

## **ABSTRACT**

Ashley Shivar, WE ARE NOT EIGHTEEN: WELCOMING NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENTS ON CAMPUS (Under the direction of Dr. Heidi Puckett). Department of Educational Leadership, May 2022.

Non-traditional students are quickly becoming the majority on college campuses, with three-fourths of campus populations fitting the definition of a non-traditional student. However, many institutions still lack a tailored orientation model for non-traditional students. This leads to the marginalization of adult learners, distance education students, transfer students, and veterans, creating an “outsider” mentality. This outsider mentality can affect non-traditional student success, causing these students to stop-off or drop-out completely. While much research and program assessment has been conducted around first-generation students and their lack of collegiate knowledge, the same level of attention has not been paid to non-traditional students. Like other four-year institutions, East Carolina University (ECU) focuses orientation efforts on the traditional student population; therefore, this mixed methods study evaluated the current online orientation program for transfer students at East Carolina University using a modified version of Cuseo’s (2015) Self-Assessment Model for Evaluating Orientation Programs in order to expand the discussion around non-traditional student success. The most effective methods for addressing the diversity of incoming non-traditional students were explored through quantitative surveys, semi-structured individual interviews, and focus groups with current non-traditional students attending East Carolina University. The study concluded with suggestions for a new online orientation model specifically catered to non-traditional students. Findings from this project can assist Student Transitions staff at ECU in creating a new online orientation model specifically catered to the growing non-traditional student population, as well as provide suggestions for other four-year institutions’ orientation programs.



WE ARE NOT EIGHTEEN:  
WELCOMING NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENTS ON CAMPUS

A Dissertation

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of Educational Leadership  
East Carolina University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership

by

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## **DEDICATION**

This dissertation is dedicated to my parents who have supported my love of learning since I was young, and who have never stopped me from following my dreams.

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My dissertation committee was instrumental in the completion of this project as I dealt with unforeseen changes. Dr. Puckett, your support and words of encouragement have been a blessing. Your dedication to the program is truly inspiring. Dr. Lewis, there is a possibility I would not be in the program if I had not gotten you for the application interview. Your willingness to help me see how I could fit into this program has forever changed my life and career. Dr. Siegel, your constant questioning has allowed me to not settle for the easy route out in this project. I sincerely thank you. And, Dr. Jessica (Ranero-Ramirez), I am beyond grateful that you agreed to be the 4<sup>th</sup> member of my committee even though you are no longer in the area. I miss working with you, but I am thankful to still have you guiding me.

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Higher education often overlooks the non-traditional student population, considering them to be static characters; yet, non-traditional student populations are the growing majority on college campuses (Chen, 2017). Traditional student populations still receive the most resources, which often feel youth-centric further isolating non-traditional students (Chen, 2017). Stressors relating to “the role of adult identity, the role of self-direction, and the role of life experience” (Chen, 2017, p. 4) cause role strain on non-traditional students. Interfering with the role of adult identity, youth-centric environments can compound a non-traditional student’s feeling of isolation (Chen, 2017). In order for institutions to assist non-traditional students in their effort to achieve academic success, they must understand the barriers this demographic face. As the first formal introduction to campus, orientation sessions are a prime vehicle in aiding non-traditional students by introducing them to the resources needed for success.

In this study, I evaluated the current online orientation program for transfer students at East Carolina University (ECU) looking for evidence of how non-traditional student stressors are mitigated. A key complaint about current new student orientation sessions is that they discourage marginalized students (Acevedo-Gil & Zerquera, 2016). These orientation sessions are often the first formal contact a student has with any post-secondary institution, and while almost all American higher education institutions offer orientation, the process still needs more refinement with non-traditional student populations in mind.

Using a modified version of Cuseo’s (2015) Institutional Self-Assessment Model for Evaluating Orientation Programs (see Appendix C), I performed a formal evaluation of the current transfer orientation, then explored which methods were most effective for addressing the diversity of incoming non-traditional students through focus groups and surveys with current

non-traditional students attending ECU. Ultimately, I presented options for revisions that specifically aid non-traditional students starting their academic career at ECU.

### **Background of the Focus of Practice**

Non-traditional students are typically 24 years old or older (Deil-Amen, 2011; Jesnek, 2012). Many balance full-time employment with part-time enrollment in post-secondary education (Gopalan et al., 2019). They are usually supporting, not only themselves, but also a spouse or dependents (Forbus et al., 2011; Jesnek, 2012; Kasworm, 2014; Kenner & Weinerman, 2011; Knox & Henderson, 2010). They may have been laid off from a job, seeking a change in career, or have served in the military (Langrehr et al., 2015). Many of them are transfer students. Regardless, they have not chosen a typical path to higher education and have different needs compared to a traditional student, or one who continues directly from high school to higher education (Tilley, 2014). As such, services offered by the institution they attend should take into consideration their unique backgrounds (Kenner & Weinerman, 2011; Knox & Henderson, 2010; Wardley et al., 2013). Resources that do benefit the non-traditional student population are often non-existent or cut in budgetary battles within institutions (Chen, 2017).

Approximately 96% of colleges and universities in the United States offer orientation as an option for onboarding new students (Chan, 2017; Koch & Gardner, 2014; Wozniak et al., 2012). Within this 96% differing implementation methods occur (Chan, 2017). A little under half of colleges only offered seated orientation sessions, while barely a third offered only online orientation sessions, and even less offered both delivery methods. In an update to his 2017 research, Chan (2019) indicated that most colleges and universities preferred or only offered seated, mandatory orientation sessions. Additionally, only 10% of those institutions offered a transfer orientation. Chan (2019) argued that more research is needed in the area of transfer and

non-traditional student orientation. In other words, there are multiple options and program designs available to new students across the country, yet many institutions only offer minimal, generic resources for students opting to complete an online orientation. And, those options are far fewer for the non-traditional student population.

With the rapid increase in distance education and movement to online format due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the mere offering of online orientation is not enough to ensure marginalized groups have adequate access to pertinent details regarding their success at the institution. One of the largest struggles facing the non-traditional student population is using academic-related technology (Jesnek, 2012). These online formats are helpful for non-traditional student populations as they desire flexibility to be successful, but these sessions need specific content geared directly toward non-traditional students and their concerns (Jesnek, 2012). Chan (2019) reiterates this in his findings from four-year institutions noting the most frequent agenda items for New Student Orientations at these institutions were social or networking events designed to help freshmen bond to the institution and develop a sense of community. As most non-traditional students are not, by definition, living on campus, the social or networking events may be unappealing (Chan, 2019).

### **Statement of Positionality**

As an academic advisor overseeing New Student Orientation at a highly non-traditional populated institution, I noticed most orientation models do not address key concerns that non-traditional students have regarding their academic success. I have worked with mostly veteran students seeking to further their education upon leaving military service. While I have experience as a staff member at a two-year institution and have witnessed student feedback given at my

institution, I wanted to explore whether all non-traditional students feel marginalized at the four-year institution, specifically related to new student orientation.

### **Context of the Focus of Practice**

This study took place at East Carolina University, a four-year institution located in Greenville, North Carolina. ECU began as East Carolina Teachers' Training School in 1907, made possible by Pitt County's gift of land and \$100,000 (Martin, 2016). Officially opening in October of 1909, East Carolina Teachers' Training School became East Carolina Teacher's College in 1967, before becoming East Carolina University in 1972 when the institution joined the University of North Carolina System (Martin, 2016). For the 2019 academic year, ECU enrolled a total of 28,651 students across its undergraduate and graduate programs. Of specific note are the numbers related to non-traditional populations: 7,706 online only students; 1,320 transfer students from a North Carolina Community College system institution; and 1,838 total new transfer students (East Carolina University, 2020).

At ECU, new students, whether traditional or non-traditional, have historically been given the option of a two-day, in-person orientation or an online orientation. Both orientation options, for students who are attending on-campus classes (pre-COVID-19), are mandatory and require a fee to attend. Non-traditional students currently do not have a direct option for orientation with ECU. There is no orientation model, on-campus or online, specifically for non-traditional students. As such, most choose the online orientation for transfer students as their orientation model. In speaking with the Associate Director of Student Veteran Services at ECU, she revealed most veteran students choose this online option as it is cheaper and easier to attend, but she noted only Veterans Benefits, or how to use a student's Government Issued Bill (G.I. Bill), are covered in that online orientation. The remaining elements of the online orientation are

directed more toward traditional-aged transfer students. These students may have finished one or more semesters at a community college or another institution within a year of transferring. Or, they may be living on campus, have just or recently finished high school, and may have more knowledge regarding what is required to be successful in college, particularly when it comes to academic technology.

It is not just ECU, however, as most American orientation programs cater directly to traditional first-year students. This is understandable as traditional students are their largest population. However, these orientations perpetuate, intentionally or unintentionally, the marginalization of non-traditional students. This is due in part to the history of orientation programs as having been faculty-driven without student input (Mack, 2010), leading to “one-size fits all” programs, including events such as placement testing, registration, campus tours, and introductions to faculty, staff, and fellow students (Koch & Gardner, 2014). These sessions often omit other elements that might positively impact marginalized demographics and negatively affect student success as they are not designed around equity; they are designed for one student population—the traditional student.

As ECU’s transfer orientation is not a new program, a brief assessment of the program sought observable changes for the non-traditional student population who have participated in the program. The current transfer orientation model is used for all non-traditional students. Using the literature review presented in Chapter Two, the current model was examined to see if it is built to ease transitional stressors. This was completed by addressing the five most noted concerns revealed in the literature: how credits transfer, academic expectations, time and stress management, using technology for education, and how to access resources on campus.

For purposes of this study, traditional students were recent high school graduates or individuals in the age range of 18-24 without prior college experience as based on an updated definition of the term by Deil-Amen (2011) among other scholars (Chung et al., 2017; Gopalan, 2019; Kasworm, 2014; Kenner & Weinerman, 2011; Robinson, 2019). A non-traditional student is anyone not in the former category but is broadly defined as a student over the age of 25 (Jesnek, 2012; Wardley et al., 2013). This includes adult learners, distance education students, transfer students, and veteran students. Non-traditional students face the following specific issues when transferring to the four-year institution: difficulty in transferring credits, difficulty in achieving academic success, and failure to integrate socially (Laanan, 2007; Townsend & Wilson, 2009; Wheeler, 2019). They also have a greater possibility of outside stressors, such as financial concerns or familial obligations, interfering with their academics (Gopalan et al., 2019; Kasworm, 2014; Kenner & Weinerman, 2011). While non-traditional students may struggle culturally as they are not necessarily familiar with the culture of the four-year institution, Chung et al. (2017) note non-traditional students often outperform traditional students with a greater ability of overcoming stressors.

In 2019, orientation models for ECU served 5,466 freshmen, with 4,366 of those students being full-time, first-year students (East Carolina University, 2020), or the population catered to in traditional orientation models. In 2019, ECU also had 7,706 total distance education students, 1,320 students transferring from a North Carolina Community College system institution, 153 students transferring from another University of North Carolina system institution, and 102 students transferring from a North Carolina private institution (East Carolina University, 2020). The number of non-traditional students who may be missing out on resources that could alleviate

transition-related struggles is enough to warrant a specialized orientation session for non-traditional students.

While orientations do exist for transfer students entering ECU, the deadline for transfer applications for fall 2020 was June 29, 2020, with orientation closing on July 30, 2020 (East Carolina University, 2020). This gave little time for all transfer students to complete orientation. Additionally, as noted by Office of Student Transitions staff, many non-traditional students feel uncomfortable coming to campus for an orientation session. These students participate in the online model which does not assist in the transfer process as well as seated options. For example, veteran students lose out on vital information by choosing the online orientation which, according to the Associate Director for Student Veteran Services, only speaks to utilizing a student's G.I. Bill benefits as part of reaching veteran students. Other non-traditional students may not be able to afford the two-day, in-person orientation. Due to financial strain or losing leave time, these students choose the online option as it is cheaper and does not require them to take off of work. This can add to transitional frustrations as a large concern for non-traditional students is technology (Kasworm, 2014; Robinson, 2019). Non-traditional students are likely to understand technology as used for entertainment but not necessarily for academia (Robinson, 2019).

Additionally, for those non-traditional students participating in distance education, ECU's Distance Education orientation model is not mandatory, leaving those who are unable or choose not to participate without any resources moving into their first semester at ECU (East Carolina University, 2020). While ECU does have an online transfer orientation in place, assessing its existing structural components informed how the session could reach more students and what current parts were effective.

## **Focus of Practice Statement**

Many institutions lack a tailored orientation model based on the non-traditional student definition. Like other four-year institutions, East Carolina University focuses orientation efforts on the traditional student population. This study evaluated the current online orientation program for transfer students at East Carolina University (ECU) using a modified version of Cuseo's (2015) Self-Assessment Model for Evaluating Orientation Programs, then explored which methods were most effective for addressing the diversity of incoming non-traditional students through focus groups and surveys with current non-traditional students attending East Carolina University, and, ultimately, presented options for revisions that specifically aid non-traditional students starting their academic career at ECU.

## **Purpose of the Study**

Many institutions lack a tailored orientation model based on the non-traditional student definition. Like other four-year institutions, East Carolina University focuses orientation efforts on the traditional student population. This study evaluated the current online orientation program for transfer students at East Carolina University (ECU) using a modified version of Cuseo's (2015) Institutional Self-Assessment Model for Evaluating Orientation Programs, then explored which methods are most effective for addressing the diversity of incoming non-traditional students through focus groups and surveys with current non-traditional students attending East Carolina University, and, ultimately, presented options for revisions that specifically aid non-traditional students starting their academic career at ECU.



## **Guiding Questions**

To answer the guiding questions, I used a mixed-method design consisting of focus groups and quantitative surveys, as well as a program assessment of ECU's current online transfer orientation:

1. What is the current status of ECU's orientation program option for non-traditional students based on an evaluation utilizing a modified version of Cuseo's assessment model?
2. How do non-traditional students at ECU perceive the current orientation program?
3. According to current non-traditional students, what aspects of an updated orientation program play a role in addressing the components of non-traditional struggle?

## **Overview of Inquiry**

Because I am not an employee of ECU, I chose a mixed-methods study to allow for a more flexible option for collecting data. A mixed-method study is one that utilizes at least one quantitative method and one qualitative method to analyze and interpret data collection (Creswell, 2007). Using a sequential mixed-methods design, I began with a quantitative survey to provide baseline data regarding orientation attendance of non-traditional students at ECU, as well as the perceived effectiveness by non-traditional students. Afterward, I was able to analyze the data collected in the survey through focus groups. The use of qualitative focus groups garnered more detailed research. Mixed-method studies allow for a comparison of quantitative and qualitative data, so any contradictions I would not know as a non-employee were revealed. This study design also allowed for triangulation of data, alleviating bias. It also helped to strengthen both models by elaborating results and developing each model further (Creswell, 2007).

Phase I consisted of a formal assessment of ECU's current online transfer orientation program, as well as a quantitative student survey. These instruments addressed the first guiding question: "What is the current status of ECU's orientation program option for non-traditional students based on an evaluation utilizing a modified version of Cuseo's assessment model?". As an outsider, I needed to first investigate what is offered within the current online orientation and how or whether it addressed the major issues surrounding non-traditional students, including difficulty in transferring credits, difficulty in achieving academic success, and failure to integrate socially (Laanan, 2007; Townsend & Wilson, 2009; Wheeler, 2019). I wanted to see if the current online orientation addressed the possibility of outside stressors, such as financial concerns or familial obligations that may be interfering with a non-traditional student's academics. The formal assessment directly involved my inquiry partners as I had the current Office of Student Transitions staff answer the survey, giving their feedback on what is currently working and what could be assisted by my study.

Cuseo's Institutional Self-Assessment Model for Evaluating Orientation Programs (see Appendix C) provides a structure for evaluating the quality of NSOs through the use of 10 questions that seek whether an orientation is personalized, treating students as individuals. To do this, Cuseo (2015) inquires what students are oriented to, if it is university staff and faculty or just university policies. I used Cuseo's questions as a guide for the formal assessment and revised them to reflect the online orientation model being observed.

Phase II included data collection in response to the second guiding question, "How do non-traditional students at ECU perceive the current orientation program?". To answer this question and collect this baseline data, I conducted two focus groups and four semi-structured individual interviews. The survey allowed me to reach the largest number of non-traditional

students willing to participate in my study at ECU, as well as locate participants for the focus groups. Of this demographic, I ascertained if they participated in the online orientation upon entering ECU, what they gained from attending that orientation, and what they would have liked to see in their online orientation session. The answer to these questions allowed me to address how the current transfer orientation can be improved to offer an updated formal introduction to the college with more specialized information for non-traditional students. Paired with the survey, the focus groups and interviews allowed me to provide a comfortable environment where non-traditional students could open up more freely about their experiences. I chose this model specifically to alleviate veteran student apprehension. Though I have worked with veteran students at my current institution, I am not a veteran myself; therefore, the focus group model allowed for this particular subset of non-traditional students to feel more comfortable with the interview process.

Phase III was planned to involve revising the current transfer orientation to create a new, online orientation model specifically for non-traditional students. Instead, suggestions for design revision were planned with the academic and social integration of the non-traditional population at the university while focusing on answering the third guiding question, “According to current non-traditional students, what aspects of an updated orientation program play a role in addressing the components of non-traditional struggle?”. These suggestions were presented to the Office of Student Transitions as well as ECU “at large.”

### **Inquiry Partners**

I partnered with the Office of Student Transitions at East Carolina University to conduct this study. Because I am employed at another institution, my specific inquiry partners were important as they had access and authority at the institution that I did not possess. Preliminary

meetings took place with the Director of the Office of Student Transitions as well as with the Associate Director of Student Veteran Services.

This study should continue to directly benefit not only the Office of Student Transitions at ECU, but allow for pertinent data to be shared with the Office of First-Year Experience at the institution. As such, the Office of Student Transitions was continually asked for feedback and kept up to date with progress of the study. Not only did the Director and Associate Director give me direct permission to research within their department, they were both active participants as the study moved forward.

Specifically, I planned to include the staff of the office to complete Phase I of the study by having them complete the modified Cuseo Assessment Model. I planned to provide feedback in the form of summaries of Phases I and II to the Director and Associate Director before moving to Phase III. I hoped my research would allow the Office of Student Transitions to better their current orientation offerings. Therefore, keeping in touch with my inquiry partners as I moved through the study was important to make sure, as an outsider, my design suggestions were usable at the institution.

### **Theoretical Foundation**

The theoretical framework for this study is built on three researchers' work focused on transitioning to higher education. Specifically, I used Astin's (1999) Theory of Student Involvement, Schlossberg's (2011) Transitions and Mattering and Marginality (Schlossberg, 1981) theories, and Tinto's (1987, 1998, 2017) research on integration. According to Astin (1999), Schlossberg (2011), and Tinto (1987, 1998, 2017), transitional stressors and integration, or a lack thereof, into the institution community can interfere with student success; therefore, any resources that would aid in community integration for non-traditional students should be

included in an online orientation. These theories are tied to the focus of practice's guiding questions as they explore how non-traditional students perceive their role at ECU. This theoretical framework is explored more in Chapter Two.

### **Definition of Key Terms**

Key terms were defined as follows to ensure clarity of the information presented throughout the study.

*First-Year Experience (FYE)* - refers to all academic and extra-curricular initiatives created to enhance a student's first year attending an institution to increase retention. Most FYEs include an orientation to the college as well as a First-Year Seminar (Koch & Gardner, 2014).

*First-Year Seminar (FYS)* - a course occurring within a student's first year at an institution with the express purpose of assisting the student in acclimating to the collegiate community (Koch & Gardner, 2014).

*Non-Traditional Students* - students who are above the average age range of 18-24/25. Non-traditional students do not go directly from high school to a two- or four-year institution. They usually are working part- or full-time, as well as caring for a spouse or dependent (Chung et al., 2017; Deil-Amen, 2011; Kasworm, 2014; Sims & Barnett, 2015).

*Orientation* - session occurring before a student enters the classroom. Orientation sessions should set students up for success at the institution. Session content varies between four-year institutions and two-year institutions but usually includes an overview of the college campus and available resources (Boening & Miller, 2005).

*Traditional Students* - recent high school graduates who live on campus and attend four-year institutions. However, with the rise in popularity of the community college, traditional

students have the added defining characteristic of living on campus and being under 24 years of age (Deil-Amen, 2011).

### **Assumptions**

In this study, there was an assumption that this research would be useful to ECU and the Office of Student Transitions. Second, this study assumed a non-traditional orientation was needed or would assist in the success of the identified population. Third, I assumed the participants would answer the survey honestly and volunteer in sufficient numbers to participate in the focus groups. Lastly, it was assumed that the non-traditional students will self-identify in the baseline survey.

### **Scope and Delimitations**

Delimitations of this study relate to its setting. The study took place at East Carolina University in eastern North Carolina. As such, there still may be issues that non-traditional students face in other parts of the state or the country that were not addressed in this study. Additionally, my study took place over a short period of time, focusing solely on the orientation experience of non-traditional students, not their entire academic career. It also only engaged the students who provided me with their informed consent.

The study was bound by the non-traditional population as defined by their age, those over 24 years of age (Chung et al., 2017; Deil-Amen, 2011; Kasworm, 2014; Sims & Barnett, 2015). At ECU, this included adult learners, distance education students, transfer students, and veteran students. Each of these four groups has their own unique needs regarding entering the institution, but my research sought to inform plans to create an orientation model that would assist all four of these non-traditional demographics as a vehicle of equity. However, data was planned to be reported for each group as individual entities for purposes of my stakeholders, and to see if each

group is served best by grouping underneath the non-traditional student title or by addressing each population separately.

### **Limitations**

In early March 2020, ECU students were getting ready for Spring Break trips. Yet, globally, cases of coronavirus, formally known as COVID-19, were growing exponentially (Emmett, 2020). At the same time, North Carolina's Governor Roy Cooper ordered all K-12 schools to close for two weeks (NC Governor Roy Cooper, 2020a). As a result of the closure and limit on gatherings, ECU expanded spring break, giving students time to exit the campus and faculty time to prepare to switch all course delivery methods to an online format in preparation for Governor Cooper's Stay at Home order beginning March 30<sup>th</sup> and lasting 30 days (NC Governor Roy Cooper, 2020b). All of this occurred during the planning stages of my study's proposal, creating restrictions on ECU's campus and effectively changing how ECU preferred to complete orientation for new students.

The impacts of COVID-19 on ECU's campus continue today. The fall 2020 semester saw two weeks of students on campus before remote instruction was required once again to cull the spread of the virus (News Services, 2020a). The spring 2021 semester looked to begin January 19<sup>th</sup> and end April 27<sup>th</sup> with no Spring Break, limited on-campus residents, and limited face to face courses (News Services, 2020b). The effects of these restrictions limited my number of participants and potentially skewed their responses.

Further research into the experiences of non-traditional students onboarding to campuses was needed to give a conclusive result to generalize how orientation models affect non-traditional students longitudinally. In the current research, many studies regarding how non-

traditional students acclimate to higher education have occurred outside of the United States and were deemed not applicable to my study.

Additionally, non-traditional students may not want to appear different or as if they were struggling in adapting to a new environment; therefore, this population potentially answered survey and focus group questions with a more positive spin than is factual. This was planned to be alleviated by multiple focus group meetings in order to create relational trust between myself and the participants in order to get more realistic feedback.

### **Significance of the Study**

Currently, non-traditional students attending East Carolina University are not mandated to complete orientation if they do not plan to attend classes on campus. Additionally, they often choose the online orientation option alleviating any anxiety that would occur by attending a seated orientation session. By conducting this study, I hoped to create suggestions for a more equitable online orientation session, advancing welcoming services for non-traditional students. A revised session would help non-traditional students integrate into the ECU community both socially and academically.

Globally, Chan (2019) notes the lack of research into non-traditional student orientation programs, while Sims and Barnett (2015) note the absence of non-traditional students from the literature on diversity. This study, though small, hoped to add to the growing conversation on non-traditional students.

### **Advancing Equity and Social Justice**

While much research surrounds first-year experiences, it is focused on the traditional student attending a four-year institution. This study hoped to create a replicable example of how to include non-traditional students in orientation by adding to the resources currently available at



ECU. Because non-traditional students may not have child care, time off work, or financial resources to attend an in-person orientation session, those minoritized based on socioeconomic statuses or age group are missing out on valuable resources to assist in their success. These students are not receiving an orientation session that is robust; they are receiving an online session that gives them the information but does not allow for interaction or integration to the community.

Nationally, non-traditional students are missing from the bulk of literature on diversity, though their experiences are similar to those of minority students (Sims & Barnett, 2015). Langrehr et al. (2015) state, “Non-traditional students are consistently marginalized based on their inaccurate depictions in higher education research” (p. 876). The dictionary definition of “marginalized” refers to those who are treated as insignificant or peripheral (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). As the targeted demographic for this stereotypical collegiate experience is the traditional student, non-traditional students often feel they are insignificant and/or peripheral to the four-year institution. This feeling is further exacerbated by the lack of literature including non-traditional students in the conversation on diversity (Sims & Barnett, 2015). Stereotypically, non-traditional students are, and have been, viewed as at risk regarding academic performance (Langrehr et al., 2015).

### **Advances in Practice**

This study hoped to create an online orientation model that could be utilized to assist non-traditional students as they onboard to the four-year institution in order to alleviate transitional stressors. As the struggles facing non-traditional students are universal, I hoped this model would be moldable for other four-year institutions, or two-year institutions, to welcome

non-traditional students to campus. While the study did not yield a fully-developed model, it did provide usable suggestions for revision of the current model.

### **Summary**

To create an equitable on-boarding experience for non-traditional students, this study gathered data on the specific needs of non-traditional students to create and implement a new online orientation model that would positively affect the academic career of the specified population. Chapter Two introduces relevant literature to provide context to the background of the study, as well as introduces information on theories framing this study—Astin’s (1999) Theory of Student Involvement, Schlossberg’s (2011) Transitions and Mattering and Marginality (Schlossberg, 1981) theories, and Tinto’s (1987, 1998, 2017) research on integration.

## **CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

The purpose of this mixed methods study was threefold. I planned to evaluate the current online orientation program for transfer students at East Carolina University (ECU). Then, I explored which methods are most effective for addressing the diversity of incoming non-traditional students. And lastly, I presented an online orientation program option specifically aiding non-traditional students joining the ECU community.

This chapter begins with a discussion of the theoretical frameworks supporting the study: Astin's (1999) Theory of Student Involvement, Schlossberg's (2011) Transitions and Mattering and Marginality (Schlossberg, 1981) theories, and Tinto's (1987, 1998, 2017) research on integration. Then, it explores the definition and types of non-traditional students. Finally, new student orientation and its relation to student success is explored, including barriers for non-traditional students and access and equity as it relates to student success.

### **Theoretical Foundation**

Using a theoretical foundation based on Schlossberg's Mattering and Marginality and Transition theories, Astin's Theory of Involvement, and Tinto's Integration and Departure Theories, the importance of specialized orientation for non-traditional students was confirmed. All of these student development theories discuss the importance of how a student successfully transitions and integrates into a campus with minimal negative effects.

### **Schlossberg's Transition Model**

Beginning with the idea that individuals react differently to change, either from others or within themselves, Schlossberg created a model to assist in understanding and helping individuals in transition. She posits it is not the actual transition that affects an individual but the context surrounding it (Schlossberg, 1981). Ultimately, an individual adapts or fails to adapt

based on the context of the transition. Schlossberg (1981) defines transition as when “an event or non-event results in a change in assumptions about oneself and the world and thus requires a corresponding change in one’s behavior and relationships” (p. 5). Individuals respond to these transitions positively or negatively based on their resources and ability to integrate the transition into their life. Factors affecting the adaptation of the individual include an individual’s characteristics as well as their pre and post transition environment. Specifically, aspects such as age or socio-economic status can affect an individual’s ability to adapt (Schlossberg, 1981).

Schlossberg’s (2011) examination of role change, while applicable to all non-traditional student populations, is especially pertinent to the veteran student population. All transitions take time; they are not instantaneous; therefore, Schlossberg created her four “S’s” to assist in understanding how individuals react to transition. The four “S’s” refer to situation, self, support, and strategy (Schlossberg, 2011).

Situations may include other contextual stressors. For non-traditional students, they may elect to be a new student, but this may also mean they have transitioned from fully employed to retired or fired or breadwinner to dependent. For a veteran student, they may see the length of time it takes to get their GI Bill funds into their account, or the prolonged process of getting admitted to the college, as a lack of accountability on the part of the institution (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015).

Self refers to the individual’s inner strength and coping mechanisms. This differs from individual to individual and explains the variance in reactions to transition (Schlossberg, 2011). For veteran students, the need for counseling regarding service-related issues, such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, can often be overlooked in post-secondary education as many

institutions, especially community colleges, lack mental health professionals on campus (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015).

Support refers to an individual's support system. Depending on how the individual arrived at the transition, they may have no support system in place. Without a support system, the transition becomes more difficult (Schlossberg, 2011). Non-traditional students may feel as though they are outsiders on a college campus due to their age or social status (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015).

Strategy involves how an individual attempts to cope with the transition. An individual who utilizes multiple coping strategies is likely to be more successful at weathering the transition (Schlossberg, 2011). For non-traditional students, the dissemination of information becomes a largely important coping strategy on campus (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015). Schlossberg (2011) designed the four "S's" to not only inform and describe how an individual copes with transition but to also operate as an initial tool for those considering a transition.

Schlossberg's theory discusses transitions as they are perceived by the individual. This includes anticipated and unanticipated transitions as well as non-events (Patton et al., 2016). Anticipated transitions are most closely associated with students entering an institution as students *choose* to attend a two- or four-year college. The transition is anticipated, not thrust upon the student. Non-traditional students may have a unique cultural capital according to social identity theories but be tied to a specific location as far as college choice and/or access (Patton et al., 2016). Therefore, the college they attend due to geographical constraints may not align with their needs or cultural capital, creating a more difficult transition. And, based on their situation, self, and setting, according to Schlossberg (2011), even though they want to transition to student, they may not have the skills to positively cope with the effects of the transition.

Transition theory also includes context and impact. Context refers to the setting of the transition, while impact refers to the degree to which an individual's life is altered (Patton et al., 2016). All first-year students may experience a large degree of impact as transitioning to college can have both positive and negative stressors. Non-traditional students, especially veterans, experience a larger amount of stress associated with the transition and are less likely to receive the support they need to be successful. This is especially complicated by the move from a rigid structure in military service, where a service member would be given direction for all decisions, to a structure where the decisions are up to them (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015).

Because the Post 9/11 GI Bill led to an increase in veterans (or their dependents) attending college, this becomes a pertinent issue to any college campus (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Ryan et al., 2001). Currently, the likelihood of these students finishing their degrees is tied to their preparedness to enter college (Ryan et al., 2001). Many institutions do not have a veteran-specific orientation, and many do not have staff and/or faculty trained to understand the unique needs of veteran students transitioning from service to student (Ryan et al., 2001). This is a common complaint from veteran students that needs to be addressed.

Non-traditional students, including veterans, face a large degree of stress related to transitioning to the two- or four-year institution. Using Schlossberg's model to frame an implementation that provides strategies based on a non-traditional student's situation and self will add support to help non-traditional students succeed.

### **Schlossberg's Mattering and Marginality**

Schlossberg's transition theory garners more popularity among scholars, yet her theory of mattering and marginality tailors more to the college population (Rayle & Chung, 2007). In the transition from high school to college, students doubt their roles and abilities which can lead to

the feeling of not fitting in or mattering. The effects of feeling marginalized, or as if they do not matter, can have a negative effect on students leading to academic failure or depression (Patton et al., 2016; Rayle & Chung, 2007). The same skills that first-year students lack that may lead to attrition are also ones that non-traditional students may struggle with—stress and time management. Without coping skills, students struggle with fitting into their new environment. When students feel appreciated, they perform better academically; when students feel isolated and alone, they perform worse academically and most likely do not persist into their second semester or year (Rayle & Chung, 2007).

While all students may feel marginalized in their first year, those who are already minoritized may become permanently stuck in the transition feeling as though they do not matter and do not fit in (Rayle & Chung, 2007). Educators and administrators have a responsibility to alleviate or lessen the negative effects associated with mattering and marginality. This idea is often overlooked regarding non-traditional, specifically veteran, students.

### **Astin's Theory of Involvement**

Astin (1999) describes his theory as a simple means for discussing student involvement for ease of use by both researchers and college professionals. He clearly defines involvement as “the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience (p. 518); further stating students who are involved are both academically and socially active on campus. By viewing synonyms and varying denotations for involvement, Astin (1999) emphasizes the term is active in nature and related to behavior more than motivation.

Astin's (1999) five basic postulates include the definition for involvement listed above, plus the ideas that involvement is specific to the student, can be quantitative or qualitative, is directly linked to learning, and has a direct relationship with institutional policy. Astin believes

colleges may focus more on using theory to create and present practices than actually examining how they work. His examination of Resource Theory closely relates to New Student Orientation as it examines how institutions deem it enough to have resources like a Writer's Center, but do not necessarily examine whether students know the resource exists and use it. In Astin's (1999) interpretation of Resource Theory through the involvement lens, institutions seem to collect resources as a sign of quality yet do not monitor these services. In other words, as long as the institution makes these resources available, their quality and/or usage is inconsequential. Student Involvement Theory, then, promotes the idea of institutions focusing on how student developments can be assisted (Astin, 1999). Every decision an institution makes affects a student's time and energy. The less time or energy a student has, the less like they are to be actively involved.

Astin notes the tendency for students working full-time off-campus to be less involved on campus. This leads to less involvement in a student's academics and reveals a potential barrier to non-traditional student success. Astin (1999) also notes involvement has a direct correlation with how a student identifies in relation to an institution. Students who attend an institution and are able to experience critical mass are more likely to be involved and, as a result, persist. Ultimately, Astin (1999) concludes his Student Involvement Theory can assist in the creation of more effective environments.

Astin (1999) includes pedagogical theories to suggest how students may struggle with involvement within the classroom. He notes many professors prefer basing their courses on the Subject-Matter Theory which relies heavily on lecture and individual study (Astin, 1999). This may inhibit the level of involvement a student, especially a non-traditional one, puts toward a course due to a lack of inherent skills to address how to be successful in such a course. Astin



(1999) also mentions Resource Theory where administrators believe the act of having plenty of resources, such as financial aid and a low faculty-student ratio, is enough to make students successful. However, just having those resources available does not necessarily spell success for non-traditional students.

### **Tinto's Integration and Departure Research**

Around the 1960s, students were blamed for their lack of retention, while the 1970s saw the addition of the institution as a contributing source to student failure or failure to return. Tinto began to look at retention regarding the first year of college to boost retention, exploring the differences between two-year and four-year institutions (Tinto, 2006).

Tinto's model stresses integration of the student into his or her academic environment. If a student is academically and socially integrated into their campus, they are more likely to persist. Therefore, the result of this integration is increased retention. Tinto's Integration Model suggests those students who find autonomy at their institution are more likely to persist, and as a result, succeed (Hagedorn, 2005a). Most recently, Stuart et al. (2014) and Deil-Amen (2011) posited that Tinto's Model could be reformed to address issues outside of the college campus; specifically, the job market (Gopalan et al., 2019; Stuart et al., 2014).

Tinto's first iteration of his theory regarding persistence and integration was created in 1975. Essentially, Tinto argues that students must go through three phases to fully integrate into a campus: separation, transition, and incorporation (Tinto, 1998). Students must separate from their previous lives, then transition into college, and incorporate into the community. By completing these phases, a student is more likely to be successful and persist (Aljohani, 2016; Ashar & Skenes, 1993; Tinto, 1987). In the late 1980s, Tinto revised his earlier Departure Model to include two key aspects of his theory: incongruence and isolation (Ashar & Skenes, 1993;

Tinto, 1987). Incongruence occurs when a student feels at odds with the campus or academic community based on a social interaction. Isolation occurs when there is no social interaction between the student and the campus community. Together, incongruence and isolation represent a lack of integration (Ashar & Skenes, 1993).

In 2017, Tinto revised his model once again by looking at the student as in control of his or her persistence based on motivation, self-efficacy, and a sense of belonging. A student's motivation greatly affects their persistence. If their motivation is weak, such as not being clear on why they are attending college, they are more likely to dropout. This is especially true if they are confronted by any institutional challenge (Tinto, 2017).

After motivation, self-efficacy is the next tenant of Tinto's Integration Model (Tinto, 2017). High self-efficacy leads to persistence. If a student believes they can succeed, they are more likely to do so. On the other hand, low self-efficacy can negatively affect persistence and is especially related to stereotypes (Tinto, 2017). This affects students at the institution if they are reminded of any negative stereotypes regarding a background they are trying to ignore, escape, or avoid. Self-efficacy is a learned behavior; therefore, institutions can affect a student's self-efficacy positively to affect persistence. Institutions must understand that even if a student has high self-efficacy, their self-efficacy and motivation can be affected by challenges they face in the first semester. This is especially pertinent for non-traditional students who face outside challenges to their motivation in the form of employment or familial obligations (D'Amico et al., 2014; Kasworm, 2014; Tinto, 2017).

While scholars such as Braxton et al. (2004) have been quick to dismiss Tinto's Integration Theory as irrelevant to two-year institutions, the idea that students should integrate both academically and socially within their campus still applies. The definition of campus is

being taken too literally, particularly considering the increase in distance education programs. Community colleges lend themselves more to academic integration by their commuter nature. However, community colleges such as LaGuardia Community College and Seattle Community College have found learning communities allow students to have both academic and social integration by creating a unit of students likely to become friends, or at the very least required to work together outside of the classroom, thus creating social integration (Dadgar et al., 2014; Tinto, 1998). With the rise of distance education because of the COVID-19 pandemic, these community college ideals are now more important at the four-year institution.

The revision of Tinto's Integration Model is important as student success is often based on persistence, retention, and completion. Scholars believe not enough institutional awareness exists regarding students' decision making. In other words, colleges ignore the connection between job opportunities and persistence (Gopalan et al., 2019). Yet, if colleges were to tap into this connection, they could increase a student's career capital (Stuart et al., 2014). What this means regarding Tinto's Integration Model is that colleges focus on engagement within the college. Meanwhile, they ignore sociological elements outside of campus which should influence administrative decision making. One such element being that non-traditional persistence has a direct relation to the job market (Stuart et al., 2014).

Tinto's Integration Model also lends to the idea of integration between faculty and staff. Research points to a need for integration between student support services and instruction. Removing the stigma of services such as tutoring or accommodations shows increased success on the part of students. Additionally, collaboration between faculty and staff exhibits a community of inclusion that illustrates a positive campus for students (Dadgar et al., 2014; Kenner & Weinerman, 2011). Students require a sense of belonging to persist at an institution.

This comes in the form of interactions between not only their peers but also the faculty and staff at the institution (Tinto, 2017).

### **Introduction to Non-Traditional Students**

In 2013, it was estimated that traditional student enrollment would depreciate and become static through 2020 (Kasworm, 2014). With that in mind, many institutions began recruitment of more non-traditional students to fill their enrollment gaps. This, however, did not necessarily lead to increased or revised resources for non-traditional students (Kasworm, 2014). Gopalan et al. (2019) defines non-traditional students as “by definition, adult learners but engaged in undergraduate or postgraduate programs generally designed with the traditional student in mind” (p. 570). Though a non-traditional student has come to be defined as any student over the age of 24, growing numbers of non-traditional students have changed the definition of this demographic to include multiple, competing priorities within the students’ lives, not just their age (Chan, 2019; Deil-Amen, 2011; Forbus et al., 2011; Jesnek, 2012; Kasworm, 2014; Kenner & Weinerman, 2011; Knox & Henderson, 2010; Macdonald, 2018). Specifically, non-traditional students may meet one or more of the following defining characteristics: over 24-25 years of age; participating in distance education; are a first-generation student; are a transfer student; are a veteran student; classified as an adult learner or a college returner; married; a caretaker for a spouse, dependent, or parent; working full or part-time; financially responsible or independent; recently laid off; or manages multiple roles (Chan, 2019; Chung et al., 2017; Deil-Amen, 2011; Forbus et al., 2011; Jesnek, 2012; Kasworm, 2014; Kenner & Weinerman, 2011; Knox & Henderson, 2010; Rouborn et al., 2018; Sims & Barnett, 2015; Tilley, 2014).

While defining characteristics of a non-traditional student are important, the working characteristics of non-traditional students are also important to observe. These following characteristics may lead to barriers regarding academic success: a lack of preparatory academic skills; functional/pragmatic knowledge instead of academic knowledge; technologically nervous (Gopalan et al., 2019; Kenner & Weinerman, 2011; Langrehr et al., 2015; Tilley, 2014).

However there are four other working characteristics that can assist a non-traditional student toward academic success; they are experienced, self-directed, motivated, and responsible (Gopalan et al., 2019; Kenner & Weinerman, 2011; Langrehr et al., 2015; Tilley, 2014).

Gopalan et al. (2019) add to the growing illustrative definition of non-traditional students by discussing the idea of students managing multiple roles and competing demands, specifically school, work, and family responsibilities. Using scarcity and enhancement perspectives in describing challenges of non-traditional students having “multiple roles”, Gopalan et al. (2019) posit that students with few or limited resources are more likely to diminish these resources by participating in multiple roles (p. 572). In other words, non-traditional students may be overwhelmed and experience extra stress due to taking on multiple roles. Tilley (2014) previously cited the non-traditional demographic’s “unique needs” that affect a non-traditional student’s daily interactions with institutional staff—in turn affecting how faculty teach and staff advise this population (p. 95).

More specifically, non-traditional students who have significant demands at work which require substantial physical and/or cognitive skills are more apt to experience Work School Conflict (WSC) (Gopalan et al., 2019). WSC may negatively affect both their work and school roles. By contrast, those whose course content matches their current employment may experience Work School Enhancement (WSE). This includes social support at work, which has been shown

to positively affect non-traditional student performance (Gopalan et al., 2019). These two concepts describe how non-traditional students can either negatively or positively experience their time in higher education. The idea of WSC and WSE is important as many non-traditional students may be returning to academia to earn a raise or promotion at their current job. Gopalan et al. (2019) state:

Student satisfaction is not simply a matter of happiness, but a complex evaluation of whether the student attains the expected quality of education expected from their academic institution...Both universities catering for non-traditional students and employers hiring them must be cognizant of the demands associated with fulfilling multiple roles. (p. 574)

In exploring multiple roles, researchers point to non-traditional students usually having their own finances, working full or part-time, and taking care of dependents (Gopalan et al., 2019; Kenner & Weinerman, 2011). Non-traditional students meeting more than one of these criteria are likely to suffer academic shortcomings, ultimately attrition. Current research points to a lack of integration to the institution as a leading factor for non-traditional student attrition (Kasworm, 2014; Kenner & Weinerman, 2011).

Due to the multiple roles non-traditional students take on, Tilley (2014) lists one consistent characteristic of non-traditional students as preferring flexibility regarding their academics. Because many non-traditional students work or take care of families outside of academics, it is important for these students to have options. Awareness of the adult learner and needs, such as flexibility, can assist this demographic in furthering or completing their educational goals (Kenner & Weinerman, 2011). It is also important to recognize that non-traditional students as adult learners have more functional knowledge from work experience.

This pragmatic skill set can cause frustration for non-traditional students when faced with academic tasks that require critical thinking skills and involve more than one “right” answer (Kenner & Weirnerman, 2011).

A lack of flexibility is not the only reason non-traditional students struggle at the four-year institution; they also struggle culturally as they are not necessarily familiar with the culture of the four-year institution (Chung et al., 2017). Noting the resiliency of this population, Chung et al. (2017) remind researchers of the varying definitions of “non-traditional”. Their study found most students identified themselves as non-traditional solely based on being over the age of 25, not identifying with any other non-traditional characteristics (Chung et al., 2017). Yet, it is because of these characteristics, non-traditional students require special attention as new students.

Stressors for non-traditional students, which may result in negative academic performance, include their propensity to attend part-time due to familial or career-related obligations, as well as a lack of financial and emotional support (Kasworm, 2014; Kenner & Weirnerman, 2011). Non-traditional students may also be underprepared for the four-year institution based on first generation status or lack of sufficient preparatory academic skills (Kasworm, 2014) and often lack the cultural or social capital to succeed in education or suffer from transfer shock (Chung et al., 2017; D’Amico et al., 2014; Martin et al., 2014; Umbach et al., 2018). Cultural or social capital refers to the benefits that traditional students have when entering higher education, such as resources surrounding college attendance or family support (Martin et al., 2014). First-generation students, for example, may not aspire to higher education because no one in their family participated in higher education, as mentioned in Braxton’s rebuttal of Tinto’s Integration theory (Braxton et al., 2004; Martin et al., 2014). They also often

lack academic preparedness, but studies have found the use of support services can counter a lack of social capital (Burns, 2010; Martin et al., 2014).

### **Adult Learners**

Adult learners are by nature non-traditional students, defined as those older than 24 years old. With the changing definition of “at-risk” students, adult learners fall into this category for a myriad of reasons. This section explores characteristics of adult learners as a characteristic trait of the non-traditional student to inform what institutions can do to assist in their success.

#### **Characteristics of Adult Learners**

Adult learners share many of the defining and working characteristics of non-traditional students. It is important to remember that traditional students fall into the 18 to 24 year old range and are associated with the stereotypical image of living on-campus, away from parents for the first time (Kenner & Weirnerman, 2011).

Particularly, three groups related to non-traditional students emerged through the research conducted by Kenner and Weirnerman: (1) unemployed or recently laid off, (2) veterans, and (3) GED earners. These three groups became known as “highly non-traditional” students with, perhaps, greater needs as compared to transfer students. In working with these populations of adult learners, focus should include the acknowledgement that they are typically employed full-time, have dependents, and are enrolling part-time. Adult learners, in general, are characterized as responsible, “self-directed”, experienced, eager to learn, and “task-motivated” (Kenner & Weirnerman, 2011). However, with all these positive attributes, there is still high attrition among adult learners due to a lack of successful integration into the collegiate landscape. While non-traditional students have gained “practical knowledge” in their career or while serving overseas, they lack the knowledge that traditional students have built on since graduation, such as critical



thinking skills and adaptability to formal academic instruction (Kasworm, 2014). If colleges can frame an adult learner's reintroduction to higher education based on what benefits they will see directly, their likelihood of persisting and succeeding through completion are much higher (Kenner & Weinerman, 2011). Framing helps non-traditional students as they tend to be goal-oriented (Kenner & Weinerman, 2011).

### ***Adult Learners and Academic Success***

There is a need for institutions to acclimate to the growing number of adult learners (Hagedorn, 2005a, 2005b). Social norms still perpetuate education as for "the young," yet Hagedorn (2005b) lists the current median age of both a four-year and two-year institution attendee as 35.3 and rising. As current as fall 2019, 6.1 million students in post-secondary programs were non-traditional by age (Bustamante, 2019). While the adult learner population has grown, colleges have not addressed the change in their enrollment demographic as catalogs, websites, and admissions policies, including placement testing geared toward traditional students, have not been altered. Wardley et al. (2013) explored the idea of universities marketing toward non-traditional students as the projection between 2007 and 2018 was for non-traditional enrollment numbers to increase. Traditionally, universities market toward the traditional student, and one known factor of attrition in non-traditional students is feeling as though they do not fit into the community or environment (Hagedorn, 2005a, 2005b; Wardley et al., 2013). This can be especially problematic if the branding of the university does not match the actual environment of the university (Wardley et al., 2013).

Adult learners can get "stuck" on their path to achieving academic goals in four areas, according to Hagedorn (2005b): access, success, retention, and institutional accommodation. Due to their multiple roles, adult learners must figure out how to fit education into their lifestyle, not

the other way around (Hagedorn, 2005b; Tilley, 2014). As such, they are more apt to choose institutions offering extended hours for services, such as advising or financial aid. Additionally, they do not mind paying more for education, through for-profit institutions like University of Phoenix, because they need the flexibility of online education (Hagedorn, 2005b). This is unfortunate as some for-profit institutions are not accredited, leading to adult learners wasting their time and money and losing their motivation and momentum.

Surprisingly to some institutional stakeholders, adult learners do not differ from traditionally-aged students regarding their grades, which have become the main way adult learners judge their own success. In fact, adult learners tend to outperform traditional students. While adult learners may view their grades as a measure of success, the institutions generally view success based on retention. Yet, it is important to note that if an adult learner “stops out,” it is not the same as “dropping out”. Drop out students never return to education while stop out students may be taking one semester off to take care of family. These students may return after one semester; they are not leaving education forever. Or, they may be attending multiple institutions in order to fit their unique scheduling needs. In fact, there are increasing numbers of students who are completing reverse transfers or “swirling” through institutions (Hagedorn, 2005b). When reviewing course completion data, adult learners are “out-completing” traditional students (Hagedorn, 2005b). With the success and legitimate retention of adult learners higher than traditional students, institutions are doing a disservice to themselves and adult learners by not acclimating their services to this large population. Specifically, Hagedorn (2005b) suggests more flexible opportunities for adult learners, such as distance education options and part-time enrollment. Institutions could also create cohort classes designed to alleviate any anxiety adult learners may feel based on their age. And, institutions should provide more opportunities to adult

learners to interact with faculty, more opportunities for them to be able to afford their education, as well as additional resources based on their career goals, transfer hopes, and technological needs (Hagedorn, 2005b).

### ***Barriers Affecting Adult Learners***

Personal, professional, and institutional barriers all affect adult learners negatively in relation to higher education. These students may have a fear of failure associated with previous academic experiences which in turn creates issues of access (Ritt, 2008). There are, however, suggestions on how to counteract this. Legislation, web design, credit for prior learning, clearer financial aid processes, clear pathways with flexible options for “life”, and knowledge of the credit-transfer process (on the part of the institution) can all lead to more success for adult learners (Ritt, 2008).

Many of these items are discussed as part of an orientation program for new students, but the amount of information given in a short time span, anywhere from an hour to a half-day, can be incredibly overwhelming for adult learners. At Inver Hills Community College (IHCC), steps were taken to address the issue of “info dump” at orientation (Sutton, 2018). Realizing adult learners, in particular, were overwhelmed with information they did not need yet, and that they had vastly different questions compared to traditional, first-year students, participants were given a survey with a plethora of questions regarding what they expected to be discussed during their orientation session (Sutton, 2018). Adult learners were more concerned with child-care, how to support their families while going to school, and what it is really like in an online classroom (Sutton, 2018). Conversely, what is covered during a typical orientation relates to the needs of traditional students, such as paying for college, making friends, and extracurricular opportunities. The Vice President of IHCC, based on this knowledge, created a main, 45-minute presentation

with specific breakout sections afterward (Sutton, 2018). This resulted in students feeling as though they had control over their own orientation by selecting topics that were relevant to their situations. This ranged from sessions on financial aid and time management to sessions on student clubs relevant to the non-traditional student population. Additionally, IHCC created a separate orientation for transfer students (Sutton, 2018). Ultimately, IHCC's revision to their orientation process catered to different demographics, creating both equity and success.

### **Transfer Students**

In a case study by Townsend (2008), participants who transferred to a four-year institution expressed frustration with the transfer of credit process. Even for students who completed an Associate in Arts or other transfer degree and were granted junior status, many still were unsure of their transfer credit status as they had to apply separately to their major. Until these students met with an advisor for their chosen major, they may not know which of their previous classes transfer and count toward their degree at the four-year institution (Townsend, 2008). Additionally, many of these students did not know they needed to initiate an appointment with an advisor until they were into their second semester (Townsend, 2008).

Transfer students in Townsend's (2008) study also noted being grouped with first year students as problematic. Though they had experience as a college student, and were successful in their last institution, they still felt like a freshman again. While they needed the same information regarding the campus as a first-year traditional student, they did not want to be joined to first-year students who knew nothing about college (Townsend, 2008). Essentially, Townsend's (2008) participants alluded to suffering from transfer shock by mentioning issues such as adapting to the rigor of the four-year institution courses and the "impersonal attitude" (p. 5) of faculty and staff.

The participants in Townsend's (2008) study suggested the following to aid in the transfer transition: knowing in advance about their transfer credits, an orientation session geared toward non-traditional students, peer leaders, chances to get to know one another and to know faculty cared about them, priority in parking and/or a transfer specific residence hall.

### **Guided Pathways**

Wheeler (2019) studied how Guided Pathways could extend beyond the community college to assist transfer students at four-year institutions. Initially created in 2015, Guided Pathways aimed to ease the transfer from a two-year to four-year institution by taking away the plethora of options available to students at a community college and giving them specific choices related to their intended majors (Wheeler, 2019). Wheeler (2019) notes out of a total of 13,000 transfer students surveyed, 7,540 did not get 90% or more of their credits transferred to the four-year institution, prolonging degree completion and success for transfer students at four-year institutions.

Wheeler (2019) suggests using the Guided Pathways model to inform transfer orientation through four steps: "clarify paths to student end goals, help students choose and enter pathway, help students stay on path, and ensure that students are learning" (pp. 277-278). These four steps mirror the needs of transfer students at a four-year institution seeking to socially integrate into the campus. By making sure students know what courses are required to complete their major and what has already transferred, potentially by use of an electronic transfer portfolio, advisors and orientation staff can make sure to intentionally advise transfer students at orientation (Wheeler, 2019). Additionally, by utilizing transfer peer leaders related to the student's major, orientation can further assist in the social integration of transfer students to the four-year

institution (Wheeler, 2019). To make sure the orientation model is effective, informal and formal program assessments can be conducted in addition to quantitative research (Wheeler, 2019).

### **Veteran Students**

Within the non-traditional population, veterans, particularly those from the Iraq and Freedom War(s) are a large and unique population with specific needs. Because this population is more likely to suffer from PTSD or high levels of anxiety, orientation programming should consider adverse reactions to large crowds or an abundance of noise. Also, many veterans struggle with adjusting between the rigid scheduling of the military and what they view as the “lax” academic environment (Jesnek, 2012). The transition to civilian life often occurs parallel to entering or re-entering higher education (Jenner, 2017). This double-transition poses many barriers to veteran student success, potentially resulting in attrition (Jenner, 2017).

### ***Veterans and Higher Education***

The relationship between the military and higher education dates to the creation of the Morrill Land-Grant Act in 1862. The Morrill Act provided land for colleges to focus on agriculture and “mechanic arts”, but it also required colleges receiving money from the federal government to offer military training (Cohen & Kisker, 2010; Jones, 2016). In 1916, the National Defense Act led to the implementation of the Reserve Officers Training Corps (ROTC) on college and university campuses. Then, the largest effect on higher education came from the introduction of the GI Bill. Shortly after, in 1947, veterans made up nearly half of campus enrollments, changing the landscape of higher education significantly (Cohen & Kisker, 2010; Jones, 2016).

### ***Government Issue Bills***

The first GI Bill was created after the end of World War II to counteract any economic downfall. With great results, 37% of the 16 million men returning from service used the benefits by 1954 (McKinnon-Crowley et al., 2019), with most universities averaging half of their enrollment as veterans. The next iteration of the GI Bill came in the form of the post-Korean War GI Bill, which doubled the years from a veteran's end of active service to use the benefits, from five to 10 years (Jones, 2016). Surprisingly, the number of veterans using the post-Korean War GI Bill was far less than the WWII version with 10% or less of campus populations containing veterans (Cohen & Kisker, 2010; Jones, 2016).

During the Korean and Vietnam War eras, many veterans were the focus of protests, leading them to hide their post-military status, and many students were using higher education to defer the draft. These factors played a role in less accurate tracking of veterans attending higher education, which may or may not have led to the dip in campus veteran populations (Cohen & Kisker, 2010; Jones, 2016).

In 1985, the Montgomery GI Bill (MGIB) continued to supply benefits to veterans with the addition of full-time benefits and the inclusion of National Guard and Reserve service members (Jones, 2016). The purpose of the MGIB was to recruit service members as the draft ended and the military was becoming a volunteer only force (Jones, 2016). In 2009, the Post 9/11 GI Bill was implemented granting a book stipend and housing costs in addition to tuition, making this version the most "generous" of all the GI Bills (Jones, 2016). To date, the Post 9/11 GI Bill has awarded \$20 billion dollars in benefits (Cohen & Kisker, 2010; Jones, 2016).

### ***Veteran Students and Academic Success***

As discussed by McKinnon-Crowley (2019), students who have access to Government Issue Bill (GI Bill) funding are more successful than those who do not (McKinnon-Crowley et al., 2019). This is most likely a correlation between the age of those using a GI Bill versus those who do not, i.e. non-traditional versus traditional students; however, not every iteration of the GI Bill has led to boosts in enrollment and student success. Veterans continue to face barriers and challenges when attempting to further their education, including paying for college, refining necessary academic skills before entering college-level classes, and responsibilities outside of the classroom (Jenner, 2017). These, of course, are the same stressors many non-traditional, non-veteran students face upon entering the four-year institution.

However, veteran students tend to value success differently; they look past GPA to measure social interactions and their relationships with faculty (Blaauw-Hara, 2016). While institutions have empathy toward veteran students, programs and initiatives created focus on deficits rather than strengths veterans bring to the classroom. In addition to their diverse world view, veterans tend to finish courses at a greater rate than traditional students (Blaauw-Hara, 2016).

### ***Veteran Students as Non-Traditional***

Veteran students may meet any four of the five key elements identifying a non-traditional student: they are generally over 24 years of age, are supporting a spouse and other dependents, are financially independent, are working full-time while acting as a part-time student, and may be a single parent (Deil-Amen, 2011; Jesnek, 2012; Langrehr et al., 2015). While some scholars have argued that veteran students struggle with the transition between the rigid structure of the military and the lax structure of higher education, Blaauw-Hara's (2016) study found that



veterans were able to apply their military work ethic to their studies. Case studies illustrated the adage “put the mission first” where veteran students associated their academic studies as the mission (Blaauw-Hara, 2016; Morrill & Somers, 2019).

Listening to veteran’s stories can assist in helping them succeed in higher education. One veteran participating in Blaauw-Hara’s (2016) study noted his experiences “tend to be overlooked, undervalued, or unappreciated by civilian society” (p. 815). Veteran students need connections to succeed. One study member also noted a fellow serviceman he knew dropped out of a four-year institution because the ratio of faculty to students was too high. He felt “lost in the crowd” (Blaauw-Hara, 2016). This is a benefit of the two-year college to veteran students. Even if they feel it may be difficult to connect with traditional students, they have a better chance of finding a smaller “team” into which they fit comfortably (Blaauw-Hara, 2016).

As mentioned in Tinto’s (1998) revised Integration model, self-efficacy is an integral quality for success of non-traditional students. Veteran students enter higher education with a much higher degree of self-efficacy, which leads to an advantage toward their success (Blaauw-Hara, 2016; Tinto, 2017). Yet, in order to promote veteran student success, their experiences must be validated. As with any non-traditional student or adult learner, they largely see themselves as their experiences (Blaauw-Hara, 2016). If their background is invalidated, as was the experience of one veteran student whose instructor corrected his pronunciation of “Iraq” (after he had served there), they may see it as an invalidation of themselves as a student. It is imperative that faculty and staff understand and recognize this. Institutions must set up resources to boost the self-efficacy of non-traditional students, especially veterans (Blaauw-Hara, 2016).

Such resources may already be in place at an institution, but it is important that they clearly explain their purpose. For example, while a writer’s center may already exist, it may not

be clear to non-traditional students what services are available there and how to access them (Blaauw-Hara, 2016). Such resources can assist in non-traditional student success by creating brief flyers or pamphlets that illustrate, specifically, how to utilize these resources for success (Blaauw-Hara, 2016).

### **First Year Experience**

Most institutions have adopted a combination of orientation and first-year seminar as part of the first-year experience to counter-act the frustration that new students may feel, especially those who are undecided on their program of study or major (Jaggars & Karp, 2016). First Year Experience (FYE) programs are relatively new with origins from the University of South Carolina, which in 1972 revived the idea of a first-year seminar to aid in student success, retention, and engagement among college freshmen. Beginning in four-year institutions, FYE practices, such as orientation, learning communities, and common reading assignments, have been adopted by two-year institutions with adaptations for non-traditional populations (Bers & Younger, 2014).

“First-year experience” as a term has ambiguity. It combines not only the physical time (first year) of a student’s academic career, but also all initiatives that lead to student success, such as new student orientation. The drive for completion and retention has allowed many colleges to adopt a FYE, as its initiatives, including NSOs, have been tied to increased student success and retention (Koch & Gardner, 2014). Post-World War II and into the Vietnam War, student populations were increasing thanks to causes such as the creation of the GI Bill, a robust post-war economy, and the Civil Rights movement (Cohen & Kisker, 2010). After violent unrest, including the shooting at Kent State University in 1970, universities began looking at how they could improve student discontent. Here, the University of South Carolina (USC) created their

version of the freshman seminar, reviving a tradition that had waned from institutional offerings due to a lack of popularity from faculty and students alike. In fact, USC is credited as creating the “first year experience movement” (Cohen & Kisker, 2010; Koch & Gardner, 2014).

### **New Student Orientations**

Ninety-six percent of all colleges and universities offer some type of orientation (Koch & Gardner, 2014). As institutions face pressure related to productivity, accountability, and budget constraints, new student orientations (NSOs) can serve as instruments for supporting widespread curriculum goals and creating a sense of community among learners (Chan, 2017; Mack, 2010). In general, orientations introduce students to the institution they are entering, whether it be months or days ahead of the start of the semester. The content of these programs differs, but usually include placement; details about campus locations, including campus resources; registration; and a chance for new students to meet faculty, staff, and peers. Many institutions also offer parent/family orientations in line with the evolving roles of parents during the first year of a student’s academic career (Koch & Gardner, 2014; Mack, 2010).

Universities first saw the need for orientations to be faculty or institutionally driven, but they have quickly learned the value of student input (Mack, 2010). More emphasis has been placed on student activities versus student expectations, though both were and are important. Since 2000, most institutions seem to be moving toward a mandatory orientation model versus a voluntary model, though collected research continues to vary on the effectiveness of each model (Mack, 2010). The challenge in mandatory orientation sessions is how institutions will enforce such a measure, especially with dwindling enrollments. Additionally, sessions would need to be offered both online and in-person to create adequate access for all to complete the requirement

(Mack, 2010). As of 2019, Chan (2019) found very few four-year institutions offering an online option for orientation sessions, only 10% of his study.

New Student Orientations can assist in the transition to an institution by promoting engagement and success. As such, online NSOs are incredibly important as researchers worry about any negative effects of social isolation. These sessions can also serve as an introduction to any technology an online student will encounter. Those who participated in an online orientation had a greater sense of integration to their campus as well as a better acknowledgement and use of institutional resources (Herridge et al., 2020). In light of COVID-19, there are suggested methods for conveying orientation resources. Timing should be limited to 10 minute live sessions in order for material to be digested. If the information is pre-recorded, it should be limited to no more than 5 minutes. Sessions should avoid “talking-head shots, reading from scripts, and text-heavy descriptions” (Sutton, 2020, p. 6). By contrast, sessions should include “animations, interactive exercises, authentic examples and speaking, and opportunities to ...increase engagement:” (Sutton, 2020, p. 6). Students will retain 95% of the information received in a video format versus 10% when only reading the same information. And, just because an orientation session is online does not mean it cannot be interactive. Peer sessions and break-out options can be beneficial toward specialization of sessions (Sutton, 2020).

### **Non-Traditional Students and Orientation**

Stressors that can affect academic success are often overlooked or ignored in areas such as orientation (Tilley, 2014). The background of non-traditional students plays a large role in orientation decisions. To offer flexibility for non-traditional students' unique schedules, session availability should include nights, weekend, and online options (Kasworm, 2014; Kenner & Weinerman, 2011). Sessions should be clear as to what campus resources are available to non-

traditional students and specify how to access these sources (Knox & Henderson, 2010). Additionally, addressing stress and academic expectations at orientation can assist in the transition to college (Kasworm, 2014; Knox & Henderson, 2010; Tilley, 2014). Orientation can also illustrate how families can act as a support network for non-traditional students. All of these options boost self-efficacy, a key element for non-traditional student success (Knox & Henderson, 2010; Tinto, 2017).

Motivations of non-traditional students are mostly job-related or based on past experiences. Taking this into account, specifically, allows for a more effective orientation process. Because non-traditional students may be returning to school to enhance their career or switch careers, orientation sessions should include career services, specifically highlighting what career services has to offer non-traditional students (Knox & Henderson, 2010). Other resources, such as financial aid, should also be included in the orientation process to clearly meet the needs of non-traditional students (Knox & Henderson, 2010).

Nationwide, increased enrollment of non-traditional students has revealed a technological divide regardless of whether non-traditional students are attending on-campus or online. In a study conducted at San Jose State University (Jesnek, 2012), two main causes of the digital divide were revealed: a lack of technological skills and a lack of online support services. Because non-traditional students are apt to quit attending if they feel they cannot keep up with the demand for computer usage, scholars have argued that orientation programs are the best vehicle to address the technological deficit facing adult learners. Schools, such as Johnson County Community College in Overland Park, Kansas, have addressed this deficit by implementing a computer skills test as part of the orientation process (Jesnek, 2012; Miller & Pope, 2010).

Information and technology literacy are crucially important for non-traditional students.

As such, at the very least, orientation sessions should provide opportunities for orientation attendees to interact with technology. Large numbers of students are taking online classes, and concerns based on their participation and success are still relevant. First-time online students, most of them non-traditional, may feel isolated or not understand how to interact in online activities such as discussion boards (Cho, 2012; Knox & Henderson, 2010).

### **Technology's Role in Orientation**

Higher education has slowly adopted technological advances in and outside of the classroom. Online platforms such as Blackboard, Canvas, and Moodle offer course delivery options as well as accessible areas for supplemental materials. Most traditional students would recognize the names of these platforms, but many do not know how to use them to successfully aid their academics (Eichelberger & Imler, 2016; Robinson, 2019). As for non-traditional students, it is likely they have never heard these names before, much less know how to use them for academic success. This section explores what new students, particularly non-traditional students, need to know when it comes to technology and their academics.

According to Jesnek (2012), first year orientation has a responsibility to assist non-traditional students in technological success. Additionally, Miller and Pope (2010) addressed a disconnect between technological skill sets and new students at the community college level. In their research, they found it most valuable to supply students with an email address immediately, make campus tours available virtually, create online treasure hunts to familiarize students with the institution's website, and incorporate technology into the new students' registration process (Miller & Pope, 2010). However, they found through their research that most survey takers did not advocate for requiring technology during an on-campus orientation, nor did they agree with

requiring all new students to have personal computers. This information is crucial to those building new student orientation programs (Miller & Pope, 2010).

Miller and Pope (2010) advocate for an introduction to academic technology, but they do not believe it should be required of new students immediately. However, in a study conducted by Wozniak et al. (2012), they designed an orientation program around mature learners who needed technological assistance. They believed that mature learners needed to be advised on how to enhance their computer skills and navigate course management systems, such as Blackboard, Canvas, and Moodle. This instruction can lessen student anxiety and make these systems seem useful toward their degree completion (Wozniak et al., 2012). Mature learners want satisfaction concerning the usage of technology. To achieve this satisfaction related to technology use, staff and faculty must address strategies to make the students comfortable with the technology so they can overcome any anxiety associated with it (Wozniak et al., 2012). Robinson (2019) revisited this idea and expressed the lack of exposure contributes to non-traditional students finding Learning Management Systems (LMS) challenging. LMS design is important for self-efficacy, which is a noted contributor to academic success, especially in an online environment (Robinson, 2019). Robinson (2019) furthers the idea that while non-traditional students may understand technology as used for entertainment, they do not necessarily understand technology as used for academia.

Recently, Eichelberger and Imler (2016) furthered the research on non-traditional students and technological preparation for academics. Schools expect students, regardless of age, to be technologically savvy and understand how to use tools included in Microsoft and Adobe suites without further instruction (Eichelberger & Imler, 2016). Studies have shown students over-estimate their proficiency, particularly when it comes to Microsoft applications, leading to a

much larger disappointment for said students when they fail in usage of these technologies (Eichelberger & Imler, 2016). Non-traditional and traditional students alike, may actually have a similar skill set when it comes to technology; however, non-traditional students may tend to be far less confident which can prevent them from even attempting an assignment or registering for a course (Eichelberger & Imler, 2016). Eichelberger and Imler's (2016) study not only found non-traditional students have less faith in their ability to use technology, it took them longer to complete the tasks given to them if they attempted the tasks at all. Additionally, they noted most students they see on a daily basis may be too late to succeed in the assignment or class they were struggling in because they wait too late to address their technological deficits (Eichelberger & Imler, 2016).

Non-traditional students, particularly those who utilize distance education, should have access to the same resources as traditional, on-campus students. Research mentions that while colleges have readily adopted online education, matching online courses with student services has not been as popular. As such, scholars suggest online counseling to utilize mandatory advising to aid in non-traditional student success (Smith, 2005).

### **Access and Orientation**

For equitable access, students should have more than one option for orientation, ergo not only seated but also online. However, there seems to be no standard; 46% of the colleges sampled by Chan in 2017 held in-person only NSOs, while 21% offered online only, and 18% offered both. The remaining 15% had limited information available online regarding their sessions (Chan, 2017). Regarding in-person NSOs, most colleges advertised the days and times available but not the topics covered. For New Student Experiences online (NSEOs), half included an assessment after completion of the orientation session, and structure of the session



ranged from 30 minutes to four hours (Chan, 2017). Ultimately, this data does not necessarily point to any trends in how orientation sessions are offered but shows that colleges are attempting to adapt to the needs of their students.

In 2019, Chan revisited a study on four-year institutions and orientation session offerings. He noted recurring agenda items related to social networking, games, and other forms of entertainment, in addition to academic transition information including success strategies and academic expectations (Chan, 2019). Within his sample, only 10% of four-year institutions offered a transfer orientation, and only 1% offered an online option in addition to the seated one (Chan, 2019). Within all orientation sessions, campus resources and services, two areas of known barriers to non-traditional student success, ranked low in agenda items (Chan, 2019). In administrative responses, staff implementors of NSOs noted “time, funding, and staffing” (Chan 2019, p. 45) to be the largest hurdles for NSO success. Specific comments from survey takers noted a lack of faculty participation (another known preference of non-traditional students) making community and team building harder to accomplish (Chan, 2019). Thus, Chan (2019) argues more still needs to be done to accommodate non-traditional students.

### **Mandatory Orientation**

Researchers argue that the advantages of a mandatory orientation far outweigh any student displeasure (Cuevas & Timmerman, 2010). The advantages of mandatory orientation include setting clear expectations around academics, success, and technology (Cuevas & Timmerman, 2010). However, mandatory orientation is not without its challenges. NSO directors need to consider what population will be mandatorily invited, how the requirement will be enforced, how students are notified of the mandatory requirement, proper staffing, if the school has appropriate space, if the school has appropriate funding, and whether or not the college and

its staff/faculty are genuinely interested in seeing students succeed in NSO (Cuevas & Timmerman, 2010).

The sessions themselves should be diverse and engaging, preferably not through lecture. Two specific examples of what works well to reach all populations of students, not just First Time in College (FTIC), are programming based on technology and group advising (Cuevas & Timmerman, 2010). It is also recommended to use creative staffing through “peer leaders” and faculty assistance, as orientation staff are usually in advising and have other duties (Cuevas & Timmerman, 2010).

### **Orientation Effects**

For students transitioning from high school to college, the benefits of orientation include a “positive emotional change”, an opportunity to make friends or connect with peers, or a chance to gain extra knowledge, particularly during late registration (Davis, 2018). Additionally, research tracking students into their first-year show students who participated in orientation earned significantly higher GPAs and had higher retention rates as compared to those who did not. There were high rates of increased confidence and less anxiety among those who completed an orientation, again leading to increased success (Davis, 2018).

Successful implementation of a student orientation (SO) includes student-centered perspectives with scheduled check-ins with attendees after the session to judge any changes in perception (Alnawas, 2015). It also provides quality instruction and services in line with customer service. Alnawas (2015) argues that SOs positively affect higher education by giving students power to be involved, not necessarily power over higher education professionals. Enacting customer service type initiatives does not disrupt the current balance of power in higher education; it just allows for more student success.

## **Successful Orientation Strategies**

Many factors leading to attrition, or lack of persistence, can be prevented by institutional strategies. In line with Tinto's Integration model, scholars argue there are two key elements to successful orientation: academic readiness and social readiness (Farrell et al., 2019). Academic readiness includes awareness of workload and what it will be like to be an "independent learner" (Farrell et al., 2019). This also includes awareness of resources on campus, such as the library, as well as tips for time management and active studying. As for social readiness, scholars recommend instilling confidence and knowledge within new students, as well as creating opportunities for them to interact with peers, faculty, and staff (Farrell et al., 2019). In other words, orientations should create a sense of belonging and connection to the institution (Kenner & Weinerman, 2011).

Farrell et al. (2019) conducted a study where they created and evaluated a two-day orientation event. Social readiness was covered by a "welcome talk", "team building" activities, meet and greet with student mentors, "a scavenger hunt, and a social event," while academic readiness was covered by "study skills, library, careers, and student services sessions" (Farrell et al., 2019, p. 867). What makes Farrell et al.'s (2019) study especially pertinent is its demographic— "school leavers". These are students who are living at home with parents and are non-traditional or part-time students. Interviews were conducted with participants six weeks into the semester, and six themes became obvious. Most relevant, academic anxiety is one attrition factor that the new orientation structure did not seem to alleviate. The students continued to worry about the workload and difference in quality of work from high school (Farrell et al., 2019). One other interesting theme was what Farrell et al. labeled "finding our way: orientation", where one participant noted the sessions from student services staff were not helpful or relatable.

However, all students felt this type of socialization was key to their successful transition into higher education (Farrell et al., 2019). It should be noted that Farrell et al. (2019) performed their study at a four-year institution in Ireland, yet the lessons are applicable globally; institutions can boost the success of their non-traditional students by listening to what they find helpful or useless.

In the United States, Hollins (2009) worked with J. Sargeant Reynolds Community College (JSRCC) in Virginia, which had no orientation model before 2006. His study piloted full and half-day sessions, as well as alternate Group Advising session options with 20 to 25 attendees (Hollins, 2009). Hollins noted the lack of research on New Student Orientations and student success but was able to determine based on research from scholars such as Busby et al. (2002) that students who attended an NSO generally did better in their classes (Hollins, 2009). While JSRCC's own study resulted in higher GPAs and retention for students who participated in either their NSO sessions or Group Advising, they believe any correlation between GPAs and NSO attendance is by chance. They did find, however, that their retention rates matched other studies with a genuine link between retention and NSO participation (Hollins, 2009).

While Farrell et al. (2019) and Hollins (2009) found their results based on seated orientation sessions for students attending seated courses, researchers cannot ignore the rise in distance education across the United States. At Richland Community College (RCC), in an effort to aid retention of distance students, the institution created a mandatory online orientation based on feedback that face to face orientation was not effective in preparing students for online courses (Jones, 2013). The online orientation implementation covered study skills, time management, and computer skills, and included a mandatory quiz where students were required

to earn a minimum score. The results of this study showed distance students were more prepared to be successful in their courses (Jones, 2013).

Understanding the need for an online orientation model, staff at Foothill College, located in Silicon Valley, came together to review vendors for online orientation options. Their findings spurred a desire to create a student-favored system, particularly targeting Generation Z (Swett, 2016). In working with a student team, they found the institution agreed with students on the main goals of orientation, to make students feel welcome while also giving them information on available support services and resources. However, the student team favored a delivery system for online orientation that lacked the usual clichés of orientation, such as a wide, landscape shot of the campus or a welcome video from the institution’s president (Swett, 2016). The student team suggested 24-hour access to an online format that included options. Ultimately, students want to be able to choose what they learn about regarding the institutions they may attend. They wanted the process to be easy to find on the college’s website, to be student-delivered instead of faculty or staff delivered, and they also wanted their parents to be able to access the session and understand it (Swett, 2016). As far as length was concerned, they suggested 30 minutes or less, which is a vast difference compared to on-campus sessions such as JSRCC’s half-day or full day sessions or the week long sessions Chan (2019) studied at four-year institutions (Hollins, 2009; Swett, 2016). Foothill College’s implemented orientation had huge success. Over 98% percent of the students who viewed the online orientation received priority registration and registered for classes. Data also showed the students were watching the material more than once (Swett, 2016). Clearly, the benefits of an easily accessible, online orientation session paid off in larger enrollment numbers for Foothill College.

## **Student Success and the Non-Traditional Student**

Student success is the broad category used to measure the effectiveness of institutional practices. Metrics to judge student success vary, and with at least 13 national initiatives in place to measure student success, it can be difficult to know which metric is appropriate to use and when to use it (Mullin, 2012). A small sampling of the literature related to student success was explored in this section as it discusses the literature on student success in relation to non-traditional students.

### **Barriers to Success for Non-Traditional Students**

Non-traditional students often lack the cultural or social capital to succeed in education or suffer from transfer shock (D'Amico et al., 2014; Martin et al., 2014; Umbach et al., 2018). Cultural or social capital refers to the benefits that traditional students have when entering higher education, such as resources surrounding college attendance or family support (Martin et al., 2014). First-generation students, for example, may not aspire to higher education because no one in their family participated in higher education, as mentioned in Braxton's rebuttal of Tinto's Integration theory (Braxton et al., 2004; Martin et al., 2014). They also often lack academic preparedness, but studies have found the use of support services can counter a lack of social capital (Burns, 2010; Martin et al., 2014).

Studies of low-income students showed they were unlikely to stay in college more than one year, with only 19% earning a credential. Additionally, those students who completed higher math courses were more likely to succeed, showing a correlation between math skills and academic preparedness (Burns, 2010).

Martin et al. (2014), in relation to academic preparedness, discovered main themes regarding student success. They argued for clear goals through academic tracks, such as Guided

Pathways, as students who started out with a goal in mind tended to be more successful, while those who did not tended to drop out as soon as they encountered a roadblock in their studies (Martin et al., 2014). Additionally, students must want to succeed. Their motivation can come from encouragement from their family, friends, school support staff, and/or classmates. Some students in the study even mentioned that competition within the classroom helped them stay motivated (Martin et al., 2014). Martin et al. also looked at external demands such as family or work obligations and financial burdens. While students may be able to cover tuition through financial aid, they still struggle with rent, food, and day care (Martin et al., 2014). Interestingly, the successful students in the study were very independent. They made their own schedules and did not rely on the advisor to tell them “what to do”. The underprepared students were dismayed that the academic advisors did not tell them what to do, and that they often felt they were “teaching themselves” and paying for services they were not receiving (Martin et al., 2014).

### **Access and Equity in Orientation**

Non-traditional students have fewer opportunities for “social integration” as compared to four-year institutions; orientation is one of these few opportunities (Boening & Miller, 2005). As such, this section reviews the literature informing suggested structures to promote access and equity through orientation.

Even though orientations may only take place in an afternoon or may be as short as an hour, they still have a large impact on diversity and social justice. Boening and Miller (2005) surveyed New Student Orientation directors and found 53 common practices toward diversity in NSOs. Ultimately, they argue for using and exhibiting diverse practices while not calling attention to diversity itself during any orientation (Boening & Miller, 2005). While this may seem difficult to accomplish, the directors suggested sessions should show how diversity

positively benefits the institution and the student monetarily (Boening & Miller, 2005). They also noted one of the worst ways to promote equity was by illustrating examples of all diverse groups getting along on campus through given materials (Boening & Miller, 2005).

Ultimately, they posit the best way to create an inclusive environment is through “showing” and not “telling” (Boening & Miller, 2005). In other words, a campus’s actions show whether it is truly an inclusive area focusing on access for all. If orientation leaders are all the same race or ethnicity, regardless of what leaders are saying about diversity and equity, their actions show they are not truly focused on making these vital issues important on their campus (Boening & Miller, 2005).

### **Cooling Out**

The idea of “cooling out”, first posited by Burton Clark in 1960, involves the academic counselor lessening the academic goals of students whom they believe are not capable of achieving their “loftier” goals (Bahr, 2008). Clark argued that students deemed to not have the necessary skills to succeed were talked out of pursuing those goals by the college, particularly by their academic counselor. This theory has racial implications, as biases and stereotypes became apparent in advising studies such as Bahr’s, where research found underprepared African American students were discouraged from pursuing college-level math skills (Bahr, 2008).

Clark’s original theory centered on the open-door policy at community colleges. In effect, his purpose was to make higher education aware that while attending college was a right, not all students who enrolled were prepared to meet the academic standards required. Thus, they were set up to fail (Clark, 1960). While current scholars, such as Bahr, claim Clark’s theory contributes to inequity on campuses, Clark’s theory is not without merit. Clark explains that four-year institutions tend to cast their lower performers to the two-year level. Once in the two-



year institution, those who failed in a four-year institution still lack the skills necessary to be successful (Clark, 1960). Additionally, students who begin at a two-year institution and place into developmental coursework are more likely, just like reverse transfer students, to end up being moved to a vocational track versus a transfer one. This means that the academic counselor must discuss with the student, through one-on-one meetings or an orientation course, “real-life” implications for their degree aspirations (Clark, 1960). “Cooling out” in Clark’s original proposal equals letting a student down gently. By discussing alternate plans, the academic counselor can move the student toward success in an alternate field.

Conversely, Goldrick-Rab (2010) suggests “cooling out” is not a phenomenon that is put on students, but instead one that naturally occurs for students once they realize their dreams and reality may never fit together. At a greater rate, however, students may “warm up” (Goldrick-Rab, 2010). In other words, their already lofty aspirations “swell” and they do not listen to academic advice. Many students who ignore the academic counselor’s advice end up on academic probation or warning lists, which can lead to further discouragement of the student (Clark, 1960). Clark’s purpose was a positive move to assist students toward success. However, his theory in the 1970s, 80s, 90s, and even the early 2000s was tied to racial inequity in colleges. Bahr, in particular, noted a study of Caucasian and Asian males in which they performed better in remedial math courses based on the advising they received from their academic counselor while African American males did not have the same outcome (Bahr, 2008).

While scholars such as Bahr make the case against “cooling out” practices, more recent studies show counselors have moved toward a “stigma-free” representation of developmental or remedial test results which alleviates the racial tension associated with “cooling out” practices (Bahr, 2008). It is hypothesized that while previous research has pointed to active or passive bias

and stereotyping, current advising strategies avoid “cooling out” and actually benefit underprepared students (Bahr, 2008).

### **Summary**

A solid contextual background for the study’s focus was established by the theoretical foundation built by Astin, Schlossberg, and Tinto, literature regarding non-traditional students, including characteristics and specific needs of four types of non-traditional students (adult learners, distance education students, transfer students, and veteran students), and the history of First Year Experience programs in the United States. Chapter Three provides information on the method of inquiry selected for this particular study. Details are presented regarding the study design, as well as the questions guiding the data collection and analysis.

## **CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY**

Many institutions lack a tailored orientation model based on the non-traditional student definition. Like other four-year institutions, East Carolina University focuses orientation efforts on the traditional student population. This study evaluated the current online orientation program for transfer students at East Carolina University (ECU) using a modified version of Cuseo's (2015) Institutional Self-Assessment Model for Evaluating Orientation Programs, then explored which methods were most effective for addressing the diversity of incoming non-traditional students through focus groups and surveys with current non-traditional students attending East Carolina University, and, ultimately, presented options for revisions that specifically aid non-traditional students starting their academic career at ECU.

### **Research Design and Rationale**

I chose a mixed-methods study to allow for a more flexible option for collecting data. A mixed method study is one that utilizes at least one quantitative method and one qualitative method to analyze and interpret data collection (Creswell, 2007). Through three independent phases, I planned to use assessment, survey, and focus groups as my study design. A formal program assessment judged the value of the current model, as is the purpose of traditional program assessment (Fitzpatrick et al., 2011). While completing the program assessment of the current transfer orientation model at ECU, I also deployed a quantitative survey to non-traditional students who completed the transfer orientation at ECU. This provided baseline data regarding orientation attendance of non-traditional students as well as the perceived effectiveness of orientation at ECU. Afterward, I was able to analyze the data collected in the survey through focus groups. The use of qualitative focus groups garnered more detailed research. Mixed-method studies allow for a comparison of quantitative and qualitative data, so any contradictions

I did not know as a non-employee should have come to light. This study design also allowed for triangulation of data which may have alleviated bias. It also helped to strengthen both models by elaborating results and developing each model further (Creswell, 2007). The design also included peer checking and member debriefing to ensure inquiry design rigor.

### **Context of the Study**

My study took place at East Carolina University, a four-year institution located in Greenville, North Carolina. ECU began as East Carolina Teachers' Training School in 1907, made possible by Pitt County's gift of land and \$100,000 (Martin, 2016). Officially opening in October of 1909, East Carolina Teachers' Training School became East Carolina Teacher's College in 1967, before becoming East Carolina University in 1972 when the institution joined the University of North Carolina System (Martin, 2016). For the 2019 academic year, ECU enrolled a total of 28,651 students across its undergraduate and graduate programs. Of specific note are the numbers related to non-traditional populations: 7,706 online only students; 1,320 transfer students from a North Carolina Community College system institution; and 1,838 total new transfer students for fall 2018 (East Carolina University, 2020).

I worked closely with The Office of Student Transitions. The office's Mission states they: will provide a coordinated, comprehensive approach to enhancing student success; provide services that will enhance the academic efficiency, effectiveness, and independence of our students; and will provide the necessary supports for families required for improving student satisfaction, academic success, and student retention.

(Student Transitions, 2020, para. 4)

The office includes orientation to assist in the transition of students to the university as well as acts as the oversight of Student Veteran Services. Additionally, the office offers resources for not

only first-year students but sophomores, juniors, seniors, and post-graduates (Student Transitions, 2020).

### **Inquiry Partners**

I partnered with the Office of Student Transitions at East Carolina University to conduct this study. Because I am employed at another institution, my specific inquiry partners were important as they had access and authority at the institution that I did not possess. Preliminary meetings took place with the Director of the Office of Student Transitions as well as with the Associate Director of Student Veteran Services.

This study directly benefited not only the Office of Student Transitions at ECU but allowed for pertinent data to be shared with the Office of First-Year Experience at the institution, and, as such, the Office of Student Transitions was asked for feedback throughout and kept up to date with progress of the study. Not only did the Director and Associate Director give me direct permission to research within their department, they were both active participants as the study moved forward.

Specifically, I planned to use the staff of the office to complete Phase I of the study by having them complete the modified Cuseo Assessment Model. I planned to provide feedback in the form of summaries of Phases I and II to the Director and Associate Director before moving to Phase III. I had hoped my research would allow the Office of Student Transitions to better their current orientation offerings. Therefore, keeping in touch with my inquiry partners as I moved through the study was important to make sure, as an outsider, my design was usable at the institution.

## **Ethical Considerations**

I completed ethical research training through CITI, and to fairly and accurately sample data from non-traditional students at East Carolina University IRB approval was sought during the fall 2020 semester. Students were chosen for the study based on their official consent and previous participation in an orientation session with East Carolina University. All names remained anonymous, and any participant was able to opt out of the study at any time. Participants were given an informed consent form before participating in any phase of the study. All participants were advised that their participation is voluntary, and they could discontinue participation at any time without repercussions.

Data was kept securely on a password protected hard drive and will be disposed of after three years. All participants' responses were member-checked in order to ensure accuracy.

## **Inquiry Procedures**

To cater to the needs of the non-traditional demographic, the program design focused on suggestions for a revised orientation session providing equitable resources for non-traditional student success. The session content should focus specifically on the areas non-traditional students need assistance with: (a) how credits transfer, (b) academic expectations, (c) time and stress management, (d) how to use technology for education, and (e) how to access resources on campus. Table 1 provides an overview of how the phases and guiding questions align.

### **Phase I**

Phase I took place early in the Spring 2021 semester and ran concurrently with the Phase II study design as each phase was independent. Phase I included a formal program assessment of ECU's current online transfer orientation model using Cuseo's (2015) Assessment Model as a

Table 1

*Phases, Guiding Questions, Design, and Timeline*

Phases	Guiding Question	Design	Timeline
I	What is the current status of ECU's orientation program option for non-traditional students based on an evaluation utilizing a modified version of Cuseo's assessment model?	Program assessment using Cuseo's (2015) Assessment Model	Spring 2021
II	How do non-traditional students at ECU perceive the current orientation program?	Survey  Focus Groups	Early Spring 2021  Late Spring 2021/Summer 2021
III	According to current non-traditional students, what aspects of an updated orientation program play a role in addressing the components of non-traditional struggle?	Program Design	Fall 2021

*Note.* This timeline is tentative and may be revised based on unforeseen circumstances.

guide (see Appendix C). A program assessment was vital to this study as I am not a current employee at ECU but also allowed for an objective baseline with which I began my study before moving to Phase II.

A program assessment's purpose is to judge the value of something (Fitzpatrick et al., 2011). Thus, I planned to judge whether the current online transfer orientation was of value to non-traditional students based on themes supported by Chapter Two's literature review. To do this, I began with Cuseo's (2015) Model. I took each question and altered it based on themes from the literature review. Specifically, I wanted to know if the current online orientation addressed how credits transfer, academic expectations, time and stress management, use of technology for education, and how to access resources on campus. The questions for the program assessment appear in Table 2. Answers are recorded on a range from 1 to 5, with 1 being very ineffective and 5 being very effective.

### ***Description of Participants and Recruitment Strategies***

Contact was made with the Office of Student Transitions at ECU and permission granted to access and conduct research with the office and their current online transfer orientation model. For Phase I, staff within the Office of Student Transitions were asked to complete the assessment questionnaire in order to see what aspects of the current online orientation model were working effectively and what they would like to see as a revision.

### ***Instrumentation***

A formative program assessment allows for a program, or offering of services, to be evaluated, or observed, to determine its success or need for revision (Fitzpatrick et al., 2011). As Cuseo (2015) had already developed an effective model for evaluation of NSOs, I used his top



Table 2

*Program Assessment Questions for ECU's Online Transfer Student Orientation*

*Questions will be answered with numerals 1-5, with 1 being very ineffective and 5 being very effective.*

Question	Related Research or Theory
Is the orientation program delivered in a personalized manner that validates non-traditional students as unique individuals and treats them as whole persons?	Blaauw-Hara, 2016; Chung et al., 2017; Jesnek, 2012; Kenner & Weinerman, 2011; Patton et al., 2016; Rayle & Chung, 2007; Tilley, 2014; Tinto, 1998; Tinto, 2017; Townsend, 2008
Are new non-traditional students oriented to people and given the opportunity to interact meaningfully with staff and/or faculty?	Chan, 2017; Koch & Gardner, 2014
Does the program provide students with relevant, pertinent information that applies directly to their transitional needs?	D'Amico et al., 2014; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Martin et al., 2014; Sutton, 2018; Umbach et al., 2018
Does the program involve both academic and social information?	Astin, 1999; Dadgar et al., 2014; Farrell et al., 2019; Mack, 2010; Patton et al., 2016
Is the orientation optional or required? How is attendance monitored?	Burns, 2010; Chan, 2019; Cuevas & Timmerman, 2010; Mack, 2010; Martin et al., 2014
Does the orientation customize to the non-traditional population?	Kasworm, 2014; Schlossberg, 2011; Tinto, 2017
Does the orientation inform about academic expectations?	Farrell et al., 2019; Kasworm, 2014; Ritt, 2008
Does the orientation advise or inform on technology knowledge needed for student success?	Cho, 2012; Eichelberger & Imler, 2016; Jesnek, 2012; Knox & Henderson, 2010; Miller & Pope, 2010; Robinson, 2019; Wozniak et al., 2012
Does the orientation address transfer credits?	Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Townsend, 2008; Wheeler, 2019
Does the orientation address financial concerns?	Cohen & Kisker, 2010; Jones, 2016; Kasworm, 2014; Kenner & Wienerman, 2011

10 questions for assessment as inspiration for the program assessment with revisions based on the literature surrounding non-traditional student transitions. Cuseo's original 10 questions are displayed in Appendix C. Table 2 displays questions for this study's program assessment and the theory or research with which they relate. The assessment questionnaire was provided to the staff of the Office of Student Transitions with a three-week deadline in order for each member to spend as much time needed to complete the questionnaire thoughtfully and thoroughly.

Submissions were anonymous.

### ***Data Analysis***

Coding for Phase I was fairly simple. The assessment allowed for a range of 1 to 5, with 1 being very ineffective and 5 being very effective. Staff completing the assessment chose the level of perceived effectiveness for the current online transfer orientation. Phase I was more quantitative than qualitative, so data was planned to be analyzed by entering the responses for each staff member, labelled numerically, into NVivo. NVivo is the CAQDAS software I originally chose to store and organize the data for my study. I then analyzed the level of perceived effectiveness by sorting all response numbers. After sorting, I examined the data to see if a pattern emerged. For example, if all respondents had answered with a 4 or 5 for question 1, I would have interpreted this as a positive response to how effective the orientation is regarding personalization. Contrastingly, if responses are extremely varied regarding question 1, I would have interpreted this as an area for potential revision. Dependent on the results of this analysis, new questions were generated for Phase II's quantitative survey.

### ***Summary of Phase I***

Phase I included a program assessment examining ECU's current online transfer orientation model based on 10 questions gleaned and revised from Cuseo's (2015) Assessment

Model. Staff from the Office of Student Transitions completed the assessment questionnaire judging the effectiveness of the current transfer orientation. This provided baseline data for Phase II.

## **Phase II**

Phase II involved both a quantitative student survey and qualitative focus groups as part of my mixed-method design, allowing for triangulation of data. These two instruments informed Phase III's program design presentation. An IRB Consent Form (see Appendix B) was included in both the survey and focus groups. For the survey, the IRB form was presented to students before the survey questions. If a student did not agree to the consent form, they were not able to continue to the survey. For the focus groups, the IRB form was sent to the participants via email once they agreed to join the focus group. Students were required to return the consent form before participating in the focus group.

### ***Description of Participants and Recruitment Strategies***

Participants were identified using purposive sampling. I requested the contact information (email addresses) for students at East Carolina University who were non-traditional—adult learners, distance education, transfer, and veteran students. This was done by contacting the Office of Institutional Planning, Assessment, and Research at East Carolina and completing a survey request.

### ***Instrumentation***

Part I of Phase II was a survey (see Appendix D). Using Qualtrics, the survey was created based on the questions created from themes gathered in the literature review. The survey was mass emailed to all non-traditional students at East Carolina University, with the hope that at least 50 responses were received to create nonproportional quota sampling. From this sample, I

then used purposive sampling to narrow to 10 to 15 students to participate in a focus group, Part II of Phase II.

Focus groups were chosen in order to create camaraderie from the non-traditional demographic, some of whom may be reluctant to share openly and honestly without the comfort of like peers. Additionally, participation in these focus groups was strictly voluntarily. They were used to garner more specific data on what successes and weaknesses were found in East Carolina University's orientation model for transfer students, and if the student responses match the data found in the program assessment. The questions for the focus group were not created until the data from the student survey was collected. Due to pandemic restrictions, the focus group took place via Cisco Webex versus in person on ECU's campus. Summaries of focus group responses were presented to the participants in order to maintain design rigor.

### ***Data Analysis***

For survey data, I totaled the "yes" and "no" answers for each question before inductive coding took place using Qualtrics's automated software to identify major themes. A hierarchal coding frame was then used to show the relation of data from the survey to inform the protocol for the focus group. This data was then planned to be entered into NVivo for comparison to data from Phase I.

I recorded the conversations occurring in the focus groups and took down immediate thoughts and notes upon completion of each group. Afterward, I transcribed the focus group recordings and planned to load that data into NVivo. I summarized the answers and themes for each question. My summary was then planned to be imported to NVivo for further organization and coding of data. Results from the focus group were triangulated to those of the survey as well as the program assessment. Specifically, I was looking to see whether non-traditional students

found value in orientation. If so, then what did they believe would make the orientation experience even better. And, if not, then what did they believe would make orientation valuable.

### ***Summary of Phase II***

Phase II incorporated a quantitative survey and qualitative focus group to collect data regarding the current ECU online transfer orientation. Data was analyzed through both Qualtrics and Quirkos. This data influenced the design of Phase III, a revised orientation model for non-traditional students.

### **Phase III**

In Phase III, I presented options for revisions that specifically aid non-traditional students starting their academic career at ECU. Due to a revised timeline based off of COVID-19 complications, presentation of the material occurred in November of 2021 and January 2022. Because I am not an employee of ECU, I did not have authority to implement a new model. If the Office of Student Transitions finds the data valuable, my hope is they will implement revisions for fall 2022 based on the data analysis.

Originally, a revised orientation model was planned, to be based on the data collected in Phases I and II; however, due to lack of participation due to COVID-19 restrictions, a new model was not created. Instead, the results were presented to the Office of Student Transitions in the form of an Infographic with accompanying recorded presentation. Additionally, the information was also presented as part of ECU's Annual Student Success Conference.

### **Inquiry Design Rigor**

This mixed method design was chosen not only for its flexibility but also for its balance of quantitative and qualitative methods. I used member checking and peer debriefing to ensure accuracy. Specifically, Phase I was planned to be checked by the Office of Student Transitions

for accuracy. Phase II was checked by the participants to ensure the intention of their responses had not been altered. Though this implementation will eventually take place at East Carolina University and obviously address elements unique to this four-year institution, the implementation and research revolved around universal needs facing non-traditional students.

### **Delimitations, Limitations, and Assumptions**

Delimitations of this study relate to its setting. The study took place at East Carolina University in eastern North Carolina. As such, there may have been issues that non-traditional students face in other parts of the state or the country that were not addressed in this study. Additionally, my study took place over a short period of time, focusing solely on the orientation experience of non-traditional students, not their entire academic career. It only engaged the students who provided me with their informed consent.

Limitations of this study related to a global pandemic, COVID-19. While I was optimistic that college campuses would return to some semblance of normalcy in the summer of 2021, this was not the case. The study needed to adapt as the presentation and potential implementation neared. Additionally, a lack of participants caused a limitation for the study given its timeframe for completion. In reaching out to all non-traditional students at ECU for participation, instead of one particular group such as veterans or transfer students, I had hoped to mitigate any limitation regarding a lack of participants. I was also limited by not being employed at the institution. However, I believe this limitation was ultimately a strength of my study as it allowed me to be an objective observer.

Assumptions of this study were that there is, indeed, a need for a specialized orientation for non-traditional students at East Carolina University; and, that the results of this study would

be beneficial to ECU. I also assumed that students would self-identify, answer the survey honestly, and volunteer for the focus group.

### **Role of the Scholarly Practitioner**

My role included personally conducting the program assessment, analyzing the data collected from the survey and focus group, and presenting my findings to the Office of Student Transitions. I was an objective observer looking to assist ECU in improving upon their orientation models. I am not directly linked to the Office of Student Transitions at East Carolina University; however, I have worked with new students orienting to the community college for the past eight years as an Academic Advisor at various locations within the North Carolina Community College system. Currently, as the lead for a New Student program at a local community college in North Carolina, I have witnessed firsthand the importance of transitional services for new students to start off with the resources needed to be successful at the institution.

### **Summary**

In three phases, this focus of practice evaluated the current transfer orientation model for baseline data regarding non-traditional student needs within orientation models at East Carolina University, collected data from non-traditional students through surveys and focus groups before options for revisions were presented that specifically aided non-traditional students starting their academic career at ECU. The analysis of all data collected was documented in Chapter Four.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS**

This chapter provides a summary of the data collection, as well as an analysis of the results of this mixed-methods study. A brief explanation of how the Coronavirus Pandemic (COVID-19) affected the study is followed by participant demographics for both the quantitative and qualitative portions of the study. Then, summaries of the data collection processes lead to an analysis of the data.

### **Coronavirus Pandemic**

In late December 2019/early January 2020, a new strain of virus was identified in Wuhan, China. This virus would become known as COVID-19, and it would have unforeseen effects around the globe, as well as on ECU's campus. On March 10, 2020, a state of emergency was declared in North Carolina by Governor Roy Cooper while ECU students were on Spring Break (Barnhill, 2020). Spring Break was extended through March 22, 2020, to accommodate the evacuation, or move-out, for students residing on campus, and to allow faculty and staff to transition to remote work (Barnhill, 2020). This disruption of the usual academic life on campus changed the plans of every student, staff, and faculty member on ECU's campus from March 2020 through the fall 2020 semester when the proposal for this study was submitted.

This research study proposal already consisted of an online survey for part of the quantitative method of its mixed-method design; however, the original planned, in-person focus groups were ultimately forced to Webex, or online meeting, due to continued COVID-19 restrictions on ECU's campus. Because of changes in programming for ECU's Office of Student Transitions, as well as slow student response based on COVID-19 challenges added to normal, everyday challenges faced by non-traditional students, the original Phase III of the proposal was redesigned. Instead of implementing a new design for a non-traditional student orientation



option, the results of the data collection and analysis were shared with the Office of Student Transitions, in the form of an Infographic and recorded presentation, with key suggestions of how to begin a new design with their office. The information was presented as part of ECU's Student Success Conference on January 28, 2022, as a way to address the enrollment cliff approaching universities and share the results of this study with a broader audience.

### **Revised Timeline and Design**

Based on the restrictions on campus resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, the original timeline and design of this study were altered. Due to changes in instruction and limited student participation, Phase II initially did not yield what I felt was sufficient data. Therefore, individual interviews were proposed and an amendment was approved by ECU's IRB (see Appendix A). In order to recruit participants for an additional round of research, the student survey from Phase I was deployed again in September 2021 to a new group of orientation attendees. As such, the research design for Phase I and II continued into fall 2021 while it was originally only planned to encompass spring 2021. The timeline was updated for Table 3.

### **Overview of Inquiry**

Many institutions lack a tailored orientation model based on the non-traditional student definition. Like other four-year institutions, East Carolina University focuses orientation efforts on the traditional student population. This study evaluated the current online orientation program for transfer students at East Carolina University (ECU) using a modified version of Cuseo's (2015) Institutional Self-Assessment Model for Evaluating Orientation Programs, then explored which methods were most effective for addressing the diversity of incoming non-traditional students through a program assessment, quantitative student survey, a focus group, and individual

Table 3

*Revised Research Design and Timeline*

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Phase	Data Collection Source	Timeline
Phase I – Quantitative Data Collection	Program assessment	February 2021
	Student Survey	February 2021 & September 2021
Phase II – Qualitative Data Collection	Focus Group	March 2021
	Individual Interviews	September 2021
Phase III – Analysis & Presentation	N/A	November 2021-February 2022

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semi-structured interviews with current non-traditional students attending East Carolina University.

The study was framed around three questions; to answer them I used a mixed method design consisting of the collection of both quantitative and qualitative data.

1. What is the current status of ECU's orientation program option for non-traditional students based on an evaluation utilizing a modified version of Cuseo's assessment model?
2. How do non-traditional students at ECU perceive the current orientation program?
3. According to current non-traditional students, what aspects of an updated orientation program play a role in addressing the components of non-traditional struggle?

### **Participant Demographics**

Participant demographic details varied by type of data collection method. The availability of the demographic information was also dependent on the way in which the data was collected. However, where possible, all student participants were identified as non-traditional students based on the following characteristics: adult learner, distance education student, transfer student, or veteran student.

### **Phase I: Quantitative Data Collection Phase**

Phase I consisted of a formal program assessment and a student survey which was deployed twice in an effort to increase the number of participants and ensure that a significant number of responses was received. The program assessment was deployed to the four staff members of the Office of Student Transitions in February 2021. Two of the four members of the office completed the program assessment. As the program assessment was distributed by

Qualtrics, and was an anonymous survey, no additional demographic information is available in relation to the participants of the program assessment.

The student survey was first sent in February 2021 to any student still enrolled at ECU who fit the non-traditional demographic. These participants were selected from a request submitted to the Institutional Planning, Assessment, and Research (IPAR) office at ECU. For the purposes of this study, “non-traditional” was defined as students with one or more of the following characteristics: adult learner, distance education student, transfer student, or veteran student.

Because the first round of data collection was modified by COVID-19 restrictions, more research was needed to explore the current perception of online non-traditional orientation at ECU; therefore, another group of participants were contacted based off of a list from the Office of Student Transitions. Based on the information provided by the Office of Student Transitions, the survey was sent to students who completed the online transfer orientation for fall 2021. Those students were not specifically identified by non-traditional characteristics; however, students who complete the online transfer orientation typically fit into the non-traditional student demographic.

## **Phase II: Qualitative Data Collection Phase**

Phase II of the mixed methods study sought to collect qualitative data and included a focus group and semi-structured individual interviews. The focus groups took place in March 2021 while the interviews took place in September 2021. Focus group and interview participants for the qualitative data collection phase were recruited from the quantitative student survey participants. These students were already identified as non-traditional; however, Table 4 displays

Table 4

*Focus Group and Interview Demographics*


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Participant	Gender Identity	Age	Student Type	Characteristics
Amber	F	22	Transfer	POC; 1 <sup>st</sup> generation; NC Community College Transfer; Student with disability
Bridgette	F	Undisclosed	Transfer	Undisclosed
Gene	M	Undisclosed	Second Degree	Undisclosed
Heather	F	23	Transfer	Out-of-State Community College Transfer; Military dependent
Mason	M	Late 50s	Transfer	Veteran; Student with disability
Mo	M	Undisclosed	Second Degree	Veteran
Scott	M	Undisclosed	Transfer	Transfer from private college
Tabitha	F	Undisclosed	Transfer	NC Community College Transfer
Wilson	F	29	Transfer	NC Community College Transfer

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more specific information regarding the known demographics of each focus group and interview participant.

Identifiers such as age or race were not pertinent to the study. Results bearing this information were redacted as part of the information request to the university. Therefore, once students were identified to meet the criteria of non-traditional, participants were not asked for any additional information regarding their demographics. However, many of the participants volunteered this information through the focus group or interview process. Each participant has been given a pseudonym to protect their actual identity.

### *Participants*

**Amber.** Amber meets many criteria of a non-traditional student. She is a 22-year-old female who transferred to ECU from a North Carolina Community College (NCCC). Amber self-disclosed she receives accommodations and is a person of color (POC).

**Bridgette.** Bridgette did not disclose her age but is a Caucasian female who transferred to ECU.

**Gene.** Gene is attending ECU to earn a second degree. He did not disclose his age but is pursuing an Engineering pathway.

**Heather.** Heather is a 23-year-old female who transferred to ECU from the Virginia Community College System. She also revealed she is a military dependent.

**Mason.** Mason transferred to ECU, is a veteran, and is in his late 50s. Mason also utilizes disability services.

**Mo.** Mo did not disclose his age. He is a veteran and is seeking a second degree at ECU.

**Scott.** Scott transferred from a private college to ECU. He did not disclose his age.

**Tabitha.** Tabitha did not disclose her age. She transferred to ECU from a NCCC.

**Wilson.** Wilson is a 29-year-old female who transferred to ECU from a NCCC.

### **Data Collection**

Data collection for Phase I and Phase II of this mixed methods study took place from February 2021 through September 2021. Data collection included a program assessment, a student survey, focus groups, and semi-structured individual interviews.

#### **Phase I: Quantitative Data Collection**

Phase I data collection utilized two quantitative methods, a program assessment and a student survey. The program assessment was conducted in February 2021 to gather baseline data from the current staff of the Office of Student Transitions. The student survey was conducted in February 2021 and again in September 2021.

#### ***Phase I – Program Assessment***

A program assessment, in the form of a survey, was provided to the staff of the Office of Student Transitions in an effort to determine their perceptions related to the level of success achieved with the current orientation model. The assessment (see Appendix C) was converted to a survey via Qualtrics. Through licensure from ECU, Qualtrics is an available online program that assists in creating surveys that are secure (Qualtrics Support, 2021). Data from the survey was anonymous and was stored on a password protected server.

The Office of Student Transitions consists of four staff members. The survey was sent to the director of the office via a secure link. She then sent the link through campus email to each staff member in the department. Participants were provided with a consent form along with the evaluation survey and were assured that their responses would be anonymous and would not affect their current job in any way. Completed surveys were received from two participants.

**Description of the Online Transfer Orientation.** Staff who completed the program assessment survey were asked questions related to the current non-traditional orientation model. The current online transfer orientation is only available through a private link. An initial email with the link to the online transfer orientation session is provided to applicable students and takes them to a series of webpages.

Students have four steps to complete, that are presented as “modules”. After these four steps, an opinion survey about the orientation session is presented. Completion of the survey provides students with information about academic advising as well as a code to access their academic advisor. Screenshots of the module from each step are included in Appendix J. Table 5 provides a listing of each module topic and its content.

Each step includes links to resources on campus as well as a small section with one to three short paragraphs about each resource. Students may click on the links to be taken to each entity’s webpage on the larger ECU website. Each module, within its assigned step, has a specific purpose. Step One, the Connect Module, is designed to introduce students to the first entities they may encounter on campus, such as academic advising. Step Two, Invest Module, promotes the necessity of investing in the community both socially and academically. Information for services like the Pirate Academic Success Center (PASC) is provided. Step Three, Motivate Module, introduces ways to get involved on campus and in the community. Step Four, Finish Strong, presents many resources that students will need as they complete their initial onboarding process and ultimately their degree at the college. Once students have completed all steps and modules, they are asked to complete an opinion survey. The link for the opinion survey concerning the orientation session can be found at the bottom of the screen in Step Four. The current opinion survey for the orientation session consists of four multiple choice questions and



Table 5

*Online Transfer Orientation Module Content*

Step/Module Title	Topics Covered
Step One, Connect Module	Office of Student Transitions Student Veteran Services Academic Advising Disability Support Services Dr. Jesse R. Peel LGBTQ Center Scholarships Student Organizations
Step Two, Invest Module	Career Services Pirates Abroad Student Employment Office Pirate Academic Success Center (PASC) ECU Transit Parking and Transportation ECU Libraries
Step Three, Motivate Module	Center for Leadership and Civic Engagement Greek Life Campus Recreation and Wellness
Step Four, Finish Strong Module	Student Health Services Dean of Students Office Student Activities and Organizations Student Involvement and Leadership Off-Campus Student Services Ledonia Wright Cultural Center Student Rights and Responsibility University Writing Center Cashier's Office ECU At-A-Glance Financial Aid Office of University Scholarships Student Pirate Club 1 card Safety

one open-ended essay question. Answer choices range from 1 to 5, with 1 being “strongly disagree” and 5 being “strongly agree.” The survey includes the following questions:

1. Online orientation provided me with information that will help me make a smooth transition to ECU;
2. Online orientation provided me with a better understanding of academic advising;
3. I am more aware of support services available at ECU;
4. After taking Online Orientation I feel better prepared to be successful at ECU.

The open-ended essay asks, “I wish online orientation addressed the following topic(s).” Once students submit the survey, they are given information about academic advising, including their “code” showing they completed orientation.

**Building the Program Assessment.** In order to evaluate the current online transfer orientation model offered at East Carolina University, I revised Cuseo’s assessment model (see Appendix C) to inform Guiding Question One: what is the current status of ECU’s orientation program option for non-traditional students based on an evaluation utilizing a modified version of Cuseo’s assessment model? A survey utilizing questions from the original assessment model was created via Qualtrics. The Qualtrics survey link was sent to the Office of Student Transitions staff by the Director of the office.

### ***Phase I - Student Survey***

The next stage of data collection involved the use of a student survey. It was determined that individuals who were eligible to participate in the survey were identified as a member of one of the following groups: adult learner, distance education student, transfer student, or veteran student, as well as students who were over the age of 24 years old. Due to the effects of COVID-19 restrictions and subsequent lack of participation, the student survey was deployed twice in an

effort to collect as many responses as possible. In February 2021, the survey was sent to all non-traditional students who completed the online transfer orientation through the spring 2021 semester and were still currently students at ECU. In September 2021, the survey was sent to all students who completed the online transfer orientation for the fall 2021 semester only, in an attempt to reach additional non-traditional students.

Contact information for the initial group of participants was provided after submitting a request for the university email addresses for the identified sample to ECU's Institutional Planning, Assessment, and Research (IPAR) office. The request provided 3,294 email addresses, identified as no more than a student deemed non-traditional by the identified characteristics. Invitations to complete the survey were sent to each of these 3,294 email addresses through the blind carbon copy (bcc) function within ECU's email system to maintain anonymity and security. The survey invite is included in Appendix E. The Survey Consent Form (see Appendix B) was included as an attachment to the survey invite email. Of the 3,294 invitations sent, 145 students, or 4 %, completed the survey in February 2021.

In the student survey, participants were asked 11 close-ended questions to collect quantitative data. These questions were chosen to address what the current and past literature note is important when addressing non-traditional students. The major concerns presented by the literature include assisting students in succeeding academically and socially, introducing campus resources, introducing academic technology, addressing transfer of credits, and addressing financial stressors (Bers & Younger, 2014; Farrell et al., 2019; Knox & Henderson, 2010; Koch & Gardner, 2014; Mack, 2010; Miller & Pope, 2010; Townsend, 2008). Additionally, as a vehicle for transition to the university, orientation sessions should relay information that students

remember and can utilize, especially if the session charges students for mandatory attendance (Cuevas & Timmerman, 2010; Herridge et al., 2020; Mack, 2010).

As originally planned, the student survey was used to recruit focus group participants for Phase II: Qualitative Data Collection. Of the 145 students who completed the survey in February 2021, 12, or 8%, noted they would like to participate in the focus group.

Based on the responses from the student survey, a Focus Group Protocol (see Appendix F) was developed for standardization purposes. The protocol for the focus group was based on the analysis of the student survey from Phase I: Quantitative Data Collection, conducted in February 2021. All focus group participants were sent the Focus Group Consent Form (see Appendix G), which they returned or acknowledged before the focus group began. In the initial student survey, participants noted several key points that inspired the focus group protocol. First, many had no memory of the orientation session other than they completed it, while others stated the information in the session was useless. Second, they believed charging for completion of the orientation session was a waste of money, and that completion of the session was an unnecessary hassle. Third, they believed the orientation session would be better in person, or if they could not attend in person, videos included in the presentation would be better. Lastly, they noted the orientation session focused on younger students and did not address the experience/needs of a non-traditional student or veteran.

## **Phase II: Qualitative Data Collection**

In a mixed-methods study, qualitative data is collected to provide richer, deeper information (Garcia & Gluesing, 2013). In this study, qualitative data was gathered through the use of two focus groups and four individual semi-structured interviews. For the focus groups, all students were sent the consent form (see Appendix G) before participation in the group and

agreed to have their conversation recorded and transcribed by Webex. For each of the semi-structured interviews, students were sent a consent form (see Appendix I) through email before participating in the interview via Webex. All students agreed to have their interview recorded and transcribed by Webex. Each transcription was quality assured, and once the transcriptions were completed, the data was coded. These codes are explored further in the analysis section of this chapter as themes.

### ***Phase II – Focus Group***

Two focus groups were attempted via Webex. The first focus group had only one attendee and is therefore explored in Phase II: Semi-Structured Interviews. The second focus group was conducted over Webex and included four participants. Two of the four participants kept their cameras off during the group to feel more comfortable, but all participants agreed to the recording of the focus group. The focus group recording was transcribed using a two-part process. Webex created a transcription based on the recording, and I reviewed the transcription and edited it for accuracy. The transcription of the focus group is 35 pages long, and the session lasted 57 minutes. Participants were not given the questions ahead of time; but, they were supplied with a consent form (see Appendix G). Each participant received and signed or verbally agreed to the consent form.

I was able to collect a significant amount of information from the program assessment, student survey, and focus group; however, because I did not meet my initial goal of multiple focus groups, I decided to deploy the same student survey through Qualtrics in September 2021. The survey was sent to 1,290 students who registered for the online transfer orientation for fall 2021 only. The emails for these students were obtained from the Office of Student Transitions in order to focus the collection of additional quantitative data on students who specifically

completed the orientation session for fall 2021, not just any year during their time at ECU. These were students who were not previously invited to complete the survey in February 2021.

In September 2021, 82 of the 1,290 students, or 6%, invited to participate completed the survey. These participants were invited to participate in the semi-structured individual interviews as part of an additional round of qualitative data collection during Phase II.

### ***Phase II – Semi-Structured Interviews***

On September 14, 2021, I conducted four individual semi-structured interviews with participants from the September 2021 survey who had indicated an interest in participating. These interviews lasted between 10 minutes and 30 minutes. The interview protocol (see Appendix H) was approved under revision from IRB (see Appendix A). All participants were sent the Interview Consent Form (see Appendix I) prior to the interview, and I ensured that each had returned or acknowledged the consent form before conducting the interviews. Each participant was asked for their permission to record the interviews and all agreed. Recordings of each interview were transcribed using a two-part process to ensure accuracy. The first transcription was created by Webex on the recording itself. Then, I reviewed the transcriptions from Webex with the recordings from Webex, in addition to any notes I took during the interview, to complete each transcription.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis began immediately following Phase I: Quantitative Data Collection and continued through Phase II: Qualitative Data Collection. The quantitative data was analyzed through inductive coding within Qualtrics. The qualitative data was analyzed through thematic coding using Quirkos.

## **Phase I: Quantitative Data Analysis**

The first quantitative instrument was the Program assessment (see Appendix C) conducted within the Office of Student Transitions. The data was automatically captured by Qualtrics where automatic reports were available to display the information. As the researcher, I reviewed the responses to the survey questions and compared and contrasted their answers.

### ***Results of Program assessment***

Table 6 shows the results of the program assessment of the current online transfer orientation model at ECU based on responses submitted by members of the Office of Student Transitions. Respondents answered each question based on a scale of 1 to 5, 1 being very ineffective and 5 being very effective. In the table, the values are expressed as minimum (no) and maximum (yes). The table also includes the mean for each category, the standard variation, the variance, and the count. A summary of the program assessment data revealed a divisive split between the current staff in the Office of Student Transitions related to their perceptions of the current orientation model for non-traditional students.

One participant indicated the orientation is very effectively delivered in a personalized manner, is oriented to people, and that students are given the opportunity to interact with staff and/or faculty in a very effective manner. They also believed that the session provided sufficient academic and social information and was customized to the non-traditional population. Additionally, they believed information about financial concerns was effectively presented. Another participant indicated the session is ineffective in the previously-noted areas. In the most closely related responses, participants did indicate that the orientation was effective or very effective in informing students about academic expectations. One participant believed the information about technology was very effective while another was neutral in this area. The

Table 6

*Program Assessment Results*

Field	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std Deviation	Variance	Count
Is the orientation program delivered in a personalized manner that validates non-traditional students as unique individuals and treats them as whole persons?	2.00	5.00	3.50	1.50	2.25	2
Are new non-traditional students oriented to people and given the opportunity to interact meaningfully with staff and/or faculty?	1.00	5.00	3.00	2.00	4.00	2
Does the program provide students with relevant, pertinent information that applies directly to their transitional needs?	2.00	5.00	3.50	1.50	2.25	2
Does the program involve both academic and social information	4.00	5.00	4.50	0.50	0.25	2
Does the orientation customize to the non-traditional population?	1.00	5.00	3.00	2.00	4.00	2
Does the orientation inform about academic expectations?	4.00	5.00	4.50	0.50	0.25	2
Does the orientation advise or inform on technology knowledge needed for student success?	3.00	5.00	4.00	1.00	1.00	2



Table 6 (continued)

Field	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std Deviation	Variance	Count
Does the orientation address transfer credits?	3.00	5.00	4.00	1.00	1.00	2
Does the orientation address financial concerns?	2.00	5.00	3.50	1.50	2.25	2

same answers, neutral and very effective, were given in the area of addressing transfer credits. Analysis of these results would indicate that while academic expectations and transfer credits may be covered sufficiently in the current online orientation model, all other areas identified are up to interpretation.

### ***Results of the Student Survey***

The student survey (see Appendix D) was deployed twice, to two different groups of orientation participants at ECU. While closed-ended questions were the bulk of the survey, one open-ended question was included at the end allowing for comments or questions. Complete data for the student survey is displayed in Table 7, while percentage results for the student survey are shown in Table 8. The main results from the survey include the following:

1. a majority of participants did not believe the session was an important part of their entry to ECU;
2. 80% of the participants did not believe orientation helped them succeed academically in their first semester at ECU;
3. a little over 80% believe the session also did not assist them succeed socially as a student in their first semester at ECU;
4. almost 75% noted they did not remember what specific information was given during the orientation session;
5. of the almost 60% who used campus resources at ECU, only half noted they learned about those resources during orientation;
6. most agreed that their orientation did cover academic technology such as Blackboard, Canvas, and PiratePort;

Table 7

*Student Survey Results*

Field	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std Deviation	Variance	Count
Did you complete an orientation upon entering East Carolina University?	1.00	2.00	1.09	0.29	0.08	224
If you completed an orientation session, do you believe the orientation session was an important part of your entry to East Carolina University?	1.00	2.00	1.62	0.48	0.24	193
Do you believe the orientation session helped you succeed academically as a student in your first semester at East Carolina University?	1.00	2.00	1.80	0.40	0.16	193
Do you believe the orientation session helped you succeed socially as a student in your first semester at East Carolina University?	1.00	2.00	1.88	0.33	0.11	193
Do you remember what specific information was given to you during your orientation session?	1.00	2.00	1.72	0.45	0.20	192
Have you used any campus resources available to you on campus during your time as a student at East Carolina University?	1.00	2.00	1.41	0.49	0.24	193

Table 7 (continued)

Field	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std Deviation	Variance	Count
If you have used campus resources, did you learn about these resources during your orientation session?	1.00	2.00	1.55	0.50	0.25	104
Did your orientation session discuss academic technology such as Blackboard, Canvas, or PiratePort?	1.00	2.00	1.32	0.47	0.22	178
Did your orientation session discuss financial information regarding paying for tuition and textbooks?	1.00	2.00	1.46	0.50	0.25	178
If you had transfer credits from another institution or from Advance Placement (AP) or College Level Examination Program (CLEP), were they discussed with you during your orientation session?	1.00	2.00	1.76	0.43	0.18	177
Would you be interested in participating in an interview or focus group to discuss your orientation at East Carolina University?	1.00	3.00	2.69	0.67	0.45	197

Table 8

*Percentage Results for Student Survey*

Question	Yes	No
Did you complete an orientation upon entering East Carolina University?	91%	9%
If you completed an orientation session, do you believe the orientation session was an important part of your entry to East Carolina University?	38%	62%
Do you believe the orientation session helped you succeed academically as a student in your first semester at East Carolina University?	20%	80%
Do you believe the orientation session helped you succeed socially as a student in your first semester at East Carolina University?	12%	88%
Do you remember what specific information was given to you during your orientation session?	28%	72%
Have you used any campus resources available to you on campus during your time as a student at East Carolina University?	59%	41%
If you have used campus resources, did you learn about these resources during your orientation session?	45%	55%
Did your orientation session discuss academic technology such as Blackboard, Canvas, or PiratePort?	68%	32%
Did your orientation session discuss financial information regarding paying for tuition and textbooks?	54%	46%
If you had transfer credits from another institution or from Advance Placement (AP) or College Level Examination Program (CLEP), were they discussed with you during your orientation session?	24%	76%
Would you be interested in participating in an interview or focus group to discuss your orientation at East Carolina University?	20%	80%

7. 75% noted that information on transfer credits was lacking.

**Value of Orientation.** The first question on the student survey asked students if they felt the online orientation session was a valuable part of their entry to ECU. Over half (62%) believed it was not a valuable point of entry to ECU. Therefore, what can be added to make orientation more valuable was a key aspect of the focus group questions created from the survey results.

**Academic Success.** Students were asked if they felt orientation prepared them to be academically successful. Eighty percent (80%) said no, signaling the purpose of the orientation may not be clear if academic success is an objective. This is a theme that arose within individual interviews.

**Social Integration.** Only 12% of participants believe that orientation prepared them to be successful socially at ECU. This is a theme that was addressed in the focus group and interviews following the results from the survey. Compared to the data collected from the academic success question, it appeared social integration was at a larger deficit for incoming non-traditional students.

**Memorability.** When asked whether the participant remembered what was included in orientation, 72% said they did not remember what was covered in their orientation session. This related to the purpose of orientation being unclear and was addressed in the focus group and interviews following evaluation of the survey data.

**Resources.** A little over half (59%) of participants stated they had used campus resources at ECU; however, 54% of those participants said they did not learn about those resources from their orientation session. If the purpose of orientation is to let incoming students know about resources available to them, the responses seemed to be an indicator that the current orientation

session may be lacking information regarding the existence and location of these resources.

**Technology.** In comparison to previous questions' percentages, overwhelmingly participants noted that orientation did inform them about technology. While the survey did not indicate this was an area of concern for non-traditional students, the individual interviews did reveal a need for more technological instruction within orientation.

**Financial Concerns.** A little over half of the participants stated the orientation addressed financial concerns such as tuition or buying books. Financial concerns do not seem to be an issue for students participating in orientation. Therefore, the individual interviews and focus groups did not include an extensive discussion regarding finances and financial concerns.

**Transfer Credits.** Seventy-six percent (76%) of participants stated that information about transfer credits was not included in the presentation. However, within the individual comments from the survey (and later echoed within the focus group and individual interviews), this did not seem to be an area of concern for non-traditional students regarding orientation. They all assumed this would be taken care of when they met with their academic advisor, the step following completion of orientation.

## **Phase II: Qualitative Data Analysis**

Originally, I planned to conduct focus groups in order to allow a sense of camaraderie and ease any hesitation non-traditional students might feel in speaking with me, particularly the veteran demographic. Unfortunately when holding the first focus group on April 22, 2021, only one student participated, Wilson. I spoke with Wilson, a white female, 28 years old, who transferred from a North Carolina Community College to East Carolina University three years ago. In our discussion, Wilson brought up many themes also seen in the student survey. Overall,

she felt and still feels that non-traditional students do not matter and are not included on ECU's campus.

First, she noted she is a senior who was in a five-year program for transfer students. She transferred to ECU after completing her associate's degree. She is finishing a degree in history education currently. She does not remember specifics from her orientation to ECU, but she does remember that it cost her \$100, and that it was online. She immediately noted the session was geared "way too much" toward freshmen and the "newbies." She noted she wished it had given more information relevant to her age group. Specifically, she indicated more information on services would have been helpful. When asked what specific services, she said these services included tutoring and counseling. She believes she had to find out about the resources she used on her own after a lot of "trial and error." She stated, "I need more than where to eat. I needed more than [the] meal plan. I needed more than this is when grades are due." She believed she should not have to look in the handbook for this information, that she is "taking a risk at this age; I need to know what services are going to be there to support me." She does feel overlooked on occasion, which was related to her indication that there was a transition from community college to the university for which she was not prepared. Wilson was anxious in her first semester at ECU and felt the community college was closer to high school and did not fully prepare her academically for what was expected.

When asked what might be added to the current model to better include non-traditional students, she mentioned it needed a slight shift to include things like the withdrawal policy and transfer credits. She mostly wished she had more of an idea what to expect in the transition from the community college to the university. She felt like she was not meeting the expectations of the university, but she did not know how to do so. She also noted that she is a visual person and



having someone give a PowerPoint or at least something more than just brief slides that she had to read would have helped her retain the information presented in the orientation session better.

### ***Results of Focus Groups***

The second focus group started with three attendees and a fourth participant joined toward the end of the session (Amber, Heather, Scott, and Tabitha). The focus group began with Amber, Scott, and Tabitha, all of whom considered themselves non-traditional and were transfer students to ECU. Around the 35-minute mark, Heather joined the focus group.

One of the first issues brought up by the group was the inclusion of alcohol and drug use as being one of the major focuses of orientation—a focus they did not need. The group, as a whole, agreed they saw themselves as adults and past the party phase in which a brand-new college student may be interested. Tabitha specifically stated she would have appreciated more information on resources and locations, “more than saying, you know, be mindful of when you go to parties.” As an alternate suggestion, they believed more focus on alternate living situations, besides in the dorms, would be a good addition.

The group then talked about their identity as non-traditional students, identity being another issue which emerged throughout the project. They believed the orientation did not address them as students. They expressed they did not know where to go for help, and wish there had been more information about a contact person to answer their questions or a clearer way to figure out their next required steps. Amber stated she “came from a community college, so I had my general courses out of the way, so I don’t really need all the information that they were giving. I wish they focus more on people.”

With that in mind, a list of resources was next on the suggested additions to the current orientation model, with resources being an issue spread throughout the project. Scott stated he

would have liked “a focus a bit more on the resources for students who are coming in who may have never been in a university setting.” The group also specified a desire for more information on social resources, rather than academics; they indicated that they understood the academic aspects of their transition to the university but were seeking more information on the social aspect. Scott also stated, “if you start out as a freshman, people already have these friend groups, and you’re coming in, and you’re like, where do I fit in?” He believes a group for non-traditional students could alleviate the anxiety of transferring.

The participants then brought up how they felt they were perceived on campus as non-traditional students, as well as how their identity was affected by this perception. The group agreed that staff and faculty have, at times, acted negatively toward them due to their non-traditional status. This has exacerbated anxiety and stress based on their own intersectionalities. Amber noted, “I’ve dealt with discrimination and being looked down upon all my life. I don’t need it from my teachers, and I don’t need that disrupting my education because I fought hard to get here.” Participants agreed that they viewed college more as a “business” as they were not there to party but to further their education, perform well academically, and graduate in a timely manner. They have all worked hard to make it this far into their education.

Participants agreed that the current online orientation does not address their needs as non-traditional students. They suggested that adding a resource list with contact information would be a small change that would benefit them. This resource list would include aspects of logistical campus life, such as how to use the tutoring center. Scott said, “My community college had a very different tutoring center, and it was very easy to go get tutoring. But here, I felt like I had to jump through hoops.” They also wanted more resources on transitional issues including, but not limited to, living off-campus and safety concerns. Tabitha noted, “My phone will get text

messages all the time...there was a shooting here, a robbery there, maybe a sexual assault, and I'm just like, is it even safe for me to come out of my dorm room?" Because they were all unfamiliar with the area, they felt they needed more information from orientation on how to safely navigate campus.

When asked if there was anything else they would like to note about their experience as a non-traditional student, they repeated they did not feel prepared for the logistical, or day-to-day, things they would encounter at ECU, and that it felt as though the orientation assumed because they were not freshmen that this information was not needed. They wanted a specific, clear list of things they needed to do to complete their admission in addition to specific, clear lists of how to access campus resources. They also reiterated their feeling that the session was focused on a younger audience with heavy emphasis on alcohol and drug usage.

### ***Results of Individual Interviews***

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in September 2021, as an additional method of data collection within Phase II of the research design. The interviews were added to the study in an effort to collect additional qualitative information when participation in the focus groups was lower than expected. The following paragraphs summarize each interview based on participant.

**Mason.** Mason is a veteran in his late fifties. He transferred to ECU to complete his bachelor's degree. Mason and I spoke for 30 minutes, and the transcription of his interview recording is 20 pages long.

Mason had a different take on the online orientation and his needs as a non-traditional student than I had seen in the previous student survey and focus group results. He believed he was no different than a college freshman, even though he was much older and a disabled veteran.

He felt a sense of camaraderie with new students as they too were learning how to navigate the college. Mason's main suggestions for improvements included more instruction on PiratePort and educational technology, more information about campus locations, and more video resources instead of just information presented on a screen.

Mason did believe the orientation was worthwhile and gave him good information, but he still saw areas where he believed the session could be strengthened to aid student success.

**Mo.** Mo is a veteran seeking a second degree. The interview with Mo took place over Webex and was recorded with his permission. The interview protocol (see Appendix H) was used and the participant was allowed to steer the conversation from the questions if needed. Mo and I spoke for 10 minutes. The transcription of his interview recording is 6 pages long.

Mo stated the idea behind orientation was a good one but that the "execution was off." He also stated that he flew through the presentation as a way to "check off a box" in his admission process. As someone working full-time, he did note that he wished he could have come to campus for an in-person orientation but that he could not alter his work schedule.

Mo's main suggestions for additions to the presentation included meal plans and where to eat as well as campus locations and bus schedules. As someone who had already completed another degree, he was aware of the academic demands of a university, but he was unaware of specific day-to-day functions at ECU.

**Bridgette.** Bridgette is a transfer student. Her interview took place over Webex and was recorded with her permission. The interview protocol (see Appendix H) was used. Bridgette and I spoke for 10 minutes, and the transcription of the interview recording is 6 pages long.

Bridgette strongly believed the online orientation was a waste of money. Her main complaint was that she did not know how to print on campus and that type of day-to-day

information would have been useful. She also mentioned the need to know where buildings are located as well as where to get food on campus.

Bridgette noted that she was at ECU to get a degree and the focus on campus life was not appealing to her. She believes “most of us” are “here to get a degree. Not to have a life awakening experience.” She suggested those campus life pieces be excluded from a non-traditional orientation. Her main frustration was the format. She believed if there had been, at minimum, videos, that would have aided the session. Her suggestion was to have a Zoom meeting with 20 non-traditional or transfer students so they could ask questions and also get a more social aspect to orientation.

**Gene.** Gene is a second-degree student. His interview took place over Webex and was recorded with his permission. I began with the interview protocol (see Appendix H); however, Gene disclosed he did not complete the orientation session, although he did sign up for a session. Instead of following the protocol, I adjusted the questions to fit Gene’s situation. We spoke for 11 minutes, and the transcription of the interview is 7 pages long.

Gene noted he was coming to ECU for a career change that required a new degree. His main questions regarding onboarding to campus were related to parking and building locations. He also noted the campus seemed geared toward the traditional student, and he would like a way to socialize with other non-traditional students. Gene did not disclose how he was able to move forward in the advising process without completing the orientation session.

### ***Coding Process and Resulting Themes***

Creswell and Creswell (2017) state, “Coding is the process of organizing the data by bracketing chunks and writing a word representing the category in the margins” (p. 198). Their definition of coding is based off of Tesch’s Eight Steps in the Coding Process, which I followed

loosely as I coded the qualitative data from my mixed-methods study. Each transcription was first generally organized into codes on a whiteboard, with immediate reactions serving as initial themes. Then, each transcription was hand-coded using highlighters on paper copies before being uploaded into Quirkos. While I had originally planned to use NVivo, I found Quirkos to be more user-friendly and utilized it instead. Quirkos is a CAQDAS software that allows for password protected projects where codes can be illustrated through bubbles. The larger the bubble, the more that theme appears in the data (*Quirkos, 2021*). The codes displayed in Table 9 emerged from the multi-layer coding of the interview and focus group transcriptions. The codes were first arranged into categories based on commonalities such as accommodations, advising, expectations, human contact, inclusion on campus, necessary information, resources, traditional students, tutoring, student life, and suggestions for revisions. These categories were then arranged by intuitive relationships to form larger themes. From this process, four main themes emerged, also displayed in Table 9.

The first round of student survey and focus group attempts invited students who were currently enrolled at ECU and completed the online transfer orientation in the past 2 to 3 years to participate. The results of this group revealed items that seem to no longer be included in the online transfer orientation as it exists now. The second round of the student survey deployment and individual interviews focused only on the 2021 version of the online transfer orientation. Both groups noted similar suggestions and concerns with the exception of alcohol and drug use, as well as campus safety. Because the 2021 participants were mostly distance learning due to COVID-19 protocols, these were likely non-issues for them anyway. In the exploration of themes, both versions of the orientation are present. However, because Gene did not remember

Table 9

*Qualitative Data Codes and Themes*

Codes	Theme
Accommodations Advisor Clear Connection Contact Person Confused Disability Interaction Needs Specific Transition Tutoring	Non-traditional students need specific information and contact from the university to be successful
Alcohol and Drug Use Basic Needs Buildings Bus/Bus Schedule Campus Map Campus Tour Food Location Meal Plan Pirate Port Safety Social/Social Events Useful Younger	Intense focus on traditional student neglects non-traditional student needs
Adulthood Age Expected Overlooked Old Risk Support Success Veteran	Non-traditional students feel their identity is overlooked by campus community

Table 9 (continued)

Codes	Theme
Cost Don't Remember Expectation Need Preparation Unnecessary	Non-traditional students are unclear on purpose of completing the online transfer orientation



participating in orientation, or outright said he did not participate in orientation, his interview is only included when pertinent to the theme.

**Theme 1: Non-traditional Students Need Specific Information and Contact from the University to be Successful.** The following codes were analyzed and grouped to create a theme of non-traditional students needing specific information and contact from the university in order to be successful: accommodations, advisor, clear, connection, contact person, confused, disability, expectations, interaction, needs, resources, specific, transition, and tutoring. Each code was repeated by at least two participants in the study.

While COVID-19 restrictions have altered how ECU offers orientation models, students who participated in the qualitative research believe the current online orientation lacks specific information, specifically related to where important offices and resources are located on campus. The lack of interaction had many suggesting a contact person for the orientation session. This would allow them to direct any questions not answered by the session to a specific source. Participants also mentioned a desire for more information regarding accommodations, advising, resources and tutoring, as well as what the expectations are for them at the university.

**Contact Person.** Mason, Mo, Bridgette, Wilson, Amber, Tabitha, Scott, and Heather all noted the difficulty of the process for non-traditional students. The lack of clarity, they believe, could be alleviated through the addition of a contact person. Though Mason admits he may not have remembered or noted information from the online session because he also took part in an on-campus orientation where he was able to speak directly with a tour guide, he did not see the amount of information he gained from an in-person session replicated in the online format. Additionally, he stated he was still confused concerning campus technology and made suggestions regarding how more of an introduction to technology could be added to the current

orientation. He also felt there was not a “clear, here’s how you get a hold of them” regarding campus points of contact and resources. He thought this was a particularly important issue for non-traditional students who are veterans, disabled, or using accommodations. Mason’s experience illustrated the need for human contact in order to be successful.

Mo agreed the clarity of the process for non-traditional students could be better assisted by a main contact person, stating he felt he “went in circles” and did not get answers to any of his questions. Bridgette also shared her desire for a contact person. She believed “there’s not really anybody available to help.” She also noted the lack of useful information such as campus locations, food options, and basic functions on campus like how to print and how to connect to the internet on campus. These are basic necessities that like Bridgette, Wilson learned “on her own.”

***Accommodations.*** Many of the research participants disclosed the need for accommodations at the university. This was a specific code that was mentioned by Mason, Amber, Scott, and unidentified survey takers. Mostly, they believed the process for requesting accommodations was not clear enough in the orientation session. They also felt this was something that made them more at risk for academic failure at the institution.

Mason stated, “I don’t remember any of the orientations telling me this is where the disability office [is]...this is [what] they can do for you and what they can’t do for you.” In the focus group, Amber and Scott also noted the lack of information regarding accommodations in orientation. Scott mentioned, “the students that do need services, brought up in orientation as well. That would be, that would be really helpful.” Amber went on to add this was especially important for her as she was “just having the worst time transitioning” and found her advisor

“very unhelpful.” Amber did not expand on why exactly her advisor was so unhelpful, but she was not the only participant who mentioned advising as its own issue in relation to orientation.

*Advising.* Advising or advisor was a code in multiple participant comments. The purposes of orientation and advising were blurred to most students, causing complaints, confusion, and frustration.

Wilson and Amber had the most frustration with their advisors. Wilson noted she had to email her advisor when her mom passed. She said she did not know what to do and felt like it was something she “shouldn’t have to look in a handbook to find.” She was considering withdrawing from classes and her advisor informed her this was something she “should have learned already.” Amber also shared her concerns about advising. When she asked her advisor about services and expressed her concerns, the advisor told her she was just struggling because she came from the community college. Amber was offended by this, and believes she was not taken seriously. Her advisor gave no specific assistance as to how to improve her reading skills but simply stated “reading is different at the community college.” Not all experiences with advisors were frustrating; however, those who were frustrated could have benefited from more specific assistance, such as direction toward resources.

Additionally, transfer credits were mentioned alongside advising with every participant who noted anything about their advisor. Wilson noted that her advisor informed her about transfer credits but she felt information about transfer credits would have been beneficial sooner. Bridgette echoed this in her statement, “It was frustrating for me. What didn’t transfer? Waiting to find out. Was it? Wasn’t it?” ECU’s standard practice is for transfer credits to be addressed by individual advisors; however, the policy is not presented clearly in orientation, which can lead to confusion and frustration, particularly for non-traditional students.

Even in the anonymous student survey, the role of advising and orientation blurred for participants. But, while Amber and Bridgette had frustrating encounters with their advisors, other students noted that their advisors were the key to their success on campus. One survey taker noted:

I did the online orientation, I did not find it helpful. Most of what was on there was just links to the school site and some videos. After meeting with my advisor, I learned a lot more, she was very helpful.

The role of advising versus orientation could be specified to more clearly show which source students should or should not be utilizing. This clarification could also aid in easing non-traditional student anxiety about what they need to know and when they need to know it.

***Tutoring, Expectations, and Other Resources.*** Participants wanted more information about tutoring and other resources available to them on campus. This was a common code among all surveys, interviews, and focus groups. They all felt there was not specific information on how to access services and which ones were available to them specifically.

Participants who were veterans noted a lack of specific direction regarding Veterans Services. Students noted they did not have a firm idea of when and how to contact Veterans Services, and they did not feel as though orientation addressed this. Mason, in particular, felt it was hard to know how to reach Veterans services. Additionally, he noted that when he attended the Transfer Meet and Greet he encountered peers who “hadn’t heard of the veterans service organization yet.”

Anonymous survey takers, as well as Mo, Bridgette, Wilson, Gene, and Amber, specifically asked for more information on which resources were available to them and how to access them. Wilson taught herself about services available. She said she needed more than

“where to eat.” She spoke about how she felt she was “taking a risk at her age” in trying to get her degree. She went on to say she had only used counseling services because that is all she knew as available to her. In the focus group, all participants expressed noticing a lack of information on who to go to for help and where campus resources were located. They also wanted to know which resources were available to them. In the survey, one participant wrote:

Maps would have been nice, parking information would have also been nice to know about upfront, where to find forms for aid, and disability also would have been nice to know, what to expect from staff would have also been nice to know.

This led to suggestions by all participants for a specific list of resources or “FAQ” page that can be accessed after the orientation session is completed.

As for expectations, in the focus group, Amber, a 22-year-old, first-generation, transfer student, stated, “My biggest fear is that I’m doing this blind. I know I struggle with school. How am I going to do better? How can I improve?” Her anxiety over academic success illustrates one aspect of the struggle that non-traditional students face when onboarding to a university. When this anxiety is heightened by a lack of specific information, transitional struggle increases.

Amber stated, “I don’t feel like we count as part of the student body, and I feel like we’re often forgotten.” Wilson mirrored this thought in her interview, “It would have been nice to see what the school expected versus what I gave them at first because my first semester here I was so anxious because I felt like I was trying my hardest but it wasn’t enough.” She believed if the presentation included more information about the differences between community college and the university she may have been more successful. More specifically, she stated, “You may be passing with an ‘A’ here [community college], but you may not get an ‘A’ on the same paper [at the university].”

All participants revealed a need for specific information and human contact. This need exists based on Theme 2. While the current online transfer orientation session is for a non-traditional population, it still focuses on traditional student issues.

**Theme 2: Intense Focus on Traditional Student Neglects Non-traditional Student Needs.** Current orientation models focusing on traditional students revealed a theme of non-traditional student needs being neglected as a result. The following codes were found leading to the theme: alcohol and drug use, basic needs, buildings, bus, bus schedule, campus map, campus tour, food, location, meal plan, Pirate Port, safety, social, social events, useful, and younger. Specifically, the concerns/needs brought up by participants included the lack of information in the current orientation session regarding getting around campus, getting to and from campus, living off campus, and day-to-day necessities like meal plans or where to find food. Participants believe the current orientation model focuses too much on alcohol and drug use, social events, and a younger audience. As such, this focus exacerbates the transitional struggle that non-traditional students face.

**Traditional Student Focus.** The codes of alcohol and drug use, social, social events, and younger contributed to what the participants believe is a traditional student focus within the current online transfer orientation model. While the target audience for the online transfer student orientation is transfer students, a non-traditional student population, participants in the study noted they still felt it was geared toward a younger audience.

The focus group participants had all taken part in an earlier version of the online orientation model which included some information not present in the current online transfer orientation. Therefore, they noted a focus on alcohol and drug use that was not geared toward the non-traditional student. They also stated they could not identify with the information they were

given and desired more about resources and where to go for help. They echoed the interviewees in their own expectations as non-traditional students, expecting to be treated more as adults versus first-year freshmen. The focus group participants felt as though the orientation was ECU's attempt to "parent" them, warning of alcohol and drug abuse instead of giving them the material they needed.

In his interview Gene stated, "I would definitely say it's very geared towards the freshman classes." Like Gene, Bridgette also believed the focus of orientation was "campus life and the college experience." She went on to say, "most of us are not here for that...so just leave all that out." Another participant, Mo, simply said, "it was poorly tailored to somebody coming in," while Wilson believed the process was "geared way too much towards the freshmen." She added, "That was great information for them, but for us, it just didn't match."

Wilson also felt a strong bias toward the traditional student audience saying, "A lot of the information they presented was really for those people that were living on campus, traditional style students and stuff like that." Wilson went on to mention a particular social event she attended. She stated:

Last year they had a nineties party, and I grew up in the nineties...that's when it, it really sank in that, all these little teeny boppers, all these little 18-year olds don't know what the nineties are...and just the way some of them were acting at the party, I'm like nope, too much of an age difference. I'm just too old.

Wilson is only 22 years old, but her strong reaction to the behavior of the traditional student population and her feeling of being too old to participate in campus events is a real and present issue for non-traditional students on campus.

*Lack of Necessary Information.* In the focus group, Tabitha noted she “came from a small town...it didn’t prepare me whatsoever how to handle situations and, obviously, where I could go if I didn’t feel like I had somebody there to tell me, hey it’s okay.” Similarly, in her interview, Wilson stated, “Even if you’re just coming back to school, telling us where things are...I would have appreciated that more than saying you know, be mindful of when you go to parties.”

Most participants expressed a desire for day-to-day or logistical information that they were missing from the current online transfer orientation model. Specifically, they wanted basic information such as building locations, bus schedules, campus maps, virtual campus tours, and information on food, among other directions for functioning as a successful student on campus. In her interview, Bridgette stated, “information that I was missing...where are the buildings? How do you print something on campus? What food options are available? How do you log into the Internet?” She was frustrated with being this far into her time at ECU and still not having answers to those basic questions. Mo, a second-degree student who was familiar with ECU from previous experience even noticed changes to campus that interrupted his success on campus. He noted, “There’s a lot more buildings now than there were before. I didn’t know where everything was.”

The frustrations of a traditional student focused orientation invoke feelings of being an outsider. Non-traditional students, because they are missing this information, feel as though they are overlooked.

**Theme 3: Non-traditional Students Feel Their Identity is Overlooked by Campus Community.** Participants showed their non-traditional identity is overlooked by the campus community through the following codes: adulthood, age, expected, overlooked, old, risk,



support, success, veteran. Many of the participants felt their status as a non-traditional student did not mesh with the intended audience of the current online orientation session. Most of the study participants identify themselves as non-traditional based on their age or stage in adulthood. They experienced anxiety as their academic needs seemed to be overlooked by ECU. The assumption was that the online orientation session was catered to the younger, traditional student population. Participants were not attending the university for the “college experience”; they were attending to further their education or career goals. They were not attending ECU to engage in a social lifestyle.

*Overlooked.* With the exception of Mason, all participants expressed they felt overlooked by the ECU community. While Mason did not expect any accommodation for his age because he views himself as a very small percentage of ECU’s campus, he did state he did not believe ECU is doing a “good job publicizing” or marketing toward non-traditional students to show non-traditional life and opportunities on campus.

While Mo remarked he did not remember a lot of his session, he did note that the design was not for non-traditional students. He also noted he did not get any social preparation from the session because he did not get to meet anyone. He believed ECU tried to accommodate the non-traditional population but fell short. In his interview, Gene stated, “I would definitely say it’s very geared towards the freshmen classes or towards the new student stuff.” Wilson, in her interview, mirrored Gene’s concerns by reiterating the campus life content presented within her orientation.

Bridgette and Wilson both believed campus life is too focused on the traditional population. Wilson more clearly expressed why she felt that way. She stated she felt overlooked because she felt events on campus were specifically for the younger age groups. She also

mentioned the burden of financial obligations that she believes are not addressed by the university. This was specifically related to the \$100 charge required for the orientation session. Her session, she believed, contained unnecessary details like “dorm” and safety on campus. It was not just her orientation that made her feel overlooked, however. She also noted her advisor made her feel like she was supposed to know a lot of information that she did not. Wilson, like Mason, noted she felt like events on campus were marketed to and focused on a younger audience. She believes the places she could go on campus were limited to the library or student center. She believes a separate non-traditional orientation would “make us feel like we’re being heard and that we’re also cared about.” She went on to say that a separate orientation would have felt more inclusive.

In the focus group, Amber stated, “I don’t feel like we count as a part of the student body, and I feel like we’re often forgotten.” This sentiment was echoed by Tabitha and Scott. They went on to speak about their experiences on campus. They noted faculty that were insensitive to them based on their age or need for accommodations. Specifically, when talking about her need for accommodations, Amber stated a professor said, “I’m sorry simple algebra is too hard for you.” The focus group also agreed that the university assumes “because you’re not a freshman that you kind of know this stuff.”

*Student Life.* Wilson also noted, “You know, what they presented wasn’t necessarily academic so much as it was student life.” She reiterated the campus life content that frustrated her in her orientation. In the focus group, safety and campus life was another topic of conversation that identified the disconnect between non-traditional identity and an orientation catered more to younger students. Wilson went on to note:

I didn't think there was a lot of places I could go other than like the library and the student center...I feel like if there was a separate orientation for my age group or my age demographic...I feel like it would have made me feel more included.

In the focus group, most of the participants indicated that they needed accommodations or were using "services." Amber noted, "I'm a part of the student body that has services so I feel like if [that was] brought up in orientation that would be...really helpful for others." She also added that "knowing that we can use these resources...that we're not going to be discriminated against or something like that, because we struggle a bit more than the average student."

Themes 1-3 all revolve around a lack of clear guidance that the non-traditional students participating in this research study desired. Specific information and human contact seem to be missing because the focus of the orientation is more traditional than non-traditional. And, because this information is missing, non-traditional students begin to feel overlooked by the campus and community. All of these are indicators that the purpose of the online transfer orientation is not clear to the non-traditional student.

**Theme 4: Non-traditional Students are Unclear on Purpose of Completing the Online Transfer Orientation.** The current purpose of the online transfer orientation was unclear to most participants as evidenced by the following codes: cost, don't remember, expectation, need, preparation, and unnecessary. Some of these codes were repeated from other themes. Participants were most frustrated by the cost and what they deemed unnecessary information covered by orientation. Many did not remember any valuable information from the session. Participants expected the session to prepare them for their time at ECU and were disheartened that the session did not prepare them for the day-to-day requirements of attending the university.

Not all of the participants were completely dissatisfied with the session; they had suggestions for how to make it better instead of complaints. The main suggestions for improving the current online transfer orientation model in order to address the needs of non-traditional students were to include video, a specific contact person, and a FAQ page (or other specific list of resources).

Mason believed in the benefit of the orientation session but did suggest changes. When asked about the session preparing him socially and/or academically, he said he did not view that as the purpose of the session. He said he “viewed it more as helping us to get our feet on the ground during the first week or two.”

Conversely, Mo only completed the session as a checkbox so he could register for classes. Therefore, the purpose of the session to him was just a hoop to proverbially jump through, a sentiment echoed by the anonymous student survey takers. Additionally, participants like Bridgette believed completing the orientation was “throwing money in the trash.” Whether or not the purpose of the session was clear to Bridgette, she did not believe the session fulfilled its intended purpose.

Wilson did not mention what she believed to be the purpose of her orientation session; however, the purpose she subconsciously wanted was a session which would ease her transition to the university. She believed the orientation should have shown her what the university expected from her. She felt unprepared and doubted her ability to succeed.

**Video.** Many participants believed video segments could address the needs of non-traditional students. In his interview, Mason stated that a “video would have made it better,” a sentiment shared also by Bridgette, who went further to mention a Zoom meeting that would

allow for a sense of community among other non-traditional students, as well as having a contact person to speak with in real time, would be a welcome addition.

**Contact person.** Bridgette's suggestion for a Zoom meeting bridged the gap between video and human interaction. This was echoed in other interviews.

**FAQ.** Mo noted the diversity in the non-traditional audience and suggested a FAQ page where students would click on the links for commonly needed information such as the bus routes and campus map.

Gene mentioned that a lot of the information he needed he received through some of the introductory classes he had to take because he was starting a completely different career path and major as a second-degree seeking student. But, for those who would not be in classes with freshmen or sophomores, he stated he could see how a list of easily accessible resources would be helpful.

The purpose of the session was unclear to the non-traditional students who participated in this research study. However, the things they wanted more information about, like accommodations, are present in the current online transfer orientation session. There is a disconnect between what was presented to these students and what they perceived.

## **Results**

This mixed methods study collected both quantitative and qualitative data. Quantitative data was analyzed by inductive coding performed through Qualtrics while qualitative data was analyzed through thematic coding. Codes were grouped into the following related themes: need for specific information and contact, focus on traditional student neglects non-traditional needs, non-traditional identity overlooked by campus community, and unclear purpose of the online transfer orientation. These themes not only supported the guiding questions from the research

statement, but also revealed that while much of the information desired by the research participants is in fact included in the current transfer online orientation model, there is a disconnect with how the information is presented and what the participants perceive.

### **Analysis of Guiding Question One**

The first guiding question asked, what is the current status of ECU's orientation program option for non-traditional students based on an evaluation utilizing a modified version of Cuseo's assessment model? This question was answered by a formal program assessment conducted as part of Phase I during February 2021. The program assessment was built into Qualtrics as an anonymous survey and sent to the four staff members in the Office of Student Transitions by the Director of the office. It was completed by 2 of the 4 members of the office.

The indecisiveness of the small sample from the Office of Student Transitions did not allow for a solid conclusion. A successful orientation should address what the current and past literature notes is important, assisting students in succeeding academically and socially, introducing campus resources, introducing academic technology, addressing transfer of credits, and addressing financial stressors (Gopalan et al., 2019; Kasworm, 2014; Kenner & Weinerman, 2011). Based on the data collected from Phase I's program assessment, the current session is viewed by the staff in the Office of Student Transitions as being sufficient in the areas of addressing transfer of credits and introducing academic expectation to the college. In the other areas—student success, campus resources, academic technology, and financial stressors—the participants gave no true indication of whether these elements were being addressed adequately in the current online transfer orientation.

In my own evaluation of the current program, as an objective outsider, I was able to see that many of these key aspects are located in the online transfer orientation. Each one of the

modules addresses a different onboarding aspect for transfer students to the university. Step One, Connect Module, is designed to introduce campus resources, which would include transfer of credits through Academic Advising. It also introduces scholarships, a way to address financial stressors. And, it introduces social success through offices that would alleviate any transitional stressors students may have, such as Veterans Services. Step Two, Invest Module, and Step Three, Motivate Module, introduce ways to get involved on the campus socially. Step Four, Finish Strong Module, presents information related to student success, campus resources, academic technology, and financial stressors. All of the pieces for a successful orientation, according to the literature, are present. However, there seems to be a disconnect between what is included in the session and how it is perceived by the students viewing it.

### **Analysis of Guiding Question Two**

The second guiding question asked, how do non-traditional students at ECU perceive the current orientation program? Guiding Question Two was addressed by student survey, focus group, and semi-structured interviews. The student survey was first deployed in February 2021 to any non-traditional student still enrolled at ECU who completed the online transfer orientation in the past 2-3 years. The survey was re-deployed in September 2021 to only students who had participated in the fall 2021 online transfer orientation session. Two focus groups were attempted in March 2021. The first scheduled focus group was only attended by one student. The second attempt yielded four participants. To garner more data, semi-structured, individual interviews were conducted in September 2021.

Though many of the participants view the orientation session in either a neutral or positive light, the participants who were most dissatisfied with the session came through the loudest. While the online transfer orientation is not designed specifically for all non-traditional

students, it is not perceived to be non-traditional student friendly by the participants in this mixed-methods study. All four themes revealed through thematic coding assisted with answering Guiding Question Two. Many, though not all, participants perceived the current online session as overlooking their non-traditional student needs by focusing on traditional student needs. They desired more clarity and specific information that would aid in their transition to the university. They also did not seem to understand the purpose of the orientation session as anything other than a “hoop” to “jump through.”

This point was made especially clear through student survey comments. One participant wrote:

Coming from a transfer school, the campus is much larger they give little detail about where you need to be and what exactly you need. The community college I went to gave clear direction on books required, professors/ reviews, and times were kept to keep ideal schedules, at ECU everything seems to be far and every time you look for resources or specific people, you are sent on a goose chase till you finally find them just for them to not have the information required and sent onward on the pursuit for answers, I enjoy the access and response times of the advisors and professors. I haven't felt like I have been unable to do something I needed to do, but things like acquiring my student 1 card took multiple trips with little assistance.

This participant noted they did not feel as though they have not been able to do what they needed to do, but that they wished the processes would have been easier. While this student had been able to persevere through their non-traditional struggles, not all non-traditional students will be successful. Another participant illustrated a higher level of frustration with the current orientation model:



There is little to no guidance about what to do prior to classes starting. I'm still not sure if I've filled out all the right forms or if I'm going to get dropped at any point for not filling them out correctly. I don't know what resources are available to students or how to go about accessing them. Overall, the orientation is fairly useless and left me confused.

Many of the participants of the student survey wrote in they wished the session was more than just a "read on your own", with others noting what they believed could be changed to aid in non-traditional student success. One stated, "I'd suggest an overhaul of the orientation system, in doing so the university may be able to bring late-in-life learners into the fold by offering a diverse DE and on-campus solution." Others just simply stated they "did not remember anything from the session," and were disappointed they were unable to "access the information later."

Overall, the orientation could be improved through small changes to address the negative perception from these non-traditional students.

### **Analysis of Guiding Question Three**

The third guiding question asked, according to current non-traditional students, what aspects of an updated orientation program play a role in addressing the components of non-traditional struggle? Originally, this question would be answered by a new program design for an online, non-traditional student orientation; however, COVID effects and restrictions altered that plan. Suggestions for changes to the current online transfer orientation came from the open-ended question at the end of the student survey, the focus group, and the semi-structured individual interviews. Comparing the suggestions from the student responses to my own program assessment of the current session, I found the elements needed to create a successful orientation for non-traditional students exist in the current model. However, the non-traditional student population is not recognizing the elements in their current form.

The main suggestion for how an updated orientation program can address non-traditional struggle was to add better technology to the information, such as videos or voiceovers. Mason believed a campus tour video would be helpful for non-traditional students who will be attending courses on-campus. He believed the most important buildings were the hardest to find on campus, and that fellow students would benefit from a short video. He also suggested video overviews of campus technology like PiratePort and Canvas. Mo and Bridgette believed if videos replaced areas where they had to read information, they would have been more prepared for entering ECU. Wilson and the focus group desired better ways to digest the information from the session, noting their learning styles leaned more toward auditory or kinesthetic models.

Another suggestion to address non-traditional struggle in an updated orientation session was creating more human contact. Almost all of the participants voiced some desire to have more social contacts on-campus and/or more contact with faculty and staff on-campus. Bridgette specifically suggested a Zoom session as the solution to this need. Her thought process was a session with no more than 20 non-traditional students and one ECU staff member. An asynchronous video conferencing orientation would provide the social interaction desired by the participants as well as provide a specific contact person with whom students could address any questions.

A final suggestion from the participants suggested more specific lists or instruction regarding logistical issues on campus. Students noted they did not know how to print on campus or connect to the internet. They also did not know whether they needed a meal plan or where the food options were located on campus. They were hesitant about finding classrooms if they were coming to campus. They also encountered anxiety from using the bus system and struggled with parking. Many noted they did not know what resources were available to them as a non-

traditional student on campus. These things were voiced by one participant as “don’t assume that we’d know information that we don’t know.” While this statement reads like an oxymoron, it reveals that non-traditional students continue to struggle with things university staff and faculty assume they already know based on their non-traditional status.

### **Presentation to Stakeholders**

A summary of the information from the research was presented to the Office of Student Transitions through an Infographic (see Appendix K) and a recorded presentation they could view as their schedules allowed. They were also welcomed to ask any additional questions or schedule a live video meeting to discuss the findings. The Director of the office did respond, thanking me for the information and noting it was “Really Interesting!” I hope this information will be beneficial to them as they continue to update their program offerings, and that they will share the information with other offices on campus, such as the Office of First-Year Experience.

While I was unable to create and present a new online orientation model specifically for non-traditional students due to COVID-19, I was able to present the data at ECU’s Annual Student Success Conference. This conference is presented by the Office of Student Transitions, and it seemed like an obvious fit to showcase the non-traditional student feedback received throughout this research project. I had a current co-worker join me, as the presentation proposals involve at least two presenters. The presentation took place on January 28, 2022, and the slides from the presentation are seen in Appendix L.

Over the course of reviewing all the data collected in this research project, I found a connection between non-traditional student success and the looming “enrollment cliff” facing higher education. Since the conference goers would not have benefited from a regurgitation of my research, I edited the results with the enrollment cliff in mind, posing that bolstering non-

traditional student success would not only help that demographic succeed, but it could also help to recruit another type of student to the university in an effort to increase enrollment.

The presentation began with three anonymous quotes pulled from my research project. I read the quotes and explained to the audience that while there were positive comments made in my study, the negative ones spoke the loudest. Then, I discussed the many definitions of a non-traditional student before explaining the enrollment cliff. Due to the “Great Recession” of 2008, and the continuous decline in the birthrate, enrollment of the traditional student at public universities and community colleges is expected to drop significantly through 2025 (Copley & Douthett, 2020; Kline, 2019; Schroeder, 2021). Therefore, it is time to start looking at more than just the traditional, straight out of high school, 18-year-old student. Information, resources, and marketing for non-traditional students is a must not just for their success but also to increase enrollment. I urged the importance of this by illustrating the job loss potential due to decreased funding.

The presentation then focused on suggestions for how to incorporate video on a budget with several low-cost ways to increase video format in text-heavy documents and presentations with which non-traditional students struggle. Specifically, I briefly described Adobe Creative Cloud Express (formerly Adobe Spark); Blackboard, Canvas, or other LMS platform video content; Microsoft Teams, Webex, or Zoom; and Microsoft PowerPoint. All of these are semi-user-friendly ways to record video and add to presentations. While Adobe Creative Cloud Express does require a subscription, many institutions already have Adobe subscriptions for staff and faculty usage. LMS options such as Blackboard or Canvas usually have the ability for faculty to create a collaborative space in which they can record video, such as a lecture. Microsoft Teams, Webex, and Zoom are typically used as teleconferencing options; however,

users do have the ability to start a meeting without inviting anyone and record a presentation. If all else fails, the suggestion was to add voiceover to any text-heavy presentation.

The ability to reach auditory, kinesthetic, and visual learners simultaneously is something staff and faculty should not ignore. Students are more apt to take in the information if it is offered in a way that matches how they learn. As such, the disconnect between what is presented in the online transfer orientation and what the non-traditional student population perceives from the session could be alleviated by creating a format that reaches more than just a “reader.”

After discussing video options, I pulled out a tennis shoe/sneaker with untied laces. I requested a volunteer to instruct me on how to tie the shoe. The first attendee got flustered with my inability to follow her directions, as did the second attendee who tried. The point of the exercise was to show that we often forget that things inherent to us may not be inherent to others. With non-traditional student success, it is not just about presenting the information to students, but the way staff and faculty present the information to the students is key to their understanding and retention. The volunteers in the audience both stated it would be easier to show me how to tie my shoe and not tell me, further expressing the need for more video tutorial resources for non-traditional students.

After demonstrating how staff and faculty, including myself, often struggle or get frustrated when trying to relay processes we view as inherent, I asked the attendees to spend 5-10 minutes writing about a population they struggle to reach and brainstorm how they could alter the process to reach that population. At the end of the 5-10 minutes, three volunteers shared what they found most frustrating in communicating with students. They also shared how they would now look at those things with a new lens, focused on student success.

After the session, two attendees, both staff members at ECU, mentioned the helpfulness of the session. One staff member noted she acknowledges her frustration with non-traditional students, but the presentation reminded her to have patience. The other staff member noted that it “hurt to see what the students had said, but they were not wrong.” She currently sits on a committee evaluating the success of non-traditional students at ECU. She also asked if I would be willing to present my information at a committee meeting. I do plan to present to this committee and continue to advocate for non-traditional students and their success.

### **Summary**

Chapter 4 presented both quantitative and qualitative data collected through a mixed methods study seeking to evaluate the current status of ECU’s online transfer orientation and the student perception of the current online transfer orientation. Data collection revealed necessary inclusions for a new orientation design strictly for non-traditional students. The three main suggestions to boost non-traditional student success were technological updates such as the inclusion of video presentations; the introduction of asynchronous video conferencing sessions; and the creation of more detailed resource lists.

Chapter Five will further explore recommendations for a new non-traditional orientation model for ECU, as well as relate the findings from Chapter Four to the recent literature discussed in Chapter Two. Finally, the chapter will conclude with the impact on my development as a scholarly practitioner and advancement as an educational leader, before providing conclusionary statements.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, & RECOMMENDATIONS**

Orientation is one facet of campus life where institutions can prepare non-traditional students for success, and the data analyzed in Chapter Four illuminated the current perceptions of the online transfer orientation at ECU. The data collection illustrated suggested necessary inclusions for a new orientation design strictly for non-traditional students. This chapter summarizes the study, analyzes the study findings through the appropriate theoretical framework from Chapter Two, discusses limitations of the study, and explores recommendations and implications for future research.

### **Summary of the Findings**

The purpose of this mixed-methods study was to evaluate the current online transfer student orientation offered at ECU to see if the session effectively addresses the needs of non-traditional students. The study's Guiding Questions were:

1. What is the current status of ECU's orientation program option for non-traditional students based on an evaluation utilizing a modified version of Cuseo's assessment model?
2. How do non-traditional students at ECU perceive the current orientation program?
3. According to current non-traditional students, what aspects of an updated orientation program play a role in addressing the components of non-traditional struggle?

These Guiding Questions were addressed through three phases.

Phase I included a program assessment of the current orientation model completed by the Office of Student Transitions staff members. The program assessment was based on Cuseo's assessment model (see Appendix C). The staff members who completed the program assessment were split on the effectiveness of the current model in regard to non-traditional

student needs. This was potentially the result of only two of the four office members completing the evaluation. It could also show that one member of the team was unwilling or reluctant to admit any shortcomings in the current model, which is understandable as that member works in the office and may have been hesitant to honestly answer the questions.

Phase I also included a quantitative survey conducted twice during 2021. The student survey was sent in February 2021 to all non-traditional students currently enrolled at ECU who also participated in an online orientation session. It was deployed again in September 2021 to all non-traditional students who completed the online transfer orientation over the summer of 2021. The questions in this survey (see Appendix D) were based on Chapter 2's Literature Review in order to answer Guiding Question Two. The results of the student survey were used to create the Focus Group Protocol (see Appendix F).

Phase II included focus groups and semi-structured individual interviews. Two focus groups were attempted in March 2021, with only one yielding enough participants to be labeled a "group". To garner more data for collection, the Focus Group Protocol (see Appendix F) was then revised and submitted to IRB to allow for semi-structured interviews. These interviews took place in September 2021 with four participants from the second disbursement of the student survey.

Phase III was originally proposed as the creation of a new orientation model based on the data collected in Phases I and II; however, due to the unforeseen impacts of COVID-19, as well as the lower-than-expected participation rate in the study, a new model was not created. Instead, to answer Guiding Question Three, three main suggestions were illustrated and presented to the Office of Student Transitions in a recorded infographic (see Appendix K), as well as a broader audience at ECU's Annual Student Success Conference (see Appendix L).



Data collection revealed four main themes: need for specific information and contact; focus on traditional student neglects non-traditional student needs; non-traditional identity overlooked by campus community; and unclear purpose of the online transfer orientation. Participants' perception of the current online transfer orientation was not all negative, but those who responded the loudest viewed their orientation experience as "useless" or a "hassle." One particularly opinionated participant wrote in the survey, "Paying for a poorly put together virtual orientation is kinda a rip off, we had no other choice but to pay."

The participants wanted specific information such as how and where to park, where buildings were located, where they could find food options, or where they could print on campus. Their frustrations revolved around processes like obtaining their ECU ID Card. Participants indicated that simple, everyday tasks were assumed instead of explained. Thus, many participants expressed a desire for human contact, suggesting a "point person" for non-traditional students who were unable to come to campus for an orientation— a particular "place" where they could voice their concerns or ask questions. Veterans also noted the difficulty with setting up their benefits or connecting with ECU staff. One survey participant noted:

I transferred to ECU from active duty Marine Corps and the orientation was simply a check in the box. In order to help nontraditional transfer students, focus on helping us meet and connect with peers. A click through slideshow does nothing for us.

Veterans, as well as the other non-traditional students who participated in the study, felt as though information that was vital to their success at ECU was omitted. Instruction regarding academic technology, a main issue noted in the literature (Jesnek, 2012; Kasworm, 2014; Robinson, 2019), also seemed to be a concern for participants. One noted:

Upset that I had to pay \$20 for an online orientation that didn't even tell me about Canvas. I was only told about it by my advisor the day before classes started and I learned everything else through an in-person tour of ECU that I took advantage of by asking lots of questions. The only thing I remember about orientation was about greek life and data about the school.

This participant's frustration illustrated that on-campus orientation tends to focus more on the traditional student population.

In the focus groups, participants noted a heavy focus on alcohol and drug use. They participated in an earlier version of the online transfer orientation, showing the Office of Student Transitions did take their concerns seriously by editing the information included in the session. However, the session still seemed to include information that non-traditional students did not find useful. Many participants felt overlooked by the campus community because of this even though the things they desired, like where or how to park on campus, are actually included in the orientation session.

A disconnect exists between what the online transfer orientation provides to attendees and what they perceive it as providing. Participant suggestions for a videoed presentation or "Zoom" session would alleviate this disconnect. Because the current session is a click through presentation, where the end goal is for students to get a code to meet with their academic advisor, some participants noted they just "clicked through" to get to the end goal—meeting with their advisor. Others were overwhelmed by the amount of text-heavy information, and stated that they could not locate the information they desired within the current session. Analysis of the data led to interpretations based on the theoretical framework and literature from Chapter Two.

## **Interpretation of the Findings**

Data collection supported the use of Tinto, Astin, and Schlossberg's theories as the framework for this research study, while the analysis of the data also linked the best methods from the literature as ones the participants suggested as revisions to the current online transfer orientation.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study used a theoretical foundation based on Schlossberg's Mattering and Marginality and Transition theories, Astin's Theory of Involvement, and Tinto's Integration and Departure Theories. All of these student development theories discuss the importance of how a student successfully transitions and integrates into a campus with minimal negative effects.

Tinto (1987, 1998, 2017) theorized that if students felt included, they were more likely to succeed. In the late 1980s, Tinto revised his earlier Departure Model to include two key aspects of his theory: incongruence and isolation (Ashar & Skenes, 1993; Tinto, 1987). Incongruence occurs when a student feels at odds with the campus or academic community based on a social interaction. Isolation occurs when there is no social interaction between the student and the campus community. Together, incongruence and isolation represent a lack of integration (Ashar & Skenes, 1993).

Data collected in the study affirmed the presence of incongruence and isolation among the non-traditional study participants at ECU. Most focus group and semi-structured interview participants expressed themselves as "at odds" with the campus community based on their non-traditional status. Though partially due to COVID restrictions, these participants expressed the lack of connection to other students on campus as making them feel lonely, and questioning how they fit in at the university. As Scott stated, "if you start out as a freshman, people already have

these friend groups, and you're coming in, and you're like, where do I fit in?" Scott and the other participants remain enrolled at the university, in spite of their statements indicating a lack of overall integration into the campus community. Their feelings affirm Tinto's theories do exist for them at ECU.

A student's motivation greatly affects their persistence. If their motivation is weak, such as not being clear on why they are attending college, they are more likely to dropout. This is especially true if they are confronted by any institutional challenge (Tinto, 2017). The data collected in this study showed that some non-traditional students are not feeling included. The participants felt events on campus tend to promote partying or just include facts that do not relate to students who are over 18 years old, regardless of the intent or actual content of those events. In fact, the focus group revealed that a large part of their orientation experience was based on information about the dangers of alcohol and drug usage, something they felt was unnecessary for their demographic. The focus group participants doubted their success at the university, reaffirming the theoretical framework.

What they deemed missing was information on bus schedules and routes, where to park, and where to eat. These items can be compiled into a category labeled as "logistics." These logistics are things institutions take for granted as inconsequential or inherent knowledge. Unfortunately, the lack of information about these logistics has the power to greatly affect their academic success and feeling of inclusion on campus. This is not to say that traditional students might not also struggle with bus schedules, parking, or food options; however, the information may be ascertained more easily by traditional students who are living on campus and have a more robust network of connections.

The literature referenced in Chapter Two indicates that academic motivations for non-traditional students are mostly job-related or based on past experiences. Addressing these motivations in orientation is something the participants in this research study also noted as necessary. Two of the semi-structured interview participants were second degree seeking, a category I did not necessarily think of as a non-traditional characteristic, but that seems to be a growing trend in higher education. They noted they had already been to college and received degrees, so they felt comfortable in their academic skills, but they did not know the specifics of ECU's campus. Those logistics were where they felt left out.

Like Tinto, Astin's theory believes involvement in the campus community has a direct correlation to how a student performs or persists. Astin (1999) noted involvement has a direct correlation with how a student identifies in relation to an institution. Students who attend an institution and are able to experience critical mass are more likely to be involved and, as a result, persist. The participants in this study did not note any involvement with the university other than attending classes and completing assignments. In fact, several stated they did not know what resources or events were available to them because of their non-traditional status. Study participants remain academically successful, but they do currently identify as "outsiders" to the institution, an early signal that some may not persist through graduation.

Schlossberg (1981) defined transition as when "an event or non-event results in a change in assumptions about oneself and the world and thus requires a corresponding change in one's behavior and relationships" (p. 5). Individuals respond to these transitions positively or negatively based on their resources and ability to integrate the transition into their life. Factors affecting the adaptation of the individual include an individual's characteristics as well as their

pre and post transition environment. Specifically, aspects such as age or socio-economic status can affect an individual's ability to adapt (Schlossberg, 1981).

Past experiences played a role in this research study. Focus group and semi-structured interview participants who were transfer students noted their experience at community colleges or other institutions had not prepared them for ECU. Participants indicated that information and direction that was easily available at their previous institution was not easily accessible and available to them at ECU. This led to frustrating situations for all participants, but two of the focus group participants specifically expressed "time" they lost where they felt they could have been more academically successful. This was before they understood how to access accommodations at the university.

Schlossberg's theory of mattering and marginality discussed the transition from high school to college (Rayle & Chung, 2007). Students doubt their roles and abilities which can lead to the feeling of not fitting in or mattering. The effects of feeling marginalized, or as if they do not matter, have a negative effect on students leading to academic failure or depression (Patton et al., 2016; Rayle & Chung, 2007). Without coping skills, students struggle with fitting into their new environment. When students feel appreciated, they perform better academically; when students feel isolated and alone, they perform worse academically and most likely do not persist into their second semester or year (Rayle & Chung, 2007).

Focus group participants stated they felt their marginalized status was affecting their academic performance, not necessarily based on their academic skills, but based on how their professors treated them. When Amber asked her professor for help, she was told that "reading is different at the community college." She was also told by a different professor, "I'm sorry simple algebra is too hard for you."

While all students may feel marginalized in their first year, those who are already minoritized may become permanently stuck in the transition feeling as though they do not matter and do not fit in (Rayle & Chung, 2007). Educators and administrators have a responsibility to alleviate or lessen the negative effects associated with mattering and marginality. This idea is often overlooked regarding non-traditional, specifically veteran, students; however, it was confirmed on a small scale by data collected in this research study.

### **Best Methods for Conveying New Student Orientation Content**

The literature from Chapter Two also discussed the best methods for conveying new student orientation content. The suggested methods gave advice for limited timing (no more than 10-minute live sessions), avoiding text-heavy descriptions, and ultimately including “animations, interactive exercises, authentic examples and speaking, and opportunities...to increase engagement” (Sutton, 2020, p. 6). Sutton (2020) also noted that students tended to retain 95% of the information received in a video format versus 10% when reading the information. This point from the literature was definitively proven based on the results of this research study. One of the most significant suggestions from research participants was to include a video or live interaction in the orientation session. I believe one of the possible reasons for the disconnect between what is in the current orientation and what the students are perceiving could be based on the presentation being text-heavy, though my research gave no definitive proof of this phenomenon.

Technology’s role in orientation is an ever-evolving issue, but research from earlier orientation models suggested ways to bridge the technological divide by making campus tours available virtually and creating online treasure hunts to familiarize students with the institution’s website (Miller & Pope, 2010). Both of these elements were mentioned by the study participants. Campus tours available on video were suggested by multiple participants. Additionally,

participants admitted to rushing through the presentation to get to the end goal: meeting with an academic advisor. If the current model is used for a non-traditional student orientation, one recommendation based on the literature would be to add something like a virtual treasure hunt so students must interact with the information and not just speed through it in order to move the next step.

### **Limitations of the Study**

My research was limited by my role as an outsider as well as by unforeseen restrictions caused by COVID-19. My current position is coordinating the orientation sessions at a community college, and this is where my passion for assisting non-traditional students began, as my current institution is populated by 55-60% veteran or non-traditional students. Unfortunately, policy regarding research at my current institution did not allow research to be conducted with this population. Therefore, I reached out to divisions on ECU's campus, asking for a space through which I could conduct research. The Office of Student Transitions, as well as the Student Veterans Services, were gracious enough to allow me the space to research. Neither office currently has an orientation strictly for non-traditional students. This is not because they are unaware of the struggles facing non-traditional students as they onboard to the university, but because they have not had the resources to accomplish this. My hope was this information could assist them in the creation of such a session.

In my role as outsider, I had no previous awareness of past versions of the online orientation. March 2021 participants from Phase II noted too much emphasis on alcohol and drug use. However, in my viewing of the current online transfer orientation, I did not see alcohol and drug use mentioned once. This is potentially something that was already removed from an earlier version of the orientation based on student feedback.



September 2021 participants from Phase II noted the lack of non-traditional student events; whereas, March 2021 participants from Phase II did not note this as an issue. It is likely these types of events were unable to be held because of COVID-19, but as an outsider, I was not aware of what was offered before COVID-19 or what was offered as a compromise during COVID-19 restrictions.

Limitations as a result of COVID-19 restrictions also prohibited me from conducting focus groups in-person at ECU, where students may have been more apt to participate and speak freely without the technical glitches that come with conducting these sessions through teleconferencing (Webex). In person, students do not have to mute or unmute themselves, and conversation flows more naturally.

On a global scale, this study is only a small sampling of non-traditional students at a four-year institution in eastern North Carolina. The student survey was initially sent to 3,294 students identified as non-traditional and enrolled at ECU in spring 2021. Of those 3,294, only 145 participated in the survey, or 4%. Of those 145, only 5 participated in the focus groups, roughly 3%. In September, the survey was sent to 1,290 students enrolled for fall 2021, with 82 participants, or 6%. And, of those 82, 4 participated in semi-structured interviews, roughly 4%. These percentages are all very small and not indicative of every non-traditional student at ECU. Additionally, the needs and concerns of these non-traditional student participants may not represent the needs and concerns of non-traditional students throughout the United States or worldwide.

### **Implications of the Findings for Practice**

Data collected not only signaled ways the online transfer orientation could be revised to address more non-traditional student needs, it also revealed a connection between non-traditional

students and the enrollment cliff. Participants' "outsider" status indicates a need for improved staff and faculty training regarding non-traditional student needs.

### **Revised Session Structure**

The data collected suggested key improvements to the current online transfer orientation to make it more non-traditional student friendly: add video, add a FAQ list, and add a "contact" person. Non-traditional students have a larger gap between high school and college. As such, their learning style requires more than giving them the information so they can teach themselves. As adult learners, non-traditional students comprehend and retain information better when it is related directly to their educational goals (Kenner & Weinerman, 2011). The current structure of the online transfer orientation presents information without context to how that information relates to the non-traditional student.

Participants sought information that is reachable through the current online transfer orientation if they know how to use ECU's website. However, the presentation of that information is not non-traditional student friendly. Participants suggested the use of video so the information could be presented in a manner that makes sense to them. According to the literature, timing should be limited to ten-minute live sessions in order for material to be digested. If the information is pre-recorded, it should be limited to no more than five minutes. Sessions should avoid "talking-head shots, reading from scripts, and text-heavy descriptions (Sutton, 2020, p. 6). By contrast, sessions should include "animations, interactive exercises, authentic examples and speaking, and opportunities to ...increase engagement (Sutton, 2020, p. 6). Students will retain 95% of the information received in a video format versus 10% when only reading the same information. Peer sessions and break-out options can also be beneficial toward specialization of sessions (Sutton, 2020).

To revise the current online transfer orientation to make it more non-traditional student friendly, the content should be converted to short video clips where the information is presented and labeled by its usage. Explicit labelling would assist non-traditional students in understanding which information is needed and how to find it. For example, a video titled “How to Set up VA Benefits” would clue non-traditional veteran students to where to find the information to connect with the Veterans Programs office. This overhaul could be done in a cost-efficient manner; it would just take time to complete.

While that edit is occurring, a simple FAQ could be prepared that would be available to non-traditional students. This could include the contact information for a specific “contact” person as well as frequent questions asked by research study participants: food options on campus, how and where to park, how to access and use the bus/bus schedule, and how to print on campus. These simple changes could alleviate potential stress for non-traditional students transitioning to the college.

### **Addressing the Enrollment Cliff**

Beginning with the “Great Recession” in 2008, researchers theorized a dramatic decrease in the college-aged population by 2025 (Kline, 2019). This is referred to as the enrollment cliff, and it has been discussed in higher education since numbers of applicants began to decrease. This figurative cliff is a direct result of the declining birthrate in the United States, proposing a drop in enrollment of up to 15% (Kline, 2019; Schroeder, 2021). While private institutions or public institutions in larger, more densely populated areas will not suffer too much from the cliff as it arrives in 2025, other public institutions may face lay-offs or closure. Additionally, administrators are now preparing for an additional enrollment drop-off as a result of COVID-19; one they fear may be much worse by 2037 (Schroeder, 2021). Higher education can wait for the

cliff to arrive, then metaphorically fall off of it, or they can change practices to encourage a different type of enrollment.

In an effort to address the enrollment cliff before it arrives, many institutions are looking for new ways to recruit and retain students. Addressing the needs of non-traditional students through a specialized orientation model may assist in easing the effects of the enrollment cliff. Currently, most colleges and universities market to the traditional student, identified as 18 years old, freshly graduated from high school and coming for the stereotypical college experience. These students are living on campus, dining on campus, joining sororities and fraternities, and otherwise immersing themselves in the stereotypically traditional college life. While the enrollment cliff is not an effect of higher education's failure to change its business model, it can be addressed through marketing toward a wider range of students—the non-traditional ones (Copley & Douthett, 2020). However, universities cannot stop at marketing. Once the non-traditional student is on campus, they must continue to support them academically and socially. This study was a small look into how non-traditional students are supported on campus, but it is in no way the only area to consider. Further research should be conducted in all areas of the university. How traditional college marketing tactics are affecting non-traditional recruitment and retention, or the effect on student success related to how faculty interact with non-traditional students are two areas apt for studying that could pro-actively address the enrollment cliff as well.

### **Advice for Practitioners**

The number of non-traditional students attending colleges or universities continues to rise as the traditional aged student declines. However, staff and faculty have not necessarily changed how they interact with this changing demographic. Though the research study focused on the

evaluation of the current online transfer orientation at ECU, it also revealed areas for improved interaction among faculty, staff, and non-traditional students. In presenting the study results to the Annual Student Success Conference at ECU, two attendees mentioned the data reminded them to remember all the obstacles non-traditional students face, and, as such, have more patience with them in classrooms or regarding college policies. Advice for practitioners moving forward is to evaluate their own biases against the non-traditional student demographic.

Additionally, faculty in particular should look at their teaching methods, specifically in online courses, to see if they are utilizing methods suggested for non-traditional students. If the institution does not offer professional development regarding online teaching methods, a practical resource suggestion is Quality Matters. Quality Matters is a non-profit organization focused on quality assurance for online teaching with membership and professional development opportunities (Quality Matters, 2021). Just as the online transfer orientation was too text-heavy with no guidance, online course content can also have this issue. Faculty should use videoed presentations when available/appropriate, include specific instructions as much as possible, and be available to listen to non-traditional students when it is convenient to them. Just as research participants completed the online orientation because their outside obligations did not give them room to attend an in-person session (pre-COVID), faculty should be available to non-traditional students when it is convenient to them. Meeting non-traditional students where they are helps to alleviate any marginality faced by the demographic.

### **Equity and Access Implications**

While much research surrounds first-year experiences, it is focused on the traditional student attending a four-year institution. This study hoped to create a replicable example of how to include non-traditional students in orientation by adding to the resources currently available at

ECU. Because non-traditional students may not have childcare, time off work, or financial resources to attend an in-person orientation session, those minoritized based on socioeconomic statuses or age group are missing out on valuable resources to assist in their success. These students are not receiving an orientation session that is robust; they are receiving an online session that gives them the information but does not allow for interaction or integration to the community.

Nationally, non-traditional students are still missing from the bulk of literature on diversity, though their experiences are similar to those of minority students (Sims & Barnett, 2015). Langrehr et al. (2015) state, “Non-traditional students are consistently marginalized based on their inaccurate depictions in higher education research” (p. 876). The dictionary definition of “marginalized” refers to those who are treated as insignificant or peripheral (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). As the targeted demographic for this stereotypical collegiate experience is the traditional student, non-traditional students often feel they are insignificant and/or peripheral to the four-year institution. This feeling is further exacerbated by the lack of literature including non-traditional students in the conversation on diversity (Sims & Barnett, 2015). Stereotypically, non-traditional students are, and have been, viewed as at risk regarding academic performance (Langrehr et al., 2015).

This study confirmed that some of the non-traditional students at ECU do identify as outsiders and feel as though they are marginalized. Addressing the concerns of these students through an edited online transfer orientation can help to alleviate their “outsider” identity.

### **Recommendations for Further Study**

Institutions often take for granted the basic knowledge of collegiate logistics. While much research and program assessment has been conducted around first-generation students and

their lack of collegiate knowledge, the same level of attention has not been paid to non-traditional students. Non-traditional students are struggling with the transition to the university and some participants admitted to still struggling even after transitioning into their first semester. Orientation only addresses a small part of this transitional struggle. As such, further study is recommended regarding non-traditional student success.

A first step in further study, specifically at ECU, would be to implement a revised model of the online transfer student orientation tailored for a non-traditional student audience and then evaluate its success based on Cuseo's Model. This data would be compared to the original study in order to see if the changes were seen as positive by non-traditional students at ECU.

Then, a study exploring faculty and staff perception of non-traditional students could illuminate more areas for investigation pertaining to non-traditional life on campus. A few participants in the study noted frustration with how their professors or advisors spoke to them. Researching the faculty and staff perception of non-traditional students at ECU would show whether the participants' experiences were an accurate representation of how the campus community views the non-traditional student population. This could confirm the participants' perception and potentially reveal ways to strengthen the relationship between ECU faculty, staff, and non-traditional students.

A longitudinal study that follows non-traditional students during their entire time at ECU would also be beneficial to inform on the entire non-traditional student experience, not just orientation. While important information was gathered in this research study, it is not indicative of how these students will perform throughout their time at ECU or other potential hurdles they may face toward degree completion.

Additional research on the topic could also analyze how marketing of the institution affects non-traditional students. Participants noted current marketing materials focused on the traditional student and the traditional student experience. Revising current marketing models could not only increase non-traditional student success through inclusion, it could also boost non-traditional student enrollment, addressing the enrollment cliff.

All of these study suggestions could further inform the larger literature of the non-traditional student experience in higher education.

### **Role of the Scholarly Practitioner**

My role in this research study included conducting my own program assessment (in addition to the one completed by the Office of Student Transitions), analyzing the data collected from the survey and focus group, and presenting my findings to the Office of Student Transitions as well as the Annual Student Success Conference, both at ECU. As an observer, I was able to view the current online transfer orientation at ECU objectively. Though I was not able to implement a new orientation model for ECU, I was able to make suggestions to the Office of Student Transitions that would assist in a revision of their current session as to better aid non-traditional students.

Throughout this study, I have been able to use the suggestions from non-traditional students at ECU to make my own changes in my current role, Coordinator for Orientation, at my current institution. My institution has a non-traditional student population of over 60%, with veterans accounting for 50% of the total demographic at the institution. The comments of participants from ECU are not limited to their experience at ECU, but they can be related to the struggles of all non-traditional students. As a practitioner, I have become more patient and understanding of the non-traditional demographic with which I work daily.



As my research progressed through COVID-19, I found more sources that are now conducting additional research on the non-traditional student demographic, though most are non-scholarly. While I was not able to use these sources in my study, it is encouraging to find non-traditional students and their needs are being addressed more than they were in 2019 when I began my dissertation.

### **Development as Educational Leader**

During the completion of my Masters in Fine Arts program, I held a handful leadership roles in campus groups. I believed strongly in my abilities as a leader, and I was willing to volunteer for any project or position where I thought I could make a difference. I even won a Leadership Excellence Award for my service to the university. However, as I left graduate school behind and began my teaching career, I saw many who had lesser experience being promoted ahead of me regardless of my expertise or willingness to work beyond my given position. This pattern of reward for networking was something I struggled with personally during my time teaching in the community college system. Eventually, I transitioned from teaching to Student Services, and began roles in informal leadership once again. Yet, the same pattern emerged. Those with less experience but perhaps more networking skills were obtaining opportunities which I desperately wanted. This is why I chose to further my education in the area of higher education leadership.

Throughout this research study, I have learned new skills to boost my own experience as an educational leader. While I had hoped to conduct the study at my current place of employment, finding another site to research within forced me to get rid of my past insecurities regarding networking. I was able to boost my confidence in building collegial networks as well as see how my knowledge could apply at other institutions. It also allowed me to remind myself

to practice patience. The perspective of non-traditional students at a four-year institution versus a two-year institution are not all that different, but the reminder to look at each student as an individual is an invaluable skill I was reminded of during this research study.

Additionally, I was reminded that even small changes can make a larger difference in the lives of marginalized students. Too often, we all think globally versus locally, and that is an invaluable lesson for creating real change in higher education.

### **Conclusion**

As one survey participant noted, “Online orientation did not address the experience/needs of a non-traditional student.” This idea was the origin for my study, with the hope to discover how to make orientation a tool for non-traditional student success. The mixed-method study utilized program assessment, quantitative survey, focus groups, and semi-structured interviews to collect data from current non-traditional students at ECU. The data collection revealed four main themes: need for specific information and contact, focus on traditional student neglects non-traditional needs, non-traditional identity overlooked by campus community, and unclear purpose of the online transfer orientation. These themes not only supported the guiding questions from the research statement, but also revealed that while much of the information desired by the research participants is in fact included in the current transfer online orientation model, there is a disconnect with how the information is presented and what the participants believe is presented.

As the non-traditional student demographic continues to grow at all institutions, more attention should be paid to how institutions are welcoming the population. Revised orientation models including video of and logistics for each institution are a small, inexpensive change that would not only lead to greater student success but could alleviate the negative effects of the looming enrollment cliff in higher education. While these revisions include services like

orientation, they should not be limited just to these services. Faculty and staff should look at their interactions with the non-traditional student population and adopt practices that alleviate non-traditional student struggle.

Non-traditional students are more than just a number. They are adult learners, distance education students, gap-year students, transfer students, and veterans. They are a diverse and marginalized group that deserves attention in the literature, marketing, and resources for colleges and universities. Though this research study took place at one institution in eastern North Carolina, it can be applied to colleges and universities across the country.

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# APPENDIX A: INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL



**EAST CAROLINA UNIVERSITY**  
**University & Medical Center Institutional Review Board**  
4N-64 Brody Medical Sciences Building · Mail Stop 682  
600 Moyer Boulevard · Greenville, NC 27834  
Office 252-744-2914 · Fax 252-744-2284 ·  
[rede.ecu.edu/umcirb/](http://rede.ecu.edu/umcirb/)

## Notification of Exempt Certification

From: Social/Behavioral IRB  
To: [Ashley Shivar](#)  
CC: [Heidi Puckett](#)  
Date: 1/27/2021  
Re: [UMCIRB 20-003074](#)  
We Are Not Eighteen: Welcoming Non-traditional Students on Campus

I am pleased to inform you that your research submission has been certified as exempt on 1/27/2021. This study is eligible for Exempt Certification under category # 1 & 2ab.

It is your responsibility to ensure that this research is conducted in the manner reported in your application and/or protocol, as well as being consistent with the ethical principles of the Belmont Report and your profession.

This research study does not require any additional interaction with the UMCIRB unless there are proposed changes to this study. Any change, prior to implementing that change, must be submitted to the UMCIRB for review and approval. The UMCIRB will determine if the change impacts the eligibility of the research for exempt status. If more substantive review is required, you will be notified within five business days.

Document	Description
We Are Not Eighteen Committee Approval(0.01)	Additional Items
We Are Not Eighteen Focus Group Consent Form(0.02)	Consent Forms
We Are Not Eighteen Instrumentation(0.01)	Interview/Focus Group Scripts/Questions
We Are Not Eighteen Instrumentation(0.01)	Surveys and Questionnaires
We Are Not Eighteen Student Survey Invite(0.02)	Recruitment Documents/Scripts
We Are Not Eighteen Student Survey Questions(0.01)	Surveys and Questionnaires
We Are Not Eighteen Student Survey Questions(0.01)	Interview/Focus Group Scripts/Questions
We Are Not Eighteen Survey Consent Form(0.01)	Consent Forms
We Are Not Eighteen: Welcoming Non-traditional Students On Campus(0.01)	Study Protocol or Grant Application

For research studies where a waiver or alteration of HIPAA Authorization has been approved, the IRB states that each of the waiver criteria in 45 CFR 164.512(i)(1)(i)(A) and (2)(i) through (v) have been met. Additionally, the elements of PHI to be collected as described in items 1 and 2 of the Application for Waiver of Authorization have been determined to be the minimal necessary for the specified research.

The Chairperson (or designee) does not have a potential for conflict of interest on this study.





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## Notification of Amendment Approval

From: Social/Behavioral IRB  
To: [Ashley Shivar](#)  
CC: [Heidi Puckett](#)  
Date: 4/13/2021  
Re: [Ame1 UMCIRB 20-003074](#)  
[UMCIRB 20-003074](#)  
We Are Not Eighteen: Welcoming Non-traditional Students on Campus

Your Amendment has been reviewed and approved using expedited review on 4/13/2021. It was the determination of the UMCIRB Chairperson (or designee) that this revision does not impact the overall risk/benefit ratio of the study and is appropriate for the population and procedures proposed.

Please note that any further changes to this approved research may not be initiated without UMCIRB review except when necessary to eliminate an apparent immediate hazard to the participant. All unanticipated problems involving risks to participants and others must be promptly reported to the UMCIRB. The investigator must adhere to all reporting requirements for this study.

If applicable, approved consent documents with the IRB approval date stamped on the document should be used to consent participants (consent documents with the IRB approval date stamp are found under the Documents tab in the study workspace).

The approval includes the following items:

Document	Description
We Are Not Eighteen Focus Group Protocol/Questions(0.01)	Interview/Focus Group Scripts/Questions

For research studies where a waiver or alteration of HIPAA Authorization has been approved, the IRB states that each of the waiver criteria in 45 CFR 164.512(i)(1)(i)(A) and (2)(i) through (v) have been met. Additionally, the elements of PHI to be collected as described in items 1 and 2 of the Application for Waiver of Authorization have been determined to be the minimal necessary for the specified research.

The Chairperson (or designee) does not have a potential for conflict of interest on this study.



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## Notification of Amendment Approval

From: Social/Behavioral IRB  
To: [Ashley Shivar](#)  
CC: [Heidi Puckett](#)  
Date: 6/2/2021  
Re: [Ame2\\_UMCIRB 20-003074](#)  
[UMCIRB 20-003074](#)  
We Are Not Eighteen: Welcoming Non-traditional Students on Campus

Your Amendment has been reviewed and approved using expedited review on 6/1/2021. It was the determination of the UMCIRB Chairperson (or designee) that this revision does not impact the overall risk/benefit ratio of the study and is appropriate for the population and procedures proposed.

Please note that any further changes to this approved research may not be initiated without UMCIRB review except when necessary to eliminate an apparent immediate hazard to the participant. All unanticipated problems involving risks to participants and others must be promptly reported to the UMCIRB. The investigator must adhere to all reporting requirements for this study.

If applicable, approved consent documents with the IRB approval date stamped on the document should be used to consent participants (consent documents with the IRB approval date stamp are found under the Documents tab in the study workspace).

The approval includes the following items:

Document	Description
We Are Not Eighteen Interview Consent Form(0.01)	Consent Forms
We Are Not Eighteen Interview Protocol (0.01)	Interview/Focus Group Scripts/Questions

For research studies where a waiver or alteration of HIPAA Authorization has been approved, the IRB states that each of the waiver criteria in 45 CFR 164.512(i)(1)(i)(A) and (2)(i) through (v) have been met. Additionally, the elements of PHI to be collected as described in items 1 and 2 of the Application for Waiver of Authorization have been determined to be the minimal necessary for the specified research.

The Chairperson (or designee) does not have a potential for conflict of interest on this study.

## APPENDIX B: PARTICIPANT INFORMED CONSENT FORM



### **Informed Consent to Participate in Research**

Information to consider before taking part in research that has no more than minimal risk.

Title of Research Study: WE ARE NOT EIGHTEEN: WELCOMING NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENTS ON CAMPUS

Principal Investigator: Ashley Shivar

Institution, Department or Division: East Carolina University, Department of Education, Educational Leadership

Address: East 5th Street Greenville, NC 27858-4353

Telephone #: 252-328-4260

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Researchers at East Carolina University (ECU) study issues related to society, health problems, environmental problems, behavior problems and the human condition. To do this, we need the help of volunteers who are willing to take part in research.

#### **Why am I being invited to take part in this research?**

The purpose of this research is to evaluate ECU's online transfer orientation. You are being invited to take part in this research because you have been identified as a non-traditional student. The decision to take part in this research is yours to make. By doing this research, we hope to learn how we can improve the non-traditional, new student orientation experience at ECU.

If you volunteer to take part in this research, you will be one of about fifteen people to do so.

#### **Are there reasons I should not take part in this research?**

I understand I should not take part in this research if I am not a non-traditional student and did not participate in ECU's online transfer orientation.

#### **What other choices do I have if I do not take part in this research?**

You can choose not to participate.

#### **Where is the research going to take place and how long will it last?**

The research will be conducted at ECU's Main Campus Student Center. You will be asked to attend at least one, one-hour session, the date and time of which is to be determined.

#### **What will I be asked to do?**

You will be asked to do the following:

- Attend one focus group.
- Participate in a group discussion.
- Give honest answers.
- Review a summary of the focus group and address any inconsistencies from your experience.

**What might I experience if I take part in the research?**

We do not know of any risks (the chance of harm) associated with this research. Any risks that may occur with this research are no more than what you would experience in everyday life. We do not know if you will benefit from taking part in this study. There may not be any personal benefit to you, but the information gained by doing this research may help others in the future.

**Will I be paid for taking part in this research?**

We will not be able to pay you for the time you volunteer while being in this study.

**Will it cost me to take part in this research?**

It will not cost you any money to be part of the research.

**Who will know that I took part in this research and learn personal information about me?**

ECU and the people and organizations listed below may know that you took part in this research and may see information about you that is normally kept private.

**How will you keep the information you collect about me secure? How long will you keep it?**

Your focus group participation will be recorded to ensure accuracy. The recording of this focus group will be kept for three years on a secure drive.

**What if I decide I don't want to continue in this research?**

You can stop at any time after it has already started. There will be no consequences if you stop and you will not be criticized. You will not lose any benefits that you normally receive.

**Who should I contact if I have questions?**

The people conducting this study will be able to answer any questions concerning this research, now or in the future. You may contact the Principal Investigator at 910-938-6243 between 9 a.m. and 4 p.m.

If you have questions about your rights as someone taking part in research, you may call the University & Medical Center Institutional Review Board (UMCIRB) at phone number 252-744-2914 (days, 8:00 am-5:00 pm). If you would like to report a complaint or concern about this research study, you may call the Director for Human Research Protections, at 252-744-2914.

**Is there anything else I should know?**

The following research results will be provided to you: a summary of the focus group conversation. These results will be shared with you within two weeks of completing the focus group.

**I have decided I want to take part in this research. What should I do now?**

The person obtaining informed consent will ask you to read the following and if you agree, you should sign this form:

- I have read (or had read to me) all of the above information.
- I have had an opportunity to ask questions about things in this research I did not understand and have received satisfactory answers.
- I know that I can stop taking part in this study at any time.
- By signing this informed consent form, I am not giving up any of my rights.
- I have been given a copy of this consent document, and it is mine to keep.

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<b>Participant's Name (PRINT)</b>	<b>Signature</b>	<b>Date</b>
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**Person Obtaining Informed Consent:** I have conducted the initial informed consent process. I have orally reviewed the contents of the consent document with the person who has signed above and answered all of the person's questions about the research.

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<b>Person Obtaining Consent (PRINT)</b>	<b>Signature</b>	<b>Dat</b>
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## APPENDIX C: CUSEO'S INSTITUTIONAL SELF-ASSESSMENT MODEL FOR EVALUATING ORIENTATION PROGRAMS

*Answers on a scale of 1, very ineffective, to 5, very effective.*

1. Is the orientation program delivered in a *personalized* manner that validates students as *unique individuals* and treats them as "whole persons?"
2. Are new students oriented to *people* (not just buildings and information) and given the opportunity *interact* meaningfully with:
  - academic advisors
  - support staff
  - peers
  - faculty
3. Are new students exposed to experienced and trained *peer leaders* as part of the orientation process?
4. Does the program provide students with *relevant, "just-in-time" information* that applies directly to their *current needs* and informs their *immediate choices and decisions*?
5. Are both the offices of *Academic Affairs* and *Student Affairs (Student Services)* involved in the planning and delivery of new-student orientation, ensuring that the program has both an *academic* and *student life* focus?
6. Is new-student orientation *required or optional*? (If required, how effectively is attendance/participation *monitored and enforced*?) (If optional, how intentional and effective are our recruitment efforts?)
7. Is the program *customized* to meet the specialized needs of student *subpopulations* (e.g., commuters, non-traditional students, transfer students)?
8. Does new-student orientation include a component designed for students' *parents and family* members that involves discussion of the role they can play in supporting their first-year student's initial adjustment and subsequent success?
9. Do first-year students experience an *inspirational, celebratory ritual* at college entry—e.g., a *convocation or induction ceremony*—at which time the college formally welcomes new students and their families into its community?
10. Is the pre-term orientation program meaningfully *connected* to new students' first-term experience so that entering students experience transitional continuity *to and through* their first term in college (e.g., via co-curricular programming and/or a first-year experience course, a.k.a. "extended orientation" course)?

## APPENDIX D: SURVEY QUESTIONS FOR PHASE I

1. Did you complete an orientation upon entering East Carolina University?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
    - i. Students who answer “no” will be allowed to exit the survey.
2. If you completed an orientation session, do you believe the orientation session was an important part of your entry to East Carolina University?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
3. Do you believe the orientation session helped you succeed academically as a student in your first semester at East Carolina University?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
4. Do you believe the orientation session helped you succeed socially as a student in your first semester at East Carolina University?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
5. Do you remember what specific information was given to you during your orientation session?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
6. Have you used any campus resources available to you on campus during your time as a student at East Carolina University?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
7. If you have used campus resources, did you learn about these resources during your orientation session?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
8. Did your orientation session discuss academic technology such as Blackboard, Canvas, or PiratePort?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
9. Did your orientation session discuss financial information regarding paying for tuition and textbooks?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No

10. If you had transfer credits from another institution or from Advanced Placement (AP) or College Level Examination Program (CLEP), were they discussed with you during your orientation session?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
  
11. Would you be interested in participating in an interview or focus group to discuss your orientation at East Carolina University?
  - a. Yes
  - b. If yes, please enter your ECU email address. By entering your email address, you are agreeing to be contacted regarding focus groups for this study.
  - c. No



## APPENDIX E: SURVEY INVITATION

Dear Survey Participant,

I am a doctoral student in the Higher Education Leadership program at East Carolina University assessing the impact of online orientation models for non-traditional students. Specifically, I am studying whether orientation helps non-traditional students transition to the university. As a non-traditional student at ECU, you have valuable insight to this topic; therefore, I am seeking your participation in my research study. Participation is minimal and consists of the following:

1. Completion of the included survey.
  - a. All answers are anonymous.
2. Voluntary participation in one or more focus groups occurring later in 2021 through Microsoft Teams, Webex, or on-campus should COVID-19 restrictions allow.

You are more than welcome to participate in the survey without joining a focus group. The attached IRB consent form will further explain the study and any potential impacts to you as a student. Again, your participation is voluntary, anonymous, and greatly appreciated!

Please email me if you have any questions: [shivara10@students.ecu.edu](mailto:shivara10@students.ecu.edu).

Warm Regards,

Ashley Shivar, doctoral student  
East Carolina University

## **APPENDIX F: FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL**

### **We Are Not Eighteen: Welcoming Non-traditional Students On Campus**

#### **FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL**

##### **PART 1.**

##### **INSTRUCTIONS**

Good morning/afternoon. My name is Ashley Shivar. Thank you for agreeing to participate in this focus group. The purpose of this focus group is to ask you all about your experiences with the online transfer orientation at ECU. There are no right or wrong answers. I want you to feel comfortable with honestly sharing your thoughts about orientation at ECU.

I have blocked out 1-2 hours for this session; however, we may end earlier or later depending on the flow of the conversation. You may leave or join as necessary while we are in progress. Additionally, if warranted, I am willing to hold another focus group at a later time to further discuss or continue any conversations we have today.

##### **RECORDING INFORMATION**

This focus group is taking place over Microsoft Teams, and I will be recording this focus group so I will be able to have all details from the conversation. You will not be identified in the recording notes; all participants will be referred to by a generic number/name. If you have a particular number or name you would like to be identified with, let me know. You will be provided the transcribed notes from the group to make notes or corrections.

##### **CONSENT FORM INSTRUCTIONS**

Everyone was sent a consent form through email. If you have not already, please take a moment to read and sign the Consent Form.

---

Date:

Time:

Focus Group Attendees:

*\*\*\*Use probing statements such as “Can you elaborate on that?” when relevant.*

*Introduction:* You all participated in the initial survey about your experience with the online transfer orientation. From the data collected, I have compiled some questions to get us started. However, do not feel as though you must stick to these questions if you have something you want to share about your orientation experience or life as a non-traditional student.

**Q1:** Survey data revealed many students did not remember specifics from their orientation session. Can anyone start us off with what you do remember from completing orientation?

**Q2:** Another theme from the survey data is that the orientation session was “useless”, a “hassle”, and unnecessary to complete. Do any of you feel that way? Why or why not?

**Q3:** One survey taker noted, specifically, that orientation did not “address experience/needs of a non-traditional student”. Do you agree or disagree? Why or why not?

*q3a:* What could be done to address the needs of non-traditional students?

**Q4:** Several survey takers noted the orientation was focused on “younger students”. Do you agree or disagree? Why or why not?

**Q5:** Many survey takers noted the “charge” for the orientation was a “waste of money” or thought it was a “scam”. What are your thoughts on this?

**Q6:** Most survey takers believe the orientation did not prepare them academically or socially for their experience at ECU. Do you agree or disagree?

*q6a:* What could be done to better prepare you academically and/or socially?

**Q7:** Did any of you have transfer credits? Do you believe knowledge about transfer credits would be helpful in orientation?

**Q8:** If you could revise the current online orientation, what would you add? Take away? Why?

**Q9:** Are there any other aspects of the orientation, or your needs as a non-traditional student that you would like to discuss?

## **CONCLUSION**

I greatly appreciate you all taking the time to participate in this focus group. If you think of anything else you wanted to include in our discussion but did not get the chance to, please feel free to email me directly at [shivara10@students.ecu.edu](mailto:shivara10@students.ecu.edu).

## APPENDIX G: FOCUS GROUP CONSENT FORM



### **Informed Consent to Participate in Research** Information to consider before taking part in research that has no more than minimal risk.

Title of Research Study: WE ARE NOT EIGHTEEN: WELCOMING NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENTS ON CAMPUS

Principal Investigator: Ashley Shivar

Institution, Department or Division: East Carolina University, Department of Education, Educational Leadership

Address: East 5th Street Greenville, NC 27858-4353

Telephone #: 252-328-4260

---

Researchers at East Carolina University (ECU) study issues related to society, health problems, environmental problems, behavior problems and the human condition. To do this, we need the help of volunteers who are willing to take part in research.

#### **Why am I being invited to take part in this research?**

The purpose of this research is to evaluate ECU's online transfer orientation. You are being invited to take part in this research because you have been identified as a non-traditional student. The decision to take part in this research is yours to make. By doing this research, we hope to learn how we can improve the non-traditional, new student orientation experience at ECU.

If you volunteer to take part in this research, you will be one of about fifteen people to do so.

#### **Are there reasons I should not take part in this research?**

I understand I should not take part in this research if I am not a non-traditional student and did not participate in ECU's online transfer orientation.

#### **What other choices do I have if I do not take part in this research?**

You can choose not to participate.

#### **Where is the research going to take place and how long will it last?**

The research will be conducted at ECU's Main Campus Student Center. You will be asked to attend at least one, one-hour session, the date and time of which is to be determined.

#### **What will I be asked to do?**

You will be asked to do the following:

- Attend one focus group.
- Participate in a group discussion.
- Give honest answers.
- Review a summary of the focus group and address any inconsistencies from your experience.

**What might I experience if I take part in the research?**

We do not know of any risks (the chance of harm) associated with this research. Any risks that may occur with this research are no more than what you would experience in everyday life. We do not know if you will benefit from taking part in this study. There may not be any personal benefit to you, but the information gained by doing this research may help others in the future.

**Will I be paid for taking part in this research?**

We will not be able to pay you for the time you volunteer while being in this study.

**Will it cost me to take part in this research?**

It will not cost you any money to be part of the research.

**Who will know that I took part in this research and learn personal information about me?**

ECU and the people and organizations listed below may know that you took part in this research and may see information about you that is normally kept private.

**How will you keep the information you collect about me secure? How long will you keep it?**

Your focus group participation will be recorded to ensure accuracy. The recording of this focus group will be kept for three years on a secure drive.

**What if I decide I don't want to continue in this research?**

You can stop at any time after it has already started. There will be no consequences if you stop and you will not be criticized. You will not lose any benefits that you normally receive.

**Who should I contact if I have questions?**

The people conducting this study will be able to answer any questions concerning this research, now or in the future. You may contact the Principal Investigator at 910-938-6243 between 9 a.m. and 4 p.m.

If you have questions about your rights as someone taking part in research, you may call the University & Medical Center Institutional Review Board (UMCIRB) at phone number 252-744-2914 (days, 8:00 am-5:00 pm). If you would like to report a complaint or concern about this research study, you may call the Director for Human Research Protections, at 252-744-2914.

**Is there anything else I should know?**

The following research results will be provided to you: a summary of the focus group conversation. These results will be shared with you within two weeks of completing the focus group.

**I have decided I want to take part in this research. What should I do now?**

The person obtaining informed consent will ask you to read the following and if you agree, you should sign this form:

- I have read (or had read to me) all of the above information.
- I have had an opportunity to ask questions about things in this research I did not understand and have received satisfactory answers.
- I know that I can stop taking part in this study at any time.
- By signing this informed consent form, I am not giving up any of my rights.
- I have been given a copy of this consent document, and it is mine to keep.

---

<b>Participant's Name (PRINT)</b>	<b>Signature</b>	<b>Date</b>
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**Person Obtaining Informed Consent:** I have conducted the initial informed consent process. I have orally reviewed the contents of the consent document with the person who has signed above and answered all of the person's questions about the research.

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<b>Person Obtaining Consent (PRINT)</b>	<b>Signature</b>	<b>Date</b>
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## APPENDIX H: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

### We Are Not Eighteen: Welcoming Non-traditional Students On Campus

#### INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

##### PART 1.

##### INSTRUCTIONS

Good morning/afternoon. My name is Ashley Shivar. Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. The purpose of these interview questions is to ask you about your experiences with the online transfer orientation at ECU. There are no right or wrong answers. I want you to feel comfortable with honestly sharing your thoughts about orientation at ECU.

##### RECORDING INFORMATION

You will not be identified in the summary of this interview or in any data illustrated within the research study. You will be provided the transcribed notes from the group to make notes or corrections.

##### CONSENT FORM INSTRUCTIONS

You were sent a consent form through email. If you have not already, please take a moment to read and sign the Consent Form.

---

Date:

Time:

Interviewee:

*\*\*\*Use probing statements such as “Can you elaborate on that?” when relevant.*

*Introduction:* From the student survey data collected throughout March and April of 2021, I have compiled some questions to further investigate the non-traditional student experience at ECU. Please be as specific as possible in your answers.

**Q1:** Survey data revealed many students did not remember specifics from their orientation session. What do you remember from completing orientation?

**Q2:** Another theme from the survey data is that the orientation session was “useless”, a “hassle”, and unnecessary to complete. Do you feel that way? Why or why not?

**Q3:** One survey taker noted, specifically, that orientation did not “address experience/needs of a non-traditional student”. Do you agree or disagree? Why or why not?

*q3a:* If you agree, what do you think could be done to address the needs of non-traditional students?

**Q4:** Several survey takers noted the orientation was focused on “younger students”. Do you agree or disagree? Why or why not?

**Q5:** Many survey takers noted the “charge” for the orientation was a “waste of money” or thought it was a “scam”. What are your thoughts on this?

**Q6:** Most survey takers believe the orientation did not prepare them academically or socially for their experience at ECU. Do you agree or disagree?

*q6a:* If you agree, what do you think could be done to better prepare you academically and/or socially?

**Q7:** Did you have transfer credits? If so, did you learn about what would transfer through your orientation session. If you had transfer credits from another institution, and you did not receive information about those credits through orientation, do you believe knowledge about transfer credits would be helpful in orientation?

**Q8:** If you could revise the current online orientation, what would you add? Take away? Why?

**Q9:** Are there any other aspects of the orientation, or your needs as a non-traditional student that you would like to note?



## CONCLUSION

I greatly appreciate you taking the time to participate in this interview. If you think of anything else you want to include please feel free to email me directly at [shivara10@students.ecu.edu](mailto:shivara10@students.ecu.edu).

## APPENDIX I: INTERVIEW CONSENT FORM



### **Informed Consent to Participate in Research**

Information to consider before taking part in research that has no more than minimal risk.

Title of Research Study: WE ARE NOT EIGHTEEN: WELCOMING NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENTS ON CAMPUS

Principal Investigator: Ashley Shivar

Institution, Department or Division: East Carolina University, Department of Education, Educational Leadership

Address: East 5th Street Greenville, NC 27858-4353

Telephone #: 252-328-4260

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Researchers at East Carolina University (ECU) study issues related to society, health problems, environmental problems, behavior problems and the human condition. To do this, we need the help of volunteers who are willing to take part in research.

#### **Why am I being invited to take part in this research?**

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#### **Are there reasons I should not take part in this research?**

I understand I should not take part in this research if I am not a non-traditional student and did not participate in ECU's online transfer orientation.

#### **What other choices do I have if I do not take part in this research?**

You can choose not to participate.

#### **Where is the research going to take place and how long will it last?**

The research will be conducted through a Microsoft Word Document. You will be asked to complete the document on your desktop, laptop, or smart device at your own convenience.

#### **What will I be asked to do?**

You will be asked to complete the document at your own convenience.

**What might I experience if I take part in the research?**

We do not know of any risks (the chance of harm) associated with this research. Any risks that may occur with this research are no more than what you would experience in everyday life. We do not know if you will benefit from taking part in this study. There may not be any personal benefit to you, but the information gained by doing this research may help others in the future.

**Will I be paid for taking part in this research?**

We will not be able to pay you for the time you volunteer while being in this study.

**Will it cost me to take part in this research?**

It will not cost you any money to be part of the research.

**Who will know that I took part in this research and learn personal information about me?**

ECU and the people and organizations listed below may know that you took part in this research and may see information about you that is normally kept private.

**How will you keep the information you collect about me secure? How long will you keep it?**

Your survey responses will be recorded to ensure accuracy. The data collected from the study will be stored on a secure drive for three years.

**What if I decide I don't want to continue in this research?**

You can stop at any time after it has already started. There will be no consequences if you stop and you will not be criticized. You will not lose any benefits that you normally receive.

**Who should I contact if I have questions?**

The people conducting this study will be able to answer any questions concerning this research, now or in the future. You may contact the Principal Investigator at 910-938-6243 between 9 a.m. and 4 p.m.

If you have questions about your rights as someone taking part in research, you may call the University & Medical Center Institutional Review Board (UMCIRB) at phone number 252-744-2914 (days, 8:00 am-5:00 pm). If you would like to report a complaint or concern about this research study, you may call the Director for Human Research Protections, at 252-744-2914.

**Is there anything else I should know?**

Completing the written interview will help ECU continue to provide excellent service to its students.

**I have decided I want to take part in this research. What should I do now?**

The person obtaining informed consent will ask you to read the following and if you agree, you should sign this form:

- I have read (or had read to me) all of the above information.
- I have had an opportunity to ask questions about things in this research I did not understand and have received satisfactory answers.
- I know that I can stop taking part in this study at any time.
- By signing this informed consent form, I am not giving up any of my rights.
- I have been given a copy of this consent document, and it is mine to keep.

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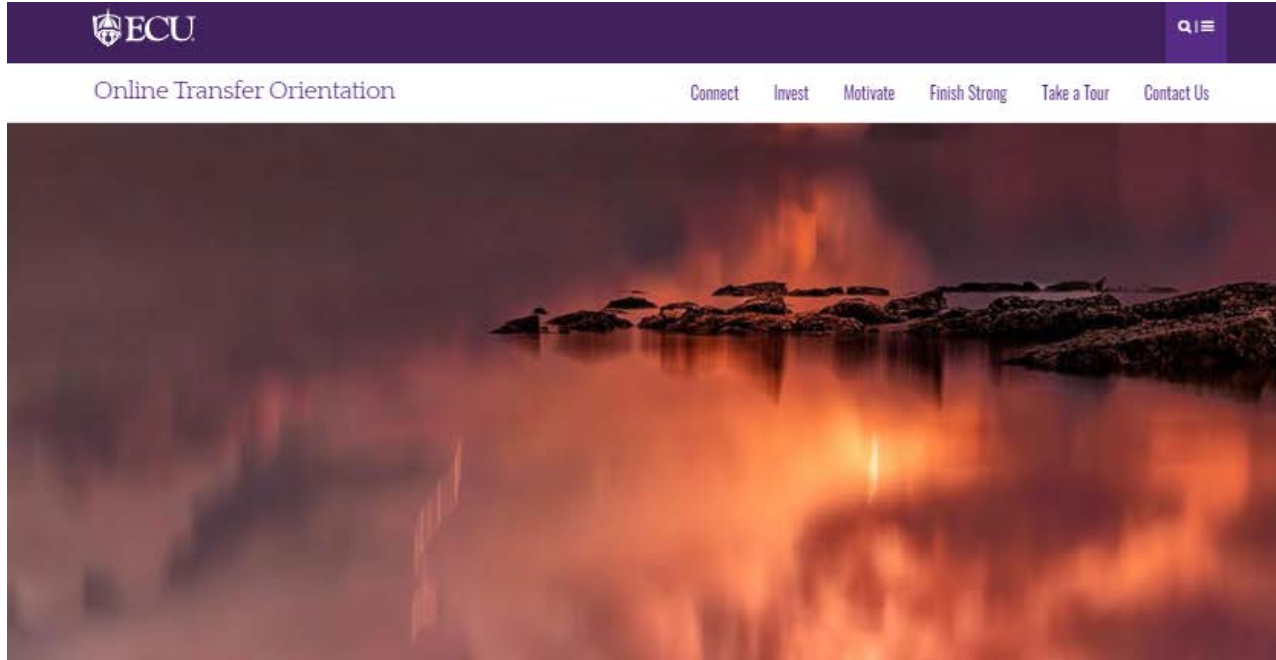
<b>Participant's Name (PRINT)</b>	<b>Signature</b>	<b>Date</b>
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**Person Obtaining Informed Consent:** I have conducted the initial informed consent process. I have orally reviewed the contents of the consent document with the person who has signed above and answered all of the person's questions about the research.

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<b>Person Obtaining Consent (PRINT)</b>	<b>Signature</b>	<b>Date</b>
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## APPENDIX J: ONLINE ORIENTATION MODULE SCREENSHOTS



### STOP!!

If you are a DISTANCE EDUCATION STUDENT contact the ECU Online Student Services Team for assistance.

Contact Online Student Services

## Welcome to Online Transfer Orientation!

The Office of Student Transitions is here to assist students in the transition to East Carolina University. As a new student, you will gain valuable information about yourself, the campus, and the ECU community during your college experience.

Take time to review the modules offered in the online orientation. Starting with Step 1 below, complete each of the four steps and complete the opinion survey at the end to receive an advising code.

To begin follow Steps 1 – 4 and complete the opinion survey at the end to receive an advising code.

The Office of Student Transitions is here to help you make a smooth transition to ECU. Please contact us at 252-328-4173 or [orientation@ecu.edu](mailto:orientation@ecu.edu) if you need assistance or more information.

### Step 1

*As an ECU student, if your experience sexual misconduct, the University has a system of care and support to provide you with assistance. [Click here to learn more about Title IX Policies.](#)*

*Students at East Carolina University have the freedom to discuss any problem that presents itself, as the First Amendment permits, and within the limits of viewpoint and content-neutral restrictions on time, place, and manner of expression that are necessary to achieve significant University interests. [Click here to learn more about Freedom of Expression.](#)*

## TRANSFER ORIENTATION SPONSORS

The Bellamy  
The District  
Campus Pointe  
University Edge & Dickinson  
Lofts  
First Street Place  
Paramount 3800  
University Park  
33 East  
The Province  
The Bower  
The Davis



## Connect Module

### Step 1 of 4

Your first year at ECU is a critical time of transition and adjustment as you are now a member of Pirate Nation. Connecting in and out of the classroom will assist you with establishing yourself academically and socially.

- [Office of Student Transitions](#)
- [Disability Support Services](#)
- [Student Organizations](#)

- [Student Veteran Services](#)
- [Dr. Jesse R. Peel LGBTQ Center](#)

- [Academic Advising](#)
- [Scholarships](#)

## [Office of Student Transitions](#)

## Office of Student Transitions

The Office of Student Transitions provides a seamless transition from orientation through post-graduation by creating an environment that contributes to the success of all students. Our programs are designed to help new students gain valuable information about yourself, the campus, and the ECU community. Transfer Student Services provides students with a comprehensive orientation 5 times throughout the year, January, March, May (2-days), August and November. If you desire to live on campus with other transfer students, you can join the QUEST Living Learning Community, an on-campus program designed just for transfer students.

## Student Veteran Services

Student Veteran Services (SVS) facilitates your transition from the military to university life. SVS to provide accurate and timely information to help you navigate your Federal VA benefits and the resources available to you on campus and within the community.

Priority registration is open to ECU students who are Activity Duty, National guard, Reserve component, and/or Veterans (spouses and dependents are not currently eligible). You will be required to provide verification of eligibility to the office of Student Veteran Services no later than the fifth day of class to be eligible to register early. Veterans must submit a copy of their DD 214 with the Member 4 copy (i.e. indicating character of discharge) or Certificate of Eligibility. Active Duty Service members must submit a copy of their current Orders or Current Military ID card (CAC).

## Academic Advising

The mission of the East Carolina University Academic Advising Collaborative is to guide, serve and support students through their academic journey.

### **The role of academic advisors is to:**

- Discuss major requirements and assist in the selection of appropriate coursework
- Discuss academic goals and ways to meet them
- Be knowledgeable of campus policies and procedures (or be able to find the necessary information)
- Respect advisees as individuals, understanding differences in backgrounds and educational/life goals

### **The Role of an Advisee is to:**

- Know who your advisor is and how to contact him/her
- Schedule advising appointments (whether individual or group, as designated by the advisor)
- Follow through with any recommendations or actions discussed
- Communicate any problems, concerns, or questions that may arise to your advisor immediately

### **Visit the Academic Advising Collaborative website to learn more about:**

- Registering for class
- Academic policies
- Choosing a major
- Major guides, descriptions, and requirements

## Disability Support Services

## Disability Support Services

East Carolina University seeks to comply fully with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Students requesting accommodations based on a disability must be registered with the Department for Disability Support Services.

Academic accommodations may be available to students including access to assistive technology and testing accommodations. ECU operates a fully compliant Transit system consisting of modern buses that allow easy on and off access. In addition, the University operates a point to point on demand services called Pirate Access. To qualify for Pirate Access, students must complete an application. Students should contact Disability Support Services (DSS) to discuss possible assistance. DSS can be reached at (252) 737-1016 or [dssdept@ecu.edu](mailto:dssdept@ecu.edu).

## Dr. Jesse R. Peel LGBTQ Center

The Dr. Jesse R. Peel LGBTQ Center provides support and a sense of community for students, faculty, staff, and alumni of all sexual orientations, gender identities, and gender expressions. The center fosters student leadership, as well as personal, academic, and professional growth, through volunteer opportunities and collaborative partnerships across campus. The LGBTQ Center offers a safe and welcoming environment that promotes understanding, acceptance, and visibility of the LGBTQ community through a comprehensive range of educational programming and advocacy services. To learn more about the Dr. Jesse R. Peel LGBTQ Center call (252) 737-2514 or email [lgfb@ecu.edu](mailto:lgfb@ecu.edu).

## Scholarships

East Carolina University has a variety of scholarships available to incoming freshmen, transfer students, and existing students. The University utilizes an online application portal for the scholarships offered to both incoming and existing students. Incoming students must have been admitted in order to have access to the portal. Scholarships are offered each academic year and the funds are typically spread across the academic year with 50% of the award paid in the fall semester and 50% paid in the spring semester. Scholarship opportunities can be located by visiting the ECU Online Scholarship Management System – [ECUAWard](#).

## Student Organizations

East Carolina University is home to over 500 student organizations designed to enhance your experience as a college student. Student organizations provide an opportunity to get involved, meet new friends, build your resume, and have fun! Programs focus on a wide range of interests including, but not limited to: academics, leadership, honor societies, cultural interests, medical and health sciences, religion and spirituality, service and visual performing arts.



# Invest Module

## Step 2 of 4

Once students have connected to their community, they must become purposefully engaged or invested both academically and socially. Connecting and investing build academic and social efficacy (confidence in self-success competencies).

Career Services	Pirates Abroad	Student Employment Office
Pirate Academic Success Center (PASC)	ECU Transit	Parking & Transportation
ECU Libraries		

### Career Services

East Carolina University Career Services supports and empowers students in their career development to succeed as professionals in a global community.

ECU Career Services provides many tools and resources to help students explore career possibilities. Handshake, CareerShift, Internships, research opportunities, job search strategies, along with volunteer and leadership opportunities are a few ways Career Services help students build experience at ECU.

Career Services is also the host of Education, Engineering & Technology, Education, Internship, and summer job fairs where over 100 employers stand ready to recruit ECU Pirates.

### Pirates Abroad

Why study abroad? East Carolina University believes strongly in the development of an international perspective among its students and faculty. Pirates Abroad offers exchange programs, summer faculty-lead programs, semester faculty-lead program: Italy Intensives, and non-ECU programs.

In addition to utilizing your regular ECU financial aid package to help with the expenses, you can apply for both ECU and national level scholarships for additional scholarship.

### Student Employment Office

The Student Employment Office (SEO) provides support to the entire campus and community throughout the hiring process of ECU student employees. SEO maintains an online job database to help current ECU students connect with part-time job opportunities both on and off campus. Working a part-time job on or off campus enables students to apply knowledge and skills learned in the classroom toward future employment. The Student Employment Office can be reached at [hirepirate@ecu.edu](mailto:hirepirate@ecu.edu) or (252) 737-5573.

## Pirate Academic Success Center (PASC)

Located on the second floor (2300 suite) of the Old Cafeteria Complex, the Pirate Academic Success Center offers free tutoring, study groups, academic skills coaching, peer academic success coaching, community tutoring, and learning communities for ECU enrolled students.

Tutoring is available by appointment in most 1000 and 2000 level and select upper division courses each semester and summer sessions. Tutors work with students at the PASC main office located in 2300 suite of the Old Cafeteria Complex. Night, Digital, and After-Hours tutoring is also available for ECU students. [Digital tutoring](#) provides helpful videos, recorded workshops, and test reviews. To contact PASC staff or make an appointment call 252-737-3009 or email [tutoring@ecu.edu](mailto:tutoring@ecu.edu). To find out more about the center, watch the [PASC in Action video](#).

## ECU Transit

ECU Transit offers a wide variety of travel options on a comprehensive system which provides service both on and off campus. Throughout the academic year and both summer sessions, buses operate on several fixed routes which circulate around main campus and connect to outlying areas, such as the health sciences campus and commuter park-and-ride lots. Service is also provided to off-campus housing and several shopping, dining and entertainment areas around Greenville. Additionally, a point-to-point, on-demand van service called SafeRide works in conjunction with the bus system to help ensure safe connections to evening routes, as well as safe travel around campus and adjacent areas at night after most regular daytime service has ended.

## Parking & Transportation

The Department of Parking & Transportation Services strives to fulfill the parking and state vehicle needs of the University community. Student permits are purchased according to availability and living arrangements. All student permits are valid according to the academic year August 1 to July 31 of the following year. These permits are not automatically renewed and must be purchased prior to parking on campus. As a quick reference all student permits have an even number next to the letter (i.e., A2 B2, B4 C2 etc) with the exception of D. Permits are not transferable and must be returned if you leave school or no longer wish to park.

## ECU Libraries

[Joyner Library](#) welcomes you with collections, services and study spaces that support the research, teaching and service goals of ECU. This main campus library has the resources you need for your coursework. Joyner Library offers students the opportunity to reserve study rooms, ask a librarian for assistance in research, borrow equipment, and interlibrary loan and document delivery. In addition, Joyner Library has partnered with [Dowdy Bookstore](#) to offer students free E-Textbooks. Most of these E-Textbooks are also stocked by the Dowdy Bookstore for anyone who prefers to purchase their own print copy.

[Laupus Health Sciences Library](#) provides health sciences information, resources and services that focus on your studies for the colleges and schools on the Health Sciences Campus. Laupus Health Sciences Library has what you need to advance your research and coursework. There is a host of electronic resources for Allied health, Dental medicine, Medicine and Nursing. Also, students can check out Anatomical Models, borrow equipment such as Laptops, iPads, Digital Cameras, Video Projectors, Tripods and more.

[Music Library](#) at ECU provides the resources you need if you are enrolled in the School of Music or the school of Theatre and Dance, or just searching for music-related materials. The Music Library has grown from its humble beginnings as a small departmental college to a collection over 101,000 volumes. The Music Library is home to Joyner's entire audio recording collection as well as the music-related portion of its video recording collection. In addition to these media collections the library owns collections of music scores, books, journals, microforms, and computer software dealing with every musical style and genre from classical to rock to rap.



## Motivate Module

### Step 3 of 4

Returning for the second semester is sometimes difficult for students. This is a time for students to re-energize and build momentum for the new semester. Students need to continue purposeful engagement that also includes exploration and new experiences.

[Center for Leadership and Civic Engagement](#)

[Greek Life](#)

[Campus Recreation and Wellness](#)

### Center for Leadership and Civic Engagement

The Center for Leadership and Civic Engagement provides opportunities for the campus community to learn, serve and lead with our community as active citizens and advocates for positive social change. Service and leadership opportunities range from one-time events to weekly, semester-long opportunities to intensive immersion experiences and service-learning courses.

The Center for Leadership & Civic Engagement hosts several leadership programs including Chancellor's Student Leadership Academy (CSLA), ECU Leads, and LeaderShape. In addition, Adapt-a-Grandparent, Camus Kitchen (CKECU), ECU Writes, Alternative Break Experiences, Pirate Days of Services, and

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## Greek Life

Fraternities and sororities provide an enriching student experience that helps students grow and develop as young men and women who have leadership and social skills, who prioritize their academics and service to community. Membership in a fraternity or sorority is life-long and provides connections long after graduation. Friendship, leadership, philanthropy and services and scholarship are the pillars of fraternity and sorority life. The process to join an organization is different for each governing council.

- **IFC Recruitment:** The formal recruitment process is strongly encouraged. This is an opportunity for men to meet all of the fraternities within IFC and then make decisions of who they would like to get to know further and join. This process takes place in the early fall semester and the early spring semester.
- **MGC Membership Intake:** Students who are interested in joining an MGC organization are encouraged to attend the MGC Diversity Invitational that takes place at the beginning of each semester.
- **NPHC Membership Intake:** At the beginning of each semester, NPHC will host an event called "Meet the Greeks" – students learn more about the joining requirements of the NPHC organizations on our campus as well as what it means to be a member of their organization.
- **Panhellenic Recruitment:** The organizations within the Panhellenic Association will host recruitment primarily early in the fall semester. All interested and prospective members must register through the online registration form on the ECU Greek Life Website.

## Campus Recreation and Wellness

In addition to the Eakin Student Recreation Center, there are facilities located at the Health Sciences Student Center, North Recreational Complex, Blount Recreational Sports Complex, and a Bowling Alley located in Mendenhall.

From outdoor adventure trips to group fitness classes; yoga to Pilates; flag football to lacrosse; and everything in between, you will find plenty of activities to meet your needs. Programs offered include Adventure Leadership, Aquatics, Challenge Course programming, Club Sports, Intramural Sports, personal Training, Summer Campus, and Youth Programs. The Wellness center is your one-stop shop for health and wellness resources.

[Back to Step 2](#)

[Step 4](#)



## Finish Strong Module

### Step 4 of 4

Throughout orientation you have read about available resources. Take a moment to Click and Explore these resources as they will be instrumental in helping you successfully navigate your academic journey at East Carolina University.

DON'T FORGET, you're not finished yet. Scroll to the bottom of this page and click the Continue to Opinion Survey button.



**Center for Leadership and Civic Engagement**



**Disability Support Services**



**Dr. Jesse R. Peel LGBTQ Center**



**Pirate Academic Success  
Center**



**Campus Recreation and  
Wellness**



**Student Health Services**



**Dean of Students Office**



**Student Activities and  
Organizations**



**Student Involvement and  
Leadership**



**Off-Campus Student  
Services**



**Ledonia Wright Cultural  
Center**



**Student Rights and  
Responsibility**



**University Writing Center**



**Cashier's Office**



**ECU-At-A-Glance**



**Financial Aid**




**Office of University  
Scholarships**





**Student Pirate Club**


  
**Off-Campus Student Services**

  
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**Cashier's Office**

  
**ECU-At-A-Glance**

  
**Financial Aid**

  
**Office of University Scholarships**

  
**Student Pirate Club**

  
**1 Card**

  
**Safety**

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To obtain your advising code you MUST complete Opinion Survey.

[Back to Step 3](#)

[Continue to Opinion Survey](#)

## Opinion Survey

**Your feedback is important to us.** Once you have completed the orientation survey you will be guided to information regarding advising. Please be sure to provide your advising center with, your Full Name, ECU Email Address, Intended Major (including Undecided), and the **ORIENTATION CODE** that will be revealed once you submit the survey. **The next time you are on campus, stop by the 1Card Office located in the Old Cafeteria Complex on main Campus, Room G-521, to pick up your 1Card. For more information about you 1Card call the office at (252) 328-2673.**

Fields marked with an \* are required

Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements:  
*(5 indicates excellent; 1 indicates a poor component of the program)*

5 - Strongly agree 4-Agree 3-Neutral 2-Disagree 1-Strongly disagree

Online Orientation provided me with information that will help me make a smooth transition to ECU. \*

5  4  3  2  1

Online Orientation provided me with a better understanding of academic advising. \*

5  4  3  2  1

I am more aware of support services available at ECU. \*

5  4  3  2  1

After taking Online Orientation I feel better prepared to be successful at ECU. \*

5  4  3  2  1

I wish online orientation addressed the following topic(s):

Submit



## APPENDIX K: INFOGRAPHIC PRESENTED TO STAKEHOLDERS

### WE ARE NOT EIGHTEEN: WELCOMING NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENTS ON CAMPUS

#### PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

To explore whether non-traditional students feel marginalized at the four-year institution, specifically related to new student orientation, and find suggestions for how to alleviate transitional stress for those students onboarding to the university.

#### OVERVIEW

February 2021 through September 2021, data was collected regarding the perception of orientation from the non-traditional student perspective.



#### DEMOGRAPHIC



#### LITERATURE REVIEW

A review of recent literature found orientation sessions that focused on non-traditional students were recommended to

- Include night, weekend, and online options
- Be clear about what campus resources are available; specify how to access these resources
- Address stress and academic expectations
- Highlight or include career services
- Include information about Financial Aid
- Address any technological deficit by allowing interaction with technology
- Introduce Course Management Systems (i.e., Canvas)

#### ANALYSIS

Most of the recommendations from the literature are present in the current online transfer orientation; however, there is a disconnect between what is presented and what students are perceiving.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS

##### Video



- Voiceover on current presentation, or
- Recorded presentation, or
- Zoom Small Groups



##### Logistics

- How to print on campus
- How to use the transit system
- Building locations
- Food options on campus

## APPENDIX L: STUDENT SUCCESS CONFERENCE PRESENTATION

We Are Not Eighteen:

Addressing the Enrollment  
Cliff through Non-traditional  
Student Success



What are non-traditional students saying about ECU?

Coming from a transfer school, the campus is much larger they give little detail about where you need to be and what exactly you need. The community college I went to gave clear direction on books required, professors/ reviews, and times were kept to keep ideal schedules, at ECU everything seems to be far and every time you look for resources or specific people, you are sent on a goose chase till you finally find them just for them to not have the information required and sent onward on the pursuit for answers.

I would recommend more discussion on parking permits and meal plans which non-traditional students are unfamiliar with.

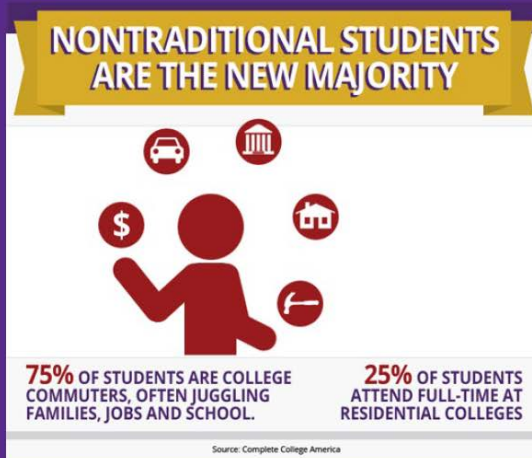
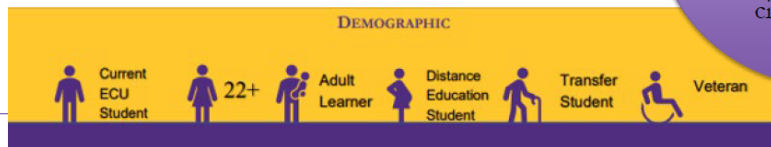
I'd suggest an overhaul of the orientation system, in doing so the university may be able to bring late-in-life learners into the fold by offering a diverse DE and on-campus solution.



## WHAT DEFINES A NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENT?

- Aged anywhere from 22 to 24/25 or older
  - Has expanded to “gap year” students
- Working full-time; attending part-time
  - Or, working part-time; attending full-time
- Supporting themselves
  - And sometimes a spouse, dependent, or other family member
- Laid off, seeking a new career
- Active Duty, Military Spouse, or Veteran
- Taking most or all of their classes online

There is not one definition of a non-traditional student. They all have unique backgrounds and circumstances.

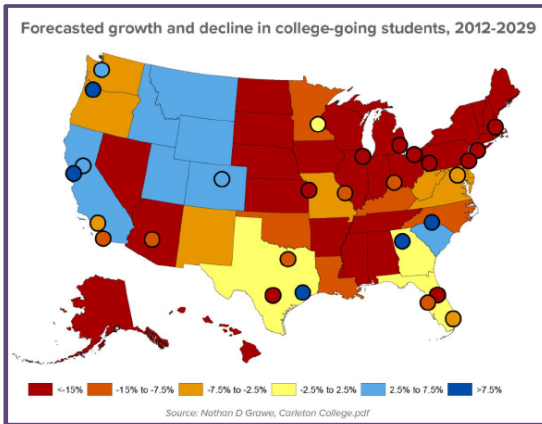


Non-traditional students do not see themselves included in college marketing and services.



## WHAT IS THE ENROLLMENT CLIFF?

- In conjunction with the drop in birth rate in the United States and the “Great Recession” of 2008, the expected college population by 2025 will drop significantly.



Boosting success practices for non-traditional students could also boost enrollment.



## WHY SHOULD I CARE ABOUT THE ENROLLMENT CLIFF?

- Fewer students; fewer tuition funding
  - Possibility of lay-offs, school closings, more responsibility for less pay
- A second enrollment cliff projected due to COVID-19.
  - Experts expect a worse enrollment “nosedive” in 2037.



## HOW CAN I HELP NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENTS?

- Human contact
  - If it can't be in person, use video versus reading text.
- Specific/detailed instructions
  - This is especially helpful for active duty or veterans who are accustomed to being directed in everyday activities.
- Logistics
  - Where to park
  - Where to get food
  - Where buildings are
  - How to print on campus
  - How to connect to internet on campus
- Technology
  - How to use PiratePort
  - How to use Blackboard/Moodle/Canvas (LMS)

Don't assume  
prior  
knowledge;  
provide all  
information.



### IDEAS IN PRACTICE - VIDEO

- Record sessions through any of the following methods
  - Adobe Creative Cloud Express (formerly Adobe Spark)  
Allows for multi-media content
  - Blackboard, Canvas, or other LMS  
Most LMS platforms have a way to create video content  
*Watch out for access to the videos*
  - Microsoft Teams, WebEx, or Zoom  
Create your own meeting (no need to invite anyone) and record
  - Microsoft PowerPoint  
You can record yourself presenting in PPT.  
*If all else fails, at least give it some voiceover!*



# IDEAS IN PRACTICE - SPECIFIC LISTS OR INSTRUCTIONS

We need a volunteer!



## EXAMPLES

### How to Register Online

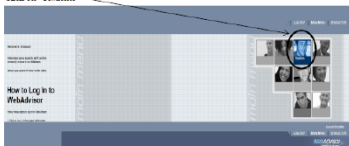
Listed below is a guideline to help walk you through online registration step by step.

Helpful Hints for Registration:

- ✓ Review your student CCCC transcript located in your WebAdvisor under Academic Profile (refer to #3 screen image below)
  - o This can be helpful to determine if you have the prerequisites required for the course for which you plan to register or to determine if a course needs to be retaken.
- ✓ Compare your CCCC transcript to your program of study located in the College Catalog (<https://www.ccsdca.edu/academic/catalog/index.html>)
  - o This will guide you in selecting courses within your program of study.

#### Stop-by-Step Directions

1. Log into WebAdvisor
  - a. Through your logged into your MyCCCC account, you will be required to login to WebAdvisor separately.
2. Click on "Students"



3. Select "Register for Sections"



### To Schedule a Placement Test

- On the MyCCCC Portal, click the Information for Placement Testing Icon
- This icon will take you to the placement testing page. Scroll down and click on desired testing location (in center of page).
- Select the desired test (RISE English or RISE math) from drop down. Fill out form. If necessary, repeat the steps above to make an appointment for the remaining test needed.


\*Please note, you are not able to take both English and math in one sitting. You will need to set separate appointment times for each test.

If you need assistance, please contact us at 910-938-6182

#### FOR PLACEMENT TESTING STUDY MATERIALS:

go to <https://redready.org/home>

- Click Get Started
- Click Enter as a Guest
- Type in 28346 as your zip code
- Click Get Started
- Click College Readiness
- Click "Go to Goal"
- Click the diagnostic you are interested in practicing with.



\*Please ensure you complete and submit the attached Placement Testing Academic Integrity Agreement. You will be unable to begin the test until it has been received.

## *Welcome and congratulations!*

We are pleased you have selected Coastal as the place where you will achieve your academic or professional goals. Please know our faculty and staff are here to help you during your academic journey in order to assist you in accomplishing your career training or academic pursuits!

Please click on option below to learn more about getting started at Coastal!



## BRAINSTORM AND SHARE

Choose an area in your current position that students often find confusing.

For the next 5-10 minutes, start writing about that issue.

Why might students find this confusing?

What are you supplying students on this issue?

How could you change the delivery method to better reach non-traditional students (or an area of students you struggle with reaching)?

