

Rural adult learners continuing their education emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic

by

Elle House

B.S., University of Nevada, Las Vegas 2013

M.S., University of Nevada, Las Vegas 2016

M.S., University of Nevada, Las Vegas 2021

AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Department of Educational Leadership
College of Education

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY
Manhattan, Kansas

2026

Abstract

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Approved by:

Major Professor
Dr. Susan Yelich Biniecki

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Acknowledgements

I want to thank my Major Professor, Dr. Susan Yelich Biniecki, and my committee members: Dr. Kerry Priest, Dr. Haijun Kang, and Dr. Farhan Sadique. I appreciate your time, feedback, and supportive guidance. Dr. Yelich Biniecki, thank you for your unconditional support throughout my academic journey and during challenging times. I appreciate and value your mentorship and conversations during our time together. I have learned so much from you that I will continue to apply throughout my personal and professional career.

To my mother, Barbara House, your love and support throughout my life has guided me through hardships that have come my way. I am privileged to know a life of unconditional love and support because of you and dad.

To Gloria Sadeghi Mogharabi, thank you for your love, support, and guidance.

To my family and friends, thank you for your support, your love, and your words of encouragement. Your love emphasizes the importance and value of community and unity.

Dedication

For my father, Charles Grant House.

You have been with me from the beginning, and you have never failed to support me. I continue to feel your support when I am faced with challenges. I love you more than I can express. Thank you for adopting me and giving me the greatest privilege of being your daughter.

Chapter 1 - Introduction

This chapter discusses a thorough review of the significant components for this study, beginning with a background of rural adult learners returning to the classroom. Subsequent sections identify the researcher's background, the conceptual framework, the importance of the study, research problem, research purpose, research question, and the summary of the study's design—including the narrative inquiry methodology, and the operationalization of terms that are used throughout the research.

Rural Adult Learners Returning to the Classroom

This research explored the experiences of rural adult learners' transitioning out of the COVID-19 pandemic, including their experience as higher education transitioned back to the learning environment as well as the role higher educational institutions played in their transition back to offering classes with either reduced or little to no pandemic protocols in place. This study aimed to shed light on how rural adult learners were impacted emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic and how this affected their educational experience. Approximately 600 million students spanning 200 countries saw their collegiate experience impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic (Djita et al., 2022). Learners were forced to move back home, learn remotely, and experience hardships spurred by the pandemic, which only further impacted learners with an existing low socioeconomic status (SES).

Adult learners faced additional struggles that traditional learners did not necessarily experience due to their existing responsibilities and life experience (Malinovski, 2015). Due to the state- and government-issued health mandates related to COVID-19, these students were asked to make several adjustments, including completing learning via a fully remote process, which included a combination of synchronous video meetings and asynchronous discussions

(Yan et al., 2021). While now pandemic protocols are no longer in mass effect, there has still been a drastic pivot towards adopting online learning (Yan et al., 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic impacted the learning environment for students on a global scale. While learners globally were faced with different barriers in their education because of the COVID-19 pandemic, adult learners faced additional challenges, including geographic, technological, and economic challenges. Adult learners who continued to pursue their education persevered and showed resilience (Kemp, 2002).

Research Problem

While there has been research conducted regarding the COVID-19 pandemic on education, there have not been specific studies investigating the educational impact the COVID-19 pandemic had in relation to rural adult learners. As a higher educational professional who witnessed and worked directly with the rural adult learner population during COVID-19, an observation I made and was mentioned by Williams et al. (2023) was that this population held multiple responsibilities in addition to their coursework. Adult learners often differ from traditional students in a variety of ways. While traditional aged students progress onward to higher education after graduating high school, adult learners often experience a gap in their education or juggle multiple roles, which makes being a full-time learner difficult (Gilchrist et al., 2025).

While digital devices and online programs can assist in overcoming a disparity, that does not mean obtaining digital devices or accessing such programs is easily feasible for adult learners (Vonitsanos et al., 2024). The lack of access to digital devices or the tools needed for success limits their engagement with the course material, and additional supportive resources may be unattainable or limited (Knowles et al., 2015). Institutional support for rural students is limited

due in part to geographical distances that larger institutions or institutions located in cities with established infrastructure may not experience (Raaper et al., 2022). Geographic barriers for many rural adult learners translates into having limited access to advising, tutoring, and in-person assistance. In addition, many rural adult learners often have multiple roles while being a student (Park & Choi, 2009). It is not uncommon for adult learners to be parents, working part time or full-time, and holding caregiver roles (Braxton, 2004). The lack of resources to assist many rural adult learners with their education during the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the differences rural adult learners experience compared to traditional learners or students who are not located in a rural area. Despite the desire to continue their education, adult learners often experience other barriers and obligations that hinder their learning experience (Winfield et al., 2023). This study sought to gain an understanding of the adult rural learners' degree-seeking experience emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic only added to the list of challenges adult learners had to navigate in continuing their education. As Knowles et al. (2015) explained, lack of access to technological devices or tools and supportive resources can impact the rural adult learner's interaction with coursework.

Research Purpose

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived academic experiences of degree-seeking adult learners who were pursuing a degree at the college or university level while emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic. The purpose of this study was to understand the academic experiences of degree-seeking rural adult learners in higher education. For the purpose of this research, the adult learner, a nontraditional learner, was defined as students aged 25 and older (Singh et al., 2021).

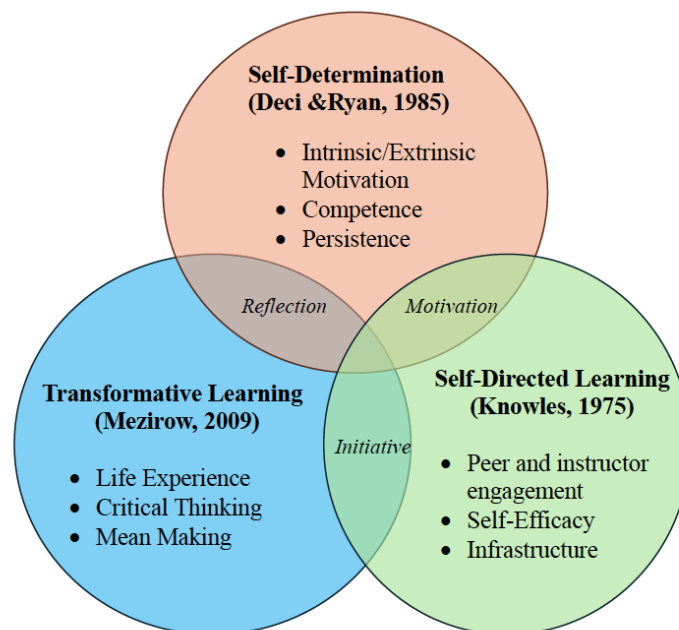
Research Question

The research question for this study was RQ1: How do rural adult learners tell the story of their educational journey emerging out of COVID-19?

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study incorporated three concepts: (a) Transformative Learning (Mezirow, 2009), (b) Self-Directed Learning (SDL) (Knowles, 1975), and (c) Self-Determination (Ryan & Deci, 1985). Together, Figure 1.1. shows the three concepts used to explore how adult learners in rural areas of the United States describe their educational journey experience after COVID-19.

Figure 1.1 Conceptual Framework



Note. This conceptual framework identifies the integration between the key concepts of Transformative Learning, Self-Directed Learning, and Self-Determination and how they are explored in this research.

Transformative Learning

Transformative learning added a unique lens to this study for a variety of reasons. Within Transformative Learning, the learner generates meaning from their experiences (Cranton, 2023). Participants in this study were asked to share their experiences allowing individuals to create a manner of viewing and interpreting what goes on in their lives (Mezirow, 1991). Transformative learning allows individuals to generate meaning from their personal experiences and examine their habits in a critical manner, thereby allowing individuals to alter their habits based on how their transformational learning experience takes place (Cranton, 2023).

This study explored rural adult learners' degree-seeking journey transitioning out of the COVID-19 pandemic. Transformative learning takes place over a span of time, applicable to learners within this study (Cranton, 2023). Transformative Learning addresses several aspects of an individual's evolving learning experience and way of seeing the world (Christie et al., 2015). This form of learning gives students the opportunity to create new meaning through diverse avenues that can include collaboration with their peers and being able to participate in discussions (Cranton, 2023).

Self-Directed Learning (SDL)

Self-Directed Learning was important to integrate in this study because it focuses on how learners have more control over their learning experience than a traditional in-person learning format may allow. In the context of education in relation to COVID-19, several formal styles of learning were disrupted (Morris et al., 2025). This study explored the experiences of learners who may not have had the same work-life balance as traditional learners during COVID-19. Self-Directed learning permits learners to generate new skills and new competencies to improve their existing knowledge while engaging in a lifelong learning process (Morris et al., 2025). Self-

Directed Learning, in which the learner has the ability to take control of their learning experience, involves the learner processing and adapting to necessary strategies to best navigate tools required to solve diverse problems such as changes in the educational delivery and environment (Morris et al., 2025).

In Self-Directed Learning, the learner plays a key role in the learning process by being proactive in their own learning experience (Robinson & Persky, 2020). Additionally, in Self-Directed Learning, the educational experience can take place in a variety of formats which include traditional and non-traditional formats (Geng, 2019). The ability to learn in a digital environment is possible, and technology readiness plays a part in an individual's ability to benefit from online courses (Geng, 2019). Different avenues such as online learning allows learners the ability to direct their learning experience. Massive open online courses (MOOC) have seen an increase in demand, and the benefits that this online setting provides learners can assist in exploring the learners' educational experience after the COVID-19 pandemic (Kim et al., 2021).

Self-Determination

Self-Determination (Ryan & Deci, 1985) accompanies Persistence (Tinto, 1993) by supporting the same principles of furthering academic and social integration, commitment to goals and institution, and a sense of belonging among learners. Self-Determination impacts a student's learning experience from a psychological standpoint. As Ryan and Deci (1985) explained, the psychological needs that comprise self-determination include the need for autonomy, relatedness, and competence. It provides a paradigm shift regarding the way motivation can be interpreted through an extrinsic and intrinsic lens (Rosli & Saleh, 2023). A learner's educational experience can be impacted in a positive or negative manner if their

psychological needs are not meeting their sense of motivation, thus decreasing their desire to perform well in classes (Deci & Ryan, 1985). When the learning environment supports the learner's needs, they are in a better position to take charge of their education, which furthers their desire to persist and take control of the learning experience (Confessore & Park, 2004).

Conceptual Framework Summary

Applying these three conceptual lenses grounded the participants' narratives and offered a deeper insight into the experiences of this adult learner population. Transformative Learning allows for unique ways of viewing the world (Christie et al., 2015). Self-Directed Learning can empower learners to decide what information they wish to explore further (Robinson & Persky, 2020). Self-Determination plays a role in the learner's motivation to continue or work towards pursuing educational opportunities (Knowles et al., 2015), relating to the learner's autonomy, sense of relatedness, and competence (Ryan & Deci, 1985).

Research Design—Overview

This study was conducted through a qualitative narrative inquiry design. This method is appropriate for this study because narrative inquiry is one style of narrative research that captures data via interviews (Terrell, 2023). The narrative inquiry design allows for a comprehensive exploration into the lived experiences through collecting the stories of the rural adult learners' unique experiences. Additionally, narrative inquiry permits a path for generating and understanding directly from the participant's first-hand experience (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The narrative inquiry research design allowed the researcher the ability to capture and explore the adult learner's experience in relation to the research problem. This method was best suited for this study since the research aimed to understand in-depth experiences from participants. Through capturing the rural adult learners' personal narratives, the narrative inquiry

design provided an avenue for generating a first-hand understanding directly from the learner's intimate learning experience (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Through theme creation, the researcher was able to identify both the similarities and differences from participants' stories (Bhattacharya, 2017). By utilizing this approach, the participants told a story spanning the beginning, the middle, and the end. Capturing personal stories this way provided rich data and insights into the rural adult learners' journey, navigating their educational process after the COVID-19 pandemic. This research focused on generating a thematic narrative to create meaning from the stories collected, utilizing an inductive process (Bhattacharya, 2017).

Narrative is an essential aspect of human activity (deMarrais & Lapan, 2017). Clandinin and Connelly (2000) outlined narrative inquiry as a qualitative research methodology. The narrative inquiry methodology focuses on examining the stories and experiences of people to reveal what gives meaning to their lives (Butina, 2015). Narrative is what gives meaning to our experiences and can be viewed as a form of analysis (Kim, 2017). Clandinin and Connelly (2000) also viewed narratives as essential aspects of human life in that there are ways of giving individuals forms of meaning to their lived experiences through capturing their stories. The concepts or core ideas of this methodology are formed on the basis that an individual's experience is inherently narrative in nature. Kim (2017) further explained that narrative inquiry can be considered one way of being able to understand the human experience, which can be done through stories. The process involves seeking to understand the context of the story, for example, through research questions and then collecting information about the story being told (Butina, 2015). Obtaining the stories via narrative inquiry aided in understanding the academic experience of rural adult learners after the COVID-19 pandemic through an analysis of the participants' narratives.

Participants

I contacted collegiate institutions before reaching out to participants. An email was sent to the institutions regarding this study and its intent. Each institution has a strong student community, and the researcher asked for voluntary participation by rural adult learners who attended the institution while transitioning out of the COVID-19 pandemic. Another prewritten email for the collegiate institution to disseminate to their student groups shared my name, affiliation, and research purpose with potential participants. I also utilized a demographic questionnaire to assist with gathering participant data (Appendix A - Interview Protocol) (OpenAI, 2024). The demographic questionnaire allowed the participant to note if they had additional responsibilities outside of being a student.

Data Collection—Interviews

Human participants can select what types of information they provide researchers based on a variety of factors (Nii Laryeafio & Ogbewe, 2023). An interview format for data collection was utilized to obtain an in-depth understanding of the participants' unique experiences related to the research question. Interviews are one of the most common forms of data collection utilized in qualitative research and, due to their adaptability, can take place in a variety of formats (Nii Laryeafio & Ogbewe, 2023). For this study, participants were interviewed through video conferencing. Once the interviews were finished, the researcher then applied the next phase of the research process by analyzing the data through journaling, creating memos, and applying the appropriate coding to the interviews.

Data Analysis

There were three rounds of coding for this study. The first round consisted of thematic coding (Saldaña, 2021), the second round consisted of concept coding (Saldaña, 2021), and the

third round was a-priori coding (Saldaña, 2021). The thematic coding cycle generated a theme, such as a repetitive phrase used by participants or a sentence that added meaning to a section of data (Saldaña, 2021). Thematic analysis assisted in answering the research question by furthering the descriptions or repetitive expressions used by participants (Saldaña, 2021). The research question explored the participants' lived experiences, and thematic coding assisted in the researcher's interpretations in summation of the beliefs generated by the data (Saldaña, 2021).

The second cycle of coding was concept coding. Concept coding allowed the researcher to recognize a word or short phrase that was mentioned repetitively and apply a broader meaning beyond what was apparent (Saldaña, 2021). During the second coding phase, analytic transitions, such as the creation of concepts and reorganization of data, were used (Saldaña, 2021). Concept coding can be applied to larger groups of data that allows for a bigger picture analysis by an overarching concept (Saldaña, 2021).

The third cycle of coding focused on provisional, or a-priori based coding (Saldaña, 2021). A-priori assisted in the ability to use pre-existing or modified coding schemes while analyzing the data (Saldaña, 2021). Starting with a small set of five to six codes allowed the researcher to expand categories as needed, which aided in theme creation (Saldaña, 2021). A-priori-based coding helped the researcher determine if and how a small set of codes may be expanded due to the participant's varying experiences.

Positionality

As an individual who both worked for a college in a rural setting and was a student in the formal higher educational system during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, there were occasions where I struggled to accept the experiences that were shared with me. Additionally, my work and school requirements did not conflict with each other, and I was able to hold both

the role of a full-time employee and a student without experiencing role conflict. During the study I also kept in mind that I was privileged to have the materials and technology needed to complete my coursework while working full-time during the COVID-19 pandemic; however, many participants did not have the same experience. Due to this, I experienced one less stressor than many rural adult learners experienced. Keeping this in mind, I remembered to bracket my opinions so that I did not impact the data collection and analysis process.

Epistemological Grounding

Epistemology explains the common background knowledge a researcher has while investigating an issue surrounded by significant public assumptions (Sol & Heng, 2022). The constructivist epistemological approach allows individuals to create meaning as they interact with the world they wish to understand (Crotty, 1998). This study used a constructivist epistemology to create meaning from the participants' educational experience (Crotty, 1998). Being able to gather the participants' stories allowed the researcher to add context in the form of themes, to make meaning from their stories (deMarrais & Lapan, 2017). Looking at the adult learner's experience through the constructivist perspective enabled the researcher to explore the participants' experiences in their learning after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Significance of the Study

Limited research has been conducted regarding adult learners with an emphasis on adult learners residing in rural areas. The literature presents different experiences that degree-seeking rural adult learners in general had upon transitioning back to their collegiate learning after COVID-19 protocols were lifted (Babb et al., 2022). Despite this, a focus on rural adult learners and their educational experiences after the pandemic has not been specifically investigated yet in this population (Gilchrist et al., 2025). This gap in research is significant, because the rural adult

learner population has shown increasing numbers since 1981 where there was a 34% increase between 1975 and 1981, whereas there was a 21% increase among adult learners from urban areas (Easton, 1991; Paul, 2026).

Operationalization of Terms

The following terms and definitions are used to add context as they appear and are referenced throughout this paper.

- *Adult Learner*. Learners who differ from the traditional-aged learner in the aspects of their life characteristics, psychological, and academic areas (Brunton & Buckley, 2021).
- *Course Design*. The process of using a multi-step approach to create a course before facilitating it (Lanares et al., 2024).
- *Depersonalization*. As referred to by Djita et al. (2022), depersonalization refers to a negative, cynical, or excessively detached response to other people “caused by an” overload of emotional exhaustion.
- *Digital Divide*. This concept refers to the inequality of e-learning outcomes (Zhao et al., 2022).
- *Digital Readiness*. As explained by Chounta et al. (2024), this term is used to describe an individual’s preparedness in using digital devices, their trust in technology, and the extent to which individuals use digital devices for online needs.
- *Educational Barrier*. These are challenges, instances, or events that can prevent an individual from formulating or continuing a postsecondary aspiration (Irvin et al., 2012).
- *Instructional Design*. The act of facilitating the learning process in a manner that allows learners to apply their newly gained knowledge, skills, and attitudes in a variety of situations (Moor et al., 2002).

- *Online Learning*. As explained by Choudhury and Pattnaik (2020, p. 2), online learning is “the transfer of knowledge and skills, in a well-designed course content that has established accreditations, through an electric media, like the internet, Web 4.0, intranets and extranets.”
- *Online Learning Systems*. Online learning systems are considered web-based systems used to distribute, track, and manage courses on the internet (Makhatar et al., 2020).
- *Non-Traditional Learner*. The defining characteristics of this type of learner include several components such as being a parent, working full or part-time, and may have experienced a break in education (Gilchrist et al., 2025). Further, Hearn and Long (2023) explained that adult learners may also be referred to as non-traditional learners. The term rural learner is also used interchangeably to describe non-traditional learners.
- *Persistence*. As explained by Comings (2024) in relation to students, persistence is a continual learning process that takes place until the adult student completes their academic goals.
- *Remote Learning*. These are tools utilized to provide and deliver innovative and flexible learning experiences (Ober & Kochmanska, 2022).
- *Rural Learner*. As explained by the United States Census (United States Bureau of Statistics, 2013), this includes all of the living areas, and total population and zone of less than 50,000 individuals in specific settings, regional areas, or communities. The term non-traditional learners is also used interchangeably to describe rural learners.
- *Self-Directed Learning (SDL)*. This learning is described by Knowles (1975) as a “process in which individuals take the initiative, with or without the help of others, in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating learning goals, identifying human and material resources for learning, choosing and implementing appropriate learning strategies and evaluating learning outcomes” (p. 18).

– *Transformative Learning*. A learning theory that strives to explain and analyze the way adult learners create meaning from their experiences (Mezirow, 1991).

Chapter Summary

This chapter provided an overview of the foundational elements that frame the study. It introduced the researcher's background and positionality, outlined the conceptual framework guiding the inquiry, and explained the significance and relevance of the research. The chapter presented the research problem, articulated the study's purpose, and identified the central research question. It also offered a summary of the research design, highlighting the use of narrative inquiry as a chosen methodology, and defined key terms that are used throughout the dissertation.

Degree-seeking rural adult learners faced a different academic experience during the COVID-19 pandemic compared to course delivery prior to the pandemic. This unique population of learners faced different barriers than traditional postsecondary-aged students. Educational barriers can include being a parent, taking care of a parent, or working full-time, among other roles. The rural setting does not offer the same educational support systems that in-person or accessibility to campus resources can provide.

Degree-seeking adult learners seeking to continue their education after the COVID-19 protocols were lifted experienced the transition back to learning in a setting that had fewer if no COVID-19 protocols in place. This study explored the rural adult learner's experience continuing their education once the COVID-19 pandemic was no longer considered to be a threat. The rural adult learners' stories shed light on how each individual navigated their academic institution's requirements for continuing their education, whether they used any

resources to meet their course requirements, and how their educational journey was impacted in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

This literature review is provided to give the reader a summary and analysis related to the experiences of non-traditional adult learners (NALs). This review provides a background and the demographics of NALs before investigating rurality and place-based barriers as well as the progress that researchers have made into the learners' experience unique to NALs after the COVID-19 pandemic. Next, the review explores the different barriers related to NALs such as family roles, demands, occupational and professional conflict these roles play in an NAL's education. The chapter provides an insight into different supportive resources in relation to NALs followed by the roles Self-Directed Learning, Transformative Learning, and Self-Determination play in relation to a NAL.

Finally, this review identifies gaps in the current literature and highlights the need for further research, particularly focusing on the lived experiences of rural NALs. It underscores how understanding these learners' perspectives—especially regarding the unique challenges they face in continuing their education after the COVID-19 pandemic—is essential. This foundation justifies the need for the current study, which used narrative inquiry to capture these distinct experiences.

Overview of Rural Non-Traditional Adult Learners

It is important to distinguish between traditional learners and NALs because their needs may not be the same. The defining characteristics of NALs include several components such as: (a) being a parent, (b) working full or part-time, and/or (c) may have experienced a break in education (Gilchrist et al., 2025). Distinguishing between the two learner groups provides a lens to reveal how the experiences of these two groups differ. Understanding this information can aid

in providing learners with the appropriate educational resources while assisting in connecting with them in a manner that meets their educational needs (Atibuni, 2024).

The National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) defined the term non-traditional student within the context of colleges and universities in the U.S. (NCES, 2002; U.S. Department of Education, 2015). According to NCES (2002) and the U.S. Department of Education (2015), NALs are a significant part of a growing sector in higher education. The NCES (2002) described a NAL as being the opposite of a traditional student who has earned a high school diploma prior to studying full-time at the college or university level. As students, NALs do not follow the conventional educational trajectory due to several factors, including employment needs, financial challenges, and physical distance to the institution (Battiste, 2022). These challenges mean that a NAL may not have adequate time, accommodations, or finances to attend school in the same way as a student living on campus (Battiste, 2022). Additionally, other characteristics of a NAL include the fact that their circumstances may result in (a) delay in enrollment, (b) dependence on a family member or spouse, (c) not having a high school diploma, and (d) lacking financial independence (NCES, 2002; U.S. Department of Education, 2015).

NALs, particularly those from the rural areas of the U.S., generally do not have the same advantages in continuing their education as their urban counterparts (Rowan-Kenyon, 2007; Schuetze & Slowey, 2002). Prior to the 21st century, NALs were among the most neglected and emphasized social groups (Chen, 2017). Data from the 2000s and 2010s shows an increased level of student population in postsecondary institutions within the U.S., with about 17.5 million undergraduate students (Chen, 2017). These numbers have also increased amid the intersectionality of the U.S. population since more students come from various social, political, and economic backgrounds. Chen (2017) stated that as of 2009, NALs represented

approximately 38.2% of students in postsecondary education; however, this figure does not account for more recent definitional factors such as age, occupation, and other demographic characteristics used to identify this learner group.

As of 2021, the NCES declared that there were over 19 million NALs enrolled in 5,831 post-secondary institutions (Winfield et al., 2023). At 32%, NALs enrolled in part-time learning were deemed to have statistically higher rates of enrollment compared to traditional students who were under 25 years old and were enrolled full-time. Additionally, this number of NALs enrolled is projected to grow by about 3.3 million by the year 2028 (Winfield et al., 2023). A significant number of NALs come from rural areas of the U.S. Before this increase in rural-based NALs, a report by Easton (1991) suggested that, in 1981, rural NALs within the U.S. consisted of just 27.6% of the total student body, which was an increase of 3% from 1975. In the decades since, there has been a distinct rise in rural NALs, particularly due to factors such as part-time learning and employment within this demographic.

Even before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, rural NALs were among the most marginalized groups of students in the U.S. (Winfield et al., 2023). While institutional systems pivoted to providing educational classes online during the pandemic, the ability for adult learners to access their coursework was a secondary factor. Not all learners had access to technology, and some learners lacked internet access (Edmunds et al., 2021). Additionally, faculty were not always trained nor expected to have any experience in online teaching platforms, so they were not as adept at supporting learners in navigating the online environment. As Koivisto (2024) explained, faculty had to learn how to use different online-based programs to continue teaching. Pandemic era disruptions can continue to impact adult learners' access to resources and ability to be academically successful (Bessette, 2020). Not all higher educational institutions have satellite

campuses near rural areas to provide community support. Inability to access technology can create a barrier in a learner's ability to complete coursework and be successful (Bessette, 2020).

Rurality and Place-Based Barriers

NALs are often at a different stage in their lives compared to traditional college-aged students. For context, when it comes to describing and defining rural areas, the literature explains that narrowing down rural areas to one specific definition is challenging. The definition of rurality varies from country to country depending on whether culture is integrated and whether place-based situations are considered (Shepherd et al., 2024). Hardison (2017) argued that remote locations in rural areas, in addition to slow internet networks and disturbances can hinder the educational system. These barriers particularly include electronic systems that are being adopted by higher educational institutions to help facilitate the continuation of classes for NALs (Hardison, 2017; Mishra et al., 2020).

Place-based barriers relate to a person's geographic location and the challenges they face due to living in that region. As it relates to NALs, their geographic location means not residing close to or within an urban area. When investigating adult learners, Cox et al. (2024) mentioned a common challenge for NALs was finding a quiet place to study in their homes. Many studies find that when NALs have multiple roles such as being a parent or financial provider, it can impact their ability to juggle school with other roles (Bessette, 2020).

While studying adult learners residing in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, Cox et al. (2024) shared that these students, which can be classified as NALs, experienced higher drop-out or stop-out rates than other areas in their region. Looking more closely at this population in Lancaster, the researchers found that the area lacked high-speed internet. Instead, the internet speed they have is lower than the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) suggests for it to

be considered “reliable internet.” Even when these NALs in Lancaster County elected to attend in-person classes due to a lack of internet access or due to technology, they were confronted with transportation challenges. The drive from Lancaster County to New York or Washington D.C. is three hours. This time does not account for the class time nor the commute back to their homes. NALs also suggest that there are many different reasons they felt place-based barriers impacted their educational experience, including: (a) peer influence, (b) social pressure, and (c) family (Prechotoko & Kirby, 2022). Finally, there was a sense of separation that rural NALs felt when working next to traditional students due to their distinct rural background, which created feelings of being more culturally diverse from their peers (Shepherd et al., 2024).

Drop-Out Rates

Park and Choi (2009) mentioned that an increasing percentage of students who participated in online classes for their coursework tended to drop out more than the students who participated in the traditional in-person teaching format. Online education has played a key role in bringing education to NALs despite an increasingly fast-changing world (Neroni et al., 2022). Low retention rates is not a new topic in higher education, and online education allows learners like NALs the option to study where and when they wish (Neroni et al., 2022). Bean and Metzner (1985) asserted that the key difference between the attrition process for NALs compared to traditional learners is that NALs are affected more by their non-academic environment compared to traditional learners; however, Bean and Metzner (1985) did not define online learners in relation to NALs in their model.

Overview of NALs after the COVID-19 Pandemic

As of 2024, a “new” educational culture was emerging, shaped by the resilience instilled in rural NALs during the COVID-19 pandemic (Atibuni et al., 2024; Lund & Wang, 2024).

According to Atibuni et al. (2024), the new culture not only insists on the importance of connecting students through technology but teaches them critical digital tools for the future. Studies show a major shift in how institutions and students approach their education and whether rurality and having a low socioeconomic status impact their learning (Atibuni et al., 2024; Kramer-Gordon & Bradley, 2023; Sundeen & Kisner, 2024; Winfield et al., 2023). For instance, Winfield et al. stated that the pandemic led to the higher educational sector increasing the amount of attention set on distance, traditional, and non-traditional adult learners. Moreover, both Winfield et al. (2023) and Kramer-Gordon and Bradley (2023) argued that there was a surge in the number of online and remote-based learning programs despite NALs commonly depending on physical collegiate environments. For instance, a study by Fiorini et al. (2022) found that a majority of NAL students (56.8%) reported being satisfied, and 32.1% were very satisfied with online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. These studies reflect that during and in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, higher educational institutions in the U.S. became more knowledgeable and sensitive to rural NALs issues compared to before 2020 (Atibuni et al., 2024; Kramer-Gordon & Bradley, 2023; Lund & Wang, 2024; Sundeen & Kisner, 2024; Winfield et al., 2023).

Atibuni et al. (2024) referenced that the pandemic caused significant disruptions to an individual's ability to learn. The pandemic exposed the divide in access to supportive resources and technology that rural adult learners encountered. Learning preferences cannot always be addressed in a digital format (Sundeen & Kisner, 2024). For tactile learners, if they cannot print required course materials or otherwise obtain what they need on their own, their learning experience may be impacted. The learning materials that would be provided in class are not always accessible outside of that setting. The structure and response of higher educational

institutions changed the learners' experience engaging in the coursework by putting a strain on learners who had to figure out how to get internet access, laptops, and technological resources without institutional support (Edmunds et al., 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic fundamentally affected the ability of many higher educational institutions to deliver education and physically reach their students. Most institutions were barely equipped with instructional procedures and manuals for handling remote communication and online learning in mass capacities, and it was extremely difficult to find solutions given limited resources (Brachtl et al., 2023).

NAL Roles and Responsibilities Affecting their Studies

NALs often navigate complex personal and professional demands that can affect their ability to fully engage in academic life, especially when financial and caregiving responsibilities take precedence over coursework (Jaeger et al., 2012). These multiple roles warrant flexibility as NALs are more likely to encounter obstacles in degree completion due to their non-academic responsibilities and obligations (Kara, 2019). Before and after the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, NALs throughout the U.S. were significantly made up of individuals aged 25 years and older (Chen, 2017). Most of the individuals in this range were working in some capacity of either full or part-time and had family responsibilities (Chen, 2017; Winfield et al., 2023). Other responsibilities may pose challenges to providing an academic setting where the learner is able to be engaged in their education with minimal resources such as limited financial means and time (Sutton, 2017).

Family Roles and Demands

Pippin's (2023) research discussed elements associated with motivations to enroll as NALs, which included the need for work competence, desire to change careers, and aspirations for higher education. Nonetheless, there are adults whose family circumstances, which are

mostly economic, drive them to want to acquire a degree to help satisfy their immediate and future needs. Pippin (2023) argued that NALs need life situations where family and work responsibilities allow time to study. Caregiving and household duties frequently compete with academic demands, creating role conflict for learners (Peich, 2017). Studies report that many rural NALs are over 25 years old, face financial strain both at home and in school, have family responsibilities, and often work full-time (Chen, 2017; Kramer-Gordon & Bradley, 2023).

Occupation and Professional Conflict

Work and professional responsibilities can pull the learner's attention away from focusing on school (Peich, 2017). Adaptable work schedules allow learners to participate in coursework at times that are convenient for them (Heeok, 2021). Employers did not restructure all jobs for remote work during or after the pandemic, which meant learners had to juggle classes, working, and caring for their children at home. In a study by Das et al. (2021) seeking to analyze the challenges of online learning from the perspectives of students, teachers, and parents, results indicated that many NALs are laborers and may engage in time-consuming daily occupations. Das et al.'s (2021) research is supported by other studies highlighting how NALs, particularly those from rural areas, found it hard to work and continue with their educational programs (Collins et al., 2021; Fensie et al., 2024; Winfield et al., 2023).

Fensie et al. (2024) share that mothers who juggled parenting and employment found those roles conflicted with their education even while participating in distance learning. Their study revealed that working mothers faced significant distractions, both during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, compounded by the cognitive load of family and work responsibilities. The distractions mentioned aligned with findings from Kara et al. (2019), who showed that rural female learners were already balancing childcare and domestic duties alongside employment

before the pandemic. Given the challenges brought by COVID-19, more rural NALs, particularly mothers, had to prioritize family and work, contributing to their discontinuation of education (Das et al., 2021; Surdick et al., 2021; Winfield et al., 2023).

Adult and Traditional Learner Differences

Ashar and Skenes (1993) provided examples of how NALs and traditional learners differ, one being that often NALs do not reside on the institution's campus. Additionally, most adult learners hold full-time jobs and identify as being married with a family. Working while having a family can create limitations in the aspect of social engagement for adult learners (Ashar & Skenes, 1993). Despite a limited social life within the collegiate realm, adult learners tend to have higher participation in other areas such as their work and family life (Ashar & Skenes, 1993). NALs who do not have physical access to their educational institutions create social memberships within their communities. Memberships within their community can improve social integration for adult learners within the collegiate setting (Ashar & Skenes, 1993). As Samoila and Vrabie (2023) mentioned, learners are more likely to continue their education through graduation if they are socially and academically integrated into their educational institution. Social and academic integration includes multiple forms of support such as a sense of commitment from both faculty and their peer group, which are part of the educational institution within and outside of the classroom setting (Samoila & Vrabie, 2023).

An additional difference between traditional learners and NALs relates to their learning needs. Ashar and Skenes (1993) explained that there can be an assumption that traditional learners appear to have a stronger dedication to completing their educational goals, but that is not always the case. In comparison to traditional students, commitment to completing their educational goals has shown to be stronger among adult learners (Ashar & Skenes, 1993). This

conclusion can point to NALs having goals that connect to their academic achievement outside of the classroom (Ashar & Skenes, 1993). NALs and traditional learners differ in that a traditional student who may live at home, is not married, and only works and attends college may not have the additional responsibilities that NALs have in addition to school (Braxton, 2004).

Support Networks

Although adult learners take on many roles, the literature identifies specific assets that support their continued educational engagement. One of these assets is having supportive friendships to assist in areas they are not familiar with, such as learning how to navigate technology (Prechotoko & Kirby, 2022). Adult learners report that dedicated teachers motivate them to persist in their programs, which improves retention. Sutton (2017) explained that in situations where learners need additional support, peer mentors from the student community play a beneficial role for adult learners.

Another aspect of student success, in addition to a student sense of belonging, was the presence of healthy relationships (Tucker, 1999). Healthy relationships create a stronger sense of community for the learners. A sense of community can consist of any aspect that can have an impact on a learner's sense of belonging or mood. The sense of community can include any type of phenomena that allows learners to feel a sense of inclusion or belonging to their new educational setting (Tucker, 1999).

The course delivery format also affects student retention (Braxton, 2004). Learners who commute to campus for in-person classes often hold roles unique from being a full-time student. Commuters can have external obligations such as supporting a family and working either full or part-time in addition to participating in class (Braxton, 2004). Due to these potential demands and external factors, support and encouragement play a huge role in commuters' ability to

continue their studies. This is because the time commitment needed to juggle multiple roles can take a toll on the learner and may lead to them prioritizing family or finances over their education. Learners who have a support system and receive encouragement towards completing college compared to those who do not receive the same support are more likely to stay in college and finish their degree (Braxton, 2004).

Role of Higher Educational Institutions to NALs

Results indicate that higher educational institutions play a significant role in how they serve different student populations, particularly NALs. The U.S. Department of Education (2015) highlighted the importance of adjusting to the challenges of learning in the classroom environment within higher education. As Hunter-Johnson (2021) pointed out, institutions need to create opportunities for NALs to both facilitate and better serve the NAL's educational needs. Hill and Smith (2023) mentioned that institutions adopted blended learning mechanisms to provide opportunities to engage with a diverse student body. A diverse student body can include international students, non-traditional students such as adult learners, and graduate students (Chen, 2017; Hill & Smith, 2023). As Chen (2017) explained, institutional diversity generates a foundation for higher educational institutions to make decisions that cater to diverse learner populations.

A variety of elements can be considered academic integration or supportive measures, such as receiving academic counseling services, the quality of educational instruction, as well as the relevance that the coursework has in relation to the learner's career and educational goals (Samoila & Vrabie, 2023). Samoila and Vrabie (2023) explained how Tinto argued that academic institutions provide appropriate forms of support by utilizing a pedagogical strategy to create a connection between the learner and educational institution. Connections through social

integration with staff, faculty, and peers can strengthen students' sense of belonging (Samoila & Vrabie, 2023). Samoila and Vrabie (2023) argued that a student's awareness of their level of social integration within their institution significantly influences their educational persistence. Social engagement plays a role in students' connectivity to the college community, and students who experience higher satisfaction with their experience feel less isolated than those who do not have social engagement.

Learning Factors Engaged by NALs in Rural Areas

The pandemic revealed significant infrastructure challenges, including barriers to tutoring access due to platform incompatibility, camera requirements, and insufficient access to technological devices (Besette, 2020). These challenges often left the learner without access to the internet and/or technology, and unable to access the school, public library, or peer resources (Besette, 2020). When NALs are able to access libraries, which in turn provides access to online resources, printing capabilities, study rooms for peer work, and test taking, their work and studies do not suffer. Overall, the shift in the online learning environments impacted NAL's engagement by affecting their opportunities for peer engagement or support by hindering their understanding of the benefits that online education can offer (Peich, 2017).

Not all learners were able to study and complete coursework at home due to needing to work for financial reasons (Herbert et al., 2023). For example, the COVID-19 pandemic fundamentally disrupted many aspects of NALs' lives, including how they approached learning. During and after the COVID-19 pandemic, various factors affected how rural NALs connected with their instructors and peers (Sutherland et al., 2023). Factors impacting how NALs were able to connect between the two groups were related to information and communication technology,

particularly accessible and fast internet, video conferencing infrastructure, and remote appropriate course designs (Lim et al., 2021).

Faculty

The sudden shift to online education during the pandemic differed across institutions, in part because many faculty lacked experience in online instruction (Bessette, 2020). Not all faculty were familiar with the technology before their students were asked to use the same technology or programs, so faculty were not always in a position to assist their students regarding technology-related questions (Bessette, 2020). Resources such as libraries had to find ways of supporting both faculty and students, whether that be online, through self-service course reserves or by offering library pickups for books (Xuan & Shaw, 2022).

Considering the various impacts the pandemic had on human life, Pinheiro et al. (2023) provide a conceptual and empirical backdrop intended to point out how systems of higher education responded during these situations. Faculty remain a fundamental actor or stakeholder in terms of institutional response at various levels. Research by Pinheiro et al. (2023) explained that, during the height of COVID-19, some institutions were able to mobilize resources and hurry to train their faculty to adapt to the changes being brought on by the pandemic, but not all institutions were able to do so. Areas where educators experienced changes were distance-learning education, computer technology, and internet-related coursework (Pinheiro et al., 2023). Faculty were forced to learn how to use different types of internet-based tools and resources to organize remote activities for NALs. Nonetheless, there were significant constraints, including learners opting to drop out of their academic program (Pinheiro et al., 2023). In a similar study aimed to identify critical factors that significantly affected learners during and after the

pandemic, Koivisto (2024) indicated that support from faculty was significantly limited during this period compared to after the pandemic.

Koivisto's (2024) study demonstrated that rural NALs would have been better positioned to study and remain satisfied with their learning processes in an in-person environment compared to the distance learning setup. Koivisto (2024) also indicated that institutional faculty played a central role in NALs' learning experience, particularly in designing policies that shape their educational experience amid their dynamic challenges. As previously demonstrated by Schuetze and Slowey (2002) and Rowan-Kenyon (2007), NALs are commonly identified as being rural learners and can be socially and economically disadvantaged individuals. NALs experience financial obstacles in addition to a lack of childcare assistance (Schuetze & Slowey, 2022).

Information Technology (IT)

In a study focusing on preferences for NALs regarding learning technologies and how they would impact their academic self-efficacy, Sutherland et al. (2023) found that students prefer consistency, relevance, and effectiveness. The preference aligned with the application of email, social media, and blended learning tools, which reflected their preference to use video resources and lecture recordings to support learning (Sutherland et al., 2023). Considering the conventional methods utilized mostly by rural NALs prior to the pandemic, providing them with a system of accessing information needed for learning using technology was deemed essential during and after the pandemic. Therefore, given Sutherland et al.'s (2023) findings, the use of lecture recordings, online and offline video resources, email, and, to some extent, the application of social media platforms could provide NALs with easier communication with fellow learners and educators. Acosta et al. (2022) indicated availability or lack thereof to smoothly navigate information technology resources may have determined the persistence of rural NALs in

continuing their education. This can be the case as a result of online technology being significantly advanced and/or some rural NALs becoming engulfed in their non-technology-based careers during COVID-19, meaning for them to become proficient, they would have needed assistance, preferably in-person, before they could systematically continue learning during the pandemic (Acosta et al., 2022; Mishra et al., 2020; Tang et al., 2024).

Results according to Acosta et al.'s (2022) study showed that amid an increase in online and blended learning programs, digital credentialing platforms provided a strategy for NALs to embrace digital skills as part of their career development goals. Nonetheless, given the challenges and obstacles experienced by rural NALs, this population was hesitant even though there were some individuals willing to cope with the technology difficulties (Acosta et al., 2022; Keevy, 2023). Some articles have highlighted these obstacles and challenges to include financial constraints, pandemic stress, and even concerns about remote and online learning processes during the pandemic (Acosta et al., 2022; Collins et al., 2021; Kramer-Gordon & Bradley, 2023). The online learning processes learners experienced during the pandemic shed light on the role instructional design played in a learner's ability to interact with the material.

Instructional Design

Due to other roles and responsibilities, an adult learners' ability to access material online varies (Sundeen & Kisner, 2024). Effectiveness in instructional design approaches in relation to rural adult learners can depend on factors out of the control of the higher educational institution. As explained by Moore et al. (2002), the role of an instructional designer is the act of facilitating the learning process in a way that learners can apply their newly acquired knowledge, skills, and their attitudes in a variety of situations. External factors can include but are not limited to a learner's internet connection, experience using digital devices, and ability to access or obtain

devices (Sundeen & Kisner, 2024). The implications of making educational transitions for future crisis response would include having an awareness of digital literacy (Sundeen & Kisner, 2024). Being aware if learners are familiar with how to navigate online courses and using supplemental resources such as the library, counseling, and/or tutoring services is needed (Besette, 2020). Faculty within higher educational institutions also play a fundamental role in designing their learning procedures, outlines, and timelines for students, including rural NALs.

According to Winfield et al. (2023), institutions are encouraged to create a human-focused classroom, wherein instructors and instructional designers incorporate principles such as andragogy into their online courses. The human-focused classrooms tend to put the student's needs first, humanize the process of studying, and help students become connected with their peers as well as their educators. Therefore, considering the principles of student instructional designs, Winfield et al. (2023) insisted that NALs, including rural-based learners, could benefit from gaining facilitative skills associated with new learning technologies while adopting distance learning. According to Mose's (2022) findings, instructional designers were on the frontline providing institutions with defensive and pragmatic solutions to meet their facilitative needs. Solutions included applying constant reminders about classes, assignments, and instructions on projects. These solutions would not only provide innovative remedies but also transform how NALs navigated learning remotely (Herbert et al., 2023; Mose, 2022).

Course Design

Course design as explained by Lanares et al. (2024) is the process of using a three-step approach to creating the course prior to facilitating it. The three steps include defining the teaching philosophy as a way to clarify the role of the facilitator, building or revising the course if needed to include teaching scenarios, and then creating the course by taking a step away from

the teaching aspect to gain an understanding of the content (Lanares et al., 2024). Course design can impact learners in a variety of ways, such as how they prioritize their responsibilities outside the classroom, which may require flexibility (Jaeger et al., 2012). Learners who juggle work and/or caregiving responsibilities while being required to attend synchronous class meetings may struggle to meet both work and course obligations (Peich, 2017). Adaptability in class attendance or having asynchronous classes can impact a learner's ability to participate in class by giving them flexibility that synchronous courses do not always offer. According to Giesbers et al. (2014), technology has contributed to improvements in the methods of delivery by offering learners a level of flexibility compared to the traditional classroom setting. Online platforms provide a diverse view of the student population amid the significant changes experienced in the 21st century (Giesbers et al., 2014; Stewart et al., 2011). The development in education via delivery methods means instructors can interact more with students from remote locations and potentially offer a variety of perspectives in their course (Stewart et al., 2011). As McClain (2024) explained, learning design and facilitation work together to create an effective learning experience for students. In that case, online learning delivery, especially for nontraditional adult learners, tends to be via the asynchronous learning format.

Asynchronous Learning

In an asynchronous learning format, students interact with course content through online platforms at their own pace, without the requirement of real-time engagement with instructors or peers (Fabriz et al., 2021; Giesbers et al., 2014; Stewart et al., 2011). Asynchronous courses, which do not have a mandatory course meeting component, allow the learner additional flexibility (Eastmond, 1998). Learners who have other obligations in addition to the role of being a student may find that synchronous courses that do not have a required attendance component,

may benefit them by not having a specified time they must be available to meet (Eastmond, 1998). Additionally, if lectures are recorded for later viewing, it allows learners who are unable to attend the lecture in real time the ability to view the class lecture at a time that works for their schedule.

Asynchronous learning not only enables the delivery of education anywhere and at any time, but the learner is afforded the flexibility to derive content-related responses and fact-based statements for their teacher and if required for their peers too (Fabrizz et al., 2021; Giesbers et al., 2014; Stewart et al., 2011). Nonetheless, Giesbers et al. (2014) understood that synchronous learning methods tend to be synonymous with in-person learning but differ in the use of online media for learners. The associated platforms tend to facilitate audio and visual learning capabilities, giving the participants a similar experience to in-person learning (Fabrizz et al., 2021; Giesbers et al., 2014; Stewart et al., 2011).

Moreover, Pippin's (2023) findings show that NALs can relate more to course designs that align with their requirements of flexibility, practicality, support, intentionality, and commitment. This alignment is beneficial because most NALs tend to be preoccupied with work or parental responsibilities. Pippin (2023) also indicated that NALs, especially from rural settings, may require more sophisticated learning techniques, particularly given their various responsibilities at home or work. In a study to review strategies needed to improve course designs in higher educational learning institutions, Barua and Lockee (2024) acknowledged that courses needed to be flexible in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In their 2024 review, Barua and Lockee explored critical elements of flexible course design and analyzed how these contributed to a more learner-centered educational framework. Given that rural NALs may benefit from an enhanced engagement and motivating process as far

as course designs are concerned, a revamped approach might make it easier during and after their enrollment. These studies show that adopting a culture of course design review to make courses as flexible and rapidly adaptable to diversified learner demographics could also increase an adaptable learning environment (Barua & Lockee, 2024; Lim et al., 2021; Pippin, 2023). For instance, rural NALs, whose institutions used a hybrid system of learning after the COVID-19 pandemic, helped students gain easier access and navigation of courses, as argued by Barua and Lockee (2024). Singh et al. (2021) provided more effective course designs by developing a standard course design template which helped ensure consistency with flexibility in the instructional design. Singh et al. (2021) also conducted a study to provide an in-depth review regarding the history of blended learning, the evolution of the hybrid instruction model, faculty preparedness for online classes, and their implications during the pandemic. Findings showed that combining online and traditional instructional methods offered learners greater flexibility, enabling them to continue and deepen their educational experiences (Singh et al., 2021).

Technology and Proficiency

Technology presents various barriers for adult learners in rural areas. Not all learners used technology in a capacity that allowed them to be ready for online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, and some students worried about having to complete more work than they had to complete before the pandemic (Bessette, 2020). Digital readiness and access impacted rural NALs' learning ability in different ways (Peich, 2017). Instructors utilize technology to design and deliver coursework while having a pathway for two-way communication between professors and their students (Mukhtar et al., 2020). Learning management systems such as Edmodo and Moodle provided interactive features, including forums and chat rooms, to support learner interaction. Additionally, the ability to use digital whiteboards, conduct polls, and

implement quizzes were also options most learning management systems offered (Mukhtar et al., 2020). Professors also listed the addition of Webex and Skype to connect with students via video conferencing when in-person meetings were not feasible (Mukhtar et al., 2020).

Cox et al. (2024) mentioned that in addition to having a limited ability to purchase technology, NALs often have minimal experience using digital devices. This limited experience is furthered by learners explaining that proficiency created another barrier for them to continue their education as technology proficiency was needed for students to attend virtual class meetings (Cox et al., 2024). Multiple studies highlight technology as a key factor influencing a NAL's access to faculty and support services throughout the pre-pandemic, pandemic, and post-pandemic periods (Chen, 2017; Collins et al., 2021; Hardison, 2017; Tang et al., 2023; Winfield et al., 2023).

Technology was at the forefront because students needed technological tools like computers, computers with videoconferencing capabilities, appropriate software, the internet, and social media platforms to connect and facilitate other types of communication remotely (Winfield et al., 2023). Rural NALs' non-proficiency in technology may have prevented them from learning new content while learning new technology, which could have increased anxiety and frustration, causing them to drop out (Kara et al., 2019; Winfield et al., 2023). Kara et al. (2019) suggested that when rural learners have low levels of computer self-efficacy in addition to few resources to help them learn computer and internet skills, students are more likely to drop out. Rural NALs dropping out in the study by Kara et al. (2019) seemed to be exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Tang et al. (2024) reported that rural Texas schools experienced literacy declines due to limited integration of essential technology during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The transition to remote and online learning for students, particularly rural NALs, during and after the COVID-19 pandemic required learners to be technologically proficient (Tang et al., 2024). However, due to financial reasons, students needed to secure various gadgets amid hard economic times, internet inaccessibility, and non-proficiency in technology, many rural NALs found it challenging to continue their education, especially in the immediate term (Collins et al., 2021; Tang et al., 2024). NALs who held multiple roles such as those of being a caregiver while working may have lacked the necessary funds to purchase devices required for class (Gilchrist et al., 2025; Jaeger et al., 2012).

The rapid shift by educational institutions to online instruction outpaced students' ability to effectively access and use the course materials (Besette, 2020). Kalman and Lorenzatti (2024) mentioned that some instructors attempted to utilize Google Forms in online learning. However, several of the students in the program expressed difficulties accessing the form, which resulted in teachers moving away from this resource (Kalman & Lorenzatti, 2024). Other online tools that instructors tried to integrate into online learning were Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and Google Meet (Butt et al., 2022). Some professors utilized eBooks during the COVID-19 pandemic, which was not always widely accepted by NALs (Sutton, 2017).

Self-Directed Learning (SDL)

Self-Directed Learning is considered a learning process that allows the learner to have a majority stake in their learning experience (Morris et al., 2025). Knowles (1975) described SDL as being a “process in which individuals take the initiative, with or without the help of others, in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating learning goals, identifying human and material resources for learning, choosing and implementing appropriate learning strategies and evaluating learning outcomes” (p. 18). SDL allows learners to incorporate different forms of humanistic

assumptions (Morris et al., 2025). SDL has gained popularity with the adult education sector with Knowles originally proposing that in comparison to childhood education which is primarily teacher-facilitated, in adult education, learners use their deep psychological desire to be a self-directed learner to further their learning process (Morris et al., 2025).

Characteristics of SDL include the learner having a heightened level of participation in the academic material and in the completion of coursework benchmarks (Geng, 2019). The SDL process includes the learner playing a role in the direction of their educational objectives (Robinson & Persky, 2020). The learner's involvement is important to keep in mind as persistence is a concept that builds upon the SDL style. In digital or asynchronous learning environments, the ability to complete work at a time that works for the learner allows greater flexibility in other areas of their life. Rural adult learners have mentioned barriers to their education including work and family obligations, and the flexibility in completing coursework aids in the ability for learners to pursue or continue their education (Park & Choi, 2009). Motivation impacts a learner's ability to be self-directed in their learning experience as they need to take responsibility for managing and building the direction their learning takes (Garrison, 1997).

Online academic programs for adult learners have increased due to their ability to offer coursework in a manner that takes out distance and travel as a barrier (Knowles et al., 2015). Learning opportunities for adult learners were expanded due to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. This expansion prompted adult learners to quickly learn how to navigate digital devices and online resources to continue their education. Since the COVID-19 pandemic there has been a rise in online educational programming and learners utilizing virtual environments (Knowles et al., 2015).

Foundations and Frameworks of SDL

SDL relies primarily on the student's initiative to engage with both instructors and peers (Liu et al., 2024). SDL aligns with the rural NAL's need for autonomy and flexibility due to its advantages (Lai, 2011). Learners who had a higher technological competency in online learning formats were shown to enjoy and be more engaged in the learning experience (Chen & Williams, 2009). Online learning allows learners the opportunity to control more aspects of their learning experience (Liu et al., 2024). SDL can be applied to academic environments as a way to promote lifelong learning (Morris et al., 2025). SDL allows the learner to retain most of the control in directing their learning experience such as controlling the means such as the "how" and the "what" in relation to their learning process (Morris et al., 2025).

Key Characteristics and Conditions Supporting SDL

Learner traits that support SDL include learners engaging with the material and utilizing time management and organizational skills to not fall behind in coursework (Liu et al., 2024). Learners hold a lot of responsibility in the trajectory of their education such as determining what they consider to be important, why they feel it is important, and when to engage with the material (Cronin-Golomb & Bauer, 2023). Learners engage in information-seeking behaviors as a reaction to the social desire to engage with their peers or other individuals (Cronin-Golomb & Bauer, 2023). Characteristics of SDL include but are not limited to having an increased participation in the academic material and completing coursework milestones (Geng, 2019).

An example of a learning path is learners controlling their own educational objectives (Robinson & Persky, 2020). One component of SDL includes the learner possessing an ability to manage what is needed to adopt the necessary strategies in navigating the tools needed to solve various problems (Geng, 2019). It is not uncommon for SDL to take place via the internet, which

can mean learners using the internet to communicate in collaborative manners. It is important to note that a learner's ability to navigate their education in a SDL format online includes being able to take into consideration the learner's readiness in relation to learning technology (Geng, 2019).

SDL in Practice: Autonomy, Motivation, and Control

SDL allows learners to create and learn new skills and new competencies and improve existing knowledge and understanding to engage in lifelong learning (Morris et al., 2025). Morris et al. (2025) explained that SDL can be implemented via a variety of learning mediums such as in a traditional face-to-face environment or in an online setting. The pivot to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic increased educational opportunities and pathways for interacting and communicating in formats that were not previously available (Knowles et al., 2015). Online learning platforms offer the ability for learners to take part in educational opportunities with the transportation or distance barrier removed (Knowles et al., 2015). This expansion is possible due to the internet allowing online education to reach rural and global audiences (Knowles et al., 2015). Additionally, online learning allows teachers to deliver lectures and instruction to students that may identify as being part of an underserved population, bridge cultural differences and geographical barriers, as well as reach students in remote areas (Knowles et al., 2015). Another barrier the literature frequently referenced as an obstacle adult learners experience is transportation difficulties (Prechotoko & Kirby, 2022). The transportation barrier is presented in different contexts. Some adult learners view transportation difficulties as contributing to their feelings of isolation in that they are unable to commute to the physical institution's campus location for in-person classes. In other instances, adult learners did not use the word barrier to describe transportation struggles, instead saying that transportation created a

situational hardship. Situational hardship was mentioned as an example that if transportation was offered, the cost involved with traveling was still not financially feasible (Crawford & McKenzie, 2023; Jehanghir et al., 2024).

Adult learners who identify as having low socioeconomic status (SES) explained that in some instances attending classes in person is not an option (Gersten & Anderson, 2024). They explained that they must work, and traveling to the institution is not always feasible with their schedule. In some areas, the travel would be five hours one way alone, and that does not include the time spent in class or completing homework (Crawford & McKenzie, 2023). In addition to the commute interfering with their ability to work, adult learners mentioned that transportation within their rural communities is often inconsistent, even if it is advertised as an option.

Technology and SDL: Digital Adaptations

Technology readiness affects how effectively students engage in self-directed online learning, with higher readiness linked to more positive perceptions of digital learning environments (Geng, 2019). Knowles et al. (2015) noted that advancements in technology have fueled the expansion of online learning by enabling more inclusive and flexible access to digital education. The online learning environment supports collaboration through various formats, including real-time synchronous sessions, chat functions, and discussion forums (Knowles et al., 2015). One type of learning environment where SDL takes place is in a massive open online course (MOOC) (Kim et al., 2021). The integration of interactive tools also allows students to take part in self-paced work such as exercises or self-assessments with limits assigned or unassigned (Knowles et al., 2015).

Adult learners who participated in massive open online courses (MOOCs) were able to participate in social interaction within a digital format (Barak et al., 2016). Barak et al. (2016)

explained that the adult learners who took MOOC courses reflected a stronger desire to learn and persist with the learning material because it provided them with more social engagement opportunities (Cronin-Golomb & Bauer, 2023). MOOCs have grown and can host courses available to a larger participant population than in-person courses can provide (Kim et al., 2021). Another aspect MOOCs provide learners is the ability for courses to be offered without space nor a set time constraint (Kim et al., 2021). While MOOCs have the potential to reach far more students than in-person courses, there are some limitations to this course delivery option. Due to MOOC's ability to serve hundreds of students at a time, there is the potential for decreased interaction between the student and professor (Kim et al., 2021).

A decrease in interaction means there is a heightened responsibility on the learner to accomplish different aspects of their coursework with the potential for less professor interaction (Kim et al., 2021). It has been suggested that online learning for the purpose of reaching adult learners should possess the following traits: an environment created with a foundation built on respect and trust to support the learner, designed to accommodate learners who wish to play a strong role in their learning experience, allow for a sense of collaboration and camaraderie for students, educational opportunities created for learners to interact with their peers and help each other (Knowles et al., 2015).

Technology Readiness in Relation to SDL

Digital readiness impacts an adult learner's ability to engage in SDL due to role conflict. Not all learners are able to access the internet nor do they have the means to due to a lack of a digital device. From one viewpoint, SDL can be viewed as being time-consuming and requiring lots of effort from the learner's perspective, which means that the material must be considered needed to warrant such attention from the learner (Cronin-Golomb et al., 2023). Interventions in

bridging the gaps in relation to technological access and readiness include increased access to technological infrastructure. Technological infrastructure includes but is not limited to being able to access affordable broadband internet service and public access points for free Wi-Fi in public areas such as libraries and/or community centers.

Infrastructure

Libraries assist learners because they provided reliable computer and internet access capabilities to meet the learner's needs (Crawford & McKenzie, 2023). According to Crawford and McKenzie (2023), access to computers and the internet helped remove two significant obstacles that had previously influenced adult learners' ability to continue their educational pursuits. Additionally, library staff assisted adult learners who lacked or had poor digital literacy skills (Crawford & McKenzie, 2023). Libraries helped adult learners by offering quiet study areas and spaces for peer collaboration (Crawford & McKenzie, 2023). Learners further mentioned if they experienced social isolation, they were able to meet with peers in the study spaces libraries provided. In-person study groups also assisted adult learners with combating their feelings of social discomfort. Beyond the resources provided by libraries, adult learners often received coursework support from trade training centers and members of their local communities.

Supporting adult learners in online settings requires thoughtful strategies, including the use of asynchronous teaching methods that accommodate varying schedules and time zones (Knowles et al., 2015). Another criterion requires instructors creating flexible courses that accommodate learners with many personal obligations and provides adaptive opportunities to complete coursework (Knowles et al., 2015). With SDL the learner begins the learning process by creating the course learning objectives, creating assessments and providing the opportunity

for feedback while locating resources to help them accomplish their goals (Robinson & Persky, 2020). This learning process contrasts with the more common in-person learning setting where the professor creates the learning objectives and the course assessments and locates supplemental material and resources to further the students' understanding of coursework (Robinson & Persky, 2020). SDL provides the learner with the opportunity to have more control over their learning experience (Robinson & Persky, 2020). Within the SDL setting, there is a shift where the learner is a co-learner and the professor moves to having more of a role as a facilitator (Robinson & Persky, 2020).

Challenges and Limitations to Implementing SDL in Structured Environments

Systemic barriers that prevent institutions from fully embracing or supporting SDL for adult learners include the inability to engage with peers. The challenge to engage with their peers can be in part due to geographical distance from institutions while also having multiple responsibilities in addition to their education (Sagna & Vaccaro, 2023). Learners who are also parents have the additional responsibility of finding someone to look after their children so they can attend class if it is in-person (Sagna & Vaccaro, 2023). A challenge in SDL as it relates to the online format are few or weak interventions to promote student engagement (Stephen & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2021).

Transformative Learning

Transformative Learning, developed by Mezirow (1991), is a key theory in adult education. It aims to explain and analyze how adult learners derive meaning from their life experiences. Mezirow (1991) brought up educational interventions in relation to assisting adults in the learning experience such as ideal conditions for learning. Conditions that help learners in their academic journey include but are not limited to: having accurate and concise information,

the ability to assess arguments, be critically reflective, and be open to having different viewpoints, as well as the ability to accept viewpoints that are informed, rational, and sound (Mezirow, 1991).

Andragogy and Transformative Learning

While andragogy and Transformative Learning are distinct concepts, principles of andragogy, such as learner autonomy and drawing on life experience, support the Transformative Learning experience (Mezirow, 1991). Andragogy is recognized as being organized in a way to aid the learning process and utilize critical thinking (Savicevic, 2008). Andragogy, as explained by Mezirow (1991), enhances the learner's ability to function as a self-directed learner.

Transformative Learning and COVID-19

Transformative Learning allows adult learners to create meaning from their different experiences (Mezirow, 1991). Due to the change in learning delivery because of the COVID-19 pandemic, learners may have altered their way of engaging in the learning experience. Beytekin (2021) explained that institutions of higher education adopted the use of online courses and programs to increase the accessibility of higher education to NALs. The COVID-19 pandemic was an unexpected but abrupt reminder of the way our lives can be impacted and forced to change. The pandemic served as a unifying event by impacting people in mass numbers (Ambrosino et al., 2022). One of the factors that fed into a learner's ability to persist includes their family (Sagna & Vaccaro, 2023). Family was mentioned by Sagna and Vaccaro (2023) as playing a key role in motivating adult learners to enroll in college and remain dedicated to their education and to persist once enrolled in classes.

Foundations with Mezirow

Jack Mezirow developed Transformative Learning, inspired by other known scholars such as Paolo Freire and Karl Popper (Wolff et al., 2022). Freire was a key influence in the initial stages of development of Transformative Learning (Calleja, 2014). Freire advocated for a transformative relationship among all individuals present in the learning environment (Calleja, 2014). Transformative Learning suggests that each person has a unique way of viewing the world (Christie et al., 2015). Their view of the world may be set on assumptions taken from different aspects of the individual's background, such as their upbringing, their educational experience and culture (Christie et al., 2015). Transformative Learning places an emphasis on learners taking part in critical thinking, reasoning skills, and reflection while challenging assumptions to transform their perspective on different views (Wolff et al., 2022). Mezirow placed an emphasis on social dimension as it relates to the Transformative Learning experience with a focus on the way individuals interact with others as a way of recognizing alternative perspectives to problems (Calleja, 2014).

Adult learners have a variety of experiences, and as McClain (2024) suggested, for at least 50 years Transformative Learning has been a cornerstone in adult education. Transformative Learning explores how learning is created and influenced due to personal experiences and the way learners experience cultural and social elements in their daily lives (McClain, 2024). Transformative Learning explores the way adult learners dissect and create meaning from their life experiences (McClain, 2024). This form of learning examines the adult learner's way of understanding and how the learner intertwines their educational and life experiences (McClain, 2024). While adult learners have diverse interpretations of problems,

Briese et al. (2020) explained that Transformative Learning impacts the way a learner views and feels about a problem.

Calleja (2014) shared concepts provided by Mezirow's Transformative Learning have changed the way adult learning is interpreted by emphasizing the important role an individual's experience and forms of reflection play in their meaning-making experience (Calleja, 2014).

Mezirow (1997) explained that learning is interpreted as the process of using interpretation gained prior to create either a new or revised understanding of the meaning the individual gained to guide future decision making. This is furthered by the individual taking what was learned previously—whether that be images, models, or schemes—to interpret new experiences (Calleja, 2014). An aspect of Transformative Learning involves communicative action (Calleja, 2014). Communicative action allows individuals to interact with others and the environment around them (Calleja, 2014).

Overview of Transformative Learning

Transformative Learning was explained by Illeris (2014) that learners create or build personal meaning created from personal experience and then validate the experience via interacting and communicating with other individuals. Learners use perceptions from personal experiences to create meaning from the world (Cranton, 2023). Transformative Learning is a series of phases that encompass examining, questioning, and validating, and then revising our perspectives as needed (Nichols et al., 2020). Experiences are sifted through an individual's perspectives, which can include assimilated views of understanding (Mezirow, 1997).

Experiences that shift can include distortions, various injustices, and other forms of unexplored beliefs (Cranton, 2023). Transformative Learning takes place when a person experiences another viewpoint that pulls in previous habits. Mezirow explained that as a person interacts with another

habit, such as taking into consideration previous belief systems, it is then that the learning experience becomes transformational (Manda-Taylor, 2007).

Types of Reflection

Mezirow offered that reflection is an essential concept within transformational learning, relating it to adult learning as one goal of the learning experience (Cranton, 2023). This type of reflection stems back to the way Dewey (1933) explained “reflection” as being purposeful, involved and having mindful consideration of beliefs in contradiction to present knowledge when contrasted to the grounds that back it. Cranton (2023) explained that present definitions of “reflection” have not changed substantially from Dewey’s interpretation, and it is still considered to be a process where reasoning, reinterpreting, and generalizing takes place.

Content reflection is one of the forms of reflection mentioned by Mezirow in which the learner examines the problem and asks questions regarding what is going on and looking at the root of the problem (Mezirow, 1997). Process reflection is the process of checking into the problem-solving strategies being utilized (King, 2009). The learner then questions how the problem came to be and may pause and look into the process and ask if something was missed (Cranton, 2023). Premise reflection is a third type of reflection presented by Mezirow; it takes place when the problem is challenged. In premise reflection, the learner asks why the problem is important to them and why they care about the problem (Mezirow, 1997).

Educator Roles

The focal role of the educator is that of being the facilitator in a learner-directed process (Cahyono & Nastiar, 2025). In this role, the facilitator reacts and caters to the needs of their learners (Cranton, 2023). The facilitator is also expected to create a meaningful group environment that fosters support and encouragement among learners while building a

relationship where learners can trust and respect each other. Learners can gain a lot from a discussion-based setting, such as being able to learn from perspectives different from theirs, obtain a greater awareness and tolerance for ambiguity, and form an appreciation for differences (Cranton & Wright, 2008). Learners can also leave with the ability to create new understanding from collaborating with peers, the ability to participate in discussions attentively, and be an attentive listener (Cranton, 2023).

In the online learning environment, a suggestion to assist in transitioning back to the learning environment is for the course to be open access and offer remedial resources to aid learners who are returning to the educational environment (Knowles et al., 2015). To help facilitate the previous criteria, course preparation is key such as pre-planning, making modifications to subject material, creating resources and material that is engaging and relevant to the adult learner. Finally, having the course set up in an interactive manner allows learners the opportunity to have meaningful interaction among their peers to further facilitate a collaborative learning environment.

Critical Reflection as a Catalyst for Change

Reflection helps NALs reevaluate their goals and future learning opportunities post-pandemic in relation to access and learning (Besette, 2020). The pandemic cast a spotlight on the inequalities related to online access and support for students. Learners recognize this inequity, which plays a role in the courses they choose based on the manner of course delivery (Besette, 2020). A few concepts of Transformative Learning include “disorientating dilemma,” which Mezirow mentioned in his original findings (Calleja, 2014). Mezirow used the disorienting dilemma as a key phase in which adult learners can undergo a personal transformation (Calleja, 2014). He further stated that this dilemma can be triggered due to a

major event whether that be a transitional or crisis event. One impact of this could be a form of grieving, which may occur when the learner has the realization that their previous ways of interpreting a problem or issue is no longer appropriate. The process of grieving could help the learner move to accept or adopt new ways of thinking or integrate those new ways with their previously held beliefs as applicable (Calleja, 2014).

Self-Determination

Self-Determination as explained by Ryan and Deci (1985) offers three psychological needs to aid in a student's learning experience: autonomy, relatedness, and competence (Ryan & Deci, 1985). Self-Determination offers a paradigm shift in the way we interpret motivation such as autonomous extrinsic motivation, as well as physiological motivation. This is done via emphasizing a person's intrinsic motivational factors instead of the factors that lie outside of their realm of control (Rosli & Saleh, 2023). Self-Determination involves human motivation and looks at how environments can support or negatively impact a learner's basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. As Jeno et al. (2019) explained, when an individual's basic psychological needs are met, their self-determination is furthered in a manner that learners will show increased motivation, performance, and overall well-being.

According to Deci and Ryan (1985), when an individual's basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are satisfied, the individual's well-being will be improved and it will foster a stronger sense of motivation. If an individual does not have their psychological needs met, their sense of motivation is impacted, which can mean they exhibit less motivation to perform (Shin & Johnson, 2021). Having self-determination helps to explain that intrinsic motivation serves as a gauge of a person's learning and achievement ability (Ryan & Deci, 2000a). Researchers have further observed that learners who are intrinsically motivated

both learn more and are more successful academically as a result of their self-determination (Taylor et al., 2014).

A classroom setting that creates an intrinsically motivated learning experience will be more successful than an externally regulated setting (Taylor et al., 2014). One way to do this is by having a learning environment that supports autonomy as described by providing the opportunity for self-directed regions while decreasing external pressures for the student (Orsini et al., 2016). As Orsini et al. (2016) explained, there is evidence to show that when professors support a student's sense of autonomy, competence, and relatedness, the student will excel within the educational setting as well as become accountable for their learning experience. Internal and external motivators also integrate within a student's sense of having autonomy, feeling competent, and experiencing a sense of relatedness.

Autonomy

Autonomy relates to the individual's ownership of a decision, their competence as it relates to the individual's sense of success, and their relatedness to belonging and connection (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Ryan and Deci (2020) later expanded this to include intrinsic motivation (IM), which reverts to activities which are implemented for the interest and enjoyment of the students. Autonomy can be considered the desire for an individual to self-initiate and structure their own behavior, which includes being able to dictate their own actions and feel initiative when their actions are impacted by outside sources (Sun et al., 2019). Autonomy is widely accepted to mean self-governance and/or self-determination (Manda-Taylor et al., 2014). However, it can still be difficult to define autonomy down to one specific definition because an individual's view of autonomy can vary from individual to individual and be subjective (Little, 1996).

A student's autonomy is their ability to be in control of their learning experience (Confessore & Park, 2004). Holec (1981) explained that learner autonomy is considered to be the ability of an individual to take charge of their learning, which includes responsibility for all their decisions related to all aspects of their learning experience. An individual's attributes and the characteristics of learners can be referred to as learner autonomy (Derrick & Carr, 2003). Even though the learner is in control of their learning trajectory, they can still work with their peers. Further autonomy is involved with a person selecting to engage in a task, whereas competence pertains to a person's sense of being able to be effective in delivering the desired outcomes (Ahn & Back, 2019).

Relatedness

The concept of relatedness is an individual's need to feel connected to other individuals and the desire to attain and perceive the acceptance of others (Deci & Ryan, 2002). Self-Determination insists that having well-developed support systems, a passion and interest, along with the desire for being challenged can promote both an intrinsic and extrinsic drive for success (Ryan & Deci, 2000b). When an individual is motivated in a variety of ways such as within a social context, cultural expectations, experiences with others, they exhibit an increased degree of dedication towards elevating their quality of life. An individual's needs as it pertains to relatedness involves an individual's feelings of closeness and being connected to other individuals (Ahn & Back, 2019).

The COVID-19 pandemic as explained by Hendrick et al. (2023) impeded a student's ability to be active in traditional school-related activities, which can assist in furthering their learning experience. With in-person meetings cancelled, a sense of loneliness can be generated (Hendrick et al., 2023). As it relates to self-determination in relation to the pandemic, relatedness

operates in two ways. In one sense, relatedness involves being able to both receive and be able to give a sense of companionship, intimacy, and love which provides a sense of care that individuals need in a social context. During COVID-19, the sense of relatedness was put to the test due to social integration that was provided by in-person settings being halted (Hendrick et al., 2023).

Competence

Competence impacts a person's sense of belonging and feeling connected to other people (Ahn & Back, 2019). As it relates to the educational setting, a student's competence can be fostered when educators provide learning opportunities that are challenging which allow students to gauge and expand their academic abilities (Niemic & Ryan, 2009). Educational activities that enhance a learners' sense of autonomy include recognizing the learner's feelings towards topics while decreasing pressure on the student (Niemic & Ryan, 2009). Self-Determination's concepts that include autonomy, relatedness, and competence play a role in a students' educational persistence (Wang et al., 2019). Wang et al. (2019) explained that if a student is highly motivated research shows that the student will continue to be engaged and persist longer. Additionally, if the student continues to persist they will acquire more knowledge that they will apply more often, which assists in having a stronger academic performance in the long term (Wang et al., 2019).

Intrinsic Motivation

When a learner's three physiological needs of autonomy, relatedness, and competence are met, the learner is more likely to participate in intrinsically motivated behaviors (Flannery, 2017). Intrinsic motivation relates to the activities an individual engages in for their own interest or for a form of enjoyment (Ryan & Deci, 2020). A learner's intrinsic motivation can be

impacted by awards that are not productive to a learner's intrinsic motivation such as threats, having deadlines, and experiencing goals that are not self directed (Ryan & Deci, 2000a).

Intrinsic motivation can also be impacted by a learner's competence in that a learner's ability to successfully engage with other learners helps build their confidence (Flannery, 2017).

Examples of intrinsic motivation include the opportunity to explore, engage in activities and work that allows the learner to be curious and, depending on the task, the opportunity to play (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Furthering a student's motivation is the encouragement of competence. Building up a student's intrinsic need for relatedness allows the learner to build the skills needed to participate in behavior that furthers their ability to build personal relationships and a sense of security (Flannery, 2017). Intrinsic motivations can be one factor that furthers a person's desire to continue learning throughout their life, compared to being required to learn, which would be an external requirement (Ryan & Deci, 2020).

Extrinsic Motivation

In contrast to intrinsic motivation is extrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Extrinsic motivation looks at the behaviors displayed for reasons outside of being an inherent satisfaction (Ryan & Deci, 2020). A key component of a person's extrinsic motivation includes their ability to engage with affirming activities which meet their basic physiological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Flannery, 2017). Extrinsic motivation is commonly described as using external sources such as rewards and using deadlines (Sansone & Tang, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic caused students to shift to learning away from their peers and ceased in-person learning; this impacted social conditions which provide the setting for peer engagement. Extrinsic motivation impacts a student's desire to contribute to their own well-being and their academic performance using values that the student relies on and may be values

already integrated into their life (Sanson & Tang, 2021). A setting that allows for peer engagement, even if adjusted to accommodate digital learning formats, provides some form of social engagement, which allows students to engage in a natural tendency of self-determined behavior (Flannery, 2017).

Higher education allows students the ability to readily engage with their educational environment (Orsini et al., 2016). The ability to interact and feel supported within their educational journey can be diminished due to internal or external factors such as a professor's teaching style or their behavior while teaching (Orsini et al., 2016). These qualities from a professor can influence a student's motivation, curiosity, and interest in learning (Orsini et al., 2016). However, when professors consider external factors such as using rewards or punishment, they risk hindering the students' internal learning goals, which jeopardizes the quality of the learning experience (Orsini et al., 2016).

Persistence

Persistence, as explained by O'Neill and Thomson (2013), is a quality providing support or increasing an individual's effort when their initial motivation wanes. Persistence among college students has been considered one of the many challenges within higher education (Olson, 2017). Helping learners build and foster a sense of self-efficacy plays a positive role in helping students' persistence in working towards their goals despite obstacles that come up (O'Neill & Thomson, 2013). This assistance allows learners with multiple roles such being a family provider or working full-time to further their education while having a flexible schedule to accommodate their other responsibilities (Park & Choi, 2009). There has been a rise in the number of educational programs for adult learners in an online format (Park & Choi, 2009). NALs who utilized most of their courses in the online learning format were adults between 25 and 50 years

old (Moore & Kearsely, 2005). The online learning format allows NALs an alternative route to take educational courses (Park & Choi, 2009). Online learning also allows adult learners to save in the costs related to traveling to and from class (Meng et al., 2024; Park & Choi, 2009).

Student Retention

Tinto's Theory of Student Retention explores how learners can be motivated by focusing on a specific career path and in turn visualize themselves completing specific activities towards that goal (Reason, 2009; Tucker, 1999). One aspect of retention can include the role that peer group relationships play. As Tucker explained, several factors including peer group relationships such as the learners' living arrangements in addition to the feelings created by their physical surroundings play a contributing role in the learner's journey in furthering their education in college. Learners who held a strong sense of belonging in a learning environment had an easier transition to the collegiate level (Tucker, 1999). The students who had a stronger sense of belonging shared that the feelings of belonging made the challenges they experienced more manageable.

The areas of intersection highlight key shared attributes in the conceptual framework. For example, the overlap between Transformative Learning and SDL emphasizes the importance of planning and structure, which can enable adult rural learners to create new mental frameworks and pursue learning goals independently. The convergence of Transformative Learning and Persistence underscores the role of self-motivation in the face of challenges, while the overlap between Persistence and SDL highlights how expectations and commitment influence sustained effort. At the core, where all three constructs intersect, lie qualities such as being determined, acting as a self-starter, and engaging in the creation of new ideas or ways of thinking. These shared attributes suggest that successful rural adult learners are not only motivated and proactive

but also resilient and cognitively agile as well as capable of adapting and persisting through educational and life transitions.

Motivation

Adult learners respond to external motivators, which serves as a form of encouragement for participating in the learning experience (Knowles et al., 2015). Examples of external motivations include obtaining a promotion, gaining a better job with benefits, more hours, or flexibility. The strongest motivator, as explained by Knowles et al., (2015) are motivators tied to internal pressures such as seeking improvement related to self-esteem, higher job satisfaction, or improvement in quality of life. Despite the need to keep moving or pursuing educational opportunities related to the reasons provided, NALs frequently see their motivation to continue educational pursuits hindered due to different types of barriers. Barriers include holding a negative self-concept as a learner, the inability to access educational opportunities or resources, and experiencing time constraints hindering their ability to participate in coursework.

Achievement Goal Orientation (AGO)

Ames (1992) explained achievement goal orientation (AGO) contributes to the formation of beliefs that can lead to different styles of approaching and interacting with the material. Lin and Wang (2018) suggested that goal orientation plays a role in how learners reflect on the differences in completing tasks. Achievement goal orientation is connected to a student's ability to cognitively engage in self-regulatory strategies such as being able to plan and regulate their learning experience (Lin & Wang, 2018). The Morris et al. (2003) study of AGO of traditional students and NALs found that NAL embraced AGO, used task-based coping strategies and saw better grades. Morris et al. elaborate on this study explaining that NALs may use coping

strategies such as task-orientation due to the multiple roles they have an increase in necessity for adaptive tools allowing NALs to focus on their learning.

Contributing Factors of Persistence

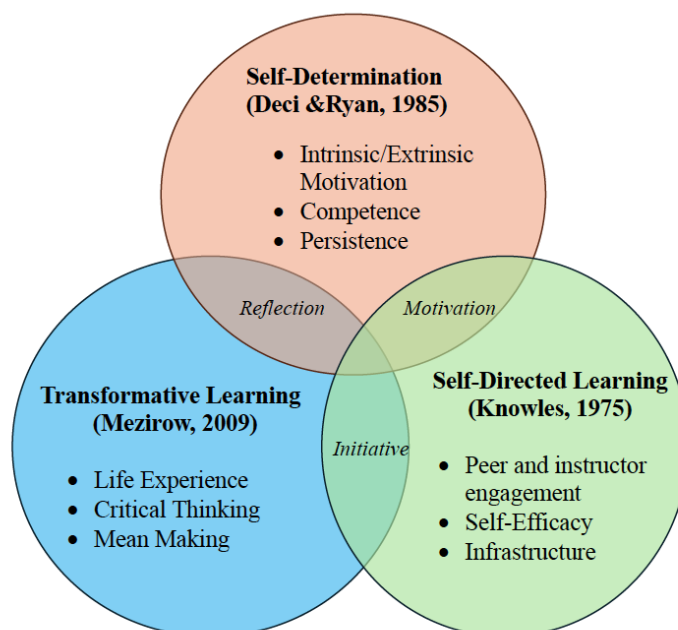
Sagna and Vaccaro (2023) explained that NALs within the U.S. have a lower graduation rate in comparison to traditional students aged 18 to 22. Among the factors contributing to a lower graduation rate are a lack of support and retention strategies due to stress related to family (Sagna & Vaccaro, 2023). Barker et al. (2023) elaborated, explaining that females are four times more likely to stop pursuing their education than males. Regardless of this differential, Sagna and Vaccaro explained how NALs are among a growing student population in higher education. Part of this growth is due to recognizing their goals and persistence. In completing their education, NALs mentioned self-identifying as being confident, assertive, and knowing how to use coping techniques as aiding in their ability to persist in academia (Barker et al., 2023). Samuels et al. (2011) explained that NALs' desire to move up in their careers, encourage their family to pursue education, be a good example for their kids, and experience personal growth are motivations to complete their education.

The role an NAL's family plays in their educational goals impacts their ability to continue their education, potentially impacting the amount of time they can engage with them (Barker et al., 2023). NALs suggested that the ability to manage having different responsibilities is essential to their ability to persist and that the support from family contributes to this persistence. In addition to familial support, community support has been shown to bridge gaps the NALs would otherwise have to navigate on their own (Barker et al., 2023). Community support can assist in providing childcare for NALs when they need to study. The presence of supportive individuals in an NAL's educational journey contributes to the NAL's persistence in

education (Barker et al., 2023). While community and familial support contribute to an NAL's persistence, so does institutional support (Barker et al., 2023).

Institutional support such as building strong relationships between their peers and instructors provides another layer of support to learners (Deschacht and Goeman, 2015). These relationships assist NALs in navigating struggles and negative feelings related to their educational journey. Learners residing in rural areas noted that the distance of the physical campus can be a barrier in their ability to complete classes; however the addition of either blended or remote learning contributes to their ability to learn. Deschacht and Goeman (2015) explained how NALs who reside in rural areas benefit from the convenience online or blended learning provides that is not found in in-person learning. Blended learning allows NALs the ability to balance work, family, and hobbies while completing coursework (Deschacht & Goeman, 2015). Persistence and the need to juggle many roles in addition to school obligation contributes to a NAL's determination to further their education. Figure 2.1 displays the three concepts of self-determination, self-directed learning, and transformative learning utilized for the study's conceptual framework.

Figure 2.1 Literature Review Conceptual Framework



Note. Figure 2.1 illustrates the dynamic interplay between SDL (Knowles, 1975), Transformative Learning (Mezirow, 2009), and Self-Determination (Deci & Ryan, 1985) within the adult learning experience for adult rural learners. This figure was created to display that each of the three overlapping circles represents a conceptual framework essential to understanding adult rural learner success.

Chapter Summary

In this literature review, peer-reviewed literature assisted in revealing the different factors that impacted how rural nontraditional adult learners (NALs) navigated and continued their higher educational pursuits during and after the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak. Being well equipped with technological tools, skills, and knowledge helped prevent some NALs from quitting or lagging in their education but also showed that it was a challenge for many rural NALs. Literature reflected that these challenges to cope with learning were compounded by family roles and demands as well as rural NALs' occupational responsibilities. Other barriers identified in the literature that significantly impacted how rural NALs navigated learning during and after the COVID-19 pandemic include limited technological proficiency and geographic isolation from institutions, educators, and peers.

Chapter 3 - Methodology

This chapter outlines the research methodology used in a narrative qualitative study. The purpose of the study was to explore how rural adult learners navigated their educational journey in the transition during the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. By gathering and analyzing participants' personal stories, the study sought to illuminate the ways in which these learners adapted to and overcame challenges in continuing their education. A narrative design was selected to center the lived experiences and stories of participants to capture the depth and complexity of their educational paths.

Data collection involved interviews conducted via video conferencing software, which allowed participants to share their experiences in their own words. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using three cycles of coding—thematic coding to identify key patterns, followed by focused coding to refine emerging themes, and a-priori-based coding to expand on themes. This chapter also discusses the rationale for using narrative inquiry, the steps taken to ensure ethical rigor (including informed consent and confidentiality procedures), and the process used for organizing, interpreting, and presenting the data. By detailing the research design and analytical procedures, this chapter aims to provide a clear roadmap for replication or adaptation in similar contexts.

Research Question

The following research question guided this qualitative study: RQ1: How do rural adult learners tell the story of their educational journey emerging out of COVID-19?

Epistemological Grounding

Epistemology explains the common background knowledge a researcher has while investigating an issue surrounded by significant public assumptions (Sol & Heng, 2022). The

constructivist epistemological approach allows individuals to create meaning as they interact with the world they wish to understand (Crotty, 1998). This study used a constructivist epistemology to create meaning from the participants' educational experience (Crotty, 1998). Being able to gather the participants' stories allowed the researcher to add context in the form of themes to make meaning from their stories (deMarrais & Lapan, 2017). Looking at the adult learner's experience from the constructivist perspective allowed the researcher to explore the participants' experiences in continuing their education after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Research Design

This research design utilized a qualitative methodology—more specifically, narrative inquiry. Narrative is an essential aspect of human activity (deMarrais & Lapan, 2017). The narrative approach appeared to be the best fit because narrative inquiry is one style of narrative research that captures data via interviews (Terrell, 2023). The focus of this research and the avenue for data collection was adult learners' unique experiences. Additionally, narrative inquiry permitted a path for generating an understanding directly from the participants' first-hand experience (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Clandinin and Connelly (2000) outlined narrative inquiry as a qualitative research methodology which allowed the researcher the ability to capture and explore the adult learner's experience in relation to the research problem.

Narrative Inquiry

Narrative inquiry was best suited for this study because the aim of this study was to understand in-depth experiences from participants. Narrative inquiry provides an avenue for gaining an understanding directly from the learner's personal learning experience (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The narrative inquiry methodology focuses on examining the stories and experiences of people to comprehend what gives meaning to their lives (Butina, 2015). The

narrative inquiry approach was used to allow the participants to tell a story spanning the beginning, the middle, and the end of their experience continuing their education after the pandemic. Capturing personal stories gathered rich data about the rural adult learners' experiences navigating their educational process after the COVID-19 pandemic. Narrative provides meaning to our experiences (Kim, 2017). Clandinin and Connelly (2000) also viewed narratives as essential aspects of human life in that there are ways of giving individuals a form of meaning to their lived experiences.

The concepts or core ideas of this methodology are formed on the basis that an individual's experience is inherently narrative in nature. Concepts or ideas assisted in theme creation to aid in identifying both similarities and differences from the participants' stories (Bhattacharya, 2017). Kim (2017) further explained that narrative inquiry is considered one way of understanding the human experience through stories. The process involved seeking to understand the context of the story, for example, through research questions and then collecting information about the story being told (Butina, 2015). Obtaining the stories via narrative inquiry assisted in understanding the academic experience of rural adult learners after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Participants

This qualitative research captured the narrative stories from 10 rural adult learners who reside in the rural area of the United States. Creswell and Creswell (2018) explained that there is not necessarily a rule on how many participants to include in the research and participants can range from 10 to 50 (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In-depth interviews were one way to allow researchers to obtain detailed data to allow an insight into phenomena that may be social or cultural (Ahmed, 2025). Ten individuals participated in this study. According to Ahmed (2025),

allowing 10-12 participants in a qualitative study provides sufficient insight to generate themes and attain saturation. The study used a sample size to gather a rich and unique understanding rather than obtain information for a general analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Saturation is when any new data will not provide any additional insights while having a significant sample size (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The participants in this study were registered and active as being either part or full -time students who continued to pursue their educational journey as their institution transitioned out of the COVID-19 pandemic. Prior to sending out the recruitment message to participants (Appendix B), an email was sent to local collegiate institutions regarding this study (see Appendix C). Also provided was another prewritten email for the collegiate institution to disseminate to their student groups which explained my name, affiliation, and research purpose. Email recruitment for a specific and targeted population was shown to be more effective than sending a recruitment email through Google or Yahoo! Groups (Sledzieski et al., 2023). Thirteen participants were initially recruited; however, because of time constraints and family obligations, that number dwindled to 10 participants. Snowball solicitation was utilized in participant selection and proved to be useful. Two participants were recruited via this manner. A demographic questionnaire was used to assist in gathering participant data (see Appendix D - Demographic Questionnaire) (OpenAI, 2024). The questionnaire allowed the opportunity to capture data related to the participant prior to the interview taking place.

Protection of Human Subjects

The study began after it was reviewed and approved by Kansas State University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). The study focused on 10 participants from rural areas of a Midwestern region of the United States. Participants shared their stories of their collegiate

experience transitioning away from COVID-19 pandemic protocols. Interviews took place and were recorded utilizing Zoom video conferencing software because of its video and transcription features. Video conferencing software has a variety of features that can aid qualitative research studies (Archibald et al., 2019). Advantages of using video conferencing software are the included recording and transcription features and the ability to create and maintain rapport with the researcher in comparison to phone or email forms of questioning (Archibald et al., 2019). Participants were provided with the open-ended interview questions once they were present for the video interview. Video and microphone features were turned on for the interviews. Clarification of the phenomenon being identified in the data took place through member checking (Sahakyan, 2023). Participants were given a copy of the transcript from their interview as part of the member-checking process (Sahakyan, 2023). Member checking was used to check that the quality of the data obtained by the participant was accurate (Sahakyan, 2023). During this process the participant checked and proceeded to either approve or clarify the data provided in their interview.

Ethical considerations are important throughout the duration of the research process. Beginning with the participant recruitment process and extending to the participant interviews, I took measures to ensure participants felt safe giving their personal narratives. Data, which included transcripts, the audio and video recording, and notes were all stored in password-protected and locked devices. The recordings were stored and used to aid in transcription purposes. Participant identification was deleted from research files to ensure participants' confidentiality. The data will be destroyed three years after the date of the collection. To maintain both ethical practices and to protect the data, the data collected were and will continue to be stored and maintained in password-protected devices and locked cabinets.

Participants were informed that their participation was voluntary and that they could cease involvement at any time they wished. All participants received an electronic explanation of the study's purpose and procedures, the informed consent (see Appendix E). The consent form used was created using the ethical guidelines provided by the American Educational Research Association (AERA) Standards of Ethics (2009) which addressed various aspects related to this research.

The consent form provided to participants covered the following points:

- Human consent and access to information: Participants were informed that participation was voluntary, and they could withdraw at any time without penalty. Confidentiality was assured, and responses were kept anonymous.
- Perspectives and voice: Participants were informed that their narratives and experiences were valued and protected.
- Bias: Procedures were implemented to minimize bias during data collection and analysis phases.
- Evidence and reasoning: The study adhered to rigorous research practices, maintained research integrity, and presented participant experiences transparently.
- Funding and sponsorship: This study did not receive any funding or sponsorship, and this information was disclosed in the consent form.

Informed Consent was available to participants for their personal review. Prior to the study commencing, each participant was required to read and sign a copy of the consent form for their own personal records. The consent form was signed and given to participants by the researcher prior to video interviews. Through adhering to the AERA ethical standards, this study

prioritized the well-being and rights of the participants and upholding the highest ethical standards during the complete research process.

Background and Role of the Researcher

Because qualitative research through narrative inquiry was used, a reflection regarding my positionality acknowledging any potential biases was needed. Tracy (2010) placed an emphasis on the role transparency plays within qualitative research. Throughout the study, the researcher utilized reflexivity through journaling to align with the ethical principles of qualitative research and to maintain self-awareness to ensure the research itself was both authentic and rigorous.

My professional background in higher education and working in rural areas has given me a unique insight into the different learning options provided in the rural higher educational system. My familiarity with navigating higher education while residing in a rural area shed light on the different challenges rural learners experience compared to traditional learners in completing their education. While understanding the gap in services to assist this unique learner population, I was mindful of how my positionality might potentially impact the research design. I explained my personal educational experience to establish rapport and trust with participants. Doing so created a sense of ease with participants talking about challenges or hurdles after hearing that I too was a student during this same time period.

Interpretations of the data gathered were grounded in the participants' perspectives rather than my own assumptions through utilizing member checking. During the process of member checking, participants checked and then approved or clarified the data they shared during their interview. Member checking was used as a way to verify the truthfulness of the interview

conducted by asking participants to look at interview transcripts to make sure the information recorded was accurate while avoiding researcher bias. Member checking took place after the data collection process ended and the research entered the analysis phase (Sahakyan, 2023).

Data Collection

Data collection for this narrative inquiry-based study was conducted using in-depth interviews via video conferencing software to explore the participants' experiences in relation to the research question. Due to the specific participant demographic, it was important to identify participants who met the study's criteria which is why a questionnaire was critical.

Interviews are a common form of data collection used in qualitative research and can be captured in a variety of formats (Nii Laryeafio & Ogbewe, 2023). An interview format for data collection was used to capture a thorough understanding of the participants' experiences. For this study, participants were interviewed using Zoom for its video conference software capabilities. Upon the conclusion of the interviews, the researcher applied the next phases of the research process, which included analyzing the data through journaling, creating memos, and applying the appropriate coding cycles to the data gathered via interviews.

Semi-Structured Interview Questions

The interview process placed an emphasis on creating rapport and trust with research participants to help foster openness in their interviews (Tracy, 2010). Emphasizing that pseudonyms would be used aided in building trust. The researcher ensured confidentiality and addressed any potential concerns related to the participants' anonymity to help the participants feel at ease in sharing their experiences. This practice aligned with the ethical principles of qualitative research in creating a setting that was both trusting and safe for participants (Tracy, 2010). Giving learners a space to share their stories assisted in building rapport. Creating a

setting that promotes trust allowed data to be collected so participants did not feel inclined to respond or interact with the study “a certain way” (AERA, 2009).

Semi-structured interview questions were used in this study, and questions aimed to capture a deeper understanding of the participant’s experience while completing their education transitioning away from the COVID-19 pandemic. Providing semi-structured questions as part of the interview process allowed the researcher to prepare questions prior to the interview taking place and abide by a predetermined protocol while also providing time for the interview to pivot depending on the direction of responses took in the interview (Bhattacharya, 2017). During this process, a researcher’s journal was utilized and maintained to take notes as interviews took place. Keeping a journal allowed the researcher to fully engage with the data allowing for reflection (Ahmed et al., 2025). Journaling allowed the researcher to utilize reflexivity to document and acknowledge different perspectives and impressions as they arose (Bhattacharya, 2017). A researcher’s journal during the data collection phase is a method to allow the researcher to record any thoughts, reactions, or hunches as they arise (Bhattacharya, 2017).

Three rounds of interviews took place utilizing the Zoom platform because it offered the ability to record and provide transcriptions (Archibald et al., 2019). The first round of interviews allowed the researcher to answer any questions the participant had related to the study and to build rapport with the participant. One-on-one interviews and participant observations depend on creating a positive interpersonal relationship between the researcher and participants (Guillemin & Heggen, 2009). Creating and establishing positive rapport between the researcher and participant allowed the researcher to generate enriching data while maintaining respect during the interview process (Guillemin & Heggen, 2009).

During the second round, the recorded interview took place. Participants were not given a time constraint and were able to respond freely. The participants shared as much information as they desired in relation to the interview questions. Study participants met in the afternoon or evening. Participants requested the afternoon or evening for their interview meeting time due to needing to work around professional or family obligations and believing this interview would be the longest meeting.

The second interview allowed the researcher to generate a transcription from the recording. After transcriptions were generated, the participant was emailed a copy of the transcript from their interview. Participants were given a maximum turnaround time of two weeks to review the transcript. During this time the participant was asked to review the transcript from their video interview and make note of any areas they wished to change, add, or alter which could take place in a third video conference meeting. While one participant chose to provide clarity during their third interview, the other participants met with the researcher in case any clarity was needed from the researcher.

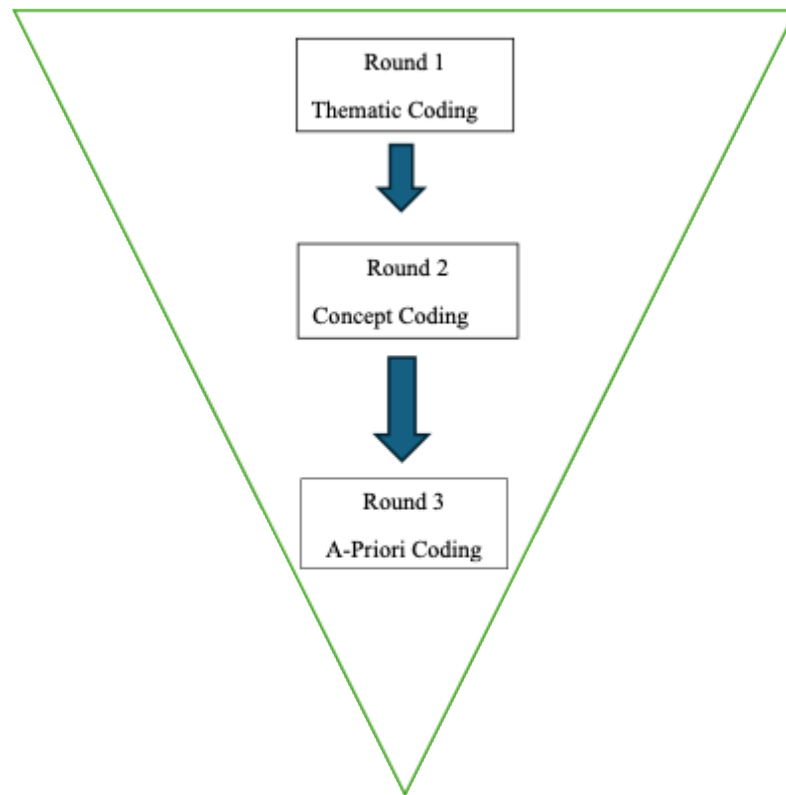
Participants were given a copy of the transcript from their interview as part of the member-checking process. The participant checked the transcript and either approved or clarified the data. A variety of member-checking approaches can be utilized in the data analysis process. According to Sahakyan (2023), member checking allows an opportunity for the researcher to check that the quality of the data obtained by the participant is accurate. It can also be used to confirm the truthfulness of the data obtained from their interview to enhance the rigor of the study and to avoid researcher bias (Sahakyan, 2023). Changes, if needed, were made during the third interview. One participant provided a clarification so there was not a misunderstanding, explaining that while he used the same textbook in his master's program as the students he was

teaching, he did not give them the same tests. Participants noted a few areas where the AI transcript was not correct in spelling, but there were no additional changes provided during the third interview other than for one participant.

Data Analysis

Once the interviews concluded, the next phase of the research, data analysis, began. Data analysis included thematic coding and analysis through a combination of journaling and memos. Three rounds of coding were undertaken for this study as shown in Figure 3.1.

Figure 3.1 Coding Cycles



Note. Figure 3.1 illustrates the coding cycle. This figure was created to display the sequence of the coding cycle.

Thematic Coding

The first round consisted of thematic coding (Saldaña, 2021), the second round consisted of concept coding (Saldaña, 2021), and the third round was a-priori coding (Saldaña, 2021). The thematic coding cycle generated a theme such as a repetitive phrase used by participants or a sentence that added meaning to a section of data (Saldaña, 2021). Thematic analysis helped answer the research question by furthering the descriptions or repetitive expressions used by participants (Saldaña, 2021). The research question explored the participants' lived experiences, and thematic coding assisted in the researcher's interpretations in summation of the beliefs generated by the data (Saldaña, 2021). This round of data analysis started with gathering the data and being mindful of the collected information before proceeding to identifying words or phrases. During this phase of coding, codes were grouped into broad themes, which were then refined. This structure allowed the ability to create insights into the data gathered. The thematic coding process as shown in Table 3.1 was a repetitive technique which allowed significant themes to emerge.

Table 3.1 Demonstration of Recurring and Significant Quotes for Thematic Coding

Participant	Significant Quote	Code
Matteo	“Articles were due and they sent me what I needed after I submitted the article review.”	Resource Procurement
Rebecca	“The professor who served as an advisor was very supportive during this time and would reach out to check on her recovery which was not required of this faculty member.”	Instructor Engagement
Reyna	“You know, here’s the big thing, adult learner, after COVID, everything’s online, all these you know, Canva and all these different programs, like, these kids had to teach me how to do my work.”	Learning in a Digital Environment
David	“Being a student while being a husband, a father, working a full-time job, you know... So it just made it my time management really important.”	Personal and Professional Obligations

Concept Coding

The second cycle of coding is concept coding as depicted in Table 3.2. Concept coding allowed the researcher to take a word or short phrase that was mentioned repeatedly and apply a broader meaning beyond what was apparent (Saldaña, 2021). During the second coding phase, analytic transitions, such as the creation of concepts, and reorganization of data were used (Saldaña, 2021). Concept coding was applied to larger groups of data, allowing for a bigger picture analysis by an overarching concept (Saldaña, 2021). Transcripts were printed and analyzed for words or phrases that appeared frequently. Once words or phrases were noted, they were put into themes and refined so they could be applied to the next phase of coding.

Table 3.2 Demonstration of Concept Coding

Short Phrase/Quote	Concept Generated
“Because there was always something else it seemed like to do besides be a student, but still having to complete, you know, papers and essays and homework and stuff like that.”	Multiple Obligations
“There was a lot of times that I would drive a bus before school, like a bus route, then I would work all day as a, you know, principal or assistant principal.”	Work Obligations
“I’m gonna get home around 9 or 10 o’clock. So it changed my kids’ bedtimes. They don’t usually go to bed till about 10, because I wouldn’t have seen them for the first, like, 4 years of their lives if I didn’t.”	Personal Obligations
“We farm soybeans and rice. And so during harvest time, I help my husband get our harvest to our... what we call the rice dryer. And, I drive a semi-truck.”	Personal and Work Obligation
“it’s too easy to jump up saying, go do the laundry”	Personal Obligations
“I really wish there was just a one-stop shop.”	Locating Resources
“If I want to meet with a methodologist, I’m probably waiting, like, a week or two”.	Instructor Availability
“And they’re only 30-minute things, so by the time I feel like you get going, their time’s up, and they’re very strict about the time.”	Digital Learning Experience

A-priori Coding

The third cycle of coding focused on a-priori-based coding shown in Table 3.3 (Saldaña, 2021). A-priori coding assisted in the ability to use pre-existing or modified coding schemes while analyzing the data (Saldaña, 2021). Starting with a small set of five to six codes allowed the researcher to expand categories as needed and aided in theme creation (Saldaña, 2021).

Video conferencing, Google Scholar, discussion board, and time management were among the

codes used. A-priori-based coding assisted the research process by determining if and how a small set of codes may expand due to the participants' varying experiences. This coding process was useful, allowing the researcher to recognize and anchor connections among participants' stories.

Table 3.3 Demonstration of A-priori Coding

Data	Code
1. "Articles were due and they sent me what I needed it after I submitted the article review."	Navigating Resource Procurement
2. "...was not sure if his local library would be able to assist."	Navigating Resource Procurement, Learning in a Digital Environment
3. "I felt it was so difficult to find up-to-date information."	Navigating Resource Procurement, Learning in a Digital Environment
4. The professor who served as an advisor was very supportive."	Instructor Engagement
5. "I did an online questionnaire or something, and they were very quick to get back to me."	Learning in a Digital Environment, Instructor Engagement
6. "...just being available, you know, in a rural community, you know, friends help friends... you know, neighbors help neighbors."	Work Obligations
7. "there are other circumstances at play that influence that, so yeah, flexibility and understanding were huge"	Personal and Work Obligations
8. "...a husband, a father, working a full-time job."	Personal Obligations
9. "...was a small institution with a lot of resources, and so they were able to just, you know, kind of quickly pivot and change and do what they needed to do"	Learning in a Digital Environment
10. "teachers became unresponsive, apathetic and uncommunicative and graded everything my nieces	Personal Obligations

and nephews did too easy, they did not have to work for the grade.”

Additionally, interpretations of the data gathered were grounded in the participants’ perspectives rather than my own assumptions through utilizing member checking. During the process of member checking, participants checked and then approved or clarified the data they shared during their interview. Member checking was used as a way to verify the truthfulness of the interview conducted by asking participants to look at interview transcripts to make sure the information recorded was accurate while avoiding researcher bias. Member checking took place after the data collection process ended and the research entered the analysis phase (Sahakyan, 2023).

Data Representation

The objective of data representation is to obtain data from a diverse pool of voices to allow the analysis of a variety of participant experiences. The data analysis cycles demonstrate the study’s alignment of the research in relation to the conceptual framework, the research question, and purpose of this study. Pseudonyms were used to protect the participants’ identities, with only the researcher being able to connect the participant to the respective data they provided. The pseudonyms were assigned by the educational institution they attended and their academic major.

Two formats were used to present the findings: a visual aid created in LucidSpark, which accompanied the data found during the study, and written explanations, which are provided for further understanding in Chapter 4. Braun and Clarke (2022) described thematic mapping as one way to provide a visual of the themes and connections of the overall analysis from the data gathered. During the coding cycle, patterns in phrases generated from the interview transcripts

were highlighted. A visual chart was created using LucidSpark to display frequently used phrases and themes recognized during the analytic memo or journaling process and obtained from the video conferencing interviews. Data in the chart were color-coded to group information that fit best with a participant or common theme. A narrative followed the chart to provide a well-rounded picture of the charted information as it related to the participants' experiences.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is essential to a study's credibility (Tracy, 2010). In addition to trustworthiness, this section explains how the study utilized the big tent based critical criteria for obtaining unique qualitative research (Tracy, 2010). It is important to maintain the integrity of eight criteria that have been recognized as essential to qualitative methodological research: worthy topic, having rich rigor, being sincere, a credible study, resonance, providing a significant contribution, adhering to ethics, and coherent (Tracy, 2010).

Worthy Topic

The objective of this research was to obtain and examine the learning experience by rural adult learners after the COVID-19 pandemic in a rural area of the Midwestern region of the United States is relevant, timely, and significant. By exploring the learning experiences of rural adult learners transitioning out of the COVID-19 pandemic, this study provides crucial insight into the strategies and experiences that impacted this unique population. The findings contribute to a gap in the literature regarding the rural adult learner population's experience after the COVID-19 pandemic, as the literature is lacking in relation to the pandemic and this population.

Ensuring Rich Rigor

This study provided rich rigor through a variety of ways. This research utilized interview questions that included three rounds of coding cycles (Bhattacharya, 2017). A researcher journal

was used to allow reflexivity and to document thoughts in relation to thematic creation. The process maintained transparency through alignment with ethical guidelines such as providing informed consent, maintaining confidentiality, and applying pseudonyms. The study included member checking as a form of providing accuracy and adding credibility to the findings. Importantly, the study adds to a larger conversation and insight into the experiences of rural adult learners' continuing educational experience after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Ensuring academic rigor, a unique conceptual framework grounded the exploration of rural adult learners' educational journeys as higher education emerged from the COVID-19 pandemic. The three concepts utilized included: Transformative Learning (Mezirow, 2009); Self-Directed Learning (SDL) (Knowles, 1975); and Self-Determination (Ryan & Deci, 1985), forming a . The research study's conceptual framework, data collection methods, and intensive coding process allowed a unique insight into the educational experiences of rural adult learners after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Including Sincerity

The study's sincerity was displayed through its commitment to practicing rigorous ethical practices such as the inclusion of informed consent and maintaining the confidentiality of participants. Reflexivity took place throughout the research to allow ongoing reflection and to aid in thematic creation. The inclusion of the research participants' experiences and dedication to an accurate representation of their experiences served to increase the study's credibility. Further, this study adhered to ethical standards through dedication to unbiased reporting and findings as well as maintaining participant confidentiality.

Ensuring Credibility

The study ensured credibility through reporting findings that were trustworthy (Tracy, 2010). Triangulation through transcripts, journals, and member checking was utilized to determine if two or more data sources drew the same conclusion (Tracy, 2010). Providing triangulation, transparent methodology, and member checking contributed to the credibility of the research.

Resonance

The study's connectivity can be applied through its appeal to explore a unique target population and understanding of mechanisms and/or resources utilized by an underserved population (Tracy, 2010). Resonance can be identified by the study reporting the findings of participant experiences in a manner that conveys their unique contributions. For example, the story telling used within the findings of this study connect to resonance.

Significant Contributions

The study explored the learning experiences of rural adult learners as they continued their educational journey coming out of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the contributions their experiences can have on higher education as it relates to serving rural adult learners. This study can assist higher educational institutions in closing gaps which rural adult learners experience which impacts their ability to pursue their education after high school. The data gathered from this study provided insight into the different unique struggles that learners experience.

Ethics

Ethics was essential in this qualitative research study to protect the participants' responses and identities. This study conducted interviews using video conferencing software to obtain participants' stories via narrative inquiry. The data were recorded and stored in

password-protected devices and will be disposed of in three years after the study has concluded. Essential ethical components utilized included collecting informed consent forms prior to the study commencing. Additionally, the participants' confidentiality was protected, and pseudonyms were used to safeguard their anonymity (Tracy, 2010). The study's findings were recorded and reported in an ethical and honest manner and acknowledging any issues should they occur (Tracy, 2010). The study did not commence until it had been approved by Kansas State University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) to ensure that the study met the ethical guidelines set forth by the American Educational Research Association (AERA).

Meaningful Coherence

The purpose of this study was to research the experiences of rural adult learners continuing their education after the COVID-19 pandemic. This study utilized a specified research design that involved having a selection criterion for participants and the utilization of formal interviews via video conference. Ethical procedures were used to guide the practices for creating participant consent forms, following research guidelines, and safeguarding participant identity. The research study was designed to align with the study's research purpose and questions and to provide credibility of the research conducted.

Summary

This chapter discussed the steps and guide used for this qualitative study pertaining to how rural adult learners continued their education after the COVID-19 pandemic. The chapter outlined the study's research design and methodology to ensure that the study was conducted in an ethical and transparent manner. This study will enhance the field of adult education by capturing the experiences of the rural adult learner's educational journey after the COVID-19

pandemic. The study's findings will serve to increase our understanding of the experiences of rural adult learners in further studies.

Chapter 4 - Findings

The purpose of this analysis of narrative inquiry was to explore the lived experiences of 10 rural adult learners as they continued their education emerging away from the COVID-19 pandemic. The research question used to guide this study was: How do rural adult learners tell the story of their educational journey emerging out of COVID-19? This chapter shares an overview of the study participants in addition to the themes generated from the data analysis. The themes generated from the analysis of narratives collected from participants assisted in answering the research question and the conclusion of the findings for this study.

Research Overview

The research question used to guide this study allowed for a thorough exploration of the lived experiences of the participants via narrative storytelling. The conceptual framework for this study encompassed three conceptual perspectives: (a) Transformative Learning (Mezirow, 2009), (b) Self-Directed Learning (SDL) (Knowles, 1975), and (c) Self-Determination (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Through these lenses, this qualitative study strove to explore the lived experience of rural adult learners' experiences emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic.

This qualitative research study used the analysis of narratives to understand participants' stories. By utilizing diverse data sources, methods of data collection, and perspectives, this study cross-verified the study's findings as a way to further strengthen the reliability of the results provided. This study utilized three forms of data collection methods: (a) demographic questionnaire, (b) interview, and (c) follow-up interview. Ten rural adult learners, considered NALs, shared their stories during videoconferencing interviews, providing insights about their lived experience emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic, which will be explored next.

Study Participants

This study included interviews from 10 rural adult learners who continued their education after the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions were lifted at their respective higher educational institutions. Participants' experience, taken from their interviews, provide insight into their academic journey as rural adult learners.

In Table 4.1, a quote from each participant is provided to provide further description of different notable aspects of their collegiate journey recorded at the time of this study. Their experiences noted in their collegiate journey are elaborated more in the themes that follow.

Table 4.1 Participant Profiles

Participant	Descriptive Quote
Matteo	"Articles were due and they sent me what I needed after I submitted the article review."
Jiovanni	"...felt lucky that my advisor had gone through the same masters program and could give great insight into what to expect and how to navigate some of the challenges as they arose."
Rebecca	"The professor who served as an advisor was very supportive during this time and would reach out to check on my recovery which was not required of this faculty member."
Josiah	"So I'd only work 3 to 4 days a week, or a month. So that way I could focus on school, because at the same time, I was a newly divorced single father of four."
Brent	"I was able to bounce ideas off my director and department chair which was super helpful."
Levi	"I'm comfortable studying this stuff at a high level, I'm good at writing papers in this area at a high level, and so I can... I can do this, yeah"
Reyna	"So it was, like, all these different programs I didn't know how to do, and every day they'd be like, okay, here, we're gonna do this. I'm like, we're gonna do what? We're going where? The professor would be like, use this program, like. Excuse me, no, I don't even know what that program is."
Scarlett	"A directory approach would have been very useful instead of having to find resources in several different areas on my own."
Jacob	"The fact of the matter is, it makes me highly organized. Okay. Okay, and it forces me to not look at what's due this week, but what's due next month. I can tell you where I'm going to be right now, I can tell you where I'm going to be."
David	"Lack of in-person engagement impacted the ability to work diligently on finishing aspects of the remaining coursework."

Table 4.2 below is provided to assist in understanding the four themes generated from the analysis of the participants' narratives noted in this chapter. A description of each theme is provided for clarification on how this theme was situated in the study.

Table 4.2 Themes for Rural Adult Learners Continuing their Education Emerging out of Covid-19

Theme	Description
Theme 1 – Navigating Resource Procurement	The personal determination to locate required and supplemental course material
Theme 2 – Instructor Engagement	The professional interactions and support NALs received from their instructors
Theme 3 – Learning in a Digital Environment	The educational learning setting rural adult learners utilized for their studies
Theme 4 – Roles and Obligations	The educational learning setting rural adult learners utilized for their studies
Subtheme 4a – Work Obligations	The educational learning setting rural adult learners utilized for their studies
Subtheme 4b – Personal Obligations	The educational learning setting rural adult learners utilized for their studies

Analysis of Narratives: The Experiences of Rural NALs Continuing their Education Transitioning out of the COVID-19 Pandemic

The narratives provided by the 10 participants in this study generated enriching insights into their academic journey in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic. This study sought to explore the impact the pandemic had on degree-seeking rural adult learners. Each of the themes provided shed valuable insight into the participants' diverse experiences continuing their education in the

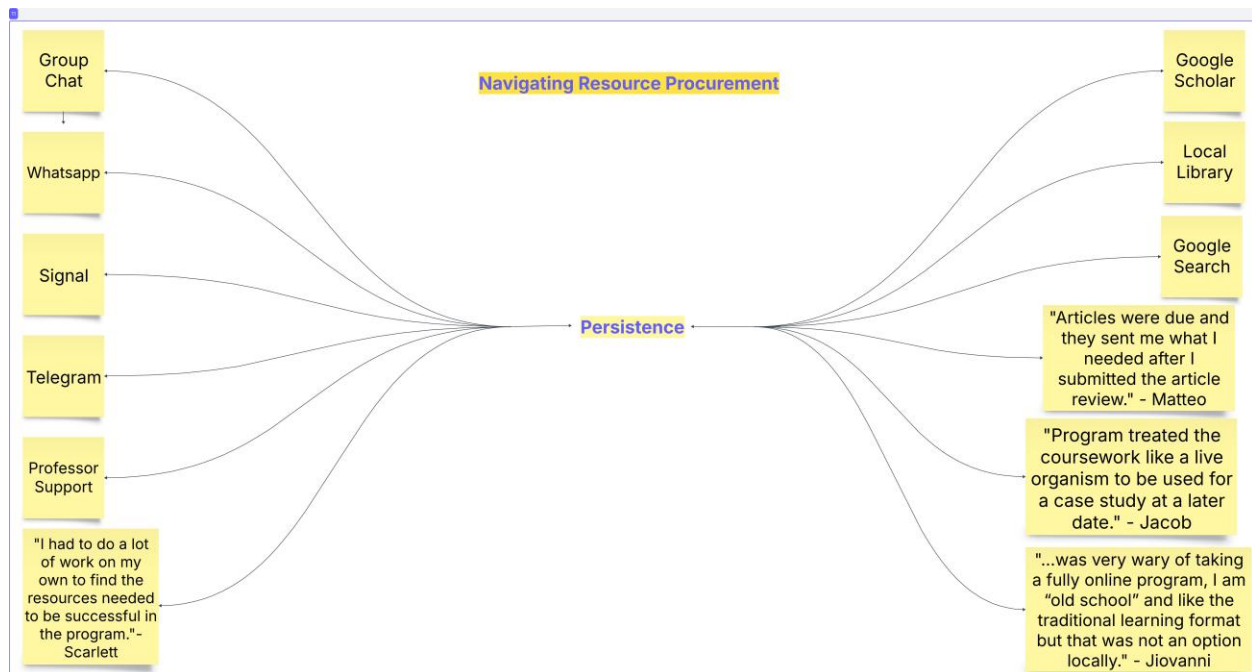
quest to obtain a degree. Applicable sub-themes are provided to provide further insight as needed into each participant's experience.

The data show the emergence of four diverse thematic categories of: (a) Navigating Resource Procurement, (b) Instructor Engagement, (c) Digital Learning Environment, and (d) Roles and Obligations. Each of these themes show the complex experiences each rural adult learner experienced while navigating their education at their respective institution. These themes correlate to the research question by providing insight into the opportunities students were provided with to assist them, the roles they held outside of their education, if they had support, and how these factors impacted their educational journey. The data revealed how study participants' personal experiences impacted the decisions they made and how they chose to navigate their education during this time period.

Each of the themes is first introduced through a quote taken directly from a participant, using pseudonyms, to allow a space for their perspective to be shared. Following the narrative excerpts are supplemental insights into the different perspectives of the way these participants' lived experiences informed and actively played a role in how they continued their education. The narrative excerpts provided are used to support the theme and aid integrating the learner's personal story into the research. Figure 4.1 provides an overview of the way the learner's individual experiences connected with their learning experience and overall academic journey during this time.

Theme 1: Navigating Resource Procurement

Figure 4.1 Theme 1: Navigating Resource Procurement



“Articles were due and they sent me what I needed after I submitted the article review.” –Matteo

This first theme, Navigating Resource Procurement, was a repetitive theme across the participants interviewed. Rural adult learners saw educational resources moved online or adapted to work in a digital format. Previously held in-person classes were migrated online, and sometimes, in order to meet federal or local guidelines, the classes never migrated back to the in-person setting. The following narratives provided by rural adult learners shed light into how they navigated procurement of the necessary educational material to succeed in their coursework.

Specifically, assignments that required supplemental sources such as peer-reviewed articles or journals that required a librarian to scan and email them to students are instances where timeliness played a role in being able to meet homework deadlines. Their narratives shed light on how the failure to complete student requests in a timely manner impacted the students’

ability to incorporate supportive resources provided by their institution which is a benefit to the student.

Matteo

Matteo had taken a break from education and noted that much had changed since he was in an academic setting. His military career had taken him to different rural areas and at one point had him stationed overseas. He explained that his fluid living situation at times left him with the inability to obtain necessary information in a timely manner. The inability to get what he needed left him going to peers for assistance in digital resources to obtain articles, which led to the use of Google Scholar. He explained, “Google Scholar ended up having, like, massive trove” of information. When Matteo reached out to the institution’s financial assistance office, he waited for multiple weeks for a reply, despite knowing that there was assistance provided via the Veterans Affairs office. Matteo described his experience getting his master’s in health administration throughout the duration of the COVID-19 pandemic as being very different than he expected due to the constraints the pandemic caused.

He explained that the program was fully online to begin with, so the courses were already situated online. He added that by obtaining his MHA he would be able to advance into leadership roles within healthcare, which would allow him to foster change and have a greater impact in the organization. Matteo remarked that he was in a house with three other families due to the COVID-19 pandemic and he stayed there even as the pandemic protocols lessened. He expressed that despite how stressful his living situation sounded, he found many benefits to the situation. Matteo shared that he had class presentations that he needed to give live to his classmates. Prior to presenting to his peers, he would practice in front of everyone in the house because he had a captive audience. He shared that even though no one else in the house had the same educational

nor professional background in healthcare as his, he was able to practice his pace and timing for presentations.

Matteo explained that while he was not alone in having to find sources for required assignments that needed more than textbook citations, there was a sense of being alone due to lack of timely responses from different departments. He mentioned that he would see an assignment that required additional articles and he would do the search in the library database, find articles the librarian would need to scan, and he would receive them sometimes four days after the assignment was due. Matteo shared that the library, while operational, did not have the capacity to serve the students due to the increased demand on the staff that had happened overnight. He stated that this experience stayed the same even as the impact of the pandemic lessened over the years.

Matteo further said that after noticing that even with timely requests for supplemental articles from the library, the materials would not be emailed to him by the due date, he took things into his own hands. He said that with prior military experience he is familiar with using applications such as Signal and Telegram for communication. Matteo explained that he “stayed away from using SMS messages to more, like, WhatsApp, Signal, or some of those type of messages ... or Telegram, where you could add and remove people at any time, and then you could have a continuous group chat,” but within the classroom these applications along with using course group chats helped him and his peers procure articles and online databases to secure this information themselves. Matteo added that this is how he learned of Google Scholar to help him get the resources he needed to complete assignments.

Brent

Brent disclosed that he was older than his peers, being in his forties, and he had been working as a teacher for many years. He lives in a rural area with a very small local library, which caused him to reach out to other colleges and ask if he would be able to utilize any of their on-campus resources should he need to. He felt the need to reach out after sharing that his academic program was very isolated and that there were no synchronous classes. He said that not once during the program did they have to meet face-to-face. He did not have strong connections with the institution nor the faculty. Brent was able to bounce ideas off his director and department chair, which he found helpful. He felt that being able to ask them about different ways to obtain research articles was very helpful for different papers and topics.

Jiovanni

Jiovanni described his academic advisor as being wonderful, expressing that, “my advisor, again, he was great...and he basically laid it out for me and what it was going to look like, because he had actually done the same program as me.” Jiovanni noted that he knew there was a small university within driving distance that he could have visited if he felt he needed the library. He explained that he felt lucky that his advisor had gone through the same masters program and could give him a great insight into what to expect and how to navigate some of the challenges as they arose. He shared that he knew he wanted to teach but he needed a masters degree in order to do so at the local community college.

Jiovanni said that there were no online programs for his major available in his area so he had to find a way to obtain the degree he wanted. He commented that he never wanted to be an “educational snob,” adding that he has such a passion for history and his field of study and enjoys being a “professional historian.” Jiovanni explained that he found a school that offered

the program he wanted, in the online format. The advisor was supportive and responsive, and he felt that his decision would give him exactly what he wanted—which he explained it did. He did not feel that there was a specific limitation that he faced due to pursuing his education throughout the duration of the COVID-19 pandemic due to the local resources available to him when he needed assistance.

Jiovanni shared that the local, free library was immensely resourceful and he has shared the library's benefits with the students he teaches. He said the library, he felt, was an exceptional resource and gave him plenty of support at various times during his education. Jiovanni shared that when it came to writing papers, the library always had resources. He explained that when he was not sure if his local library would be able to assist him, he reached out to his alma mater from his bachelor's degree and asked if he could use their library while not being a current student and they said yes.

Rebecca

The program was situated fully online, and Rebecca was prepared to order her required textbooks to be delivered to her house. She mentioned that living in a rural area she is not close to a large city, and that meant planning ahead. Rebecca said that she was raised on a farm and that upbringing has continued to play a huge role in her life, expressing that part of small town living means "just being available, you know, in a rural community, you know, friends help friends... you know, neighbors help neighbors." She explained that being raised on the farm she was always working in some form or another. Rebecca noted that in farm life you have to do things and do them right the first time.

Rebecca explained that while she did not have kids still in the house she had to hunker down and focus on class work. In order to complete her final paper, she told her husband she

needed to be away from distractions. To create this setting she went to a hotel with enough distance from the house and stayed there for a week. Rebecca brought snacks, drinks, and enough to keep her in the hotel without needing to venture out and get anything additional so she could focus on her schoolwork. She explained that she even told her children that she was not to be contacted until the week was up and she was back at home so she could focus on schoolwork.

Josiah

Josiah expressed that he had been away from the academic setting for many years and a lot had changed. He mentioned that living in a rural area meant less resources compared to a metropolitan city, but said he was able to access the internet and had wi-fi at home to complete coursework away from campus. Josiah felt that the course material was easy to access due to knowing if the book was either a physical or electronic textbook. He mentioned being able to navigate the financial assistance aspect of school. Josiah stated that he did not have trouble with obtaining the resources he needed to be successful or obtain his associate's degree. Josiah said that the educational institution he attended had grants available to assist in purchasing scrubs and paid for his NCLEX exam. He described the process of obtaining assistance from the grants as being simple.

Regarding academic resources, Josiah indicated that his institution had a library that he could access either online or in-person if needed. He explained that his professors had recorded lectures, which he found convenient and beneficial due to their easy access from anywhere and at any time. The online recording instead of in-person lectures allowed for viewing from home or during down time at work. Josiah shared that online resources helped him with the papers required for class such as having online resources for APA formatting and mentioned that

accessibility was very important to him with juggling work and being a father in addition to school demands.

Levi

Levi expressed that he first began his master's degree with one institution but then realized that he needed a different learning experience than what that institution could provide, so he transferred to another institution. He felt that this new institution made resources accessible and mentioned that there was a software package that the institution purchased for the students. Levi emphasized what a great resource it was for papers and as a reference. He explained that if he needed other references, he could utilize the library as well, which meant he did not have to lean heavily on Google Scholar for supplemental resources and articles.

Levi emphasized feeling that his institution did a great job in making the students in a fully remote program not feel isolated from benefits that students able to attend classes in-person received. He indicated that as it related to resources, "it was a small institution with a lot of resources, and so they were able to just, you know, kind of quickly pivot and change and do what they needed to do." Additionally, he said that the few times he needed a book and it was not digitized, he could request it, and the librarian would send him the physical book on loan. With this type of service, Levi did not feel like he was unable to get any of the school resources that he needed, as there was always a work-around option.

Reyna

Reyna disclosed being in her 50s and much older than her peers and noticed the difference in the classroom setting. Reyna shared that having worked at the same higher educational institution she was attending for her associate's degree, she felt supported by the faculty. She mentioned not being able to use financial assistance from her time in the military but

was able to get assistance paying for school through grants and working for the school too. She said, “my classes were free while I was working there, so that’s pretty much why I chose them.” She explained that she was in her 50s when she decided to begin her associate’s degree, and while she had acquired some classes for college credit during her time in the military, she had been away from the classroom setting for several years.

Professors would mention utilizing a specific software program, Canva, and Reyna had not heard of it. She said that technology was the biggest challenge during her time in school, so she leaned on her much younger peers to assist her. Reyna acknowledged that she sometimes had trouble completing assignments due to being a rural learner and sometimes tried to complete coursework using the wi-fi at work which was not always stable.

,Scarlett

Scarlett shared that overall, she had to do a lot of work on her own to find the resources needed to be successful in her program. She indicated that the librarian was helpful and introduced her to some of the institution’s resources that were available to her for free as a student. Prior to the librarian sharing these resources she was not aware of some of the databases that Scarlett found herself using for class. She added, “I felt it was so difficult to find up-to-date information.” Scarlett added that she utilized the institution’s writing center for assistance with papers too.

There were supposed to be in-person residencies and those were transitioned to being held virtually and never returned to an in-person setting after the pandemic ended. As a result, this multi-day virtual setting became taxing and also required her to use personal time to take off from work so she could participate in the required virtual residencies. She noted that there was

not another work-around for the residency requirement that would have taken the burden off of requesting time off from her job.

Scarlett described a few instances of support she found outside of the classroom with her peers when they completed mock interviews. She felt that she made some really good friendships from that and within that role they ventured into helping each other in different areas. Scarlett shared that they helped each other with different aspects of figuring out assignments.

David

David disclosed that living in a rural area meant less convenience to accessing the institution on a physical level, mentioning that video conferencing became a prominent experience. David shared that as it related to course materials “everything was digitized” and available to him. He said that in the beginning of his program, prior to COVID-19 the program did not feel as overwhelmed with technology. David revealed that, during one period, his major professor was not very communicative. He explained that months passed before receiving correspondence, which did not help him move at the rate he wished. Once David made contact with the professor, having felt that the months-long wait was not working, he was able to get the information he needed and pick up the pace on coursework.

David disclosed that felt that it was pretty easy to get the materials needed for his program. He shared that the institution had everything converted to being more readily available online such as the dissertation handbook. He reported that during the COVID-19 pandemic transition he lost touch with his peers. When they had class once a week for a few hours it was a good time to engage with peers, but they cancelled class rather than moving to a virtual format during the pandemic, and when pandemic protocols were lifted, they did not transition back to in-person. He shared that he has not seen or heard from his cohort peers again, with two

exceptions. One peer was a friend he has known for a great deal of his life, so he sees that person but not for class-related reasons. The other peer is his wife, who took classes alongside him.

Jacob

Jacob shared that he lives in a rural area and there are not many people who hold degrees and that motivated him to continue his education. Jacob explained that his program treated the coursework like a live organism to be used for a case study at a later date. He further explained, “I could go back and access any of the things that I’ve had in my program,” and watch any of the lectures from any of the classes he has taken, even after completing courses. Jacob explained that all of the educational resources he needed could be found online and that he did not have to hunt for additional resources outside of his institution’s website or portal.

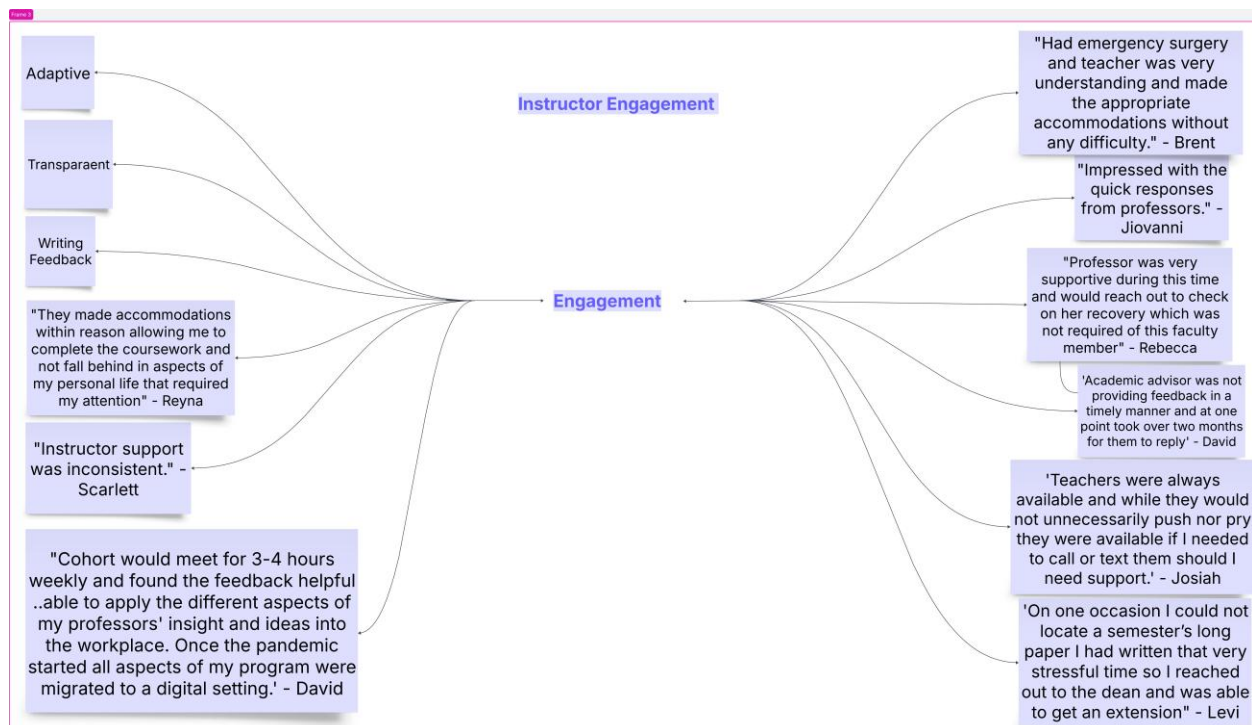
Summary of Theme 1

The theme, Navigating Resource Procurement, places an emphasis on the many ways rural adult learners navigate obtaining the different sources needed to participate in class or complete assignments. Participants provided their lived experiences via personal narratives about the paths they took to obtain the required course-related materials and supplemental resources to complete coursework. Matteo shared how papers required him to use peer-reviewed journals. He knew he had online access to his school’s library but on multiple occasions needed articles to be obtained by a librarian and then emailed to him. Unfortunately, the several times he did this the articles did not arrive in time for him to utilize them for papers and instead he sought other avenues for getting peer-reviewed articles. Matteo referenced utilizing Signal and Telegram to communicate with peers and share sites that assisted with finding resources. He said that Google Scholar ended up being the resource he went to frequently.

Additionally, the experience Matteo expressed as a rural adult learner having to navigate finding alternate routes to obtaining articles and leaning on peers to do was similar to Reyna's experience. Reyna expressed that being in her early 50s and having not worked in a field that required using several programs required of her degree caused her to lean on her much younger peers as well. She explained that her professors would mention programs such as Canva and her peers would teach her how to use the program. Collectively, as reflected in Figure 4.2, instructor support and encouragement played a role in the multiple ways participants procured resources including reaching out to their peers, using applications to communicate, and finding free academic-based resources online to help navigate their coursework.

Theme 2: Instructor Engagement

Figure 4.2 Theme 2: Instructor Engagement



"The professor who served as an advisor was very supportive during this time and would reach out to check on my recovery which was not required of this faculty member." – Rebecca

The second theme of instructor engagement was where rural adult learners shared that their educational journey emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic involved needing instructor support at some point during this timeframe. Due to personal reasons, such as health-related reasons, was where professors provided support to participants. Their narratives illustrated how diverse experiences towards completing a degree can vary from student to student. From quick replies from faculty to figuring out who to contact for basic questions regarding coursework, each rural adult learner's story highlights the importance of their commitment toward continuing their education.

Matteo

Matteo explained that instructors seemed aware of the impacts COVID-19 was having on the institution even as it was coming to an end. He mentioned instructors as being encouraging and "were very... adaptive." He said that there were times when it felt like the professors were handed the course shell and did not have control over adjusting the required work, which became burdensome at times. Matteo did not feel it was the instructor's intention; saying due to lack of control in adjusting the assignments, "they were just running off the materials that was already presented anyway." An example was an assignment that required providing background data; Matteo said he had to essentially figure it out himself because at times the instructors would reply to emails saying they did not have the answers as the assignments were pre-made.

He reported that he did not get angry when this happened because despite the situation the instructors were understanding, which provided the idea that they were aware that the situation was not the most "fair" to the student. Matteo explained that he lacked confidence in how his writing assignments turned out. He reached out to one of his teachers who told him that his writing was "super, above par," and that greatly increased Matteo's self-confidence. The

teacher further told Matteo, “Don’t compare yourself” to his peers. He took this experience and tried to help his peers when it came to discussion posts and group assignments to help them with their writing too.

Brent

Brent had to have emergency surgery and explained that he felt supported. He shared that “there are other circumstances at play that influence that, so yeah, flexibility and understanding were huge,” when his teacher was understanding and made the appropriate accommodations without any difficulty. He really leaned more on his department chair and colleagues than he did on his professors and his program’s institution. He would ask his department chair at work for suggestions about where to find resources and run some potential paper topics and ideas by them.

Jiovanni

Jiovanni emphasized multiple times that he was impressed with the quick responses from his professors and institution, saying, “I did an online questionnaire or something, and they were very quick to get back to me.” He explained that it was great and he could email his teachers at any time and they would often get back to him within a day. Jiovanni shared that he felt one reason the communication was so smooth was due to the class sizes being small. He referenced having faculty who taught classes within his program while living all over the United States. Despite the time differences, they all managed to respond to him in a very timely manner. He stated that overall the experience was “all awesome.”

His first class focused on writing historiographies, which can be extensive coursework. He explained that his teacher, despite the topic being heavy, was upbeat and positive. Jiovanni explained that from the mental health and psychology standpoint, his teacher provided support and encouragement which really helped. Jiovanni shared this teacher “led by example...the way

he engaged with us, we almost felt obligated to engage with him and one another the same way, so it was a really cool experience.” He explained that the way his teacher engaged with the class, encouraged them to turn around and engage with their peers in the same manner ,which created a great learning environment.

Jiovanni disclosed that he had taken some time away from school before he decided to further his education. When he resumed classes, he was “apprehensive about all the writing and didn’t see myself as a good writer.” Jiovanni described the feedback from his professors really helped his confidence. He explained that the feedback helped him because the writing was demanding. He also expressed that the support he received from the majority of his professors kept him engaged. He appreciated that most of the professors were considered to be experts in their field. Taking classes from professors he felt were experts made him want to do more. He felt that they were upbeat when he spoke to them and that they “never had a dull conversation.” When he reached out to them for feedback, they provided him with help to improve his writing.

While Jiovanni explained this example of overall receiving support from his teachers there was one teacher who made his class experience challenging. He said that it was a class where the professor recommended a topic for him to use for his project. He took her advice and then received so many suggestions by the professor after he submitted his rough draft that he did not understand why this topic was one she felt would fit him the best. This was the class that “gave me nightmares” and said that it impacted his confidence in writing because he was so many years from his undergraduate degree. Jiovanni recalled turning in the first draft and she “ripped him up and down,” and that did not help his mindset towards the class.

Jiovanni shared that this was the one class where his peers all talked about their experience with the instructor outside of class. He said that now he uses his experience in that

specific class in his job as a teacher and offers this experience to his students when they mention having challenges understanding and working with a teacher. Giovanni explained that while he does not like that he wrote a paper he felt was not his best work but written in a style to please the teacher, he continues to use his experience “as an educational tool” and feels he will continue to reference it.

Rebecca

Rebecca had to have surgery, and during this time she was not able to participate in Zoom sessions. Her institution operated on a quarter system so she took one semester off from her program and focused on her health. The professor who served as an advisor was very supportive during this time and would reach out to check on her recovery which, Rebecca reiterated, was not required of this faculty member. She shared, “she checked on me, outside of school. That was thoughtful.” Rebecca explained that she wanted to be an “A student” and was not going to risk registering for the quarter not knowing if she would be able to fully participate or complete the required coursework.

She looked for opportunities to improve her career, and the faculty supported her. Rebecca submitted a paper for a conference and found that it was accepted. However, the conference had not been moved to in-person and when she received the acceptance email, it was right before winter break. Rebecca revealed that for her to move forward she needed to record and upload her presentation to be included in the conference’s digital format before the end of January. This fell during the holiday break; she would need some assistance from the faculty at her school and she did not feel that the shortened turnaround time was fair to them nor her. As a result, Rebecca was appreciative that she was selected but withdrew her paper and did not move

forward with the conference even though she felt it would have been a good move for improving her curriculum vitae.

Josiah

When Josiah began his coursework for his associate's degree, he was also going through a divorce. He shared that between work, school, and his personal life, he had a lot to manage. He noted that despite the stress, his "divorce definitely motivated me, kept me on track, and gave me a different kind of goal to stay motivated." He reported that he felt comfortable talking to at least three teachers, and they would do informal check-ins on him, making it known they were available if he needed to call or text them for support. They would check in but make it nonchalant; "they wouldn't push or pry" yet their support was meaningful. The extra layer of support from his professors greatly assisted him in juggling course requirements and work.

Levi

The dean of the program was Levi's main point of contact and ended up becoming his advisor during his time in the program. He said, "It was mainly with the dean, like I'd mentioned, and being able to always reach out to him and talk with him. He became my academic advisor, and so then, like, he just stayed with me the whole way." He described the dean as being a great resource not just during his initial conversations when Levi inquired about the program, but also while Levi was a student. One specific instructor taught three classes and during each course there were times when expectations were not being met by the instructor. Levi expressed that this specific instructor would not follow the syllabus that he created, resulting in making it harder for Levi and his peers to navigate the course appropriately. During times like this, Levi reached out to the Dean, his academic advisor, and he was able to assist him.

Levi shared that on one occasion he could not locate a paper he had worked on for an entire semester, and during that very stressful time he reached out to the dean and was able to get an extension. He said that example stands out and knowing that his advisor was constant and reliable. In addition to that example, Levi mentioned utilizing office hours with several of his instructors. They had a link on their syllabus where you could book a time on their Google calendar. He remarked that they would meet during his lunch time and were always happy to answer any questions he had and never expressed difficulties meeting with him.

Reyna

Reyna shared that because she worked at the institution, she was able to get to know the faculty within the program, and she spoke with the program director before fully deciding to begin her associate's degree. She noted that one professor was so passionate that it was hard as a student to not get wrapped up in the course material and become fully immersed in the discussion. Reyna shared that while the syllabus made the course requirements strict, at times there were course deadlines that conflicted with personal obligations. When times like this arose, she would talk to her teachers, explain what was going on and they would make accommodations that were within reason that allowed her to complete the coursework without interfering with her personal life.

Reyna described some classes as being tougher to get through. She explained a class could have used a trigger warning at times before showing videos or discussing certain topics. In one class specifically she mentioned, "there's a lot of things in sociology that, like, need to have a trigger warning. Or need to have an explanation before you watch some of these videos." Reyna has a military background and expressed that the attacks on September 11 impacted her greatly. She described the teacher showing a video which included the Twin Towers falling and

asked the teacher to provide a trigger warning as a caution because some topics like the towers falling impact everyone differently. She stressed that it was topics like these that opened her eyes, because her younger peers did not know about the events of September 11, and she learned that many of them had not been born until after those events.

Reyna noted that while her teachers were communicative, being in a rural area the institution did not have as many organizations and student groups that cities and larger schools like universities offer. She furthered that it would have been nice to have something that was geared toward adult learners, mentioning a group for just adult learners would have been a beneficial resource. It would have provided a space for adults to talk about how to deal with being one of the older students in a class full of younger peers. She shared that the student organizations would hang posters for meetings and events on campus, but there were no emails to help rural learners know about the events on campus.

Scarlett

Scarlett expressed that instructor support was “inconsistent. I had a couple who were very willing to try to help me but in the grand scheme of things, I don’t feel like anybody who had a stake, a stakeholder meaning a chairperson or anybody who could help me with the educational aspect.” Scarlett’s committee for her program kept changing. She had classes with one professor who was her committee chair, but she was not familiar with her area of education, which meant Scarlett did not receive the adequate support she was seeking. This individual ended up leaving Scarlett’s committee but the cycle continued. Scarlett emphasized that she spent at least three and a half years in the program before she felt like she was put in contact with someone who could articulate what a “gap in the literature” means, which would have saved her a lot of trouble had this been communicated years prior. Scarlett further stated that there have been a few times

where she seriously questioned whether continuing her doctorate was worth the cost emotionally, financially, or professionally. She said that she did not have a formal academic advisor that she could contact on a regular basis. Scarlett explained that the advisor who registered her for classes reached out once every three months or so to get her registered for the next set of classes and that was all.

Scarlett expressed that after numerous meetings with different people as her committee kept changing she felt that so much time had gone by that she could have been narrowing her focus for her research. Scarlett felt that she was continuously put with faculty that did not understand her professional background to assist her in connecting it with her study—so much so that she was forced to change her educational path. Scarlett started the program with the desire to earn her Ph.D. and ended up changing in the fall of 2025. Scarlett remarked that she is now working on completing a white paper so she can earn her Ed.D. to be able to graduate.

On one occasion when she was taking a dissertation-based course before changing to an Ed.D. focus, Scarlett met with a methodologist. Scarlett stated that she found the meeting with the methodologist to be very beneficial and one of the occasions where she felt supported. However, there were still some drawbacks. Scarlett explained that while the time with the methodologist was very useful, the institution is very strict on their time limits. Once the meeting reached the thirty-minute mark, the methodologist had to go. Scarlett said that she respected these time limits but it felt like this led to having to make multiple meetings which took more time to get answers.

Scarlett's mother received a breast cancer diagnosis, and Scarlett became her caregiver as needed. There were times where she took her mom to treatment and other times she would be helping manage other aspects of her mother's medical journey as part of her support system.

During this time, she did not receive supplemental support from her professors or the institution. She disclosed that she had to have a procedure herself, and that was the one time she was granted an extension. Related specifically to instructors she thought that there were a couple that were very willing to help her but in the grand scheme of things, she did not feel like anybody who had a stakeholder role such as being a chairperson could help with her prospectus.

David

David revealed that before the migration to a fully digital setting due to the pandemic, his cohort would meet once a week for three to four hours on a Wednesday. During this time he was able to connect with his professors and ask questions that he felt directly applied to his job at that time. He found the feedback helpful and was able to apply the different aspects of his professors' insight and ideas into the workplace. Once the pandemic started, David said all aspects of his program were migrated to a digital setting and never returned to in-person settings. He said, "what would have helped would have been, you know, once we could come back in person, if we would have come back in person, or at least to some extent." David shared that when the program converted online his institution made access a priority. He remarked that the professors all had set hours where they were available so students could hop on and ask any teacher questions. Instead of worrying that there was a time or day that he had to be available, his university offered several hours consecutively on a daily basis where faculty were available to assist students.

David shared that while the continuous coverage provided by faculty was great and very useful he did experience some challenges. He remarked that his academic advisor was not providing feedback in a timely manner and at one point took over two months to reply to him. David expressed that situations like this happened frequently and that led to frustration. He

mentioned that this went on several times and with months before getting a reply, he was not progressing at the pace he wanted. He reached out and had a direct conversation, which helped him get the change he needed.

He further stated that he felt that there was always someone he could reach out to if he had any questions regarding schoolwork or the dissertation process. He said that his institution made it formal but gave students the ability to talk through ideas and bounce ideas off of others. He stressed that there was not a time when he was not able to speak with someone. The institution had someone available online that would meet virtually every week, made remote drop-ins available, and that there was always someone for students to contact. David said that prior to the pandemic there was not a virtual option nor the availability set up like this for students to utilize. He said that the pandemic transition created more availability.

Regarding support related to instructors, David said in his classes that was not ideal. He became frustrated at times because he would email a professor with questions related to his dissertation that he needed checked by his committee, and it was months before he would hear back. David admitted that he was not sure if this delay was due to COVID-19 or the way the institution's system worked, but it was very frustrating and made the process long. He said the delay in communication was three to six months at times.

Because he wanted to be done with his degree and continue to make progress, he approached the situation a little more urgently, which generated a faster turnaround. He mentioned that he had reached the period of writing his dissertation when the migration to online started. During this time, he realized the lack of weekly in-person time made it easier for him to procrastinate writing his dissertation. He added that it was easier to push off the work due to the all-remote nature.

David shared that his instructors were alumni of the institution, so they knew the institutional resources available very well, which was nice. He reported that “once you met the teacher you got to know them and knew where to find them should you need to talk to them.” David said that it was nice because they could talk about the field they practice in and since the professors lived relatively close to David’s area, they were aware of the places and topics he brought up on a local level which made it personable. He also said that the professors had the same or similar backgrounds so being able to bounce ideas off of them greatly helped his coursework. The faculty could offer real feedback, not just hypothetical reasons about the topics of case studies David mentioned. He described one professor who used a lot of case studies in class and that he enjoyed that experience. David mentioned that he would put his own experience into the scenario and it was nice to be able to relate to the things the professor shared.

Jacob

Instructor involvement played a huge role leading up to and throughout Jacob’s educational journey. He explained that his major involves a lot of governmental and military based components, and having been retired from the military, he found his professors to be wonderful supportive resources. Jacob expressed that his program received a large donation and with that money they were able to bring in another full-time staff member. This individual truly impacted Jacob’s academic experience.

The instructor served as an area specialist, and Jacob explained that this really broadened his educational experience, saying of this person, “they had some of the specific knowledge that I was looking for.” He said this new faculty member, he felt, strengthened his academic program. Additionally, Jacob explained that this staff member made his life easier because he was able to help Jacob. The specialist assisted Jacob in narrowing down potential topics and his focus on

areas that he wanted to dig into further. Jacob, through military experience, had work experience in various areas of the world, and this specialist had lived with communities in those regions and gotten to know them very well to provide a more intimate insight beyond what Jacob had via living on base.

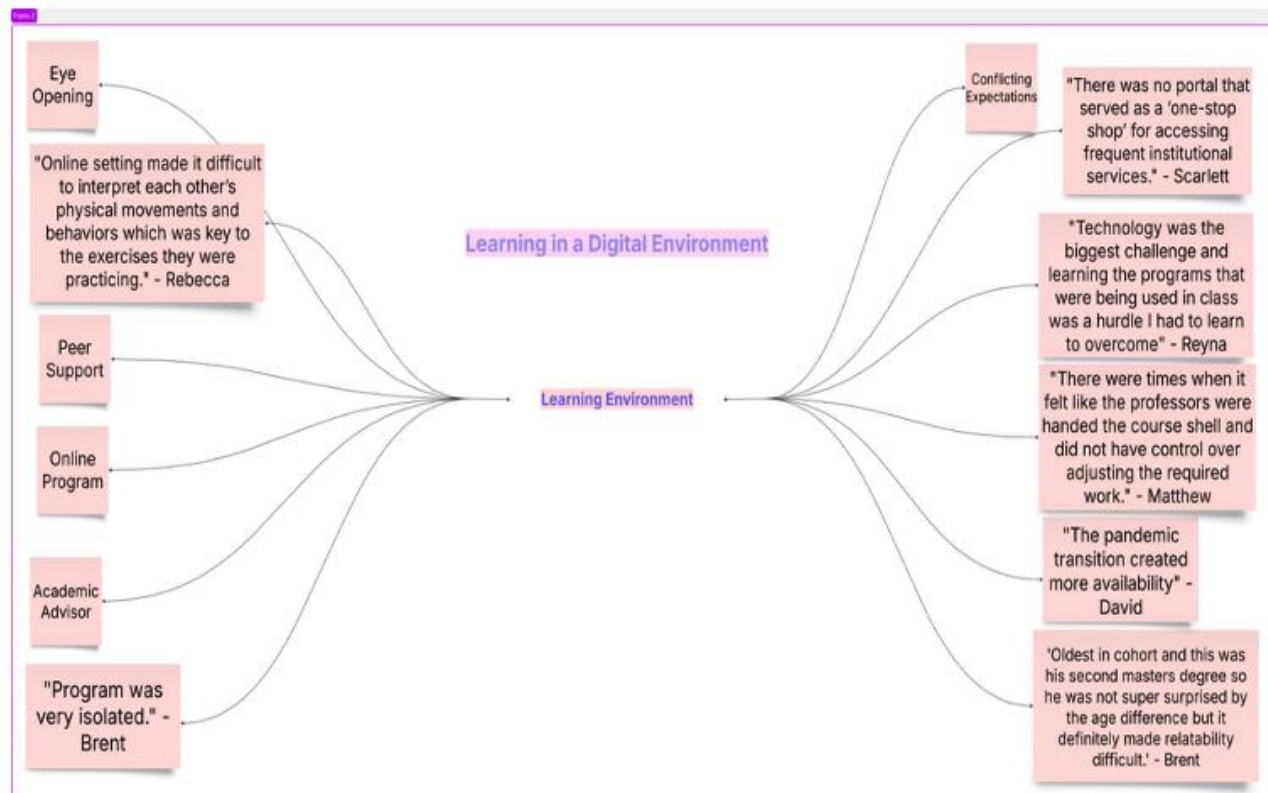
Summary of Theme 2

The theme of instructor engagement showed the different ways instructors contributed to the education of rural adult learners during this transitional period. While many of the rural adult learners did not go into their degree thinking about the role instructor support would play in their degree, the participants' lived experiences speak to how at some point during their educational experience their instructors played a role in their ability to feel confident in their writing or juggling multiple obligations in addition to coursework. Reyna shared that the syllabus had deadlines and requirements set in firm language, and sometimes those requirements and deadlines collided with aspects of her identity that were important to her, such as the role of being a mother. When moments like this came up, Reyna reached out to her professors and explained what she was stuck between and to see if there were accommodations that could be made to not let aspects of her life that mattered a lot to her become neglected.

In addition to support that can assist with various roles outside of the classroom was the support in relation to the coursework. Matteo and Giovanni both shared examples where their instructors increased their confidence in their writing which furthered their ability to write papers. While the support from instructors played a role in their motivation, some students like Reyna still needed assistance with the digital learning environment.

Theme 3: Learning in a Digital Environment

Figure 4.3 Theme 3: Learning in a Digital Environment



“A directory approach would have been very useful instead of having to find resources in several different areas on my own.” –Scarlett

The NAL experiences navigating learning in a digital environment differed from participant to participant. As depicted in Figure 4.3, NALS had similar experiences, each recounted times where the digital setting impacted their lives in some manner outside of the classroom. The stories within this theme provide a deeper insight into the awareness and readiness NALs had regarding learning within this unique educational setting.

Matteo

When asked about his identity as a rural adult learner and how it influenced his educational experience after the COVID-19 pandemic, Matteo explained that it changed the way he viewed learning online. He worked full-time during the COVID-19 pandemic and had “three

families living in one household,” having taken in his nieces and nephews. Matteo explained that this experience “opened my eyes on how effective a digital learning environment was” further stating that online learning environments provided a better use of his time than traditional in-person settings. When Matteo was asked which experiences stood out to him, he mentioned being given assignments instructors said they could not alter. Matteo explained that in these situations he would adapt and embrace the rush of having to “work a little bit faster and welcome another grey hair.”

Brent

Brent’s program was fully online, and he never had to go to his institution for any in-person related reasons at any point during his time in the program. He noted that at one point, he was taking a master’s course that was “using the same textbook as the bachelor’s program” he was teaching. When asked how this made him feel, he said he found it useful from the teacher’s aspect. Brent shared that he ended up providing his students with some of the supportive resources that his teachers gave him at the master’s level. He disclosed that the assignments utilized podcasts, and that seemed to be much more relatable to the students than the coursework he had been thinking of delivering.

Brent reported that he was the oldest in his cohort and that this was his second master’s degree, so he was not surprised by the age difference, but it made “relatability” difficult. He revealed that he was married with five children, and many of the members of his cohort were single with no children and did not experience as many obligations or time commitments outside of class that he experienced. Brent voiced that the program was completely asynchronous. He explained that other than individual assignments, the majority of their assignments were done via Canvas discussion board posts, which did not require face-to-face contact.

Brent shared that he was a part-time student because he was working full-time and was a parent and spouse. He did not feel that he could juggle working full-time during the COVID-19 pandemic while being a full-time student. He shared that not having to drive to his institution during the pandemic was a blessing because the program was situated fully online.

Jiovanni

Jiovanni mentioned that at first he was very wary of taking a fully online program, explaining, “I like the old school stuff” and liked the traditional learning format, but that was not an option locally. He explained that he wanted a challenge and met with an advisor to make sure that the program was legitimate. The institution provided students with full access to their library and any digital subscription archives that he could have needed. He shared that the program was set up to be fully online, so he did not have to worry about a resource not being formatted to the digital setting.

Regarding his advisor, Jiovanni shared, “he was a mentor, he was with me” throughout his time in the master program. His advisor had gone through the same academic program as he did and said that no matter what questions he had, his advisor was empathetic and helped him navigate hurdles as they came up. Jiovanni further stated that every professor was accommodating. He said while the online environment was accommodating and he enjoyed it, if he had not had work or family constraints and obligations, he would have wanted to have completed the program in-person because he liked traditional learning formats.

Rebecca

Rebecca explained that during the beginning of the program, when in-person connectivity took place she had more opportunities to interact with her cohort. After that, the program did not make a strong effort to revisit in-person meetings or group connectivity. She shared that when

she applied, it was “an online program with in-person residencies,” which changed during the pandemic and never returned to in-person. Rebecca further stated that the online setting required weekly discussion posts. In addition to discussions, her academic program required meeting in small groups to practice required exercises, which became tricky.

The online setting made it difficult for Rebecca and her group members to interpret each other’s physical movements and behaviors, which was key to the exercises they were practicing. Rebecca revealed that she felt there was an immediate move to migrate courses online, and the accommodations did not stop there. Rebecca said, “it felt like there were so many accommodations.” At one point in her program she was a teaching assistant; she was given the rubric for the course during the COVID-19 pandemic, and she noted the rigor was not the same. She said that while she was able to give more time to her coursework with her children either in college and out of the house or married with children, she had peers who were requesting extensions and other accommodations that would not have been granted otherwise.

Rebecca noticed when she had Zoom meetings with her peers that while she had a quiet space at home to work on coursework, her peers were not always so lucky. Often during Zoom meetings she would hear noises in the background of her peers. Rebecca divulged that while her children were off at college or out of the house, her peers were often much younger than her and had young children at home. She mentioned that while she is in a rural area she was able to obtain reliable internet, some of her peers did not have reliable internet. Rebecca noted that on a few occasions she noticed peers on Zoom in coffee shops, which was a distracting learning environment.

Josiah

Josiah said that his associate's degree was primarily situated to be an in-person degree, and that even during the transition back to campus, in-person learning was not back to being completely "normal" or "how it was" prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Part of the degree required nursing practicals to be hands-on, and they would be placed in smaller groups to complete these tasks and simulations. The school "had invested in the VR headset for us to act out clinical skills, like hanging fluids and doing little assessments and things of that nature" and to use it as a learning resource when they were not able to engage with each other physically. Even when Josiah's institution transitioned away from the digital setting, they still had to wear masks, and they were placed in smaller groups when they were in the classroom or lab settings. Classes never returned to how they were prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. He mentioned that he wasn't upset by the smaller setting and did not mind it.

He mentioned that several of their learning experiences had to continue to be held in the adaptive settings. Josiah said that he was always on the computer. He shared that unlike in a high school biology class, where they would dissect a frog in-person and hands-on, he had to do that same process but virtually. This example stood out to Josiah as one of the most memorable distinctions between his educational experiences. Overall, Josiah felt that the online learning environment was eye-opening and a little bit of a culture shock.

He disclosed that the last time he was in an educational setting was in high school, which was several years prior to him starting his associate's degree. Josiah mentioned thinking that the educational experience would be the same as his high school experience, and due to COVID-19 that was far from the case. His teachers were straightforward, which was a key reason he felt the institution met his expectations as a student; he knew what to expect from his classes by the clear

examples that were provided. He said at the very end of his educational experience they were able to move away from wearing masks and having to stand six feet apart, but that was not the case during most of his educational experience. Josiah felt that recorded lectures were beneficial in helping study for exams. He commented that skills labs were beneficial and helped him prepare for the skills needed within the field.

Levi

Levi shared that he started his master's during the pandemic and completing it recently. He said, "we'd have an occasional Zoom meeting on those asynchronous classes." In addition to offering in-person meetings, they offered the option to attend by Zoom. Levi shared that, had he lived closer to the school, there were classes that were held on campus with students in the classroom, and then I and any other students who were distance would Zoom in on large screens, like, in the room, and then typically one of us would have, like, control of a camera, and that we could use to, like Move from person to person, and check in.

He explained that one of the benefits to this program was that he was "allowed to do it completely at my own speed." An example of coursework included using message boards with specific timelines for posting.

Levi mentioned that at that point in his life he was newly engaged and they were planning a wedding, and he did not think having to stay on campus was fair to his fiancée. He also mentioned that while there were advantages to the in-person setting, he did not think he wanted to be far from his family either after having been able to return back to the area that he was raised in. He also disclosed that he was working part-time with a church and did not want to leave them for a semester either. Knowing that he wanted to pursue ministry, he felt that his time

with the church was even more important since he already knew he would be pursuing his master's degree in divinity.

Reyna

Reyna acknowledged that technology was her biggest challenge, and learning the programs that were being used in class was a hurdle she had to learn to overcome. She mentioned that the lectures were recorded, and while that was nice and made accessibility to lectures convenient, they were not always accurate. She explained that some lectures were “already all pre-recorded from when they weren’t going to classes during COVID.” Reyna noted that the recorded lectures for history were still referring to a president that was no longer in office but still recorded in present tense. Reyna expressed that being able to complete coursework at home was beneficial to being able to keep up with the other roles and obligations in her life but stressed that time management was essential in her ability to stay on top of personal and school requirements.

Reyna shared that she was able to gain access to the internet from home and had a laptop, but at one point it broke. The college had set up a process to check out a laptop on loan program. When her laptop broke, Reyna contacted the school and arranged to use one of the loaner laptops until she was able to access her class work from home again.

Scarlett

Scarlett shared that in-person residencies were cancelled, and even in 2024 they remained held in the virtual setting, and she did not participate in any in 2025. She knows they were converted to the digital setting quickly due to the pandemic, but they remained virtual into 2024 which was the last time she participated in them. She explained that her institution had “weekly assignments and discussions and writing and research.” The classes are held 11 weeks at a time,

which is why she has stuck to taking at least one class a semester as they have increased in difficulty level. Scarlett shared that, as it related to engaging with her classmates, discussions were the only time she had interaction with them. Scarlett enjoyed this setting as she got to engage with peers in other degrees.

Scarlett mentioned that she received directions from multiple people, often directions that were conflicting, which led to more confusion for her. She expressed that she did not have a dedicated person to talk to about navigating her doctorate. In regard to the cost, Scarlett disclosed having accumulated thousands in student loans and the white paper option was an avenue that helped her see the “end.” Having had at least three switches in either chairs or topics, she was tired and decided to take the white paper path.

Scarlett shared that she felt that she was asked repetitively to provide security codes to access content for class. She also mentioned that there was no portal that served as a “one-stop shop” for accessing frequent institutional services. She said a directory approach would have been very useful instead of having to find resources in several different areas on her own. Scarlett shared an experience where she was asked to find the dissertation template, and she looked all over the program and institution’s website but was unable to locate this template. She reached out to an advisor, and instead of providing Scarlett with support and comfort, the advisor said that what she was looking for was not called a template but a dissertation form and that Scarlett should have inferred this on her own.

She also mentioned that there were several occasions when Scarlett felt that the program was misaligned depending on who she was talking to. Often it did not seem that everyone was on the same page, which impacted her confidence in the program. Scarlett explained that at one point she had talked to three different professors, one methodologist, and a general faculty

member and these constant changes made it difficult for her to persist in her original plan. She expressed that the methodologist was very nice and supportive, but meetings with the methodologist or other staff members were always limited to 30 minutes.

Scarlett said that she was told other students would book several appointment slots back-to-back so they could meet with the staff member they needed for more time than what the appointments allowed for. Unfortunately, while that was an option, Scarlett shared that in order to book multiple meeting slots sequentially, she would have to look weeks out for an opening. She said that it was good to know students were allowed to secure multiple time slots, but often her questions needed to be addressed within a shorter time period than available sequential booking would have allowed.

David

David explained that the transitional phase of COVID-19, the program did not include a return to in-person engagement in any fashion, further stating, “we kind of stopped the in-person stuff right as COVID was happening, so I’m not sure how much of it was a result of COVID.” He felt that this lack of in-person engagement impacted his ability to work diligently on finishing aspects of his coursework. He shared that those few in-person weekly meetings had kept him focused and on track. He also enjoyed being able to ask professors questions in person. He mentioned that once five or six students enrolled, the institution would open a new student cohort, so the class sizes were very manageable. He commented that prior to getting his master’s he did not know anything about the institution. David mentioned that then during his master’s degree he only went to campus to take his final tests. It was during his doctorate degree that he became more familiar with the campus.

David explained that this created challenges because his time was always going somewhere, either being a husband and a father or working. He added that some of the benefits included putting in the time to be in a position to move up in his career. David mentioned that the biggest transition during his time as a student was his program shifting to and remaining online. He said that even as the pandemic was coming to an end, they did not bring back weekly classes. David was writing his dissertation and said that even though that could have been done remotely, it still felt different even though it meant he did not have to drive almost two to two and a half hours to class once a week. He shared, “I’m not somebody that isn’t self-motivated, but that was just, like, that transition to where it wasn’t in my face all the time.” He remarked that since his program did not bring back any of the in-person aspects that were in place prior, he did his defense remotely and then once the meeting was over, he was done and it left him feeling “incomplete.” He said it was not the same doing a dissertation with three or four committee chairs all in a virtual meeting and then once they tell you that you have passed, it’s over and he just had to know he was “done.” He added that it did not feel like there was a personal connection that he thought the occasion would have provided him.

Jacob

Jacob expressed that his program was already structured in an online setting with students living in many areas throughout the country. He stated that his institution did not require synchronous lectures or group work. Jacob expressed that the availability of the recorded lectures helped him personally and professionally, saying “I was in a library of virtual presentations.”

Summary of Theme 3

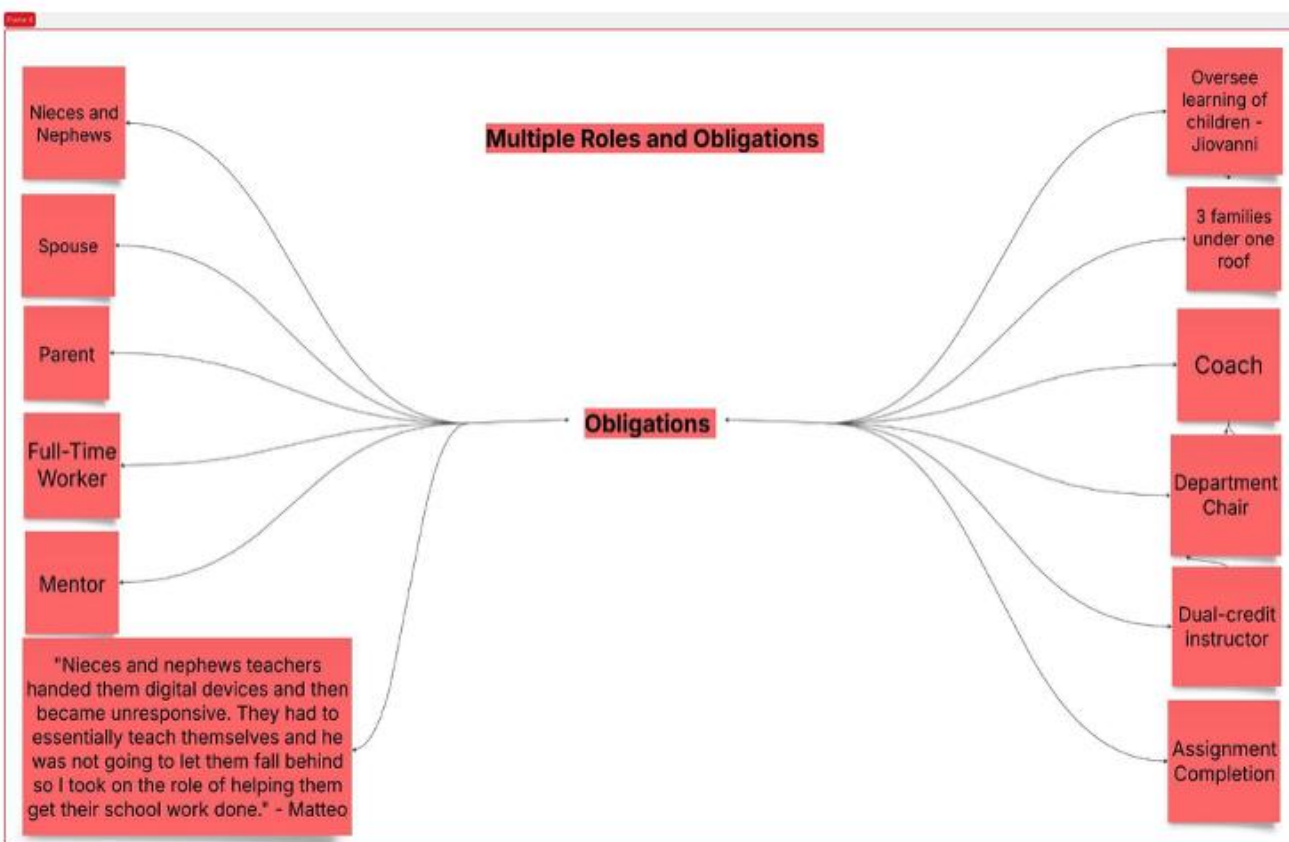
The third theme of Digital Learning Environment came up in each participant’s lived experience during this time in their education. Matteo expressed how online learning opened his

eyes to how learning can be delivered. He also said the online learning environment was a better use of his time than in-person learning environments, referencing his previous learning experiences. Rebecca mentioned that while the online setting allowed her to further her degree, she noticed several instances where connectivity was lacking, which came up often in her academic program. Rebecca explained that group exercises required connectivity; being able to see body movements and mannerisms plays into how they can best help future clients, and the digital setting did not always fulfill this need.

Additionally, all participants indicated that online coursework greatly assisted them with being able to chip away at it on their own time. Giovanni mentioned, that if no students were scheduled to come to his class, the digital access he had as an online student allowed him to read an article or look for supplemental articles for papers during his homeroom period. Josiah mentioned that his associate's program was situated within the health field, and their labs were converted to limit lingering COVID-19 exposure through social distancing. To ensure the class as a whole still received the same lectures, they were delivered via Zoom. Reyna said that despite feeling like technology was her biggest struggle, at one point during her associate's degree she worked two jobs, and the online delivery of courses allowed her to complete assignments using her work internet when she needed to while juggling multiple roles and obligations.

Theme 4: Multiple Roles and Obligations

Figure 4.4 Theme 4: Multiple Roles and Obligations



“So I’d only work 3 to 4 days a week, for a month. So that way I could focus on school, because at the same time, I was a newly divorced single father of four.” –Josiah

This final theme further explores the aspect of the rural adult learners’ lives that impacted their educational journey by addressing the hats they wore outside of the classroom. As shown in Figure 4.4, this theme explores common strategies utilized by participants such as leaning on peers and family for support during their educational experience. These narratives showcase the challenges NALs faced when confronted with navigating their education while being present in other roles.

Subtheme 4a: Work Obligations

This subtheme explores how participants described their work obligations while they were students. While there was a commitment towards finishing their studies, participants described recognizing that time management was essential in juggling deadlines from school while working.

Brent

Brent only enrolled in the program as a requirement for his job. He mentioned that when he first got the job, he knew he would need to get another degree but did not treat it as urgent until the accreditation committee was scheduled to come to campus, so he enrolled and started the program to show he was in compliance. He noted that he needed to obtain an additional degree within the specific concentration because his first master's did not meet the requirements. Brent added that by obtaining this additional degree at the time that he did, he felt that he was able to improve in many areas. Brent said that he was able to use some of the coursework he himself was being asked to complete for the students in the class he was teaching at the undergraduate level. This is one example where wearing a hat of a student and being a teacher benefited him.

Jiovanni

Jiovanni decided that he did not want to be a master's student for an extended time, so he chose to enroll full-time. While completing his master's, he worked full-time for the local high school, where he also serves as the head of his department. Jiovanni stated that having a family made it necessary for him to maintain full-time employment. Additional hats he wears include being a coach, husband, and father of three children who are all under 21 years old. Jiovanni

stressed that he never regretted the decision to be enrolled full-time and said that he has always had good time-management skills.

When asked how obtaining his master's helped shape his life, he said, "I'm all about it." He stressed that he utilizes the information and his experience getting his master's degree every day in some form in his work. He said his master's degree greatly shaped his experience at work. Giovanni explained that he coaches three different sports, which can span the full academic year, This meant he did not have a semester with only school and no additional work duties.

Giovanni explained that all the roles he held outside of being a student gave him a lot of motivation and helped him in his role of being Department Chair for Social Studies. He teaches an upper division social studies class, which he explained is geared toward the top 3% of students in their respective grade level. This provides opportunities for deep conversations within the classroom. Giovanni shared how some of the challenges included being a husband, father, coach, and working full-time meant reading papers for classes that only he could teach due to his education. He said that he was the only one qualified to teach the upper division classes, which is why he was the only one able to grade the students' work.

Giovanni explained that he has been able to provide support to colleagues at work. He explained that even though he is the Department Chair for Social Studies, he has more education than his colleagues, so they will ask him for his opinion on content and managing the classroom. He reported that his time in the master's program helped him with diplomacy. As a teacher he said, "we've got problems with this country," and students recognize this and want to talk about it. His time as a master's student helped him open his students' eyes and think of other ways to talk about tough topics.

Josiah

Josiah shared that his work urged him to continue his education, explaining there were lots of areas for growth if he obtained his associate's and kept going. It was multiple conversations like these that fueled Josiah's desire to continue his education. Josiah referenced having conversations with not just his co-workers but also with his friends, and family encouraged him to make the leap. He enjoyed the work setting and felt that furthering his education was a good idea; he started before the pandemic and finished as his collegiate institution transitioned out of COVID-19 protocols.

He disclosed that being older than his peers may have made the dynamic between him and his teachers different than what he saw his peers receive. He reported that it was difficult transitioning in the class to being a student and not thinking like a parent. Josiah said a lot of his peers viewed him as either an older brother or a father figure. On multiple occasions he often had to keep his peers focused when they got distracted by material unrelated to class work. He had supportive counseling resources at his workplace, but because it was also his place of work, he never wanted to utilize those supportive opportunities in that setting.

Scarlett

Scarlett said that being a teacher is her full-time job, and that she cannot afford to work part time, which would cause financial hardship. In addition to her duties as a teacher, she also has an IEP caseload that she juggles with at least 11 to 14 students. She also said that time management has been key in her ability to juggle work with her other roles. She said that there are times where she has to make a decision on what gets done around the house and what is considered a priority.

Scarlett mentioned that when she had to use personal time for completing her residency, moving to a virtual setting instead of an in-person setting created more work than just being able to have a true “vacation day.” She explained that she had to create subplans for two days straight for the days she was going to be participating in the residency. Scarlett told the substitute if she needed assistance to give her a phone call, and sure enough, the substitute called her several times. She was not sure why her institution did not resume in-person residencies in 2024, which was the last time she participated in them, but felt that because so many students were located in different areas, it may have been tied to social distancing and commuting related reasons.

David

David was a full-time student while being “a husband, a father, working a full-time job.” He said that the program included six credits every session, with the only breaks being scheduled school holidays. He expressed that working full-time while being a student, he truly had to hone his time-management priorities. He expressed that being able to manage his time was important to keeping up with the other roles in his life while being a student. His multiple roles during this period could have included driving a bus route or serving as the athletic director of his school, among other school duties.

Within his professional role, David mentioned that several of his colleagues had master’s degrees as a necessity and work requirement. When he thought about getting more than a master’s degree, he found himself isolated. David mentioned that he did not have professional support when he decided to further his education to help him professionally move up within the field. He expressed that he did not get a lot of support within the workplace, mentioning, “I actually had people, other teachers, like, ask why would you go through all that? Like, why do you want to get your doctorate?” when he brought up furthering his education. David disclosed

being a principal at the time, he started his degree to help him eventually progress into a different role such as a full time college professor, which is his role currently. David expressed that the job he has now requires a terminal degree, so he definitely needed to further his education to have the job that he does now.

David revealed that his mom was a bookkeeper for a superintendent at a local school, and that sparked his interest initially in roles like that which drew him into administration. He said that he got married and had children, and that made him rethink that professional role. He shared that being an administrator is a large time commitment. He expressed that it was a lot of stress, dealing with various matters parents brought to him, and he put in a lot of hours away from his family. This caused him to look at teaching positions at colleges, which brought fewer hours in an office and less stress, and decreased the interaction (if any) with parents, which he felt would improve his quality of life overall.

He remarked that the school where he worked when he was an administrator was small, so within that role he wore several hats such as directing transportation, driving buses, and supervising athletic events, and he was feeling burnt out. He acknowledged that there was a principal who held the role for 30 to 40 years, and David respected him and learned a great deal from him. He attributed his desire to further his education to this burnout, saying he saw another path towards finding a different profession that would give him the time with his family while having a profession he enjoyed.

He took six credits per semester, which was the way the program was structured. David said the classes moved quickly with a new set of classes every eight weeks. It was a steady progression. He took a total of 16 credit hours over the course of a semester. The only breaks

were scheduled school breaks like Christmas holiday; other than that, the program went straight through.

Jacob

Jacob mentioned that he works for the local junior high school full-time after being retired from the military. He coaches baseball at the junior high level and also serves as a Division I NCAA baseball umpire in addition to being a husband and brother. He said there would be night games that were close and he could go home and complete coursework after umpiring, but other times he would stay in a hotel. Time management was key in completing coursework.

Summary of Subtheme 4a: Work Obligations

Jiovanni shared descriptions of how his experiences of being a student assisted him within the workplace. Brent mentioned furthering his education as a work requirement but found it useful and applied what he learned in the very courses he was teaching. Rebecca, Scarlett, Jacob, and David shared similar descriptions of expectations within the workplace. Both identified time management as being essential in being able to stay on top of their schoolwork. Because David experienced early mornings followed by late nights, which limited the opportunities to focus on schoolwork, he utilized free moments during the workday to complete assignments.

Subtheme 4b: Personal Obligations

This subtheme explores the personal obligations the rural adult learners had outside of work and while juggling school. Through their narratives, these rural adult learners describe their educational experience while meeting personal obligations. They recognized that factors such as

being a parent or spouse or supporting family members can pose challenges which can impact a rural adult learner's time to dedicate to school.

Matteo

Matteo explained that while he felt his educational experience online was manageable, his nieces and nephews were in his house, and the teachers were forced to move their schooling to online environments as well. This served to create another hat that Matteo needed to wear as he further stated that his nieces and nephews' teachers handed them digital devices and then became unresponsive. They had to essentially teach themselves how to work the devices, and he was not going to let them fall behind, so he took on the role of helping them get their schoolwork done and being an impromptu teacher. Otherwise, he said, the "teachers became unresponsive, apathetic and uncommunicative and graded everything my nieces and nephews did too easy, They did not have to work for the grade." Despite how busy it was having three families under one roof, working full-time, and going to school full-time, he learned a lot and felt that the online setting provided more flexibility. He said if he "had options like this after high school [it] would have been great."

Rebecca

Rebecca wore many hats while furthering her education. She is a Sunday teacher, youth leader, pianist at church, wife, mother, grandma, and works on their farm, in addition to being a student. Rebecca said that she helps her husband on the farm where they grow soy and rice, depending on the season. She reported that once they harvest the soy or rice, it has to go to the dryers. Rebecca shared that a lot of people do not expect her, as a female, to be in the semi-truck, but she drives one, sharing that "during harvest time, I help my husband get our harvest to our...what we call the rice dryer. And I drive a semi-truck." When the harvested product is ready

for the dryers, there is a long line of semi-trucks. Rebecca said she would take her textbooks with her while she was waiting in the long lines to get to the dryer, so she could read while waiting in the queue because she had to manage her time wisely. Rebecca mentioned that other drivers in this small community knew she was in school and she received lots of encouragement from them.

She stated that while she was in school, the farm obligations did not stop. Rebecca said her office at home is near the laundry room, and it was tempting to want to get up and do the laundry because she knew that chores at home had to be done. The rural area has a small grocery store, but the cost of milk is much higher than the closest city, which was quite a drive from her house. She said that she would often make a long list and bring back several groceries from the larger stores due to cost effectiveness. That also took time away from school, but it had to be done. This led to some nights where she was in the office doing schoolwork until midnight or 1 a.m. instead of going to bed at her usual time of 9 p.m.

Josiah

Josiah mentioned that he wore a few hats while completing his associate's degree. He was a father, full-time student, and full-time worker. When asked how being a parent played a role in his education, he said that he has been a father since he was in his late teens. "I've been doing that since I was 17 years old, so it's always been part of my life," and that it has become something he has always known and learned to juggle. He identified time management as a skill that was key in being able to complete schoolwork while being a parent. He said that he had a routine which included taking the kids to school. He would do schoolwork during the day, and the kids would go to their mom's house on the weekend. When they were at their mom's house, he would work Saturday through Monday.

As a newly divorced father, in addition to having work and his own school to focus on, Josiah had children to help, too. Josiah wanted to lead by example by going to college and show them that it can be done, especially since he is the first from his family to go to college. He said that when his kids were able to go back to school, he had to drive them to and from school and then after work help them with their own homework. He revealed that all of that had to take place before he could complete his own homework, which was a full load because he was a full-time student. When asked about how his many obligations influence his role as a student, Josiah responded that he just had to learn how to balance them because he wanted to lead by setting a good example for his kids. He did not want them to see him as clocking in and out of a factory or not doing anything. Because he continued his education, now he feels they will see school as important and that it can be fun because “dad is doing it.”

Levi

Levi wore many hats during his time in graduate school. He disclosed that by the time he started the program he was a husband, leader in his local church, employed full-time, and was a son and brother, too. Levi said that he did not let school obligations fall by the wayside but expressed that he used priority management. Levi stated that while time management was key, priority management came first. If he was not able to complete his coursework during the week, which he preferred, he would complete it on the weekends. He felt that overall there were probably three or four nights a semester when he had to work on coursework late. He would get up at three or six in the morning, and if he had to work in the evening during the week, he would work from 9 to midnight. He said he did this “because I decided that my family was gonna be the most important thing for me.” Levi stressed that he did this to make sure his family and the roles that mattered to him the most were not put in the backseat.

Levi shared that family is the center and takes priority over everything. He would make sure he showed up for them and then focused on school related coursework. He expressed that he gained a role working full-time with a social services agency where he received great support from his supervisor, which allowed him to participate in coursework. Levi said that at the time he was taking classes, some were held during the day instead of the evening. He would need to take his lunch at a certain point in the day to be able to attend class. Without this accommodation, it would have interfered with his ability to take classes required for the program. Levi shared that as he started to wrap up his degree, he noticed more classes moving towards being offered in the evenings.

Levi also shared that while he was a part-time student, he felt that the pace of the courses was fine but that some of the classes that required synchronous meeting times were held during the workday. The daytime scheduling made it tough for him and some of his peers, many of whom held jobs outside of class.

Reyna

Reyna disclosed that at one point during her associate's degree, which was during the transition of the COVID-19 pandemic, she was working two jobs and lived in a state that neighbored the state of the college. She took several classes online but decided to take a few in-person because she obtained an adult scholarship and knew the teacher for her required Ethics course. She disclosed that she really learned who her friends were and that a social life does not exist while trying to juggle so many roles. Reyna reported that she had to have strong time-management skills, which also meant missing events such as weddings.

During her time completing her associate's degree, she was not only a student but a wife, mom, and full-time worker. She mentioned she wanted to be a full-time student because she felt

that being in her early 50s, she did not want to take a long time to get through her degree. Reyna revealed that the decision to be a full-time student was “rough, it was exhausting.” Reyna emphasized that time management was essential. She had a schedule where she would set a timer and go into the office at home and focus on just schoolwork from 6:30 p.m. to 9:30 p.m. or sometimes 10 p.m.

One of Reyna’s children was a student athlete. In addition to working and being a student, she attended basketball games and tournaments. She shared that she would take her homework with her, and often the girls’ game would be before the boys’, so she would go to the concessions area to complete her homework. Reyna also shared that she wanted a career change since she had spent most of her career in the medical area. Reyna also felt that she wanted to further her education to set a standard and to be a role model for her child to continue their education after high school. During this time Reyna stressed that her husband really stepped up to help her, knowing that she was juggling work and school. Some nights he made dinner.

Reyna acknowledged that there were a lot of challenges during this time of her educational journey. She experienced some health challenges, saying “I had some health setbacks, just due to being stressed out, and lack of sleep,” and that caused her and her husband to manage money on a tighter budget. In the role of student, Reyna said that she learned so much by being a student and was in classes with students much younger than her. She said that being in a class with younger students helped her understand youth better and made her want to continue her own learning experience. She worked in the college she was completing her associate’s degree and enjoyed working with this age group of learners. Reyna revealed that at one point early in her degree, she was in classes with several students that her job had required her to report on regarding COVID compliance, which resulted in an awkward classroom

dynamic. She said that despite all of this, taking classes with peers younger than her helped her understand the social pressures these students were experiencing. Reyna revealed that several of her peers had obligations outside of the classroom such as work and paying rent on top of completing the same homework she had to complete.

Scarlett

Scarlett explained that she worked full-time, took on additional roles at work to assist students with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), tutors after work, and at one point during her degree served as a caregiver for her mother. She described how household duties and work roles collide, explaining that she will “cook, clean, take care of her mother medically when needed. Since I am a special education teacher, I do an IEP caseload, which means not only am I a teacher, I’m also in charge of 14 to 16.” Her mother received a breast cancer diagnosis, so Scarlett stepped up to assist her mother in her care. Scarlett was her mother’s main caretaker for a year and a half. She would also go with her mother for treatment where Scarlett would take her computer with her and do work outside in the waiting room as her mom had surgery.

David

David mentioned that he wore a lot of hats during his degree at this time. He was a father and a husband and worked full-time. He stated having all of these roles and expectations meant that time management was really important. He stressed that this was important because there was always something else he had to do besides being a student with schoolwork that had to be completed such as a paper or other type of homework. David stressed that it always seemed like a real time crunch. He added that specifically during COVID he served in a variety of roles such as being an assistant principal, athletic director for transportation, and then became the head

principal and the transportation director. While working in these roles, he was also a husband and had two children at that time.

He said that this impacted his personal life because he would have to drive a bus after school or supervise a baseball or softball game before heading home, which meant coming home late. This impacted his time with his kids because he would get home around nine or ten at night. He remarked that he altered his kids' bedtimes so he could spend some time with them even if it was short, so they went to bed at 10 p.m. David noted that this did not impact his kids in a negative way because they were so young. If explained that if he had not altered their bedtime schedule, he would not have seen his kids for almost four years of their lives.

David explained that he had to juggle all the roles and demands, and he could tackle schoolwork here and there during the open periods of time he had available throughout the day. He further stated that he used this time to work on papers if possible because the other option was working on them late at night after the kids went to bed at 10 p.m., saying that he got used to very late nights. David mentioned that he is not a morning person, so he preferred to work late at night instead of getting up at 5 o'clock in the morning to tackle the work.

David revealed that he did not receive a lot of support in the professional environment at work. He said that during that program he worked in a rural school and most teachers had a master's degree because of the teaching needs and promotions that came with having one, but beyond that, no one furthered their education. When David shared that he was doing that, people at the school, including teachers, asked "Why would you go through all that?" and said that he received little to no support.

Summary of Subtheme 4b: Personal Obligations

The rural adult learner' narratives of their personal obligations while being students provided insight into the challenges they faced outside of being a student. Matteo described assisting nieces and nephews with coursework in addition to needing to complete his own. Rebecca noted serving her community by spending time with her church. Josiah shared that he is a father and that he wanted to set a good example for his children by continuing his education.

Levi stressed that while school was important to him, he would not let his family take a backseat to his education, which meant spending late nights and early mornings working on coursework. Reyna shared that she would complete coursework in the concession area when she was at basketball games to both show up for her child and stay on top of assignments. Scarlett described taking care of her mother while she battled cancer and chipping away at schoolwork while her mother was receiving treatment. David mentioned being a father and husband and spending late nights doing on schoolwork so he could spend time with his children before they went to bed. Ultimately, the NALs mentioned completing schoolwork around their personal obligations.

Summary of Theme 4: Multiple Roles and Obligations

A central theme throughout this study and in all the narratives provided were the various roles and obligations that the participants held outside of the classroom setting. Brent shared that in addition to working full-time, he also had five boys at home under 18 years old who needed help with their own schoolwork. While they were given tablets in school, he explained that they were still not really learning the material, and he was not going to let them fall behind. Similarly, Josiah and Matteo expressed that their children play key roles in their lives and that this was a reason that despite the pandemic having moved so much of their coursework online, it worked

out for them when their classes did not convert or quickly revert back to being held in-person. The online setting provided them with more flexibility to be present in other roles.

Taking into account coursework being completed regardless of in-person or digital learning settings, NALs indicated that time management was a skill they learned to hone very well in order to meet deadlines and not fall behind. Rebecca emphasized that her role on the farm cannot wait for school, so she had to learn to adapt school responsibilities to fit into her duties on the farm. Rebecca shared that she would take the required reading material books or articles with her while she waited in her semi-truck in line for the dryers for their rice. While not waiting in a semi but still looking to be present for other roles in her life, Reyna took required reading with her to her son's basketball games.

Summary of Findings

The narrative stories of 10 rural adult learners' experiences navigating their collegiate journeys as higher education began emerging out of the COVID-19 pandemic provided a unique insight into the challenges this experience presented during this time. Four key themes were generated from their unique experiences. The themes of navigating resource procurement, instructor engagement, digital learning environment, and roles and obligations emerged. These themes offer an insight into areas of the lives of these rural adult learners' experiences that can assist current or future rural adult learners who are considering furthering their education. Additionally, the lived experiences of this learner population can assist higher educational institutions in seeing the areas that helped students continue their degrees during this transitional timeframe, where supportive resources lacked or were successful, and how faculty and staff assisted students or could have provided more support.

Throughout their academic experience during this timeframe, participants showed dedication and persistence towards completing their degree. Essential to their educational journey were their efforts to maintain many expectations and roles outside of their education while not falling behind in class. Despite being students, rural adult learners expressed that they wear many hats. Some rural adult learners had children at home, other learners were working full-time in farm-based settings, and other learners worked full-time while helping extended family during this period. Rural adult learners provided examples of the different obligations they each had outside of being a student, including the additional responsibilities that this learner population navigated while seeking to fulfill educational goals and requirements. The findings of this study lay the groundwork for further exploration of the themes provided through the perspective of rural adult learners, which can be further applied in academic settings related to the literature in Chapter 5.

Chapter 5 - Discussion

The purpose of this analysis of narratives was to explore the lived experiences of rural adult learners as they navigated their educational journey following the COVID-19 pandemic. This study employed a qualitative approach, using an analysis of narratives to capture the rich, situational experiences of rural adult learners. Through utilizing in-depth interviews, the research sought to answer the question: RQ1: How do rural adult learners tell the story of their educational journey emerging out of COVID-19?

Chapter 4 delivered the findings that were generated from the analysis of narratives of 10 rural adult learners exploring their lived experiences in continuing their education after the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. The analysis of narratives revealed four key themes: (a) Navigating Resource Procurement, (b) Instructor Engagement, (c) Learning in a Digital Environment, and (d) Roles and Obligations. The participants in this study made completing their education a priority showing resilience while persevering to fulfill several requirements put on them both professionally and personally. Their narratives highlighted their diverse experiences and situations, such as being a parent, a spouse, and a full-time worker. In addition to being expected to meet deadlines or complete coursework alongside their peers, these participants navigated their education while being NALs or rural adult learners, which gave them different learning experiences from those of the traditional students. These findings underscore that challenges experienced by participants were not simply individual or situationally driven, but were shaped by structural conditions associated with rurality, including geographic isolation, limited infrastructure, and reduced access to institutional resources.

Results and Interpretation

This study has provided a significant contribution to existing literature in relation to the learning experience as learners continued their educational journey emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly in the context of rural adult learners. Through a detailed analysis of the participants' educational experience, which spanned from 2018 to the present (as some NALs are still enrolled in degree-seeking programs), several notable findings were produced that offer new insight on the complex and diverse experiences rural adult learners faced in continuing their education. NALs described emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic as snapshots of completing coursework in concession areas of rural high school basketball games, juggling two jobs, and assisting children with their own schoolwork while keeping up with their own. The limitations of being from a rural community were mentioned in relation to the place-based barriers related to the support they received and the institutional resources that could assist them (Sundeen & Kisner, 2024; Edmunds et al., 2021). NALs mentioned having to drive over an hour to their institution when their personal laptop broke down and they needed to obtain a laptop on loan. Additionally, NALs mentioned having family obligations that required them to be familiar with coursework and plan ahead to meet deadlines. The findings presented can extend the existing understanding of rural adult learners' academic experience by focusing on their lived experiences in relation to their multiple roles in addition to school, the influence of their learning environment, the role of encouragement they received, and the role persistence played during this transitional time.

Multiple Roles

A key finding from this study shows significant evidence that rural adult learners experienced role conflict during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants mentioned

having the role of spouse and parent, and/or serving as a caretaker while working full-time (Bessette, 2020). Additionally, rural adult learners talked about having children completing their schoolwork at home because their schools had moved to remote learning as well (Kara, 2019). Participants explained that they had to take on the role of teacher, while also being a student and full-time worker. As described in the findings, the lived experiences of rural adult learners impacted their lives in a variety of ways. Their stories shed light on the many hats NALs wear and how these roles have impacted their educational journey.

Multiple roles, specifically juggling being a full-time worker while being a parent and caregiver, emerged as a significant factor that impacted a NAL's ability to be present in both roles (Fensie et al., 2024; Surdick et al., 2021). The NAL's impression of what was needed as a student and expected as a parent, spouse, or caregiver differed due to varying educational expectations as higher educational institutions transitioned away from the pandemic. A few rural adult learners lived in areas where accessibility impacted their ability to juggle work with school, as rural communities can include disturbances which impact the learner's ability to complete coursework (Hardison, 2017). Therefore, proximity to metropolitan areas with additional resources may provide additional support, assisting the learner to be academically successful within multiple roles.

The personal narratives reflected an emphasis on work obligations and responsibilities, which participants described as factors impacting their ability to succeed in coursework. Having an adaptable work schedule allowed NALs the ability to engage in coursework at times that worked for them, as rural learners do not always have access to the internet or the technology needed to attend class at home (Heeok, 2021). In addition, a learner's employment impacted

their education in a multitude of ways. For example, NALs mentioned the inability to decrease their employment status to part-time due to the fiscal impact it would have on them at home.

Concurring with previous research, participant narratives supported the need for adaptability due to having many roles demanding attention in their lives (Bessette, 2020; Heeok, 2021). NALs are challenged with navigating both personal and professional demands, impacting their ability to engage in the academic aspect of their life, when financial and caregiving responsibilities are present (Jaeger et al., 2012). These impacts include being able to pay rent or their mortgage, purchasing food and basic necessities, and supporting their families, reflected in the literature as factors impacting a NAL's ability to juggle school with additional roles (Bessette, 2020). The weight of their personal experiences suggests that the multitude of responsibilities asked of NALs impacts where and how they use their time. As Cox et al. (2024) revealed, locating a quiet area to study within the home can pose a challenge for NALs, and being able to fit schoolwork into the workday helped offset this requirement at times. While these scenarios may be considered standard for adult learners, rural learners did not have the supportive resources that urbanized areas offer such as libraries that offer additional academic support, community centers that provide access to free internet or technology for virtual course meetings.

As Lim et al. (2021) shared and the participants' experiences reflected, there were factors which impacted how NALs were able to interact with their peers and instructors. Rural learners mentioned experiencing difficulties with getting in touch with faculty or institutional resources. Unlike metropolitan areas where there are more opportunities to connect with faculty, rural learners relied on faculty making time for them. As explained by one participant who had a

faculty member not respond to emails for weeks, this learner was not able to find academic support in his rural community and relied on his professor for academic support.

NALs expressed the importance of time management as a concept and skill allowing them to make time for completing coursework while maintaining their employment status. NALs' lived experiences shed light on the impact that slow or no transition back to course delivery or structure prior to COVID-19 had within their lives. NALs shared how education had changed so much since they were in high school and found themselves leaning on much younger peers to navigate course requirements. For example, living a few hours away from their institution, if not several states away meant adapting to virtual conferencing-based lecture requirements. Some learners who lived several states away took classes in a fully virtual setting while staying at home, in their rural community, instead of commuting to in-person classes due to the lack of educational opportunities in their own community. Their children were still learning from home, so being able to continue classes from home assisted with childcare but also pulled away from their ability to complete coursework as they were assisting their children with schoolwork. Previous research supports this finding, expressing that mothers were juggling parenting responsibilities with work, and these roles at times put a strain on their ability to participate in the online learning environment (Fensie et al., 2024; Surdick et al., 2021). As it relates to rural learners, unlike urban areas, rural towns may not have childcare services and if they do, their availability may be limited, leaving learners strapped for evening assistance. Although multiple roles and responsibilities are common across adult learners, the rural adult learner population described these obligations as being compounded by geographic constraints which included long commute times, limited childcare availability, and little if any academic

resources available locally. These findings suggest that role conflict among rural learners is not only widespread but structurally intensified.

Digital Learning Environment

The results show conflicting perspectives regarding the digital learning environment for rural adult learners. While some participants mentioned being enrolled in an educational program that was already set-up fully online, that did not mean that supplemental institutional resources were equipped to handle the student capacity spurred by the COVID-19 pandemic. Digital learning did not eliminate barriers for rural adult learners; instead, it redistributed and, in some cases, intensified them. One example was the expectation that coursework included additional peer-reviewed sources, yet when the rural adult learner contacted their school library for additional sources, the articles arrived several days after they were needed. The participant explained that after seeing this was happening repeatedly, they looked for other methods outside of the institution to obtain the necessary articles for their coursework. However, this learner did not have access to a physical library, or community center so they had to utilize other means to access peer-reviewed sources. A participant noted at times their courses were not updated and at times the software required was not familiar to them, this is supported in the literature showing that there were instances when faculty were not well versed nor given the appropriate access to adjust courses to meet the students' new needs in a virtual environment, which limited the way faculty were able to assist NALs (Bessette, 2020). Rural learners experience place-based barriers which means a lack of access that extends beyond physical support. As this study showed, a rural learner had to utilize the internet at their workplace for taking quizzes and submitting assignments due to temporarily losing access at home and not having other options in the community.

The online learning environment overall provided an added layer of convenience for rural adult learners as rural areas may offer fewer community-based assets like formalized childcare that urban areas offer. A few NALs mentioned that their program was fully curated for the remote setting prior to the pandemic, but the pandemic hindered their ability to utilize the physical or on-campus provided resources that were beneficial to them during their program. This observation by NALs is not new; both Winfield et al. (2023) and Kramer-Gordon and Bradley (2023) shared that NALs have enrolled in online and remote situated programs at an increasingly high rate compared to programs requiring or offering in-person learning. One participant noted being familiar with working in a digital setting and mentioned that the convenience of this learning experience opened their eyes to more educational opportunities. Chen and Williams (2009) stated it is not uncommon for learners with a stronger digital competency to enjoy online learning and be engaged in coursework.

Rural adult learner participants also referenced the digital learning environment overall, saying that during and after the pandemic the learning environment was altered. Relating to self-determination, a NAL's needs pertain to their feelings and closeness with their peers (Ahn & Back, 2019). A few rural learners noted the digital conversion during the pandemic had made the educational offerings more accommodating than the in-person setting. This accommodation is important to note as, rural learners need less time constraints such as multiple commutes to and from in person classes, dropping and picking up children from daycare so they can attend class, in the digital settings which provides rural learners with this opportunity. One rural adult learner noted that their experience was far from what they expected, having only taken courses in-person prior to this academic program. The experience was "eye opening," and the concept of online classes was something they said would have changed their academic career if they had been

aware of them while still in high school. Several learners had to juggle their academics while having their own children at home doing class work, which Cox et al. (2024) noted as posing a challenge for NALs due to a limited number of quiet places to study.

Other rural adult learners expressed that the learning environment posed a different set of challenges but present areas for growth to support this student population. Their narratives shed light on how the failure to complete student requests in a timely manner impacted the students' ability to incorporate supportive academic resources provided by their institution which would have benefited the student. Academic resources such as the ability to access consistent and reliable internet and a librarian to assist with location-reviewed articles are barriers that rural adult learners navigate. One NAL expressed that the instructors referenced computer or software programs they had never heard of, which impacted how rural adult learners approached learning. As NALs took classes during the transition away from the COVID-19 pandemic, they still noted difficulties such as a faculty member taking over a month to get back to them, an example of the difficulties with connecting with faculty as a struggle rural learners experienced (Sutherland et al., 2023).

When instances like this happened, the rural adult learners leaned on their peers for assistance navigating the new program, which required learning more than just the material necessary for class. One NAL mentioned that their program required being able to work in groups and the group setting on Zoom made it difficult to notice or pick up on body movements which was key to their program. In another example a mentioned that their program required activities that involved being able to view a peer's body language, and that was harder to take note of virtually with in-person residencies no longer offered. Therefore, although higher education needed to pivot to online delivery during the pandemic to increase accessibility

(Beytkin, 2021). A learner's preferences could not always be accommodated within a digital learning setting (Sundeen & Kisner, 2024).

Encouragement

Importantly, all participants said that they received support from their professors and while this instructor support is important for adult learners broadly, for rural learners this support functioned as a critical form of institutional access, particularly in the absence of local academic or community-based resources. A few rural adult learners were first generational students, and the only academic support they received was from their professors. A rural learner noted that when they had questions regarding their coursework, they needed to speak with someone specifically. However, they could not rely on peers or friends, and this support was needed for the learner to progress in their program. Information related to understanding required paperwork for moving through an academic program and feedback on the quality of writing was not support they could receive within their rural communities. Therefore, some adult learners noted professor support was instrumental in their ability to complete their coursework online. Even within a program that was fully set up to be delivered online, professors recognized that the COVID-19 pandemic would have additional impacts on their students outside of class. Rural adult learners recognized dedicated instructors,' their transparency and support, which motivated and impacted them in multiple ways (Sutton, 2017).

A participant noted reaching out to a professor and explaining that they had done everything they could think of to get supplemental assistance from other institutional resources such as the library for articles, but the articles were not being delivered in time for the student to complete assignments by the due date. The instructor recognized this dilemma and said the assignments were pre-created, and they did not have the ability to adjust them but understood the

struggle. This experience led the rural adult learner participant to reach out to their peers and external resources. The NAL also mentioned that they worried about the quality of their writing and communicated this concern to their instructor. Their instructor met with them and told them that the quality of their writing was definitely not a concern and was actually on par with what they were wanting students to submit. Participants described these types of interactions as greatly increasing their self-esteem and motivation.

Another rural adult learner mentioned prior to the pandemic protocols met at least once a week on Wednesday for close to two and a half hours. Their institution was a two to two and a half hour drive from their home, so the in-person class requirement forced them to make time outside of their work and family life to participate in furthering their degree. This NAL mentioned that the pandemic caused them to migrate to the online learning setting very quickly and that the institution did a wonderful job of having faculty available on a regular basis to answer questions. This migration was beneficial at the time and remained in place for learners even as institutions transitioned away from COVID-19 protocols in other areas of their campuses. The learner mentioned that this helped them talk through ideas and feel that they were able to get basic questions answered as needed. This interaction provided a sense of engagement (Flanner, 2017).

Importantly, some institutions did not choose to bring back the in-person weekly class meetings for classes even after COVID protocols were lifted. One NAL mentioned that after a long time away from having in-person classes they realized the value those classes provided, mentioning that it allowed the NAL the opportunity to talk with professors and peers in their cohort. This NAL emphasized that, without class meetings, they felt themselves pushing off work a little longer than necessary and felt that their motivation was decreasing. If a setting with

more group engagement had been added, it would have been beneficial for support and for staying focused. A setting that allows for peer engagement, even if adjusted to accommodate digital learning formats, provides some form of social engagement which allows students to engage in a natural tendency of self-determined behavior (Flannery, 2017).

Persistence

Rural adult learners also spoke to the need of being persistent. When they were unable to obtain educational resources such as peer-reviewed journals, they started group chats with their peers. Participants mentioned the use of applications such as WhatsApp, Signal, and Telegram to communicate with each other about the coursework and share resources. Examples like these are grounded in the literature where when NALs needed support beyond what their peers were able to provide in obtaining these necessary resources which for rural learners was important as they are often first-generation students and do not have institutional support in their area nor the guarantee of community centers or a library with staff to assist them (Sutton, 2017). Peer support was repeatedly mentioned among rural adult learner participants as being a quality that helped them as they continued their coursework emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Outside of peers, other individuals such as dedicated and reliable advisors played roles. One participant noted that their advisor had gone through their same academic program and this connection offered a unique insight into course and program expectations as well as emotional support when times were tough. For rural learners this academic support was important as participants mentioned that the ease that online accessibility brought due to the shifts made during the pandemic did not necessarily mean that class meetings were not considered essential. As Shin and Johnson (2021) discuss, if a learner's psychological needs are not being met, the

learner's motivation will be impacted. This can also impact their motivation to stay focused and perform in their classes, as was the case with this learner.

A three to four hour class meeting made a difference in their ability to stay focused and benefit from peer support. A setting that allows for peer engagement, even if adjusted to accommodate digital learning formats, provides some form of social engagement, which allows students to engage in a natural tendency of self-determined behavior (Flannery, 2017). Having a setting that allows a learner to obtain the support they need—whether that be solely from peers, their instructors, or offer a setting that supports it—makes a difference in the learner's engagement. This learner's experience was supported by Hendrick et al. (2023), in that not having in-person classes brought back created a sense of loneliness. Jeno et al. (2019) mentioned that when a NAL's basic psychological needs have been satisfied, their self-determination can grow in a way that the NAL will have heightened motivation, desire to participate, and perform academically.

Another NAL mentioned that their classes met virtually even before the pandemic, and felt that class meetings allowed them the opportunity to connect with peers who were not in a rural area, therefore; transitioning out of the pandemic, did not change this virtual experience. However, this experience allowed them an enriched educational opportunity they would not have otherwise obtained in their local community. A classroom environment can foster an intrinsically motivated learning experience, as Taylor et al. (2014) stated. The NAL mentioned that they had taken several years away from their education and felt nervous about returning to the classroom. During the pandemic the institution had resources available, but further support was needed to assist them in their determination. Their instructor, however, went above and beyond and met with and assisted them in providing feedback on their writing. Experiences like this were

supported by Orsini et al. (2016), expressing the importance that a professor's support plays in a learner's sense of self and competence.

Another NAL mentioned that their professor met with them and talked to them about their writing and provided genuine words of encouragement, which impacted their autonomy. This is furthered by how Sun et al. (2019) explained the way autonomy impacts a learner's ability to structure their routine and behavior as they engage with the class work. A NAL's sense of autonomy impacts their actions and their desire to take initiative when they see their effort being impacted by external factors such as the supportive encouragement from their professor (Sun et al., 2019). The study shows that when learners have multiple roles demanding their attention and experience limited resources and time constraints, they will manage the time they have available to meet deadlines or advocate for themselves if they need an extension or assistance. Further, as Orsini et al. (2016) explained, there is evidence to show that when professors support a student's sense of autonomy, competence, and relatedness, the student will excel within the educational setting as well as become accountable for their learning experience.

Conceptual Framework

The key findings of this study reflect that rural adult learners found furthering their education was important and relates back to the conceptual framework. The participants created meaning from their learning experiences during this time; the ability to do this is a characteristic of Transformative Learning (Mezirow, 2009). For rural learners, the disorienting dilemma was not limited to the pandemic itself but included navigating educational systems which were not designed with this rural geographic reality in mind. It is also noticeable that the NALs utilized several skills to make sure their education was a priority. This learner population expressed dedication to juggling many personal and professional obligations which align with the

principles of Persistence (Tinto, 1993). Further, the study's results also displayed learners' desire to help their community or family while continuing their education with aligns with Self-Directed Learning (Knowles, 1974). Finally, the results of this study acknowledge key components of Self-Determination (Ryan & Deci, 1985), which include both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, such as participants mentioning wanting to further their education to obtain greater job opportunities or to set an example for their children. Furthermore, the need for autonomy, competence, and relatedness was not only present but took on heightened significance within the rural context, where limited access to institutional and technological resources constrained the rural learners' ability to fully exercise self-directed behaviors. This conceptual framework offers a unique lens into rural adult learners as no other study has utilized these three concepts as it relates to this learner population.

Implications

The findings from this study present significant implications for rural adult learners, but as a distinct population whose educational experiences are shared by structural conditions tied to geography, infrastructure, and access to resources. As such, institutional strategies that are designed for adult learners more broadly may be insufficient if they do not explicitly account for rural learner contexts. These implications are in the connection Transformative Learning, Self-Directed Learning, and Self-Determination, the conceptual framework, the lived experiences of rural adult learners continuing their education in the transition of the COVID-19 pandemic (Barker et al., 2023).

This study displays the background of rural adult learners and their experiences navigating their education during a time of transition. NAL narratives illustrated obstacles they faced and provide insight into both effective and ineffective institutional supports. This

information can be used to help degree-seeking rural adult learners evaluate if their educational decisions can also provide educational institutions with guidance directly from students to create environments that support recruitment, retention, and student success, particularly in times emerging from great disruption, like the pandemic.

This study reinforces the essential role that the intersection of transformative learning, self-directed learning, and self-determination continued to play in a NAL's educational journey after the COVID-19 pandemic. Both the literature and this study's findings showcase that NALs who showed persistence—such as reaching out to their professors, creating group chats, and looking for resources outside of their institution—are dedicated to continuing their education (Barker et al., 2023). At the same time, higher education institutions face challenges such as recruitment, retention, financial sustainability, and funding requirements, while NALs often encounter financial instability, childcare needs, transportation barriers, and limited access to course materials. The findings suggest that rural adult learner's experiences are a source for insight for improving institutional support.

An additional theme in both the findings and the literature is trying to make services adaptive to serve the students' best interest and to meet them where they are, both financially and geographically. Rural areas can experience disturbances which include slow internet networks, which impact remote learning (Hardison, 2017). At one point, a NAL participant explained that they were stationed overseas for work and had to balance work with making adjustments to make calls when the institution had someone physically in the building. Rural adult learners in this study had to be persistent and demonstrated the ability to juggle wearing multiple hats in their personal lives in addition to taking on school and educational responsibilities. These findings

suggest that NALs rely on strong communication with peers, faculty, and advisors and must actively utilize available campus resources to overcome barriers.

The study's findings also show that the various obstacles NALs faced during their educational journey emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic were tied to the institution's ability to transition their services in relation to the pandemic. The literature provided suggestions and examples of ways higher educational institutions were meeting their students' needs, such as using the school library, which exemplifies persevering during this transitional period (Bessette, 2020). The implications suggest that institutional solutions to assist NALs may not have been straightforward to NALs as they appeared to traditional learners (Peich, 2017). Strategies to assist NALs, whether they are in person or taking classes online, are paramount to their retention. Higher educational institutions need to be equipped to provide or adapt the same academic supportive services in-person in an online setting. This study showed that when faculty and institutional resources were accessible the learners utilized them.

NALs emphasized the importance of instructor engagement in their educational experience. Learners mentioned experiencing health challenges, some planned and others unexpected. When these took place, they recalled instructors reaching out and checking on them. NALs understood that this was not required of their instructors, and the gesture meant a lot to them. The NALs' experience with receiving support contributed to their persistence and self-determination with coursework, which is displayed within the conceptual framework. Having faculty show an interest in their academic journey or personal life impacted their educational experience in a positive manner. Additionally, due to personal setbacks related to health and work could have impacted the NALs' ability to continue coursework and their ability to be self-directed if it were not for coursework being readily accessible. Online accessibility emerged as a

key factor in supporting rural adult learners who cannot reduce employment or personal obligations.

The findings and the literature reiterated the importance of understanding the NALs' needs based on their life circumstances. The rural adult learner participants in this study, needed supportive resources, support outside the classroom, and the ability to access required academic resources to continue their education. These findings imply that higher educational institutions should deepen connections with this student population specifically to better understand their needs. The NAL participants demonstrated examples of times they were told to contact the institution, but when they did, the assistance was delayed for prolonged periods of time. These delays required the NAL to look elsewhere to have their academic needs and support met. While these examples were unique and specific, they can guide higher educational institutions to focus on specific topics such as accessing supplemental resources, navigating video conferencing software, or providing inadequate support. These examples, if addressed, can serve to help higher educational institutions in retention and recruitment efforts.

The findings further demonstrate rural adult learners' dedication to completing their education. The literature suggests the rural adult learner student population will persevere to complete their education and will utilize various forms of collaboration to do so (Fensie et al., 2024). Rural adult learners who have family support, job security, and the ability to be flexible with time to dedicate to their studies, are better situated to overcome challenges and gaps in educational support (Das et al., 2021; Fensie et al., 2024; Winfield et al., 2023). As the findings showed, participants leaned on their external family for support as needed.

Some rural adult described bring able to utilize local resources such as their local library, or other higher educational institutions' resources as comforting. Although institutional support

was sometimes limited, instructors and peers often helped learners complete coursework through other forms of support. This demonstrates the importance of both formal and informal support systems in rural adult learner's success, which higher educational institutions could incorporate into student success models.

Time management was an important skill for NALs as they juggled their non-academic obligations to stay on top of the many expectations assigned to them in their work and personal lives. This skill was key to the NALs' success, as it allowed them the ability to remain present at home with their families, continue working, and not fall behind in their coursework. The literature supports the need for higher educational institutions to not only recognize but meet this balance that rural adult learner's experience (Deschacht & Goeman, 2015).

Finally this study contributes to the increasing wealth of research focusing on the rural adult learner student population and their educational experience related to the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings offer that the conceptual framework of Transformative Learning, Self-Directed Learning, and Self-Determination plays a key role understanding NALs' educational experience. As rural adult learners continue to seek educational opportunities, institutions must provide accessible academic resources that meet geographic and financial needs. Strengthening institutional support will allow rural adult learners to focus on academic success rather than searching for resources to fill institutional gaps.

Recommendations

Taking the findings into consideration and drawing from the personal accounts provided, multiple key recommendations were generated from the analysis of narratives for higher educational institutions to consider to best support this rural adult learner student population. These recommendations focus on faculty encouragement, recognizing role conflict, expanded

access to external and community resources, and the development of flexible and effective digital learning environments for NALs' who may be geographically separated from institutional services. This study's findings reveal critical insights into the rural adult learners' collegiate experience.

One of the most potent recommendations from this study for higher educational institutions is the implementation and recognition of the external resources students are using to supplement their coursework and that those resources are given to the NAL. Participants expressed that they utilized peers and other external resources to help them navigate educational hurdles. For institutions that serve NALs, sharing supplemental resources with these learners would be beneficial and assist them with staying on top of coursework and their other roles by decreasing the time NALs spend searching for supplemental resources.

A critical recommendation for higher educational institutions serving NALs is to acknowledge the multiple obligations and roles that are required of their learners away from the classroom—being mindful of what matters to them in their personal lives such as the roles of being a parent, full-time worker, in addition to being a student whether at the part-time or full-time status. Recording lectures and making them available for viewing for an extended period of time and having multiple opportunities for students to ask questions allows learners with multiple roles the ability to obtain information needed to complete coursework.

Another recommendation is for institutions to connect rural adult learners with community-based resources and encourage awareness of local support systems. Although the literature discusses place-based barriers impacting NALs, learners leaned on peers and other external resources to meet their educational needs (Prechotoko & Kirby, 2022). Assisting NALs with navigating educational hurdles as they arise provides another supportive measure that can

contribute to their academic success. A NAL mentioned having a family member assist with dinner when they were short on time meeting deadlines for school. This experience is supported by the literature, which explains that commuting to and from their institution is not always feasible for some students without the ability to lean on their community or family for support (Crawford & McKenzie, 2023). Additionally, rural adult learners mentioned being mindful of the resources the local library could provide, such as if there were meeting spaces available. Higher educational institutions that can assist learners by providing a list of community resources that can supplement their educational experience would save time and energy in locating this information themselves.

The recommendations, grounded in both the literature and findings of this study, generate a comprehensive framework for assisting NALs in their educational journey. The recommendations address topics such as accessibility, support, and role conflict students experience away from academics. By focusing on these topics, higher educational institutions are better able to assist their rural adult learner population in navigating their learning experience by providing a centralized, one-stop-shop location for accessing information and supplemental resources. A centralized location may include a place where learners can access a computer when the institution is closed, which departments are available to meet via phone or virtually to assist with questions, information for local libraries that provide meeting spaces or support with research, and a list of software used for coursework along with guidance on how it can be utilized.

Limitations

While this study was able to provide powerful insight into the lived experiences of rural adult learners, there are several limitations which should be recognized. The study included

learners working on degrees ranging from associate's degrees to doctoral degrees. While the learners were in degree-seeking programs, they were not in the same program and were at different phases of their respective programs.

Even while keeping these differences in mind, the participants were candid while sharing their lived experiences as well as what they thought worked well, was supportive, and the aspects of their educational journey at that time that were not helpful. Additionally, because the study focused on adult learners aged 25 and older, being able to secure enough participants was a challenge. Despite these challenges, this study offers a meaningful contribution to the understanding of rural adult learners' educational experiences after the COVID-19 pandemic protocols were lifted at their respective higher educational institutions.

Another limitation of this study was that several of the participants were already enrolled in programs that were situated to be delivered fully online before the pandemic began. Despite this, the participants were open with sharing their experiences—successes, challenges, and failures—to allow an open and honest conversation to take place. There were moments when participants started to pause before responding to questions related to the institution but after reassurance that pseudonyms and anonymity were in place, they proceeded to fully share their impression and experience. Furthermore, participants responded using different forms of communication styles when sharing their experiences. Their differing forms of verbal communication enriched the data they were providing due to how detailed some participants wanted to be when answering questions. Throughout the research process, all efforts were made to capture authentic data while ensuring that the interpretations on their lived experiences as narrated from the participants' and the researcher's perspectives were in agreement through member checking. In summary, this qualitative research study utilized narrative analysis from

NALs spanning different fields of academic study, and despite the challenges shared by participants regarding their academic journey, their desire to continue their education is another reason for further research to look at additional ways to support this student population.

Future Research

This study has generated valuable insights into the lived experiences of NALs continuing their education after their respective higher educational institutions lifted COVID-19 protocols. However, there are still several aspects of their experience that could be explored to provide a deeper understanding of the rural adult learner's educational experience especially in relation to fully structured in-person academic programs in urban areas. Participants reported living hours away from their institution, which created a place-based barrier that required them to make advance preparations if they needed to travel to campus. Further research could be done regarding the benefits of providing rural adult learners with information to assist learners with locating local supportive resources—how to best utilize their local library and the different ways of gaining access to the internet.

Given the study's focus on NALs, future research should examine how rural learners navigate in-person learning within the constraints of limited or unavailable online course options. Future research should explicitly differentiate rural adult learners from broader adult learner populations to avoid masking the structural inequalities tied to geographic context. It would be beneficial to explore how NALs experienced their educational journey by gender to gain a stronger insight into the responsibilities each gender experiences in the obligations they have outside of the classroom. Investigating these factors experienced by the NAL group within the rural setting would further contribute to an understanding about whether the needs of this group

dramatically change between genders with a larger participant pool and focusing on programs offered solely via in-person settings.

Another area that could be further explored is investigating the success different NALs have in remote and in-person settings in relation to their academic programs. Some participants were enrolled in fully remote programs and identified shortcomings following the pandemic due to their institution's inability to provide certain services in the online setting. Being able to assess how different programs are created, either remote or in in-person settings, and if they accommodate or lack supportive services can assist in determining where further support is needed. Further exploration into specific work and parental status, and gender would be a way of determining which programs have adequate support in place to accommodate the NALs needs.

Additionally, further research could explore the assets that rural adult learners have at their disposal for meeting their academic needs. Understanding these assets can help institutions better support rural adult learners outside metropolitan areas. Having an understanding of the assets available to rural learners, can identify areas where supportive resources for this learner population can be provided.

This study utilized a qualitative methods approach to further explore the lived experiences of 10 NALs; however further research could incorporate quantitative methods as a way of exploring how different genders and different majors support NALs in the different learning formats of the in-person setting versus the digital environment. A quantitative study would permit a larger analysis of the correlation between the NAL and their respective institution's ability to assist specific to major and gender, not just the status of being a NAL of 25 years or older. While a demographic questionnaire in the form of a survey was used for this study, a survey or additional data collection method could assist in recognizing trends and areas

within the academic program or institution that may or may not be providing supportive resources to NALs.

Finally, while Transformative Learning, Self-Directed Learning, and Self-Determination served as the foundational framework in this study, this student population faces a diverse mix of roles and obligations which require ongoing cooperation, adaptability, and understanding from their instructors and institutions. This learner population migrates past the assumption that the NAL has the same needs and expectations as traditional-aged students continuing their education after graduating high school. Instead, the study highlighted the ways that NALs were able to navigate their collegiate journey as their institution migrated away from the COVID-19 pandemic.

This study was limited to exploring the lived experiences of rural adult learners who are NALs while continuing their education in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic. Importantly, these findings suggest that barriers experienced by rural adult learners may be more frequent as well as qualitatively different due to geographic and infrastructural constraints. The NALs included in this study were contacted through higher education institutions situated within the Midwestern region of the United States. The institutions then reached out to students within their database and shared information related to this study. Based on the results of this research, a study which further explores other rural areas of the United States would be valuable. Additionally, it would be worthwhile to study institutions outside of the United States that have rural populations with NALs as well as those inside the United States that allow online participation from NALs outside of the country.

Lastly, participant criteria included adult learners who were at least 25 years old and were in a degree-seeking program. Based on the results of this study, it would be useful to explore

how NALs within specific majors experienced the transitional period of the COVID-19 pandemic compared to other educational disciplines. This type of exploration would help examine whether different majors made accommodations beyond what the institution had in place, were not able to meet the accommodations and return to meeting in-person to an extent, and how they adapted to meet the needs of their major. Some learners within specific programs were able to have their coursework adapted, whereas other learners remained in virtual settings without accommodations being made to fit this setting.

Conclusion

Through narrative inquiry and the lenses of Transformative Learning, Self-Directed Learning, and Self-Determination. This study aimed to understand the lived experiences of rural adult learners continuing their education as their respective educational institutions emerged out of COVID-19 protocols. Rural adult learners shared their stories of struggles and successes.

This study demonstrates that rural adult learners are not just an underserved population but structurally misaligned with dominant models of higher educational delivery, specifically in post-pandemic contexts. This research identifies specific areas of structural misalignment that institutions of higher education must address and can serve as inspiration and encouragement for continuing and future NALs. While this study is situated from the perspective of rural adult learners in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic, it offers valuable insight into the learner's experience within different phases of lifelong learning. This insight can further enrich discussions within the higher educational arena, with a specific emphasis on the challenges and barriers that the participants juggled and experienced during this time. Instead of separating the NALs' experience and the assistance and services provided by higher educational institutions, I urge further research to explore these topics together, as they are intertwined and contribute to

each other. Additionally, this research can act as a framework for other fields to explore individuals' experiences during this transitional timeframe in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic.

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Appendix A - Interview Protocol

Initial Interview

Appreciation

I am thankful that you have allocated some of your time for participating in my study! I am excited to hear and learn more about your experience. As stated in the study information this interview will be recorded via video if on Zoom or via Voice Memo application if in-person for later transcription. Transcription creates a better opportunity for me to assess the data. Once transcription has been completed, I would be happy to give you a copy of your interview should you wish.

Research Question/Focus

This study looks to gain a better understanding of how adult learners continued their educational journey after the COVID-19 pandemic ended.

Interview Procedures

This interview is estimated to take anywhere between 60 to 90 minutes. During our interview I am going to ask you several questions related to continuing education after the COVID-19 pandemic. If at any point you would like to pause before providing an answer you are welcome to do so, please do not feel pressured or worried about prolonged moments of silence. There may be moments when I ask you to further explain your response, please do not worry, there is no right or wrong answer, I am only seeking clarification, so I have an accurate understanding of what you are sharing with me. If you do not have anything further to add please feel free to say that and we will continue with the interview. From the information I have shared do you feel you are able to participate today and in a setting without distractions?

Thank you for your dedication in this interview process. Is it okay if we get started?

Interview Questions

1. Please share what you selected as a major.
 - a. What factors influenced your choice of this field of study?
 - b. Have your interests in this area changed over time?
 - c. How do you feel this major will assist you moving forward?
2. Please describe the school you are attending and what your experience has been like?
 - a. What led you to choose this particular school?
 - b. How has the school met or not met your expectations so far?
 - c. Is there anything specific about this school compared other schools in the area that caught your attention?
3. What experiences or influences led you to pursue your degree?

- a. Were there particular events, people, or goals that motivated you?
4. What motivates you to pursue higher education?
 - a. Why did you choose to obtain a degree compared to other educational options?
 - b. How does this degree connect to your future goals or personal values?
5. How would you describe the way you balance your student status—whether part-time, full-time, or somewhere in between?
 - a. What factors shaped that decision?
 - b. How has that choice affected your experience?
6. What other roles do you hold outside of being a student?
 - a. How do they shape your life?
 - b. How do those roles interact with or influence your role as a student?
 - c. Do they create challenges, benefits, or both?
7. How would you describe your overall experience as a student in the context of COVID-19 transitions?
 - a. What was it like for you when your courses transitioned after COVID-19?
 - b. What types of support—formal or informal—did you experience from your institution during this time?
 - c. How would you describe your experience receiving support from your instructors?
 - d. What was it like trying to access the materials you needed for your coursework after COVID-19 changes?
 - e. How would you describe your interactions with classmates during this period?
 - f. What experiences stand out when you sought or received support outside of the classroom?
 - g. What factors made it easier or harder for you to complete your coursework on time?
8. Please share an example of a time when something related to your institution affected the quality of your classwork—for better or worse?
 - a. What about that experience stands out to you now?
 - b. How did you respond to it?
9. Please describe a situation where the actions or approach of an instructor influenced your learning experience.
 - a. How did that impact the way you engaged with the classwork?
10. In what ways, if any, do you feel your identity as a rural adult learner influenced your educational experience after COVID-19?
 - a. Please share an example that illustrates this?
11. Looking back, what differences do you notice between your experience and that of peers who weren't rural adult learners?
 - a. What stands out most clearly to you?
12. What kinds of services or support do you think could have made a meaningful difference in your educational journey after COVID-19?
 - a. What gaps do you wish had been addressed?
 - b. What support did you appreciate most, even if limited?

- c. Please share any areas where you felt support was lacking.
- 13. Please share anything else about your experience continuing your education post-COVID-19 that feels important to share?
- 14. Please share any further information you feel would help your capture experience more fully.

Appendix B - Student Recruitment Message

Greetings (First Name),

My name is Elle House, and I am the Director of Academic Services for a local nonprofit organization. I am also a doctoral student in the Adult Learning and Leadership program at Kansas State University. I have served students within the higher educational setting for over fourteen years. While I am passionate about helping students on their collegiate journey, I want to understand the experiences of rural adult learners as they continued their academic journey after the COVID-19 pandemic. To gain this insight, I am conducting a research study to obtain data related to the different experiences of rural adult learners.

Your experience and insight regarding your experience will provide a wealth of knowledge to me and your inclusion in my study will contribute to the understanding of what the educational transition after COVID-19 protocols was like for rural adult learners. If you elect to participate in this study the following is what you can expect:

- One interview, either virtually one-on-one or in-person with me, will last between 60 to 90 minutes. An additional interview, if needed, will be requested in October and November.
- Interviews that take place one-on-one in person will have the audio recorded.
- Interviews that take place on Zoom will be recorded to enable the ability for later transcription.
- All the information you provide will be kept secure and used strictly for research purposes. Any information related to you will be assigned a pseudonym and no one will know the names of study participants, be able to access any audio recording nor view interview transcriptions. The computer used during the study will be password protected, and any physical materials will be stored in a locked safe that only I can access.
- Participation in the study is completely voluntary. You can choose to cease participation and withdraw at any point during the study.

If you would like to participate in this study or if you have any questions related to the processes mentioned please reach out to me using the contact information below and I would be happy to provide any clarity needed. I am excited at the possibility of gaining an insight into your experience as it relates to this study. Your participation will add value to an area of reach that is limited, and I thank you for considering this opportunity!

All the best,

Elle

Appendix C - Institutional Recruitment Message

Dear _____ ,

This is a study I am developing to understand the experiences of rural adult learners as they continued the academic journey after the COVID-19 pandemic. To gain this insight, I am conducting a research study to obtain data related to the different experiences of rural adult learners. I am reaching out to see if you would consider sending this to your alumni listserv. If participants elect to participate in this study the following is what they can expect:

- One interview, either virtually one-on-one or in-person with me, will last approximately 60 to 90 minutes. An additional interview, if needed, will be requested in October and November.
- Interviews that take place one-on-one in person will have the audio recorded.
- Interviews that take place on a free video and audio conferencing software will be recorded to enable the ability for later transcription.
- All information provided will be kept secure and used strictly for research purposes.
- Any information related to you will be assigned a pseudonym and no one will know the names of study participants, be able to access any audio recording, nor view interview transcriptions. The computer used during the study will be password protected, and any physical materials will be stored in a locked safe that only I can access.
- Participation in the study is completely voluntary. Participants can choose to cease participation and withdraw at any point during the study.

Thank you for your consideration,

Elle

Appendix D - Demographic Questionnaire

Kansas State University

Screening Survey for Rural and Non-Traditional Adult Learners

Please answer the following questions to help us better understand your background and educational needs. Your responses are confidential.

1. What is your current age?

☐ Under 18 ☐ 18–24 ☐ 25–34 ☐ 35–44 ☐ 45 and older

2. Do you currently live in a rural area (outside a city or major town)?

☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Not sure

3. Have you ever taken a break from school or college for more than one year?

☐ Yes ☐ No

4. Are you currently employed?

☐ Yes, full-time ☐ Yes, part-time ☐ No

5. Are you a parent or caregiver for children or dependents?

☐ Yes ☐ No

6. What is the highest level of education you have completed?

☐ Less than high school ☐ High school diploma or GED ☐ Some college or technical school

☐ Associate degree ☐ Bachelor's degree or higher

7. Did you grow up in a rural area?

☐ Yes ☐ No

8. What are your primary reasons for pursuing further education? (Select all that apply)

☐ To advance in my current job ☐ To switch careers ☐ Personal growth ☐ To be a role model for my children/family ☐ Other (please specify): _____

9. Do you have reliable access to the internet and a computer or device for learning?

☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Sometimes

10. What are your biggest challenges in continuing your education? (Select all that apply)

☐ Time management ☐ Family responsibilities ☐ Work schedule ☐ Internet or technology access ☐ Cost/financial reasons ☐ Transportation ☐ None ☐ Other (please specify): _____

Appendix E - Informed Consent

If you are performing research involving human subjects, it is your responsibility to address the issue of informed consent. This template is intended to provide guidance for crafting an informed consent document. The Committee for Research Involving Human Subjects (IRB) *strongly* recommends that you model your consent form on this template. However, if you choose a different approach, it must contain at a minimum the same elements as this standard version. Language and terminology used in the consent form must be written at no more than the 8th grade level, so that the potential participant can clearly understand the project, how it is going to be conducted, and all issues that may affect his or her participation. In addition, please write the consent form in a manner that addresses your subjects directly instead of writing it in a manner that addresses the University Research Compliance Office directly. *Information on the important issue of informed consent can be found in 45 CFR 46 at <http://www.hhs.gov/ohrp/humansubjects/guidance/45cfr46.html#46.116>. Federal law mandates that all signed and dated informed consent forms be retained by the P.I. for at least three years following completion of the study.*

WAIVER OF INFORMED CONSENT: *There are limited instances where the requirement for a formal informed consent document may be waived or altered by the IRB.*

45 CFR 46 states that “An IRB may waive the requirement for the investigator to obtain a signed consent form for some or all subjects if it finds either:

- 1 That the only record linking the subject and the research would be the consent document and the principal risk would be potential harm resulting from a breach of confidentiality. Each subject will be asked whether the subject wants documentation linking the subject with the research, and the subject’s wishes will govern; or*
- 2 That the research presents no more than minimal risk of harm to subjects and involves no procedures for which written consent is normally required outside of the research context.”*

If a study employs only questionnaires and surveys as the source of their data, it may generally be assumed that to answer and return the questionnaire is an appropriate and sufficient expression of free consent. However, there are circumstances that might call this assumption into question - e.g., teacher-student relationship between the investigator and the subject, etc. However, a statement should be included on the questionnaire or survey form indicating that participation of the subject is strictly voluntary, the length of time reasonably expected to complete the questionnaire or survey form, and that questions that make the participant uncomfortable may be skipped.

Form Content

PROJECT TITLE: Full title of project. If possible, the title should be identical to that used in any funding/contract proposal.

PROJECT APPROVAL DATE/ EXPIRATION DATE: provided in the approval letter, must be in place before distributing to subjects.

LENGTH OF STUDY: Estimate the length of time the subject will be expected to participate.

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR/CO-INVESTIGATOR(S): Must be a regular member of the faculty.

CONTACT DETAILS FOR PROBLEMS/QUESTIONS: Name, phone number and/or email address of the P.I.

IRB CHAIR CONTACT INFORMATION: *For the subject should he/she have questions or wish to discuss on any aspect of the research with an official of the university or the IRB. These are:* Lisa Rubin, Chair, Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects, 203 Fairchild Hall, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS 66506, (785) 532-3224; Brad Woods, Associate Vice President for Research Compliance, 203 Fairchild Hall, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS 66506, (785) 532-3224.

PROJECT SPONSOR: Funding/contract entity.

PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH: Explain in lay terms that this is a research project, and why the research is being done.

PROCEDURES OR METHODS TO BE USED: Explain in lay terms and in language understandable at the 8th grade level how the study is going to be conducted and what will be expected of participants. Tell participants if they will be audio or videotaped, if they will be paid, etc.

ALTERNATIVE PROCEDURES OR TREATMENTS, IF ANY, THAT MIGHT BE ADVANTAGEOUS TO SUBJECT: Explain any alternative procedures or treatments if applicable.

RISKS OR DISCOMFORTS ANTICIPATED: Describe any foreseeable risks or discomforts from the study. If there are no known risks, make a statement to that effect.

BENEFITS ANTICIPATED: Describe any *reasonably expected* benefits from the research to the participant or others from the research.

EXTENT OF CONFIDENTIALITY: Explain how you plan to protect confidentiality.

IS COMPENSATION OR MEDICAL TREATMENT AVAILABLE IF INJURY OCCURS: *In cases where more than minimal risk is involved.*

PARENTAL APPROVAL FOR MINORS: If minors or those who require the approval of a parent or guardian are participants, you should include a space for their consenting signature.

PARTICIPANT NAME/SIGNATURE: Name of research participant and signature.

WITNESS TO SIGNATURE (PROJECT STAFF): Staff signature.

If any of the following content sections do not apply to your research, feel free to delete from the consent form.

PROJECT TITLE:

Explore the rural adult learner experience continuing their education after COVID-19

**PROJECT APPROVAL
DATE:****PROJECT EXPIRATION
DATE:****LENGTH OF
STUDY:****PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR:**

Dr. Susan Yelich-
Biniecki

CO-**INVESTIGATOR(S):**

N/A

**CONTACT DETAILS FOR
PROBLEMS/QUESTIONS:**

Dr. Susan Yelich-Biniecki
785-532-5535
susanyb@ksu.edu

**IRB CHAIR CONTACT
INFORMATION:**

Lisa Rubin, Chair, Committee on Research
Involving Human Subjects
203 Fairchild Hall, Kansas State University,
Manhattan, KS 66506
(785) 532-3224

Brad Woods, Associate Vice President for Research
Compliance
203 Fairchild Hall, Kansas State University,
Manhattan, KS 66506
(785) 532-3224.

**PROJECT
SPONSOR:**

N/A

PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH:

The purpose of this study is to gain a better understanding of the rural adult learner experience continuing their higher educational journey after COVID-19 ended.

PROCEDURES OR METHODS TO BE USED:

This study will consist of a one-on-one interview that will be recorded using Zoom. Should applicants not have Zoom capabilities an in-person interview at the local library will take place. Each interview, regardless of interview format, is expected take between 60 to 90 minutes. Participants will be informed that their participation is strictly voluntary, so no compensation is included. Interview questions will be shared with each participant prior to them signing the consent form. Participants will be provided with a copy of the consent form at least one week prior to the interview. Follow-up questions may occur based on the participants responses to the planned questions provided. An example would be, can you share more about what obstacles you faced completing the coursework online?

BIOLOGICAL SAMPLES COLLECTED (Describe procedure, storage, etc.):

N/A

[Select a statement from the drop down menu]

[Select a statement from the drop down menu]

ALTERNATIVE PROCEDURES OR TREATMENTS, IF ANY, THAT MIGHT BE ADVANTAGEOUS TO SUBJECT:

N/A

RISKS OR DISCOMFORTS ANTICIPATED:

There are no anticipated risks or discomforts to the participants regarding this study. Participation in this study the participants will not have a positive nor negative impact on the participants.

BENEFITS ANTICIPATED:

The benefit of this study is to gain a better understanding of the rural adult learner's educational experience as it relates to the study topic. By gaining an understanding of the rural adult learner experience institutions will have an understanding on how to better serve rural adult learners. Additionally, the study will assist institutions in understanding the services and types of support rural adult learners need to continue their education.

EXTENT OF CONFIDENTIALITY:

No one other than the researcher and graduate student, Elle House, will ever know or gain access to the names of the participants, be able to view, hear any recorded interview file, or be able to locate any of the study's data such as findings or the transcripts to indicate who the individuals were that participated in this research study. Additionally, all the data collected will be stored on a password protected device/computer or stored within a locked safe that only the researcher can access.

[Select a statement from the drop down menu]

IS COMPENSATION OR MEDICAL TREATMENT AVAILABLE IF INJURY OCCURS? ☐ Yes ☒ No

PARENTAL APPROVAL FOR MINORS:

**PARENT/GUARDIAN APPROVAL
SIGNATURE:**

DATE

Terms of participation: I understand this project is research, and that my participation is voluntary. I also understand that if I decide to participate in this study, I may withdraw my consent at any time, and stop participating at any time without explanation, penalty, or loss of benefits, or academic standing to which I may otherwise be entitled.

I verify that my signature below indicates that I have read and understand this consent form, and willingly agree to participate in this study under the terms described, and that my signature acknowledges that I have received a signed and dated copy of this consent form.

(Remember that it is a requirement for the P.I. to maintain a signed and dated copy of the same consent form signed and kept by the participant).

PARTICIPANT NAME:

PARTICIPANT SIGNATURE:

DATE

**WITNESS TO SIGNATURE:
(PROJECT STAFF)**

DATE