

Social Capital and Part-Time, Mature Students in a Master's Program

Patricia Barber

504488

Supervisor: Dr. Jenepher Lennox Terrion

Department of Communication

January 7, 2013

© Patricia Barber, Ottawa, Canada, 2013

Abstract

Nontraditional or part-time, mature graduate students have been a relatively consistent factor in enrolment in Canadian Universities over the past 10 years, with a slight upward trend. However, the factors that contribute to persistence and/or withdrawal of this student group are not clear. Without persistence there is the potential of this increasingly important student group to withdraw from their studies. It is important, therefore, to describe the graduate school experiences of part-time, mature students to understand contributing factors to their persistence, including their satisfaction and dissatisfaction with their studies, which may impact persistence. Further, given that the graduate experience provides an opportunity to develop connections with professors and other students it is important to understand the relative importance of these connections on persistence for part-time, mature graduate students. This phenomenological study includes interviews with five participants and seeks to understand the experience of part-time, mature graduate students through the theoretical lens of social capital theory, persistence and engagement theory, and social identity theory.

Keywords: graduate program, mature, nontraditional students, part-time students, persistence and engagement, phenomenological study, qualitative interviews social capital, social identity

Table of Contents

Abstract	2
Chapter 1: Introduction	6
Theoretical framework	8
Experiences of part-time, mature students	12
Purpose of study	14
Research questions	14
Methodology	14
Structure of research paper	16
Chapter 2: Literature Review.....	17
Social capital theory	17
Persistence and engagement theory	22
Identity theory	23
The experience of part-time, mature students	26
Chapter 3: Methodology	32
Research design	32

Table of Contents

Data collection	34
Data analysis	37
Validation strategies	38
Ethical considerations	38
Role of the researcher	38
Chapter 4: Results	39
Overview of participants' profiles.....	39
Description of Participants' Experience	39
Participant No. 1.....	40
Participant No. 2	44
Participant No. 3	47
Participant No. 4	50
Participant No. 5	54
Composite description of the essence of the experiences	58
Chapter 5: Discussion	63
Key themes	63

Table of Contents

Findings in the context of the literature	65
Significance of study	73
Limitations and future directions	74
Chapter 6: Conclusion	74
How do part-time, mature students experience graduate studies?.....	75
The importance of social capital to retention and persistence	75
References:	78
Appendices:	88
Appendix A: Interview Questions.....	88
Appendix B: Participant Eligibility.....	89
Appendix C: Information Sheet and Consent Form.....	90

Chapter 1: Introduction

Increasingly graduate students are part-time, mature students. The Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (2011) found that in 1980 58% of the part-time, master's students were over 30 years of age, and this increased to 70% in 2010 (p. 11). Clearly, these statistics reflect a change in the composition of those who are enrolling in Master's programs, with an emphasis on the older student. Older students are those who delay graduate studies for a period of time after completing their undergraduate studies. For the purpose of this study older graduate students are defined as mature graduate students who have had a gap of at least two years between their undergraduate and graduate studies. The two-year period is based on Nevill, Chen and Carroll's (2007) 10 year longitudinal study, which found an average delay of two and three years before students enter graduate programs (p. ix). Further, this study focusses on part-time students who take a reduced number of courses compared to full-time graduate students, and this number is defined by the institution's policy for part-time studies.

This research is inspired by the growing trend of part-time mature students, which has many positive influences on students in graduate classes as well as on the part-time, mature students themselves. To address the former, we first consider the value of diversity to the learning experience. Diversity in the context of this study refers to differences in age, which it is assumed also reflects difference experiences. For example, Bishop-Clarke and Lynch's (1998) study of mixed ages at the college level found that students and faculty "generally appreciated the mixed-age college classroom." (p. 32). As well, in Gaetjens' (1997) study of age diversity at the master's level it was found that "From the students' perspective, the wide range of ages, and especially the presence of older students, brought to the classroom a sense of realism and

practicality”(p. 768). Gaetjens’ study focused on students studying gerontology, and therefore, the students may have been more open to age diversity given its relevance to the area of study. Notwithstanding, the positive reception of older students by other students in a gerontology program may be because of a perceived increase in understanding and insight between the older students and the nature of the program; nevertheless age diversity in classrooms is increasingly being supported because it represents the reality of society. Age is only one aspect of diversity, along with the personality and experience of the older student, that has the potential to enrich the learning experience of participating students.

From the perspective of the part-time, mature student, graduate school represents many potential opportunities including intellectual challenges, and future professional advantages. For example, Thacker and Novak’s (1991) study of women who re-entered university found that older women return to school for the intellectual challenge, while, in comparison, “[y]ounger women have more pragmatic reasons for returning to school” (p. 21); for example, “to gain independence, get new skills and to either change careers or advance in their work” (p. 21). Therefore, the perceived benefits of returning to school after a break may be dependent on, and relative to, age. In the research discussed above, compared to the relatively older women, younger women expect practical returns from their higher education that improve their work life or job prospects.

Given that part-time, mature students are an increasingly important component of graduate enrolment, it is important to consider the value and practical use of connections between this student group and their relatively younger colleagues, their instructors, and others in the academic community. It is important to consider connections because being connected to others has practical implications for persistence in education (Tinto, 1975; Tinto 1997; Tinto 2003).

Theoretical Framework

This research is framed using three theories: social capital theory; persistence and engagement theory; and social identity theory. These theories will be used to explain contributing factors that may influence the graduate experience. The common thread between these theories is that they link to social connections or engagement.

Social capital theory. There are at least two aspects to social capital theory: the social and capital aspects. “The social aspect of social capital is the interactions between individuals [and groups] to achieve goals. The capital aspect of social capital is the resources realized as a result of these interactions” (Petersen, 2006, para.1). Social capital theory, therefore, identifies connections as raw material, which are valued for their potential to achieve other goals that are deemed worthy.

Adler and Kwon (2002) write that social capital can be “understood roughly as the goodwill that is engendered by the fabric of social relations and that can be mobilized to facilitate action” (p.17). These researchers also recognize the inherent existence of social capital in social life: “The breadth of the social capital concept reflects a primordial feature of social life—namely that social ties of one kind (e.g., friendship) often can be used for different purposes (e.g., moral and material work and non-work advice)” (p. 17). Similarly, Woolcock and Narayan (2000) approach social capital from a common sense perspective. They write that “the basic idea of social capital is that a person’s family, friends, and associates constitute an important asset, one that can be called on in a crisis, enjoyed for its own sake, and leveraged for material gain” (p. 226). In this context, social capital has multiple purposes, and it is an enabler: social capital enables actions that provide an advantage or a gain to the recipient.

Social capital theory also recognizes that in order for social capital to be developed prior investment in social networks is needed to allow “individuals to develop norms of trust and reciprocity, which are necessary for successful engagement in collective activities” (Valenzuela, Park, & Kee, 2009, p. 877). Lin (1999) echoes the need for prior investment when she writes: “The premise behind the notion of social capital is rather simple and straightforward: investment in social relations with expected returns” (p. 30). The opposite of this premise is also true: when there is no prior investment in connections, there are no returns. These premises highlight the importance of those abilities, personalities, and other contributing factors that facilitate investment in social relations.

Educational institutions are a key context that is conducive to the development of social capital. For example, Ramos' (2011) description of opportunities to build social capital in the traditional learning environment includes “daily face-to-face interactions with instructors and peers, class lectures and discussion groups (p. 283). Also, Conrad, Duren and Haworth's (1998) study found that students in master's programs identified a ‘community of learners’ as one of the factors that contributed to meaningful learning. When describing ‘community,’ the students “emphasized the collegial and collaborative relationships among faculty and students” (p. 66). The school, therefore, is an important environment in which to build social capital.

However, the social capital developed in schools is not the only source of connections that support the educational experience. Social capital developed outside of schools is also a contributing factor to retention and educational performance. For example, Coleman's (1988) analysis of early withdrawal from high school provided evidence that social capital, in and outside of the family and in the adult community, is a factor that diminishes the probability of dropping out of high school (pp. S118-S119). Also, Putnam (2000) writes that the “level of

social trust in a state and the frequency with which people connected informally with one another.... were even more closely correlated with educational performance than was the amount of time state residents devoted to club meetings, church attendance, and community projects” (p. 300). Quite clearly, therefore, social capital, as represented by connections, and in particular informal connections, are potentially significant contributing factors to success in school.

Persistence and engagement theory. Persistence and engagement theory is similar to social capital theory because it also highlights connections as a contributing factor to retention in school. In 1975 Vincent Tinto wrote that ‘integration’ is a key to success in higher education: “the higher the degree of integration of the individual into the college systems, the greater will be his commitment to the specific institution and to the goal of college completion” (p. 96). Integration in this context refers to both academic and social integration. While academic integration is associated with grade performance and intellectual development, social integration is related to connections with peers and faculty (Tinto, 1975, p. 95). From Tinto’s perspective, therefore, social connections are an equally important contributing factor to integration as academic integration.

In 2003 Tinto emphasized the importance of involvement in the classroom: “Nowhere is involvement more important than in the classrooms of the university, the one place, perhaps only place, students meet each other and the faculty, and engage to connect with others, with the classroom representing the key meeting place” (p. 4). The classroom, therefore, is an enabler for building dynamic connections that support learning, and perhaps persistence.

Social identity theory. Social identity theory is a useful framework for this research for at least two reasons: one, the graduate experience provides an opportunity to develop identity

through experiences with others; and two, the social connections developed during the graduate experience are a possible factor influencing retention and a successful graduate experience.

Hogg, Terry and White (1995) describe social identity theory in the context of belonging to a social category: "The basic idea is that a social category (e.g., nationality, political affiliation, sports team) into which one falls, and to which one feels one belongs, provides a definition of who one is in terms of the defining characteristics of the category—a self-definition that is a part of the self-concept" (p 257). Social identity, therefore, refers to the group self (Ellemers, 2009, para.1). Stets and Burke (2000) add that "Having a particular social identity means being at one with a certain group, being like others in the group, and seeing things from the group's perspective" (p. 226). An individual's social identities are varied to the extent that they have membership in different social groups.

A key element of social identity is the social context in which social groups operate. The social context appears to be deterministic because it can guide the development or decision towards a self-categorization. Ellemers, Spears and Dousje (2002) discuss the importance of social context (pp. 164-166) when they write: "the relevant social context determines which categorization seems most suitable to provide a meaningful organization of social stimuli, and hence which identity aspects become salient as guidelines for the perceptions and behavior of those who operate within that context" (p. 165). The importance of context when discussing social identity is further understood when one considers that "social identities are chosen" (Brewer, 1991, p. 477). Therefore, an individual chooses a social identity— for any number of reasons, including agreement with the norms of the social group— and this choice potentially influences an individual's openness to making connections. In turn this openness may be influenced by those salient aspects of personal identity that resonates for the individual in the

context of a particular social group. The individual, therefore, chooses those social groups that are meaningful to their personal identity, and the importance of this association is reflected by a person actively seeking connections with a particular social group.

Another key concept to identity theory is *identity performance*, which is “purposeful expression (or suppression) of behaviors relevant to those norms conventionally associated with a salient social identity” (Klein, Spears, Reicher, 2007, p. 4). In general, “performances are governed by interests that attach to the actor as a group member” (p. 4). Therefore, the individual's interest in a particular group will be reflected in appropriate identity performance for that group.

Identity is relevant to mature students. Baxter and Britten (2001) write that “Mature students are, by definition, a group of people who are attempting to use education to shape their own biographies and identities in a reflexive way” (p. 88). Further, because of the context of education—in classrooms, online, with others—many aspects of social identity theory may have practical value to research on part-time, mature graduate students because the delay for this student group to return to school, may be associated with desire to enhance a particular personal identity that can only come about by developing, or being part of, a particular social identity. However, based on current research the relative impact of social identity on the graduate experience and success remain unclear.

Experiences of Part-time, Mature Students

The literature on part-time, mature students in Master's programs shows that there are gaps in studies on this particular group. Conrad, Duren and Haworth (1998) observe two gaps: “One, there is almost no literature on how students experience their master's programs, much less the effects of their experiences on students themselves. Two, the literature does not draw on

students' perspectives" (p.65). Also, O'Connor and Cordova (2010) write that the purpose of their research is "to describe the learning experiences of adult part-time masters students, who are rarely the focus of research" (p. 259). And, Schwartz and Holloway (2012) comment that "The lack of scholarly attention focused on master's students is noteworthy given the continuing increases in master's enrolment" (p. 116). Because of these gaps, we are guided by a few studies of the experience of master's students, and by other research on part-time, mature students at different institutions of higher learning including high school and college.

However, the research that exists is helpful and provides further insight into the challenges of part-time, mature students, their relative personal traits, and peer relationships. For example, Visser's (2011) literature review found the most important of the challenges of part-time, mature students to be the amount of time, conflicting commitments, and balancing time with and loyalty of family, work, social and higher education obligations (p. 3). Further, a study by Murphy and Roopchande (2003) found that "mature students experience higher self-esteem and higher levels of intrinsic motivation compared to traditional students, [and] qualitative research studies suggest mature students are unconfident and anxious learners" (p. 256). These studies reflect both practical and personal challenges for the part-time, mature student that may influence their graduate experience.

Finally, other studies explore the part-time and mature students challenges from the perspective of peer support. Polson's study (2003), for example, found part-time, mature students as being "without peers with whom they can relate easily" (p. 60). Abidden and Ismal (2011) discuss how mature students prefer one-on-one relationships with the professional educator. Consistent with this finding, Kasworm and Pick (1994) found that "older adults had higher rates of interaction with faculty" (p. 706), and Lundberg's (2003) study found that for adult students

“peer relationships with an educational focus have a strong effect on their learning” (p. 683). All of these studies provide insight into the reality and expectations for part-time, mature students to connect with others during their graduate experience.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is to understand the graduate experience of part-time, mature students in a graduate program in Communication at the University of Ottawa, Ontario, Canada including the Master of Arts in Communication with thesis or with a research paper, and the Master of Communication with coursework. This type of program is assumed to attract a level of diversity that may not necessarily be found in other programs that support specific professions such as business, education and health, which by design and focus facilitate the development of common bonds of professionalism among participants.

Research Questions

The two questions in this research are:

1. How do part-time, mature students experience graduate studies?
2. What is the importance of social capital to retention and persistence in the experience of part-time, mature graduate students?

These questions are intended to reflect on the participants' graduate experiences, with question two emphasizing those experiences relating to social involvement and engagement.

Methodology

This research is based on a phenomenological approach, which is appropriate for research when the intended outcome is to understand experiences. Specifically, such an approach is used “to reduce individual experiences with a phenomenon to a description of the universal essence”

(Creswell, 2007, p. 58). The intent of this study is to understand the graduate experiences of part-time, mature students in a Communication program.

Other studies on the experience of mature students that have used a phenomenological approach include Ayres and Gulfoyle (2008), O'Connor and Cordova (2010), and Shepherd and Nelson (2012). However, each of these studies examine the graduate experience of mature students from different perspectives compared to the current research: Ayres and Gulfoyle focus on the expectations and experience of graduate students and gaps between expectations and experience; O'Connor and Cordova focus on the relevance of content in graduate studies to the work of the participants; and Shepherd and Nelson focus "on better understanding how adults successfully complete their graduate studies in spite of the barriers" (Shepherd & Nelson, 2012, p.5). In comparison, the focus of the current study is the importance of social connections on the graduate experience.

Data collection consisted of face-to-face, one-on-one interviews with five participants in either the Master of Arts in Communication (thesis or research paper) program or the Master of Communication (coursework) program at the University of Ottawa in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada. Six open-ended questions were asked. See Appendix A: Interview Questions. The participants were, or had been enrolled in part-time graduate studies, and they had returned to school after a gap of at least two consecutive years. See Appendix B: –Participant Eligibility. This criteria is based on Nevill, Chen and Carrol's (2007) longitudinal study, which found that on average there is a delay of two to three years between completing undergraduate studies and entering graduate studies. This criteria is important not only because it is consistent with the research, but also because the delay in time represents a potential gap in connections that would otherwise exist if the students had followed a linear path of studies.

The data was analyzed using a process described by Moustaka (2004), which considers the detailed experience of the participants in order to understand the essence of the phenomenon. Key steps in this process include the following: identifying units of meaning; two, identifying themes from the statements; three, developing a textural description of participants' experiences; four, developing a structural description of participants' experiences; and five, combining the textural and structural descriptions (as described in Creswell, 2007, p. 60). Finally, a composite textural-structural description is developed that reflects the essence of the phenomenon.

Structure of Research Paper

Chapter two consists of a literature review on three theories: social capital theory, persistence and engagement theory and identity theory. These theories are used to explain contributing factors that may influence the graduate experience. The common thread between these theories is that they link to social connections or engagement. Also, this chapter provides an overview of other studies on part-time, mature students, or mature students.

Chapter three outlines the methodology used for this research. This research is based on a phenomenological approach because it captures the experiences of part-time, mature students. This chapter discusses the role of interviews in collecting data, the method used in this research, as well, it provides a brief description of Moustaka's (2004) approach to conducting a phenomenological study, which guides this study.

Chapter four provides the results of the study, which are based on the findings from five interviews. The results include extensive description of the experiences of part-time, mature students, which are organized in the following categories: factors influencing the decision to study part-time at the graduate level; expectations of the graduate experience; the importance of connections and relationships with students and others in the university community;

factors influencing the co-ordination or prioritization of your connections, factors that make it difficult to develop connections, and whether expectations of the graduate experience were met. As well, this chapter provides a composite description of the essence of the experiences of the findings that captures the essential graduate experience of part-time, mature students, which is consistent with the phenomenological methodology.

Chapter 5 discusses the findings relative to key themes, and the relevance of the findings to the literature review covered in this paper. As well, the significance of this study is discussed. A brief description of future directions for this research is provided. For example, it is suggested that more research be conducted on part-time, mature students.

Chapter 6 concludes with a discussion on the two questions that were the basis of this research: How do part-time, mature students experience graduate studies? What is the importance of social capital to retention and persistence in the experience of part-time, mature graduate students?

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter reviews the literature on the theories applied in this research paper: social capital theory, persistence and engagement theory, and identity theory. The theories have a common thread in that they each touch on the idea of social connections. Also, the literature review covers the experiences of part-time, mature students, which highlights the themes of challenges and connections during the graduate experience.

Social capital theory

Social capital is defined by Putnam (1993) as "features of social organization, such as, trust, norms, and networks, that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions" (p. 167). In later research Putnam (2000) referred to social capital as "connections

among individuals—social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them” (p. 19). Therefore, to have connections or to be connected is not sufficient by themselves to create social capital; in addition, the connections must be characterized by mutual trust and cooperative exchanges, for example, of privileges or other benefits. When reflecting on the development of the concept of social capital during the twentieth century, Putnam observes that there was “attention to the ways in which our lives are made more productive by social ties” (p. 19). There is, therefore, a direct link between connections and productivity.

There are at least two aspects to social capital theory: “The social aspect of social capital is the interactions between individuals [and groups] to achieve goals. The capital aspect of social capital is the resources realized as a result of these interactions” (Petersen, 2006, para.1). Therefore, social capital is represented by interactions and productivity. Further, a key feature of social capital is its embeddedness, which is defined by Bevir (2007) as “the different conditions within which various modes of social action take place and upon which they depend (p.2). For example, Predergast (2004) explains that “Individual and collective action alike are enabled and constrained by the resources that actors can leverage within and between levels of social structure” (para.1). Further, Coleman (1988) refers to social capital as “less tangible” compared to other types of capital: “If physical capital is wholly tangible, being embodied in observable material form, and human capital is less tangible, being embodied in the skills and knowledge acquired by an individual, social capital is less tangible yet, for it exists in the relations among persons (pp. S100-S101). The embeddedness of social capital is reflected in the relations and connections, which makes it less identifiable.

In the university context, social capital is found where students have the opportunity to connect including inside and outside classrooms, and on and off campus. However, unlike, for

example, “student support services,” which allow students to connect with university representatives or employees for specific support services available to the student community, it may be difficult to identify, or determine in advance, what a student is accessing from relationships with other students in and outside classrooms and on and off campus. For example, while one may “observe” students connecting with each other, less observable is the potential of the relationships to lead to trust and subsequent reciprocity, key elements required in the development of social capital.

To develop trust and reciprocity, prior investment in relationships is necessary. Such an investment will allow “individuals to develop norms of trust and reciprocity, which are necessary for successful engagement in collective activities” (Valenzuela, Park, & Kee, 2009, p. 877). Also, Ahn (2012) comments that “characteristics of relationships—such as reciprocity or trust—imply the amount and quality of social capital” (p.99). Valenzuela et al. (2009) also indicate that “Individuals with a large and diverse network of contacts are thought to have more social capital than individuals with small, less diverse networks” (p. 877). In contrast, Adler and Kwon (2002) comment on the quality of social capital, which is based on the goodwill of others towards us. These authors define goodwill as “the sympathy, trust, and forgiveness offered us by friends and acquaintances” (p. 18). In this context, social capital is guided by human emotion, in particular, by caring, which can lead to micro advantages (benefits) at the individual level, or macro advantages (benefits) at the institutional or community level.

Social capital has been shown to be a contributing factor to success in school, specifically, in preventing withdrawal and positively influencing development and academic performance. For example, Coleman’s (1988) analysis of early withdrawal from high school showed evidence that social capital, in and outside of the family and in the adult community, is a factor that

diminishes the probability of dropping out of high school (pp. S118-S119). Also, Putnam (2000) identifies social capital as having an important influence on children's development and academic performance. He writes that children's development "is powerfully shaped by social capital" (p. 297); and the "level of social trust in a state and the frequency with which people connected informally with one another.... were even more closely correlated with educational performance than was the amount of time state residents devoted to club meetings, church attendance, and community projects" (p. 300). Putnam, therefore, understands that the informal connections of a young person support the development of that person in a fundamental way. Both Coleman and Putnam recognize the importance of connections, in and outside of the school, on successful academic performance and development.

In the modern context social interactions are increasingly taking place online, which adds another dimension to the idea of needing a "place" from which to form connections. For example, Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe's study (2007) focused on the connections in Facebook, and they suggest that such a social media increases the probability that undergraduate students will maintain connections as their lives move forward. For example, the study found that "participants overwhelmingly used Facebook to keep in touch with old friends and to maintain or intensify relationships characterized by some form of offline connection such as dormitory proximity or a shared class" (p. 1164). The researchers suggest that by helping to maintain relations through social networks "[s]uch connections could have strong payoffs in terms of jobs, internships, and other opportunities" (p. 1164). Therefore, the social media provides another method upon which to maintain connections, develop trust and reciprocity.

Coleman (1988) understands social capital relative to its function. He writes that social capital is "a variety of different entities with two elements in common: they all consist of some

aspect of social structures and they facilitate certain actions of actors—whether persons or corporate actors—within the structure. Like other forms of capital, social capital is productive, making possible the achievement of certain ends that in its absence would not be possible” (p. S98). Therefore, social structures, such as education systems, are tools in and through which individuals and groups interact in a way that allows for the production of outcomes such as decisions, new ideas etc. The outcomes, which benefit the individual and the collective, could only come about because of the intention of the individual to invest in the network and to cooperate with others.

Putnam (2000) also identifies the positive benefits of social capital, including “mutual support, cooperation, trust, and institutional effectiveness” (p. 22). However, Putnam also recognizes that there are potentially negative consequences of social capital such as sectarianism, ethnocentrism and corruption (p. 22). Sectarianism “is often defined as focusing on distinctions that set a group apart from other religious adherents and, sometimes, with society at large” (Ebersole, 2011, para. 6). In comparison, ethnocentrism is a group’s preference for its own group and beliefs and “ethnocentric beliefs are typically expressed as a feeling of superiority over others” (Croll, 2012, para.1). Both sectarianism and ethnocentrism express an intentional separateness between groups. This separateness is also seen with groups engaged in acts of corruption, which represents forms of abuse against others. When groups intentionally separate from, and/or go against, others, this decreases the probability of positive connections being formed between different groups.

Finally, similar to Putnam, Woolcock and Narayan (2000) point out that social capital can be a liability: “that it has costs as well as benefits” (p. 226). The researchers give the example of peer pressure, as well as a desire for acceptance that may motivate teenagers towards harmful

habits. Also, at the institutional level social capital's liability is seen in nepotism laws, which represent the possibility that unfairness and corruption may result when certain family members are given benefits and advantages that others outside the family would not be able to access. Therefore, social capital has the possibility of creating positive benefits and negative consequences.

In summary, social capital theory identifies connections as the key element upon which to develop bonds of trust and reciprocity. Studies on the influence of social capital in an educational context show that it can prevent withdrawal and positively influence performance. However, the studies also indicate that social capital can have negative consequences ranging from peer pressure to corruption.

Persistence and engagement theory

Persistence and engagement are important contributing factors element for retention in school, and Vincent Tinto's research highlights the relevance of academic and social integration on persistence and engagement. In 1975 Tinto introduced a model of persistence in which both academic and social integration are important influences on commitment levels to post-secondary education. Tinto's conceptual schema for college dropouts includes academic integration, which is linked to grade performance and intellectual development, and, social integration, which is linked to peer and faculty interaction (Tinto, 1975, p. 95). In 1997 Tinto concludes in his research on "Classrooms as Communities" that "classroom experience shapes student persistence" (p. 614). Specifically, Tinto understood that the social connections that are made in classroom activities provide an opportunity for academic engagement; and both the social and academic involvement increase the quality of effort by the students (p. 615). Therefore, social integration (connecting with faculty and other students) and academic

integration (meeting course objectives and requirements) are mutually reinforcing that together increase the probability of persistence. Tinto is clear when he writes concludes that “both social and academic involvement influence persistence” (p. 616).

Finally, in 2003 Tinto discussed five conditions that promote persistence: the institution's expectations for the student's success; supportive settings (academic, social, and personal support); frequent and early feedback on performance; settings that involve the student; and settings that promote learning (pp. 2-3). While all of these factors contribute to student persistence, Tinto emphasizes the importance of involvement in the classroom: “Nowhere is involvement more important than in the classrooms of the university, the one place, perhaps only place, students meet each other and the faculty, and engage in learning” (p.4). The classroom, therefore, is an enabling factor in the production of social capital that supports learning.

In summary, Tinto's research clearly highlights the influence of involvement and engagement on persistence. Further, while Tinto recognizes the fundamental importance of both academic and social integration to persistence, it is only the classroom that stands out as a key of fundamental importance to making connections.

Identity Theory

The key theories on identity that relate to this research on part-time, mature graduate students are social identity and personal identity. From a psychological approach, personal identity refers to the individual self, and social identity refers to the group self (Ellemers, 2009, para.1). The former involves “one's private conception of self and feelings of continuity” (Cheek & Briggs, 1982, p. 401), and the latter “involves a person's social roles and relationships” (p. 401).

The personal identity is relatively more independent compared to the social identity, given that the latter is based on group norms. Further, “one’s personal identity is constructed over time, and reflects the level of importance of a category to the individual’s self-concept” (Jaussi, Randel & Dionne, 2007, p.248). Therefore, personal identity is developed over time; as well, since it a result of reflection, it can also change over time relative to the continual development of the self-concept.

In comparison to personal identity social identity exists in relation to a social group. Hogg, Terry, and White (1995) also describe social identity theory in the context of belonging to a social category: “The basic idea is that a social category (e.g., nationality, political affiliation, sports team) into which one falls, and to which one feels one belongs, provides a definition of who one is in terms of the defining characteristics of the category—a self-definition that is a part of the self-concept” (p 257). Stets and Burke (2000) further elaborate that “Having a particular social identity means being at one with a certain group, being like others in the group, and seeing things from the group’s perspective” (p. 226). However, Brewer (1991) emphasizes that “Social identity should not be equated with membership in a group or social category. Membership may be voluntary or imposed, but social identities are chosen. (p. 477). In this context, social identity appears to be a conscious decision by the individual, which is not necessarily related to belonging to a group. For example, an older person may decide to go to school and, while his or her student card indicates that he or she is a student, that person may still not choose the identity of a student. This adds complexity to recognizing social identity because it cannot be assumed simply by virtue of membership in a group.

An important concept relating to identity theory is “salient identity,” which is understood relative to commitment, which “refers to the degree to which persons' relationships to others in

their networks depend on possessing a particular identity and role; (Stryker & Burke, 2000, p. 286). Salient identity is, therefore, based on expectations of how others expect another person to be, and the commitment that a person has to an identity that is performed within a certain network. In the context of part-time, mature students, taking on the role of a student may not be part of a person's prominent (salient) identity, and therefore, the transition into the identity of a student may be difficult. The transition is made more difficult when the expectations of others in that person's network are to interact only with a person in the context of, and relative to, their past identity. While the salient identity of a person may work well in one context, it may not work well in another.

The power of salient identity has practical applications for part-time, mature students since the role of student represents a new identity, and education play a key influence on identity. For example, Baxter and Britton (2001) argue that higher education, "through its culture and practices, is a key site for the construction of new identities, which may conflict with other/prior identities" (p. 99). For older graduate students, in particular, this tension created by changing identity can be difficult. Lauzon (2011) writes that the personal identity of many mature students in the second half of life "has been rooted in their professional identity and to surrender that for a student identity—an identity that is often associated with an earlier period in life—can be challenging" (Lauzon, 2011, p. 300). Conflicting identity, therefore, is a potential barrier to persistence in graduate studies, in particular, in those situations where the student role is not a comfortable fit.

Johnson and Watson (2004) write about the fit of the student's identity and its influence on retention. The researchers understand that an important contributing factor to retention is when there is a "fit" between an individual's identity and their understanding of the successful

student in their educational institution or program (p. 474). Therefore, the student identity that the individual takes on aligns with their perception of the successful student in the institution and programs with which they are associated. In this context, part-time, mature students may transform their identities to align with their perceptions.

In summary, many aspects of identity theory may relate to research on part-time, mature graduate students, including personal identity, social identity and salient identity. However, the relative impact of identity on the graduate experience, in particular persistence, in comparison to the impact of connections on the graduate experience, is not clear.

The experience of part-time, mature students

To study a phenomenon it is practical to identify or label it, if only to establish a common vocabulary for discussion purposes. This practice is applied in research in education to identify student categories, including “part-time” and “mature.” However, while the definition of part-time is clear, the definition of mature is less clear because there is lack of standardization for this concept.

Firstly, we begin with the definition of part-time student, which is understood relative to full-time registration and has the meaning of a student that is registered in fewer courses than a student registered as full-time. The meaning, therefore, of both part-time and full-time registration is based on a certain number of courses, which is determined by the educational institution and its regulatory bodies. While, the programs of study for students in both streams—part-time and full time—are essentially the same, those in part-time studies will prolong the completion time. Additionally, in some situations part-time students may experience less of the academic experience compared to full-time students. For example, one study of law students found that “Part-time students were less likely to participate in collaborative and interactive

activities than full-time students” (The Law School Survey of Student Engagement, 2011, p. 18), such as participating in a pro bono project. In this way, part-time students may have a different experience.

Secondly, the concept of “mature” student is problematic because it is often used interchangeably with “adult” student and “nontraditional” student, which in turn are problematic terms because there is no agreement in the literature on the precise features that represent these categories of students. In much of the literature age is used as a distinguishing feature. For example, Bishop-Clark and Lynch (1998) write that “Consistent with the literature ... the terms older student or nontraditional student refer to students over age 25” (p. 21). Brus (2006) identifies nontraditional graduate students as those over thirty (p. 34). Shepherd and Mullins Nelson (2012) present a baseline age for graduate students: “Based on the traditional age of high school graduates (18) and the traditional length of baccalaureate studies (4 years), it is reasonable to conclude that most graduate students are 22 years old or older. Thus, one could argue that *most* graduate students are adult learners on the basis of age alone” (p. 6). Richardson and King (1988) note that the legal meaning of adult causes a problem when using the term “adult” student. They write that “In many countries, the legal age of adulthood for most purposes is 18 or younger; consequently, even traditional college students are, strictly speaking, adults (pp. 65-66). It appears, therefore, that simply describing “adult students” without any context may be misleading given the lack of standardization for this concept.

In addition to age, other researchers include qualitative features in their definition of mature in an attempt to distinguish this category from “traditional” students. For example, MacFadgen (2007) writes that the definition of mature students for her study, which is “consistent with extant research” (p. 9), is “individuals taking degree-level courses who are 25

years of age or older with life circumstances that include financial obligations, family responsibilities, work and community commitments, full-and part-time enrolment status and varied educational goals and intentions” (p. 9). Similarly, Schuetz and Slowey (2002) describe nontraditional students using qualitative features but within the context of a “framework of the life-cycle discourse.” (p. 313) They write that the term nontraditional student “tends to relate to older or adult students with a vocational training and work experience background, or other students with unconventional educational biographies” (p. 313).

The definitions of mature or adult student that include qualitative dimensions reveal the heterogeneous nature of this student group. This is emphasized by Richardson and King (1998) who caution that “one should beware of treating "adult" students as a single homogeneous group” (p. 66). Also, Waller (2006) writes that “Mature students en masse are not the homogenous group portrayed in much early research” (p. 126). Waller further emphasizes the diversity of mature students when he writes about his study: “The data presented here demonstrate that the individuals highlighted are not simply “cases” of mature students per se, rather instances of social phenomena and carriers of wider social histories” (p. 127). It is clear, therefore, that mature and adult students are not easy to typify or classify.

However, despite the importance of qualitative features in defining mature students, and the richness of their diversity, in some situations the feature of age may be so apparent in a study that to argue whether the students are adults or nontraditional is irrelevant when the overriding fact is they are older students compared to others in their classes or programs. For example, the 2011 Annual Survey of Law School Student Engagement discusses part-time students and identifies demographics as a distinguishing feature: “Part-time students tended to be older than their full-time counterparts... . Almost half (47%) of part-time students were over the age of 30,

compared to only 11% of full-time students” (p.11). In this particular study, the results clearly emphasize the difference between student groups is age. There is no reference to “mature” to further describe the “older” students since the outstanding difference in the part-time students relative to the other class members is age.

Given that there is no standardization in the definition of “mature” student, each researcher selects those features in their definition of “mature” that makes sense to their study. In this study the salient feature is a gap of at least two years before beginning graduate school. This feature makes sense for two reasons. Firstly, it aligns with a longitudinal study that found that on average there is a two to three year gap between completing undergraduate studies and beginning graduate studies (Nevill, Chen, & Carroll, 2007, p. iv). And, secondly, the gap in time reflects a possible gap in connections that the student would otherwise have had if they had chosen to follow a linear path for their studies. This potential gap in connections allows us to more fully isolate the relative importance of connections to persistence when those connections have to be developed in a relatively short time period.

Although the research is clear that there is no standard definition of “mature student”, at the same time, the research highlights a number of common themes relating to the experience of part-time, “mature students”—however they are defined. These include the challenge of balance and the tension between desired and actual relationships in the learning community. Each of these will be discussed in turn.

Visser's (2011) study, for example, found that the most common challenges of part-time, mature, Masters students were the amount of time, conflicting commitments, balancing time with and loyalty of family, work, social and higher education obligations (p. 3). O'Connor and Cordova's (2010) study also found that time was a significant factor for adults working full-time

and studying at the graduate level. They report that some participants “simply described challenges in finding enough time in the day to do what needed to be done” (p. 363). Demands from jobs, school and life all competed for time and energy, all of which may impact on persistence in graduate school.

Relative to the role of the learning community and connections for part-time graduate students, O'Connor and Cordova's (2010) study found that adult students wanted to feel part of the learning community (p. 365). Also, students in their study “regretted not being more involved socially and several regretted not having had a close circle of classmates who were also friends” (pp. 367-368). In hindsight, after experiencing graduate school, the participants were able to value the experience of graduate studies by being connected with others. However, other participants weighed the desire of having social connections with the reality “that they simply had no time to attend extracurricular events, take advantage of campus facilities, or establish friendships” (p. 368). Therefore, while the participants valued social connections, their reality as part-time, mature students presented barriers that did not allow them to invest time in social connections, a key requirement for developing social capital.

Finally, Polson (2003) describes the lack of connections between part-time, mature, graduate students and others in quite frank terms. Polson writes that such students are “without peers with whom they can relate easily” (p. 60). Therefore, there is a sense that there is no commonality between the situation of part-time, mature students and other students. This situation is accepted by some part-time, mature students, and it is reflected in their expectations of peer support.

For example, Kasworm and Pick (1994) found that “older undergraduates reported lower levels of involvement with other students than did younger undergraduates. However, older

adults had higher rates of interaction with faculty” (p. 706). This finding is similar to that of Abidden and Ismal (2011) who found that mature students showed a preference to have relationships with the educators compared to other students. Further, Ayres and Guilfoyle’s (2008) study found that “the majority of mature age female students had very little expectation for social support at university” (p. 54); however, as they proceeded in their courses “most participants reported that they used social networks to exchange information on assignments and find out information about tutorials and lecture schedules” (p. 55). In this study, while social support was not expected to be an aspect of the university experience, when it was experienced it was found to be helpful. Also, Lundberg’s (2003) study found that “when peer relationships have an educational focus, they are vitally important to learning for all students, regardless of age” (p. 682). Therefore, mature students benefit just as much from study and tutorial groups as other students. Finally, Gaetjens’ (1997) study of students in a master’s program in gerontology found that “[s]tudents reported that developing a friendship with an older or younger student not only provided emotional support but often inspiration” (p.774). All of these studies contribute to an understanding of the important role of peer support for mature students while recognizing that peer relationships may be difficult to develop, given their unique situation.

The literature review in this chapter covered theories for social capital, persistence and engagement, and identity, all of which can be connected to the idea of social connections: connections are the building blocks for the development of social capital; persistence and engagement in school are found to be attributed to social connections; and identity is vulnerable to change given different circumstances and social groups. Also, the literature review covers the experience of part-time, mature students, which highlights the lack of standardization for the term mature and adult, as well as the theme that this student group is unique (for example, time

and financial pressures), which is a direct challenge to their ability, and desire to connect with others during their graduate studies.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This chapter provides an overview of the phenomenological research method used in this research study, including research design, data collection, and data analysis. During this discussion, I consider the appropriateness of a phenomenological approach for this research, as well as the value of a semi-structured interviews and the contribution of tape recording the interviews. Validation strategies and ethical considerations are also covered.

Research Design

This research takes a qualitative approach, “an umbrella term under which a variety of research methods that use languaged data are clustered” (Polkinghorne, 2005, p. 137). “Languaged data” refers to data based on language, which can include oral and written language, in contrast to, for example, statistical data, which is based on quantitative data. Creswell (2009) writes that “Qualitative research is a means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (p. 4). Creswell also points out that the main reason to conduct a qualitative study is for exploratory purposes: “This usually means that not much has been written about the topic or the population being studied, and the researcher seeks to listen to participants and build an understanding based on what is heard” (Creswell, 2009, p. 26). Also, Polkinghorn (2005) emphasizes that the purpose of qualitative research is to increase understanding. He writes that qualitative data “provide evidence (i.e., to make evident) the characteristics of an experience. The data are in the form of descriptions or accounts that increase an understanding of human life as lived” (p. 141). Continuing the theme of understanding, Hannabuss (1996) comments that understanding has to be revealed: “Often this

entails bringing the understanding “out into the open,” for instance through interviews, transcriptions of which “exteriorize” what has arguably been up to then tacit, hidden away, or merely inferable from actors’ actions” (p. 22). In this context, the “exteriorization” of each participant’s experience provides concrete evidence that contributes to advancing the understanding of the phenomenon. Qualitative research is appropriate for this research paper because the aim of the study is to understand the lived experiences of the participants: part-time, mature master’s students. In order to understand the lived experiences a phenomenological approach is used.

Mortari (2008) points out that “Phenomenology is grounded on the assumption that everything has its own manner of appearing and therefore a way of manifesting itself to the consciousness. The essence of the phenomenological method lies in receiving this manner of appearing and in describing it in a very careful way, unsullied by assumptions” (p. 5). Van Manen (1990) also points out that “Phenomenology aims at gaining a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of our everyday experiences (p. 9). Creswell (2007) adds that the goal of phenomenology is to describe what he refers to as the “universal essence” (p. 58) or essential nature of a phenomenon. While the participants may have lived through different experiences, the research will reveal the true or essential nature of a phenomenon. Creswell (2009) also discusses that the goal of phenomenology is to identify “the essence of human experience about a phenomenon as described by participants” (p. 13). All of these researchers emphasize that phenomenology is a process of revealing meaning in human experience (Creswell 2007, 2009; Mortari, 2008; van Manen, 1990). The meaning already exists in the experience of the participants, but it is revealed through language.

The connection between language and its role in revealing meaning points to the importance of accurate and detailed descriptions, since these form the basis of understanding the universal essence and the essence of human experience. Van Manen (1990) offers that “the term ‘essence’ may be understood as a linguistic construction, a description of a phenomenon” (p. 39). Further, van Manen (1990) points out that “phenomenological descriptions, if done well, are compelling and insightful” (p. 8). Therefore, the relative value of a phenomenological study is the degree to which the captured data is detailed enough to understand the essence of the experience being studied.

Data collection

Data collection for this study relied on face-to-face, one-on-one interviews with six participants in a master's program in the Department of Communication at the University of Ottawa in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada. Five open-ended questions were used. (See Appendix A: Interview Questions.)

Polkinghorne (2005) points out that “the purpose of data gathering in qualitative research is to provide evidence for the experience it is investigating. The evidence is in the form of accounts people have given of the experience” (p. 118). It is important, therefore, that the questions used in the study are designed to provide the appropriate evidence. Van Manen (1990) points out that “the interview process needs to be disciplined by the fundamental question that prompted the need for the interview in the first place” (p. 66). Van Manen (1990) also indicates that the questions in a phenomenological study “ask for the meaning and significance of certain phenomena” (p. 23). This contrasts with, for example, problem questions where the aim is to find a solution. Therefore, since the purpose of this study is to understand the experiences of mature, part-time graduates, “meaning questions” were designed to reveal these experiences.

The source of data collection for this study were participants registered as part-time graduate students at some point during their program, and they had returned to school after a gap of at least two consecutive years. (See Appendix B: Participant Eligibility.) The relevance of the two year gap is based on a 10 year longitudinal study which found that “on average, most 1992-93 bachelor’s degree recipients waited between 2 and 3 years to enroll for the first time in a graduate degree program” (Neville & Carroll, 2007, p. iv). In addition to being consistent with the findings from the research, the criteria of a two-year period potentially represents a gap in connections from others in the academic community that may otherwise exist if students had proceeded with their studies in a linear fashion. A gap of two years assumes the possibility that students may need to form new connections related to and/or in support of their studies.

Face-to-face, one-on-one interviews was a practical approach for this study because the small number of participants permits interviews to take place over a relatively short time period, which in turn allows the timely completion of this exploratory research. It should be noted that the small number of participants in itself does not reduce the quality and validity of the study, since the aim is to obtain sufficient data to understand the experience. Polkinghorne (2005) emphasizes this when he writes that “The concern is not how much data were gathered or from how many sources but whether the data that were collected are sufficiently rich to bring refinement and clarity to understanding an experience” (p. 140). Participants were intentionally selected because they met the participant criteria (two year gap before starting graduate studies, and experience as a part-time, mature student), which would help understand the part-time, mature graduate experience.

Further, a semi-structured interview is an appropriate approach for this study because its “purpose is to obtain descriptions of the life world of the interviewee with respect to interpreting

the meaning of the described phenomena” (Kvale, 1996, pp. 5-6) and because it “has a sequence of themes to be covered, as well as suggested questions” (Kvale, 1996, p. 124). The semi-structured qualitative interview supports data collection for this research by providing focus, but not rigidity, as implied by the reference to “suggested questions”. Finally, the research interview is an important data collection technique because it may be a positive experience for the participants. Rowley (2012) writes that interviewees “may welcome the opportunity to reflect on and talk about a topic in which they are interested, and they may recognize that they will learn something useful from this process” (p. 266). For these reasons—efficient for an exploratory study, appropriate for the purpose of understanding an experience and potentially helpful to the participants—the semi-structured interview with a few selected participants was chosen as the method of data capture for this research.

All interviews for this study were tape-recorded and transcribed. The rationale for taping the interviews is similar to why other researchers use this method: “to facilitate use of a conversational style and to minimize information loss (Aberbach & Rockman, 2002, p. 675). For example, a taped interview allows the interviewer to create a more conversational experience, and a conversational type experience is more likely to fully engage the participant with the overall result that the interview process enables capturing dense and detailed descriptions. As well, a conversational style interview is aligned with the idea that phenomenological research is characterized by “thoughtfulness” (van Manen, 1990, p. 12). A face-to-face interview provides the opportunity to practice thoughtfulness relative to the lived experience of another person.

Data analysis

Data analysis “is about how the researcher engages with his or her data” (Caelli, Ray, & Mill, 2003, p. 8). For this study engagement follows a process that Moustaka (1994) modified

from the methods suggested by Stevic (1971), Colaizzi (1973), and Keen (1975). The elements of this approach are as follows. Firstly, using verbatim transcripts of the interviews, the researcher considers each statement of the participants and, as Moustaka suggests, “every statement initially is treated as having equal value” (p. 97). Secondly, irrelevant statements to the topic and repetitive or overlapping statements are removed. This leaves the researcher with the “invariant horizons” or, in other words, “the unique qualities of an experience” (Moustaka, 1994, p. 122). These are also known as the units of meaning. Thirdly, the researcher relates and groups the units of meaning into themes. Fourthly, the researcher develops a textural description from the units of meaning and themes. This includes “thoughts, feelings, examples ideas, [and] situations that portray what comprises an experience” (Moustaka, 1994, p. 47). A description of the textural experience “describe[s] *how* the phenomenon is experienced” (Moustaka, 1994, p. 78). Fifthly, the units of meaning and themes are also used to describe the structural experience, which is the “context or setting that influenced how the participants experienced the phenomenon” (Creswell, 2007, p. 61). Finally, a combined textural-structural description is developed for each participant. Once this process is completed for each participant, the researcher constructs a composite textural-structural description by “integrating all individual textural structural descriptions into a universal description of the experience representing the group as a whole” (Moustaka, 1994, p. 122). The composite textural-structural reflects the essence of the phenomenon.

Validation strategies

Three validation strategies were applied to this research. Firstly, the interview questions and the approach to the interviews were reviewed by the researcher's supervisor to ensure that they contributed to the aim of the study. Secondly, the participants were provided with an

opportunity to review and validate, as well as to add information or otherwise revise, the transcribed interviews, to ensure that the texts reflected an accurate description of their experiences. Thirdly, the researcher reviewed the data and the analytic process with her supervisor to ensure procedural integrity.

Ethical considerations

The researcher obtained ethical approval for this study from the Ethics Committee at the University of Ottawa, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada. Further, all participants signed a consent form that indicates that the information they provided for the study will remain confidential. (See Appendix C: Information Sheet and Consent Form.) Also, in the final paper, the names of the participants and other personal identifiers are removed.

Role of the Researcher

For three years I was enrolled in the Master in Communication program at the University of Ottawa as a part-time student. This research study is a component of my degree requirements. As a part-time, mature student I had my own expectations of the graduate experience. I was aware that each person has a unique journey, and, I did not predetermine what I would find from my interviews. However, the literature prepared me for what I might hear in my interviews.

Chapter 4: Results

Overview of Participants' Profiles

Table 1 shows that this study includes a mix of male and female participants, most of whom work full-time, and who are between 25 and 34 years old. Participant number three began the master's program on a part-time basis, and completed one semester as a part-time student, but at the time of the interview had registered as a full-time student. This participant meets the

eligibility criteria for the study because one of the requirements is that a participant is either enrolled as a part-time student in graduate studies, or the participant was enrolled as a part-time student for a period of time during their graduate studies. Also, all of the participants are enrolled in different graduate programs in the Department of Communication at the University of Ottawa.

Table 1: Overview of Participants' Profiles

Participant No.	Male (M)	Age Range	Program	Work Full-time (F)
	Female (F)			Work Part-time (P)
1	F	30-34	Course-based	F
2	M	30-34	Research Paper	F
3	F	30-34	Thesis	n/a
4	F	25-29	Research Paper	F
5	M	25-29	Research Paper	F

Description of Participants' Experiences

The descriptions of the participants' experiences in this section cover the areas identified in

Table 2: Describing the Experiences of Part-time, Mature Graduate Students.

Table 2: Describing the Experiences of Part-time, Mature Graduate Students

Area of Interest
a) Factors influencing the decision to study part-time at the graduate level
b) Expectations of the graduate experience
c) The importance of connections and relationships with students and others in the university community
d) Factors influencing the co-ordination or prioritization of your connections
e) Factors that make it difficult to develop connections
f) Whether expectations of the graduate experience were met

Participant No.1

a) Factors influencing the decision to study part-time at the graduate level

Factors influencing a return to school include a desire for a career change and a desire for challenge. When discussing the former, the participant describes being in a job with no possibility to progress:

I felt unchallenged and stagnant with what I was doing. I didn't see a lot of opportunity for me to progress. I also didn't know what exactly what I wanted to progress to, so I felt like going back to school was a way to open a few more doors, and ...I felt that this might help give me some guidance to move in a certain direction.

Further, when discussing the need for a challenge, the participant discusses wanting to use more of their abilities: "I think I wasn't using my strengths to their full capacity, and coming back to school has definitely helped me do that." Therefore, for this participant graduate school is an opportunity for personal development.

b) Expectations of the graduate experience

The participant's expectations of the graduate experience focused, to a large extent, on the academic aspect: "I expected to read a lot. I expected a lot of independent work I expected that I would have a lot more difficulty with doing the research." Also, the participant describes being overwhelmed by the prospect of graduate studies: "I think that my expectations were that I was going to be so out of my element and overwhelmed." As well, the participant expected the return to graduate school to result in less social contact: "overall, I expected it to really drain my social life more than it has." In response to the question *Is the social life completely unrelated to school?* the participant responded, "Yes, totally separate."

- c) The importance of connections and relationships with students and others in the university community

The participant recognizes that connections are important as a "support network that gives you confidence and courage to keep going". However, while connections were made in the classroom, developing connections outside of the classroom were not needed. For example, in the classroom the participant describes a "big moment" that allowed her to connect with her classmates:

"There was a point in one of my classes where I admitted to the class during the discussion that the article was difficult and that I didn't get it. That I had spent so much time looking up words that I lost the whole meaning of the article, and after I said that all these other people popped up that they also felt that way. So inside the classroom that was a big moment to, you know having that connection with people and being able to say 'I don't get it' and they say 'Neither do I'. It helps with my confidence that I can do, right. That was a big moment for sure."

While this connection was important for the participant, connecting with other students socially are not needed: "You know, I am not away from home, and needing to make that social connection with people".

d) Factors influencing the co-ordination or prioritization of your connections

The participant described not feeling connected to anyone at school: "I don't feel really connected necessarily to anyone here," and this to an extent is the result of school being only a part of her life, as described in the following text:

"You know, I come from work, I do my class, I go and I read by myself, and then I go home, and I am with family or I am with friends. I don't spend a lot of time evaluating my connections here, I don't think. It's nice now to have familiar faces in the class so that when I get there and classes are starting, it is nice to chat with someone, but once we leave, we are done. That is all there is to it."

For this participant, the priority is connections with family and friends.

e) Factors that make it difficult to develop connections

The participant describes three factors that make it difficult to develop connections. Firstly, the distance between the university and home— "Definitely, the distance from campus". Secondly, age: "I also feel that my age is a big factor in developing connections, because I am just, I am in a different stage in my life." When discussing age the participant describes feeling very old when attending a pub night organized for graduate students: "I just felt very, I felt old. I felt like I didn't connect with them because I am at a different stage in my life where I have different priorities, and I have different things to think about." Further, the difference in age of the students was emphasized when the participant realized that the pub night event held no meaning for her: "And, as much as I enjoyed, you know, meeting these people, and spending the

evening, it really solidified for me that I don't feel like I am missing out." Thirdly, the classroom makes developing connections difficult: "I just think just in the classroom that makes it very challenging when you have some in the course based, some in the research program, and some in the thesis. Their goals are quite different."

For this participant, while it is difficult to develop meaningful connections at university, she connects with others minimally: "I can develop very surface level connections with people and have, whatever the word is, have inconsequential conversations." The participant further explains the meaning of connections: "When I see the word connection, I view it as being something deeper, something that is You know you have common factors in your lives that make you understand each other a bit better, and so that I definitely don't have [at school]."

f) Whether expectations of the graduate experience were met

The graduate experience met the participant's expectations relative to being challenged: "I felt that I was more capable and intelligent than what I was doing currently. So it has definitely met that expectation that I was capable of more." However, the participant expected to conduct more independent work, because she "felt that a master's level should be more independent." Also, the participant was able to maintain a social life with graduate studies: "I find that I am able to manage it [university studies] with keeping in touch with friends." The participant summarizes her graduate experience as follows:

"I am glad that I ended up here [in graduate studies]. I enjoy being a student. Learning, finding these new things, or having different things to talk about at a dinner party. I have a lot more to contribute than I did before."

Overall, for this participant, the graduate experience met their expectations.

Participant No. 2

a) Factors influencing the decision to study part-time at the graduate level

The key factor that influenced the participant's decision to return to school at the graduate level was future career opportunities. The participant indicated that "the nature of the program appealed to me," and he "felt that communications was a growing and interesting area anyways, particularly in the federal government." Further, the participant indicated that he was influenced by the possibility of making a career transition: "I thought this would give me an understanding of what the field was about, and if I wanted to transition into that field later on in my career at least that option would be available to me." Therefore, the decision to enroll in graduate studies was based on future possibilities.

b) Expectations of the graduate experience

A key expectation for the graduate experience was to conduct original research. The participant expected that "at this level you would have the opportunity to engage in original research." As well, the participant was motivated by personal enrichment: "for me the primary motivation was to enrich myself really." This motivation was facilitated with financial support from the participant's employer.

c) The importance of connections and relationships with students and others in the university community

The participant indicated that he had "met quite a few students who are also are working, simultaneously," and he has "learned a little about their experiences and from... what they have been through." As well, some of the participant's connections have opened up opportunities "in terms of networking and finding information about other career paths." The participant provided the example of one student with whom he has taken three or four classes, and who was the

source of different information including “things that are going on in the community locally, in communications, that I probably wouldn't have been aware of if it was not for this person.”

The participant also, discussed the importance of one particular relationship with a professor with whom he has had two classes.

“...he has just been a great resource, even for classes that I took that weren't necessarily in his area of specialty. He was just a good sounding board person to provide feedback or he would sort of orient me in terms of books or resources that I could find and so that was really valuable. I certainly didn't have that relationship with every professor, I would say, in the program.”

The participant provided a number of reasons for why he has been able to make a connection with this professor: “I attribute maybe to his teaching style and personality.” Also, the professor was “someone who was approachable and he was someone there that was willing to help students out.”

d) Factors influencing the co-ordination or prioritization of your connections

The participant indicated that the motivation for entering the graduate program may have had an influence on his perspective on connections:

“It is a personal kind of goal or ambition, a personal accomplishment or achievement. Whereas, maybe if I would have been pursuing it as someone who just came out undergrad and who wanted to pursue a career in communications, and knew sort of that this was the program and the place that they wanted to do it in, then well maybe then I would have thought about it more strategically.”

Therefore, for this participant connections with other students are not a priority.

e) Factors that make it difficult to develop connections

The participant identified two factors that make it difficult to develop connections. Firstly, the time factor, and this includes his work schedule: “by the time you come to class you are just exhausted, and because of that, maybe, maybe you don’t have the energy or even the desire to maybe reach out in the same way.” The work schedule also prevents the participant from getting “involved in the graduate association, or to do things that I would consider extracurricular outside of class.”

A second factor that makes developing connections difficult is being relatively older than other students. The participant discusses this in the following: “I am probably four to seven years older, and so I think that makes a tremendous difference too because maybe you are just not into the same things.”

f) Whether expectations of the graduate experience were met

The participant indicated that he had “minimal expectations” coming into the graduate program, and after taking five courses he still learning the process: “I still feel that I am new to this in a lot of ways.” However, the participant described his graduate experience positively:

I have enjoyed the learning experience. I have enjoyed the content, of some courses of course, more than others... I would say overall I had a good experience. Something else that appealed to me at the University of Ottawa is the fact that I could take courses in either language.

However, the participant recognized that he is in a period of uncertainty as he prepares to begin the process for the research paper: “for myself, there is a lot ... it is unknown at this point, so there is a little bit of fear, maybe.” A new phase in the graduate program will, therefore, contribute different experiences to the overall graduate experience.

Participant No. 3

a) Factors influencing the decision to study part-time at the graduate level

The participant indicated that her impression was that it was typical for mature students to study part-time: "My impression was as a mature student at the graduate level that most graduate students, most mature graduate students only studied part-time." Also, the participant's decision to enroll on a part-time basis was related to time management: "I was working part-time so it made sense to start off that way to see how the balance went. I was also sort of under the impression that there is a course load that was also related to part-time."

b) Expectations of the graduate experience

The participant expected classes at the graduate level to be "very business-like," meaning professional. When discussing the expectations for professionalism, the participant provided examples such as "Taking presentations seriously for instance" and listening. The latter is described in the following:

I went in with the notion that I didn't have a need to use a laptop in the classroom that I could really sort of take advantage of interfacing with my peers, and interfacing ... with the professors focusing on listening to what they are saying without being plugged into a laptop constantly."

Also, the participant expected that students would be more mature, and inclusive:

"I also did have an expectation that there would be a higher maturity level with different students inside the classroom and outside the classroom [and] that it would be more of an inclusive atmosphere."

Further, the participant did not expect to be socially active in the school setting: "I am not in any of that social circle nor did I necessarily expect to be coming into the program." As well, the

participant thought that school would take up a lot of her time: "Outside of the classroom, I expected that I would be treated as though it was, as one of my full-time jobs or one of my tasks, so that I would be constantly sort of at it." As for expectations with others in the academic community, the participant discusses professors from the context of what they had to offer: she "expected that professors would be flexible" and that they would "not only [...] provide the theoretical perspective, but the practical perspective as well."

c) The importance of connections and relationships with students and others in the university community

The participant indicated that that it is important to have connections: "I felt that it was really important to establish a dynamic between each other and use that to enhance the learning experience." For example, the participant discussed the importance for connections when doing group projects, which have "been supporting my learning because I am actually able to sort of see a little bit of difference of opinion." Connections outside of the classroom with others in the university community included professors, which have been very helpful from a practical perspective:

To be able to engage with different professors, get their feedback, look for a thesis supervisor, and really sort of focus on sort of keeping up that rapport. I think that that has been absolutely helpful, given me a more robust learning experience.

However, the participant indicates that connections outside of the classroom with other students "has been completely irrelevant to my learning, or to my experience." However, the participant described two important connections that support her learning. First, the participant values the connection with a former teaching assistant who recently defended her thesis: "it has been nice to sort of to know, to know someone that has actually gone through the process, being able to share

it with me, anticipating that myself.” Second, the participant values the support received from her husband: “He is able to really provide me with an objective ear despite the fact that he is my husband, it is really helpful to have his ideas, to have his input, and to have objectivity from a different department to give me a different lens to look through things.” Therefore, for this participant, only those key connections that supported her learning were relevant.

d) Factors influencing the co-ordination or prioritization of your connections

The participant indicated that she coordinated and prioritized connections, for example, choosing to work with other mature students: “In one class, in the class that I am actually in right now, I actually chose to work with people that were mature students that can actually understand what I am going through”. The participant further explained that mature students “would also understand the demands on my time.”

e) Factors that make it difficult to develop connections

The participant identified three factors that make it difficult to develop connections: age, time and being married. As for age, the participant says that younger students treat mature students differently: “I feel that mature students are looked at differently. I feel that sometimes there is a little bit of fear associated with our participation or that our knowledge might be perceived as condescending or intimidating.” The participant describes one experience where she perceived that younger students were “standoffish”: “I found in one instance people were standoffish and there is a 10 year age gap between us. So, that was a little bit surprising.”

The focus of schoolwork as a key preoccupation, as well as being married are key factors for not connecting with others at university:

“I would say that it's not that I am uninterested in making friends, but it's a matter of what I, what I really need in terms of accomplishing my goals. So I, being married I am

not sort of not interested in dating here, I am not really interested in going to pub nights or hanging out a different place during lunchtime. I am here for a reason, and I am here to get my work done.”

f) Whether expectations of the graduate experience were met

The participant indicated that the graduate experience met her expectations “in terms of the academic experience.” However, it did not meet her expectations regarding professionalism:

“In terms of professionalism, I would say that it hasn't really met my experiences. I thought that would have been a little bit more ... a professional sort of feeling program just given the importance of communications in business.”

Participant No. 4

a) Factors influencing the decision to study part-time at the graduate level

At least four factors influenced the participant's decision to study part-time at the graduate level. Firstly, career: the participant “wanted to study something that was relevant to the federal public service,” her employer at the time of enrolling in the master's program. Secondly, the participant wanted a challenge: “I just felt that there was more that I could be doing.” Thirdly, the participant was interesting in keeping in the workforce: “I did not want to come out of the graduate level program with no work experience.” Finally, the participant did not want to struggle with finances: I “didn't want to take a year away from having a regular income to being a student struggling to pay tuition.”

b) Expectations of the graduate experience

The participant expected that she would have more in common with other students, and this was not her experience. For example, the participant expected that there would be more students studying part-time and working. “I thought that I would be amongst other students who

are also studying on a part-time basis and also working like on a part-time or full-time basis, whatever, so I would have more commonality with other students.”

Secondly, the participant works with the Canadian federal government and, because the University of Ottawa is in a location where the Canadian federal public service is an important employer, the participant thought that there would have been more participation from this sector: “I had expected other students to be working for the public service as well, and I was proven wrong there as well.”

c) The importance of connections and relationships with students and others in the university community

The participant indicated that making connections was “imperative” for her graduate experience, however, the connections were those developed in and for the classroom:

“I felt that to be able to form those connections with classmates and to form those commonalities and to be able to discuss different perspectives when it comes to the theory or any sort of assignments and things like that it’s just, it was imperative for me and in progressing through grad school.”

The participant believes that she was able to make connections inside the classroom, but making connections outside the classroom were limited by time:

“Yes, I felt like I did make those connections. I would have liked to have made more connections and relationships, but I think of the factor that came into play there was also the fact that ...just my work/school balance, and that I had been working full-time and didn’t have as much time to spend on campus and take part in the activities and sort of build those relationships outside of the classroom.”

Further, when further discussing the importance of other students in support of the participant's learning, the participant indicated that she relied on others "to fill in the gaps for me":

"...for myself, as a part-time student I felt like my time is divided between work and school, so the time that I do dedicate to my studies, I relied upon those connections to fill in the gaps for me, whether that be just having a conversation with another student about what I am writing for my paper. Being able to bounce those ideas off of them..."

The participant further explained that it was more important to have connections with full-time students who were more immersed into the program: "it may be more important for part-time students because you are not fully immersed in your studies because your time is just limited. So to be able to have a connection with someone who is fully immersed is valuable." Therefore, on some level there is the expectation that the full-time students would be a more valuable resource to mature, part-time students than other students.

When discussing connections outside of the classroom, the participant responded, "No, not so much outside." And, "I wasn't really involved with a lot of activities outside of the classroom."

Finally, besides students in the classroom, the participant felt it was import to connect with the professors on an academic level: "I just found that I could really learn from them, and, you know be able to sort of apply that knowledge to my work."

d) Factors influencing the co-ordination or prioritization of your connections

The participant did not co-ordinate or prioritize connections because she did not know anybody in the program and in her classes, and she "thought that I could just work with whoever, and often times we were just put in a group together." However, because the participant had already known some of her professors from previous studies, she indicated that "I was able to

draw on some of the experiences that I had in my undergrad.” When discussing connections with professors, the participant indicated that it was important for her to be able to learn from them: “the approachability of the professor, and not necessarily how easy I can reach them, but just the level of, you know if we can have a discussion, can I learn from them.” Therefore, while the participant did not co-ordinate or prioritize connections, connections with professors were relatively important, including with those from a previous program and current ones.

e) Factors that make it difficult to develop connection

While the participant indicated that connections were made in the short-term, in the long-term a “difference in goals” as well as the factor of time, made connections unsustainable.

“I did make connections, and I was happy with the connections that I made because they did support my learning for that period of time. But, to be honest I haven't really sustained those connections, because it's just, and again I think it goes back to having a different set of goals, a different set of objectives that really just didn't make those connections sustainable. And, I think, also being on a part-time basis, there is the time issue that you are not, you just don't spend as much time cultivating those connections.”

Upon further discussion, the participant indicated that she did not think she had made a connection with others in the classroom because of a different goals: “But, I still don't think a connection was really made because, I think, I had a different goal of what to get out of the course. And, I think it was largely because of my, my experience with work and my career.” Therefore, for the participant, a key barrier to developing and sustaining connections are the different goals of students, and the limitation of time.

f) Whether expectations of the graduate experience were met

The participant indicates that the graduate experience met her goals from an academic perspective; however, she would have liked to have made more sustainable connections. This is summarized in the following:

“I think I learned a lot from an academic perspective, definitely learned a lot, and was... my expectations were fulfilled at that end. But, on the flip side to complement that I would have liked to have had a foundation of connections that I could take with me.”

Further, the participant indicated that there could have been more of a link between her studies and career, which may have been facilitated with more connections:

“I would have liked to have had the opportunity to make more of a link with my graduate studies with my career. And, I think that a way that I could have made that link is by, you know maybe making connections with others who are, you know, sharing the same situation as myself, in terms of career goals, career objectives, and being able to make those links while also having similar academic goals.”

Therefore, the participant's graduate experience would have met her expectations if she had made connections with others with common interests and backgrounds.

Participant No. 5

a) Factors influencing the decision to study part-time at the graduate level

Two factors influenced the decision of this participant to study part-time at the graduate level: finance and career. The participant indicated that “the financial factor is probably the main reason. And, the secondary reason ... is that I wasn't waiting for any big promotion upon getting my masters.”

b) Expectations of the graduate experience

The participant expected class discussions to include a lot of participation: "Inside the class, my expectations, I expected to be a lot of interaction, a lot of participation, debating that sort of thing." As well, the participant indicated that at the graduate level he expected his classmates to be interested: "being in the graduate program I expected to have group members that cared a lot about what they were doing." However, the participant did not have expectations for social contact with class members outside of the class:

"...being part-time, I didn't expect to have a whole lot of social contact with my peers, especially after my experience in public administration, I was expecting very little interaction outside of class."

Further, the participant had expectations that there would be no time for social activities, and that the students, in general, would not be interested in making connections:

"I expected to always be very busy, and not have much time for the social aspect, always... I expected people, a lot of them to have kids and be very busy with work and so not be interested at all in maintaining a lot of connections a part from the possibility of, like getting references, suggestions for job postings."

Finally, being a federal government employee, the participant expected to be in class with others who were similarly employed in the government sector, and this was not the case: I expected it to be almost all government employees, which is wasn't." The participant, therefore, did not have a 'common employer' upon which to be the basis of a connection.

c) The importance of connections and relationships with students and others in the university community

The participant's preoccupations with working full-time and studying part-time did not leave a lot of time, including for socializing after class with other students: "I was coming in as someone who was very busy, and never had free time."

In contrast, the participant was very active in the classroom: "inside the classroom I participate a lot." As well, as a mature student the participant found it educational to learn from other mature students: "hearing from the other students like me, that are mature students, and bringing in more examples of their work, work life. I found it very educational." However, the participant also valued the input from younger students: "the recent undergrad seem to have a lot more theoretical base when they comment in class, so that fills in, things like research methods". When discussing connections with the academic staff, the participant recognizes that he has a very focused relationship with his academic supervisor:

"...although he is my supervisor, I don't get to meet with him very often. He works full-time outside of the university and he is a very hard guy to get a hold of a lot. So, I don't have a whole lot of relationship. We discuss very little outside of my research paper."

As well, the participant indicated that he has "a little bit" of a relationship with another professor "but not really a whole lot."

d) Factors influencing the co-ordination or prioritization of your connections

The participant described that he connects more with other mature students:

"I probably don't really prioritize connections with those who are much younger than me, not because I don't have interesting things to say. But, because I probably have more in common with the mature students who are out there working, and can kind of apply what we are learning to the work place environment. Whereas, I don't want to generalize, but the younger students have different priorities."

The participant described his efforts to connect with other mature students, even at social events

“So, I would go to these events even though mature students will be the minority at these events, I will seek them out, especially the ones that were in my class. I will chat with them, about, largely about work.”

The base of the connection with other mature students is their commonality including work, experience and an understanding that these relationships can be practical: “it is just more relevant to me to talk about work and exchanging like reference type stuff, where there might be opportunities and that sort of thing, and people's experiences.” However, in general, the participant is only interested in going to social events when they are convenient, for example, immediately after regularly scheduled classes.

The participant does not prioritize connections with professors, since he has limited connections with professors: “there are only two professors that I only really ever deal with.” And, he adds that there is a practical reason for getting to know these professors: “one reason that I try to get closer to the professors that I already know, is because if I ever want to do another program I will need references for it.” Finally, of the two professors with whom the participant has connections, he is closer to one “because I have the most experience with him.” This professor is not his research supervisor.

e) Factors that make it difficult to develop connections

The participant reported that his other responsibilities make it difficult to make connections: “my other responsibilities, besides school, outside of school certainly make it a lot more difficult. The same thing goes for participating in campus groups.” However, he found it easier to develop connections inside the classroom with other mature students: “I think it is

easier to develop connections at the graduate level in that sense, inside the class.” Further, he finds that mature students “tend to be a bit more outgoing in terms of class participation.”

f) Whether expectations of the graduate experience were met

The participant was able to tailor his interests to his academic program and, in this sense, the graduate experience met his expectation: “I expected to be able to tailor it towards my interests, which in that case it did meet my expectation.” However, he expected the classroom to include more mature students, and this was not the case: “I expected it to be mostly, mostly mature students, if not all.” But, he found that “The mature students were in the minority in my classes.” However, the participant thinks that the minority status of mature students may have drawn them closer together: “perhaps because we are in the minority, it drew the mature students kind of closer together. If there was any hanging outside the classroom, it would tend to be with them.”

Further, the participant feels that classroom discussions did not meet his expectations, which he expected more of: “I was expecting a lot of participatory ... especially when you were being marked on participation... . But, there is far less participation in the class than I expected, which leads to less understanding.”

As well, the participant only expected interaction in the classroom: “I expected very little interaction outside the classroom.” And, although there were opportunities for interaction, his preference was to minimally participate.

Composite description of the essence of the experience

This section provides a composite description of the essence of the graduate experience of part-time, mature students based on the Description of Participants' Experiences found in the previous section.

a) Factors influencing the decision to study part-time at the graduate level

Factors that influence the decision of mature students, between the ages of 25 and 34, to study part-time at the graduate level include personal development, for example, the need to feel challenged, and to explore an area in which potentially they may find employment opportunities. As well, some students, who already work in the field of communication, want to study something that is relevant to their work.

The decision to study part-time, as opposed to full-time, was made for very practical reasons including the need to balance school with work, usually full-time jobs. Also, some students are interested in staying in the workforce to continue accumulating work experience. The financial factor is important as well, since the participants in this study reported not being able to afford to go to school full-time. Other students will choose to enroll in the part-time program because there is no career advantage to graduate, for example, the degree will not lead to a promotion.

b) Expectations of the graduate experience

Mature students enrolled in the part-time, graduate program with the Department of Communication expect a strong academic emphasis, which includes reading a lot, doing independent work and conducting original research. Some students will feel overwhelmed by these expectations. Further, there is the expectation that time will be taken up by work outside of the academic program, and that during the studies there will be no time for a social life. In general, mature, part-time students expect very little interaction outside of the classroom.

Many of the part-time graduate students expect to interact with mostly other mature students, who have many things in common such as being older than other students, work experience, and balancing school with work and families.

As for the classroom experience, students expect engagement between students, and between the students and the professor. And, they will expect other students to care about what they are doing in the classroom.

c) The importance of connections and relationships with students and others in the university community

While most part-time, mature students will understand that connections and relationships with students and others in the university community are important, the connections and relationships are confined mostly to the classroom. Within the classroom informal and minimal connections are formed during classroom discussions, and other connections are formed for the sole purpose of accomplishing a task through group work. Further, most mature students connect with other mature students. In general, for mature, part-time students there is little energy or desire to invest in connections beyond the classroom. Further, most part-time, mature students already have their social connections, namely family and established friends.

Within the academic community mature, part-time, mature students find it valuable to connect with at least one professor. This connection is important as a resource and a sounding board for projects and research.

d) Factors influencing the co-ordination or prioritization of your connections

Most of the part-time, mature, students interviewed in this study do not co-ordinate or prioritize their connections. In general, they know very few other students when they begin graduate class, and they accept that they will work with whatever group they are assigned. However, some mature students will specifically choose to work with other mature students because they want to interact with others who understand them.

e) Factors that make it difficult to develop connections

Many part-time, mature students do not feel the need to be connected to others in their program. In addition, there is not the desire or energy to do so. And, if they do connect with other students, it is mostly surface level connections, for example, informal chats before class, and inconsequential conversations.

For those who may be interested in connections, there are many barriers, including class size, to a limited extent, limited time, which is not sufficient to cultivate connections, and other responsibilities such as family and work. Additionally, age and goal differences create barriers to connect with others. In general, part-time, mature students are older than other students by at least ten years, and this difference is reflected in different experiences, thinking and goals, which are not conducive to making connections.

f) Whether expectations of the graduate experience were met

Some mature, part-time students will have minimal expectations when enrolling in the graduate program and, therefore, they cannot assess what they never had. However, for those students who had expectations, the key expectation that was met was the academic challenge. In this respect, these part-time, students enjoyed the role of a student.

For some mature students, the graduate experience did not meet certain expectations; for example, to connect with more mature students, to do more independent work, to have more direct links between their studies and careers. Finally, some mature students regretted not having developed a foundation of connections that they could “take with them” when they graduated from the program.

The following table summarizes the key findings reflected in the composite descriptions:

Table 3: Summary of Findings in Composite Description

Area of Interest	Findings
a) Factors influencing the decision to study part-time at the graduate level	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • personal development • explore an area and potentially find employment opportunities • part-time option for practical reasons (need work experience, financial burden, no career advantage to graduate quicker)
b) Expectations of the graduate experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • strong academic emphasis • very busy • little interaction outside of the classroom • classroom engagement • interact with mostly other mature students
c) The importance of connections and relationships with students and others in the university community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the connections and relationships are confined mostly to the classroom • within the classroom informal and minimal connections (discussions and group work) • mature students will connect with other mature students • little energy or desire to invest in connections beyond the classroom • valuable to connect with at least one professor
d) Factors influencing the co-ordination or prioritization of your connections	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • do not co-ordinate or prioritize their connections • some mature students will choose to work with other mature students
e) Factors that make it difficult to develop connections	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • no desire or energy • class size • limited time • other responsibilities such as family and work. • age

Area of Interest	Findings
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • goal differences
f) Whether expectations of the graduate experience were met	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes, expectations met - academic challenge • No, expectations not met: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ connect with more mature students ○ do more independent work ○ have more direct links between their studies and careers ○ not having developed a foundation of connections that they could 'take with them'

Chapter 5: Discussion

Key themes

There are two key themes found from the results of this research: one, part-time, mature graduate students, to a large extent, make connections with other students only inside the classroom and as needed to meet class requirements; and, two, part-time, mature students understand that there is value to having at least one connection, inside and/or outside the classroom, with at least one member of the academic community to support their learning.

Connections with other students inside the classroom only. The part-time, mature graduate experience is challenged by time. The results of this study emphasize that graduate studies is only one aspect of the life of a part-time, mature student: they are continually challenged by the school workload and the balance between school and their other responsibilities, including family and work. They do not have time to invest in other relationships, nor do they have the desire to invest in relationships with other students. Part-time, mature graduate students are comforted by having familiar faces in their classes, but they only

expect to interact with other students in a minimal way within the classroom experience to meet program requirements.

The part-time, mature student understands that the nature of the master's program includes group work, and they are prepared to work with others to complete the necessary tasks; and, some students, given the choice and opportunity may choose to work with other mature students, because of the common bond of being mature students. As well, there is the expectation that mature students will understand each other, including the challenges of working through the graduate program and balancing other obligations. The part-time, mature student also understands that participation in the classroom is important for learning and sharing. However, some mature students feel that the younger students are limited in their contribution, mainly because of lack of practical experience. Nevertheless, the classroom experience is an important component of the academic experience for the part-time, mature student.

For the most part, connections formed in group work and in the classroom are for the purpose of fulfilling a task. Most of these connections are superficial, and are not intended to be deep or beneficial or sustaining outside of the task at hand. Such relationships are viewed as short-term, and practical with minimal investment.

One academic contact makes a difference. Part-time, mature students need at least one academic contact during their graduate experience. These students do not have the time, interest or energy to invest in connecting with classmates, but they understand that connecting with a professor, not necessarily only as their academic supervisor, inside and outside the classroom, can make a difference to their graduate experience. The connection does not have to be frequent, nor does it have to be consistent; but there has to be a connection. Having that one connection

with a member of the academic community can contribute to the motivation, if not the persistence of part-mature students.

Findings in the context of the literature

The findings of this study are less relevant to the literature on social capital theory mainly because part-time, mature students are not interested in developing meaningful relationships with their classmates, who are often much younger. While the participants reported developing relationships with their professors and classmates who were also mature students, connections with others did not seem to be a driver of mature, part-time graduate students.

However, the findings are relevant to persistence and engagement theory, in particular as this theory applies to the role of the classroom for learning. Also, the findings are consistent with those in other studies reviewed in this paper on the experiences of part-time, mature students, including the challenge of time and having no peers. Finally, the theories of personal identity and salient identity are relevant to part-time, mature students, but the theory on social identity is less relevant.

Social capital theory. A basic premise of social capital theory is that prior investment in social networks is needed in order to develop mutual trust and reciprocity (Valenzuela, Park, & Kee, 2009, p. 877). Putnam (2000) discusses how mutual trust and reciprocity 'arise' from connections (p. 19). Further, trust and reciprocity "are necessary for successful engagement in collective activities" (Valenzuela, Park, & Lee, 2009, p. 877). In the context of this study, it was found that human capital, and not social capital, is the important element required for successful engagement in collective activities. Coleman (1988) discusses the differences between physical, human and social capital: "if physical capital is wholly tangible, being embodied in observable material form, and human capital is less tangible, being embodied in the skills and knowledge

acquired by an individual, social capital is less tangible yet, for it exists in the relations among person (pp. S100-101). In this study, the part-time, mature students were interested in sharing their human capital, which had been developed through years of accumulated working experience. Also, they were interested in developing more human capital specifically through their graduate studies, including skills and knowledge. The part-time, mature students are less interested in developing relationships with their classmates, in particular their younger classmates, and any connections that are developed are necessary and restricted largely to the in-class experience. Further, the part-time, mature students evaluated engagement in graduate school relative to their contributions to classroom discussions, which they were pleased to do since they have much experience to share. As well, engagement was evaluated relative to cooperative efforts, for example, co-operating in groups in order to get a task done.

Adler and Kwon (2002) discuss that “The core intuition guiding social capital research is that the goodwill that others have toward us is a valuable resource” (p. 18). Goodwill is defined as “the sympathy, trust, and forgiveness offered us by friends and acquaintances” (p. 18). What is clear from the current study is that for part-time, mature students, their classmates are not friends, but rather acquaintances who have a common reason for being together. Further, within the scope of the acquaintance relationship the study found less evidence of goodwill, as defined above, and more evidence of cooperative behaviour, which was guided by the norms of the educational institution, and reflected in class requirements, for example, group work.

In the literature, social capital is discussed as being an influential factor on retention. For example, in Coleman's (1988) study social capital found in the family and in the adult community is shown to diminish the probability of high school students to drop out (pp. S118-S119). Putnam (2000) also discusses that an important contributing factor to the development of

children is the “level of social trust in a state and the frequency with which people connected informally with one another” (p. 300). In the current study, because there was no attempt or desire to develop social capital, other factors played a role in retention and development (personal and academic). These include the part-time, mature students’ desires and goals: to be challenged; to obtain a degree in a new field; to develop new skills. Therefore, the personal goals and desires, as well as the social capital found in family and friends outside of school, all contributed to maintaining commitment to graduate studies for the part-time, mature students. This sample of students was not dependent on the support of their classmates for their development through, or commitment in, graduate school.

In summary, in the context of this study, part-time, mature students will *contribute to*, in contrast to *invest in*, connections inside the classroom to get the work done, for example, group work and classroom engagement; and, they do not invest in classroom contacts outside of the classroom. Because of their approach to engagement, they are less likely to develop social capital.

Persistence and engagement theory: A key element of persistence and engagement theory relative to education is that academic and social integration are important influences on commitment at the post-secondary level (Tinto, 1975). Tinto discusses that “it is the individual's integration into the academic and social systems of the college that most directly relates to his continuance in that college” (1975, p. 96). Integration into the academic system includes grade performance and intellectual development, and integration into social systems includes interactions with peer-groups and faculty (p. 96). Further, Tinto indicates that a student’s integration into these systems “lead[s] to new levels of commitment” (p. 96) to their development. In the context of this study, the part-time, mature students were strongly integrated

into the academic system, in particular, intellectual development: they wanted to take their learning to the next level, they want to do independent work; they wanted to conduct original research; and they wanted to make links between their learning and their work. Also, while the part-time, mature students interacted with both classmates and faculty to accomplish tasks, their connections with faculty, often outside of the classroom, represent their integration into the social system at the university. Often, a connection with one faculty member was all that was required for the student to feel part of the program and integrated into the university. Further, students chose to connect with faculty who were approachable, and whose style of teaching met the students' needs. These factors allowed the part-time, mature students to make a connection with faculty, which contributed to their commitment to their studies. In this context, integration with the academic system was greater than integration with the social system.

A key contribution of Tinto's (1997) study on persistence and engagement theory focuses on the role of the classroom. He writes that the role of the classroom in academic and social integration leads to development and persistence "because contact with the faculty inside and outside the classroom serves directly to shape learning and persistence, but also because their actions, framed by pedagogical assumptions, shape the nature of classroom communities and influence the degree and manner in which students become involved in learning in and beyond those settings" (p. 617). In this study, the classroom played a key role in the graduate experience for part-time, mature students, in particular, because it was a meaningful place for core learning to take place. The classrooms offered opportunities to learn through others in discussion and group work. In this study part-time, mature students were interested in sharing their experience with others, particularly their work experience. Further, some students may use the classroom as an opportunity to connect with other students at a more personal level; for example, by sharing

feelings of frustration about the graduate experience. Therefore, in this study, the classroom was viewed as an important location for learning and sharing, and developing informal connections, all of which contributed to the positive experience of graduate students and their persistence.

In summary, part-time, mature students focus their investments of time and effort on academic integration, and the classroom plays an important role in this integration. Social integration plays a minor role, and only to the extent that it takes place in the classroom and has an education focus.

Identity theory: The findings in this study are very relevant to personal identity theory, and less relevant to social identity theory: “personal identity refers to the individual self, and social identity refers to the group self (Ellemers, 2009, para. 1). In the context of this study, part-time, mature students were focused on their individual selves: they were interested only on what they wanted in terms of goal attainment, and what they needed to reach those goals. Further, personal identity involves a person’s “private conception of self and feelings of continuity” (Cheek & Briggs, 1982, p. 401), compared to social identity, which “involves a person’s social roles and relationships” (p. 401). In this study, it was clear that part-time, mature students understood their graduate experience as being completely separate from other aspects of their lives. However, they were able to perform well in the graduate experience, for example, in classroom participation and group work, even though, for the most part, their private selves felt that their younger classmates were immature and sometimes irrelevant to their experience. It appears that part-time, mature students managed their self-presentation such that they shared or revealed to a minimum, or to a minor degree, their private selves, as they carried out their role as student. A possible reason or motivation for this is that the part-time, mature students were not comfortable sharing their private selves with other students because of a perception that they had

little in common with many of their classmates. Also, possibly the part-time, mature students prejudged that increased sharing of their private selves would only be necessary if there was a perceived value in the investment of relationships with other students. With this study it is difficult to determine the reasons and motivations for keeping the private selves separate when taking on the role of student; however, it appears clear that this strategy of compartmentalization works on a practical level for part-time, mature students.

Further, in this study the part-time, mature students' social identity was reflected in playing the "typical" student role, which included class participation and group work. In this way, the students were "being like others in the group, and seeing things from the group's perspective" (p. 226). However, not all part-time, mature students identified with the others, and saw the group's perspective. This is reflected in the intentions of some of the mature students to want to only work with other mature students with whom they felt they had greater compatibility compared to their younger classmates. Brewer (1991) points out that membership in a social group "may be voluntary or imposed, but social identities are chosen" (p. 477). This is particularly relevant to this study where the findings reveal that the part-time, mature students intentionally only chose social identities that were meaningful to them, for example, they chose not to be involved with social activities outside of the classroom because the type of activities offered was not appropriate for them: the activities were not meaningful social activities for them.

Finally, the concept of "salient identity" is applicable to the findings in this study. This concept explains that one's relationship with others in a network depends on having a particular identity and role (Styker & Burke, 2000, p. 286). The particular identity and role is the salient or prominent identity. For most of the part-time, mature students being a student is only one aspect

of their lives, and for this reason they continue to nurture their true salient identity within the contexts of their primary social networks including family, friends and co-workers. However, in their role as a student, and in the context of other students, part-time, mature student are able to maintain their salient identity, and this is revealed by representing themselves, for example, in classroom discussions, in the roles that they identify with most. In this way, their salient identity is consistent.

In summary, in the context of this study, part-time, mature students are more invested in their personal identity, which can evolve as they focus on self-improvement (for example, through academic challenges). However, to the extent that they were students, part-time, mature students played the required social roles in the classroom, for example, by participating. Nevertheless, for many mature students it was important to distance themselves from the social groupings of the typically younger graduate student, and to associate with other part-time, mature students.

Experiences of part-time, mature students. Many of the findings of this study are consistent with other studies on mature students. For example, Visser's (2011) study found that part-time, mature students had common challenges of time and balancing family, work, social and school responsibilities (p. 3). And this study found the same challenges. Further, the participants indicated that time was a constant challenge, and lack of time played a role in that they did not want to invest in relationships: they did not have the time.

Further, a study by Murphy and Roopchande (2003) found that "mature students experience higher self-esteem and higher levels of intrinsic motivation compared to traditional students" (p. 256). In this study, evidence was found that some part-time, mature students are motivated to return to school for the challenge and personal development. These reasons reflect

intrinsic motivation. The part-time, mature students were aware that they would be challenged by returning to school, but yet, they wanted the experience for themselves.

As well, this study is consistent with the finding of Polson's study (2003), which found that part-time, mature students are "without peers with whom they can relate easily" (p. 60). It was clear in this study that part-time, mature students find that most of their classmates are much younger, and the age difference was an important factor in not connecting: mature students could not relate to their younger classmates. All of the differences—age, perspectives, interests, experiences, goals—create a reality for the part-time, mature students of having few peers. Further, O'Connor and Cordova's (2010) study found that adult students "regretted not being more involved socially and several regretted not having had a close circle of classmates who were also friends" (pp. 367-368). As well, Ayres and Gulfoyle's (2008) study found that "the majority of mature age female students had very little expectation for social support at university" (p. 54). In this study it was clear from the participants that part-time, mature students also did not expect a social aspect to school, nor did they desire this. However, they would have liked to have had other part-time, mature students in their classes who understood them, and who related to their situation. As well, students liked having informal contacts with other students to fill in gaps in information that may exist because they are not plugged into the university experience on a full-time basis. This is consistent with Ayres and Gulfoyle's (2008) study, which found that social networks were used for practical purposes, for example, to exchange information on assignments (p. 55). Further, the motivation of the part-time, mature students in this study to develop relationships only as they relate to the academic side of school is consistent with Lundberg's (2003) study, which found peer relationships that have an educational focus are important to learning for students of any age (p. 682). Finally, this study, in contrast to Gaetjens'

(1977) study, did not find that developing friendships with students, older or younger, provided emotional support, and in particular inspiration (p. 774). Instead, this study found that the part-time, mature students thought that the differences between themselves and their younger classmates were so significant that an important connection could not be formed.

In summary, many of the findings in other studies are consistent with those of this study. This study found that part-time, mature students are intrinsically motivated to pursue the graduate experience. Also, typically they are without peers, and try to seek out other part-time, mature students. Further, while this student segment wants to be “plugged into” the university, it is primarily to support their academic integration.

Significance of Study

This study is significant for at least two reasons. Firstly, it contributes to a gap in information about the experience of part-time, mature students enrolled in the graduate programs at the University of Ottawa in the Department of Communication. Specifically, it highlights key findings, including the desire of this student segment to be challenged and to learn. As well, it highlights that part-time, mature students do not have much in common with many of their classmates, most of whom are relatively younger. It is important to have these, and other perspectives, brought out because then those responsible for the master's programs can further study the situation with a view to increasing the true potential that exists in the diversity of the classroom, as this diversity is expressed in age and work experience.

Secondly, the study shows that ultimately the graduate experience for part-time, mature students is very much a solitary experience, with minimal contact with other students and professors, which is limited largely to in class contact. This situation represents missed

opportunities for students to fully explore and to develop their academic, personal and social selves.

Limitations and Future Directions

The key limitation of this study is the number of participants used to collect the data. Although the data collected provided rich descriptions of the participants' experiences, more data would have been helpful. For example, there was a mixture of male and female participants, and more data would have allowed the researcher to determine if there were some experiences that were more consistent with males and others with females. Similarly, there was not a significant age range in the participants in this study; and, it would have been interesting to have included some participants who were in their forties and fifties.

More study is needed on the graduate experience of part-time, mature students in the Department of Communication at the University of Ottawa. This study revealed findings that can be used as the basis for further discussion and further exploratory studies, perhaps on a larger scale. It is important to confirm the findings in this study, in particular, to determine if the low level of connections developed in graduate school are diminishing the graduate experience for part-time, mature students. As well, it will be important to study younger students to determine their perspectives of having part-time, mature students in their classes.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

Part-time, mature graduate students in the Department of Communication at the University of Ottawa are an important component of the student landscape in their graduate programs—course-based, research and thesis streams. This research set out to answer two questions:

1. How do part-time, mature students experience graduate studies?

2. What is the importance of social capital to retention and persistence in the experience of part-time, mature graduate students?

This section provides a brief overview of the answers to these questions revealed in the research.

How do part-time, mature students experience graduate studies?

The findings from this research reveal that part-time, mature students are challenged by the experience of graduate studies: they are challenged academically, which they enjoy; and they are challenged personally when juggling multiple obligations, which is exhausting and difficult. However, this segment of the student population are prepared to make the necessary sacrifices to reach their goals, because they are personal goals of enrichment, as well, these goals are practical, to the extent that they may support career opportunities.

The personal journey of part-time, mature students does not include a lot of meaningful connections with other students. For the most part the connections are informal, require minimal investment before, during and after class; and they are purposeful connections: to accomplish tasks and to add value to engagement in the classroom. The connections are less meaningful to part-time, mature students because, for the most part, the connections are with younger students, and the older student finds it difficult to find bonds of commonality. Further, part-time, mature students prefer to invest their time in the connections and relationships that matter to them, as represented by family and established friends.

The importance of social capital to retention and persistence

When part-time, mature students decide to enrol in graduate studies, they bring with them certain expectations, many of which have been formed in their undergraduate years. In general, they see graduate studies as having a certain number of components, with a heavy emphasis on preparatory work, for example, readings and assignments. As well, they understand that they

must meet certain requirements including those that require working with others, for example, in group work. Based on their undergraduate experience, part-time, mature students expect that group members will co-operate and get along to get the task done. As well, they understand that the classroom is a central place of engagement that may lead to increased knowledge, and perhaps understanding, including about other students; but, in general, the classroom is not seen as a place to deeply connect with others. Certainly, during the course of interacting with others in the classroom familiar and casual connections are developed with others, and these contribute to creating a familiar learning environment in which students find comfort and confidence when participating in interactive activities. However, it appears that these connections are developed to enable students to meet the expectations of the course(s) in which they are registered. The connections developed are neither deep nor meaningful; instead, they are casual, short-term and necessary to meet a situation specific purpose. Therefore, social capital, as primarily defined as meaningful connections with other students, does not play a significant role in the experience of part-time, mature students.

However, part-time, graduate students have other sources of social capital, which may contribute to persistence and retention. The primary source of social capital is close relationships that come from family and friends who provide consistent support. However, faculty members also play a key role in influencing persistence. Part-time, mature students value their connections with professors both inside and outside the classroom, in particular, their knowledge and understanding, which can be customized to meet the needs of the personal journeys of the students. It appears, therefore, that professors, compared to other students, can be more effective and efficient in supporting the learning and persistence of part-time, mature students who are not fully immersed in the academic environment. Finally, the social capital that is represented by the

academic community does not have to be measured in quantity to be valuable; a part-time, mature student needs only one academic contact to sustain their motivation to persist.

References

- Aberbach, J. D., Rockman, B.A., (2002). Conducting and coding elite interviews. *Political Science and Politics*, 35(4), 673-676. .
- Abiddin, N. Z., & Ismail, A. (2011). Attrition and completion issues in postgraduate studies for student development. *International Review of Social Sciences and Humanities*, 1(1), 15-99.
- Adler, P. S., & Kwon, S-W. (2002). Social capital: prospects for a new concept. *The Academy of Management Review*, 27(1), 17-40.
- Ahn, J. (2012). Teenagers' experiences with social network sites: relationships to bridging and bonding social capital. *The Information Society*, 28, 99-109. doi: 10.1080/01972243.2011.649394.
- Archidiacono, P., Cooley, J., & Hussey, A. (2008). The economic returns to an MBA, *International Economic Review*, 49(3), 873-899.
- Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada. (2011). *Trends in higher education, Volume 1 – Enrolment*. Ottawa, ON. The Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada.
- Ayres, R., & Guilfoyle, A. (2008). Experiences of mature age female students studying psychology: a phenomenological account. *Edith Cowan University, COM International Conference*, 46-50.
- Barker, S., Felstehausen, G., Couch, S., & Henry, J. (1997). Orientation programs for older and delayed-entry graduate students. *NASPA Journal*, 35(1), 57-68.
- Baxter, A. & Britton, C. (2001). Risk, identity and change: becoming a mature student, *International Studies in Sociology of Education*, 11(1), 87-104.
doi: 10.1080/09620210100200066

- Bedell, M. D., & Johnson, J. L. (1997). The social fabric of a team-based M.B.A. program: Network effects on student satisfaction and performance. *Academy of Management Journal*, 49(6), 1369-1397. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/257037>
- Bevir, M. (2007). "Embeddedness". *Encyclopedia of Governance*. Sage Publications, Inc. doi: 10.4135/9781412952613
- Bishop-Clark, D. & Lynch, J. (1998). Comparing teacher and student responses to the mixed-age college classroom. *Community College Review*, 25(21). 21-34.
doi: 10.1177/009155219802500403
- Brewer, M.B. (1991). The social self: On being the same and different at the same time. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 17(5), 475-482.
doi: 10.1177/0146167291175001
- Brus, C. P. (2006). Seeking balance in graduate school: A realistic expectation or a dangerous dilemma? *New Directions for Student Services*, (115), 31-45. .
- Caelli, K., Ray, L., Mill, J. (2003). 'Clear as Mud': Toward greater clarity in generic qualitative research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 2(2), 1-13.
- Cheek, J. M., Briggs, S. R. (1982). Self-consciousness and aspects of personality. *Journal of Research In Personality*, 16, 401-408.
- Cleveland-Innes, M. (1994). Adult student drop-out at post-secondary institutions. *The Review of Higher Education*, 17, 423-445.
- Coleman, J. S. (1988). Social capital in the creation of human capital. *American Journal of Sociology*, 94, pp. S95-S120.
- Coleman, J. S. (1990). Foundations of social theory. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Conrad, C. F., Duren, K.M. & Haworth, J.G. (1998). Students' perspectives on their master's degree experiences: disturbing the conventional wisdom. *New Directions for Higher Education*. (101), 65-76.

Creswell, J. W. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry & research design, choosing among five approaches*. Thousand Oaks: California.

Creswell, J. W. (2009). *Research design. Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*. Thousand Oaks: California.

Croll, P. R. (2012). "Ethnocentrism." *Encyclopedia of Global Studies*. Ed., K. Helmut, M. Juergensmeyer, and V. Faessel. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 525-527. SAGE Reference Online retrieved on July 3, 2012.

Ebersole, S. E. (2011). "Religious Communities." *Encyclopedia of Social Networks*. Ed. George A. Barnett. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 742-746, SAGE Reference Online retrieved on July 3, 2012.

Ellemers, N. (2009). "Social Identity Theory." *Encyclopedia of Group Processes & Intergroup Relations*. Ed. John M. Levine and Michael A. Hogg. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 798-802. SAGE Reference Online retrieved on July 24, 2012.

Ellemers, N., Spears, R., Doosje, B. (2002). Self and social identity. *Annual Review Psychology*, 53, 161-186.

Ellison, N. B., Steinfield, C., & Lampe, C. (2007). The benefits of facebook "friends:" social capital and college students' use of online social network sites. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 12, 1143-1168

Gaetjens, C. A. (1997): Contributions of age diversity among students to graduate education in gerontology: students' view. *Educational Gerontology*, 23(8), 763-774

doi: [org/10.1080/0360127970230802](https://doi.org/10.1080/0360127970230802)

- Groenewalk, T. (2004). A phenomenological research design illustrated. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 3(1), 42-55.
- Hannabuss, S. (1996). Research interviews. *New Library World*, 97(1129), 22-30.
- Helliwell, J. F., & Putnam, R.D. (2004). The social context of well-being. *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B.*, 359, 1435-1446. doi: 10.1098/rstb.2004.1522
- Holdaway, E. A., Deblois, C., & Winchester, I. S. (1994). Practices and opinions reported by coordinators of graduate programs, *Interchange*, 25(1), 65-86.
- Hughes, G. (2007). Diversity, identity and belonging in e-learning communities: some theories and paradoxes. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 12(5,6), 709-720.
- Jaussi, K. S., Randel, A. E., & Dionne, S. D. (2007). I am, I think I can, and I do: The role of personal identity, self-efficacy, and cross-application of experiences in creativity at work. *Creativity Research Journal*, 19 (2-3), 247-258.
- Johnson, G. C., & Watson, G. (2004). 'Oh Gawd, How am I going to Fit Into This?': Producing [Mature] first-year student identity. *Language and Education*, 18(6), 474-487.
- Kapucu, N. (2011). "Social Capital." *Encyclopedia of Social Network*, Ed. George A. Barnett, Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 787-789. SAGE Reference Online retrieved on July 3, 2012.
- Kasworm, C. E., & Pike, G. R. (1994). Adult undergraduate students: evaluating the appropriateness of a traditional model of academic performance, *Research in Higher Education*, 35(6), 689-710.
- Kvale, S. (1996). *Interviews: An introduction to qualitative research interviewing*. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications, Inc.

- Lauzon, A. (2011). The changing nature of graduate education: Implications for students in the second half of life. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 30(3), 287-307.
- Klein, O., Spears, R., & Reicher, S. (2007). Social identity performance: extending the strategic side of SIDE. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*. 11(28), 28-45.
- Leonard, M. (2004). Bonding and bridging social capital: reflections from Belfast. *Sociology*, 38(5), 927-944. doi: 10.1177/0038038504047176
- Lin, N. (1999). Building a network theory of social capital. *Connections*, 22(1), 28-51.
- Lundberg, C. A. (2003). The influence of time-limitations, faculty, and peer relationships on adult student learning: a causal model, *The Journal of Higher Education*, 74(6), 665-688. doi: 10.1353/jhe.2003.0045
- Mortari, L. (2008). The ethic of delicacy in phenomenological research. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies on Health and Well-being*. 3, 3-17. doi: 10.1080/17482620701747392
- Moustakas, C. (1994). *Phenomenological Research Methods*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.
- Murphy, H., & Roopchand, N. (2003). Intrinsic motivation and self-esteem in traditional and mature students at a post-1992 university in the north-east of England. *Education Studies*, 29(2-3), 243-259. doi: 10.1080/03055690303278
- Nevill, S. C., & Chen, X. & Carroll, C.D. (2007). The path through graduate school: A longitudinal examination 10 years after bachelor's degree. (NCES 2007-162). U.S. Department of Education.
- O'Connor, B. N., & Cordova, R. (2010). Learning: the experiences of adults who work full-time while attending graduate school part-time, *Journal of Education for Business*, 85(6), 359-368. doi: 10.1080/08832320903449618

- O'Donnell, V. L., Tobbell, J., Lawthom, R., & Zammit, M. (2009). Transition to postgraduate study: Practice, participation and the widening participation agenda. *Active Learning in Higher Education, 10* (1), 26-40.
- Petersen, D., (2006). "Social Capital." *Encyclopedia of Governance*. Ed., Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 874-875. SAGE Reference Online retrieved on July 3, 2012.
- Polkinghorne, D. E. (2005). Language and meaning: data collection in qualitative research. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 52*, 37-145. doi: 10.1037/0022-0167.52.2.137
- Polson, C. J. (2003). Adult graduate students challenge institutions to change. *New Directions for Student Services, 102*, 69-68.
- Prendergast, C. (2004). "Social Capital". *Encyclopedia of Social Theory*. Ed., Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE. 716-718. SAGE Reference Online retrieved on July 3, 2012.
- Putnam, R. D. (1993). *Making democracy work: Civic traditions in modern Italy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Putnam, R. D. (1995). Tuning in, tuning out: the strange disappearance of social capital in America", *Political Science and Politics, 28*(4), 664-683.
- Putnam, R. D. (2000). *Bowling Alone, The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Rajas, H. Shah, D. V., Friedland, L. A. (2011). A communicative approach to social capital.. *Journal of Communication, 61*(4), 689-712. doi: 10.1111/j.1460-2466.2011.01571.x
- Ramos, J. A. (2011). A comparison of perceived stress levels and coping styles of non-traditional graduate students in distance learning versus on-campus programs. *Contemporary Educational Technology, 2*(4), 282-293.

- Richardson, J. T. E. (1994). Mature students in higher education: I. a literature survey on approaches to studying. *Studies in Higher Education, 19*(3), 309-325.
- Richardson, J.T.E., & King, E. (1998). Adult students in higher education: Burden or boon. *The Journal of Higher Education, 69*(1), 65-88.
- Roberts, N.A., & Plakhotnik, M.S. (2009). Building social capital in the academy: the nature and function of support systems in graduate adult education. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education, 122*. doi: 10.1002/ace.333.
- Rowley, J. (2012). Conducting research interviews. *Management Research Review, 35*(3/4), 260-271. Doi: 10.1108/01409171211210154.
- Schuetzei, H. G. & Slowey, M. (2002). Participation and exclusion: A comparative analysis of non-traditional students and lifelong learners in higher education. *Higher Education 44*, 309-327.
- Schwartz, H. L., & Holloway, E. L. (2012). Partners in learning: a grounded theory study of relational practice between master's students and professors. *Mentoring & Tutoring: Partnership in Learning. 20*(1), 115-135.
- Shepherd, J. & Mullins Nelson, B. (2012). Balancing act: a phenomenological study of female adult learners who successfully persisted in graduate studies. *The Qualitative Report. 17*(19), 1-21. Retrieved on August 10 from <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR17/shepherd.pdf>
- Snow, D. A., Oselin, S.S. & Corrigan-Brown, C. (2004). "Identity." *Encyclopedia of Social Theory*. Ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 391-94. SAGE Reference Online retrieved on July 23, 2012.

- Stets, J. E., & Burke, P. J. (2000). Identity theory and social identity theory. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 63(3), 224-237. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2695870>.
- Stone, J. F. (2002). Using symbolic convergence theory to discern and segment motives for enrolling in professional master's degree programs. *Communication Quarterly*, 50(2), 227-243.
- Stryker, S., & Burke, P. J. (2000). The past, present, and future of an identity theory. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 63(4), 284-297.
- Swain, J. & Hammond, C. (2011). The motivations and outcomes of studying for part-time mature students in higher education, *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 30(5), 591-612. doi: 10.1080/02601370.2011.579736
- Terry, D.J., Hogg, M.A., & White, K.M. (1999). The theory of planned behaviour: Self identity, social identity and group norms. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 38(3). 225-244.
- Thacker, C., & Novak, M. (1991). Student role supports for younger and older middle-aged women: Application of a life event model. *The Canadian Journal of Higher Education*, XXI-1, 13-36.
- The Law School Survey of Student Engagement (2011). Indiana University's Center for Postsecondary Research.
- Tinto, V. (1975). Dropout from higher education: a theoretical synthesis of recent research. *Review of Educational Research*, 45(1), 89-125.
- Tinto, V. (1982). Limits of theory and practice in student attrition. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 53(6), 687-700.
- Tinto, V. (1997). Classrooms as communities: exploring the educational character of student persistence. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 68(6), 599-623.

- Tinto, V. (2003). *Promoting student retention through classroom practice*. Paper presented at the Enhancing Student Retention: Using International Policy and Practice conference. Retrieved September 12, 2012, from <http://www.staffs.ac.uk/access-studies/docs/Amster-paperVT%281%29.pdf>
- Valenzuela, S., Park, N., & Kee, K.F. (2009). Is there social capital in a social network site?: Facebook use and college students' life satisfaction, trust, and participation. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, 14*(4), 875–901. doi 10.1111/j.1083-6101.2009.01474.x
- Van Manen, M. (1990). *Researching lived experience, human science for an action sensitive pedagogy*. London, Ontario, Canada: The University of Western Ontario.
- Verma, S., Paterson, M., & Medves, J. (2006). Core competencies for health care professionals: what medicine, nursing, occupational therapy, and physiotherapy share. *Journal of Allied Health, 35*(2). 109-115.
- Visser, J-A. (2011). *Challenges and support needs of mature postgraduate part-time students at a higher education institution*. Thesis presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Educational Support in the Faculty of Education at Stellenbosch University.
- Waller, R. (2006). 'I don't feel like 'a student'. I feel like 'me!': The over-simplification of mature learners' experience(s). *Research in Post-Compulsory Education, 11*(1), 115-130. doi: org/10.1080/13596740500508019
- Wellman, B., Haase, A. Q., Witte, J., & Hampton, K. (2001). Does the internet increase, decrease, or supplement social capital: social networks, participation, and community

commitments. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 45(3), 436-455. doi:
10.1177/00027640121957286

Woolcock, M., & Narayan, D. (August 2000). Social capital: implications for development theory, research, and policy. *The World Bank Research Observer*, 15(2), 225-249.

Appendix A: Interview Questions

1. What factors influenced your decision to study part-time at the graduate level?

Purpose: To understand the motivation for choosing the “part-time” experience (option).

2. What were your expectations of the graduate experience, for example, relative to experiences and interactions inside and outside of the classroom?

Purpose: To identify expectations, including with respect to social capital.

3. Discuss the importance of connections and relationships with students and others in the university community, both inside and outside the classroom, to support your learning.

Purpose: To identify the importance of social capital for the participant.

4. What factors influenced how you co-ordinated or prioritized your connections during your studies?

Purpose: To identify the importance of social capital for the participants.

5. Based on your experience, what factors make it more or less difficult to develop connections?

Purpose: To understand the relative ease of accessing networks, and developing social capital.

6. Did your graduate experience meet your expectations?

Purpose: To identify satisfaction, fulfillment or disappointment relative to a number of factors, including social capital.

Appendix B: Participant Eligibility

Name: _____ Participant # _____

For this study, participant eligibility is based on the following criteria:

- The participant began graduate studies after an absence of at least two consecutive years from studies/school;
- The participant is enrolled as a part-time student in graduate studies, or the participant was enrolled as a part-time student for a period of time during their graduate studies; and
- The participant is enrolled at the University of Ottawa, Ottawa, Canada in a master program with the Department of Communication.

*Age category at the time of enrollment:

- 22-24 25-29 30-34 35-39 40+

While age is not a criteria of eligibility for this study, the range of ages will provide more information about the participants that may be useful in helping to understand them.

Appendix C: Information Sheet and Consent Form

This form will be provided to the potential participants on official University of Ottawa letterhead.

Social Capital and Part-Time, Mature Students in a Master's Program

**Researcher: Patricia J. Barber, Master's candidate, Department of Communication,
University of Ottawa**

Phone: 613.791.2012

Please read this Information Sheet and Consent Form carefully and ask as many questions as you like before deciding whether to participate.

Introduction: You have been invited to participate in a research project entitled: *Social Capital and Part-Time, Mature Students in a Master's Program*. The purpose of this study is to understand the phenomenon of the graduate experience for part-time mature students in a Communication graduate program at the University of Ottawa, Ottawa, Canada. The study will involve you participating in an interview with a researcher at either the University of Ottawa, or at another convenient and appropriate agreed upon location with the researcher. Your participation will last at a minimum 45 minutes, and no more than 60 minutes. The total number of participants in this study is 6.

Procedure: If you agree to participate in the study the researcher will take at a minimum 45 minutes to interview you, and no more than 60 minutes. The researcher will record your conversation on an audiotape.

Risks and Discomforts of Participation: Participation in this study requires at a minimum 45 minutes, and no more than 60 minutes, of your time to complete an interview with the researcher. There are no known risks to participating in this study.

Benefits of Participation: You may not receive any direct benefit from your participation in this research. However, potentially you may find the reflective nature of the exercise personally interesting. Your participation in this study will allow the researcher to gain a better understanding of the experiences of part-time, mature students in a Communication graduate program, and the research may potentially inform changes that may enhance these experiences for future students.

Confidentiality: You will not be identifiable in publications or presentations, but you may be directly quoted from the interviews in publications or in presentations. Anonymity in publications and presentations will be preserved. Interview audio-tapes and transcripts will be appropriately safeguarded.

Data gathered during this research study will be conserved for 5 years after any publications that result from it.

Ethics: The Research Ethics Board (REB) of the University of Ottawa has approved this study. The REB considers the ethical aspects of all research projects involving human subjects at the University of Ottawa. If you wish, you may talk to the Research Ethics Board by calling 613-562-5800 Ext. 1787 or at ethics@uottawa.ca.

Participation: Participation in this research is completely voluntary. You are free to choose to participate or not to participate in this research study. If you agree to participate in this study, you may choose to withdraw your participation at any time. You may also refuse to answer any specific questions.

Consent to Participate in Research

I understand that I am being asked to participate in a research study to help gain a better understanding of the varsity football culture, ultimately informing a more accurate and relevant final video production.

I have read and understood this Information Sheet and Consent Form. All my questions at this time have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that there are two copies of the consent form, one of which is mine to keep.

I voluntarily agree to participate in this study.

Participant's Name

Participant's Signature

Date

Researcher's Signature
