathered from document reviews, interviews, student focus groups, AR

team meetings, and the reflections of AR team members.

The Extent of Progression

The current study found that the extent of academic progression among adult learners

could be organized into three major categories: lost to attrition, continuously enrolled, or

graduated. Attrition among FTAF was found to be a complex phenomenon, the outcome of an

intersection and intermeshing of contributing factors. FTAF attrition was primarily a combined

result of learners experiencing high levels of social and nonacademic challenges (e.g., first-

generation status, years of delayed entry into college, and need for financial aid or employment)

brought on by (a) low levels of self-directedness and (b) the college's lack of readiness and

ability to adequately identify and/or address learners' challenges in meaningful ways. FTAF

attrition also resulted from both academic and financial restrictions and exclusions that arose

from (a) gradual declines in FTAF's course completion and academic pace, (b) consistently low

course hours and earned credits, (b) persistent course withdrawals, both official and unofficial,

and (c) significant increases in college debt.

Continuous enrollment among FTAF, on the other hand, was found to be a circular

phenomenon promoted by iterative and communicative exchanges between the learner and the

college system. The FTAF who were continuously enrolled or transferred entered MACC East

with a higher level of self-directedness than FTAF lost to attrition. This heightened ability to

direct their own learning appeared to promote their desire to seek assistance from the system via

(a) diverse on-campus interactions and (b) developmental, academic, and personal advisement.

As continuously enrolled FTAF engaged in positive and constructive ways with the system, their levels of self-directedness was strengthened, encouraging and creating momentum for further interactions. Though the iterative cycle of exchange between FTAFs and the system was not as evident for students who transferred, the fact that learners made the choice and took action to leave the college demonstrated their self-direction.

Graduation among FTAF was found to be a product of high-level self-directedness combined with strong support from a college prepared to scaffold the growth of this type of learner. While all of the FTAF in this study entered MACC East with some level of social and nonacademic challenge, learners who graduated were more likely to persevere through those challenges by (a) relying on their high academic performance and self-determination, (b) connecting with the system and receiving graduation-oriented advisement, and (c) maintaining their desire for continued growth.

Guiding Principles

A second area of findings related to guiding principles that administrators, faculty, and practitioners considered (or could consider) when addressing the issue of academic progression for FTAFs. After reflecting on the transcribed interviews of study participants both internal and external to the college, the AR team devised a set of practical considerations that institutional agents could refer to in their efforts to encourage the academic progression of FTAF. Though individual participants contributed unique perspectives to the discourse, all of the responses were combined to generate a compilation of assessments concerning institutional- and student-level contributions.

Institutional-level contributions to the guiding principles included developing adult learner programs and initiatives, expanding MACC East's access-driven model of practice to

incorporate retention and graduation, and aligning institutional efforts in an effort to promote the academic success of adult learners. Student-level considerations for the guiding principles included celebrating the heterogeneity of MACC East's FTAF, nurturing the instrumental components of the adult learning process, and acknowledging the need for resources dedicated to the success of adult learners. As more adult learners enter the college to gain new skills and knowledge, extend their level of self-directedness, and/or earn a degree prior to transferring, administrators, faculty, and staff in two-year colleges must embrace new mindsets, actions, and practices that shift the college's focus from access to comprehensive education.

Individual, Team, and System Learning

The third area of insights that grew out of this research related to identifying the knowledge gained at the individual, team, and system levels. To better understand the AR team's, study participants', and my own reflections surrounding the project, the team members and I conducted a data analysis of researcher memos, post-team meeting notes, and transcripts of participant interviews. In the process of trying to gain a deeper understanding of the progression of adult learners, we learned that our personal biases and preferences, challenges with establishing democratic processes, and mistrust of the system were influential enough to obstruct the progress of our project. On several occasions, we slowed down our process; when this occurred, we had to restart a new cycle. At the team level, therefore, we learned the value of tenacity and continuing our efforts to promote a collaborative research team and process. Finally, we learned, through the use of the action research framework, that the MACC system—caught in its own whirlwind of institutional change—and the AR team possessed a low level of readiness to receive and benefit fully from the dynamic functionality afforded by AR.

Throughout the entire AR process, however, the team remained driven to work collaboratively and within an open system built upon team communication. As we continued to push through our challenges, implement our innovations, and receive feedback from students and study participants, we gained valuable information related to the progression of FTAF, including expanding the working definition of adult learners, challenging traditional rhetoric and pedagogy, and identifying the adult learner initiatives already present at the college.

Conclusions and Discussion

Three conclusions emerged from the findings of this action research case study, all of which speak to the value of engaging in research within the context of the two-year college; gaps existing between the institutional processes and practices of measuring and exploring academic progression and the causes of attrition; misalignments between institutional goals and learners' academic intent; the gradual process of and risk factors for attrition in FTAF; and the binary benefits of using AR methodology with concurrent micro- and macro-level change. The following sections discuss these conclusions relative to the literature.

Conclusion 1

Adult learner progression (e.g., attrition or completion) occurs gradually and can be better understood and addressed by undertaking research bound in theory (e.g., AR bound by the model of nontraditional adult learner attrition). When institutions systematically engage in exploratory inquiries in which they gather, analyze, and make sense of progression data, deeper understandings emerge that lend themselves to the creation and implementation of learner-centered strategies that can mitigate adult learners' risks for attrition.

One might assume that the answer to the first research question guiding this case study—"To what extent do first-time adult freshmen progress?"—was primarily quantitative; however,

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as discussed in Chapter 5, beneath the numbers were stories describing not only the extent to which learners progressed, but also the underlying factors contributing to their progression. "Wider possibilities of understanding [unfolded]" (McIntosh, 2010, p. 48), giving the AR team a means for providing participants a first-hand, comprehensive account of the experiences of adult learners progressing within a two-year college.

Adult learner progression was found to be a complex phenomenon, shaped by the confluence of expected and unexpected social, academic, and environmental factors presenting throughout one's learning experience. Though possessing their own limitations, the seminal models of dropout process among college students presented by Spady (1971) and Tinto (1975), and later by Astin (1985) and Bean and Metzner (1985), underscored the role of students' integration into and involvement within the college environment, as well as their intent to leave, as key variables in adult learner attrition.

Likewise, the progression of MACC East's FTAF was found to be a gradual process, neither linear nor direct, but rather characterized by several tiers of variations, including term lengths, manners of attrition, and varying provocations for leaving college. The outcomes of the study showed that FTAF progression extended to as few as one to as many as 10 semesters of enrollment, and behaviors ranged from autonomous disenrollment to graduation and encompassed a spectrum of academic, environmental, and social variables impacting learner progression (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Deil-Amen, 2011; Forbus, Newbold, & Mehta, 2011).

Moreover, the data analysis process confirmed that the FTAF lost to attrition were significantly impacted by learners' extensive pre-entry challenges (ensuing from their secondary performance, obtaining a GED, or delaying entry into college) (Choy, 2002; Miller & Murray, 2005); prolonged poor academic performance, particularly during the first two semesters of

enrollment (resulting from withdrawals, non-completion of courses) (Calcagno & Long, 2008);

and prolonged personal crises (medical issues or loss of home) that were unresolved, requiring

student withdrawals from one or more terms of enrollment (Bozick & DeLuca, 2005).

Previous research has shown that postsecondary enrollment processes are positively

impacted by theoretically driven institutional research since the inquiry process aids in equipping

college administrators with information that allows them to identify and address learners'

barriers to education (Ritze, 2006). Unfortunately, in the current case, the MACC system had a

low level of readiness and interest for seeking out this type of information. As confirmation of

this lack of readiness, it took multiple attempts to form a team within the system, and even after

this occurred, support for the team's work in understanding adult learners, reducing their barriers

to learning, and exploring why they were being lost to attrition was finite and limited.

Understanding adult learners. The assumptions of the current study aligned with those

represented in Knowles' (1980) adult learning theory. According to this theory, adult learners

are characterized by their independence, self-direction, and "reservoir" of knowledge, as well as

their purposes for attending college (e.g., adapting to changing social roles, learning to find

resolutions for practical problems, and pursuing lifelong learning). Though MACC East's FTAF

each came to the college with a base of knowledge that promoted success in their familial or

occupational lives, this inherent trait was not immediately transferrable to the direction of their

own learning. The largest proportion of MACC East FTAF in the study exhibited low levels of

readiness for directing their own learning, while the smallest proportion had achieved higher

levels of readiness. In reference to the benefits of a "reservoir of knowledge," as implied by the

theory of andragogy, FTAF who managed to remain enrolled had the opportunity to build their

academic and social knowledge with the help of receptive advisors, faculty, staff and peers.

Knowles (1980) held up andragogy as a central concept for aiding, understanding, and addressing the specific learning needs of adult learners. Andragogy maintains that adults are independent and internally motivated when seeking educational opportunities. As such, knowledge is presumed to be constructed by the learner or co-constructed by the learner and a learning facilitator. To some degree, many of the participants who were interviewed as a part of this study evidenced these tenets by revealing how the college was acknowledging (or could acknowledge) the self-directed nature of MACC East's adult learners. Unfortunately, these supports, in the form of academic assignments, lectures and discussions, and experiential activities, were inconsistently established, implemented, and assessed at the college.

Expanding approaches to learning, undergirded by adult learning theories, would make it possible for practitioners, faculty, administrators, and policymakers to offer multiple avenues to learning that complement traditional, instructor-led pedagogy (e.g., andragogy, peer education, supplemental instruction, self-directed and experiential learning) in order to facilitate and stimulate learning in adults with diverse needs and abilities. As the current study demonstrated, adult learners come to college from various backgrounds, with a range of academic abilities, and face varying challenges during their educational pursuits.

Unfortunately, for the majority of the students in this study, attrition was the resulting outcome, though a smaller subset remained continuously enrolled and an even smaller subset went on to graduate. Incorporating changes that aid in acknowledging adult learners' various needs and their diverse intentions, educational goals, and academic barriers may not fix the problem of attrition in its entirety, but it represents a starting point for bringing about deeper understanding of the issues posing the greatest risks to adult learner progression.

Criticisms of andragogy. Although the theory of andragogy is one of the most widely used in adult learning practice and heavily influenced the current study, it has its weaknesses. Boucouvalas and Lawrence (2010) insisted that "most critiques conceptualize andragogy as a method or model, and attempt to discern its effectiveness in general and its exclusivity to adults" (p. 41). The "elasticity of meanings of andragogy and the consequent variability of interpretations, empirical examinations of andragogy—its science … have tended to be inconclusive, contradictory, and few" (Rachal, 2002, p. 211). Furthermore, debate continues around "the extent to which the assumptions [of andragogy are] characteristics of *adult* learners only … as [s]ome adults are highly dependent on a teacher for structure" (Merriam, 2001, p. 5). Generally speaking, this was true for newly admitted FTAF at MACC, who often were intimidated by the prospect of entering college, successfully completing their coursework, engaging with their younger peers, and adjusting to available technologies.

Some researchers have argued that learners of all ages are able to benefit from an increasing "ability to understand oneself as a learner and develop the capacity to assume one's internal directedness … to know how to learn but also when one might need to be taught, and to take responsibility for one's learning or nonlearning" (Boucouvalas & Lawrence, 2010, p. 41). However, this was not the case universally for MACC East's learners, 90% of whom left the college prior to progressing to completion. In contrast to continuously enrolled or graduated learners, FTAF who were lost to attrition demonstrated limited internal directedness at the time of college entry (e.g., secondary credentials) and at the time of their exit (e.g., official and unofficial withdrawals, poor academic standing). Conversely, learners who were continuously enrolled or graduated benefitted from higher levels of readiness and from working with instructors who provided an adequate amount of individualized support.

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Another critique of andragogy is that its intense focus on the growth and development of the individual, resulting from engaging in learning, is Eurocentric and devoid of the "grit" needed to bring about social justice, collective transformation, or emancipation of the oppressed. Overall, detractors believe that andragogy:

- assumes wrongly that education is value-neutral and apolitical;

- promotes the idea of the adult learner as universal with White middle-class values;

- ignores other ways of knowing and silences other voices;

- ignores the relationship between self and society; and,

- reproduces inequalities and supports the status quo. (Sandlin, 2005, p. 37)

While the debate surrounding the merits of andragogy persists, this study's findings indicated that FTAF enter college with varying levels of self-directness, which, when appropriately matched with the college's readiness and ability, can be extended—as was evidenced by the continuously enrolled and graduated FTAF. Regrettably, the findings showed the opposite results for FTAF beginning college with low levels of readiness, as the college's readiness to facilitate learning within this group was lacking.

Knowles' (1980) theory of andragogy offers an imperfect, learner-centered approach for administrators, faculty, and practitioners to follow as they consider policies, instruction, and services aimed at positively influencing the academic progression of adult learners on campus. Indeed, "the central thrust of Knowles's work definitely portrays andragogy as the most appropriate approach for most adults in most learning situations" (Davenport, 2013, p. 113).

Reducing barriers. Cross (1981) offered a framework for understanding the barriers faced by adult learners seeking education. Specifically, Cross suggested that adult learners come up against situational, dispositional, and institutional barriers which, if not lessened or

diminished, impede their educational pursuits. Thus, in conjunction with seeking ways to more

deeply understand the learning process of adults, it is equally important and necessary to be

conscious of the value of identifying and addressing the barriers articulated by learners. In the

case of MACC East's learners, each of the barriers suggested by Cross surfaced. Situational

barriers for adult learners included a lack of transportation and of time required to care for ailing

family members. Dispositional barriers included feeling pressed for time to study or to complete

school work and feeling overwhelmed by efforts to manage multiple life responsibilities.

Institutional barriers manifested, most frequently, as a loss of financial aid and an inability to

navigate the academic system.

In considering these barriers, it is important for practitioners, faculty, and policymakers

to continuously create avenues for learners to seek support from peer groups, counselors, or

community resource centers capable of tending to these students' social needs. Additionally,

resource allocations aimed at creating a dedicated safe space for adult learners or employing an

advocate may need to be considered to help learners resolve non-academic challenges that

inadvertently place adult learners at risk for dropping out of college or being lost to attrition as a

result of academic restrictions, academic exclusion, financial restrictions, autonomous

disenrollment, or transfer.

Addressing attrition. With the introduction of their model of nontraditional student

attrition, Bean and Metzner (1985) were the first to consider the dropout patterns of adult

learners attending public, non-residential commuter colleges similar to MACC East. Their

comprehensive model captured a range of variables thought to influence a student's intent to

drop out of college. The current study added to Bean and Metzner's model by offering reasons

for attrition not due to dropping out and by promoting an awareness that attrition occurs over a

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series of semesters and often culminates within the first three semesters of a learner's matriculation due to poor academic progression and completion.

These findings suggest that there may be opportunities for faculty, practitioners, and policy makers to consider the use of qualitative and quantitative data to evaluate and introduce measures for intervening with adult learners at risk for attrition. Furthermore, prescriptive completion programs (e.g., 15 to Finish), educational policies (e.g., withdrawals, incompletes), course offerings (e.g., online, on- campus, hybrid, mini-terms), and costs must all be reconsidered and reevaluated to determine their overall effectiveness.

The outcomes of the current study affirmed that, to some degree, each of the characteristics posed by Knowles (1980), the barriers proposed by Cross (1981), and the variables suggested by Bean and Metzner (1985) were exhibited by the FTAF of MACC East. However, the study findings also revealed significant levels of diversity, individuality, and nuanced distinctions within the group. Fundamentally, these variations have implications for extending and updating the theory of andragogy, barriers to education, and the model of nontraditional student attrition so that adult learners' needs may be comprehensively addressed.

Expanding these theories and models to include academic intent to remain in college, the reasons learners give for leaving college not due to attrition, the confluence of variables impacting progression, and the notion of "adult-ness" would provide a fuller and richer conception of the adult learner and the complexities they experience as they progress through college, even if they do not ultimately graduate. Administrators, faculty, and practitioners who, as scholarly practitioners at two-year colleges, explore and utilize these theories and models will become more adept at investigating, devising, and implementing postsecondary educational policies serving adult learners. Invariably, this will yield advantageous long-term outcomes for

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the development of adult learners. Table 17 reflects the study's findings in relation to the

attrition and progression literature.

Table 17

Study Findings in Relation to the Empirical Literature

Author	Summary	Relation to Current Case Study
Astin, 1984	To provide a theory of student development that allowed for a systematic and comprehensive approach to understanding the dropout process of students enrolled in higher education.	Concurs: It is important to have an understanding of the dropout process. A major outcome of this study was the development of a comprehensive approach to promoting progression that uses empirical findings, anecdotal input from participants, including learners, and strategies for decreasing barriers to participation within a two-year college.
Bailey & Cho, 2010	To substantiate the effectiveness and ineffectiveness of postsecondary remediation and the impact remediation has on progression in learners who are required to complete developmental learning sequences.	Concurs: Within the first year of matriculation, 50% of MACC East's FTAF were lost to attrition. Under the umbrella of academic attrition was learning support exclusion, which adversely impacted the academic pace and progression of MACC East's FTAF.
Bean & Metzner, 1985	To study the enrollment of nontraditional undergraduate students and to introduce the conceptual model of nontraditional student attrition, created to explain the factors (background, academic variables, environmental variables, social integration, and intent to leave) associated with the dropout process of nontraditional students.	Concurs and extends: Supports the findings of Bean and Metzner specific to the academic, social, and environmental variables influencing barriers. Extends the nontraditional model of attrition by introducing adult learner attrition not due to dropping out and the intent to progress with outcomes of continuous enrollment and graduation.

Author	Summary	Relation to Current Case Study
Donaldson & Townsand, 2007	To report findings from the higher education literature to determine the level of discourse related to adult learners. The authors found few articles dedicated to discourse of adult undergraduate students.	Concurs: The current study found that very little discourse concerning adult learner attrition was occurring at MACC East. Additionally, very few adult-specific initiatives or resources were recognized. The current study advocates for more attention and discourse concerning adult learner attrition at the individual, team, and system levels of the organization.
Fairchild, 2003	To explore the effects that balancing multiples roles and responsibilities had on college-level success for adult learners and to determine if institutions were operationally prepared to assist students with their diverse needs. The author found that a great number of institutions were not sufficiently equipped to take on the diverse needs of their adult student population, suggesting that institutions reconsider their provision of student services.	Concurs: The FTAF of MACC East struggled with the decision to leave the college. However, upon closer consideration, one basis for learners' decision to leave the college included shifting beliefs that their needs were no longer being met by the college via academic progression, support services, flexibility with life changes, or utility of their degree.
Ritze, 2006	Investigated the role of institutional research in the enrollment management process. The author found that institutions that increased the role of institutional research in the enrollment management process were better equipped to identify underrepresented students and address their barriers to education.	Concurs: At the outset of this project, MACC East had not specifically studied the academic progression of adult learners. Therefore, the AR team had to work closely with the office of research to identify FTAF and to determine the best way to contact them and retrieve the data associated with academic progression and related barriers. Consequently, those conducting future research on the campus will have a framework for aiding this population.

Author	Summary	Relation to Current Case Study
Tinto, 1993	To better understand the different types of leaving-college behavior experienced by students. The author presumed that social and academic integration were integral aspects of a student's decision to remain in or depart from the college. Students who lacked either social or academic integration, or had an imbalance of either, were thought to have an increased likelihood of departure.	Concurs: The FTAF of MACC East experienced multiple levels of attrition not formally addressed within the context of adult learners enrolled in a two-year college. In the case of MACC East's FTAF, academic factors contributed to multiple forms of attrition within the first year of matriculation; however, social interactions with representatives from the college influenced transfer attrition, continuous enrollment, or graduation in adult learners.

Conclusion 2

First-year attrition among adult learners is qualitatively different from attrition

occurring in the second year of enrollment. While this study found that first-year adult learner

attrition was strongly impacted by personal and academic variables, it affirmed that second-year

adult learner attrition was strongly influenced by the learner's social integration. Additionally,

it also offered, as a supplement to the Bean and Metzner (1985) attrition model, a view of

attrition behaviors not due to dropping out.

The FTAF of MACC East who progressed beyond their first year of enrollment helped to

offer a new perspective on academic attrition and progression within higher education and

particularly within two-year colleges. Again, according to the study data, the decision of

learners in their second year to leave the college was driven less by pre-collegiate risks,

academic performance, or deficits (as Bean and Metzner [1985] assumed), and more by learners'

financial struggles and their desire to transfer to another college as a result of their shifting

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educational intentions and goals, as well as their desire for the increased degree utility (Fairchild, 2003) offered by other institutions. One fifth of MACC East's FTAF progressed successfully into the second year of enrollment but did not progress to graduation because, as an alternative to simply dropping out, they transferred to another two-year or technical college to obtain a degree or certificate, or to a senior-level institution (whether public or private) to pursue a four-year degree. These students transferred to further their educational commitments and to accommodate their changing social roles or academic interests (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Knowles, 1980).

Although it was documented that these students transferred to other colleges and therefore continued their academic growth elsewhere, under current definitions, these learners were considered "drop outs" since they did not progress to completion at MACC East. Such inaccurate recordkeeping is a notable area of concern for the majority of public institutions, as guidelines for retention, attrition, and progression are generically established at the federal and state levels, not the institutional level. Yet, institutions such at MACC East are not prevented from undertaking projects (in fact, they are advised to do so) with the intent of developing a comprehensive approach to promoting progression using empirical findings, anecdotal input from participants (including learners), and strategies for decreasing barriers to participation (Astin, 1984; Cross, 1981; Wild & Ebbers, 2002). Through this deeper level of investigation, the study identified the following five reasons for adult learner attrition: academic restrictions, academic exclusions, financial restrictions, autonomous disenrollment, and transferring. Each of these was offered as a supplemental variable to Bean and Metzner's (1985) model so as to explicate the distinctions in learners' attrition at MACC East and, more generally, within two-year colleges.

Finally, the academic trajectory of FTAF who remained continuously enrolled after matriculating and of those who eventually graduated were strongly influenced by social integration beyond the classroom experience, namely advisement from academic and non-academic agents of the institution. The FTAF of MACC East benefitted principally from social integration opportunities that encouraged engagement in a diversity of on-campus interactions, such as financial literacy, pro-graduation advisement, or self-assessments of academic needs, and managing their academic and nonacademic uncertainties arising from issues like job loss, lack of familial support, or difficulty with coursework.

This latter finding contradicted Bean and Metzner's (1985) presumption concerning the indirect impact of social integration on a learner's intent to leave college. This study found that social integration had a direct impact on learners' academic intent to progress, as evidenced by the FTAF's continued enrollment or progression to completion or graduation. The resulting variables—intent to progress, continuous enrollment, and graduation—are offered here as supplements to Bean and Metzner's model, serving as facilitators of adult learners' continued progression and graduation within the context of a two-year college (see Figure 13).
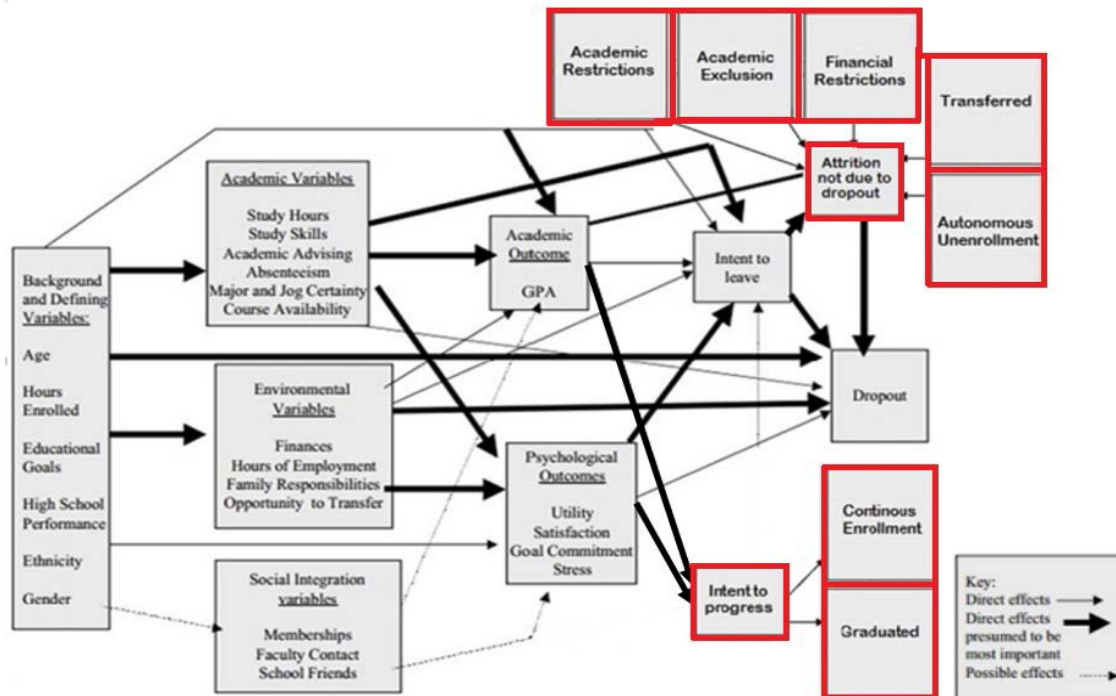
Figure 13. Supplemented Bean and Metzner (1985) attrition model.

Conclusion 3

The action research framework can be utilized to explore and manage micro-level change within organizations experiencing macro-level disruption.

I could not have anticipated the significant and constant change that the AR team, the study participants, the system, and I would experience over the duration of this study. As discussed in earlier chapters, in the spring of 2012, MACC East experienced a series of macro-level disruptions that ultimately resulted in the college's consolidation with another institution. This overarching change had evolutionary components (Burke, 2013) that left the AR team's work in jeopardy. Due to our need to manage our personal emotions around and understanding of the experience, while continuing to fulfill our obligations and responsibilities to the college

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during this change, the work associated with our project at times slowed and at other times completely stopped.

Team members experienced apprehensions associated with (a) taking on a new project, (b) learning the AR methodology, (c) managing our full-time commitments, and (d) dealing with the awareness that MACC East was in the early phases of a radical organizational restructuring. Though not evident in the beginning stages of the project, in the latter portions the systematic approach of the AR framework, with its reliance on reflection and learning to bring about practical change, provided much-needed support as the team navigated the attrition project even as the organization itself was in the process of imploding.

Reflection and Learning

While the qualitative nature of the AR framework provided an avenue for the team to understand more deeply the issues related to adult learner progression, it also afforded the team opportunities for engaging in reflection and learning that assisted us with recognizing our governing variables and strategies for change (Argyris & Schon, 1974), irrespective of our collapsing organization. From the outset of the project, the team's model of practice was undergirded by our desire to create and implement interventions that would fix MACC East's adult attrition problem. Within the team, we were in problem-resolution mode, assessing issues related to attrition and planning targeted interventions to remedy these issues.

Intrinsically, we suggested action-oriented strategies, such as returning to the "activity hour" or incorporating "brown bag lunches" to provide lectures for increasing knowledge and skill. We falsely assumed that acquiring these stated attributes would solve the problem of adult learner attrition. It quickly became evident that the AR team was "adequately prepared to deal with the technical [project] requirements" (Stringer, 2007, p. 2) of the core cycle of this project

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but woefully underprepared for the deeper learning associated with the thesis cycle. Thankfully, with the commitment of our project sponsor to continue with this endeavor and the team's willingness to learn and use the AR framework, we came to see that our solutions-oriented approach would neither yield meaningful understanding nor impact the progression patterns of adult learners attending MACC East. We also realized that any broad sweeping change efforts would be ineffectual, as we increasingly faced uncertainties about our organizational structure and positionality within the consolidated environment.

The iterative nature of the reflection-action cycles and phases of the AR process offered ample occasion for the AR team to slow down, reflect upon our action (and in some cases our inaction), and begin assessing the emerging patterns arising from our data (e.g., transcribed notes from meeting and interviews), within our changing context. Once we accepted these new values within our governing variables, the team was able to recalibrate and change our strategy for exploring the problem. No longer did we keep our explorations within the confines of the team; through several iterations of the construction phase, we came to understand that in an unraveling organizational structure, it might be of positive consequence to be inclusive in the exploration process, gaining feedback and input from participants across the MACC East community. As a result, the participants of MACC East provided insights from varying perspectives that aided the team in understanding the "underlying problems … the root cause or core fundamental issues" (Anderson, 2012, p. 121) contributing to the extent of progression in adults. In order to create this type of understanding we had to shift away from a "fix it" attitude to a mindset driven by learning via reflections on our actions (Schon, 1983).

Within every attempt to enter and engage the system or to implement action, as well as the resultant collapses, there was something to be learned. Specifically, after the first

engagement process in which I made contact with our client (i.e., the medical program manager), I learned to incorporate and trust the AR team and process. By the end of our time together, the team members had learned the value of securing institutional support for this type of project, articulating and questioning our beliefs and biases during the research process, challenging our false assumptions, and remaining mindful and present throughout the project's duration.

Amidst our struggles to stay on track, we pushed forward in the face of change and continued to reflect on the value of the work we were doing; through our camaraderie, we built a strong democratic collaboration. Though we lost one team member to attrition, each of the remaining team members adopted the AR framework to bring about practical change or knowledge of attrition-related issues by engaging in multiple iterations of the process, making sense of what was learned, and co-sharing the responsibilities associated with this project in spite of the greater organizational issues.

Future Research and Recommendations

Academic attrition is an established concern for public, two-year college practitioners, administrators, and policymakers. As a result of demographic shifts in the population, the expansion of globalization, and an increased demand for skilled and credentialed workers, public, two-year colleges like MACC East enrolled a multitude of older, adult, and experienced learners between 2000 and 2011. However, since that time, as has been the case for many public, two-year colleges, there has been a massive decline in enrollment of adult learners at MACC East. This study extends the literature by not only describing today's adult learner, but also by offering learners' first-hand accounts of the academic, personal, financial, and dispositional circumstances that have contributed to their intent to leave college prior to earning a degree. That said, more exploration of the attrition of adult learners enrolled in two-year

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colleges is needed. Specifically, three areas of future research are offered here for consideration by scholars and practitioners.

Future Research

The first area of future researcher relates to expanding the participant group. The current study consisted of 81 FTAF attending MACC East, which represented a tiny percentage of the roughly 20,000 students within the MACC system at the time of the study. Conducting similar research with a greater number of participants and at multiple two-year colleges would help to determine the similarities and differences between MACC East's FTAF and those from other campuses located in urban settings with larger student bodies or other two-year institutions, such as for-profit colleges or those housed as internal colleges within larger universities.

A second area of future research relates to understanding the pathways for establishing, promoting, and supporting the work of scholarly practitioners. As noted in Chapter 3, practitioners conducting research on two-year campuses are limited by restrictions related to approved time for scholarly studies or work, an inability to actively participate in activities that require time away from the office (e.g., meeting times, interviews, etc.), and redefining the classification of "provider of service" to a "facilitator of knowledge." In the current study, team membership was confined to only members working at MACC East, out of prudence and respect for the members' travel time and the required time away from their designated college duties. In retrospect, had we recruited new members more aggressively, solicited ideas for the project from personnel in other institutions who were accustomed to undertaking scholarly research, or brought in more experienced personnel to aid in facilitating our processes, we may have been able to develop as a team more than we did.

A third area for future research centers on understanding the long-term impacts that undertaking an action research study might have on group members within their institution. Action research is a collaborative approach used by inquiry teams to bring about practical change; it focuses upon first-, second-, and third-person reflection, and values iterative cycles of learning in action. It would be valuable to learn if team members at a two-year college would continue using the AR method—or at least particular aspects of it—in future projects, and, if so, why? Would the prospect of continuous learning, reflections, the presence of an insider-action researcher, the process of implementing the project, the support from others outside of the project (including administrative superiors), or the perceived value or utility of the study's outcomes be the deciding factor or factors? Though these actions are often present in college-based change projects, it would be a fruitful endeavor to uncover how other practitioners' mindsets regarding the change process are influenced by their participation in an action research project.

Recommendations

I conclude this dissertation as I began, by taking stock of the value of American higher education in the 21st century, particularly for adult learners. As the world has become more globalized, the work industry more automated, and the average skillset needed to secure entry-level positions more advanced, the demand upon learners to earn post-secondary credentials and degrees has risen. Accelerated by completion agendas, such as that proposed by President Obama in 2009, the goal of higher education is to help engender a

> *nation [that] should once again have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world...[increasing current numbers by] 50 percent nationwide by the end of the decade, [translating] ...into eight million more young [and older] adults ... [earning] associate and bachelor's degrees by 2020.* (US DOE, 2011, p. 1)

Unfortunately, as evidenced by the current study of FTAF enrolled in a two-year college, and fewer than four years from 2020, first-year attrition due to academic, financial, and personal hardships has continued to increase. Few studies within the context of two-year colleges and related directly to adult learners' progression have been undertaken, and only a handful of attrition theories have been introduced to better understand and resolve the issue within the given context. Deeper exploration and strategic action—through the use of frameworks such as AR— are necessary to guide future inquiries in an effort to unearth and define the problem, plan and implement actions to resolve the matter, and assess and make meaning of the resulting outcomes. These results may, ultimately, substantiate for administrators, faculty, and practitioners the value and necessity of incorporating adult-centered policies, instruction, and practices that tap into a learner's reservoir of knowledge, are designed to be practical and realistic, and support multiple ways of knowing (Knowles, 1980).

Furthermore, as highlighted by the current study, adult learners face extreme complexity as they juggle multiple competing commitments in their lives. Though the college's main focus remains the facilitation of learners' progression toward completion, the results of this study indicated that this is not always the goal of adult learners who enter college from various backgrounds (e.g., first-generation, delayed entry into college, etc.) and for varying reasons (e.g., skills acquisition, lifelong learning, displacement, etc.). There is an inherent value to understanding the impact these variables have upon students' academic intent and satisfaction with the college experience, further supporting the need for continued strategic inquiry and the provision of accessible social services and developmental advisement and counseling throughout a learner's matriculation. It is imperative that institutions implement strategies that bridge the educational divide for adult learners facing socioeconomic constraints (such as the sometimes

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severe "press" of work, life, and education), make available pre-supplemental instructional opportunities for learners who are underprepared upon entering college (such as in the case of pre-collegiate advisement and test prep), and maintain timely and relevant community resources and referrals for learners facing personal crises (such as job or home losses, or displacement).

Grassroots Efforts of the Willing

The educational ecosystem is changing. While administrative processes (i.e., the ecosystem's producers) and learners (i.e., the ecosystem's consumers) are central to higher education, the traditional brick-and-mortar structure of two-year colleges is fighting to remain relevant and avoid decomposition. As evidenced by this study, two-year colleges have structures that are in the process of being transformed, in terms of their mission, size, and purpose of accommodating the growing number of adult learners seeking personal enrichment and professional development, not necessarily academic credentials.

This places the onus on two-year colleges to respond meaningfully and expeditiously to the growing demands of adult learners. This study's outcomes, generated through first-hand accounts of administrators, faculty, practitioners, and students, confirmed this, though there were few identifiable adult-centric initiatives, policies, or practices to which the group could point as aiding adult learners. However, as a result of the "grassroots efforts of the willing"—members of the AR team, faculty members, practitioners, and student participants—more empirical data is available to understand the extent to which first-time adult freshmen progress, the guiding principles administrators, faculty, and practitioners of community colleges use to address adult attrition, and the knowledge gained by individuals, teams, and systems using an action research methodology.

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APPENDIX A

ACTION RESEARCH TEAM MISSION

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MACC East Campus Acton Research Team AY 2013-2015

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Vision

As a group, the MACC East Campus Action Research team, will work collaboratively and creatively to explore the issue of adult learner progression. Our research into adult learner progression will be guided by the values of trust, excellence, integrity, civility, passion, diversity, and efficiency; and will align with the colleges overarching vision of cultivating a student centered environment.

Mission Statement

The MACC East Campus Action Research team aims to positively impact the lives of the student body. In exploring the issue of adult learner progression, the team will also take, implement, and assess actions which are intended to enhance the opportunity for progression in our adult learners.

In our efforts to create enriching environments for our student body, we will strive to bring about efficient learning opportunities for students by engaging in dialogue and reflective practice, providing constructive feedback, working transparently and collaboratively.

Goals

- Identify more ways to address and assess learner's needs
- Introduce adult learning theory to the community
- Create learning outcomes and assessments for adult learners programs initiated through this project
- Create and adult learner themed learning environment
- Collaborate with college stakeholders and constituents to explore the topic of adult learners faculty to address the issues of learning outside of the classroom
- Introduce learning modules in webinars online for the student body

APPENDIX B

COLLEGE INITIATIVES INFORMATION SHEET

College Initiatives
Information Sheet

Department	Name of the initiative, strategy, technique or program	Description of the Initiative, strategy, technique or program	Key People	Roles/Responsibilities

APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Guiding Questions

1.	How would you characterize MACC East's adult learners?
2.	After the current activity, what do you presume are the educational expectations of MACC East's adult learners?
3.	In your experience with adult learners, what do you see as the beneficial to the development of adult learners?
4.	In your experience with adult learners, what do you see as the detriments to the development of adult learners?
5.	What makes MACC East "adult learner friendly?
6.	What helps adult learners remain in college?
7.	Would you like to expand upon or add thoughts we have not already covered?

APPENDIX D

FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL

Your participation in this focus group is very much appreciated. As a reminder the focus group session will be recorded so that I may re-review comments and statements at a later time. Your responses are confidential. It is my goal to work with you to get a better understanding of the challenges and rewards adult learners may face as they progress through and complete college. This focus group will last for about 60-75 minutes. Your honest and candid responses to the questions will be very valuable in understanding how adults progress through and complete college and the assistance students will need to meet their goals. Thank you again for your participation.

A. Pre-Intervention Focus group questions (students)-
- Do you consider yourself to be an adult learner? If so, why? If not, why?
- What was your motivation for enrolling in the college?
- What do you see as the benefits of attending the college?
- What do you see as the downside of attending the college?
- In your experience, what has been the role of the college in your educational experience?
- What are your educational goals?
- How are your educational goals being met by the institution?
- What has helped you to continue your enrollment at the college?
- What challenges make it difficult for you to continue at the college?
- What has been your experience with course selection?
- How do you define academic success?
- What services do you participate in at the college to be successful academically?
- How are these services helping you continue at the college?
- What other services do you need to be successful at the college?
- What programs do you participate in at the college?
- How are these programs helping your to continue at the college?
- What other programs do you need to be successful at the college?
- What type of opportunities would you suggest to the college to help you complete your degree?
- What additional suggestions would you like to make?
- Are there any questions?

APPENDIX E

PARTICIPANT INTERVIEW GUIDE

Participant Interview Guide

Areas of Concern	Guiding Questions
Context	• How would you define your current role at Metro Atlantis Community College (MACC)? • How would you define MACCs out-of-the classroom learning environment? • What is your relationship to/role in the group? • What keeps you motivated/interested in working with the group? • What resistance exists (or do you expect) in or outside of the group? • Whom does the group currently collaborate with or wish to collaborate with in the future?
Roles	• How would you describe the group/power dynamics of the team members? • Whom do you see as being responsible for identifying, planning, implementing and assessing the improvements/transformations of the group? • Who organizes the leadership meetings? Who attends, who is expected to attend? How often are meetings held? • Who organizes the learning sessions for the public? • Who supports this program and how? • What do you expect of your other team members? • What do you expect of me? What are you hoping to get out of our partnership?
Current Project State	• How would you describe the current state of the group at the college or on campus? • In your opinion what are the mission/vision/goals of the group? Do they match those of the institution? • What are the benefits of the program on adult learners? • How is this program funded for the remainder of this year? For the next academic year?
Project Needs	• How would you describe the current state of the group at the college or on campus? • In your opinion, what are the mission/vision/goals of the group? Do they match those of the institution? • What are the benefits of the program on adult learners? • How is this program funded for the remainder of this year? For the next academic year?

Areas of Concern	Guiding Questions
Future Project State	• What areas of improvement or change would you like to see for the program? • How would you describe the potential future state of Return-to-College Program? (at the end of the semester, at the beginning of the new academic year, a year from today) • What will a successful completed project look like? How will we know
Assessment Process	• AR involves learning in action by making meaning from one's experience through individual and group inquiry and reflection upon our assumptions. How does the group currently assess learning in student leaders or participants of the program? • What has been done thus far in relation to planning, implementing, and assessing the effectiveness of the program? • What types of assessments do you wish to use to collect data? • What implications exist if this project succeeds or fails?