

‘Inhabiting the Habitus’: Identity, Belonging, and Becoming in the Narratives of Mature Women

Returns at the University of Washington Tacoma

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**Abstract**

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This dissertation explores the stories of lived experience of mature women returners within the habitus of a single institution of higher education: The University of Washington Tacoma (UWT). This urban-serving university in Washington State was founded more than 30 years ago as an upper division branch campus designed to serve a place and time-bound, working adult population in need of a local institution to complete baccalaureate and graduate degrees. Women age 35 and over represent a growing segment of this population at UWT, as well as other institutions of higher education across the United States over the last several decades. Yet little research has considered their storied experiences as mature returners within the habitus of the university. Viewing this research as a move toward social justice and equitable opportunity, I gathered data from oral histories and campus archives, as well as through interviews and other

forms of narrative from eight mature women returners from a variety of backgrounds. Focusing on themes of belonging and becoming in their storied experiences, I sought to make visible both supports and obstacles to their successes as returning students. Employing an amalgamation of narrative inquiry and autoethnography as methodological tools of analysis and interpretation, I included my own experiences as a mature woman returner alongside those of my study participants. In this way, I (re)storied our jointly constructed experience into a new narrative representing a student population that is often overlooked within campus policies and practices. Incorporating an intrinsic case study of UWT that included an extensive analysis of policies, practices, documents, artifacts, oral histories, and interviews with current staff, faculty, and administrators, and relating this data to the stories of my focal participants, I examined the habitus of UWT from the inside. In this way, I was able to gain an understanding of how mature women returners constructed meaning and identity as UWT students through their experiences of belonging and becoming, even as I considered ways the university might better support them.

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## Acronyms

ACE – American Council for Education

BB – BB is the campus designation for a block of classrooms on the UWT campus

BIPOC – Black and Indigenous Persons of Color

EVCAA – Executive Vice-Chancellor of Academic Affairs (UWT)

GED – General Education Degree

HB – House Bill (Washington State)

HECB – Higher Education Coordinating Board

LGBTQIA – Lesbian Gay Bisexual Trans Queer Intersex and Asexual persons

NCES - National Center for Education Statistics

RN to BSN – a two-year nursing program for registered nurses (RN) who seek a Bachelor of Science degree (BSN)

SPSHEC – South Puget Sound Higher Education Council

TLC – Teaching and Learning Center

UK – United Kingdom

US – United States

UWB – University of Washington Bothell

UWT – University of Washington Tacoma

## Acknowledgements

It seems almost trite for a writer to say—despite the hours spent alone in a room, scouring books and articles for elusive facts, scribbling notes in their margins, or pecking at a keyboard—that they couldn't have accomplished their work without help. But it's true.

Oh. So. True.

For me and for this dissertation, I need to go back more than a dozen years to acknowledge all those who made this work possible. First, there were my professors at Tacoma Community College: Debbie Kinerk, whose English 101 course lit the fire of writing in me; Liz Fortenbery, who assigned that little 'ethnography of garbage' project that brought research to life; and Mary Fox, who not only fed my passion for editing, but taught me to teach through observation (and then gave me my first teaching job not too many years later). There are so many others whose names escape me now, but if I ever see you on the street or at the grocery store, I owe you a hug!

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supporting mature returners and helped me gain access to campus documents that appeared beyond reach during library closures during the COVID-19 pandemic; John Bolcer from the UW Seattle library who volunteered to scan hundreds of pages of UWT historical documents housed in the archives in Seattle, sending them to me through secure email links and enabling my project to proceed; advisers like Karin Dalesky, who was my first introduction to UW Tacoma and one of its strongest supporters, as well as a fount of information who helped me shape much of the history connected to this document; and Joe Lawless, Brain Anderson, and Alice Few, who came to my rescue when an important campus document disappeared from the internet about two weeks before my defense. And last, but most certainly *not* least, Beck Adelante, who acted as both proofreader and cheerleader in the final stages of editing this dissertation. As my own personal English major (and amazing *Access* assistant editor), you were a big-time sanity saver!

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—I treasure each one of you.
- ❖ All those who have taken this journey of belonging and becoming, before and beside me  
—I honor your courage in the hard moments and your joy in the good.
- ❖ And for those who have yet to take the plunge, to return—but want to (*oh*, how you want to!)  
—I encourage you to take the leap.
- ❖ It will be worth it, I promise!

## **Dedication**

*For my first storyteller, my mother*

*Helen Nickerson Braham*

*“We are born into a world of stories...much of who are and what we do originates  
in the tales passed down to us and the stories we take on as our own”*

*(Bochner, Ellis, & Tillman-Healy, 1997, p. 307)*

## Chapter One

### Each One a Story

Whether and where (or not) to attend college is often one of the first major life decisions young adults make. Regardless of why they might choose to go: to gain a first taste of independence, to train for a career, or simply because they aren't sure what else to do after high school, it is a monumental choice that will ultimately cost them time and money, even as they reap the sometimes-unanticipated rewards of learning. Yet, when a prospective college student is over the age of 35, there are aspects of that still-monumental decision that those who followed a more 'traditional' path might not need to consider: For example, can I uproot my family to attend my dream school on the other side of the country—or the world? Or should I stay closer to home and attend whatever school would allow me to continue my job more easily? How will I find the time to get my reading and research done, write three 15-page final papers, and plan group presentations—*every quarter*—while working full- or even part-time? How will I support myself and my family, pay my bills, and still be able to afford the cost of tuition and books? Can I manage to do all this and still help my kids with *their* homework, get the laundry done, make dinner, and attend family and/or community events? And perhaps the greatest concern of all: will I ever find a place to belong on a campus full of 18 to 22-year-olds?

These are all concerns I recognize—because they echo my own experience as a mature returner<sup>1</sup>. I returned to college at 52, hoping to finish the degree I had abandoned more than 30 years earlier. Like the majority of mature returners, I started at a local community college (Parks, Evans & Getch, 2013; Zhang, Lui & Hagedorn, 2013), because it was close to home and

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<sup>1</sup> I discuss my use of this term at length later in this chapter, but for now, I will say—in the absence of a unified, defined terminology for students who do not fit the 18-22 traditional image—this is the term I have chosen to use to describe the students my research is focused on: mature women returners, women age 35 and over who have returned to education after an extended time away.

somehow less terrifying than enrolling at a four-year university. While my first quarter back left me feeling alone in a classroom filled with much younger students, as time went on, relationships with my professors and shared experiences with other mature returners made my continuing transition easier. Over time, I also gained a sense of what Maslow (1962) called ‘belonging,<sup>2</sup>’ or the feeling that we are part of something larger than ourselves—a basic human motivation that Maslow claimed is superseded only by our need for physical and psychological well-being. I made a few friends, conquered algebra and chemistry, and found ways to get involved on campus. I became a Supplemental Instructor for an anthropology course, wrote articles for the student newspaper, joined a campus-based research journal as a student editor, and became an officer in the campus chapter of a national honors society.

But I also discovered that this move back into higher education created in me a sense of transitioning identity—a recognition that, in some ways, I was becoming someone different. Braidotti (2011) spoke of this as ‘becoming’—a growing awareness of new possibilities and new identities, things that are “always in relation and in process.” Yet, she claimed that becoming is more than just leaving behind the old—whether a location or an identity—but a re-imagining of ourselves as someone new (p. 37). Although, for me, this becoming was not always comfortable, my return to college helped me recognize myself in new ways and imagine things I’d never thought possible. This ability to reimagine myself brought me to the University of Washington Tacoma (UWT) to finish a BA in literature, an MA in interdisciplinary studies—and today, a little more than a dozen years after I began this journey, I have discovered a new niche in a career I never anticipated—working in the UWT writing center as a staff writing specialist—and am crossing the finish line of a final degree.

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<sup>2</sup> I discuss the concepts of both belonging and becoming at greater length later in this chapter.

Throughout this journey, I have met many women who, like me, were well past ‘traditional’ college age but returned to higher education to fulfill their dreams. Many of them had also left college behind years before, taking time out to raise families, run businesses, or pursue careers. Although we all had our ‘return’ in common, our backgrounds were sometimes wildly different. Our early educational experiences were different. Our reasons for returning and goals after college were different. Yet despite those differences, we had each taken the remarkably brave step to enter an educational experience not designed for people like us and one that too-rarely considers the unique needs of mature returners.

Talking with other mature women returners about their experiences in returning to higher education is what led me to this project. My research has focused on narratives—both written and spoken—collected from eight mature women returners, age 35 and over, who are current students or alumni of UWT. These narratives afforded me the opportunity to observe the experiences of mature women returners on this one particular campus, to inquire into what it means to become a student again at an age when most of their peers are well-settled into careers or even looking ahead to retirement. This idea of beginning anew and weaving a new identity into the old pervades many of their stories—as well as my own—even as their stories locate them within the habitus of UWT, a place they have each—on some level—come to call home.

Through the rest of this chapter, I consider the long road leading to my return to college, the intention and relevance of this study, as well as the questions that guided it. I also introduce the site of this study—the University of Washington Tacoma (UWT)—and then relate the stories behind my own story: those of my parents as mature returners. I address my own subjectivities as a researcher, the challenges of research during a global pandemic, and introduce the theoretical frame that supports my study. Next, I consider some of the existing literature surrounding mature

returners, including their representation in colleges and universities around the world, some of the risks and barriers to their success, and consider some of the ways mature women returners construct a new student identity as they re-enter higher education. Finally, I draw conclusions about the existing literature on mature returners and the place of my study within it, before turning my attention toward the topics covered in the remaining chapters of this dissertation.

### **A Backward Glance**

In both the research and writing of this dissertation, I began with an idea discussed by Bakhtin (1981, 1986): that every utterance is intricately linked to both those which came before and those anticipated to follow. I believe that behind every story is *another* story—a story that began with someone else and somehow continues through the stories of others. My story is no different.

Like many high school graduates in June 1974, I started college that same fall, moving to a university halfway across the country from my California home. But at the great age of seventeen, I—who had never really been away from home before—was overcome by homesickness and dropped out before the end of the first semester. Once back home, I enrolled in the local junior college, taking classes by day, and working nights in a nearby retirement home, until my chaotic schedule led to too much missed sleep, too many missed classes, and not enough time to get my homework done. Less than a year later, I dropped out once more after completing just a few classes. Although I planned to continue my education, as often happens, life intervened: I met and married my husband, moved from California to Washington State, and spent the next few decades raising our two sons and starting a career as a decorative artist. I never really let go of the idea of returning to college, but the more time passed, the less I thought

it would ever be possible. Besides, I was busy and happy; what would be the point of going back?

Yet, once again, life intervened. In 2008, real estate bubbles burst, and a global recession hit—hard. When the economic dust of those events had begun to clear, my 20-year career was dead. I was left with no income and worst of all, nothing to do. And for someone who really likes to be busy, that was hard. Really hard. I spent almost a year binging Netflix, reading some great books, cleaning closets, and trying to figure out what to do next when my youngest son (then 27) uttered these life-changing words:

“You should go back to school!”

A web search, a few phone calls, a campus visit, and some major soul-searching followed—and by June of 2009, I had made the decision that ultimately led me to where I stand today. Now, in this truncated version of events, it might seem that obstacles I might face as a mature student never crossed my mind—but that wouldn't be true. I was both exhilarated and terrified by what lay ahead of me. Exhilarated, because returning to college represented a new challenge, as well as the chance to finish something I had left unfinished so long before. I have always loved digging for information and learning new things, so the thought of spending several years of my life doing just that was...really exciting. But I was also terrified at the thought of entering a college classroom, interacting daily with students who were younger than my own children, who knew what education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century was like, and who were prepared for college in ways I was not. What I was considering was *way* outside my comfort zone.

I couldn't help but wonder, after all my years away from school, was I even capable of doing college-level work? And who would I become if I did this?

These questions inspired not only this project but an earlier pilot project. As part of my work in the UWT writing center, where I am employed as Personal and Public Writing Specialist, I began a project—in early 2017—considering how mature returners performed identity through the use of literary archetypes in writing literacy narratives. This project was not focused exclusively on mature women but included any student who had returned to college after at least ten years away from education, including mature returners of any gender from several other campuses, not just UWT. As a part of that original pilot, I collected data for more than a year. However, by the time I was ready to roll the pilot into my dissertation project, two things had happened: first, I had lost contact with all but one of my original participants; and second, I realized that I was more interested in examining participants' stories of identity construction than I was in their use of literary tropes. At that point, I decided a refocus of the project was in order.

### **Intention of this Study**

Like the earlier pilot project, my study is grounded by my own experience as a returning UWT student and inspired by stories of the experiences of others like me. This current study, however, has been focused on the stories of lived experience of mature women returners age 35 and over at the University of Washington Tacoma. My intention has been to discover what their stories can tell us about the challenges these women faced in returning to higher education. Of equal significance, I sought to examine how these women theorized their educational and social experiences in narrative as they constructed a new student identity on the UWT campus. In the spaces of higher education, mature returners inhabit bodies and lived experiences that are easily

marked as different, even as they seek to fit into the institutional habitus<sup>3</sup> of the university. With mature returners increasingly represented on college and university campuses across the nation, this kind of information is vital to understanding how to better support all mature returners. Yet within this study, I focused specifically on mature women returners who matriculated at UWT.

### *Addressing my Questions*

In my exploration of the stories of lived experience of mature women returners at UWT, the following questions guided my research:

- Beginning with the idea that telling a story is theorizing experience, how do mature women returners use stories of belonging and becoming to theorize meaning from their experiences and (re)construct their identities as students?
- What can we learn from their stories about the obstacles mature women face and the kinds of support systems they need to gain a sense of belonging at UWT?
- What can we learn about how the institutional *habitus* of UWT “mark[s] and read[s]” mature women returners (Inoue, 2016, p. 96) and how can this understanding help to discover ways to better meet their unique needs, and thus enable them to become more successful students?

### **Significance of this Study**

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2020), in the fall of 2018, individuals aged 25 and over made up more than 40% of all U.S. undergraduates (see also

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<sup>3</sup> My exploration of institutional habitus is drawn from Bourdieu’s (2012; originally published in 1974) concept of *habitus*, defined as “a system of implicit and deeply interiorized values...” (p. 32) and byrd’s (2018) extension of this concept to the systems of higher education. I discuss this concept at length in chapter three.

Jacobs & Hundley, 2010 for a broader discussion of the increase of mature college returners since the 1970s). Yet, ‘college-age’ is still colloquially understood to mean individuals who are 18–22 years old and enrolled in college right out of high school (Givens, 2009). With this language—and the mindset behind it—the student experiences of mature women returners are made largely invisible to the general public and university administrators alike. With women 35 and over representing the largest percentage of mature returners enrolled in institutions of higher education (Hagedorn, 2014; Grabowski, Rush, Ragen, & Watkins-Lewis, 2016; NCES, 2020)—a trend that is projected to continue through the end of the decade (NCES, 2020)—the lack of recognition of this group by campus programs and policies often leads to inequitable practices that can leave mature women returners with a sense that they do not belong.

Yet, even when supportive policies and practices are extended toward other marginalized groups in the university, such as first-generation students, black and indigenous persons of color (BIPOC), LGBTQIA, veterans, and those who are differently-abled, mature returners are rarely thought of—even by scholars and researchers. For example, Seidman’s (2005) foundational text on student retention offers one short paragraph on “Nontraditional Student Attrition” (p. 65) in a book that spans 350 pages. His takeaway? There are many reasons that nontraditional returners leave college. Although he claimed a wide range of explanations for leaving across sub-groups that include older returners, ethnic minorities, and women, Seidman offered no recognition of barriers or suggestions for overcoming their lack of retention—and other than that one paragraph, included no further mention of them at all.

Malm and Weber (2018a, 2018b), however, did speak of the importance of expanding research into matters that affect mature returners as critical to the future and well-being of U.S. universities, even as it is vital to the returners themselves. The authors noted that in order to help

mature returners overcome their higher risk of stopping/dropping out, even as many universities are actively encouraging their enrollment, institutions of higher education must become more intentional about meeting these returners' unique needs and helping them avoid feelings of social and academic disconnect (see also Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011). This sense of disconnect from the life of the university, according to Tinto (2000), is the most significant predictor of a lack of student persistence (see also Harper & Quaye, 2014).

### **Site of the Study**

In my staff position in the UWT writing center, I regularly encounter mature women returners who share with me their experiences of returning to college: (re)discovering a love of learning but also confronting uncertainty over the unwritten 'rules' of higher education. Amidst this confusion, they too-often struggle to balance employment, family responsibilities, and coursework, while seeking a sense of belonging on campus. Because they know of my experiences as a mature returner, I believe they often see me as an ally, someone who understands what they are going through as they navigate the unfamiliar waters of higher education. Rarely does a week go by without my hearing stories of both the joys *and* frustrations they face in reaching for a degree—and the new student identity they are constructing along with it.

Because of my familiarity with this campus—as a student, an alumnus, and a staff member who works closely with many mature women returners—I chose to focus this study on UWT—a self-described *urban-serving university*,<sup>4</sup> situated in the South Puget Sound region of

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<sup>4</sup> UWT describes itself as an urban-serving university, the definition of which varies across the research, but most often includes a diverse student body that is more likely to be considered non-traditional: older and/or first-generation college students, married or single heads-of-households, caregivers, and those who are employed at least

Washington State. In an intrinsic case study, I examine its history, mission, and identity as an urban-serving university through campus documents, oral histories, and interviews with current administrators, staff, and faculty. Inspired by Inoue’s (2016) discussion of habitus as “mark[ing] and read[ing]” returners (p. 96), I also focus on its institutional habitus. Although I, by no means, perform a comprehensive study of the university as an institution, because UWT itself is a major player within this study, I dedicate the entirety of chapter three to observing the habitus of the university.

### **My Research (Hi)story**

As I mentioned earlier, I believe that every story was inspired by one that precedes it. My experience as a mature returner, and hence my position as researcher in this study, did not begin when I returned to college. Its genesis can be discovered some 50 years earlier on the campus of San Jose State College (now, University) when I was about two years old. My father, a Korean War Era veteran, had his college education interrupted at the start of his senior year—first by marrying my mother, then by serving in the Air Force on the other side of the country from his California home. After leaving the service at the age of 26, thanks to the GI Bill, student loans, and my mom’s job, he was able to return to college to complete his baccalaureate degree. For two years, my family lived in married student housing on campus, where I played on the swings with my little sister while my dad studied on a nearby bench. I was four years old when he

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part time—bearing very little resemblance to the ‘traditional’ college student image of 18-22 year olds right out of high school (Dietz & Triponey, 1997; Elliott, 1994; Martin & Samels, 2019). With the demographics of UWT noting that 55% of its total student population is first-generation and its minority-majority ethnic makeup, UWT is definitely a ‘nontraditional’ university (UW Tacoma Transfer Guidebook, 2019, inside front cover).

graduated, finally becoming the elementary school music teacher he had long planned to become.

However, it was my mother who actually set the stage for my delayed re-entry. Although still unusual in the early 1960s, her job supported our family—which meant leaving my sister and me in the care of a neighbor while she was at work and my father in class. One of my earliest memories is visiting the downtown phone company offices where she worked. I was awestruck by the massive switchboard holding thousands of plugs and cables that allowed voices to be heard almost anywhere in the world simply by moving the plugs around the board. To a four-year-old, it was magical! Even after my father graduated, my mother continued to work at least part-time: as a substitute teacher and an occupational therapist in a state mental hospital.

Though she always had a job, my mother was also a perpetual student, taking classes one at a time. While my sister and I went off to summer school with my dad, she attended classes on campus at my dad's alma mater. In the days before online classes, she took correspondence courses during the school year—the two of us sitting side-by-side at the kitchen table, doing our homework. I spent summer afternoons during my middle school years skimming her psychology texts and reading books like *Lord of the Flies* and *Animal Farm* from her literature classes. It seemed my mother was always writing papers—fingers flying across the typewriter keys—and she appeared to love it, even though it took over many of the hours she might have used for other things. When I was 13, she began to teach full-time<sup>5</sup>—spending her evenings correcting her students' homework before working on her own. Finally, at the age of 56, she completed a Bachelor of Science degree in psychology—but she wasn't finished yet. Nine years later, she

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<sup>5</sup> Thanks to a California law that allowed teachers in private schools to teach with the “equivalent” of a degree, my mother taught 3<sup>rd</sup> grade for almost 20 years before she finally completed her degree.

earned a master's degree, taking correspondence courses while teaching full time—despite spending some of those years undergoing chemotherapy.

When I made the decision to return to finish my own degree, my mom was one of my biggest cheerleaders. Although she succumbed to cancer toward the end of my first year back in school, she was—and continues to be—one of my greatest inspirations to always finish what I start, no matter how long it takes or what obstacles might crop up—even if one of those obstacles is my age.

My identity as a mature woman returner and my position as a researcher is grounded in this history. Yet there is more to my position than simply my family history and personal experience of returning to college. My staff position in the campus writing center is what made possible my association with each of the women who took part in this study. Although I have come to claim some level of friendship with each of them—friendships that have grown over time—those relationships are still rooted in our initial professional associations. Because of the manner of our initial introduction, each participant was always aware of my job. It would be naïve of me to claim that my privileged position as university staff and an older white woman, as well as the researcher in this project, had no effect on either my research questions or methods, or my participants' responses within my study. There were times during our conversations when I was deeply aware of that privilege. The power disparities between my participants and I, no matter my view of our relationships as 'friendly,' were never going to vanish completely. I was the person with the greatest authority in our relationships. Still, I attempted to interact with each participant with transparency: offering my own stories of challenging experiences as a way to help them feel heard and understood, while at the same time actively acknowledging the differences in our experiences.

### *Addressing Researcher Subjectivity*

In writing this dissertation, I begin with an acknowledgment of the ways that I constructed my own identity within it. With subjectivity referring to the “experience[s], moments, structures, conditions, and processes” by which persons define themselves, I am compelled to acknowledge my position as a subject in the research, employing my (hi)story to answer the question “who am I?” before I move on to recognize the subjectivities of my study participants (Johanssen, 2020, “Subjectivity”). In this work, I identify with Bruner’s (2002) claim that “stories are always told from a particular perspective” (p. 23), meaning that the stories I have told of my life experiences were expressed by an identity formed within the place and time I speak from today. Therefore, these experiences may be evaluated differently each time I tell them, depending on the context, the audience, and in the service of meaning and identity in the telling moment (see also Bruner, 1990; Chase, 2008). In acknowledging the truth of this statement, I recognize that my own subjectivity and life experience were the lenses through which I conducted this study. The questions I asked, the specific answers from participants that drew me to listen more closely, the choices I made about which stories to (re)tell in the writing—and which to pass over—all were shaped by my own lived experience. As Geertz (1988) noted, all texts are personal in the end—and this one is no exception. My experiences as a mature returner, along with the stories of experience I heard from other mature returners, led me directly to this research. And finally, it was my authority as researcher that allowed me to choose to leave space for my own voice, even as I attended to the voices of my participants.

Inspired by DeVault’s (1999) claim that “researchers’ own experiences as women serve as resources for listening and personal connections” (p. 71), my work rests on the premise that it is not only viable but valuable to use my experience to inform my research. Mizzi (2010) noted

that the connections made between “the personal self [and] the social context” add to the “representational richness and reflexivity of qualitative research” (p.1). By positioning my own storied experiences in higher education alongside those of my participants in the social context we share, I have collaborated with them as we discovered mutual meanings, recognizing and enriching the stories each one called out from the other.

Within this study, I have listened closely and intentionally to each individual’s stories of experience, recognizing the messiness of identity (see Baker and Irwin, 2021; Weedon, 2004). I fully recognize that my lived experience and identity as a middle-aged white woman—a married mother and grandmother with a family background in education, a graduate degree, and a professional position within the university—is intricately woven into the methods by which I conducted this study and interpreted its data. I also acknowledge I have not addressed every story or topic shared with me, my subjectivities no doubt visible through those on which I have chosen to focus. Within the limited space of this dissertation—and the constraints set by my own research questions—I selected those stories that seemed most salient to my purposes or resonated across the individual narratives. This means that many worthy stories were overlooked. Another researcher might view the same narratives differently, selecting different stories or different themes as they examined them from a different social location or within a different time or space. I might have even chosen differently at another time or with a different purpose in mind. And, in considering the times within which my research has taken place, I move next to explain its larger context.

### **Setting the Stage**

## Research During a Global Pandemic

Beginning with Connelly and Clandinin's (1999) assertion that knowledge is always grounded in context (see also Davies, 2019; Jovchelovitch, 2019), my contention is that to know *what* we know and *how* we know it, we must examine the context within which that knowledge was birthed. In this case, I must acknowledge the role that the global COVID-19 pandemic came to play within my research. Because of the early 2020 outbreak and its alternating shutdowns, social distancing mandates, and work from home orders, the (still ongoing) pandemic became an actor within both the research process and writing of this dissertation.

The World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic on March 11, 2020 (Cucinotta & Vanelli, March 19, 2020), but on March 6<sup>th</sup>, 2020, my UWT colleagues and I—along with many others in the State of Washington, across the nation and around the world—were sent home for what we—or at least, *I*—thought would be just a few weeks. Those few weeks spilled over into spring quarter 2020—which became summer and then fall, rolling into 2021 through winter, spring, and then summer quarters. Although I returned to my campus office in September 2021 as UWT returned to on-campus operations, the pandemic has not yet ended, and its impacts continue. By the end of 2021, tens of millions have been sickened and more than three quarters of a million people had died from COVID-19 in the United States alone. The numbers of those afflicted around the world are almost unimaginable.

Because COVID-19 has loomed so large over humanity for two years—and *counting*—it is impossible to discuss my research without at least recognizing the pandemic and its impact. For a year and a half, I worked with students and colleagues through a computer monitor—and conducted my research the same way. This virus has, in one way or another, affected every conversation I have held since late February 2020. It invaded discussions with colleagues and the

dialogues within each interview, whether with study participants or the UWT faculty, staff, or administrators I spoke with. Its presence prefaced every Zoom© meeting with my adviser, as well as those with my students in the writing center. The virus has altered the environment within which each of us lives and works and even impacted relationships with family and friends. It has also had an enormous influence on the way my study was accomplished—from interviews to accessing library books to archival research—something I explain in greater detail in chapter two. For now, however, it is enough to simply introduce the COVID-19 pandemic as a supplementary player in the narrative I have crafted within this study.

### **‘Assembling’ a Frame**

In this study shaped by the voices of others, I employed a primarily feminist frame that encompasses aspects of Bakhtin’s dialogism, feminist standpoint theory, as well as intersectionality theory. Yet moving beyond the idea of a framework, I was inspired by Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) concept of ‘assemblage’ to link the theories I employed within my study. Deleuze and Guattari describe an assemblage<sup>6</sup> as an intersection of identity—a becoming of sorts. This becoming represents not just one thing in one place or time, but an ever-shifting multiplicity of moments: the past of memory, the ephemeral flash of the present, and the future of imagination, all working together to construct identity. The three theories I discuss in this section act together as an assemblage of sorts—or in Deleuze and Guattari’s original French, an *agencement*—an act of “compositional unity” (Phillips, 2006, p. 109) to support my study.

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<sup>1</sup> Here I use Phillips’ (2006) reading of Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) use of the French *agencement*, most often translated in English as assemblage. Phillips sees the original French as carrying a different connotation, one of relations of patterns, of fitting and arrangement (as in the moving parts of a machine) that “corresponds to the notions of event, becoming and sense,” as opposed to the image of a collage—from the English and French *assemblage* used in art theory—of diverse and sometimes unrelated objects (p. 108-9).

Dialogism, with its emphasis on the ongoing reciprocity of the speech act blends neatly with the aspect of feminist standpoint theory that emphasizes “the process of dialogue, analysis, and reflexivity” within a contextualized knowledge production (Naples, 2007, p. 586). McKinzie and Roberts’ (2019) focus on the intersectionality of social identities acting in dialogue with each other to generate an individual’s identity *in context* is also cleanly woven into this composition. In the following subsections, I will examine each of these theories at greater length and explain how I use them in this study

### ***Bakhtin’s Dialogism***

I begin assembling this *agencement* with Bakhtin’s theory of dialogism and its claim of ideological becoming. Bakhtin declared that language is never independent nor solitary; it is crowded with the intents and voices of others—an idea succinctly expressed by Faigley (1986) in his paraphrase of Bakhtin: “words carry with them places where they have been” (p. 535). Hamston (2006) described Bakhtin’s theory as one that follows “threads of discourses in the past” as they are caught up in the present (p. 57), threads that run through the intersections of identity, fitting together the parts into a dialogue that extends into the past even as it reaches toward the future. Hamston further defined these discourses as “social standpoints or voices [which] circulate across time and space, some of which become internalized in an individual’s consciousness” (p. 57). This ongoing dialogue, one that never truly belongs to anyone—mediated as it is by the voices of others—becomes for each of us an internalized discourse that becomes part of our inner dialogue, a concept that Bakhtin (1981) called addressivity. Hsu (2014) described addressivity as the notion that speech is “always addressed to someone and anticipates an answer.” It acknowledges and embraces a diversity of voices, “possess[ing] not

one but two consciousnesses: Self and Other” (p. 65). Speakers respond to the words and ideas of others (just as I am responding to the ideas of those who have come before me throughout this text), “appropriating [their] voices, engaging with [their] theoretical ideas...and developing a new set of ‘internally persuasive voices’” in the process (Delp, 2004, p. 205), even as I am doing now.

Bakhtin’s (1986) assertion that every word we speak is either anticipatory or reactive to words expected or spoken has focused my observations of the way that stories develop in dialogue. In the stories shared by the women in this study, I have heard not only their voices, but the voices of others—sometimes almost literally—as they responded in story to the speech of others or employed reported speech that gave me the ‘exact’ words of one not present (or at least, exactly as they were *recounted*). These other voices included partners, children, parents, or siblings—as well as bosses, faculty, advisers, or staff. Such voices advanced the plotlines of stories participants shared with me, sometimes seeming to speak aspects of the teller’s identity that they might have otherwise been reluctant to share.

In listening in on these stories, I have experienced the veracity of Maftei’s (2013) assertion that the voices of others help us define ourselves in a variety of ways—either against what others say about us or in agreement with them (see also Gornick, 2008). These ‘others’ are enmeshed in our stories, just as we are entangled in theirs—as are events or experiences outside those told in the moment. Just as every novel contains a backstory (or several) that unwinds with the plot, the stories we tell do not begin in a single moment. They begin long before, not just in our own remembered moments, but in the moments of others. As I mentioned earlier, my own story of returning to college begins in the stories of my parents—which arose within the stories of their own families, moving ever back through time. Yet, even as my story extends into the

past, it also moves forward into the future. It does not end with me but branches out through my own family,<sup>7</sup> and in some ways—both large and small—through the lives (and stories) of every person I have or ever will meet. It has already moved forward again through my engagement with the women who took part in this study.

It is my contention that listening to the stories of these mature women returners can bring a greater understanding of how they view their experiences of returning to higher education. Yet at the same time, I also believe their stories will continue to move forward, calling for a response from the university to once again expand its vision to more effectively support this population. For these reasons and others, this study focuses on two things: first, observing the ways that mature women posit their identity through storying their experiences of returning to higher education. We see this theorizing primarily as they examine themes of belonging and becoming<sup>8</sup> in their stories. Second, through their stories—and the narratives shared by others on campus—I conduct an examination of the institutional habitus of the University of Washington Tacoma and its effect on the construction of a new student identity among these same women. However, I am interested in more than just the theoretical—I am eager for practical answers for these students. In examining the content of their stories and their constructions of identity and meaning—as well as the comments of faculty, staff, and administrators who work with them—I seek to understand how UWT can better support them and others like them in the future.

### *Feminist Standpoint Theory*

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<sup>7</sup> After my own return to college, my oldest son—then, in his 30s and a father of two—returned to finish his bachelor's degree three months before I did. Our family education story goes on.

<sup>8</sup> I discuss the concepts of belonging and becoming at length later in this chapter.

The second theory I have added to my *agencement* is feminist standpoint theory. According to Cabrera, Belloso, and Prieto (2019) feminist standpoint theory is grounded in “the assumption that the world is traditionally represented from the perspective of a determined social location” (p. 309). This viewpoint acknowledges the relationship between knowledge and power, particularly the struggle over who is allowed to claim what counts as knowledge based on the social location of the knower. Haraway (1988) claimed that this battle over knowledge is as much “over *how* to see” the world, as it is who is doing the seeing (p. 587). Yet through the use of feminist theories and methods, individuals who have too-long been marginalized and invisible have claimed the right to construct knowledge based on their own points of view, even as they identify the oppressions and privileges that exist within their lived experience.

Standpoint theory rose within early feminist considerations of the “embodied experiences” of women as “historically shared [and] group-based,” viewed through normatively gendered and socially-constructed experiences (Collins, 1997, p. 375). This observation, at its heart, was based on the supposition that specific experiences might be shared by all women within certain contexts—a viewpoint that many, particularly women of color, found to be problematic. Over time, however, this view that the experiences of women are uniquely shared, even across race, ethnicity, class, nation, and age has shifted. According to Ramazanoğlu and Holland (2007), a feminist standpoint is no longer understood as a view “from a fixed social place, or from a female identity, or from a woman’s body,” but is, instead, “grounded in experience of gender subordination and constituted as feminist theory.” A standpoint, they noted, is not singular but one among many possible standpoints. It is a “relational concept” that acknowledges the struggle from which knowledge arises (p. 69). Naples (2007) added that standpoint theory has broadened over time into a group of varied theories found across multiple

disciplines. Yet, despite their variety, these ‘standpoint theories’ are all based on recognizing the value of experience, with an epistemology that clarifies the ways that power shapes what is accepted as knowledge, as well as how that power shapes women’s lives. Hartsock (1998) and Collins (1990) also asserted a distinction between feminist standpoints and a ‘woman’s standpoint,’ as they located standpoints not in the individual but in community contexts that attend to the subtleties of “race, class, and gender” (Naples, 2007, p. 581; see also Hawkesworth, 2006). Naples (2007) noted the emphasis of feminist standpoint theories on “dialogue, analysis, and reflexivity” as characteristics of the process of knowledge production (p. 586). Knowledge is situated in community, she claimed, and developed collectively in dialogue. Haraway (1988) also spoke of the situatedness of individual knowledge—the place(s) from which we view the world and the subjects we become in the viewing—as rising from multiple positions, each with a claim on knowledge.

This idea of the situatedness of knowledge is one that I took to heart in examining the stories of my focal participants. Although we all had the similar experience of returning to higher education as adults, for many of us the similarities ended there. We may have arrived at the same campus threshold, but the paths that led us there and the skills and tools we carried in hopes of success, were not the same. Keeping an eye out to understand the individual standpoints that recognized our experiences as different while acknowledging the value of the unique knowledge of each individual—these were the goals I kept at the forefront of my research.

In planning this study focused on the experiences of mature women whose lives are situated in Western culture with its closely held gender norms and expectations, I was particularly drawn by Stoetzler and Yuval-Davis’ (2002) view of the situatedness of both knowledge and knower in feminist standpoint theory, especially based in what they described as

the “dialogic relationship” among differently situated subjects (p. 315). However, in considering gender as but *one* aspect of the embodied knowledge of my participants, even an array of standpoint theories are not broad enough to fully examine the construction of identity among my various participants. Taking an intersectional approach to interpreting their stories is vital to understanding the nuance of their lived experiences.

### ***Intersectionality***

In adding intersectionality as the third component of my theoretical *agencement*, I began with Crenshaw’s (1991) initial explanation of intersectionality as a traffic event. She described this event as one in which cars were depicted as “coming and going in all four directions,” focusing on the shifts in identity that happen with changes in context as an individual vehicle moves through space (p. 149). Puar (2012) also considered Crenshaw’s example, viewing the intersection as a “process [of] identification...an encounter, an event,” emphasizing the movement through space and time. Clarifying her view of intersectional identities as “multicausal, multidirectional, liminal,” Puar described it as a movement that leaves traces that are not “always self-evident” (p. 59) unless a researcher closely examines the relationships and patterns within the identity space.

Today, after more than 30 years of scholarly consideration, however, there seems little agreement on exactly what intersectionality *is*. It has alternately been described as a field of study (Cho, Crenshaw, & McCall, 2013), a theory (Levine-Rasky, 2011; Walby, Armstrong, & Strid, 2012), a method (MacKinnon, 2013), and a practice (Choo & Ferree, 2010). Cho *et al.* (2013) called it both a “theoretical and methodological paradigm” and a “practical intervention” (p. 785). Hawkesworth (2006) defined it as an “analytical tool,” while Collins and Bilge (2016)

called it an *assortment* of tools for examining oppressions more fully than through any one of the patterns of identity structured around including race, ethnicity, gender, and age (see also Collins, 1990). Thornton Dill, McLaughlin, and Nieves (2007) similarly described intersectionality's capacity for identifying "systems of ideological, political, and economic power," particularly as they are influenced by "historical patterns of race, class, gender, sexuality, nation, ethnicity, and age..." (p. 629). Whatever its definition, intersectionality recognizes the distinctiveness of each person's experience even as it examines the inequalities and power imbalances that surround them. By focusing on social location and situation, an intersectional approach makes space for an examination of experiences and oppressions more fully than through any single variable, whether gender, race, or class, by acknowledging that no one's intersections of identity and experience are the same (see Collins & Bilge, 2016; Crenshaw, 1991; Hekmen, 1997).

McKinzie and Richards (2019) took a wider view of intersectionality, looking beyond the individual to observe the ways that institutions are "creating advantages and disadvantages for different groups of people" through the systems of power in which they are entrenched (p. 3; see also Crenshaw, 1991; Hill Collins, 2009). Their focus draws connections with standpoint theory—particularly the idea of starting from the specific viewpoint of those who are marginalized because of some aspect of their identity. Discussing the intent of intersectionality to expose the invisible structures of power within an institution, McKinzie and Roberts' (2019) claim that "race, class, and gender do not mean the same things at all times and in all places" (p. 8) serving as a reminder that context *always* matters. Thornton Dill *et al.* (2007) concurred, stating that systems "must be understood within [their] own context" (p. 631). Responding to this recognition, I came to view McKinzie and Richards' (2019) concept of "context-driven intersectionality" (p. 6) as the final piece of the *agencement* of my study as it considered the

historical and political context of my site, as well as the viewpoints of all individuals involved—the eight focal participants, as well as the faculty, staff, and administrators I interviewed. Taking a context-based view of intersectionality creates space for analysis and theorizing from the bottom up—making meaning within the contexts that the individuals involved in my study inhabit: the institutional structures of UWT.

Although my study participants are all mature women who have returned to college after an extended time away from the classroom—they are not a monolithic group. These women come from a variety of linguistic, class, racial, familial, and social backgrounds<sup>9</sup>. In some cases, their gender and return to school appear to be their only commonalities. With their various backgrounds and social identities in mind, I have incorporated Ralston’s (1996) view of extending the range of voices<sup>10</sup> in my study to include those not often heard from. In this study focused on women within a particular age group not often considered in the policies and structures of higher education, it was essential that I listen closely to their voices to address the power imbalances that intersectionality theory addresses, not only as part of their future as returners, but also within the specific institution I examine.

### **Mature Women Returners**

In this next section, I examine some of the existing literature concerning mature returners in general and mature women in particular. Although a large swath of the existing research on adult students is broadly focused on literacy education for older adults who never finished

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<sup>9</sup> See chapter two for an in-depth introduction to each of my study participants.

<sup>10</sup> I dislike the connotations of a researcher “giving a voice” to participants—as if, without the researcher, they could not speak at all. My participants had voices before they spoke with me and will continue to speak for themselves long after I depart the conversation. I view my study more as a microphone that can enable their voices to be more widely heard through the spaces we all inhabit. What my participants have given *me* is the opportunity to listen and interpret their stories and to become part of an ongoing dialogue.

secondary school, a significant proportion of what remains examines this population within the structures of higher education in the British Commonwealth countries. This research, set in what numerous researchers described as *post-1992 widening participation* efforts, is focused on inclusion of older-than-typical and other non-traditional students into higher education, particularly those of lower socioeconomic status (see Bowl, 2003; Burke, 2012; Reay, 2006, 2017; Reay, Ball, & David, 2002; Reay, David, & Ball, 2001; Thomas, 2015; Wainwright, Chappell, & McHugh, 2019). Many of these individuals had formerly been kept out of higher education due to leaving secondary school before high school graduation or an elitist perspective among university administration directed toward students without a higher education background. Yet these new widening participation policies began to open spaces for them in institutions that had formerly been inaccessible. Although these U.K. researchers worked within a different educational and social context than those who research mature students in the United States, their data is the most comprehensive available<sup>11</sup>. However, because it also incorporates a variety of definitions for ‘adult’ or ‘mature’ returners, it does require a bit of unpacking to be useful. Thus, to avoid confusion from a mixture of terms, I will use the term ‘mature’ in discussing the literature concerned with these returners, unless it confounds the reader’s understanding to do so.

A number of researchers have found that mature returners make up the largest minority group on campuses across the nation and around the world: Malm and Weber (2018a) claimed that students aged 25 and older made up more than 40% of all undergraduates in the United

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<sup>11</sup> Simply by removing “United States” from the search term “mature students” in the UWT WorldCat, the number of books and articles more than doubled. Searching for “mature women students” dropped the original total to less than 26% of the number of texts concerning all mature students world-wide. Although not all of the articles/books discovered in each search were related to the actual subject, this drop in numbers is clear evidence of the lower interest among researchers regarding mature women students in the United States.

States, calling such students the “New Majority” (p. 3). Wyatt (2011) asserted these students totaled more than 43% of all college students, calling those aged 25 and up one of “two primary groups<sup>12</sup>” on campuses nationwide (p.10); Malm and Weber (2018b) took those numbers a bit farther, claiming that only 32% of all undergraduates could be classified as ‘traditional’ students: matriculating immediately following high school, attending classes full-time, living on campus, and financially dependent on their parents.

Yet, with college students conventionally identified by age and relation to high school graduation—18 to 22-year-olds who matriculate directly after high school—Malm and Weber (2018a, 2018b) stated that, historically, ‘nontraditional’ returners were defined as those who were simply *older* than average. Categorizing mature students by age alone is complicated, however. Definitions are inconsistent across existing literature, contributing to confusion about just who mature students are. Compton, Cox and Lanaan (2006) labeled those over the age of 25 as adult students, even as they acknowledged that 21-year-olds are also adults; Gross and Clark (2018) agreed with this assessment, while several Australian researchers characterized the age group between 21 and 35 as mature students (see Christiansen & Evamy, 2011; Heagney & Benson, 2017). Acknowledging the difficulties inherent in the term ‘mature,’ Hagedorn (2014) characterized older-than-traditional returners into three categories: “young matures,” if age 21-30; “prime timers,” when between the ages of 31 and 45”; or “last chancers,” if over 45 (p. 309). O’Shea and Stone (2011) used the term “mature-age” to describe students older than the norm, but otherwise left the term virtually undefined (see also McKenzie & Gow, 2004). Reay, Ball, and David (2002), in describing the growth in numbers of ‘mature’ students through the 1990s and considered them according to their percentage in the university population: 15.7% of all

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<sup>12</sup> Wyatt (2011) described the other group as the “traditional College student, aged 18-24” (p. 10).

first-time enrollments in British universities in 1994-95 were age 25 and over. They also noted that 6.7% of those students were aged 25-30, and 9% were 30 and over. However, the researchers' primary focus was the social class of participants rather than where they fell on an age continuum. Yet with vast social and personal differences between 25-year-old and 45-year-old returners, for example, this lack of a common definition makes assessing the literature surrounding mature returners more challenging than it needs to be. By delineating the ages of my study participants as those age 35 and older and naming them mature returners, I have been better able to observe some of the characteristics these mature women returners share in common, as well as those which distinguish them from each other.

Although older-than-average students have long had some presence in higher education in the United States, the population of mature returners on college campuses across the nation (and around the globe) increased steadily after the introduction of the G.I. Bill after World War II. Their numbers have grown most rapidly during times of economic recession as workers return to higher education to seek new career opportunities or to renew job skills. Barrow and Davis (2012) claimed that, between 2007 and 2010, the early years of the Great Recession, rates of college enrollment grew approximately 12%, compared to 2.5% growth in the previous three years (p. 123). Although data is only available through 2019, this growth can be seen in National Center for Education Statistics ([NCES], 2019) data across age categories.

Table 1.1: All U.S. college students 2009-2019 (civilian non-institutionalized population), numbers in thousands

| <b>YEAR</b> | <b>TOTAL</b> | <b>14-17</b> | <b>18-19</b> | <b>20-21</b> | <b>22-24</b> | <b>25-29</b> | <b>30-34</b> | <b>35+</b> |
|-------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|------------|
| <b>2019</b> | 18,289       | 251          | 4,004        | 4,495        | 3,436        | 2,456        | 1,290        | 2,358      |
| <b>2018</b> | 18,908       | 212          | 4,220        | 4,396        | 3,481        | 2,862        | 1,338        | 2,399      |
| <b>2017</b> | 18,398       | 236          | 3,943        | 4,367        | 3,627        | 2,674        | 1,207        | 2,346      |
| <b>2016</b> | 19,196       | 241          | 4,171        | 4,417        | 3,733        | 2,882        | 1,336        | 2,417      |
| <b>2015</b> | 19,101       | 222          | 3,978        | 4,505        | 3,669        | 2,805        | 1,370        | 2,551      |

|             |        |     |       |       |       |       |       |       |
|-------------|--------|-----|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| <b>2014</b> | 19,175 | 234 | 4,036 | 4,218 | 3,878 | 2,722 | 1,267 | 2,820 |
| <b>2013</b> | 19,467 | 308 | 3,951 | 4,326 | 3,925 | 2,715 | 1,351 | 2,891 |
| <b>2012</b> | 19,930 | 269 | 4,015 | 4,562 | 3,879 | 2,817 | 1,516 | 2,871 |
| <b>2011</b> | 20,397 | 203 | 4,242 | 4,459 | 3,869 | 3,066 | 1,551 | 3,007 |
| <b>2010</b> | 20,275 | 229 | 4,364 | 4,348 | 3,501 | 2,992 | 1,632 | 3,210 |
| <b>2009</b> | 19,764 | 206 | 4,289 | 4,034 | 3,749 | 2,769 | 1,524 | 3,193 |
| <b>2008</b> | 18,632 | 241 | 4,126 | 3,920 | 3,420 | 2,657 | 1,356 | 2,911 |
| <b>2007</b> | 17,956 | 186 | 4,075 | 3,794 | 3,292 | 2,496 | 1,342 | 2,772 |

Data derived from U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, October 1947 to 2019. (2020). [www.census.gov/programs-surveys/cps.html](http://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/cps.html)

The percentage of all college returners aged 35 and over grew from 15.4% in 2007 to nearly 16% of the total student population in 2008 and continued to grow until 2010 when the numbers began to drop as the economy turned around. The numbers of U.S. college students age 35+ reached a high in 2011, before trending down through 2019, while the economy was recovering. Looking to the future, as employment numbers—and job satisfaction—decreased during the COVID-19 pandemic, it will be interesting to see whether numbers of mature returners increase again as individuals seek to develop new knowledge and skills for career change and/or personal fulfillment by transitioning back into higher education.

Leathwood and O’Connell (2003) argued that this transition back into higher education, in institutions whose policies and programs were designed to accommodate the needs of 18–22-year-olds, is too-often “characterized by struggle” for mature returners (p. 597; see also Given, 2009; Kasworm, 2005; Malm & Weber, 2018a, 2018b; Grabowski *et al.*, 2016). Although colleges and universities are certainly aware of the older and nontraditional students who enroll every year, Malm and Weber (2018a) claimed that “from recruiting and enrollment, residence life, financial aid, academic support, [and] career services” (p. 2), most institutions remain focused on ‘traditional’ undergraduates —creating a situation where mature returners are left

feeling disengaged from the university and at greater risk of dropping out (see also Harper & Quaye, 2014).

Notwithstanding their increasing numbers, Malm and Weber (2018a) determined that mature returners continue to be seen by many institutions as little more than a deviation from the norm, rather than a valued part of the campus population (see also Given, 2009; Kim, 2002). Donaldson and Townsend (2007) argued that even their designation as ‘nontraditional’ demonstrates their primary identification is based in what they are *not*. This perspective on the mature returner experience, which challenges the image and discourse surrounding what a college student ‘looks like’ or needs to be successful, can only serve to make their construction of identity as a college student more difficult. Given (2009) noted that many are left feeling invisible, lonely, and unsatisfied in their student experience (see also Williams, 2006) and, in too many cases, will seek out another institution in hopes of better support—or they will give up on their hopes for a degree altogether.

However, Barr (2016) noted that, unlike the student who enrolls right out of high school, those outside this norm are not a homogenous group that can be defined by age or a particular type of educational background. Mature students, described by NCES (n.d.) as a subset of ‘non-traditional’ students, may present one or all of the following characteristics: delayed enrollment (more than a year post-high school); financially independent of parents; parents and/or caregivers, or single parents; GED holders; part-time students; with work responsibilities (‘Definitions and data’). They might be what Woolsey (2003) described as ‘stop outs,’ students who come and go from higher education, often attending several institutions before finishing a degree—something that was true for most of my study participants (see also Kinser & Deitchman, 2007). However, they might also be graduate students who finished an

undergraduate degree as a traditional-age student but are returning for an advanced degree after raising children, to begin a new career, or for advancement in a current job.

Nevertheless, age, family, and employment status are not the only things that separate mature returners from their more traditional peers. Hagedorn (2014) noted that mature returners are more likely to be women and persons of color (see also NCES, 2011). Of the total number of mature returners in 2010, women made up nearly 64%. By 2019, almost a decade after the end of the Great Recession and amidst a strong job market, mature women still represented 63% of all returners age 35 and older (NCES, 2020). These women might be first generation students, but they may also have parents—or even children—who have college degrees. They might be single, divorced, widowed, or involved in long-term committed relationships. Mature returners are frequently caregivers to children or aging parents (or both). They might be full-time employees who take a course every semester or two, part-time workers who attend classes full or part-time with tuition subsidized by their employers or paid for with personal savings. They might also be full-time workers who carry a full course load—or they may not hold any outside employment at all. Some mature returners view themselves primarily as employees who also happen to be students, while others see themselves as students who are also employed (Bash, 2003; Kasworm, Rose, & Ross-Gordon, 2010; Kazis, Callahan, Davidson, McLeod, Bosworth, Choitz, & Hoops, 2007; Malm & Weber, 2018b). Yet, although their differences are often greater than their similarities, mature returners do have at least one thing in common: a decision to step (back) into a college classroom at an age when most of their peers are rooted in careers—or looking ahead to retirement.

### **(Re)turning to Higher Education**

Whether they enroll for the first time or return to complete a degree begun years earlier, Kinser and Deitchman (2007) claimed that mature returners come to that decision thoughtfully, simply because there is so much more for them to consider than choosing a school and applying. When they do return, they are often seen as “tenacious persisters” in pursuit of a degree (p. 75). Barr (2016) agreed that mature returners are likely to be goal-oriented, wanting to complete their degrees as quickly as possible, yet he also claimed that persistence could sometimes be a problem since mature returners<sup>13</sup> tended to focus on the end goals of “pay raises, career switching, and family stability,” rather than learning (p. 51). Barr also noted that mature returners too-often had little idea of what to expect from a return to college or how they will deal with work or family conflicts that might arise. McGivney (2004) claimed they are also less likely than younger students to finish their degrees at all, with Bowl (2003) noting that this is often because of the unexpected demands on their time due to the family and work responsibilities mature returners continue to carry while enrolled (see also Erisman & Steele, 2015; Malm & Weber, 2018b). According to Baxter and Britton (2001), a mature returner’s ultimate success in higher education requires them to find a balance between their familiar adult roles and new identities as students. Yet, it is in this balancing act that both risks and barriers arise.

## **Risks and Barriers**

Although a return to higher education can be empowering to mature returners, they also face personal and professional risks and barriers to their success along the way. Several

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<sup>13</sup> Barr’s work was focused on a group of students he called “The Plus 50.” Although he never specifically defines this group, he does refer to the growing numbers of Americans aged 50 and older who are attending colleges across the country, as well as the fact that the number of workers between 55 and 64 is expected by the U.S. Bureau of Labor to rise by nearly 36.5%—although he gave no timeline for this increase. However, the point he attempts to make is that the trend of increase among mature students on U.S. campuses is expected to continue.

researchers discussed three types of barriers that mature returners face on their return to higher education: institutional, situational, and dispositional (Barr, 2016; Given, 2009; Osam, Bergman, & Cumberland, 2017; Shepherd & Nelson, 2012). Given (2009) claimed that university discourse on “academic success” and “student identity” has “concrete, real effects on students,” while also noting that “the ‘traditional (normal) student’ [still] reigns supreme,” which acts as a barrier for some, even as it wraps others in welcome (p. 15).

This discourse can be seen not only in the language of the university, but in the institutional barriers it erects—best described as a lack of organized support. These barriers can be seen in admission practices and support services specifically focused on the model of a traditional age student and/or curriculum design that assumes a student who is able to prioritize their education over anything and everything else. Carruthers (2019) spoke of faculty and administrator expectations that mature returners should be able to devote themselves to fulltime study, claiming that some were “being discouraged from working during their programs—as if it was merely a choice that one might make, rather than necessary to live and pay for their education” (p. 20). Shepherd and Nelson (2012) claimed this situation is both educationally and emotionally fraught, particularly when faculty—especially those who teach graduate students—take the attitude that a student’s workload is *supposed to be* heavy, and the student should expect it to take all of their time and efforts. Such comments can easily make mature returners doubt their place in the university as such attitudes completely overlook the reality of their lived experience. And for women returners in particular, Shepherd and Nelson noted that the mindset behind these types of institutional barriers seems focused on “why you may fail,” rather than “how you can succeed” (p. 5). Munro (2011) further suggested that for mature returners who already struggle with internalized barriers— uncertainty over their academic abilities, for

example—a sensed absence of understanding from faculty about their outside responsibilities, different learning needs and scarcity of free time to study, some of these institutional barriers can feel insurmountable (see also Bamber & Tett, 2000; Osborne, Marks, & Turner, 2004). Other institutional barriers are financial, including issues that are less likely to effect younger returners, such as those mentioned by Hardin (2008), which include paying for school while supporting a family despite reduced working hours to accommodate classes. Australian researchers O’Shea and Stone (2011) spoke, for example, of financial aid programs that are only available to full-time returners, while many mature returners take courses one at a time to accommodate work schedules and tuition costs. O’Shea and Stone also discussed limited/non-existent evening or weekend courses or advising hours that are rarely accessible for returners who work a traditional 9-5 workday.

Yet, the greatest barriers can arise from within mature returners’ personal situations as workers, family members, and students. Markle (2015) described family, employment, and higher education as “greedy institutions,” all of which require complete dedication from participants (p. 269), meaning that role conflicts between these institutions can make it difficult for a mature returner to balance the multiple demands on their time and attention. Many of the situational barriers faced by mature women returners rise via conflicts between institutional demands and the gendered social norms that consider women’s time as less “valuable and productive” than men’s (Stone and O’Shea, 2011, p. 276)—meaning that a woman’s time is seen as a negotiable resource.

Women face cultural expectations that they will sacrifice their personal time and desires in order to meet the needs of their families and larger communities in ways that men do not. With time understood as a gendered barrier, not having enough of it to fulfill the ‘old’

responsibilities of family and work alongside the ‘new’ academic responsibilities of a student can leave mature women returners feeling perpetually stressed and working long into the night just to get things done—something that is especially true for single mothers who have no one to share family responsibilities with. These expectations, whether from family, society, or self, are not always overt; women (and men) are socialized into them. In my own research, I discovered such self-expectations loomed largest, appearing most often through participants’ expressions of guilt and feelings of selfishness for prioritizing self over others—even for mature women without children—making this idea worthy of extended examination within this study regarding the experiences of mature women at UWT. Many of these situational barriers become risks for mature returners, and again, particularly for women. Some are seen in family relationships where partners and/or children may not be supportive; in work situations with employers who are not willing to be flexible when schedules change, quarter after quarter. Other barriers are found within the university itself as mature returners face risks to their settled adult identities in classrooms where their knowledge, skills and strengths may not be appreciated by either faculty or classmates. Although there is little research that discusses this issue in the United States, U.K. researchers Gallacher, Crossan, Field, and Merrill (2002) do talk about the risks of “social exclusion” for mature returners who do not easily fit into the spaces and habitus of higher education (p. 493), leaving them at risk of rejection—and even feelings of humiliation—on campus.

As mature women returners struggle with unexpected workloads, academic language, or educational expectations, Merrill (1999) claimed that, on returning to higher education, many of them find—in addition to a growth in self-confidence and personal fulfillment, they no longer fit easily into long-term friendships or even marriages as the “dynamics” of their “public and

private spheres” shift through their continued education (p. 2). Even without these changes, mature returners bring a great deal of life experience to the classroom, however—as with the struggles over gendered expectations—not all of it is positive.

Stone and O’Shea (2011) considered the dispositional barriers that mature<sup>14</sup> women face: lower levels of self-confidence in their skills, particularly in using technology or in meeting the academic standards of an environment they have been away from for an extended period. Given (2009) and Stone (2008) both noted that many mature returners also carry the weight of negative experiences from earlier schooling that can become barriers to their college success, as the old childhood ‘tapes’ of teacher comments and poor report cards become the backdrop for all new attempts at learning. Mature returners also tend to believe that any gaps in their knowledge base are their own problems to solve—leaving them reluctant to ask for help or clarification when they don’t understand technology or concepts discussed in class. Munro (2011), for example, discussed such experiences as barriers that can spark a mature returner’s fear of failure and doubts about their ability to be successful in college (see also Kasworm, 2008; Osam *et al.*, 2016; O’Shea & Stone, 2011), making it even harder to make a successful transition into college learning. Michaud (2011, 2013) agreed, claiming that mature returners can find it particularly baffling when the literacy skills they bring from the workplace do not transfer easily to the college classroom, making an already precarious transition seem overwhelming. These topics and others were raised by the mature women returners who took part in my project. Their stories of experience—and the meaning they found in them—add to our current understandings of the issues mature women returners encounter through a focus on ways they have or have not been

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<sup>14</sup> Stone and O’Shea (2011), researchers in Australia, also considered mature-age students to be those who began higher education at 21 or over. Although this age bracket is not directly comparable to the ages of my own research participants (little research uncovered for the purposes of this literature review looks specifically at this age group), their findings are still worth considering here.

able to overcome the risks and barriers they have faced in their return to college classrooms. They also discussed where they found support, and where they were most challenged within the university setting they have come to inhabit—the University of Washington Tacoma—and the role that these challenges came to play in their construction of a new student identity.

### **Constructing a Student Identity**

Ivanić (1998) asserted that, for a mature returner, going back to college represents “a turning point”—a location in time and space where social and academic conflicts can lead them to question the legitimacy of their newly-minted student identity and leave them feeling “alienated and devalued” (p. 9). Moss (1987) argued that the “unvoiced traditions, expectations and values” of academia place great demands on any student’s time (p. 46). But for mature returners, the lack of familiarity with the student role or assumptions about what a college student should know can also cause “crises of confidence [and] conflicts of identity” as they struggle to identify with the values and practices of higher education that are often wildly different from the social contexts they never quite leave behind (Ivanič, 1998, p.7).

Whatever identities they may carry, Baxter and Britton (2001) argued that mature returners see education as a way to reflexively “shape their own biographies and identities,” through a sometimes-massive shift from their former mature identities (p. 88-89). Few of these former identities prepare mature returners to ‘blend in’ among the much younger students who are now their peers or to feel as if they can even identify as college students, all of which can leave them feeling that they don’t belong. As their maturity (read: older bodies and more extensive life experience) sets them apart in a classroom, mature returners are as likely to be taken as the professor on the first day of the quarter as they are to be viewed as interlopers by

younger classmates who see them as trying to enter spaces where they do not belong. O’Boyle (2014) argued that such experiences contribute to a mature returner feeling a “sense of separateness” (p. 169) from their classmates, making it difficult to feel as if they matter in the university. Ahmed (2012) also spoke of this ‘separateness’—what she called “a stranger experience” in inhabiting settings that “assume certain bodies as their norm” (p. 3)—leaving those who are entering spaces not constructed or planned with them in mind feeling marginalized. Although Ahmed was writing specifically about the experiences of exclusion among persons of color, I see connections between her ideas and other marginalizing signifiers within university spaces. Diversity on campuses must move beyond issues of race and ethnicity, to address ability, gender, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation—and age. Overlooking any student’s need for belonging/inclusion can leave their student identity—and the completion of their education—resting on shaky ground.

Another aspect of identity that must be considered when considering mature women returners is gender, particularly the role it plays in the construction of a new student identity. Postmodern scholars, such as Cameron (2005) and Rahilly (2020), maintained that gender is not a binary—a fixed biological characteristic that identifies a person as either male or female. Rather, it is a performance of identity that plays out along a spectrum of diverse or fluid practices, a performance where identities are constantly shaped and reshaped, interpreted and reinterpreted throughout a person’s lifespan (see also Weedon, 1999; Yelland & Grieshaber, 1998). Still, however gender may be defined by scholars, the cultural norms that prescribe specific gender *roles* for certain individuals are still deeply embedded in 21<sup>st</sup> century Western culture, a legacy that must be considered—particularly in a study that examines lived experience.

Although mature returners may carry some of the same defining characteristics regardless of performed gender—employment status, family and community responsibilities, for example—culturally-prescribed gender roles can make the lived experience of mature men and women returners vastly different. Although my study does not specifically examine the differences between culturally prescribed gender roles, I believe that they still play a role in some of the difficulties of (re)defining identity that mature women returners face, particularly those who are mothers. Examining their experiences through an intersectional lens focused on an individual’s social location allows for an exploration of experiences and oppressions more fully than through any single variable, whether gender, race, or class, acknowledging that no one’s intersections of identity and experience are the same (Collins & Bilge, 2016; Crenshaw, 1991; Hekmen, 1997). The participants in my study are all women age 35 or older, however, they are not a monolithic group. Each of them exists within the single place of UWT and this current time, yet their backgrounds and lived experiences are vastly different. In this project they storied their experiences and the meaning and identities they are (re)constructing through their return to the classroom. From their places along the structural margins of higher education, these women describe their experiences of repurposing and reconstructing their identities: from wife, mother, grandmother, healthcare worker, store manager, librarian, and hourly worker—identities they never fully leave behind—to new identities as university students.

### ***Belonging: Identity in Relationship***

For mature returners who arrive on campus already anxious about whether or not they belong in higher education, finding a place where they can feel at home can make all the difference. O’Shea (2014) noted that mature returners arrive on campus from a variety of

backgrounds, bringing with them knowledge and skills—cultural capital—that academia may not consider of value, leaving them indeed feeling like ‘strangers in a strange land,’ rootless nomads who feel as if they don’t belong in either new or old spaces or situations (Brah, 1996; Braidotti, 1994). Yet, Baumeister and Leary (1995) claimed that the human need for—and maintenance of—social bonds is one of our strongest motivations. Finding a sense of connection with others, even strangers, can positively affect our sense of self (Aron et al., 2004). These relationships—built on the common ground of shared purpose and understanding—can help us find and maintain the feelings that we belong (Asch, 1952; Vygotsky, 1978; Walton & Cohen, 2011). Wenger (2000) argued that belonging is the result from coming to understand a community well enough to contribute to it through mutual practice and language (see also Motteram, 2016). Wenger also noted that this sense of belonging is made possible in three ways, through: 1) engagement, or taking actions that include others within the community; 2) imagination, or taking the view of oneself as part of the community; and 3) alignment, or coming to a place of harmony between the identity and practices of the new community and the identity and practices the student brings with them<sup>15</sup>. This sense of alignment does not rest in leaving old identities behind, but rather finding ways to ‘make peace’ between old and new practices and ways of thinking, and discovering openness to discovering “other ways of being in the world” (p. 239).

Yet, when a campus sees students primarily through a certain lens, then structuring practices to foster to a sense of belonging can lead to ‘one size fits all’ solutions where mature returners who do not correspond to that image are viewed through a deficit mindset. Such students are too-often—at least historically—defined by negatives: minority, non-standard, disabled or dis-advantaged, un- or under-prepared, part-time—or simply non-traditional. Carruthers

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<sup>15</sup> Wenger’s (2000) concept of belonging, viewed through the lenses of engagement, imagination, and alignment, supports my examination of belonging within my participants’ stories shared in the narrative inquiry in chapter four.

(2019) noted that behind this deficit viewpoint lay an apparent “need to classify [students] in some way: mature learners, first-generation, commuter, etc.—but always presenting them as ‘other’ to some specific standard of ‘studentness.’ An individual,” Carruthers claimed, is only defined as “a ‘student’ if they fit the norm through age, generation, race, language, etc.” (p. 25). Yet, this simplistic view of college returners also limits our understandings of what it takes to help any student feel they belong on campus.

With a sense of belonging considered to form the basis for engagement within the university, its importance for mature returners cannot be underestimated. Krause (2005) described engagement as “the time, energy and resources returners devote to activities designed to enhance learning at university” (p. 3). Yet, historically, college students did not hold down jobs or have families that they must support through either full or part-time jobs even while they are attending classes. Donaldson (2020), a U.K. researcher who wrote from his own perspective as a mature student, noted that the ways that mature returners view engagement is not—and truly *cannot*—be the same as for a younger, more ‘traditional’ student. While he claimed that the conventional road to engagement may be challenging for mature returners, its consequent sense of belonging is no less important for them. Making friends—because they do not live on campus, have few true peers among their fellow students, and because lecture courses can be large and impersonal—may be difficult for mature returners, but it is not impossible. On a campus like UWT, however, with its smaller class sizes and overall supportive staff and faculty, it can be easier for mature returners to connect to others, even if a smaller student pool means that it is less likely that there will be other mature returners in each class. For a university enrolling mature returners—or one that is considering ways to better support them for future growth—campus units like tutoring or advising centers or even those that focus on equity and inclusion for

all students would be wise to make plans to expand their offerings to be more inclusive of mature returners, enabling them to more easily connect with each other. This concept of belonging, seen as identity in relationship, is examined through my analysis of the story data gathered primarily through interviews and considered within the narrative inquiry in chapter four of this dissertation.

### ***Becoming: Identity in Transition***

Bøe, Kristoffersen, Lidbom, Lindvig, Seikkula, Ulland, and Zachariassen (2013) spoke of becoming as a process of change—“an answering act” in response to the events and experiences of our lives and those involved in them (p. 23). Guyotte (2018), in writing of her own experiences as a doctoral student and new mother, described becoming as a positive process, one that “opens individuals to new possibilities,” as they “explore [them]selves in relation to others.” Depicting becoming as a “zigzagging that cuts across our encounters and experiences...” Guyotte further suggests, not “that we ‘are,’ but that we ‘become’” (p. 37; emphasis mine), highlighting identity as an ongoing process. Braidotti (2011) also described becoming as a process—albeit a sometimes-jarring exchange between material and symbolic situations that affect a person’s “embodied, situated self” (p. 274). Britton and Baxter (1999) spoke specifically of becoming among mature returners but focused it through a gendered view of identity. They claimed that women construct a sense of identity in relationship with others, which leads them to construct a new student identity in the same way—within the relationships they form in the university (p. 179). Yet this process of transformation—this answering act—is not a smooth, linear process. Gravett and Winstone (2021) described it as “rhizomatic,” without beginning or end, but always taking place within an “ongoing and continuous” process (p. 1580). James’

(2013) focused on the role of difference in the process of becoming, contextualizing it as a transitory process, a metaphoric consideration of the drafts and revisions of writing to represent the act of becoming. Like the writing process, identity construction is not a direct pathway from first to final ‘draft;’ it is an iterative transition of language and meaning, transpiring in fits and starts. It is within the association of these ideas, an irregular (re)making and (re)mediation of identity that meanders through our experiences—a rhizomatic drafting process that truly has no identifiable beginning or end—that I best understand the process of becoming as a meaningful recognition of identity.

However, this process of becoming is occasionally as uncomfortable as it is meaningful. Baxter and Britton (2001), speaking of the identity risks involved in becoming a mature student, noted that experiences as new returners both *challenge* and are *challenged by* long-held ‘adult’ identities, even as mature returners are constructing “new forms of cultural capital” (p. 89) along the boundaries of the old. For a mature woman returner, especially, these new forms of both identity *and* capital can bring internal conflict with familiar culturally-prescribed gender roles, causing tension in relationships with family and friends as the woman tries to strike a balance between the new and the familiar. Gravett and Winstone (2021) claimed that these transitions of becoming in mature women returners’ stories of experience are often discovered “in the gaps and margins of a narrative” (p. 1579)—written between the lines, so to speak. Linde (1993), in speaking of an individual’s maintenance of identity as “good, socially proper, and stable,” claimed that individuals require a “*constantly revised* life story” (p. 20; emphasis in original)—also acknowledging identity as the *never-quite finalized* result of becoming. In chapter five, I examine the theme of becoming as a view of transitioning identities in the lives of my focal participants, through data drawn from their narratives.

## Engaging on Campus

In considering issues surrounding student success and retention, Wyatt (2011) noted distinctions between the concerns of younger and older (age 25+) students and the challenges that disengaged students face in developing a sense of belonging, yet she spoke of engagement primarily through the lenses of academic activity and involvement in campus activities. While mentioning the importance of “active and collaborative learning, student faculty interaction, enriching educational experiences, and indications of a supportive campus environment” to student engagement (p. 11), Wyatt did not address the idea that some aspects of engagement may look different for students beyond a ‘traditional’ age. Overlooking the responsibilities of work and family as possible obstacles to campus involvement leaves the greatest barriers to success for a mature returner unexamined. Pascarella and Terenzini (1998) conceded that, no matter how hard institutions may work to facilitate student engagement, it is students themselves who must find places—academic or social—where they can feel they belong, where they can make friends and interact with mentoring faculty. Although this is true to some extent no matter the age of the student, for mature returners who may have few true peers in their classes, this is doubly important to acknowledge.

Donaldson (2020), reflecting on his own experiences as a mature student, examined what engagement means for mature<sup>16</sup> returners. He concluded that ‘life’ often gets in the way of *what mature returners see as engagement*<sup>17</sup> with education: perfect class attendance, on-time (or

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<sup>16</sup> Donaldson (2020) defined mature students as those 21 and over at entry into the university (see also Willans & Seary, 2011 for their research based on this same definition).

<sup>17</sup> This distinction between what mature students view as engagement with education and how the institutions themselves view engagement is an important one.

*early*) work, and excellent note-taking skills<sup>18</sup>. This form of interference can leave them with the sense they are failing, feelings I have noted in many of the mature returners I work with in the writing center. Many, unfortunately, see anything less than ‘perfection’ in these areas of engagement as proof of their inability to succeed, ultimately blocking their journey toward developing a sense of belonging.

### **Conclusion**

In reviewing the literature that surrounds mature returners, and mature women returners in particular, I have come to several conclusions about the state of the field. First, although much consideration has been given to the academic and support needs of mature returners—women of lower socioeconomic status, in particular—in the United Kingdom and British Commonwealth countries—there is much less research on women in the 35 and over age group, at least in four-year university settings. The research coming out of the U.K focused on examining issues such as: why they (re)turn to higher education; the inherent difficulties and barriers in their transition as they attempt to balance the responsibilities of work and family with the demands of higher education; their transitions in skill and self-confidence through education alongside the sometimes negative responses of family and friends to their changes in educational status; and the identity challenges they face as members of lower socioeconomic classes attending universities. However, there is considerably less research that considers this group of returners in the context of colleges and universities in the United States, at least over the past few

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<sup>18</sup> I would add high grades to Donaldson’s list, as anything less seems a failure to achieve—and therefore indicative of low engagement.

decades<sup>19</sup>. And of that research, the attention paid to mature women returners has been broadly focused on literacy skills, with scant attention paid to issues of belonging and becoming in identity construction as new students.

Second, there is the difficulty of narrowing a definition of mature students, with so many researchers using similar terminology (adult student, mature student, returning student, adult learners, etc.), yet with conflicting definitions or foci. My study takes a very narrow view of mature women age 35 and over who have returned to higher education: considering mature women returners at one specific urban-serving university; examining their lived experiences through the lenses of belonging and becoming; exploring how they theorize meaning through narrative; and viewing their construction of student identity within the institutional habitus of the university they all attended: the University of Washington Tacoma (UWT). Through this study, I seek to build a knowledge base that can inform a better understanding of how mature women returners construct a new student identity within the university habitus, as well as discovering stronger supports for current and future mature women returners by administrators, faculty, and staff at UWT.

### **The Rest of the Story**

In a dissertation focused on mature women returners' narratives of experience, I have chosen to employ story not only as a tool of analysis, but as the product of that analysis as well. Riessman (2001) claimed that "storytelling... is simply what we do when we describe research...and what informants do with us when they convey the details and courses of their

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<sup>19</sup> There is considerable research regarding mature students in the U.S. done in the 1970s and 80s as numbers of mature students began to rise across the country—in community colleges, in particular. However, that did begin to drop off in the 1990s.

experiences” (p. 696). In this dissertation, I use the tools and language of storytelling to create meaning from my own experience as a researcher, as well as my participants’ experiences as mature women returners and research participants. (Re)storying this work allows me to grant precedence to the positionality and subjectivity of each of those involved. With narrative described as a way to create order from experience, just as a narrator “creates themes, plots, and drama...[to] make sense of themselves, social situations, and history” (Bamber & Tett, 1998, p. iii), I use narrative in the assessment and distribution of my research findings.

Moving forward through this dissertation, in chapter two, I review the methodologies that anchor my research through a discussion of the story building process, essentially adding process to backstory. This ‘peek behind the curtain’ offers an explanation of writing practice that every researcher will recognize: the methodical assembling of context: history, event, location, and the people with whom you are working, as well as the point you are trying to make. This chapter lays out the entirety of my research process, beginning with the types of data and methods of collection, as well as the methodology behind my analysis/story-building process.

Through an intrinsic case study in chapter three, I focus on the University of Washington Tacoma as the location with which all participants interacted. In this chapter, I examine the backstory of the university, including a consideration of its history, mission, values, and its changing vision for returners over time. Through interviews with campus stakeholders and analysis of campus documents, I also consider the habitus of the university through its discourse, in preparation for listening in on the specific group of mature women returners this dissertation observes.

Chapters four and five represent the restorying of my data, as I examine the constructions of identity and meaning discovered within participant stories shared in literacy narratives,

questionnaires, and interviews. Grounded by the unique voices and viewpoints of my participants, I explore belonging and becoming in the university as the two primary themes that emerged from the data.

Chapter four examines the theme of belonging through the form of a nonfictional narrative, complete with dialogue and reflection, foregrounding the voices of my participants as a way to examine their experiences as mature women returners. It is the most pragmatic of the chapters, focusing on the spoken needs of the participants—some met, some unmet—as they consider how, where, and whether they belong at UWT. In this chapter, I view belonging as a social practice: we *belong* within a culture; we *belong* within relationships; we *belong* in places—the locations we identify as feeling at home *in* or outside *of* (Carruthers, 2018). And with a sense of belonging acknowledged by researchers as a key factor in student retention and success, examining the stories of mature women returners who found (or did not) a sense of belonging on campus is vital to the future success of the university.

In chapter five, my reflections are focused on the individual participant, examining their sense of becoming as a transition and (re)construction of student identity through the stories they tell. In exploring this theme, I consider how each focal participant has (re)imagined herself as a student and a mature woman, theorizing identity and meaning through their stories of experience—examining how they have positioned themselves within their narratives. This chapter investigates not only the effects of UWT’s institutional habitus on their identity construction as students, but also examines their (re)construction of personal habitus in the light of the educational journeys outlined their literacy narratives. Likening it to the continuous dialogue of story, Frank (2012) claimed that ‘becoming’ is never final because identity is not fixed but is instead a life-long iterative process (see also McAdams, 1993, 2006; McAdams &

McLean, 2013; Ricoeur, 1992; Singer, 2004). It is a snapshot of this process that I examine in this chapter.

Finally, in chapter six, we reach the resolution—the *so what* of my research story. Before offering one final story, I take a step back from the stories my participants shared and consider their meanings—what I hope they will teach us. I explore not only the personal meaning participants found through their lived experience, but what those stories can mean to UWT and its mature returners, both today and in the future. I also consider topics for future research—some of the knowledge and insights yet to be acquired, as well as what might be done with the knowledge about mature women returners that we currently hold.

## **Chapter Two**

### **Storybuilding: A Peek Behind the Curtain**

The approach I have taken in this study is grounded in the questions I sought to answer and the medium in which their responses came to me. To explore the stories of lived experiences of belonging and becoming shared by mature women students, my methodology could only be based in the study of narrative. I begin this chapter with the restatement of my research questions, a brief discussion of the site of my study which will be explored in greater depth in chapter three of this dissertation, and a detailed introduction of each of the participants in my study. Although I had several options when it came to narrative research methods, there were two that seemed best suited to the type of data I intended to collect. My methods of collection were also multiple, with data gathered in both written and oral formats—from written narratives to oral interviews that produced both written transcripts and audio-visual data. In the rest of this chapter, I reiterate my research questions, describe the site and design of this study, introduce the participants, review the types of data collected and theorize the methods of analysis used to examine it, as well as discussing how they were implemented. Finally, I conclude with a reminder of the intention of my project and a look ahead toward the intrinsic case study of the University of Washington Tacoma (UWT) in Chapter Three.

#### **Research Questions**

In order to explain my research design and methodology, I begin with a reintroduction of the questions that guided my research involving the stories of experience told by mature women students as they sought to (re)construct meaning and identity from their experiences as students at UWT. These questions are: How do mature women use stories of belonging and becoming to

construct meaning from their experiences and (re)construct their identities as students? What can we learn from their stories about the kinds of barriers mature women face and the kinds of support systems they need to gain a sense of belonging as university students? And finally, what can we learn about how the institutional habitus of the university ‘marks and reads’ mature women returners, and how might this knowledge be used to better support them to become successful students?

### **Research Site**

Since the majority of mature returners across the U.S. are women (Grabowski *et al.*, 2016; Hagedorn, 2014; Peter, Horn, & Carroll, 2005; U.S. Census Bureau, 2020), I chose to refocus my original pilot study<sup>20</sup> on mature women returners at UWT. This change in emphasis led me to incorporate UWT itself as a ‘character’ in the story, one with whom all participants interacted, influencing their experiences as viewed through their stories. Because of this altered view, the institutional habitus—“the embodied history” (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 56)—of the university also invited scrutiny, including an examination of the mission and focus of the campus over its 30-year history, and an exploration of historical documents surrounding the founding of the campus. In examining these documents, and conducting interviews with long-time staff, faculty and administrators, I discovered the original mission of UWT focused on serving upper division transfer students—“an adult population with specific needs” (University of Washington Tacoma, 1993, p. 5)—with some college but no degree, a group of students very like the women participating in my study. Because of the strategic importance of the university to my study, I examine its history and mission—both past and present—at greater length in chapter three.

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<sup>20</sup> See chapter one for description and purpose of the original pilot study.

## Participants

My study included two types of participants. The focal group involves eight mature women students, to which I include myself as a ninth participant<sup>21</sup>. The second group of participants is comprised of five UWT administrators, staff, and faculty. As my project shifted from the pilot study to consider only mature women returners who were past or present students at UWT, the institutional habitus of the university itself came into play as yet another participant in the study. Because of this shift, one of the original participants was no longer qualified. Although I knew her as a colleague—and she *was* a mature returner—she had never been a student at UWT. After discussing this issue with my chair, I made the decision to replace her to keep the project centered around the experience of mature women returners at UWT. At that point, I approached another mature woman returner at UWT who agreed to take part in the project<sup>22</sup>.

### Focal Participants

My eight focal participants are mature women returners, all age 35 or older and connected to UWT as students or alumni, with racial/ethnic demographics that closely resemble the diversity of the UWT student body. These women also represent a variety of previous or current professions, as well as multiple undergraduate majors and/or graduate programs. Although most were undergraduates when this study (or its pilot) began, all are now either

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<sup>21</sup> I explain my inclusion as a research subject at greater length in the autoethnography section of this chapter.

<sup>22</sup> Making this change mid-pandemic also meant making a change in the interview aspect of my data collection process, something I will explain in the data collection section of this chapter.

graduate students or alumni. Aside from their one common experience as returning UWT students, their backgrounds and life experiences often diverge widely.

In Table 2.1, I have assembled basic information about each participant, identified by their chosen pseudonyms. This includes their age and early education status, as well as whether or not they are a first-generation college student, or had some college experience before they returned to the university. I also included their self-identified race/ethnicity, student status—both at the start of this project and currently—and their marital/parental status. Following this table, I offer more extensive biographical narratives for each participant, written with personal information drawn from written and oral narratives, culture sketches, and informal conversations, with all quoted material (in italics) coming from these sources. Each of these data sources will be discussed at length later in this chapter.

Table 2.1: Basic demographic information for focal participants

| Participant           | Age Range | HS graduate/GED | First-Gen. College | Some college/degree before current return | Race/Ethnicity (self-defined) | Student Status: at recruitment/ (current)             | Marital/Parent Status                        |
|-----------------------|-----------|-----------------|--------------------|---|-------------------------------|---|--|
| Chantal               | 40-49     | HS graduate     | Yes                | Bachelor's degree                         | African American              | Graduate/ (Graduate)                                  | Single/grown children                        |
| Hazel                 | 50-59     | HS graduate     | No                 | Bachelor's degree                         | African American              | Graduate/ (Graduate)                                  | Single/No children                           |
| Ironeyes              | 50-59     | GED             | Yes                | No  | Native American               | Graduate/ (Alumni)                                    | Married/grown children/raising grandchildren |
| Jane                  | 40-49     | HS graduate     | Yes                | Some college                              | Cambodian American            | Graduate/ (Alumni)                                    | Single/grown children                        |
| Lupita                | 50-59     | HS graduate     | Yes                | Associate degree                          | Latina                        | Undergraduate/ (Alumni)                               | Married/grown children                       |
| Robin                 | 30-39     | HS graduate     | Yes                | Some college                              | White                         | Undergraduate/ (Graduate)                             | Married/no children                          |
| Shelly                | 50-59     | GED             | No                 | Some college                              | Native Hawaiian               | Undergraduate/ Graduate)                              | Single/grown children                        |
| Vera                  | 40-49     | GED             | Yes                | Some college                              | White                         | Undergraduate/ (Alumni, planning for graduate school) | Married/raising young children               |
| Margaret (researcher) | 60-69     | HS graduate     | No                 | Some college                              | White                         | Graduate  | Married/grown children                       |

In their biographies, I refer to each of these women by a pseudonym of her own choosing (see Table 2.1). Although names are typically given to us by our parents, rather than through personal choice, names *are* extremely personal. Most of us object if people misname us or mispronounce our names. I wanted to do neither, so I asked the women to choose the names they would be known by in this dissertation. Some chose the names of well-loved family members or friends; others chose names that were based on childhood nicknames or a favorite author. One chose to use her “native name”—the name taken from her in a boarding school operated with the declared intent of stealing her culture in the name of ‘civilization.’ It is my great privilege to introduce each of them here.

***Chantal:*** Chantal is an African American woman in her late 40s. Although she briefly mentioned a partner in her interview, she described herself as a single mother of three grown sons. She is also a first-generation college student who completed a baccalaureate degree at a ‘traditional’ age—as a single mother, no less—yet chose to return for a graduate degree decades later, in pursuit of a promotion at work and a more financially secure future. She began UWT’s Master of Interdisciplinary Studies (MAIS) program in the fall of 2019, but soon came to realize that the program’s theoretical bent just didn’t align with her more pragmatic interests. She transferred to the Master of Community Planning program in the spring of 2020 after deciding the program’s focus on project management was a much better fit for someone with her professional strengths and interests.

A born storyteller, Chantal is one of five siblings born and raised in a Pennsylvania steel mill town. She described herself as “*a quintessential book nerd who loved to read. In elementary school, I was just the weird girl with glasses who didn’t fit in... I always loved reading. I always*

*loved stories and talking to people...But through books, I could be anybody I wanted to be. And that was powerful.”* Chantal and I met during her second quarter in the MAIS<sup>23</sup> program.

Although she had been initially drawn to the flexibility of the program, she was coming to realize it did not fit either her learning style or her career goals. It was about that time when a dear friend and colleague—Anna Salyer, a now-retired UWT librarian—brought her to the writing center to meet me. Remembering our first meeting, Chantal said, *“It was like a lovely connection between myself and a friend. We just meshed when we met, and it was just a really good energy... You were a grownup and somebody who could really understand where I was coming from as a returning student.”* After that first meeting, we met regularly to talk about academic life and writing, until the pandemic intervened.

Gregarious, an engaging conversationalist, and unfailingly direct, Chantal has worked as a fundraiser for a variety of local nonprofit organizations, including the United Way, Metro Parks of Tacoma, the LeMay Car Museum, and KBTC Public television. She is currently employed as the director of development at a local community college. Her boss is preparing her to take over his position when he retires in a few years—as soon as she completes her degree.

**Hazel:** Hazel is an African American woman in her late 50s. She has never married and has no children. Although she graduated from college as a traditional age student, Hazel made the decision a few years ago to return to graduate school in pursuit of a Master of Education degree (M.Ed.). She is employed in the UWT library in a position she describes as the *“supervisor for student employees,”* where, she notes, *“I train them, and I monitor their work.”* She says her student employees *“are like my kids”* and she enjoys interacting with and teaching them. I first

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<sup>23</sup> Master of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies.

met Hazel when I was an undergraduate checking out books in the UWT library. After I joined the UWT writing center staff and returned to graduate school, Hazel and I held many conversations at the circulation desk about her desire to do the same. I was delighted when she finally joined the M.Ed. program and invited her to take part in my study.

Hazel grew up *“in a Christian home, where going to church on Sundays and throughout the week...was a strong part of African American identity during those days and earlier generations...I was definitely shaped by and continue to treasure and value that experience.”* Born in the early 1960s, she described her *“growing up years”* as *“backdropped by the Civil Rights movement, JFK, Dr. King, and the Vietnam War,”* yet she acknowledges that her father’s military career, which found her traveling the world and the country at a young age, gave her a more global point of view—something she greatly values. Hazel’s family tree has deep roots in higher education—grandparents, great-grandparents, and numerous aunts and uncles—which fostered her belief that attending college was both an expectation and *“the goal toward upward mobility.”* Choosing to continue the tradition herself, she moved to across the country to Washington State to attend college, choosing Pacific Lutheran University because it was *“an international place. I loved that about it.”*

A gracious woman with a ready smile, sweet voice, and a kind demeanor—Hazel describes herself as *“a little reserved and quiet, and a little shy. But for some reason, I love to know people from different places, get to know their interests. I guess it's because, many times, whenever we moved, we lived next door to somebody that was from another part of the world.”*

***Ironeyes:*** In her mid-50s, Ironeyes is a Native American woman—and a proud member of the Omaha, Nez Perce, and Winnebago tribes. Married since her late teens, Ironeyes is a mother of

five and a grandmother of six—two of whom she and her husband are raising since the death of their mother in 2020. She is also a 2021 graduate of the UWT Master of Social Work (MSW) program. Although Ironeyes has spent the better part of the last two decades in school—first to earn a GED, then associate and bachelor’s degrees, before earning an MSW degree—her educational journey actually began when she was just four years old. Along with her older sister, she was taken from her Nebraska home to an Indian Mission boarding school where she stayed until she was about 12. Of her early education, Ironeyes had little good to say: *“The ones who struggled didn’t get that much attention because they had to focus on the other students and the ones who got it—the ones that excelled.”* As a child who struggled in that environment, she remembered school as filled *“with insensitive punishments and no regard for our culture.”* Her educational experiences were *“painful and frightening,”* leaving her to view her childhood as *“a very lonely experience,”* one where she felt she *“didn’t belong anywhere.”*

Facing periods of homelessness in her early teens, she dropped out of high school at 15, married young, and struggled with alcohol addiction as a young mother. But as her children grew toward adulthood, she knew she needed to change her life: first, by getting her addiction under control and then by returning to school 28 years after she left it. In confronting that challenge, Ironeyes acknowledged how unprepared she felt by an ‘education’ that never really started until she was an adult getting her GED. Of that journey, she said, *“for the nine years it took, I was going through fourth grade, fifth grade, sixth grade levels...”*

After completing her MSW degree in June 2021, Ironeyes began a position with Catholic Community Services as a case manager, while raising two teenage grandchildren—one of whom has multiple sclerosis. As one among the tiny percentage (0.5%) of Native women who earn

baccalaureate degrees<sup>24</sup>, let alone graduate degrees<sup>25</sup>, Ironeyes' determination and pride in her successes are truly awe-inspiring. Having chosen her pseudonym to reclaim her "*native name*," to honor her heritage, and declare her desire to be a role model for those who might be led by her example, she noted that her grandchildren are eager to follow in her footsteps. Together over homework, they regularly discuss with her their own plans for attending college.

**Jane:** In her late 40s, Jane is a Cambodian-Chinese woman who grew up in a refugee camp in Laos and emigrated to the U.S. at the age of ten. She is a single mother to three grown daughters. The older two are college graduates; the youngest is currently taking what Jane described as a "*gap year*" from college while she decides her next move. Jane is a first-generation college graduate and a spring 2021 graduate of the Doctor of Nursing Practice (DNP) program at UW Seattle. I "met" Jane through the UWT writing center about four years ago, although never face-to-face until she picked up her name card on the day of her 2018 Bachelor of Nursing (BSN) graduation at UWT. Letting out a joyous whoop, she threw her arms around my neck—across a table, no less—when I told her who I was. And I am now beyond pleased to call her "Dr. Jane."

As a working nurse, full-time student, *and* a mom, Jane is also caregiver to her elderly parents—one of whom has dealt with several cancer diagnoses, while the other has suffered from a series of strokes, the last during Jane's final quarter of DNP coursework. Jane herself also struggled with the fallout of a cancer diagnosis at the start of the final year of her BSN program—a diagnosis that threatened to derail her plans for graduate school until a co-worker advised her differently. As she remembered it, "*I literally dropped out of my BSN program for 30 minutes. I called my academic advisor, like "I need to drop out because..." But 30 minutes*

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<sup>24</sup> (2017-18, NCES, 2019a)

<sup>25</sup> (2017-18, NCES, 2019b)

*later, I spoke with my coworker and she's like, "Jane, just continue your school. And if you need to stop when your surgery is scheduled, then you can stop." Thankfully, she took that advice, noting "If I had stopped, I couldn't have applied to my program. I was like, 'I'm know I'm going to end up so blessed that my oncological journey did not prevent me from achieving my ultimate goal—becoming an oncology nurse practitioner.'" She assured me that she just knew that this was simply another of the steps set in motion towards making her dream a reality—a reality that came to full fruition in August 2021 when she passed her National Board Exam, marking the official start of her practice as an Adult-Gerontology Acute Care Nurse Practitioner.*

Before returning to college, Jane worked as a medical receptionist and scheduler, but decided that becoming an RN would help her better support her family. In addition to her graduate work and all its required clinicals hours, she is a working nurse—all of which kept her very busy during DNP coursework, internships, and planning for life after a degree. She is also a proud new US citizen, taking her citizenship oath in the early spring of 2020—right at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Jane is a great fan of British literature, especially Jane Austen's novels. She chose her pseudonym to honor that literary devotion.

**Lupita:** Born in Tijuana, Mexico, Lupita is a Latina woman in her late-50s. At the age of eleven, she emigrated to the United States with her mother and brothers. Now a married mother of three grown children and grandmother of one, Lupita was the first focal participant to join this study and also the first to complete her degrees: a BA in Psychology (2017) and a Master of Social Work (2020). We met in the UWT writing center in early 2017 when she was a senior grappling with writing her Psychology capstone paper in academic English (her first language is Spanish) and I was taking a Spanish composition course. We bonded over the trials of writing in a second

language and our shared experience as middle-aged university students, becoming fast friends in the process.

At just eleven years old, Lupita's life was changed forever when her mother made the decision not to return to Mexico after her older sister's funeral in California. She missed her friends and family, but it was the change in her responsibilities that had the biggest impact on her life. She stated, *"After the death of my sister. I became the oldest of five and I took responsibility of taking care of my four brothers while my mother had to work at a shoe factory to support us because our dad was not home. My life totally changed. I did not have a normal teenager stage. I grew up sooner, I also became my mother's right hand. My time was divided, raising my brothers, work part time and go to school. There was not enough time for me to complete my homework, I had to make sure my brothers had finished theirs first."* Speaking no English, Lupita initially attended an elementary school without an ESL program, leaving her feeling *"uncomfortable and embarrassed when teacher asked me questions."* She recalled walking home from school crying, frustrated at not understanding what was going on around her.

After graduating from high school (after a move that brought her to a school with an ESL program), Lupita married and attended a local city college, completing an associate degree while pregnant with the first of her three children. Later, after a divorce, Lupita worked to support her family, yet still tried to find a way to finish her degree. Stopping in and out of college while her children were young, she was always determined to finish. *"However,"* she noted, *"it was very difficult because working as a single parent slowed me down to meet the requirements to transfer to university. I took one class a semester and then stopped for a while, because sometimes I was working two jobs and did not have time to go to college. It felt like an endless situation."*

With a 2014 move to Washington State, Lupita “*looked into a new beginning, which was to be a full-time student...I thought it was like when I migrated from Mexico into the USA at age eleven, but this time was different. I am mature woman and I know what I want in life and followed my dreams.*” Lupita chose her childhood nickname as pseudonym for the project because of its connection with a beloved grandfather and her Hispanic heritage. As one of the most outgoing of my study participants, Lupita is kind-hearted and thoughtful, someone I never see without a smile, even if it is occasionally shared through tears. Although her path was not an easy one, today, Lupita is working in what she calls her dream job: as a social worker in the VA Puget Sound Healthcare System, working in the mental health division. She also works with the Pierce County Health Department running “Positive Parenting” workshops. Like their mother, her three adult children are also college graduates. Two have gone on to earn graduate degrees and the youngest is currently in graduate school—something that brings her great pride.

**Robin:** The youngest of my study participants, Robin is in her late 30s and a self-described millennial. A white woman who grew up in “*an insular religious community...with very conservative values and a kind of in-group/out-group*” mentality, Robin has been married for more than ten years to an immigrant from Mexico; they have no children. She was homeschooled for most of her childhood, before starting classes at a local community college when she was about 25. Before matriculating at UWT, Robin had stopped in and out of college at least twice yet was determined to try again. She was an undergraduate, majoring in literature when we met in the UWT writing center where she worked as a peer tutor; she is currently a graduate student in the MATESOL program at UW Seattle. Because of her husband’s experience as a DACA recipient, she said, “*I have a very strong interest in the immigrant community, so I knew I always*

wanted to teach English in some capacity. But it's only been in the last year that it's become clear to me the age group that I want to teach... adults, actually—hopefully in a community college setting.”

Robin described her childhood self as “*an anxious sensitive little person...a late bloomer, always a bit (or a lot) behind my peers,*” calling that “*the theme of my life.*” Recounting her home-schooling experience as “*aimless,*” she remembers feeling “*unintelligent, lost, an outcast.*” The lack of structure, however, did leave her time to explore her interests, one of which was a love of language. She noted, “*I love to read...everything! I love to write. I've been journaling since I was 10 or 11. Off and on, like, forever. I have suitcases full of old journals.*”

In both her literacy narrative and our interviews, Robin was very open about her struggles with anxiety and depression in her teens and early adulthood, struggles that were not taken seriously by her family. These ongoing issues affected her relationships and her confidence in her ability to succeed at UWT. Ultimately, though, “*the right balance of medication*” and positive experiences in higher education made a difference in her life, as she came to see herself as someone who had the ability to succeed.

**Shelly:** Shelly is a mixed-race, Native Hawaiian woman in her early 50s. Although she mentioned having a supportive partner in her interview, she described herself as a single mother and grandmother with three grown sons. Calling her teenage self “*bored*” with education, she recalled that she “*quit school, took my GED test, and passed at the age of eighteen.*” She attempted college at 26 but noted that “*the demands of motherhood and working were more than I could handle then.*” Although she stopped out, she never fully dropped out of higher education—always hoping to return someday.

Remarking on some of her early struggles with identity, Shelly recalled that her parents' divorce when she was just three years old left her with a childhood spent shuttling back and forth between two worlds. Her father's home in Oahu was one where she remembers feeling *"accepted and never looked at differently."* But her mother's home in Eastern Washington, where she lived most of the year in a majority white community, was the place she came to realize that *"being brown was a noticeable difference."* These identity challenges and the constant need to reacclimate from one community to another left her dealing with conflicting social identities and what she called the *"not healthy coping skills"* of addiction that plagued her for years.

Ultimately, however, Shelly returned to college when her children began to leave home, starting classes—like myself and most of the other participants<sup>26</sup>—at a local community college before transferring to UWT to complete her degree. She recalled her desire *"to pursue education, higher learning, so that I could get a career. I wanted a good career for my children and myself, but I just wasn't able to at that time."* But more than that, she stated, she wants to *"do something that matters. I am leaning towards housing planning—something that could possibly have a positive impact on my community. I think the older I get, those things become more and more important to me. Life develops those kinds of passions."* And for Shelly, the time to begin again was finally right.

Now a graduate student in the Master of Urban Studies program at UWT and a colleague of Chantal's, Shelly was an undergraduate when we first met during winter quarter 2019. A

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<sup>26</sup> Ironeyes, Jane, Vera, Robin, Lupita, Shelly, and I all began our returns to higher education at a community college (the same one, as a matter of fact—Tacoma Community College). Even Lupita, who had already completed an associate degree as a younger adult, chose to restart her life as a mature student at a community college. With 2/3 of U.S. adult (age 25 and older) university students beginning at community colleges (Aslanian, 2001), the percentage of my participants who did the same (approximately 78%) is not surprising.

mutual friend (also a UWT alumni) suggested Shelly seek me out in the writing center for help with her personal statement for a graduate school application. In that statement, Shelly shared her heart for marginalized people in our community, as well as her work with local nonprofit organizations. Through her writing, Shelly painted a picture of a woman whose experiences in higher education led her toward some significant personal changes, including reconnecting with her Native Hawaiian roots in a meaningful way. After working with her on this statement, I knew her stories about her experiences as a mature returning student could provide a valuable dimension to my project. However, because I never want students to feel obligated to work with me, I waited until shortly before her graduation to ask her to join my study.

Although she guards her privacy closely, Shelly shared with me that she was in recovery, something she claimed was *“more meaningful because I chose to return to school.”* A deeply spiritual person, Shelly—through her recovery and return to higher education—has come to understand her experiences as extending benefits for those beyond herself. She claimed, *“My experience is worthy insofar as my capacity to help others; to empathize with those who have experienced similar stigmatized oppressive dominant narratives; and be more compassionate towards myself and fellow persons. If my past can help one person, then it is for a purpose greater than me.”*

**Vera:** Vera, a married mother of three children between the ages of 4 and 14, is a White woman in her early forties. She was the last to join this study, but her family situation—raising younger children—brought a viewpoint not previously represented in the group. Like several of the other participants (Lupita, Jane, Robin, Shelly—and me), Vera also stopped in and out of higher education several times in her early 20s, before returning to community college and later

transferring to UWT to complete a BA in Psychology in June 2021. She had, she noted, *“gone to college, briefly, when I was like fresh out of high school but decided it wasn't for me, so I dropped out...of three different colleges. But I think I just kind of didn't know what I wanted to do. You know, if you're not motivated in your classes, it becomes really hard to do well.”*

After dropping out the last time, Vera—who had then-undiagnosed bipolar disorder—began a 20-year career with a large retail chain, working as a sales associate before eventually becoming an executive manager who supervised up to 150 employees at a time. After nearly five years in this last position, she realized she *“was really unhappy with my job, what they were asking me to do. So, when I got pregnant with my third child, I started to have some mental health issues. The company denied me paid leave during the first trimester... You can't take medications that you normally take when you're pregnant, so that led to some severe mental health issues.”* After her daughter was born, she made the decision not to return to work and *“enrolled in a local community college, just to see what would happen.”*

It went well.

Vera's return to college renewed her love of learning, writing in particular. Positive school experiences with writing—plays written and performed with her elementary school classmates and high school papers that garnered her praise—fueled an early understanding of the power of the written word. *“It's impactful to hear your words come out of someone else's mouth,”* she recalled. *“And I think that really set the stage for my persuasive writing now, the essays that I write, and the advocacy I do.”*

Vera's personal experiences with mental health challenges led her to advocate not only for herself and her family, but also for others. People would contact her and say, *“Hey, I have a friend who is kind of going through the same thing you went through in her pregnancy, do you*

*mind talking to her?’*” Her desire to advocate for those suffering mental health issues in pregnancy led to a Global Honors project that won a Bamford grant, which allowed her to focus her undergraduate research on the topic of postpartum mental health—but she plans to carry it further. Vera is currently planning to continue her education, with an end goal of a Ph.D. in Psychology, which she hopes to use to help other women navigate experiences like her own.

### **Other Study Participants: UWT Staff, Faculty, and Administrators**

To gain a broader perspective on the university—including its mission, history, and culture—from stakeholders who are not students, I included interviews with faculty, staff, and administrators in positions that either directly worked with students, or who worked to create policies and programs meant to benefit students. These interviews were held over Zoom© during the spring of 2021. Each interview lasted approximately one hour and was recorded and transcribed using the Zoom© platform. Transcripts were then corrected by hand. The five persons<sup>27</sup> I interviewed were Associate Vice Chancellor for Innovation and Global Engagement and Communication faculty, Dr. Divya McMillin; Karin Dalesky, undergraduate advisor for the School of Interdisciplinary Arts and Sciences and graduate adviser for the Master of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies program; Executive Vice Chancellor and Milgard School of business faculty, Dr. Jill Purdy; Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs, Mentha Hynes-Wilson; and Senior Transfer Adviser, Navia Winderling. In these next sections, I introduce each of these campus stakeholders.

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<sup>27</sup> Each of these campus stakeholders gave me permission to record the interviews, use the information shared, and identify them by their real names and job titles. Each was also including in the member checking I discuss later in this chapter.

***Dr. Divya McMillin:*** Dr. Divya McMillin is an early member of UWT faculty, having arrived on campus in 1998 to organize the Communication major. In 2008, she took on an additional role as director of the Global Honors program. Although she is no longer director of the program, it remains under her purview as Associate Vice Chancellor for Innovation and Global Engagement. For the current 2021-22 academic year, McMillin has added one more position to the mix: she is Interim Dean of the School of Interdisciplinary Arts and Sciences. Our interview was conducted over Zoom© on February 9, 2021 and lasted approximately one hour. My first introduction to Dr. McMillin was when I joined Global Honors as a transfer student. She was the instructor in the first course I took as part of the program, as well as teaching the research methods course I took during my final year in the Global Honors program. Dr. McMillin was my direct supervisor for an internship I did with the Prix Jeunesse International Foundation (based in Munich, Germany) in 2012, and she was also my undergraduate thesis adviser. Because of our close association through Global Honors—a program that attracts a large number of mature and otherwise ‘nontraditional’ students—and the wide range of positions she has held at UWT, I felt that her input regarding the campus history and habitus would be beneficial to my study.

***Karin Dalesky:*** Karin Dalesky holds dual roles at UWT: She is program advisor for the Master of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies (MAIS) program, as well as undergraduate advisor for students in the School of Interdisciplinary Arts and Sciences, focusing on students with majors in Ethnic, Gender & Labor Studies; Global Studies; History; Psychology; and Interdisciplinary Arts & Sciences. But she is also a UWT alumnus and the first person I met on the UWT campus. Dalesky came to the university while it was still located in the Perkins Building downtown, arriving as a 32-year-old transfer student in 1996, staying to graduate from not one but two UWT

programs: first, the undergraduate liberal studies major that preceded the Interdisciplinary Arts and Sciences major and then from the MAIS program. After graduation, she moved through a variety of positions on campus before landing in the advising office. Dalesky shares my interest in supporting mature returners on campus and seeks to do the same in her advisory position—something we discussed at length in our interview. This interview was held over Zoom© on January 29, 2021 and lasted approximately one hour.

***Dr. Jill Purdy:*** At the time of our interview, Dr. Jill Purdy was Executive Vice Chancellor of Academic Affairs (EVCAA) at UWT. She served in this position from 2017 to September 2021, before stepping down to return to full-time teaching in the Milgard School of Business. Our interview was conducted over Zoom© on February 24, 2021 and lasted about 45 minutes. Purdy joined UWT in 1994 as founding faculty in Milgard; she was also founding director of the school's MBA program (2000-2005). I met Dr. Purdy in the spring of 2017 when she was first named EVCAA and became direct supervisor to the Teaching and Learning Center/writing center. Because of our connection and her administrative position in Academic Affairs, she knew of my project and had expressed an interest in it. Based on our acquaintance and her long-time faculty position at UWT, I felt her viewpoint would be a valuable addition to my study.

***Mentha Hynes-Wilson:*** Mentha Hynes-Wilson has been serving as Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs since 2017 and is a member of the Chancellor's Cabinet. She holds an M.Ed. in Educational Policy and Research and is currently completing a Ph.D. in organizational leadership. I had never met Vice Chancellor Hynes-Wilson before our interview, but she was highly recommended to me by both Dr. Purdy and Karin Dalesky as someone whose insights

into the campus habitus would add greatly to my study. Our interview was held over Zoom© on March 25, 2021 and lasted approximately one hour. Hynes-Wilson described her campus role as “*expansive,*” one in which she works to develop and facilitate opportunities and access for student success. She noted that on her arrival on campus, she was “*tasked with everything related to pre-college outreach and the admissions process. As students transition into the campus community, their student life growth, development and then also career readiness... so we often joke that we are responsible from cradle to career and everything in between*” (M. Hynes-Wilson, personal communication, March 25, 2021).

**Navia Winderling:** During my interviews with both Karin Dalesky and Mentha Hynes-Wilson, Navia Winderling’s name was mentioned as a valuable source of information for my case study of UWT. Winderling is Senior Transfer Advisor in the UWT admissions office, but also a UWT alumni who attended as an “*older-than-average student.*” She graduated from UWT in 2014 with a BA in Communication before moving to Arizona State University to earn an M.Ed. in higher and postsecondary education in 2017. In speaking of students who are seeking to complete their degrees at UWT, Winderling indicated that “*there’s really no such thing as a traditional college student anymore,*” as the number of students who fit that traditional ‘college-age’ bracket—living on campus, and without outside responsibilities—gets smaller every year (N. Winderling, personal communication, February 12, 2021). Winderling’s insights into the needs of transfer students, and mature returners in particular, were indeed helpful in allowing me a better understanding of current (and future) campus efforts to meet them. I conducted the interview with Winderling over Zoom© on February 12, 2021; it lasted approximately fifty minutes.

## **Data Collection**

Data collected for this study came from a variety of sources. From my eight focal participants, I collected literacy narratives and questionnaires that gathered basic demographic information, such as age, class standing, and the number of years away from school. These documents were part of an informational packet given to participants when they agreed to take part in my study. The packet also included an interview consent form and information about the project. I later added culture sketch surveys to the original data, as well as two informal questions sent through email. I also conducted both group and individual interviews with the eight focal participants<sup>28</sup>.

In addition to interviews with my focal participants, I interviewed five members of UWT staff, faculty, and administration to gain insights into the past, present, and future of the university. I also gathered campus-wide demographic information on mature students across the 30+ years since the 1990 founding of UWT. As a part of my efforts to learn more about the history of the campus, I examined a large number of historical documents from the UW Seattle library archives, as well as some which were accessible through the UWT website, including oral history interviews<sup>29</sup> with founding members of campus faculty and some involved in launching the UWT campus. I discuss each of these data sources—and their collection methods—in the sections that follow.

## **Literacy Narratives**

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<sup>28</sup> I explain the chronology of these interviews in the subsection on interviews.

<sup>29</sup> These oral histories, both recordings and transcripts of interviews, are available through the UWT Digital Commons on the library website.

A written literacy narrative—one from each focal participant—was another source of data collected as part of this project. A narrative, particularly a first-person literacy narrative, holds much evidence regarding the ways that a writer uses language to construct their identity as a literate person. Ivanič (1998) called writing “an act of identity...deliberate, potentially permanent” (p. 32). Writing constructs an identity that the *author* wants the reader to see—a view not necessarily true or false, but a performance arranged for a particular audience. Writing scholars and researchers have long discussed the value of literacy narratives in understanding a student’s construction of literacy (Alexander, 2011; Kamler, 1999; Sharma, 2015; Soliday, 1994; Williams, 2006, 2018), as well as offering insights into how students understand their identities as literate persons. In writing, participants’ evaluations of their past experiences with literacy are often more reflexive, as they more thoughtfully craft their identities through the stories they choose to tell. Each of the literacy narratives sets up a story arc that carried the narrator over time and told a series of smaller stories that plotted their experiences within a larger life narrative (see Eldred & Mortensen, 1992; McLean & Pratt, 2006). At the same time, adding written narratives to other data I collected offered a chance to address the reliability of the data, as many stories/themes crossed texts—from literacy narrative to interview to culture sketch.

At the time they chose to join my study, each focal participant was informed about the purpose of the project<sup>30</sup> and signed a consent form for all data collection, including interviews. This document packet also included a writing prompt comprising a variety of topics they might consider in telling their literacy stories. Participants were informed that they could address any aspect of the prompt, or any other topic they chose. The writing prompt is paraphrased below:

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<sup>30</sup> Information about the project, consent forms, and writing prompts were either handed to participants in person or sent through email, with all narratives and signed consent forms returned through email.

*Please take a moment to reflect on some of the formative literacy experiences that shaped your sense of self as a literate person and write your reflections written as a 'story' and arranged in chronological order. What conclusions can you draw about your personal literacy history and its connection to your current experiences as a mature adult student?*

*Examples of the kinds of things you might want to discuss include:*

- *Early experiences with reading and writing*
- *The most difficult or enjoyable writing assignments you had in school*
- *Positive or negative comments on your writing from teachers or peers and how you feel about them*
- *Anything that you believe affected the way you see yourself as a literate person either in the past or present.*

*What I am curious about is what these events mean to you today. What kinds of connections do you see between your early literacy experiences and your experiences as a mature student who has returned to college? Has the experience been mostly positive? Negative? Is it what you expected? What have been some of the highlights or difficulties of your experience as a mature student? Do you feel these experiences have changed you in any way? (See Appendix A for complete prompt).*

In asking for these literacy narratives, I knew was asking very busy people to take on a writing project in addition to their coursework. However, each participant showed great enthusiasm for the project, offering thoughtfully written narratives about their early learning experiences and their return to higher education. Although the prompt requested approximately 500 words, the narratives I received ranged in length from two to four pages. I received them through email as

Word documents sent from each participant. In all cases save one<sup>31</sup>, I received the narrative well before the individual interview took place.

## **Interview**

Interviews played a vital role in my data collection. I included both group and individual interviews: the first, including multiple focal participants together; and the second, with dyadic interviews with each focal participant and myself. In addition to the two group interviews, the eight focal participants were also interviewed individually, one interview with each participant. These individual dyadic interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes each and were conducted over Zoom©, with seven of the eight interviews taking place between April and July 2020—after the first group interview in December 2019, but before the second held in December 2020. My purpose in combining the two interview formats, beyond merely offering a way to triangulate my data, was to add to its depth and a greater understanding of my participants' experiences as mature women returners, believing that each interview format would offer participants a different level of comfort and openness to sharing. Lambert and Loiselle (2007) noted that various contexts<sup>32</sup> in which interviews could take place—and with particular groups—could lead to differences in the type and depth of the information that participants shared. With this in mind, I decided that including both individual and group interviews would enrich my data by offering a variety of opportunities and formats for participants to share their stories.

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<sup>31</sup> In this one case, the last participant to join the project—Vera—had not yet completed her narrative by the pre-scheduled date of our interview; I received it about a week later.

<sup>32</sup> The types of context Lambert and Loiselle (2007) discussed included: common characteristics of participants, status hierarchies among participants, the flow of conversation and its sense as a social occasion (or its lack), and the degree of prior relationship between participants. They claimed that these contexts can lead to either more or less self-disclosure among participants (see p. 229).

Therefore, beginning with Holstein and Gubrium's (1995) view of an interview as an active "social encounter" and a site of knowledge *production*, rather than a method of knowledge *collection* (p. 3; see also Ikonen and Ojala, 2007; Talmy, 2010, 2011), I employed a semi-structured interview format to make space for dialogue. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) spoke of the co-construction of stories in interview spaces through the give and take of conversation (see also Clandinin, 2013). Holstein and Gubrium (1995) also viewed interview as dialogic, rather than monologic, echoing Bakhtinian polyphony, or the recognition of multiple voices in an "interpretively active" social interaction (p. 4) that creates stories that are unique and unrepeatable as they are constructed in dialogue between researcher and participant (Atkinson & Silverman, 1997). The consideration of these multiple voices directed all my interviews, as I sought to create space for all participants to position themselves within the dialogue and in relation to each other. Moffatt, Ryan, and Barton (2016) also addressed the concept of polyphony through what they described as an ongoing dialogue between researcher and participants made possible by returning interview data to participants for review, creating the opportunity for an ongoing negotiation of meaning between all parties involved in the dialogue. Through a process not unlike the construction of a narrative inquiry—a practice I followed by returning both the interview transcripts and the final narrative to all participants for correction and/or comments—the resultant extended dialogue also directed further interpretation of the interview data. I discuss this process more fully in the section on member checking later in this chapter.

### ***Group Interviews***

Two group interviews were conducted. The first was held in person on the afternoon of December 12, 2019, with five of the eight focal participants: Ironeyes, Lupita, Robin, Hazel, and

Jane. Shelly cancelled at the last minute because of a family emergency, Chantal and Vera<sup>33</sup> had not yet joined the group, and Diane<sup>34</sup> was unable to attend at the last minute due to illness. Vera did not take part in either of the group interviews as she joined the study two months after the second group interview<sup>35</sup>. The first in-person group interview was recorded with my iPhone (and a backup digital recorder, just in case); this interview lasted nearly three hours. The second group interview was conducted over Zoom© and lasted almost two hours. My original design for this project included one group interview with all participants. However, the spring 2020 stay-at-home orders in Washington State and the (still) ongoing public health concerns over the COVID-19 pandemic compelled me to alter this design in order to safely move forward with my data collection during an ongoing public health emergency with no apparent end date.

Group interviews, or focus groups, have roots in multiple disciplines: behavioral science, social and clinical psychology—even marketing (Stewart, Shamdasani, & Rook, 2007)—but it is the interactions that happen within a group that made this type of interview valuable for my project. With a theoretical *agencement* including Bakhtin’s (1981) concept of dialogism undergirding my study, my intent was to encourage dialogue *between* participants in the group interview, rather than simply asking them questions one after the other to collect information. With Paget’s (1983) claim that “knowledge accumulates with many turns at talk” in mind (p. 78), my goal was to generate knowledge through an extended conversation, producing stories

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<sup>33</sup> Vera joined the study in February 2021. She was the only participant not present during one of the two group interviews as she joined the study two months after the second group interview.

<sup>34</sup> Like the rest of my focal participant names, Diane is a pseudonym. Diane was later replaced by Vera when the focus of the project shifted to UWT students in December 2021. I discuss this change at greater length in the section titled: Participants.

<sup>35</sup> Due to the state of the world at the time and the lack of availability of the other focal participants who had already been involved in one of the two group interviews, I decided against scheduling a third group interview to include Vera. The rest had already heard and answered my questions, and because of this it would have been impossible to recreate a situation similar to the two group interviews already held. I discuss my solution to this problem in the subsection on individual interviews.

that would be unique and unrepeatable because of the interactions between participants within a certain context as participants positioned themselves in relation to each other through the stories they told (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008; Harré, Moghaddam, Cairnie, Rothbart, & Sabat, 2009; Peterson & Langellier, 2006; Sandhu, 2016; Wortham, 2001). Viewing interview in this way echoes Bakhtin's (1981, 1984) concept of polyphony, or the inclusion of multiple voices found within the "interpretively active" social interaction of conversation (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995, p. 4).

The format of group interviews—multiple participants with a single interviewer—offers a different field for knowledge production than a dyadic interview between the researcher and a single participant. Lambert and Loiselle (2007) noted that the interactions within a group interview can serve to "accentuate members' similarities and differences and give rich information about the range of perspectives and experiences" within the group (p. 229). Kruger, Rodgers, Long, and Lowy (2019) claimed the size of the group in an interview seems to influence self-disclosure.<sup>36</sup> With a small group size and similar ages, Guest, Namey, Taylor, Eley, and McKenna (2017) argued that such group dynamics will encourage conversation, making group interviews more relaxed experiences for participants. More importantly, Guest *et al.* claimed, participants in group interviews are often more comfortable with revealing personal information in a group than in a one-on-one setting with a researcher<sup>37</sup>. With this in mind, my desire to make my participants as comfortable as possible became a deciding factor for incorporating both group and individual interviews in my study. However, due to unforeseen

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<sup>36</sup> Kruger *et al.* (2019), in a study involving women undergraduates discussing body image, concluded that smaller group size—their focus groups ranged in size from 4-7—led to easier sharing on sensitive topics.

<sup>37</sup> Guest *et al.* (2017) did note, however, that the gender and race of the interviewer can make a difference in interview subjects' willingness to speak. Their study involved a white female researcher and a group of African American men discussing personal health information. They found that the men were more likely to share their concerns in a group than in an individual interview.

circumstances the day of the planned group interview (and the subsequent advent of the COVID-19 pandemic), I was forced to conduct two separate group interviews.

The first group interview took place on December 12, 2019 in the conference room of the Teaching and Learning Center (TLC) on the UWT campus and lasted approximately three hours. The location was chosen because of its easy proximity for participants, most of whom were already on campus for class presentations or final exams. To make it to feel more like a social occasion than a formal interview, I rearranged the room to create a more relaxed atmosphere and brought in coffee, tea, and snacks. I used an iPhone to record our conversation, but to guard against a possible technology failure, I used a small digital recorder as a backup. I also used this second recording device to assure that all voices could be understood since we were seated around a long table. Other data collected as part of the interview were field notes written immediately after the group interview<sup>38</sup>, as well as those written during transcription and later review.

Before this group interview began, I introduced a project information/timeline sheet to be sure they understood how the project would proceed (Appendix B). I explained that I would share the transcripts with them, sending them by email for their feedback or edits, including any other information about them written in my dissertation. This included their biographies and the two narrative chapters that cover the stories and other information gleaned from all collected data. I shared my research questions and the purpose of my study, then explained the simple ‘ground rules’ I had prepared for the interview: the need for a signed release and my hope they would “feel free to respond and ask questions of each other” in addition to answering mine (see

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<sup>38</sup> I refrained from taking notes during each of the interviews to stay “in the moment” with participants. I did, however, occasionally jot a question that came to mind while a participant was speaking, asking those questions later in the interview.

Appendix C for consent/release form). Once I assured that consent forms had been signed, I began the group interview by asking participants to introduce themselves to each other with a bit of background information: what they did before they returned to school, their educational background and current student status, and whatever else they wanted to share with the group about their families, previous or current employment, and hobbies (see Appendix D for full list of questions). With this first question, each participant answered in turn around the table. As the interview progressed, however, participants spoke up more randomly, but each one responded to each question before I moved on to the next. Occasionally, the one who had been speaking prompted the remaining participant (one who had not yet spoken) to respond. During the course of the interview, I intermittently asked clarifying questions or offered a story of my own in hopes of promoting conversation and eliciting more stories. This semi-structured dialogic approach was meant to encourage multivocality by creating a space for expanding our “shared stocks of knowledge” as mature women returners (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995, p. 71), as participants shared their experiences not only with me as researcher but in interaction with each other (Morgan, 2019). As I had hoped, the small group size in the first group interview created a sense of camaraderie over shared experiences and seemed to make participants more willing to tell their stories. Once this interview had been transcribed, it was sent to all participants for their feedback and edits.

The second group interview was conducted a year after the first group interview. It took place over Zoom© on the evening of December 29, 2020 and lasted approximately 90 minutes. Because of the upheaval of alternating lockdowns due to the pandemic and the challenges of arranging a time that all participants could be available (even over Zoom©), more than a year had passed since the first group interview. Three of the focal participants involved in the

interview used the Zoom© video feature: Shelly, Diane (who was replaced by Vera about a month later), and me, with Chantal joining by phone due to a weak internet connection. All participants in this group had already signed a consent/release form, completed their individual interviews, and approved the transcripts of those interviews.

Although this second group interview took place after all the individual interviews—except for Vera’s—I used the same questions and format as the first: I reiterated the project timeline and my plan for getting their feedback on the interview transcript, as well as drafts of the biographies and the narrative inquiry chapters. This interview proceeded in a more traditional<sup>39</sup> fashion than the first: I asked the questions and each participant answered in turn without much interaction between them—possibly because only two of the participants had any prior acquaintance.<sup>40</sup> As with the first interview, participants took turns answering questions; occasionally, Shelly and Chantal responded to each other’s comments. Diane was a bit more introverted than either Shelly or Chantal and did not know either of them outside the interview space. She answered questions readily, but with little detail and no real interaction with the other two participants<sup>41</sup>. This interview proceeded with each participant answering questions as if going in order around a table. As with the first group interview, transcripts were sent to all participants for their feedback and corrections.

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<sup>39</sup> By traditional, I mean more along the lines of a stereotypical interview where the interviewer asks a question and listens without response as the interviewees answer questions one at a time. A virtual platform like Zoom© is not conducive to the same give and take of face-to-face interviews—particularly for a group—so there was less dialogue between participants overall. Some participants, did, however, occasionally “speak to” the responses of others, just in a more orderly fashion than during a face-to-face conversation that sometimes includes talking over or interruptions.

<sup>40</sup> Chantal and Shelly were students in the same graduate program; Diane, the last of the three, was eventually replaced in the study once the project was refocused on UWT students, as she had never been a student there.

<sup>41</sup> I noted the same thing during our individual interview. Diane answered my questions easily, but without much detail and did not tell a single story. In the group interview, her limited responses may have been because of her introversion or because she didn’t know the other two participants. But her individual interview—at less than 30 minutes—was also the shortest of the interviews (25 minutes) with the focal participants. Possible reasons why are hard to gauge.

### *Individual Interviews*

In addition to the two group interviews, the eight focal participants were also interviewed individually, one interview with each participant. These individual dyadic interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes each and were conducted over Zoom©, with seven of the eight interviews taking place between April and July 2020—after the first group interview in December 2019, but before the second held in December 2020. The final individual interview with Vera was completed in February 2021, shortly after she joined the study to replace Diane.<sup>42</sup>

During each of the individual interviews, the first five to ten minutes were spent “catching up” and discussing world (and family) events. For example, in my interview with Jane (who had taken her U.S. citizenship oath the day before our April 2020 interview), we discussed the effect of the virus on her workplace, the rapid shift in moving classes online the previous month, the organizational challenges of the citizenship ceremony and her feelings about her family’s inability to attend the citizenship ceremony due to COVID-19 social-distancing policies. In a similar fashion, each of the other interviews began by renewing a human connection between myself and each participant—sorely lacking in those early months of COVID-19 “lockdowns”—and discussing the oddities of video communication before we moved on to the interview questions.

I began each interview with the same list of questions, opening with an invitation to “tell me about yourself.” I then asked participants about their reasons for returning to higher education; a critical experience they had on returning to the classroom and how they felt about it; their expectations of higher education before returning; and experiences they had in the classroom that they believed were different from what a ‘traditional’ student might face. I also

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<sup>42</sup> Vera joined the project in late January 2021.

asked about their prior literacy experiences and how those might have affected the way they viewed themselves as a returning student. And finally, I asked about the differences they saw in themselves and their lives as a result of their return to the university (see Appendix E for list of questions). Additionally, if a story told in their literacy narrative was repeated during the interview, I asked for clarification or more details. I also occasionally offered stories of my own in response, as a way to encourage more stories.

These individual interviews proceeded as open-ended conversations between the participant and me. Once a question was asked, I listened for the answer, offering clarification of the question if it was requested. If the participants' response brought up a story of my own, I shared it as their own response wound down—just as I would in a 'normal' conversation. More than once, a participant told a story they had included in their literacy narrative but added details in one telling that were not in the other. When this happened, I asked about the differences. For example, Lupita told a story in her interview that she had also included in her literacy narrative, regarding an elementary school track event in which her entire class stood and cheered when she won second place. But because she didn't understand English, she didn't even know it was a competition—she was just running. Although she had told the story with much of the same descriptive detail in both the interview and her literacy narrative, I asked about the one major difference between the two versions: in her interview, she ventriloquized the Spanish-speaking voices of her cousins who told her that she won the race—something she entirely glossed over in the written narrative (not just the Spanish, but their announcement that she won). She had no explanation for the difference and laughed when I pointed out that she spoke her cousins' words

in Spanish<sup>43</sup>, rather than the English she used during the rest of the interview. Incorporating such differences between the data sources allowed me to create a more nuanced story and offered a deeper understanding of the participants' experience.

During each of the individual interviews, when I felt we had exhausted the response to one question, I moved on to the next. Occasionally, one of the questions I had planned to ask had already been answered, so I skipped over that question and moved through my list. This happened more than once with Chantal and Lupita; I believe this is at least partially because of their outgoing personalities. Both of them like to talk and offered expansive answers to my questions. This compared to Jane, Ironeyes, and Shelly, who, although they typically offered a story in response, stuck very close to the topic of the question asked and asked me at the end of each response whether they had answered my question. I would describe these three as introverts (although Jane is less so) but they were also more concerned than the rest about making sure they had specifically answered my questions and were doing the interview "right"<sup>44</sup>.

Once we reached the end of my questions, I asked participants if they had anything else they wanted to add that I hadn't asked, and then asked them to choose a pseudonym to be known by in my dissertation. I also asked them to tell me the reason(s) they chose the names they did. At that point, the rest of our time was taken up with the kind of small talk and conversation closing cues that are typical of the end of a conversation or phone call, what Schegloff and Sacks (1999) described as a 'warrant'. For example, the participants (or I) often said things like:

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<sup>43</sup>Lupita will occasionally slip into Spanish when we talk (she calls it her 'Spanglish,' and knows I usually understand her—as long as she doesn't speak too quickly). As we talked through the differences in the two stories, I wondered aloud in the interview whether she used Spanish then because that was the language of the memory. As a Psychology major, she found that idea fascinating. This was a story I wanted very much to address in this dissertation, but I could find no real connection with my research questions; I'm pleased to include it here.

<sup>44</sup> Knowing these women, the characteristics of their responses did not surprise me. Looking at interview responses through the lens of personality and relationship of participant and interviewer could make for a fascinating future study.

“Thanks so much. I’ll let you get back to that paper,” or “Oh sorry, I’ve got to go. I can hear my kids fighting downstairs” as a way to end the conversation. Then each interview closed with a final exchange of good-byes.

### ***UWT Stakeholders***

In addition to interviews with the eight focal participants, I also conducted interviews with five UWT administrators, staff, and faculty: one interview with each, recorded and initially transcribed by Zoom©, each lasting approximately 45-60 minutes. Each interview began with a question about the individual participant’s position/s on campus. The questions that followed were primarily open-ended, guided by the answers they gave to my initial question, stories they told in the ebb and flow of conversation, and/or themes that surfaced during focal participants’ interviews. For those participants who had been at the campus since the early years of its existence, I also asked questions about campus history and issues raised during my archival research, based on their experiences of the time for those that were on campus during the first decade (1990-2000). My goal in these interviews was to discover more about the history and mission of the university over time, especially as they concern mature returners, as well as to discover any campus-wide strategies concerned with supporting them. As with the interviews conducted with my focal participants, I corrected the transcripts by listening/watching the recorded interviews and taking notes on the interview at that time.

### ***Challenges of Zoom© Interviews***

Addressing the conversational/dialogic differences of interviewing over Zoom© was vital in research focused on dialogic narratives. Working from Talmy’s (2010; 2011) stance on

interview as a collaborative site of knowledge *production* rather than the more traditional notion of interview as a method of knowledge *collection*, as well as his view of interview as a social practice (see also Ikonen & Ojala, 2007), it was clear that moving the interview site to a virtual platform like Zoom© could make a difference in the way participants collaborate within it. Archibald, Ambagtsheer, Casey, and Lawless (2019) noted that Zoom© offers a great deal of convenience and flexibility to interviews—as compared to the challenges of trying to schedule a face-to-face interview with multiple persons—however, Kurzius (2021) argued that the normal give and take of a face-to-face conversation is “derail[ed]” over Zoom© (para. 1). As an example, she noted that efforts at turn-taking or contemporaneous comments that are common in face-to-face conversation too often fail in virtual conversations, which then fill with apologetic exchanges like, ‘I’m sorry. No, you go ahead’—something I have found all too true in countless Zoom© meetings over the past two years. Muted microphones for those not currently speaking also keep spontaneous comments—frequent in ordinary conversation—to a minimum, meaning that there can be no dialogic response to contemporaneous remarks that are never heard. Tannen (2020, October 20) described this “cooperative overlap” of speech as a form of agreement or encouragement to a conversation partner (para. 9), a conversational signal of a listener’s interest and enthusiasm for the topic. Unfortunately, with a platform like Zoom©, this overlap looks more like an disruption, and words of encouragement, agreement, or further observations are less frequently offered to prevent interrupting a speaker. Though Zoom’s© chat function can sometimes bridge the gap here, it went unused by participants in the second group interview. They answered questions in a straightforward manner, but—with the exception of two conversational interactions between Shelly and Chantal (who knew each other outside the interview space)—participants rarely directly addressed each other. Whether it was because of

the format or lack of acquaintance, the absence of some of the conversational give-and-take in the second group interview attested to Kurzius' (2021) discussion of the differences a virtual platform like Zoom© makes in a group setting.

The Zoom© platform includes a transcription feature—something that turned out to be not quite as useful as it sounds. Because it is a machine transcription, its accuracy is limited, and much time was spent correcting the transcriptions before I could work with them. Both group interviews were transcribed by hand<sup>45</sup>; individual interviews were transcribed within the Zoom© program, after which I viewed the video-recorded interviews to correct the machine transcriptions. This need for correction did, however, allow me a pre-analysis of the transcripts even as I corrected the texts—taking notes on my observations as I worked. Once the transcripts had been corrected, I read through them several times to mark the stories within them, taking notes and reflecting on their content (the “what” of the interview), as well as the constructions of identity and meaning they contained (the “how” of language constructions used by each participant). I also made note of themes that emerged from the data, with remarks about belonging and becoming standing out the most. As a result, I focused on these two themes as I chose the stories to include in the narrative inquiry.

### **Privacy Issues**

To protect the privacy of my focal participants, I used pseudonyms to identify all written texts, as well as in labeling all digital files and paper copies of any received information.<sup>46</sup> For

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<sup>45</sup> The Zoom© transcription feature was apparently not able to keep up with the multiple voices—since one of the participants was using only the audio from her phone—or something else happened to interfere. Either way, the transcription never arrived, leaving me no choice but to transcribe the second group interview by hand from the video recording.

<sup>46</sup> Only demographic surveys and consent forms retain participants' legal names. However, neither are labeled with their corresponding pseudonyms, so there is no discoverable connection between the two identities. I asked campus stakeholders if they would prefer to use pseudonyms but all of them gave me permission to use their real names and titles, instead.

example, on digital copies of participants' literacy narratives, I first changed the file name to their chosen pseudonym then saved each to a file on my password-protected computer. For the few who had submitted a written narrative before their pseudonym was chosen, this was done after the fact. To protect the anonymity of all participants, the original files were then deleted,<sup>47</sup> leaving me with only the renamed files.

Zoom© recordings are typically stored in the cloud for 90 days before deletion; however, as soon as transcripts were made available, I downloaded all files (audio, video, transcription) into a folder on my computer, then deleted them from Zoom©. After converting the transcripts to Word documents, I used Word's find feature to change participant names to their chosen pseudonym and renamed each file accordingly. Because these cannot be changed, the only remaining record of participants' actual names is embedded in the recordings of the interviews. Finally, I printed copies of the transcripts as a final backup.

### **Other Data Sources**

In addition to literacy narratives and the individual and group interview data, I also gathered several other types of data from focal participants. In these next sections, I discuss each of them, individually.

### ***Demographic Questionnaires***

To gather some basic information about each of my focal participants, I used demographic questionnaires, given to each person when they agreed to take part in the study.

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<sup>47</sup> Once pseudonyms were chosen, I made a hand-written list of participants names matched to their pseudonyms—just to keep the names straight—but as I became more familiar with the data, I no longer needed the list. At that point, I shredded it and all further work with the texts was done using pseudonyms.

These questionnaires were a holdover from the pilot project, but they still proved valuable even after the project changed. Information gathered included: name, age group, contact information, student status (graduate or undergraduate), expected graduation date, and educational background. I also asked about the number of years they had been away from education, any college experience after high school, current employment, status as either a full or part-time student, and finally their reasons for returning to college (see Appendix F for questionnaire).

### ***Culture Sketches***

Alongside the information gathered earlier in the project, I added a culture sketch designed by Hays (2013), which asked participants to consider a variety of cultural influences and how they “shape what you think, feel, and do” (p. 14). As written, Hays’ survey examined “cultural influences and intersecting identities that impact our life experiences” (p. 14) through questions that allow the responder to understand themselves as part of either a dominant or non-dominant group based on influences or identities grouped by: age/generation, disability status, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, indigenous status, national origin, and citizenship status. This survey also included questions that asked the participant to personally consider each of these influences, which offered me a window into how they viewed their own intersecting social identities. Much of this information was used to assist me in writing the biographies that introduced focal participants earlier in this chapter, but it also guided my interpretations of their stories in later chapters. A greater understanding of how they view their own identities made my own interpretation and understanding of their stories richer. I adapted Hays’ survey questions to better suit the purposes of my research involving mature women returners (for example, adjusting the ‘age/generational influences’ to one that viewed young

adults as a dominant age group among students and mature adults as the non-dominant<sup>48</sup>). I sent the culture sketch to all participants, asking if they would be willing to complete it and received positive responses from all of them. All participants returned their answers by email by the end of March 2021. Ironeyes, Hazel, Lupita, Vera, Chantal, and Jane used the survey form itself to answer the questions; Robin and Shelly did not use the form but responded to the surveys by writing narratives that addressed most of the topics raised by the survey questions<sup>49</sup> (see Appendix G for culture sketch)

### ***Email Exchanges and Informal Conversations***

In addition to the formally collected data described previously, I also included story data that arose during informal, unplanned conversations with some participants (Shelly, Lupita, Ironeyes). Some of these email conversations were initiated by the participant (Shelly, Lupita), with another initiated by Ironeyes during a tutoring session. Shelly and Ironeyes both lost family members during 2020 and, knowing that I had lost my mother the year I returned to school, they turned to me for help in staying on task with their assignments during this difficult time. Other exchanges took place via responses to additional questions I emailed to all participants, based on ideas that occurred to me in either data analysis or through my readings. I also sent two additional questions to all participants over email:

1. As a mature student, what aspect of your social identity enters the classroom first?

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<sup>48</sup> In a survey meant to examine identities that impact life experiences of mature women returners in higher education, age clearly identifies whether one is a member of a dominant or nondominant group on campus.

<sup>49</sup> Robin and Shelly each sent their responses through email. Robin addressed the survey questions directly, for the most part. Shelly's narrative was a bit more like a life story. Although she addressed most of the questions in the culture sketch, she passed over a few even as she offered information I hadn't asked for.

2. Can you tell me something about the kind of support you needed as a mature student, whether support you received that was really invaluable to you, or support that you needed that you didn't feel was available to you?

I printed the email exchanges with responses to these questions, as well as those containing more informal email conversations.

### *Field Notes*

The final data sources included in my study are reading and field notes, reflective journal entries following interviews and informal conversations with participants over Zoom®, as well as my thoughts on participant responses to emailed questions. I also recorded my reflections on readings of interview transcripts and literacy narratives during multiple re-readings.

Because I worked with several of these women as a writing tutor, stories occasionally rose in writing consultations that I thought would be valuable to include in my research; this happened twice. Both times, I asked for permission to include the information shared with me and it was verbally granted. With those conversations, I took notes either during the conversation (with Jane) or after (with Ironeyes). Some of their remarks during these conversations (and my reflections on them) were included in the narrative inquiry in Chapter Four. For informal conversations that took place over Zoom®, there are no recordings or transcriptions, but I did keep field notes of these conversations. I also have extensive notes regarding my observations during my review of transcripts, literacy narratives, and culture sketches.

Many of the insights and ideas that appear in my field notes and reflective journal became part of my description, evaluation, and analysis in the two narrative inquiry chapters, adding to the “thick description” that Geertz’ (1973) discussed in his work on ethnography, as well as becoming part of my narration of the larger story. Clandinin and Connelly (2000), spoke

of the incorporation of these multiple data sources into preliminary “research tests” that are then “fit[ted] together into an overall narrative text” (p. 139) as the researcher moves throughout the three-dimensional research spaces of a narrative inquiry. In this study, the various field texts I collected played a role in crafting the texture and nuance of the final narrative.

### *Continuing the Conversations: Member Checking*

Once the first full draft of the two narrative inquiry chapters was complete (i.e., the major analytic pieces), I emailed the chapters, as well as the individual biographies, to all participants for comments and corrections. Although they had already reviewed and approved the interview transcripts for both the individual and group interviews, this review was meant to gain insights into their thoughts on the constructed story that incorporated dialogue that—in some cases—had not actually taken place.<sup>50</sup> My intent here was not just to validate the information or my interpretation of the stories that had taken place across the data, but to be able to incorporate their feedback into an ongoing discussion within the narrative inquiry. I received comments from each, as well as a few corrected facts which I then incorporated into the inquiry chapters where applicable. Since all the comments I received were positive<sup>51</sup>, I was assured I had covered the concerns of my participants well.

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<sup>50</sup> While I discuss this at greater length in a later subsection of this chapter, it is worth mentioning here that the constructed dialogues in the narrative inquiry in chapter four sometimes happened between people who were never actually in the room together. These dialogues were based on themes discussed across interviews, as well as other data sources, including field notes, emails and other notes, and literacy narratives. All of these data sources were incorporated into one restoried text (McCormack, 2000, 2017), as well as the analysis in chapter five. The comments appear dialogic because they were all made within dialogue. See the subsection on narrative inquiry for a larger discussion of restorying

<sup>51</sup> Each of the participants’ responses went beyond just acceptance of what I had written. All commented on how well represented they felt in the narrative and how well I had captured their voices and concerns. Since this was my intent in the writing, I was pleased.

I also sent interview transcripts to all faculty, staff, and administrators I interviewed, seeking their corrections and feedback. Since these transcripts were each about 40 pages long, I marked content that I considered potentially useful to my project to reduce the amount of reading each would need to do. Dr. Purdy was the only one of the five who responded initially, but the comments I received from her were positive and encouraging. In a second round of member checking, I sent out the completed subsections written with the interview data, asking for corrections or comments<sup>52</sup>.

### **Archival Research: Oral Histories, Institutional Documents, and Student Data**

In order to develop a clear image of UWT as a campus, I gathered as many historical campus documents as was possible while the libraries were closed during the COVID-19 pandemic. My purpose in examining these documents was to discover, as much as possible, the original design, mission, and purpose of the university. Since UWT owes its very existence to an act of the Washington State legislature<sup>53</sup>, legislative documents discussing its founding were included in my search. However, since the university's original design—to offer baccalaureate degree completion and graduate education to “place and timebound” upper division transfer students (Carwein *et al.*, 2001)—was changed by a second legislative edict (in 2006) to expand access to lower division students, accessing these additional documents allowed me to examine some of the policy changes made, as well as the effects these changes had on the campus. Much of this information is incorporated into the site study in Chapter Three.

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<sup>52</sup> In the email, I told each that if they were satisfied with my commentary no response was necessary. I received comments from four of the five—all positive.

<sup>53</sup> Although I will discuss this at greater length in chapter three, I will note here that the founding purpose of UW Tacoma (and UW Bothell, as well) was to address previously unmet need for baccalaureate and graduate education among place- and timebound adults in the Puget Sound area (Carwein *et al.*, 2001; Olswang, 2004).

### ***Oral Histories and Web Resources***

In addition to legislative and other foundational campus documents, I examined oral histories compiled by UWT librarians for the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the campus (2020), including transcripts of interviews with founding faculty, staff, and administrators, as well as a few members of the Higher Education Coordinating Board (HECB) that was highly involved in the founding of the campus. I searched the UWT website for documents, for example, campus strategic plans, articles written by former campus administrators, minutes from faculty meetings, and reports on campus self-studies. I also discovered news articles published on the campus website regarding changes in student composition and university focus over time. These and other materials helped me piece together a rough sketch of the character of the university over time. Once gathered, I performed a textual analysis focused primarily on content, but, in the case of one UWT document in particular—the transfer student guidebook available on the UWT website—I also examined it rhetorically, as a way to assess its effectiveness in supporting its stated audience<sup>54</sup>.

### ***UW Library: Archival Documents***

With the COVID-19 pandemic raging, campus libraries were closed, making access to archival documents impossible. Because of this, my document searches were limited to what I was able to discover through the UWT campus website. This meant that there were resources I could see in the UW library catalogue but could not gain direct access to—at least not for about 15 months. Some of these materials included the *UWT Chancellor's Book*, a collection of 26

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<sup>54</sup> I examine this document at length in Chapter Three.

boxes of materials housed in the UW Seattle library archives. In early summer 2021, however, Serin Anderson, the UWT Collections librarian, put me in contact with John Bolcer, University Archivist for Special Collections at UW Seattle, who, on multiple occasions over that summer, entered the closed library buildings and scanned several hundred pages of documents from the UWT collection for my use. His efforts on my behalf made it possible for me to access to some of the documents I was hoping to find. Although not as hands-on as I would have preferred—particularly when it often takes a deep search to find materials you don’t know you need until you find them—having any archival access at all during the still-locked-down summer of 2021 was more than I could have hoped for. It was also extremely valuable in helping me form a fuller picture of UWT’s history and habitus. These materials, along with the UWT Oral Histories and web documents available through the UWT Digital Commons and campus website, form the foundation for the campus history laid out in Chapter Three.

In September 2021, Serin Anderson discovered additional materials<sup>55</sup> in the UWT library’s Private Reserve Collection regarding the founding of the campus. These materials had not yet been catalogued but she made them available to me, bringing them to my office on a cart and assuring me I could keep them as long as needed. Combined with the rest of the material I found, I feel as well informed on campus history as I could be given the constraints of the pandemic. Much of this material is also referred to in Chapter Three.

### ***Additional Data: UWT Student Demographics***

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<sup>55</sup> Because of my status as a UWT employee, I was able to gain access to materials that may not have been so readily available to ‘regular’ students at that point in time due to library closures. UWT librarian Serin Anderson found this uncatalogued material and left it for me in my campus office, requiring only a trip downtown to look it over. I can’t thank the librarians on both campuses enough for making so many of these otherwise inaccessible texts available to me.

Additional data collected for this project includes demographic data regarding UWT students from the founding of the campus in 1990 through the 2020-2021 academic year<sup>56</sup>. This information was shared with me by Alice Few in the Office of Institutional Research. The data included numbers of enrolled students, categorized according to age group, gender, class standing, student status (graduate or undergraduate), full or part-time status, and school or program. One of my co-workers in the TLC is a statistician who was a great help in helping me sort through and understand the data. With the information given to me as raw data contained in Excel files, she and I created pivot tables<sup>57</sup> to break down this information in order to answer questions about it. For example, one of the questions I sought to answer regarded the percentage of mature women students 35 and over on the UWT campus, and whether that percentage had changed—either rising or falling—over the 30 years of the campus’ existence. This information can be found in tables included in the intrinsic case study of UWT in chapter three. I have also integrated this information and more into the conclusion and implications section of chapter six.

### **Data Analysis**

The methods of analysis I employed in this study are two-fold; however, my use of both is inspired in part by Bakhtin’s (1981) theory of the novel. Beginning from this inspiration, I primarily considered Kim’s (2016) description of the first two facets of Bakhtin’s theory: *polyphony*, or the acknowledgment of the multiplicity of voices in every interaction, past and

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<sup>56</sup> Student demographic information covering five years was originally gathered in Fall 2019 with the assistance of Alice Few. In winter 2021, I widened the time span to include student demographic information from the campus opening in 1990 through 2020—all the years then available.

<sup>57</sup> A pivot table is a tool built into the Microsoft Excel program that allows a user to interact with data by extracting and summarizing some aspect of it. For example, the data I was given by the UWT Office of Institutional Research contained student enrollment numbers from 1990-2020. It included numbers of all enrolled students by age which made it possible for me to separate out all students age 30 and over. Using a pivot table, I was able to select certain groups of students according to specific characteristics, such as full or part-time attendance, graduate or undergraduate status, or gender. This enabled me to count them and compare numbers across years.

present, without privileging any of them; and 2) *chronotype*, or the awareness of time and space found within each story which authenticates the experiences of each participant. Polyphony, Kim claimed, makes space for each of the many voices that come to live in “the researcher’s consciousness” where they are “treated as equals and engage in a dialogue” that becomes part of the narrative inquiry (p. 74). Chronotype, Bakhtin (1984) asserted, is the place “where dialogues happen” both in time and location (p. 246). Kim (2016) spoke of the value of these features of what she called Bakhtin’s theory of “‘novelness<sup>58</sup>’” in understanding lived experience through narrative inquiry, as it “create[es] the open-endedness of story,” connecting participant and reader, as well as “one story to another” (p. 73).

With a focus on polyphony, I listened for the voices present in each dialogic interchange, naming them where I could, but always searching for the answering response found within focal participants’ words. In considering chronotype—as discussed by Wall and Thomson (1993)—I looked for “an open attitude toward the future... [a process of] *becoming*,” rather than a “fixed being,” that “take[s] place” in an open future where participants allowed aspects of their identity to be (dis)placed, then (re)placed (p. 49; emphasis added). Wall and Thomson also tied the third aspect of novelness—*carnival*—or the humorous (and occasionally vulgar) aspects of a life turned upside down—to becoming. Kim (2016), however, viewed carnival a bit differently—and for my purposes, more usefully—calling it the idea that “everyone is an active participant, openness is celebrated, hierarchy is invisible, and norms are reversed” (p. 75). In employing these aspects of novelness as the foundation of my analysis, I was able to consider the context of

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<sup>58</sup> Holquist (1990) claimed that what was often translated as “literariness” in Bakhtin’s writing about the novel should be translated instead as “novelness.” Holquist understood this term to mean “the study of any cultural activity that has treated language as dialogic” (p. 68) and takes a view of language, not as a matter of “literary stylistics” but as a matter of epistemology or social dynamics (p. 70). Scholars such as Bruhn & Lundquist (2001), Hoy (1992), and Kim (2016) echoed Holquist’s claim that the concepts of polyphony, chronotype, and carnival (what Bakhtin describes as aspects of the novel) are the ways that ‘novelness’ presents.

both the dialogue shared between participants and myself and the larger context of the stories they shared. Undergirded by my theoretical *agencement*, I examined each aspect of the stories within the larger narratives for their “anticipation and ... response to *other voices*,” whether those ‘in the room’ or those who had spoken into their lives before the current dialogue (Frank, 2005, p. 966). This aspect of the analysis is most evident in chapter five.

### **Viewing Stories as Data**

Stories ground us in lived experience, whether our own or that of others, enabling us to share in and make meaning of their experiences—meaning that can then be passed along to others: teaching, admonishing, entertaining, enlightening. We theorize our experience through story into a meaning that can be shared with others (Erasga, 2010). Stories carry experience and its lessons from one person to another, allowing the teller to use imagination to craft and shape their past experiences to meet the needs of the present. Stories can also act as “tool[s] for change” (Bheenuck, 2010, p. 71), not only for the listener, but for the teller, interpreting and reinterpreting the events or experiences of a life to create new meanings with each telling. Psychology researcher Paul Slovic, in speaking of the value of shared stories of experience versus the too-easily-ignorable parade of numbers that represent the human costs of the COVID-19 pandemic, stated, “Statistics are human beings with [the] tears dried off...And that’s dangerous because we need tears to motivate us.” (Wan & Shammas, 2020, December 21, para. 14). In his study regarding the phenomenon of mass numbers of dead or suffering persons equaling a lowered human response, Slovic named the reason that we need stories to make a situation clear to us: numbers alone don’t make clear the consequences of disease or the effects of policy. It is the stories of individuals that will move us to empathy, offer us a view of another

person’s situation, or change our actions when and where change is needed. Numbers—no matter how large or how they are presented—simply don’t wield that power.

It is story that moves us.

### **Narrative Inquiry – (Re)Storying Stories**

The concept of restorying is broadly used across the disciplines—from psychology to sociology, to education and instructional sciences, nursing, and literature (see Appendix H for a brief bibliography of research that employed restorying as part of its process). Although—like most terms used across disciplines—restorying does not carry the same meaning in each, the concept of reconstructing a story from component stories or incorporating multiple or marginalized viewpoints is similar. Nesheeda, Abdullah, Krauss, and Ahmed (2019) spoke of the variety of strategies that could be used by researchers to present the data they gather through narrative research, “reorganizing and analyzing” various story elements, then “rewriting it within a chronological order” (p. 2; see also Ollerenshaw & Cresswell, 2002)—essentially creating a new story from component parts. For example, Dubek (2020) spoke of Toni Morrison’s use of restorying in writing her novel, *Beloved*, as “employ[ing] multiple points of view” in constructing “a richly textured” story. Morrison, Dubek noted, spoke of her work as “literary archeology” (p. 842), narrating a reconstructed story that incorporated not only viewpoints drawn from historical documents and autobiographical narratives, but her own imaginings to re-live the stories and flesh out the narrative. Jarvis, Lindhart, Mthiyane, and Ruus (2021) discussed restorying as an “empathetic-reflective-dialogical” tool of transformation (p. 1), describing it as a process of engaging in a “self-dialogue, self-narrative, and in a Community in Conversation” (p.

1). At its heart, restorying is an act of narration—telling a new story through the interpretation of stories told by others.

With an eye to including multiple voices and points of view and creating reflexive empathy in myself as researcher, as well as in the final reader, I focused on the ways that narrative inquiry uses restorying as a method of analysis. Webster and Mertova (2007) stated that narrative inquiry “attempts to capture the ‘whole story,’” as opposed to other research methods that seek to understand finer points of subject positions or phenomena (p. 3-4). Narrative inquiry seeks to understand lived experience. Trahar (2009) claimed that narrative inquiry is grounded in the understanding that human beings “come to understand and give meaning to our lives through story” (p. 1; see also Andrews, Squire, & Tambokou, 2008). Bochner (2007) suggests that these stories rise not from “knowledge *about* the past...[but] knowledge *from* the past” (p. 203; emphasis in the original). In viewing the stories my participants shared as ‘knowledge from the past,’ I chose narrative inquiry as one of the two primary methods for conducting, crafting, and sharing the knowledge gained through my research.

Kim (2016) argued that narrative inquiry is “inherently interdisciplinary,” incorporating concepts and theory from multiple disciplines (p. 260), making it a perfect fit for a project that incorporates inspiration and ideas from not only narrative studies and discourse analysis, education, psychology, creative writing, composition, and rhetorical studies, but also philosophy and even biology. As both method of analysis *and* the final product of the research process, narrative inquiry takes story as its raw data and interprets that data to create a *new* product: another story, complete with voices, characters, performances, and dialogue crafted from the original stories—essentially re-storying participants’ stories of experience (Clandinin, 2013, 2020; Ollerenshaw & Cresswell, 2002; Pelias, 2019). Gordon, McKibbin, Vasudevan, and Vinz

(2007) claimed that “the narrative telling itself becomes” the way we reach understanding of the experience it speaks of (p. 326). Acting as narrator to the stories I heard has brought me a greater understanding of the experiences of my participants, at the same time creating space to reflect on my own. And incorporating those retold stories into dialogue also enabled me to keep the context of the data intact.

Situated in relationship, narrative inquiry is deeply reflective. It explores *and* constructs narratives by incorporating an imaginative process that moves in and out through a “three-dimensional narrative inquiry space” that incorporates time, place, and relationship into an examination of a story within its context, even as it offers space for researcher reflexivity and creativity (Clandinin, 2013, 2020; see also Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). As a narrative inquirer, I acted as the narrator who stories the research journey *and*, at the same time, a subjective participant in the (re)storying process. In this way, I am both “teller and interpreter” of the stories within the restoried product (Gordon *et al.*, 2007, p. 327).

Narrative inquiry views its subjects’ experience through a kaleidoscope of methods but focuses in particular on stories of everyday experience (Bamberg, 2006; DeFina & Georgakopoulou, 2012; Georgakopoulou, 2006; Ochs & Capps, 2001). The stories I examined lived within the larger narratives constructed in dialogues between myself and participants. These dialogues unfolded in interviews, as well as in narratives written to a prompt or in answer to a question. In the narrative-based chapters of this dissertation—sections of Chapter Three where I introduce interviews with campus stakeholders, as well as Chapters Four and Five—my analysis was primarily influenced by Bakhtin’s dialogism (1984, 1986). I also incorporated aspects of McCormack’s (2004) framework, examining participants’ narratives for the following features (also cited by Kim, 2016; Frank, 2005, 2010):

- Stories embedded within the larger narratives.
- Words or phrases that mark the construction of identity by the speaker, particularly the “I-positions” or “Voices of Others/Inner Others<sup>59</sup>” spoken of by Aveling, Gillespie, and Cornish (2015).
- Dialogic features, such as responses to the researcher or other participants, reported speech within a speaker’s words, reported attitudes or actions of another (or even a ‘past self’), etc.

In chapter three, in addition to including voices of those who participated in the campus 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary oral history project, I (re)story dialogic exchanges with five UWT staff, faculty, and administrators, examining those primarily for content. In chapter four, I also emphasize the thematic content of my focal participants’ stories as shared in both individual and group interviews to construct a secondary narrative with the collated data that features the stories of belonging shared with me by participants. In chapter five, I switch the focus to individual focal participants’ stories of becoming, examining their constructions of a student identity within the UWT community, primarily through written narratives<sup>60</sup>.

### ***Adding an Autoethnographic Slant***

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<sup>59</sup> These ‘I-positions’ are not fixed but change according to context. For example, I might speak as a woman, a mother, a student, an employee, etc.—and this will change according to context. The voices of others/inner others are seen in such linguistic constructions as: direct and indirect quotes of those we offer voice to; ventriloquation, which involves speaking with the voices and/or discourse of others; and echoing the words we hear around us daily—from books, teachers, cultural references, etc. (Aveling *et al.*, 2015, p. 673).

<sup>60</sup> When the same topic was discussed in both written narratives and individual interviews, details from both texts were integrated into the dialogue in chapter five: the interview text occasionally added additional insights or more lively language in discussing the same topic as the written text. Integrating corresponding data across sources made for a richer interpretation and better reading.

Working hand in glove with narrative inquiry, autoethnography is the second method I employed in this study. Autoethnography can take a multitude of forms: performance (Spry, 2016); collaborative (Chang, Ngunjiri, & Hernandez, 2013); first-person narrative (Ellis, 1995); reflexive ethnographies (Ellis, 2004); poetry (Clough, 2000); video diaries or vlogs (Holliday, 2004); and layered accounts that “focus on the author’s experience alongside data... [through the inclusion of] vignettes, reflexivity, multiple voices, and introspection” (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2010, p. 6 ; see also Ellis, 1991, 2004)—all through a focus on lived experience and the intent of representing voices and knowledge not often considered through more traditional social science methods. Through addressing and acknowledging the voices, backgrounds, and subjectivities of both subject(s) and researcher, autoethnographers interpret and share storied experiences, as well as exploring the relationship between them through the construction of yet another story. In this way, the lived experiences of both researcher and participant can be presented through autoethnography, with the goal of writing and research becoming a “socially-just and socially-conscious act” intent on changing the world (Ellis *et al.*, 2011, p. 273; see also Denzin, 2014).

As a member of the culture I studied—mature women returners at UWT—I took an active role in interviews by sharing stories of my own; writing a literacy narrative; completing a culture sketch; and writing my own answers to the additional questions I asked the rest of my participants. Including myself in the data collection and incorporating an autoethnographic perspective on my research questions allowed me to acknowledge and embrace my experiences and subjectivities as a researcher, even as I investigated the experiences and subjectivities of each participant (Adams, Holman Jones, & Ellis, 2015; Canagarajah, 2012). In restorying the stories shared by my participants and myself through this amalgamation of narrative inquiry and

autoethnography, my goal was to extend equal weight to all voices, beyond even my own and those of my participants. I also sought to acknowledge the multivocality of our speech—whether those other voices were parents, spouses, partners or other family members, faculty, staff, or any of the others who influenced our lived experience as mature women returners at UWT. By merging the data from individual interviews with the group interviews that included most participants<sup>61</sup>, an additional layer of multivocality was added to my data, making the analysis and final autoethnographic narrative inquiry richer than with personal interviews alone.

### ***Listening to the Data***

As I began to work with my data, I found myself blending narrative inquiry and autoethnography into what Eisenbach (2016) described as an “autoethnographic narrative inquiry” (p. 1). Autoethnographic narrative inquiry allows the researcher to listen, to interpret, and to retell the stories that participants share with them—integrating the tools of both narrative inquiry and autoethnography into analysis—even as they acknowledge that, on another day and through a different set of choices, the stories chosen and told could be entirely different. The amalgam of autoethnography and narrative inquiry forms a three-dimensional inquiry space that moves in and out of the data, as well as forward and backward through time, space/place, and relationship.

In writing the autoethnographic inquiry chapters, I included data gathered across sources into each chapter: interviews with campus stakeholders in chapter three, individual and group interview and written narrative data into chapters four and five. During the initial review, I—like McCormack (2004)—avoided using a traditional coding process, instead keeping participants’

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<sup>61</sup> As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, Vera was not present for either of the group interviews. She did, however, participate in an individual interview,

stories intact and, as much as possible, in context, considering each story as a single unit of meaning. I immersed myself in each text via active listening (Stenberg, 2015)—reading and rereading and listening carefully to the audio recordings and paying attention to the overarching themes that emerged, before choosing the two most prevalent across the data: belonging and becoming. As I listened, I noted my responses, as well as the additional stories and/or questions that arose in my reflection on the dialogue. This immersion deepened my insights into how the individual interview texts constructed the relationships between participants and myself—and in the group interviews, between participants. By examining the “long stretches of talk” that Riessman (1993) claimed are too-often overlooked by researchers, (p. v), I observed the stories participants shared, listening for the multiplicity of voices within them. I also considered the context in which they were told—not just the physical context of the speech event(s) of individual and group interviews—but how the questions asked brought forth the memories of experience around which the stories formed. Since the questions asked across group and individual interviews were similar (see Appendices C & D), integrating the story data collected across texts was straightforward. I examined stories told across interview types—those appearing in both individual and group interviews—for several purposes: 1) to complete or complement data collected across sources; 2) to highlight similarities or differences across participants’ storied experiences; 3) to create a more nuanced understanding of individual stories by considering details mentioned in one data source, but not in another. In the same way, I looked at stories shared in interviews to discover whether any had been repeated in the literacy narratives; again, where this occurred, I looked for similarities and differences within the stories, making possible a more nuanced understanding of participant experience. I also made note of interactions between participants and with myself as researcher and considered the configuration

of stories told across the texts. With these interactions in mind, I began to incorporate themed stories into what Clandinin (2013) called an “interim research text” (p. 47), which begins the process of shaping and restorying the original data. This interim text essentially fashions the distinctive story data gathered across all texts and assembles them like puzzle pieces into a single narrative.

Taking these individual stories, identified by themes yet suspended within their dialogic context, I began to weave them together into the plotted format of a single conversation that took place over a single afternoon. This allowed me to keep the dialogue—again, as much as was possible—in the form in which it ‘actually happened,’ while blending dialogue chronicled across texts. Since my data arose from multiple sources across multiple months, the text that results in chapter four, for example, is a composite of stories told mostly in individual and group interviews. These data sources together offered me a more nuanced understanding of participants’ experiences.

As is common to both autoethnographies and narrative inquiries, the analysis is incorporated into the constructed narrative, which also includes the stylistic effects of a fictional text, including exposition and reflexive evaluation, description, dialogue, and dialogue tags to identify speakers (see Ellis, 2004, for an example of an autoethnographic novel).

Drawing inspiration from Richardson’s (1994) claim that writing is a “method of inquiry” and not simply a mechanism to report results (p. 516), I worked my way through the constructed story space, reflecting and revising as I went. Acting within the narrative inquiry space, I kept my focus on the “situation, continuity, and interaction” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2002, p. 49) of the first group interview, using it as a frame story. I then continued writing my way through the frame in a series of drafts. Notes and reflections on my initial readthroughs of the transcripts and

written materials were woven into the frame story, as well, with some of them appearing as conversation or evaluation, and others becoming autoethnographic reflections on either participant dialogue or my own inner speech regarding themes or individual stories discussed by participants. In this way, I chose to “come in and then go out” of the writing (Bruner, 1993, p. 6), by entering the dialogue with my participants as both narrator and character (Lincoln & Denzin, 2000). In dialoguing with my participants during interviews, writing myself into the research text, and occasionally stepping back to reflect on both dialogue and writing, I interpreted my own experience as a mature woman returner even as I reflected on and interpreted theirs.

### **Conclusion**

Josselson (1996) described identity as “the ultimate act of creativity,” noting “it is what we make of ourselves” (p. 27) as we narrate our experiences. Bruner (2002) spoke of the ways that narrative “gives shape to things in the real world” (p. 8), even as it helps us to discover—if not solve—the inequities of the world we live in. My intent in this project was to examine the stories of experience shared by my focal participants with two purposes in mind: first, to discover the acts of identity within their stories and what meaning these women are making of their experiences through their return to higher education. And second, to consider the ways that their narratives shape (and are shaped by) this one small corner of their larger world—the University of Washington Tacoma—with an eye toward social justice by constructing a better view of inequities that exist within that world. In this project focused on acts of identity- and world-shaping perceived through the stories of lived experience of mature women returners, the methods I chose—contextualizing their positions as students, and employing textual analysis of the content of archival materials, interview, narrative inquiry, autoethnography—are all fixed on

uncovering and interpreting the stories embedded within the data in response to the purposes of my study.

Moving into the next chapter, I begin to examine the context of my participants' stories through an intrinsic case study of the site in which they 'exist' as students: the University of Washington Tacoma (UWT). Stake (2000) defined an intrinsic case study as one that makes possible a better understanding of a larger phenomenon or social process. This single case is examined in detail, including "the nature of the case...[its] historical background...[and] physical setting" including "informants through whom [this] case can be known" (p. 438-39; see also Janesick, 2000). An intrinsic case study, Janesick claimed, incorporates multiple sources of data, theories, and methods of analysis as a way to triangulate, or "recognize the many facets of any given approach to the social world as a fact of life" (p. 392). Although my study of this case is not extensive, its focus on the institutional habitus of this one university and its discourse regarding mature students permits us to see how these have shaped the experiences of each participant involved in my study participants. To understand the interaction of my focal participants with the university, their sense of belonging within it, and the becomings of their new identities as students (and beyond), the reader must have a basic understanding of the history, mission, and goals of UWT, particularly as they relate to both original and current students. I examine all these things in the next chapter.

### Chapter Three

#### Observing the Discourse: An Intrinsic Case Study of the University of Washington Tacoma

*“The University of Washington Tacoma is a new facility designed to serve an adult population with specific needs. As students who are typically working and living in the area and commuting to the site their need for quick access to and from the facility; the need for a secure environment and collegial atmosphere; the need for basic services, both academic and non-academic (such as food, daycare, and other similar services) is a major program determinant. In order to make it possible for the student to maximize their learning experiences within the framework of tight schedules, the facility must respond to these needs as well as the normal academic requirements of a modern university.”*

(University of Washington Tacoma, 1993, p. 5)

I begin the intrinsic case study in this chapter with a brief history assembled through an examination of historical documents that lay out the foundational mission, goals, and practices of the University of Washington Tacoma (UWT)—as well as relevant narratives collected through an oral history project completed by UWT faculty and librarians shortly before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. In this chapter, I discuss the founding purpose and goals of the university, as well as changes to those goals and practices over time. I examine the demographics of the university itself over its 30-year history—particularly as they show the changes in mature student matriculation after the focus shifted from its original mission. I will also offer some of the stories shared with me by UWT staff, faculty, and administrators in interviews to assist in unpacking the institutional *habitus* of the university and discover its effects on the identity construction of

mature women returners. I believe this glance at campus history will allow a greater understanding of the habitus of the university as seen through its discourse.

### **Serving the ‘Working...Commuting’ Student: A UWT History**

Although an extensive history of UWT is beyond the scope of this study, a basic knowledge of the history, founding purpose, and goals of the campus over its thirty-year history is an important factor in understanding my participants’ stories in the light of the institutional habitus of the university as it exists today.

In the mid-1980s, the Washington State Higher Education Coordinating Board (HECB)—at the behest of the Washington State Legislature—began to consider the need for increased access to higher education for persons around the state who had some college but no degree—especially those on the west side of the state. At the time, “college participation and degree production” in the state was declining (University of Washington, 1993, p. 1), even as colleges and universities throughout the region were overcrowded and turning away students. Yet the need for greater numbers of individuals with baccalaureate and graduate degrees was high (Lamphore, 1996). Although Washington had a strong community college system, it was found to be “severely lacking in upper division and graduate programs” (p. 14), with residents of both Tacoma and Pierce County showing the lowest quantities of baccalaureate degrees in the state<sup>62</sup>—even lower than the national average (Olswang, 2004, p. 10). A need to increase access to graduate education was also acknowledged.

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<sup>62</sup> These numbers grew among Pierce County residents, from 17.5% to 20.6% from 1990 to 2000—the first ten years of UWT’s existence—although the increases were greater throughout WA State, as well as nationally (Olswang, 2004, p. 10). According to the UWT self-study, this slow rate of growth—although it was lauded—demonstrated the need for an increased access that would only be met by expanding institutions like UWT to four-year universities (Olswang, 2004). This change would not only make a four-year experience more widely available to students who were being denied admission to UW Seattle (for space reasons), but also for local students who did not have the ability to move their families—or work commitments—across the country or the state to attend another institution.

A preliminary survey sent to 4000 Tacoma area residents 19 years of age and over examined not only whether such individuals were currently enrolled in college courses but also whether they might consider doing so in the future. One thousand of those who were then-current students were interviewed and asked about factors that led them to choose the college they currently attended or what might lead them to re-enroll in the future.<sup>63</sup> A convenient location close to home (34%) was the most cited reason for their choice of institutions, followed by courses available at a time they could access (27%); for those who might one day consider graduate education, the academic reputation of the institution was of highest importance (21%). As far as barriers to enrollment for those not currently attending college courses, a lack of time to do so was the most cited reason (27%), followed by no considered need for further education (20%), or a lack of interest (10%). A large percentage of those not currently enrolled, yet considering it in the future, preferred evening classes (54%) to daytime classes (30%). Individuals in both groups stated that the availability of childcare played a large role in their decisions (10-17%) about whether they could attend college or not (Vice Provost for Branch Campuses, 1988a, pp. 13-14).

Around the same time, a University of Washington report to the Higher Education Coordinating Board (HECB) discussed the needs regional employers had expressed for greater numbers of new employees with baccalaureate degrees, alongside the large numbers of adults over age 25 who had some college but no degree. The report, examining then-current need and projecting it forward over a period of 30 years, claimed “evidence that the largest portion of unmet need at the upper division level involves ‘placebound’ adults, those persons whose work and other responsibilities” would limit their ability to attend institutions of higher education

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<sup>63</sup> The data collection in this section of the survey was limited to those 25 and over.

beyond “commuting distance” (Vice Provost for Branch Campuses, 1988b, p. 3). The report stated that, in order to be competitive, local employers would either need to “import [a] very high percentage” of degree holders or find a way to produce them locally (p. 4). As part of this study regarding the unmet need for higher education in the region, researchers performed a comparative analysis of two groups of individuals, all age 25 and older. The first group consisted of those currently enrolled in college courses, while the second was made up of persons not currently enrolled but desirous of attending college in the future. Researchers discovered that those not enrolled were more likely to be working full time (60%), but also more likely to have a degree as a goal (50%), compared to those currently attending classes who were without the stated goal of a degree (25%). Interestingly, both groups noted that courses scheduled “outside the nine-to-five workday” would be most convenient for their lives (Vice Provost for Branch Campuses, 1988b, p. 5).

In the mid-1980s, a group of Pierce County residents founded the South Puget Sound Higher Education Council (SPSHEC) and also recommended finding ways to make higher education more accessible to residents of the South Sound. The goal of this group, however, was more specific than simply examining the need for expanded access to higher education in the region: they wanted to see a “free-standing University” brought to Tacoma. Their goal was to found an “independently-governed, non-residential, non-intercollegiate athletic, urban university” with an interdisciplinary curriculum focused on the needs and population of the Tacoma metropolitan area. These two studies—one by the SPSHEC, and the other, the HECB—were conducted independently but concurrently; in the end, however, they brought forward “virtually identical findings” (Lamphore, 1996, p. 21). Because of the efforts of these two

groups, the Washington State Legislature passed a bill in 1989 to establish University of Washington branch campuses in Bothell and Tacoma (Washington State Legislature, 1989).

On October 1, 1990, UWT opened its doors with the intent of offering upper-division courses to individuals who had some college credit but no degree, enabling them to complete baccalaureate and—eventually—graduate degrees. The UWT Campus Master Plan echoed this idea, stating that the mission of the campus was “to offer selected upper-division baccalaureate degree programs and graduate degree programs designed for the working, commuting student” (University of Washington Tacoma, 1993, p. xii). Classes were held in the old Perkins Building downtown for the first five years of the university’s existence.

### **Original Mission**

Although, in the late 1980s, Washington State already had several public and private universities, as well as a healthy system of community colleges, residents still had low levels of access to upper-division and graduate programs. To address this problem, the state legislature funded upper-division campuses in population centers across the state and mandated that the new campuses meet the particular needs in their individual service regions for accessible higher education. These branch campuses were “*designed to serve older, non-traditional, place- and time-bound, working adult students*” (Carwein, Boyle, Ildstrom, & Wark, 2001, p. 68, emphasis added). This claim, that the university’s original purpose was meeting the needs of mature returning students, was repeated by many participants in the University’s 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary oral history project: *Founding Stories*, including founding faculty, administrators, staff, and members of the UW Tacoma Advisory Committee who did much of the foundational planning for the campus. I refer to several of these stories later in this chapter.

Serving the educational needs of mature returners was the motivating focus of the university from the start. Bill Philip, a member of SPSHEC who advocated for the founding of UWT<sup>64</sup>, in commemorating the opening of the permanent campus location, stated that the university “provides more affordable access to higher education to segments of our population that for one reason or another were unable to take advantage of the opportunity to go to college when they were younger” (cited in Olswang, 2004, p. D-23), leading to an understanding on the part of the audience that the main clientele of the university were older students who had not attended college at a more traditional age. This idea, repeated in the UWT student handbook, acknowledged the campus was “designed to respond to the educational needs of a diverse population that includes employed commuting adults beyond the traditional college age” (Lamphore, 1994, p. 24).

### **A Metropolitan/Urban-serving University**

During the late 1980s, before the two UW branch campuses were opened in Tacoma and Bothell, the UW administration planned that these campuses would operate with a different focus than the flagship campus in Seattle, acting as “distinctly metropolitan institutions, designed mainly for the working commuting student who is committed to earning a degree” (University of Washington, 1988a, p. 15). Beginning with this early statement, UWT styled itself a “Metropolitan University” (Olswang, 2004, p. vii)—a designation used in the 1970s and 80s to describe universities that were located within the metropolitan areas of cities. The student bodies of such universities included high proportions of commuters, first-generation students, students with children or other caregiving responsibilities, and working and/or returning students who are

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<sup>64</sup> Bill Philip later became a member and two-term chair of the UW Tacoma Advisory Board; William Philip Hall on the UWT campus was named for him.

also time- and place-bound. These universities also incorporated evening and weekend classes into their course schedules, as well as community partnerships that acknowledged the needs of the community and the students who lived there (Zerquera, 2016; see also Elliot, 1994 for a description of urban universities).

These metropolitan universities—a type of institution Zerquera (2016) claimed were alternately called urban universities, urban-serving universities, urban state universities, and city universities—view themselves as citizens of the cities within which they exist, focusing not only on increasing access to higher education for some long excluded from it, but on serving local publics through service learning and community engagement, and community-focused research and innovation that extends the benefits of higher education beyond their students (see also Diner, 2017; Elliot, 1994; Holland, Seligsohn, & Howard, 2018). These institutions have typically been established in one of two ways: either by extension of state flagship universities—as UWT was—or through a conversion of formerly private universities, academies, or teachers’ colleges (Zerquera & Doran, 2017). Most of these universities have been tasked by state governments to take on ‘underprepared’ students who were denied admission at the flagship school, who do not fit a traditional student description, or are place-bound working adults. As with metropolitan universities, urban-serving universities are more likely to serve students from low-income backgrounds who are the first in their families to attend college. These students also characteristically carry some combination of seven characteristics or markers that previously described them as nontraditional: delayed enrollment after high school graduation; full- or part-time employment; financial independence from parents; having dependents other than a spouse; single parents or caregivers to adult parents; having no high school diploma (Malm & Weber, 2018a, 2018b; NCES, n.d.).

Today, UWT describes itself as an “urban-serving university,” noting its position as an “anchor institution whose physical presence is integral to the social, cultural, and economic wellbeing of the community” (University of Washington Tacoma, 2012, “What is an urban-serving university?”). Zerquera (2016) stated that these universities have taken on a mission to serve underrepresented and marginalized students within their communities, individuals who have been historically overlooked by most institutions of higher education. Although many of these students with college aspirations do attend community colleges, their transfer rates are low, and few end up graduating with four-year degrees. One of the stated goals of urban-serving universities is to change that—a mission that UWT has strongly maintained.

### *Shifting Visions*

From its opening quarter in the fall of 1990—with one-degree program, 187 students, 13 faculty, and 11 staff members (Wadland & Williams, 2017)—UWT grew rapidly. Eleven years after the first students had been admitted, Carwein *et al.* (2001) noted that the university’s offerings had increased to five baccalaureate programs, five graduate programs, a nonprofit management certificate program, and a teacher certification program (in combination with an M.Ed. degree). From its first graduating class of five in 1991 to more than 5000 graduates by 2004 (Olswang, 2004)—the majority of these students had been members of the community: mature returners or transfer students from local community colleges.

Five years after its founding, on May 13, 1995, UWT broke ground on a permanent site in downtown Tacoma, an area of derelict buildings filled with “quirky antique shops, dive bars, strip clubs, and drug addicts” (Wadland & Williams, 2017, para. 9)—renovating a row of historic warehouses in an area that would one day become the heart of Tacoma’s ‘Museum District.’

This 46-acre site, located in the heart of the city, was chosen not only for its central location but in the hope the presence of the university would help revitalize the area. Projected to take up residence in its new spaces during the summer of 1997 (UWT 5<sup>th</sup> year self-study, 1995), the university held its first classes on the newly (re)constructed campus on September 27, 1997, enrolling approximately 1200 students (Wadland & Williams, 2017).

### ***Evolving Purposes***

In 2004, fifteen years after the legislature had mandated the creation of UW branch campuses in Tacoma and Bothell, Washington State Substitute House Bill (HB) 2707 expanded the original purpose of those campuses from a two-plus-two model<sup>65</sup> to extend enrollment to lower division students and the courses that would support them (Washington State Legislature, 2004). With this stated intent, according to Danseco (2005), not only would the university create a four-year experience for first year and sophomore students, the shift in campus focus would also “creat[e] richer opportunities for juniors and seniors to round out their majors with study in related fields” through the addition of lower division courses (para. 3). HB 2707 (2004) stated that “branch campuses enroll proportionately more older and part-time students” from surrounding communities than do main campuses (p. 2), yet despite a stated purpose to “reaffirm the[ir] role and mission” in supporting those students (p. 3), the Washington State legislature directed a “reassessment of the role and mission[s]” of UWT and UW Bothell based on what it saw as the changing needs for greater access to higher education across the Puget Sound region (Olswang, 2004, pg. A-3). Although this shift was accompanied by a promise of a campus commitment to reserve at least 72% of undergraduate seats for students transferring from

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<sup>65</sup> The two-plus-two model included community colleges enabling students to take their first two years of courses, followed by a transfer to a four-year or upper division university to complete their degrees.

community colleges, Danseco (2005) did note that this agreement would be up for review in 2010-11 (para. 5).

This redirected vision—shifting the two UW branch campuses to become four-year institutions through the addition of lower division courses and students—was encapsulated in HB 2707 (Olswang, 2004). Although lower division students would be added to both student bodies, graduate programs would be expanded, as well. Over time, twelve such graduate programs were founded on the UWT campus, including an Ed.D. program (founded in 2013) and a Ph.D. in Computer Science and Systems (begun in 2020).

So, in the fall of 2006, UWT admitted first-years and sophomores for the first time; however, in 2008-09, the university was still showing its greatest growth among juniors and seniors (*UW Tacoma sees largest enrollment*, 16 October 2008). This shift in focus from solely upper-division students and courses brought a certain apprehension among those who worried the change might leave transfer students on the sidelines as the university focused on more ‘traditional’ students. Yet even before the state legislature mandated the change, Olswang (2004) had assured campus stakeholders that “[t]hose placebound and timebound citizens who deserve a public baccalaureate university in their local[e]—were our clientele when we opened our doors, and will remain so” (p. 3). Things would unquestionably change, he admitted, but the university was dedicated to staying true to its founding mission. Transitioning to a four-year university would be another way to provide the community members who had been the university’s primary constituents something not accessible to them before: access to lower division courses to round out their degree programs and the ability to attend a four-year institution without moving to another region. The 2004 UWT self-study argued that this extra time on campus would allow students to form a stronger identification with the university, which would ultimately strengthen

campus culture, student identity, and create “a strong body of committed alumni” (Olswang, 2004, p. 25)—which would be valuable not only for the university but for the community at large. Even once the outreach of the university shifted in 2006 to include lower division students and courses, the university vowed to continue to “seek to increase the number of transfer students we accept, even as we evolve into a four-year institution” (p. vi), with Olswang noting that “our historical premises are what makes us unique, and thus most attractive to our students and community” (p. 25 ). In other words, the composition of our student body might change, but we will remain uniquely the same.

Yet, as lower division students were added in 2006, the balance of student ages—unsurprisingly—began to shift (see Table 3.1), from a 1990-91 student population where more than half were 30 or older, to the 2020-21 student body where 20% of students are age 30 and over. Although the percentage of students 30 and older has dropped since lower division students were added to the UWT population, their numbers on campus have continued to increase among the 30-49 age group, and particularly among undergraduates aged 60 and over, where—in 2019-2020—numbers more than doubled<sup>66</sup>.

With this backstory, including its personal mission and institutional goals, as well as its organizational ties to other urban-serving universities across the nation, UWT clearly has a distinctive purpose and ‘personality’ that affects its decision-making processes, as well as the ways that its students relate to it. As we consider UWT’s unique institutional personality, Bourdieu’s concept of habitus becomes the ideal lens through which to view it.

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<sup>66</sup> The numbers of students 30 and over (especially those 50 and over) did drop considerably during the 2020-21 academic year (during Covid-19). I can’t help but wonder if it was due to a lack of confidence in technology skills many mature students feel regarding fully online classes (see Chu, 2010 for a discussion of the need for research focused on older adults and e-learning, and Bandura, 1997 regarding older adults and internet self-efficacy). It will be interesting to see if those numbers increase over the next year or two as the campus re-opens and fewer courses are fully online.

Table 3.1 – Annual student count at UWT per academic year (1990-2021)

| Academic Year  | Graduate   | Undergraduate | Total       |
|--|------------|---------------|-------------|
| <b>1990-1991</b>   | (N/A)      | <b>322</b>    | <b>322</b>  |
| 25 to 29   |            | 50            | 50          |
| 30 to 39   |            | 102           | 102         |
| 40 to 49   |            | 70            | 70          |
| 50 to 59   |            | 12            | 12          |
| 60 or over   |            | 3             | 3           |
| under 25   |            | 85            | 85          |
| <b>Students 30+ = 58% /Students under 25 = 26%</b>               |            |               |             |
| <b>2005-2006</b>   | <b>496</b> | <b>2188</b>   | <b>2684</b> |
| 25 to 29   | 125        | 432           | 557         |
| 30 to 39   | 129        | 424           | 553         |
| 40 to 49   | 122        | 264           | 386         |
| 50 to 59   | 68         | 91            | 159         |
| 60 or over   | 6          | 18            | 24          |
| under 25   | 46         | 959           | 1005        |
| <b>Students 30+ = 42% /Students under 25 = 37%</b>               |            |               |             |
| <b>Lower division students added</b>                             |            |               |             |
| <b>2006-2007 (FY)</b>  | <b>556</b> | <b>2302</b>   | <b>2858</b> |
| 25 to 29   | 128        | 436           | 564         |
| 30 to 39   | 139        | 414           | 553         |
| 40 to 49   | 140        | 217           | 357         |
| 50 to 59   | 77         | 86            | 163         |
| 60 or over   | 5          | 19            | 24          |
| under 25   | 67         | 1130          | 1197        |
| <b>Students 30+ = 38% / Students under 25 = 42%</b>              |            |               |             |
| <b>2019-2020</b>   | <b>933</b> | <b>5421</b>   | <b>6354</b> |
| 25 to 29   | 223        | 714           | 937         |
| 30 to 39   | 320        | 518           | 838         |
| 40 to 49   | 145        | 139           | 284         |
| 50 to 59   | 64         | 38            | 102         |
| 60 or over   | 7          | 46            | 53          |
| under 25   | 174        | 3966          | 4140        |
| <b>Students 30+ = 20% / Students under 25 = 65%</b>              |            |               |             |
| <b>2020-2021 (During COVID-19 pandemic)</b>                      | <b>951</b> | <b>5220</b>   | <b>6171</b> |
| 25 to 29   | 231        | 688           | 919         |
| 30 to 39   | 331        | 510           | 841         |
| 40 to 49   | 163        | 136           | 299         |
| 50 to 59   | 44         | 31            | 75          |
| 60 or over   | 4          | 19            | 23          |
| under 25   | 178        | 3836          | 4014        |
| <b>Percentage of students 30+ = 20% /Students under 25 = 65%</b> |            |               |             |

## Habitus and the Institution

Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) describe habitus as a system consisting of three critical parts. First, it is a structure created and adopted by a person or group who employs its benefits to maintain dominance, typically at the expense of those on the margins. Second, it is a system of attitudes that reflect the preferences of those who hold the dominant position within it. Third, it contains a system of practices that includes both actions and insights that reproduce the patterns and norms of the cultural system it represents. These facets of habitus—unconscious though they may be—motivate practices, shape experiences, and influence the ways that individuals within an institution or group interact with their environment (byrd, 2019). Habitus acts as a personal possession of sorts: for example, the habitus of the family you grew up in, or the environment you “instinctively understand” and in which you feel most “at home” (Carruthers, 2018, p. 33). This aspect of habitus is something that *belongs* to you but not to others. Yet, habitus is also cultural, a social construction that comes via membership in a group or institution, such as higher education. Here it represents the ‘personality’ of either the larger institution of higher education or a specific university. According to Reay, David, and Ball (2001), institutional habitus “generates its effects” through curriculum, pedagogical practices, and the attitudes of faculty, staff, administrators, and students (p. 13), but also through normed messages based in the assumptions and expectations about students, university spaces and practices. Habitus “produces action” simply because of the things it makes possible—or *impossible*—through its discourse (Reay *et al.*, 2001), leading to structures that favor one view of student identity over others. Çelik (2021) described the habitus of the university as the “organizational practices...[that] structure student engagement and performance” that reproduce habitus via relationships—between individuals and with the organization itself—practices that stratify and position students within

the field of the institution (p. 524). Although many researchers of institutional habitus in higher education, particularly in the U.K, focus on class as a defining aspect of this stratification (Clayton, Crozier, and Reay, 2009; Reay, 2004, 2006, 2017; Reay *et al.*, 2001; Reay, Ball, & David, 2002), I refocus this lens on age and life experience as additional forms of capital that can privilege and/or marginalize the students who carry them, depending on the situation.

With its spotlight on stories of experience told by mature women students re-entering the spaces of UWT, this study was informed by Bourdieu's concept of habitus and, more specifically, by Inoue's (2016) interpretation of it as the distinct "ways that people are marked and read" by an institution according to its prevailing norms (p. 96). Since it is within the habitus of the university that student identities are constructed, the policies and practices of UWT as an institution impact the ways mature returners see themselves and are seen by others. Within their narratives—both written and oral—the mature women returners participating in my study have spoken of both how they see themselves and how they are seen by others on campus, making an examination of UWT's institutional habitus a vital concern in considering ways that the university does or does not support them.

I could not have examined the institutional habitus of UWT without putting its story into an embodied context that includes its history and practices, its people and practices, its spaces and how they are used. Just as byrd (2019) discussed the significance of making visible the institutional habitus of a university by exploring the traces of inclusion and exclusion viewed through "the values, history, and practices of [its] institutional culture" (Hurtado, Alvarez, Guillermo-Wan, Cuellar, & Arellano, 2012)—and, I would add, its discourse—an examination of this trace is something I undertake in the remainder of this chapter.

## **Life in the Habitus: Student Experience over Time**

Examining the experiences of UWT students across the more than 30-year life span of the institution became possible for me only because of the efforts of librarians and oral historians. Although the COVID-19 pandemic threw up multiple barriers along my research path, the digital age has opened doors that might have otherwise remained tightly shut during a time such as this. In this next section, I examine a variety of campus documents and oral histories as a way to assess the UWT student experience. These documents include campus master plans, student needs assessments, newspaper articles, and a variety of other archival materials that offer a window on past (and current) policies and practices of UWT.

### ***Student Needs Assessment (2008/2009)***

In discussing campus growth, the University of Washington Tacoma (2008) *Campus Master Plan Update*—citing the 2008 UWT Student Needs Assessment Survey—concluded that, although lower division students had been added to the UWT student body, the “highest percentage of students on campus will [continue to] be upper-level students.” At the same time, however, it asserted that because the majority of classes would occur during “traditional work hours, most students will choose to enroll full-time” (p. 40). This document also noted that a large portion of students would be commuters, likely with young children, making “continuing provisions of services and programs” vital to supporting these students (p. 36). Although childcare is listed among the student services needed to support campus life, it is only discussed in conjunction with possible community partnerships or in its basis on “the HECB planning

model”<sup>67</sup>, but not as a program that actually existed. The Master Plan also stated that childcare could be “provided as part of an education program, through public/private partnership, or by an offsite vendor” (p. 46) For working students with families, the availability of childcare or classes offered outside traditional work hours could be vital to their ability to even attend the university. Yet the idea that offering courses during traditional work hours would cause students to “choose to enroll full-time” is, essentially, an assumption that *if you build it, they will come*. This belief overlooks the need of *all* students for a university experience that fits their lives.

The UWT Campus Life Facilities Master Plan Final Report (2009) includes no mention of a childcare facility among planned student life spaces, like recreation and campus housing, although the topic was raised in focus group interviews incorporated in the final report. While the 2020-21 “About UW Tacoma” Quick Facts on the UWT website showed that women currently outnumber men on campus (52% women to 48% men)—and did in 2009, in every age bracket and from undergraduate to graduate (see Table 3.2)—women were overwhelmingly under-represented among the survey participants (25 men/8 women; see pp. 1-2) referenced in the 2009 Final Report<sup>68</sup>. When student support needs were discussed, social and recreational spaces were at the forefront, along with student study spaces, housing (primarily discussed in conjunction with lower division students); while many mature women returners are likely to have children, this subject was scarcely broached by the majority of men.

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<sup>67</sup> The Higher Education – Board (HECB) planning model referred to in the 2008 Campus Master Plan document is one of two campus planning models that consider square footage and FTEs in urban branch campuses of comparable sizes across the country.

<sup>68</sup> These survey results were referenced in the final report of the 2009 Campus Life Facilities Master Plan.

Table 3.2 – UWT Student Demographics by age, gender, and student status (2008-2009)

| 2008-2009  | Graduate | Undergraduate | Total |
|------------|----------|---------------|-------|
|            | 647      | 3052          | 3699  |
| 25 to 29   | 212      | 541           | 753   |
| Female     | 155      | 298           | 453   |
| Male       | 57       | 243           | 300   |
| 30 to 39   | 162      | 421           | 583   |
| Female     | 113      | 240           | 353   |
| Male       | 49       | 181           | 230   |
| 40 to 49   | 125      | 202           | 327   |
| Female     | 97       | 144           | 241   |
| Male       | 28       | 58            | 86    |
| 50 to 59   | 67       | 76            | 143   |
| Female     | 55       | 61            | 116   |
| Male       | 12       | 15            | 27    |
| 60 or over | 7        | 21            | 28    |
| Female     | 5        | 11            | 16    |
| Male       | 2        | 10            | 12    |
| under 25   | 74       | 1791          | 1865  |
| Female     | 56       | 1042          | 1098  |
| Male       | 18       | 749           | 767   |

The Student Services Needs section of this same Final Report did note that a “large percentage” of UWT students had children and acknowledged that participants were interested in an on-campus childcare facility that would offer daytime services while students were in class (p. 4). At the time, however, an on-campus childcare facility did not exist. Twelve years later—in 2021—on-campus childcare was still not a reality.

***Assessing the Student Experience (2014)***

Eight years after the initial shift toward the inclusion of lower-division students and courses, the Winter Assessment of the Student Experience (University of Washington, 2014)—a

campus-wide email survey which had last been sent to students in 2009<sup>69</sup>—set a goal of discovering student needs, as well as the university’s successes at meeting them. Students were contacted across the campus population, with the survey drawing 460 respondents.

Approximately 84% of the students who responded were upper division undergraduates (70.48%) or graduate students (22.57%), meaning that they were likely to be older than lower division first years and sophomores. This also meant they were more likely to be employed, caregivers, or supporting a family. Women made up 66.3% of respondents, men another 33.7%. Among the women, 77% were undergraduates, 21% graduate students, and 2% were non-matriculated graduate students. Of these students:

- 48% worked more than 15 hours per week
- 41.09% lived with a spouse or partner
- 58.26% were financially independent of parents
- 59.78% depended on financial aid to support themselves and their families

Although many topics were introduced in the survey, including some that remain issues of concern today (parking (!), student life, student housing), three were mentioned that are of high interest to mature students: childcare, online or hybrid classes, and the availability of family housing for students. In these next subsections, I discuss these aspects of the survey results.

### ***Child Care Questions***

UWT first took on the issue of childcare in 1992, beginning with a list (shared with students) of possible caregivers: students from the nearby University of Puget Sound (UPS) who

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<sup>69</sup> Due to the Covid-19 library shutdown, I was unable to access the entire 2009 assessment survey results. My examination of this document was, therefore, limited to a web pdf of the executive summary. From this document, the only applicable information I found was regarding student need for increased online or evening courses. Approximately 1/3 of participants called hybrid or distance learning of “high importance,” and another third stated it was of “some importance” to them.

were majoring in Elementary Education and used their experience as babysitters to complete some of their degree requirements. However, Lamphore (1996) asserted that, by 1995, a Child Care program had been established by a member of the UWT Student Services staff<sup>70</sup>. While 32.6% of respondents to the 2014 Student Assessment survey stated that “the Childcare Assistance Program is an important student service” (p. 4), only 3.15% of respondents had used the program and claimed they were satisfied with it. Another 1.47% stated they had used it but had concerns about it, while 13% responded that they were not even aware of the program’s existence.

Today, funding for childcare assistance can be requested through the UWT Childcare & Family Support Services office. The program website offers information about who is eligible for assistance grants of between \$400 and \$600 per quarter per family, with the amount depending on the enrollment status of the requestor—breaking down to between \$36.50-54.50/week per quarter, per *family*, in a city where the average cost of full-time childcare is \$1272 per month (Winnie, 2021). This funding is offered for autumn through spring quarters, but not summer—a time when parenting students with school age children are more likely to need childcare. Although it is certainly better than nothing, the amounts available are not nearly enough to support students who need affordable childcare. In Washington State, the average childcare cost for an infant is 15.4% of median income for a married couple; however, for a single mother, it is about 51% of median income. The average childcare cost for a toddler is about 13% of median income for a married couple and 44% of median income for a single mother (ChildCare Aware of Washington, 2017, p. 1). According to the Institute for Women’s Policy Research (2017), nearly 25% of all college students in the U.S. are parents—and among

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<sup>70</sup> Unfortunately, I have not been able to confirm this claim, nor have I been able to ascertain just what this program actually did.

those who are students of color, first-generation, or low income, that percentage rises to more than a third (see also Garcia, 2021). Over 75% of single parents are considered low-income, and more than 40% of parenting students work full-time while attending classes. Garcia also noted that “[s]ome student parents end up spending 70 hours per week or more on their jobs and caretaking duties—attending classes and studying seems like an impossible added burden” (“The obstacles facing student parents”). And, in the midst of all of these numbers lies the reality that on-campus childcare is becoming harder and harder to find across the nation.

Of my study participants, one is raising young children, and one of her children requires care while the others are in school (she was four at the time of our interview). Vera<sup>71</sup> spoke of the cost of childcare and its effect on her ability to attend classes, noting,

*“I wouldn't be able to do this if it wasn't for my mom because she comes over and watches my kids... If we had to pay for daycare, I wouldn't be able to do this. I would say that there are definitely some barriers for women returning to school—or not even just women. I would say anyone that's returning to school that doesn't have those funds or those needs met.”* (Vera, 2020, personal communication)

While the UWT Childcare & Family Support Services office is understandably unable to recommend childcare providers “for liability reasons,” the website does offer a list of childcare providers that have been used by UWT students in the past (University of Washington Tacoma, 2021, Finding Childcare). The website also includes lists of other resources for parents, FAQs about the program, and information about two lactation stations available to parents while on campus. Although there is much more to say about this topic in the light of the university habitus, I cover it in a later section of this chapter.

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<sup>71</sup> Vera is a pseudonym.

### ***Online/Hybrid Courses***

Asked about hybrid or fully online courses in the 2014 Student Assessment survey, 32% stated that hybrid courses were of “high importance” to them, with another 35% saying they were of “some importance,” meaning that a total of 67% of students saw some level of personal value in the university offering more hybrid courses. As for fully online courses, 33% of respondents stated that they were of “high importance,” with another 33% stating that were of “some importance.” In other words, nearly two-thirds of respondents (66%) saw the availability of online courses as important to their education (p. 19). Online advising, another service which would likely be helpful in supporting parents or working students, was given high (34%) or some (33%) importance by respondents—again, about two-thirds (p.20).

Although few of my focal participants had taken any online courses pre-pandemic, Jane<sup>72</sup> spoke of a desire for more online courses, saying, *“If at least some courses were offered online, I would have less of a problem coordinating my schedule with work”* (group interview, 2019). For working students like Jane—a nurse in an oncology clinic, who also has family care responsibilities that include both children and parents—online courses could make a difference in balancing life demands and still assuring timely graduation. Hazel, a member of UWT library staff and another of my focal participants, discussed a hybrid course she took pre-pandemic, saying, *“We only had two classes where we were in class and the rest of it was online. It still required a lot of discipline from me because when it’s online, the teacher is not in front of you. You have to make that time”* (group interview, December 2019). Online or hybrid courses do require more discipline from students to stay on top of the work, but greater availability of online

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<sup>72</sup> Jane is a pseudonym for one of my study participants. See chapter two for her bio.

or hybrid courses can be helpful to employed mature returners. Online or hybrid classes make it possible to construct more flexible schedules that will better meet the needs of mature returners and their families, as well as their employers—likely increasing retention and timely degree completion.

While online learning and advising became ubiquitous during the campus closures of the COVID-19 pandemic—not only at UWT but at campuses across the country—this was not something that existed to any large degree prior to 2020, at least not on the UWT campus. However, even as I write in December 2021, approximately 25% of all courses on the fall 2021 time schedule were offered in either a hybrid or online format (UW Tacoma Time Schedule Quick Search – Results, Autumn 2021, <https://www.tacoma.uw.edu/ts-quicksearch/>), with some ‘becoming’ hybrid as faculty decided the extent of community spread of COVID-19 was not a risk they were willing to take—for themselves, their families, or for their students.<sup>73</sup> Although issues of student support may not have been the impetus for making online courses a reality—thus making them more readily available to students with family or job responsibilities—a global pandemic has changed the practices of the university, at least temporarily. Moving forward, I am hopeful that online and hybrid courses will continue to be offered, possibly even increasing in number, enabling greater access to higher education for a growing number of working or parenting mature returners.

### ***Family-focused Campus Housing***

While there were no questions concerning student housing on the 2014 Winter Assessment of the Student Experience survey, the UWT Student Housing Demand Analysis final

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<sup>73</sup> For example, the UWT nursing programs moved all their courses online for the entire 2021-22 academic year.

report (January 2016) directly addressed the need for family housing among students, with comments and suggestions from several students<sup>74</sup> regarding the future of UWT student housing. More than a few of these comments also addressed other issues that might be important to mature students. Because these comments were anonymous, there is no way to recognize any gender-specific needs for housing among these commentators. However, these remarks do make clear that the availability of campus housing for families is a necessity at UWT.

None of my focal participants mentioned a need for campus housing for families—a need that I would imagine would be greater among younger returners and/or single parents, as compared to mature returners who are more likely to have settled housing situations—however, other mature women returners have discussed this issue with me. I remember a conversation I had several years ago with a single mother working on her history capstone. She had returned to college to complete her degree in her mid-30s after a divorce. Although her children were elementary school age and she was able to attend classes during the day while they were in school, she still faced occasional difficulties due to a lack of childcare options. More than once, her two sons accompanied her to the writing center due to a teacher in-service day at their school.<sup>75</sup> One day, while she attempted to keep them quiet and entertained with tablets and snacks, she told me that she had been living with her parents temporarily, but their impending move out of state was leaving her searching for housing. Two quarters from graduation, she was facing the very real risk of homelessness and wished aloud that UWT had housing available for families. While this is a single example, I am also certain that this woman was not alone in her

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<sup>74</sup> These comments were left anonymously in comments following the survey questions.

<sup>75</sup> This single instance is not the only time I had students arrive for an appointment with children in tow or cancel appointments because of childcare issues. Though it is not a daily thing, it does happen often enough that we set a policy in the writing center about how to accommodate with students who arrive with their children (we do it on a case-by-case basis, if the tutor is comfortable with it).

need—a need that echoes through the anonymous comments at the end of the Student Housing Demand Analysis, final report (UWT, 2016).

- “[This] was supposed to be a "commuter" school...with a commitment to transfer students. The transfer students have lost out in these recent changes and the original promises to us have been LOST. Now our class times are NOT do-able for our families and children and it seems all you care about are kids who are the "typical" students. Just stop already and start listening.” (p. 59, emphasis in original).
- “The non-traditional student is becoming a larger part of the college life, as such, considerations for family housing and accommodations for veterans and the like should be more available” (p .60).
- “Family housing is a must. Give hope to young parents struggling with obtaining an education by providing quality, safe housing options, UW of T will in turn get more applicants and instill hope in the next generation.” (p. 54).
- “Having increased housing options and options for those with families would be beneficial as a large majority of the student body are commuters” (p. 55).

Based on these student responses gathered nearly eight years ago, the questions that came to mind as I combed through these campus documents focused on childcare, online or hybrid courses, and student housing—asked in the light of Bourdieu’s habitus and regarding these three university practices —now become:

- When the need for childcare to attend classes is apparent enough to administrators to create a program to address it, but not well-funded enough to make a real difference for student parents, what does that say to the students who need it most?

- Does this situation make clear to student parents that they are valued members of the campus community, or that their problems with finding childcare, housing, or accessing courses at a time they are able to attend are ultimately their own to solve?
- Although the university now finds itself meeting student need for more flexible classes by scheduling hybrid or full online courses, does the fact that it took a global pandemic to admit it could be done show the students who have always needed that flexibility that their needs didn't really count, until nothing else *could* be done?
- How should the university address the question of student housing that meets the needs of *families*—a resource that existed for my own father at a public university in the early 1960s?
- And finally, how do the existing systems of higher education within this particular institution work to maintain the balance of power between those groups considered “standard” or dominant and those which are marginalized by the structure of the system?

Ultimately, the support of parenting/working students goes beyond the need for campus childcare or family housing—or even offering more online or hybrid courses outside of pandemic conditions. Those things—vital as they are—require funding and preparation that aren't likely to happen overnight. Indeed, the campus is more than 30 years old and they have not happened yet. But this does not mean that the situation is beyond resolution. However, until the concerns of mature returners are pulled back from the margins of university policies and practices, institutional shifts toward student supports like childcare, housing, and flexibly scheduled courses (i.e., a greater availability of hybrid, online, or weekend courses) will not be sufficiently addressed.

However, the questions I ask in this subsection—about how mature students feel the university values and support them through a system of services such as childcare and family housing—were unanswered, even *unasked*, by the 2014 survey that netted the responses shared earlier in this subsection. And, today, eight years later, they remain without easy answers. The issue behind childcare and family housing is undoubtedly at least partially due to the same issue that always faces public universities: tight budgets due to a lack of funding. But rather than letting ‘There’s just not enough money for that’ remain the standard answer, maybe we should look at how the systems and services that do exist—the habitus of the university as seen in its policies and practices—tell current and prospective students who and what *is* important on campus. The University of Washington Tacoma has come a long way in the last 30-plus years. It has grown from an institution that inhabited a few floors of a rented downtown building to fill an ever-expanding space of its own. Before we dive into a closer look at the habitus of the university today, let’s take one more look back at the past.

### **‘On Fire to Learn’<sup>76</sup>: UWT’s Founding Students**

Although I could not return to the earliest days of UWT to directly interview students, staff, and faculty about their experiences, thanks to the resourcefulness of several members of the UWT community, it wasn’t necessary. To commemorate the university’s 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2020, UWT librarians Justin Wadland and Joan Hua, in collaboration with History professor Charles Williams, interviewed multiple staff, faculty, and community partners who are long-time members of the campus community, many from its inception. The quoted material in this section is drawn from the oral history interviews that reside in the *Founding Stories: University of*

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<sup>76</sup> (C. Connerly, 2020, University of Washington Tacoma Oral History: Founding Stories)

*Washington Tacoma Oral History* (2020) project, housed in the UWT Digital Collections. The voices in this subsection offer a picture of the ‘personality’ and habitus of the university that we could gain in no other way.

Vickie Carwein, UWT’s first chancellor, in speaking of the mature age of the first classes of UWT students, claimed that “...*part of the attraction [to the campus] was the fact that one of the parts of the mission and the mandate for UWT was to provide opportunity to students who otherwise would not be able to go to school,*” giving them a chance to do so (V. Carwein, 2020, UWT Oral History: Founding Stories). Also speaking of that original student population, Marcia Monroe, who has worked in the UWT library since shortly after the campus was founded, concurred with Carwein’s assessment of the opportunities UWT provided, recalling that many of the early UWT students “*were retired military...women returning into the workforce. And in fact, I think that that was sort of the draw of the school at that time...*” (M. Monroe, 2020, UWT Oral History: Founding Stories). Carwein’s statement makes clear that the original ‘mission and mandate’ of UWT—to provide access to higher education for those who might not otherwise be able to complete their degrees—was what made it most attractive to those in the surrounding community. And this population was also noted by Monroe’s recollection of the ‘retired military’ and ‘women returning to the workforce’ who were drawn to the campus from the start. Although the focus has shifted over the last decade and a half from mature returners to a more traditional student body, I believe this provision of access is still the major draw toward UWT. Many of the students who enroll come from groups greatly underrepresented on other campuses, lending to the diversity of our student body. Yet, with the original mission—supplying access to place and timebound “students who would not otherwise be able to go to school”—still representative of the same community need, it seems vital to revisit the original ‘mandate.’

Christine Connerly, who worked in the UWT Student Services office between 1990 and 1998, also addressed the necessity of UWT's mission:

*"... for place-bound students who weren't able to commute to school [in] Seattle... who were wanting to change careers, mid-careers, older people... and the people who wanted to transfer from community colleges. There wasn't room for them at University of Washington Seattle. And there, it was difficult for some people to leave jobs or leave young children... [M]ostly, they were adult students. A lot of women going back to school, because they had helped support their husbands to get through school and had gotten their children off to school... And now they're coming back to finish their education.... And they were just on fire to learn. There were some people that were probably not quite ready, you know, they still needed, maybe, some additional work... But a lot of the early students had enough life experience and work experience, all kinds of different perspectives on things"* (C. Connerly, 2020, UWT Oral History: Founding Stories).

Like Carwein and Monroe, Connerly saw UWT's importance to the community as creating space for underrepresented groups—like mature returners—who lacked practical access to UW Seattle or other universities around the state. Focusing on the women returning to college after children started school or supporting their husbands through their educations, Connerly recognized they might need additional preparation to be up to the challenge of college coursework. Yet she knew their life experience could be an advantage in their education that other—younger—students might not have. However, she also understood that a local campus, right in their own backyards, offered an opportunity for working/parenting students who could not move across the country to gain a degree, take time away from work, or commute long distances at the end of the workday.

Without a local university like UWT, many of the mature returners who made up the original student population would never have been able to enroll, let alone graduate.

Rob Crawford, Professor Emeritus in the School of Interdisciplinary Arts and Sciences and a founding member of the UWT faculty also remembered the early students who returned from “[w]orking and raising kids...[C]lassrooms were always diverse in terms of age, with an emphasis on older students... so that was very enjoyable. Students brought their life experience to the classroom” (R. Crawford, 2020, UWT Oral History: Founding Stories). Crawford—like many founding faculty—saw value in the life experience that mature returners brought to the classroom, not only their knowledge, but the enjoyment that brought to the rest of the class. David Morris, Associate Professor Emeritus and another founding member of the UWT faculty, also spoke of the life experience that mature students brought to their learning, saying, “*they were serious. They were paying for it themselves, so they were interested. They showed up*” (D. Morris, 2020, UWT Oral History: Founding Stories). Morris’ comment reminded me of a similar remark from Chantal, one of my focal participants<sup>77</sup>, who said—speaking of her felt need that the university should consider weekend classes or other class scheduling that is more accessible to working students—“*we are paying for this. We are trying not to take out loans and it is exhausting.*” Morris, like Chantal, recognized the value and significance mature returners ascribed to their return to college and the difference that could make in their experience of it.

Steve Smith, who was Minority Student Services Coordinator at UWT’s founding, saw the value of UWT as a local option that could provide:

*“... more access to higher education for folks... because I had seen firsthand people who really needed more education, but there really was not a local option for them that would*

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<sup>77</sup> Chantal’s response was drawn from her answer to an additional emailed question re: university policies or practices she would set in place if she could.

*be flexible enough ... with their adult schedules and lives and things. It was tough... I had met a lot of people who were sort of stuck in jobs in different places, and they hadn't even thought about going to school, just because there was no place to go. I liked what UW Tacoma was going to be providing for the area...because there were just way too many people who are not achieving a bachelor's degree, because there was just very limited access” (S. Smith, 2020, UWT Oral History: Founding Stories).*

Smith’s comments here resonated with stories that I heard from other mature returners looking for a way to improve their lives by getting out of jobs they felt ‘stuck in.’ Yet without universities like UWT—located in the heart of communities where people live and work—it can feel like ‘there [is] no place to go,’ especially for mature returners who are both time- and placebound. I think of a mature woman returner I met in the writing center several years ago. She was a 51-year-old Law and Policy major, about two quarters from graduation when we met. She had always wanted to go to college, she said, but had dropped out of school when she became pregnant in junior high. After raising her children primarily as a single mother, she returned to school to earn a GED and then turned her eyes toward the college degree she had long hoped for. The last time I saw her, we worked together on her personal statement for a law school application. I never heard from her again, but I’ll always remember her face when she told me of her dream of becoming a judge someday: “So I can speak for someone who can’t speak for theirselves.”<sup>78</sup> If determination was all it took to reach a goal like that, I have no doubt she could have made it happen.

These observations about the mature returners who made up the student body during UWT’s earliest years offer a window into campus attitudes and operations at the time—the

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<sup>78</sup> I interviewed this woman in 2016 for an ethnography I did as part of my job in the UWT writing center; this quote is drawn from the unpublished manuscript and is included via a signed release.

historical foundation of its habitus. Yet in order to fully understand it, we must extend our observations from the past to the present. In this next section, I introduce the voices of current campus stakeholders—faculty, staff, and administrators—who, in some cases, remember the past even as they look to the future.

### **Interviews with UWT Staff, Faculty, and Administrators**

In a project focused by dialogic research practices and the voices of returning mature women students—as well as those who had been part of the university from the beginning—it seemed logical to me to also include the voices of others interviewed as part of this project. Therefore, this next section features the same dialogic format found throughout much of this dissertation, allowing the habitus of the university to be viewed directly—and indirectly—through the discourse of those who, in many ways, shared in its construction and/or its maintenance.

As a part of this site study, I interviewed five individuals who have been part of the UWT campus community for several years—whether as students, staff, faculty, and/or administration (sometimes a combination thereof)<sup>79</sup>. These dyadic interviews were conducted, recorded, and initially transcribed using the Zoom© platform, and each lasted about an hour. Questions asked during the interviews were based on each individual’s campus role and regarded their interactions with mature returners, as well as their potential knowledge of policies and practices that affect these students.

The individuals I interviewed were Dr. Divya McMillin, Associate Vice Chancellor for Innovation and Engagement, founder of the Institute for Global Engagement, professor of Global

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<sup>79</sup> For more information about these individuals, their roles on campus, and the interviews themselves, refer to Chapter Two (in the subsection titled “Other Study Participants: Staff, Faculty, and Administrators”).

Media Studies in the School of Interdisciplinary Arts and Sciences, and Interim Dean of the School of Interdisciplinary Arts and Sciences; Karin Dalesky, UWT alumni and Academic Adviser in the School of Interdisciplinary Arts and Sciences; Dr. Jill Purdy, Executive Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs and founding faculty in the Milgard School of Business; Mentha Hynes-Wilson, Vice Chancellor for Student and Enrollment Services; and Navia Winderling, UWT alumni and Senior Transfer Adviser in the UWT Admissions Office.

In these next subsections, I recount the interviews with these five individuals in the dialogic form in which they took place. With the stories born in dialogue forming the heart of my research grounded in Bakhtin's dialogism, I chose the format of a dialogue to convey the data collected in these interviews to portray what Clandinin and Connelly (2000) described as the co-construction of knowledge through the give and take of a conversational interview between researcher and participant<sup>80</sup>. Using this conversational format also allowed me to include my reflections on the interviewees' remarks directly into the narrative (see Abu-Lughod *et al.*, 2003; Ellis & Berger, 2001).

### **Dr. Divya McMillin**

Dr. McMillin is a professor in the Communication department, Associate Vice Chancellor for Innovation and Global Engagement, and interim Dean of the School of Interdisciplinary Arts and Sciences. She was also one of my first professors at UWT and faculty adviser for my Global Honors undergraduate thesis, so, as a student, I got to know her fairly well. She remembered the campus' original focus on upper division students when she was hired in 1998, describing it as *"fantastic, because the students' average age was 35 at that time. Most*

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<sup>80</sup> I discuss this idea of the co-construction of knowledge in the dialogue of an interview at greater length in Chapter Two.

*of the students were older than I was. And the environment? I just loved it. I could teach right away at a higher theoretical level, in 400 level classes. We had students who were really ready to learn and needing to make every penny count.*” McMillin’s comments regarding students’ need to “*make every penny count*” reminded me that adult students are not only paying for college out of pocket, in many cases, but doing so while they are carrying mortgages or paying rent and supporting families—sometimes on a reduced salary as they cut work hours to make room in their schedules to attend classes<sup>81</sup>. Robin, one of my focal participants, noted this expense as increased pressure to do well in her classes, saying, “[*school*] *felt like such a gamble: it meant paying out of pocket because I didn’t qualify for that much aid at first. And because we were investing so much money in it, I was constantly terrified of failing*” (email, May 2020). I was not surprised that students mentioned the costs of returning to higher education—not just the possible loss of income, but the greatly increased outgo at the same time—but I was pleasantly surprised that faculty like McMillin (and emeritus faculty David Morris in his UWT oral history interview) were also aware of the sacrifices that many mature returners make in order to complete their degrees.

McMillin also spoke to the diversity of ages among UWT students as a positive thing for all students, noting “*I valued, so much, the differences in ages in the students and I thought the younger students coming in benefited tremendously from having more mature students in the classroom. There was a definitely an anchoring, a calmness. And the younger students would speak to me separately and say, ‘I’m learning so much.’ They valued the good energy in the*

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<sup>81</sup> As a mature working student, this has been my experience several times during my graduate program—changing my work hours/time schedule quarterly to accommodate travel time from Tacoma to Seattle for classes at different days and times and sometimes working fewer hours to make more time for both travel and study. In my case, as a married student without children at home, it has not been a significant financial hardship; but for single parents, it can be difficult to sustain a family on reduced pay or with a constantly changing schedule—a situation mentioned by more than one of my participants.

*classroom, something I was grateful to see. And I continue to see a more vibrant mix of students from various backgrounds.”*

As we spoke, I reminded Dr. McMillin of my own experience as a mature returner in her Global Honors orientation course and the anxieties I carried over whether I would be up to the work or would be accepted by my classmates. But when I walked in the first day, I told her that seeing “at least half of us [in a class of ten] were over 30, I was more than a bit relieved. I walked through the doors, thinking ‘This is nice, I can do this.’”

*“And you did do it,” she reminded me.*

*“I did,” I admitted, laughing. “But it wasn’t easy.”*

*“I have just finished teaching my fall quarter class, that same class you took,” McMillin said. “The older students—who spent a lot of time emailing me before the class and revealing that they felt completely vulnerable... I had to tell them, ‘You have more than you know, and I’m just looking forward to having you in class.’ I spent a lot of time making them feel really, really welcome. And they could see, over time with the class, that their anxieties were not really necessary, and that everybody was supporting one another. There was a lot of positive group chat during the classes, a lot of reinforcement for all points of view.”*

McMillin’s class was easily one of the most challenging courses I took as an undergraduate, and I always felt like I was at least three steps behind the rest of the class. I also remember that sense of vulnerability and worry over what I didn’t know going into class on the first day. But at the same time, the wide-ranging diversity of students in that class and many of the classes I took as an undergraduate at UWT was an asset—and not just to me. I believe the value of the life experience that I and the other mature returners carried with us extended to the entire class. I was glad to see that Dr. McMillin thought so, too.

From this experience of working with faculty like Dr. McMillin who valued the life experience of mature returners in the class, I came to see myself as someone who could accomplish what I set out to do—no matter how challenging the class might be. In this class and many others, this recognition of the knowledge and experience I brought into the classroom with me allowed me to feel ‘read’ as someone who mattered.

### **Karin Dalesky**

Another person who has been involved with the UWT community since its early days—even before the campus moved into its present location—is UWT Academic Adviser Karin Dalesky. Because of her historical connection to the campus and her advising work with both graduate and undergraduate students over the decades that followed her graduation, I was eager to talk with her. She was equally willing to share her experiences with me.

When Dalesky enrolled at UWT in 1996, *“I was 32, and the typical student was 32 or 33, female, working, and doing 10 to 15 credits.”* The focus of the university in those early days, she said, *“was definitely on nontraditional mature students that were looking to kind of finish, you know, such as you and I both, right?”* But she also noted, *“over time, that focus has shifted. And I’m not gonna lie, that makes me kind of sad because... initially the campus was ‘yeah, we’re going to cater to these nontraditional students...’”*

Although Dalesky is happy to see the tremendous support currently generated for first-generation and traditional-age first-year students, *“it seems like it’s the transfer students as a whole...who tend to get lost in the shuffle... People coming in, maybe with a huge number of credits and they’ve gone to seven different universities...and they’re often military or older. I*

*mean, really, the campus was formulated on those people, like you and I,” she stated, gesturing between us.*

*“We had people that were 50 years old... they were trying to finish what they had started maybe 30 years before. So, it's unfortunate, I feel, both as an advisor and a former student... the numbers dropped over the years, [as the average age went] from 32 or 33 or whatever; now it's down to 26 or so.”*

That number—a number once listed on the UWT website as the average student age—had been around 29 when I made the decision to enroll in 2011. I admitted the difference that it made for me to know that there would be other older students there.

I nodded and said, “It was just a really easy decision at that point, you know? I often wonder about those numbers I used to see, but I don't see anymore.”

*“Older students can go to City University and do everything online now,” Dalesky said. “And some people are not into going to a campus and the whole ritual of going to school, which to me was very important; to other people, not so much.”*

At the same time, there is more to consider about attending college than just ‘online or in person.’ I mentioned that several of my study participants had wished for weekend classes as they had to constantly reschedule work hours around courses—which meant that every 10 weeks, schedules had to be adjusted. Again.

Dalesky understood.

*“Weekend classes? We used to have them. We would always offer Friday classes<sup>82</sup>. The class was one day a week in the morning, or in the afternoon. We'd book a four-and-a-half-hour block. We would also offer...more evening classes. The Saturday classes were a gift for many*

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<sup>82</sup> Friday morning classes have returned to some extent, although most are just part of a MWF schedule, rather than a once-a-week class. Saturday classes no longer exist.

*people because lots of people worked. But those have sort of gone away. And that makes me really sad because I have people now who would take Saturday classes.*<sup>83</sup>”

This is something to ponder since many of the students I work with, as well as much of the literature, have spoken of mature returners’ desire for more evening or even weekend classes. For working adults, classes outside the typical 9-5 of the workday—like those evening classes scheduled for graduate students on the UWT campus—could be a valuable draw for mature returners or other working students who are trying to juggle job and family with class schedules. Yet, Chantal<sup>84</sup> noted that even those evening classes begin too early for students with full-time jobs, saying, *“Most of us get off work at 5 or 5:30 and the time to get down there to campus, park, and prepare is just too much. Classes on the weekends would be a great help!”*

But Dalesky had more to say.

*“I think that some concerted effort towards the nontraditional students, you know, the more mature students, perhaps, would be a welcome addition to our campus. And then somebody like us says, ‘Hey wait a second, didn't we kind of used to cater more to...?’ And it's like ‘yeah we did.’ I'm so glad that somebody else is remembering this, you know?”*

I wanted to say, ‘I understand how you feel.’ But life is never static. Things always change—they have to. No matter the intention of those in charge at the time, the focus of the university did change when the legislature mandated the shift to a four-year experience. None of that can be erased—nor should it be. The addition of lower division courses and students *was* important to the community and to the students who have flocked to the campus over the subsequent decade and a half since the change was made. It was necessary.

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<sup>83</sup> K. Dalesky, UWT Oral History interviews.

<sup>84</sup> Chantal is a pseudonym for one of my study participants. See chapter two for her full biography.

But I didn't say any of that. Instead, I said, "You know, I know these younger students are, in some ways, the future of the university. The university hopes to keep them for four years, or six years, or however long it takes to graduate them. But, at the same time, we have this whole group of people who are standing on the doorstep saying, 'Can't we be important to folks, too?'"

Dalesky nodded.

*"They are important," she said. "They're more important in a lot of ways, because this is their second chance, you know? This is their opportunity.... They want to take care of their unfinished business. Yeah, they want a degree, they need a degree to move on in their job, or they've come to realize that they want to do something different. And so, this is all the more reason that we need to be mindful of these folks and pay attention. And so, if they happen to end up in advising with me, which is awesome, I try to roll out the red carpet for them, for sure. I don't think I don't think it hurts to remind anybody what our initial mission was."*

I assured her that was the point I was trying to make with this project—just reminding our campus community of the value of remembering where we started.

*"It's not our mission anymore," she said. "But, if you look at things differently, if you have a nontraditional student and they come in and they're like 'oh my god, this place transformed my life. I'm going to continue. I'm going to earn a graduate degree here...' It's a different kind of investment that we're making with these folks, but it's an equally important investment. Because these are people who are maybe time-bound and place-bound, and maybe they had kids and that dream was just out of reach. Or maybe their dreams have changed over time—but they still have them. And I always was so happy that we, you know, that we could provide that for people, I mean, the university could. For me, it changed everything. To me, this is all the more reason that we need to be mindful of these folks and pay attention."*

Through my conversation with Karin Dalesky, I came to understand that—although the focus on campus has indeed shifted away from its original mandate of support for mature returners—there are still pockets of support on campus for these students. Faculty like Dr. McMillin and academic staff like Dalesky are still looking out for this population of students, listening for their voices and supporting them in any way they can.

### **Dr. Jill Purdy**

Overlooking the voices of mature students is also a concern to UWT administrators. Dr. Jill Purdy, Executive Vice Chancellor of Academic Affairs (EVCAA)<sup>85</sup> and a professor in the Milgard School of Business, admitted, *“It’s been very hard for us, institutionally, to be as responsive as we might be to mature students because they’re more likely to be saying, ‘I’m not going to complain about this issue, because I can comprehend where it might have emerged from and I know how to get myself past it.’ I think that’s more common for an older student than it is for younger students who may feel a little safer saying, ‘Oh, I don’t get what’s going on here. I need this. How are you going to get it for me?’”*

As with the old maxim about the squeaky wheel and the grease, at least part of the answer seems to be that mature students don’t complain enough; their voices aren’t being heard because they aren’t speaking out. And this is one of the reasons for my research—to shine a light on what mature students *are* thinking about the habitus of the university, about whether and how their needs are being met.

However, Purdy continued, noting that, as lower division students were added, *“there was a lot of attention towards focusing on keeping the campus welcoming for adult students and*

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<sup>85</sup>Since this interview, Dr. Purdy stepped down from her position as EVCAA (September 2021) to return to full-time teaching in Milgard.

mature students. I think people took for granted that things would continue for a while.” But, over time, she noted, the focus seemed to change.

*“I don't know quite when we reached the tipping point where some of those folks started to feel like they weren't welcome and maybe they were the only mature student in class. It took some time for that to happen, but I feel like now when I talk with students, for example, even students who are in their 30s, in their 40s... they've retired from the military, or they've raised a family, and are coming to school. They feel a sense of difference that didn't used to be there. I have observed that.”*

As faculty, Purdy decries that shift, noting that the presence of mature students *“is a wonderful thing in the classroom. I've always loved our diverse student population as a teacher. And I've also found, as I've gotten older, that it's nice for those students to feel like they can connect to me on the level that has to do with the shared experiences of what it what it means to have reached a certain age.”*

Speaking of the university, however, Purdy admitted that *“issues of how to better support mature students ... is something we really need to grapple with.”* She noted that there has been an ongoing conversation, especially over the past two years, as the university considered *“how to better support mature students”* and examined its *“ability to serve adult learners.”*

*“I have been influenced by the experience of some of my friends who have done the Western Governors University route, and their struggles. And I've said, ‘it may not fit for you, but you know, take a look at UWT because we've always been welcoming to a mature adult learner.’ And I thought, ‘how do we make that connection with people that have the interest and don't feel like an online degree is a good fit for them? How do we accommodate the fact that a lot of those folks are probably working a sort of nine to five type of schedule? How do we*

*support their pursuit of all kinds of areas, not just classes they happen to be able to take that happen after five o'clock?"*

Those are all excellent questions, and they deserve to be answered. Still, Purdy assured me there has been more than just talk. She told me the university is *"participating with a state initiative around adult learners. The state is interested in helping the educational attainment of the population ... trying to connect opportunities for higher education with people who have some higher education, which is a ridiculously huge number in the state of Washington.*

*"It's in UWT's DNA to work with those folks who are very likely transferring credits from another institution or community college. It's not like going to a very traditional four-year undergraduate school where pretty much everyone is between the ages of 18 and 22. So I think that's become a very deliberate focus, because we don't want those folks to be invisible.*

I was struck by Dr. Purdy's remark about working with adult learners being part of our DNA as a university. With my growing knowledge base about the university's history and founding mission, I could see that on some level her DNA metaphor was sound—this was certainly something baked into the university at the start through our mandate to meet the needs of students who might have no other way to finish their degrees. But like my recessive gene for blue eyes—made visible only when my blue-eyed husband and a brown-eyed me gave birth to two blue-eyed sons—I wondered if this aspect of our identity as a university *"designed to serve older, non-traditional, place- and time-bound, working adult"* (Carwein *et al.*, 2001, p. 68) was also invisible to the students who most needed to experience it.

Dr. Purdy had more to say, however. *"Although there are other groups on campus who serve older students—like the Veterans office—you're pointing out a population near and dear to my heart, which is returning mature women who don't necessarily have a military connection or*

*another kind of affinity group to feel like they fit in with. How do we foster a sense of community and social support for them?”*

“My question, exactly!” I said.

Purdy smiled in response. But she also noted that the university *“has not been intentional...in terms of thinking about that”*—about how mature students experience connection and belonging on campus. *“There absolutely has not been as much attention and there haven't been as many resources allocated in that regard.”*

Working to create a sense of community among mature women returners at UWT is a goal that is long overdue. It was an idea discussed in both group and individual interviews by many of my focal participants—and one that I mentioned to Dr. Purdy as something that mature women returners are looking for. And although this group of students carry many outside-of-campus responsibilities, having a space and opportunity to connect with others who are “in the same boat<sup>86</sup>” could make a difference in these women finding belonging on campus.<sup>87</sup>

### **Mentha Hynes-Wilson**

As we spoke over Zoom© during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs Mentha Hynes-Wilson also referred to the Washington State initiative and its investment in mature students who have nearly—but not quite—finished their degrees. Hynes-Wilson, speaking about UWT as an institution, said, *“We are very young in our history and our origin. And for many years, we did attract the commuter student.”* But she also realized the shift that began in 2006 when lower division students were admitted: *“I'd say, as*

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<sup>86</sup> This comment came from Lupita, one of my focal participants, in the first group interview as we talked about the need for a chance to share our experiences as mature women returners at UWT.

<sup>87</sup> The theme of belonging on campus as a mature woman returner is the central focus in chapter four.

*we've been growing the pipeline from high school to college, we've been very effective with our high school partners. But what about others? If we look at the demographics of the US and college-going population, we're seeing a shift. Those students that are going straight out of high school into college are declining, but there's this really robust population that I refer to as a non-traditional student that has tended to be neglected.”*

My ears perked up at Hynes-Wilson’s comments. I had read a great deal lately about the declining numbers of high school students due to a drop in the birthrate over the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century—a number Barshay (2018) predicted to decline by more than a million potential students. Yet, as a result, adults who are older than traditional college age are becoming a larger percentage of the US population—a trend expected to continue for at least a decade—and many of those adults do not have the degrees they need to gain a good job in our society<sup>88</sup>. I have to wonder, though, if the university knows this shift is coming, are they preparing for it? Are they realizing that they not only need to look outside the university for those who may want to enter, but also to make sure they are looking out for the well-being of the mature returners who are already here?

Hynes-Wilson continued. *“So, we've been trying to do the best we can, in terms of gathering information about the demographics in Washington. Is there interest? Is there desire? And what might we be able to do to eliminate those barriers? And going back to our mission, the greatest barrier we have found has been, thus far, debt. We know of so many individuals who began their career as a student but had to stop out for financial reasons. And that debt is limiting their ability to come back into the system. However, for the upcoming year, beginning in autumn 2021, we are introducing a pilot program. We wish to bring in a cohort of adult learners and we*

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<sup>88</sup> I discuss this issue at length in Chapter Six.

*will offer them a completion grant. We will also pair them with an advising coach or completion coach and work with them to persist and to graduate. So, the informal and the tacit agreement is going to be, 'if you commit to us, we commit to you. We're going to stay with you on this journey until you finish.' And the incentive will be the grant. We want to say debt forgiveness, but Washington State doesn't really embrace that. So, a completion grant is what we have in place. Thankfully, we have a little bit of unrestricted funds that will allow us to do that. Our longer-term goal is, of course, to recognize this is our niche."*

In Hynes-Wilson's comments, I could hear echoes of Dr. Purdy's comment about supporting mature returners being "*in our DNA.*" That supporting them should be "*our niche.*" And there are so many things to note in her remarks—trying to discover the individuals who would like to return, identifying not only who they are, but the kinds of barriers that are keeping them from returning. And—as she mentioned—the financial barriers that many of them face. But Hynes-Wilson was optimistic about the help even a small amount of money could be to students, saying, "*It is really going to be worthwhile when we're able to see how that small investment of probably no more than \$1,000 per student can help them finish.*"

I was encouraged to hear about this program offering funds to mature returners who may have just a short way to go to complete their degrees. As she noted, finding the finances to attend can remove a major barrier for working or parenting students who are already carrying major financial responsibilities. But supporting mature returners takes more than just a budget line item—something that Hynes-Wilson is well aware of.

*"Orientation also really makes a big difference,"* she said. *"The ways in which an individual is welcomed into a community will determine whether or not they feel like it's a good*

*match and how they can navigate the spaces. So, in many ways, we have focused on that traditional age population.”*

*“But I have been in those spaces,” she said. “I have looked and said, ‘Okay, there are transfer students here... individuals above the age of 21. Does this appeal to them?’ It’s something that we’ve recognized, that has come up in our evaluations and I know the director of the Student Transitions Program is very intent on making some changes this upcoming year—making sure the programming is relevant to the mature student.”*

I have seen some of those orientation programs firsthand, been aware of the sometimes-bewildered, often uncomfortable faces of mature returners as they watch younger students bounce across the stage in high school pep rally style, announcing their names and their pronouns and their favorite classes and their favorite things to do on or near campus on weekends—oh, and places to eat and study, too. I can’t speak to the feelings of all the mature returners watching, but I know *I* would be feeling wildly out of place in that situation—because *I did*, just a decade ago when I stood in their mature ‘new student’ shoes.

Another issue Hynes-Wilson called *“important to mature students”* is a *“really good relationship with your advisor. It sets the tone. So, I would hope that we can apply many more resources or even rethink the ways in which we have our advising systems in place, I think that’s an area that we really, really need to spend some time on.”*

I had to agree that a good relationship between a student and their adviser was important—as a mature returner it was important to my success as a student to have someone to help me stay on track toward my degree. But that same understanding brings us back to the fact that, for a mature returner who is working a full, or even part-time job, making an appointment with an adviser is not always easy if advisers only work a 9-5 schedule. Currently, however—

during the 2020-21/22 academic years—advisers have been meeting with students over Zoom©, as well as face to face. Yet, available appointment times<sup>89</sup>, whether for Zoom© or face-to-face, still seem to be only during the day—from 9 am to 3:30 pm<sup>90</sup>.

Still, I was heartened by much of what Vice Chancellor Hynes-Wilson had to say about the university’s plans for a renewed focus on mature students, but I was eager to learn whether anything was happening *now* that might help a mature returner feel supported of the UWT campus—a quest that led me to Navia Winderling, UWT Senior Transfer Adviser.

### **Navia Winderling**

Standing on the front line of establishing relationships with potential UWT students, Navia Winderling’s job as Senior Transfer Adviser is the active recruitment of transfer students to UWT. In her position, she is highly cognizant of the often-challenging lives of mature returners, as compared to traditional-age students. She reminded me that *“the transfer student population is made up of a lot of mature students... who have other obligations. They have jobs, they have family, they have children, so they need flexible programs that are hybrid, online, evenings, Saturdays. And, you know, many of our programs don't have that flexibility.”*

Winderling, echoing Hynes-Wilson’s remarks about the changing demographics of colleges across the country and Dalesky’s comments about students’ need for more flexible course schedules, also mentioned the anticipated decline in the numbers of traditional age students, stating, *“the number of students that are in high school right now is less than what we*

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<sup>89</sup> Students are able to make appointments directly with their advisers from the Academic Advising webpages.

<sup>90</sup> This observation is based on what I could see of the academic adviser’s online scheduling tool. Karin Dalesky mentioned in an email exchange in January 2022 that she will occasionally make evening appointments with students who request them, but this information is not found on the scheduling tool. She also told me she was not aware of other advisers scheduling evening appointments.

*had years ago. So nontraditional students, these transfer students, these mature students, this is the norm now and people need to jump on board with resources to support them.”*

In the face of declining enrollments among younger students due to “slowing growth” among traditional-age high school graduates—a number predicted to drop by 450,000 beyond 2025<sup>91</sup>—mature students looking to complete, or even begin, a degree may end up taking a major role in the future of the university. But Winderling also noted another phenomenon changing the demographics of the university—and this one was directly associated with the pandemic. With the sudden switch to online learning in March 2020, she recalled getting phone calls from *“a lot of our former UWT students who want to come back now, those who didn't finish their degree before. In this pandemic, with the shift to online...we're getting all of these returning students who are like, ‘Now I can finish my degree.’<sup>92</sup> So, I hope that signifies to people that we need some flexible options, because online is really, really beneficial for a large population of students... because we recognize that if we have an adult learner population that wants to engage with us, we need to do so after 5pm. We do admissions presentations and transfer student orientations in the evenings. Although, I confess I look forward to the day when not everything needs to be online anymore, I have also become aware of the value of online programs to students who work full-time or are parents.”*

I had to laugh, even as I declared my agreement. “Nothing like being forced to do something to find out that you actually *can*, right?”

*“Absolutely,”* she nodded.

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<sup>91</sup> (Pearson, 9 March 2018, para. 3).

<sup>92</sup> Although Winderling did not specify the age-range of these students, it is interesting to note that one area of growth among students in the 2020-2021 academic year was in graduate students between 25 and 50, while the number of students under 25 dropped by more than 100 during this same time period (see Table 1).

Yet, there is a greater need among mature returners than just access to online orientations; mature students often need flexibility in course offerings or degree programs that traditional college students may not. Several of my focal participants mentioned their need for more flexible programs, online, hybrid, or weekend courses<sup>93</sup>—and although not all students prefer online learning, its availability is vital to mature students, especially those who are working or parenting.

Winderling agreed. *“There are adult learners that really want to come here and maybe don't have the flexibility to do whatever they want. We talk a lot with them about the Interdisciplinary Arts and Sciences major (IAS),<sup>94</sup> which is flexible in the courses and the variety of offerings... But it's hard to have those conversations when you have a student that's like, ‘Well, I am looking for something else.’ Or they are asking, ‘How can I do that when I'm working eight to five and have a family?’ So, it's on our minds a lot. Where I'd love to see growth is in those flexible programs,”* Winderling added. *“The major that is going to connect to the career. I've had so many students turn away after I say I don't have a fully online business program, for example. Those are really hard conversations.”*

As I considered Winderling's comments about the desire many students had for programs or class schedules that would work for those who have families or jobs and are looking for evening or weekend classes, I remembered an email exchange with Chantal—one of my focal participants—who talked about some of the campus practices she would change (if only she could). She gave me a list, and most of it was focused on just this topic—more flexible (and thoughtfully planned) schedules for working students:

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<sup>93</sup> See chapter four for the discussion of this topic among my focal participants, and Chapter Six for my recommendations.

<sup>94</sup> The IAS degree program—for a long time—billed itself as a degree that could be entirely earned through evening classes.

*“Classes that don’t start at 5:30, when most of us get off at 5 or 5:30 but still need the time to get down to campus, park and prepare for class.*

*Classes on the weekends.*

*Classes that aren’t four hours long after a full workday...”*

It all sounded so familiar. The students Winderling was speaking to wanted the same things that Chantal did—a schedule of classes that were actually accessible to working adults with family responsibilities; evening classes that started at times that didn’t require a student to take time off work just to get to class on time; and a consideration of the practical challenges of a downtown campus with limited parking—or without enough time to grab something to eat on the way. As a potential mature returner looking forward to a schedule like that—every quarter—I might wonder if someone like me was even considered when quarterly class schedules were built.

In considering those class schedules, I also thought of a conversation I had with Karin Dalesky about the IAS major—a major that for a long time was billed as a degree that could be entirely earned through evening classes. Dalesky assured me that the IAS major is still one *“that people can do at night—depending on how people define ‘night.’ But other majors may be available if late afternoon is considered evening.”* Yet, she also mentioned that there are *“changes coming”* that will make the IAS major *“far more flexible for students with limited availability”*<sup>95</sup>.

Considering the ways that prospective students find their way to UWT, I mentioned my own experience of trolling the UWT website as a prospective student, searching for information about the campus—available majors and classes, information about faculty, activities and student

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<sup>95</sup> This remark was taken from an email exchange with Karin Dalesky in January 2022. It was part of her response to a question about evening advising hours (not widely available) and whether the IAS major could still be completed by a student who could only attend classes at night.

services, and most of all, some of the demographic information that might give me a hint to whether I'd be alone on campus as an 'older' student.

“Are there any resources that prospective mature returners could view on the UWT website—something that would connect them to support services or resources they might need as students?” I asked.

In response, Winderling described an online resource: The UWT Transfer Guidebook as *“something we share with all students, just to give them an idea of what we've got going on. It highlights a lot of our campus resources and it's typically very helpful.”*

Intrigued by the idea of a document that would help connect transfer students, mature students in particular, to available resources or support services on campus, I followed the link she sent and looked it over for myself, viewing it as a prospective mature student (or discourse analyst) might.

### **‘In-Text’: Observing the Discourse of the University**

Although a thorough examination of the discourse of the university and its habitus as viewed across its physical documentation or the campus website is beyond the scope of this project, the 2020-21 Transfer Guidebook that Winderling mentioned—although just one possible document out of many—acts as a useful example of the discourse and habitus of the university, and one readily available on the UWT website.<sup>96</sup> In this section, I consider how the habitus of UWT might be made visible through its discourse within the text of this single document, particularly as it would be viewed by potential students. In this evaluation, I focus specifically on

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<sup>96</sup> (UW Tacoma Admissions, 2021, <https://www.tacoma.uw.edu/admissions/transfer-guidebook>).

its constructions of student identity and its potential meaning through a multimodal textual analysis of its discourse.

A discourse is portrayed by Mayr (2015) as a real-world use of language, while Gee (2011) extended that definition to include not just language but “...actions, interactions, ways of thinking...[and] various symbols, tools and objects” that are used to construct a social identity (p. 201). Foucault (1980) also viewed discourse in society as something beyond language, encompassing the social practices that fashion a subject even as they shape its meaning (see also Hall, 2001; Yates & Hiles, 2010). Citing Bourdieu, Kvasny (2005) called discourse “a *structured structuring structure*” in which social actors “construct a social reality harmonious with the shared social, historical, and cultural structures that embody the habitus”—with language acting as both means and raw material (“Theoretical foundations: Habitus and practice,” para. 4, emphasis mine). In short, a discourse is all-encompassing: both the means of structuring culture and the culture that results.

Shifting the focus from the broader culture to the discourse of institutions, Mayr (2015) asserted that “language is the principal means by which institutions and organizations create their own social reality” (p. 755), an echo of Mumby and Clair’s (1997) claim that this social reality, once constructed, then supports and maintains the identity of the institution. Foucault (1980) further claimed that the subjects created by a discourse reveal what is sayable or thinkable about them, allowing us to personify subjects in certain ways (and, Foucault claimed, only in those ways). For example, with the authority it affords to cultural “truths” about UWT students, the transfer guidebook constructs norms for the subjects it creates through its discourse. It is the social power of that discourse—rising from the shared relationship between persons within it—that constructs and maintains the discursive practices that formed it in the first place.

This document—focused on offering a glimpse of campus culture to potential students—offers several pieces of information: “quick facts” about the racial/ethnic/gender breakdown of the student body; photographs of several faculty and their research and teaching interests; a list of majors by school; information about study abroad opportunities; things to do around the campus and throughout the city; information about Student Life, student organizations, and ways to get involved; on-campus housing and its cost; admission requirements and ways to become a more competitive applicant. It also has pages dedicated to information specifically for international students, and veterans and active-duty military students; tuition costs and financial aid—including aid for undocumented residents and information about scholarships; and finally, a page that includes notice of special “Transfer Tuesday” sessions for students interested in transferring to UWT (University of Washington Tacoma Transfer Guidebook, 2020-21<sup>97</sup>). From this perspective, I noted a few discursive features of the text that might stand out to prospective mature returners:

1. Among the students pictured in this guidebook, I saw no one (other than those named as faculty) who appeared to be over the age of 30<sup>9899</sup>.

In examining the discourse of the university through a text like this one, Reissman (2008) claimed, we must consider not only what the text *does*, but how it does it. My primary focus here is on the 2020-21 Transfer Guidebook; in it there are numerous photographs of smiling students involved in a variety of activities alongside textual information about various aspects of

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<sup>97</sup> My observations of this guidebook are primarily drawn from the 2020-21 guidebook. However, since this chapter was originally drafted, a newer version was published online. Throughout this section, I note a few of the changes made in the newer version

<sup>98</sup> This observation of the 2020-21 edition of the guidebook is purely subjective as the ages of individuals can be difficult to gauge, particularly in photographs. However, because 20% of all UWT students are age 30 and over, their (lack of) representation in this text does not appear to be proportional to their presence on campus.

<sup>99</sup> In the 2021-22 version of this document, I did see one student highlighted who appeared to be at least 30—a transfer student who also works as the campus’ Veterans Corps Navigator (p. 19). This is a real improvement in representation over the 2020-21 edition.

university culture. The photos present a certain view of students, supporting the idea that individuals like those pictured are the students for whom the campus is intended— those considered to be the norm—making it more difficult for those not represented to identify with it. Although it can be difficult to guess the ages of some individuals from a photograph, I suspect this document would not do much to make a mature woman returner feel welcome: there was not one student in it who looked like me. Although the document references the diversity of the student body, it speaks only of race and ethnicity—or international student status—with no mention of student age or parental and/or employment status. And for someone who already feels that they are not ‘college age,’ the visual silence—as viewed through the physical absence—surrounding mature student representation speaks loudly, letting such students know they are an afterthought at best, or unwelcome at worst. Although the information gleaned from interviews with staff, administrators, and faculty assures me this is not meant to be the case, this example of the discourse of the university that mature returners may see first still speaks— loudly.

Language also plays a role in this text. Fairclough (2010) noted that language is both positioned within and constructs society. In a text like this one, the language not only reflects the culture of the university, but also builds it. In this document:

2. No information is offered for working or part-time students, students who are parents,<sup>100</sup> or mature returners—nor is there any mention of any available resources or support systems that might be specific to those students.

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<sup>100</sup> Although not included in the transfer guidebook, there is an information page of the UWT website (<https://www.tacoma.uw.edu/uwt/cfss/finding-childcare>) with a list of family support services. There is no mention of the page in this document, however (neither the 2020-21 version, nor the updated 2021-22 edition).

What does this language—or its lack—do to reflect or construct the culture of the university? To a prospective student, the silence surrounding working and/or part-time students, student parents, or mature students could speak loudly: they are not considered part of the university culture—or at least, they are not valued by it.

In our conversation about transfer students and the university-prepared transfer student document, Navia Winderling spoke of the importance of making students aware of available resources, claiming that

*“it's tough because students don't always disclose what other kind of bubbles they have in the air, what other obligations they have. But we try to ask them, ‘what do you have going on at home? Do you need childcare assistance? Do you have a job that is supportive of you going back to school and finishing out your education? If you don't and you need to find a job that supports it, let's make sure you get connected with career development.’”* (personal communication, April 2021)

Face-to-face conversations on these topics are undoubtedly more valuable to mature returners than web resources they may or may not see. However, I noticed there was no mention of childcare or career development in the transfer guidebook, and for mature returners who are looking for a place to continue their education—a place to belong—this omission speaks volumes. It tells me—whether intentional or not—that the university has given little thought to meeting the needs of working/parenting students. There are no childcare options, for example, nor is there any mention of the Childcare Assistance program. There are no mentions of how the university is attempting to meet the needs of working students through evening or weekend classes or even whether there are after-work hours available for advising. This document tells me that if I fit into a category of student not pictured or otherwise addressed, not only am I likely to

be alone on this campus, I would also be left on my own to find any support I might need to become a successful student.

There are three categories of ‘nontraditional’ students specifically mentioned in the 2020-21 edition of the guidebook, however:

- Veterans and Active-Duty service members (approximately 18% of all UWT students are military-affiliated). There is an entire page in this document dedicated to this group of students (see p. 19 in both 2020-21 and 2021-22 versions)
- International students (approximately 4%<sup>101</sup> of all UWT students). Although most of these students are traditional age, most are also transfer students, coming from local community colleges. There is an entire page dedicated to this group of students (see p. 18, both versions)
- First-generation students. The inside cover notes that 55% of all UWT students are first generation students (2020-21 edition). In the 2021-22 edition, that number has grown to 56% (p. 4). Although there is a brief mention of the First Gen Fellows program in the 2020-21 version of the guidebook (p. 4), there is none in the 2021-22 edition.

A large percentage of mature returners are also first-generation students (two-thirds of my focal participants are) or veterans.<sup>102</sup> Yet, while approximately 20% of all UWT students (graduate and undergraduate) are at least 30 years of age, there is no mention of this information in the guidebook<sup>103</sup>—nothing that would let a prospective mature returner know that they would find representation on this campus.

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<sup>101</sup> (UW Tacoma 2020-21 Facts, 2021, ‘Demographics’).

<sup>102</sup> I came to UWT as a military-affiliated individual and greatly appreciated this office as an incoming student.

<sup>103</sup> Although this information is no longer found on the UWT website, in 2011—when I arrived as a transfer student—the average age of UWT students was listed on the website as 29. As a mature student, this number was important in my decision to attend.

The images and information within this one document work together to tell a story of who belongs on campus and—by omission—who does not. Howarth (2002) claimed that just as negative representations can create a stigma and affect an individual’s social identity and self-esteem (see also Mills, 1998, for her consideration of linguistic representation and sexism), a lack of representation can have a damaging effect, as well. According to Fryberg and Townsend’s (2008) theory of invisibility, a group who finds themselves un- or underrepresented in advertising or other forms of media regarding a particular social context receives the message that they are intruders who do not belong. When a lack of representation extends beyond marketing efforts to potential students to encompass campus policies that delimit office hours for advising services or campus-wide student events, for example, to times when many mature students are at work, what is a mature student to think but ‘I am not valued here. I don’t really belong’?

Jane, one of my focal participants, discussed this very idea in relation to student-centered campus events, saying *“I noticed that when they have Husky Week, it’s all during the day, like 9-11 or something. We work! Adults work! And you get off at 5-something. There’s no activities. You want to be a part of it and enjoy the festivities... And I voiced that during a senior class event, that maybe one day out of the Husky Week, something could be planned...like a weekend! But just in general, to be mindful of adult learners, that we have family obligations, we have lives, we have jobs. I think about activities where we could still be a part of the university—just during weekends or evenings.”*<sup>104</sup>

Feeling like your presence is not important to those who plan campus activities, that you aren’t a ‘real’ student because you aren’t able to attend events that all seem to happen during the

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<sup>104</sup> Jane’s comment here comes from the first group interview.

noon hour, can affect the identity construction of mature students, leading them to believe the university sees only one way to “be” a student—and it does not include people like them. And for mature returners who believe they are an underrepresented minority group on campus, they are likely to see that the means of becoming a student—beginning with being part of a certain age group—is not open to them. Bowl (2003) calls this “access without accessibility,” or the situation that exists for some students when they are able to gain admittance to an institution, but a gap remains between the language (and practice) of inclusion and the realities of everyday campus life. This gap can be seen in a lack of support within an institution “still geared toward the needs of a different class of people”—meaning those *with* unlimited time and flexible schedules, and *without* family and work responsibilities (p. 153).

With this text in mind, I once more query the university’s discursive habitus, asking: How are mature students at UWT “marked and read” (Inoue, 2016, p. 96)? My response—at least in the case of this single document—is they are marked as inconsequential and read as invisible. After all, why does the university include percentages of transfer students, student ethnicities, or first-generation status in the demographics it makes public? Surely these numbers are meant to help students identifying with one or more of these groups recognize they will be represented and welcomed at UWT, so why would we not extend the same sort of textual welcome to the mature returners who already make up approximately 20% of our student population—and represent a population that currently shows the greatest potential for sustainable growth in the university spaces of the near future? In 2011, when I chose UWT as the place I would complete my own degree, the demographic information on the UWT ‘Quick Facts’ webpage, including the average student age on campus—which I remember as 29—played an

important role in convincing me that I would find a place of belonging on this campus. However, sometime between 2011 and 2020, that number disappeared from the campus website.

If the visibility of that number made me feel included—‘marked’ by the campus as valued—it could do the same for some other mature returner. Now might be a good time to bring it back.

### **Conclusion**

In this chapter I have looked at the institutional habitus of UWT, beginning with its origin story, its historical mission and values, and in documents and oral histories left behind by those who forged it. I have traced UWT’s mission across the years as it began with community need as viewed through legislated mandates, examined it through the words of those tasked with implementing it, and explored the effects of legislated changes to that original design. I have examined a single document—one among many—for the vision of university discourse it offers. In the process, although I heard many positive things about what the university plans for its future, I also discovered that—whether intentional or not—mature returners appear to be an afterthought at UWT. There appears to be little consideration given at an institutional level to focusing effort on their support. Over the decades of the university’s existence, as numbers of lower division students increased—particularly first years of a traditional age—the percentage of mature students has decreased. Although not surprising, the shift in focus from supporting transfer students, who are more likely to be mature age students, to providing a substantial “first-year experience” for more traditional-age students (University of Washington Tacoma, 2021, Undergraduate Education) seems to have become central to the university’s habitus and personality. And to some extent, this shift was not trivial or unnecessary; the number of students

around the state who need expanded university access has grown over the years as first-generation students whose family experience did not include a college education began to apply—and gain acceptance—in increasing numbers. This is a good thing for the university, but also for the larger community and the students themselves.

Yet, at the same time, I was heartened to hear from campus decision-makers that the pendulum may be swinging back towards a greater inclusivity: that support for the mature returner is once more being reflected in university planning, not only for the present but into the future. I discuss this shift at greater length in my final chapter, where I consider some of the implications of my study. But in this moment, the spotlight shifts toward the women whose experiences have formed the heart of my research. In the next chapter, we listen in on their stories.

## Chapter Four

### Belonging: Identity in Relationship

In this chapter, I consider the idea of mature returner belonging through an autoethnographic narrative inquiry that incorporates texts from all data sources. In examining the storied experiences of my participants, I observed their roads to belonging as a negotiation of sorts, one where their (re)entry into higher education with already established adult identities required finding the sort of relationships that would help them find ways to belong within a new situation. Within the constructed narrative, I explore their storied experiences through Wenger's (2000) three aspects of belonging<sup>105</sup>—engagement, imagination, and alignment—as well as a consideration of place, to explore whether and how these mature women students have found a sense of belonging in the relationships and spaces of UWT.

The narrative in this chapter encompasses all narrative data collected across the time frame of this project, yet its (re)storied appearance is that of a single group conversation. All these stories were born in the dialogic interaction of a dyad or group. So, rather than reducing the stories gathered through group and individual interviews to a series of codes, categories, and patterns, I instead regarded the individual stories as units of meaning in themselves, examining them for themes that crossed the narratives. I then integrated those stories according to the meaningful themes that arose as I read and put those storied meanings into conversation with each other as a researcher would in writing a literature review. In this way, I synthesized these units into meaningful stories as McCormack (2004) described: “generat[ing] stories by

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<sup>105</sup> Wenger (2000) described belonging as developing in three ways: through engagement, imagination, and alignment. Engagement, he claimed, can be seen in interactions with others within a community; imagination is described as coming to view oneself as part of the community; alignment can be understood as finding a place of balance and agreement between new and old practices and ways of thinking. These concepts are discussed at greater length in the subsection titled “Belonging: Identity in Relationship” in Chapter One.

composing stories” (p. 220; see also McCormack, 2004; McCormack, Gilchrist, Hancock, Islam, Kennelly, Northcote, & Thomson, 2017). I began this composition process with Polkinghorne’s (1995) depiction of narrative inquiry: an amalgamation of “analysis of narrative,” or seeing stories as data that can be analyzed according to themes that exists across stories, and “narrative analysis,” (p. 5-6) or what McCormack (2004) explained as an investigation of described actions or events as data that are then “used to generate stories through a process of emplotment” (p.220). Where plot points converged, I sought to integrate them, thereby theorizing a story of experience (Erasga, 2010) into a larger unit of meaning; where they diverged, I compared and contrasted them within another unit of meaning. In this way, I sought to interpret and transform my “messy data into meaningful stories” (Kim, 2016, p. 184). In many ways, the reconstructed dialogue of the larger narrative in this chapter is like a found poem<sup>106</sup>. All the words, ideas, and interactions already existed within the source text(s), but just as with a ‘found poem,’ the words and ideas I interacted with in the stories shared with me gained an additional meaning as I (re)interpreted and (re)storied them into something new.

The setting for the (re)storying in this chapter is real. The stories and memories it evoked are real. Although some dialogic interchanges may be slightly reimagined, their origin is rooted in the realities of multiple dialogic interactions—covering many of the same topics—within both group and individual interviews and the various written narratives I collected from each participant. Analysis is embedded within the constructed narrative as I sought to gain meaning from my own experience of those stories as researcher. As a part of this (re)storying process, I

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<sup>106</sup> “Found poetry” is described by the Academy of American Poets (n.d.) as a collage-like, literary art form that begins with existing texts, refashioning and reordering their lines/phrases into poems. Annie Dillard (1996) spoke of found poetry as refashioning the lines while keeping the original meaning intact. Where poets like Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, and T.S. Eliot (among others) have created poetry using lines as units of meaning from a variety of texts, including government documents, opera, and Greek mythology, I took stories as my unit and constructed a found dialogue with them.

faced several editorial choices. As with all qualitative research, there was more data than I could address in a single study. So, selecting which stories to include was the first of these choices. Those choices were based in the predominant themes that arose across narratives. As a part of this selection process, I kept my research questions at the forefront, focusing on stories that I felt best spoke to the issues they addressed, leaving out stories of issues other researchers had previously dealt with. With a different set of questions, I would likely have chosen different stories. Even once I had selected stories to include, several were withdrawn for space. Through a process of narrative smoothing, I removed some of the normal hesitations or repetitions that fill the patterns of everyday speech<sup>107</sup>, and re-ordered some of the dialogue, “brushing off the edges” of the data to make it more “coherent, engaging, and interesting to the reader” (Kim, 2016, p. 192). Although Spence (1986) claimed that this practice can be problematic, as a researcher attempting to tell a good story rather than being strictly faithful to the data, I worked to overcome this issue by avoiding the coding process—keeping participants’ stories intact and in context.<sup>108</sup> Citations are included in footnotes to maintain the narrative flow and make for a more generative reading experience. Using the first group interview with my focal participants as a story framework, I used it to do what all good stories do: construct meaning from experience. About this construction of meaning, Polkinghorne (1995) claimed that stories allow us to view “the richness and nuances of meaning in human affairs” (p. 11). Similarly, Riessman (2008) discussed

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<sup>107</sup> Several of my participants stated they were more than a bit horrified at how they sounded in the original transcripts and were relieved when I told them of my intent here. But natural speech patterns do not make for a good reading experience, so ‘cleaning up’ our speech was necessary for readability (Kim 2016; see footnote below for further explanation).

<sup>108</sup> What this means in practice is that the various stories grouped in this narrative were all responses to the same question, regardless of whether they were given in individual or group interviews. Kim (2016) spoke of this aspect of narrative smoothing as “transposition,” or moving data (stories) from one situation to another. Although she describes this as a “tricky” part of narrative inquiry—and one where the researcher must work carefully—she also claims narrative smoothing to be a “major means of narrative data analysis” (p. 191), and part of coming to understand a text.

the ways that experience is storied by individuals as a way to evaluate and construct meaning from that experience for a specific audience. Maines, Pierce, and Laslett (2008) wrote about the value of individual stories in drawing connections between personal and larger social issues, creating meaning in this way (see also Geertz, 1973). Bruner (2002), spoke of the power of stories to open “possible worlds” into new understanding (p. 22), and Frank (2012) insisted that stories “represent experiences that are *meaningless* until they are shared as stories” (p. 36; emphasis added). To tell a story *is* to create meaning.

So, it is with all this in mind that I begin my story of...

### **The Interview**

Fastening my raincoat and reaching for an umbrella, I glanced at the clock on my office wall. One-forty. Just enough time to run down to Starbucks and make it back before everyone arrived. I was looking forward to the afternoon but was also a bit anxious. How would it all work out, trying to construct a comfortable conversation between eight very different people who—as far as I knew—had only me as a common acquaintance? What would I do if they wouldn’t talk to each other?

Attempting to quash my concerns, I stopped by the Teaching and Learning Center conference room where two of my wonderful colleagues, Su-Maio and Cara,<sup>109</sup> were strong-arming chairs into place to create more comfortable seating and arranging the fruit and cookies I hoped would help make the afternoon’s conversation feel more like a social occasion and less like a typical interview. Since the two of them seemed to have the set up under control, I left to

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<sup>109</sup> Su-Maio Lai and Cara Hale are two of my colleagues in the UWT Teaching and Learning Center. They have given me permission to use their real names. Throughout the rest of this chapter, several staff and faculty are mentioned by name; all names are included with permission.

brave the December rain and pick up the coffee. Hurrying down the Snoqualmie stairs, I walked past the library desk and out the door, picking my way around quickly growing puddles and the barren flower beds that would burst with purple and gold tulips come spring. With my destination on Pacific Avenue, I turned toward the Grand Staircase that centers the campus. Although the day looked quite different, I couldn't help but remember the first time I had set foot on campus a decade earlier—climbing this same staircase for the very first time.

I came to UWT in 2011 as a 54-year-old transfer student from a local community college. During the two years I spent there, I had grown (somewhat) used to my “oldest student in the room” status. But I had also found a level of comfort in a place where I felt I like I belonged. I made some friends among a small group of students who, like me, were older than a traditional college student, and was cheered on by faculty and administrators who had come to know me and supported my desire to finally complete a bachelor's degree. I couldn't help but wonder if I'd find similar support and encouragement here on this campus.

Pushing open the door to the campus bookstore and making my way toward the Starbucks lobby, I smiled at the memory. I most definitely had—and then some<sup>110</sup>!

...

Walking the UWT campus for the first time that hot July afternoon, I sought out the building hosting the transfer orientation meeting. After wandering a few halls, I finally found the

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<sup>110</sup> Throughout this reconstructed story, there is a movement back and forth through time that incorporates autoethnographic vignettes into the narrative inquiry space. These brief autoethnographic stories are interwoven within what Clandinin and Connelly (2000) called the three-dimensional space of a narrative inquiry—built through an interaction of time, place, and relationship that incorporates the past, present, and future of all participants within the spaces they inhabit, and the relationships carried into and out of those spaces. Like my own stories woven through the narrative—present recollections and reflections on my own experience—the stories shared with me also inhabit these narrative inquiry space(s). This narrative inquiry includes the (then) present recollections and reflections of my focal participants, as well as my own recollections and reflections on the stories they shared with me. In my view, a narrative inquiry most faithfully portrays Bakhtin's view that utterances reach both back and forward across time in an ongoing dialogue where utterances lead both backwards and forwards, from and to one another.

room—but it was empty. Peering into adjacent classrooms and hoping I’d just mistaken the room number, I finally came across a custodian who directed me towards the advising office and a front desk person who told me the meeting had been cancelled. Standing by as she picked up the phone, I was more than a bit irritated. I’d just taken a bus for the first time in more than 30 years, for goodness’ sake--traversing the city on an inconvenient 45-minute route to campus compared to the 20 minutes it would have taken had I driven myself. Yeah, I was ready to complain to anyone who would listen. But as I stood there silently fuming, the person at the desk set down the phone and smiled.

“If you’ve got a minute, one of the advisers will be right out to talk with you.”

She directed me toward a classroom down the hall and within three minutes, a tall blonde with black-framed glasses and a brilliant smile appeared and introduced herself as Karin Dalesky. For an hour we sat in that empty classroom—just the two of us—while she told me her UWT story, answering every question I could think of. Our interaction that day changed everything for me. Rather than taking the hefty scholarship PLU had offered me, I chose UWT as the place I would finish my degree—a decision I never regretted.

...

Just as I arrived back with the coffee, the women who had agreed to take part in my research project began to drift in. Ironeyes and Lupita arrived first, chatting about final papers and holiday plans. As members of the same program, they already knew each other. The rest of the group—Hazel, Vera, Robin, Chantal, and Shelly—trickled in over the next few minutes, with Jane, fresh from final exams on the Seattle campus, arriving last. As I introduced those who were unacquainted, I urged them toward snacks and coffee and we settled in for what I hoped would be more than just a successful interview, but an enjoyable afternoon as well.

I was not disappointed.

The winter sky was dark and the rain—at times—pelted the windows with such force our conversation ceased as we watched the raindrops bounce off the glass. Yet, the rain—and the fact that most of the women had previously been strangers to each other—did not hinder our enjoyment of the afternoon. Amidst cookies and coffee, our conversation—peppered liberally with laughter—meandered through a variety of topics. The stories we shared that afternoon were funny, encouraging, and occasionally brimming with frustration; there were even a few tears. Yet as we talked, we discovered that, for all our differences, we had a great deal in common. No matter our starting points, we had all set out on a journey that ultimately changed our lives.

Since this was an interview, I was armed with a list of questions. But as the afternoon proceeded, topics seemed to arise unsolicited, swirling around issues many of us had faced as mature women returning to college. One of the first topics we discussed were the spaces on campus that called to us in some way, making us feel like we belonged, as well as those that were clearly designed with much younger students in mind—and not quite so welcoming.

## **A ‘Place’ to Belong**

Most of the spaces on any campus—at least those beyond classrooms and offices—are public spaces, defined as those for which no one who is a member of the campus community needs “permission or invitation” to access.<sup>111</sup> Intentionally or not, such spaces are rhetorically fashioned with certain audiences in mind, causing some to feel out of place even as they attract others. Academics often speak of “inclusive environments” and the need to “remove barriers to belonging,”<sup>112</sup> without always considering that ‘environments’ and ‘barriers’ are more than just

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<sup>111</sup> (Trawalter, Hoffman, & Palmer, 2021, p. 132)

<sup>112</sup> (Gravett & Ajjawi, 2021, p. 2).

metaphorical; they can be material, too. If mature students are to feel ‘at home’ on campuses—as administrators work hard to make sure that ‘traditional’ students do—the kind of environments they need to build that sense of belonging for themselves must be investigated.

For a mature student, finding a sense of belonging is more than just connecting socially with classmates or overcoming a sense of being ‘out of place’ because of age. But as I consider the idea of belonging, I remember Vice Chancellor Hynes-Wilson’s ideas about a campus living room—a *“central location that lends itself to people feeling as if they belonged. UWT is a commuter campus by its birth and we’re really working to try to create more spaces where students can come together and have a sense of community.”*<sup>113</sup> Although I certainly see the value of such spaces, I also know that belonging does not look the same to everyone.

...

I found it early on—probably the second week of my first quarter on campus. Winding behind the lecture-style classrooms in the BB block, the space opened up at the end of a ramped walkway obscured by the glare of a winter sunrise. Although not always quiet, it was bright and open—well-lit, even on rainy days—and performed well as a study space on mornings I took the early bus to campus. Although the main area was filled with benches and tables flanked by a towering, brightly painted mural, it was the nearer end of the space that called to me: little more than a pass-through, dotted with a few bright orange chairs perched in front of tall windows that overlooked Pacific Avenue. Tucked out of sight until you were almost in it, this little nook was my favorite space on campus—one that always gave me the sense that I was truly a college student. It signaled familiarity and reassurance, but also discovery and belonging. With space to put books, backpack—and feet—on the deep windowsill and still balance a laptop, I spent many

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<sup>113</sup> See Hynes-Wilson’s interview in Chapter Three for the rest of this story.

contented hours there, reading, writing, and thinking, watching the traffic pass below my feet. When I think of the spaces of belonging that represent my UWT student experience, this one tops my list.

...

Like me, Robin, a married White woman in her late 30s, also found campus spaces that signaled belonging to her, noting that her favorite was the *“big wide open study area in the Snoqualmie library building. It was always so quiet there. There were little signs on all the tables that you had to be quiet, which, to me, always felt like little protective talismans. I tried to get a table by the window if possible.”*

For Robin, belonging was not found in a large group space filled with like-minded people—but in the library’s *“silence...the privacy of its wide-openness and light. If we are talking about belonging as a deliberate practice, I think that is a space that I was able to make my own...That was a place that I belonged academically, personally and environmentally.”<sup>114</sup>*

To an introvert like Robin, a space away from others gave her what she needed to feel she belonged in the university, to become a successful part of it. The constraint of required interactions with other people too-often caused her to feel *“shuffled around and lost.”* It may seem counterintuitive to think of belonging—something that appears to signal connections between people—as an interaction with quiet spaces. But for Robin—and for me—it was a relationship with the space itself that was most important to the sense of belonging. The spaces of belonging were so important to Robin that she noted, they, *“in some cases, have been more instrumental in making me feel part of the university setting than any relationships I formed.”*

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<sup>114</sup> All the quotes in this paragraph come from Robin’s response to an emailed question about the spaces on campus that made her feel that she belonged.

For Ironeyes, a married Native American mother and grandmother in her 50s, belonging also came within the spaces of the Snoqualmie Building, but it was “*the librarians—Johanna Jacobsen Kiciman and Marisa Petrich*”—who helped her find it. She claimed, “*They are the ones who made me feel like a researcher, that I knew what I was doing. At times I felt lost, but I kept on asking questions until I understood how to research on my own. The library was more than a place I went to study. It was a place that made me feel like I belonged and felt worthy of being at a university.*”<sup>115</sup>”

Like Robin, Ironeyes also found belonging in the library, but for her it was through the engagement she found with the people she worked with there, and through it the ability to imagine herself as a member of the community. For someone whose early education involved a place that effectively kidnapped her childhood and did everything but support her learning, finding the campus library to be a space that supported her learning also made her feel worthy of belonging to it.

Belonging for a mature student is, of course, found in relationships but is also connected to spaces—but then, so can be a sense of not belonging. As a mature student, one campus space I never felt I belonged was the Dawghouse Student Lounge—its pool tables, video games, and loud music demarking an area designed with a specific category of student in mind, a student clearly not me.

Jane, a Cambodian-Chinese single mother in her 40s, acknowledged similar feelings about the same space, with Jane stating that she “*felt judged by young students each time I walked in there to warm up my food or go to the financial aid department. I felt their facial expressions read, ‘What is she doing in here? She’s old.*”<sup>116</sup>”

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<sup>115</sup> From Ironeyes’ response to the question about places of belonging on campus.

<sup>116</sup> From the first group interview.

Laughing, Robin added, “*Yes! Me, too.*”<sup>117</sup>”

Although a central student ‘living room’ could be a wonderful way to create the physical and social connections that could lead to a sense of belonging on a campus, it is critical to acknowledge that not all students ‘read’ belonging in the same way. Just as individuals will always decorate the spaces of their homes differently—some like clean, uncluttered spaces, while others prefer overflowing bookcases and an abundance of throw pillows—there is no one way to create a sense of belonging in campus spaces. Taking the time to talk with mature students about the ways they understand belonging can be vitally important to their success.

### ***Belonging in the Classroom: Age is (Sometimes More Than) Just a Number***

Jane’s comments on feeling ‘old’ in some campus spaces led us to talk about some of the ways that we, as mature women returners, struggled to experience ‘belonging’ in our campus community. Feeling like an integral part of an academic community like UWT involves more than just an ability to take on the work and meet (or overcome) faculty expectations. Sometimes encountering the age difference with others in a classroom is enough to shake whatever other feelings of belonging a mature student might have.

Although Vera, a 40-ish married White woman with three school age children was—along with Robin—among the youngest women in our group, she had still felt the sting of age difference with fellow students. She said, “*There was one class I had where...we're in a group project—and one of the girls in my group? She was born the year I graduated from high school! That was, like, a punch in the gut, you know? I had some of that, like ‘I'm old and I'm returning to school.’ I really had some mental like barriers with that.*”<sup>118</sup>”

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<sup>117</sup> From the first group interview.

<sup>118</sup> From Vera’s individual interview.

“Me, too.” Lupita, a Latina mother and grandmother in her 50s, said. *“I felt very like an outsider, like I didn’t belong. All I can see is young people in the class and I was the only one older than them...I felt very uncomfortable, like people were judging me, and knowing that the professors were younger than me<sup>119</sup>.”*

“Oh yeah, I remember that feeling,” Robin said. *“Like I’m a hundred years old. That is exactly what I felt like going back to college in my 30s—like, I’m this really, really old man sitting with a bunch of kindergarteners.<sup>120</sup>”*

Although we all chuckled at the image that Robin painted for us—this young-looking woman feeling like an elderly man in a room filled with five-year-olds—we definitely related to the feelings Vera, Lupita, and Robin shared with us. It might have been hard for the rest of us to imagine that either of them would feel out of place among students who didn’t really look that much younger than the two of them but belonging is more than just a number.

Jane, who also returned to college—the first time—at age 30, agreed.

*“I was always the older person in my cohort, whatever class that might be, whether taking my nursing pre-requisites or in the nursing program. There were sometimes one or two older than me, but normally, I was the oldest one. In the bachelor’s program, same experience, and again in my Doctor of Nursing Practice program. So, I am not included in some of the after-class activities or events or get togethers, because, you know, I am like their mom when you really think about it.<sup>121</sup>”*

When you are already feeling old and out of place—always the oldest in every room—the lack of inclusion that each of these women mentioned and the feelings you are being judged for

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<sup>119</sup> This quote is from Lupita’s individual interview, but she talked about the same issue in both the first group interview and her literacy narrative.

<sup>120</sup> This quote from Robin is from the first group interview.

<sup>121</sup> This quote from Jane comes from the first group interview.

it can be difficult to overcome. But although the sense that you stand out in a crowd—and not in a good way—can be uncomfortable, it is not always so. Shelly, a Native Hawaiian single mother and grandmother in her early 50s had a different take on her experiences with younger students in the classroom.

*“I hear you! But I’ve made friends with some of the younger students. I also feel like some of the younger 20 years olds are, you know, like my kids. But they’re brilliant! Sometimes I just sit there and listen to them, and I’m awestruck by how they talk. They’re just so smart! And for the most part, they’re all just super nice.”<sup>122</sup>”*

Hazel, a single African American woman in her 50s, also talked about a finding a comfortable fit in the classroom, in spite of her age. She noted:

*“It was good to see my fellow staff members in the class. But that’s what helped me to think, “Ok, I can do this” because I saw someone I knew who worked in a different department... and there were just people I knew. And I thought, ‘I can do this. I know the people a little bit.’ So that really helped, I think... that reassurance that we’re kind of all in this together for the overall good of the university, and individually, professionally, socially. You know, it just seems a fit.”<sup>123</sup>”*

...

Although every new college student likely enters the classroom feeling unsure of the welcome they will find inside, I quickly came to know what to expect on the first day of every new quarter: a room full of students whose faces showed uncertainty over my presence. This reaction was typical—particularly in seminar-style classes where students sit around a table, rather than in desks stretched in lines across the room. One of the younger students would always

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<sup>122</sup> This quote from Shelly comes from the second group interview.

<sup>123</sup> This quote from Hazel comes from the first group interview.

assume I was the professor, leaving them with bewildered expressions when the actual professor walked through the door to start class.

But I also remember one early November day in 2017—during my first quarter in my PhD program in Seattle— when I finally felt as if I belonged in my cohort. A fresh-out-of-undergrad classmate—probably no more than 21—struck up a conversation as we were leaving the classroom. He had questions about the rhetoric track of our program, and we ended up talking in the hallway for about 30 minutes—about the program, our research interests, and some of the courses we planned to take in the future. It may not have been a social occasion—although it was certainly an enjoyable conversation—but that acknowledgement of me as a person and my sense of inclusion and out shared interests sparked the first glimmerings of a sense of myself as a student who belonged, rather than just the occasionally-outspoken outsider I had felt like since the first day of class.

And it didn't hurt when he waved and said "Hey, Margaret, how was your weekend?" as we walked into class the next week, either.

...

Although, obviously, feeling so...different from the rest of the students in a classroom can be uncomfortable at times, there is also a sense that the life experience that comes with age can be an advantage.

*"It absolutely is," Vera said. "Coming to UWT, I felt fine. It's quite a diverse campus. And I found that my maturity and my previous experience worked in my favor. I think I get more respect, and I think that does come from my previous experience, the confidence level I have. And that comes with age, as well. There are things that I know... like, I just have a separate area where I can say, 'This is my expertise. I'm an expert at something.' Right? And you don't really*

*get that with an 18- or 19-year-old. I think that is different, as well. Like I get a certain level of respect for my own experiences and what I have to offer.”*

In Vera’s words, I heard echoes of a story shared with me by Executive Vice Chancellor Dr. Jill Purdy, about one of her former students: an 80-year-old gentleman who, she said, had originally *“started his degree way back before he got drafted into the military. He had long since retired from both military and a job and it was just a point of pride for him to want to earn his degree. To me, this is a very mature student, very visibly different...*

*“But I noticed about four weeks into the class that this older gentleman had kind of a little circle around him—younger men who had obviously developed respect and admiration for him and wanted to make sure that he had all of the tools and resources that he needed, because he wasn't super comfortable with technology and all of those kinds of things. And they were clearly getting something from him and his stories and his life experience and just his way of being with people. And honestly, I think, everyone was just so admiring of his motives, right? Like it's the purest possible motive: ‘I want to go to college, because I want to learn. The degree is not doing anything for me for my career, or for me financially.’ But that's not the point, right? And it was just an amazing quarter because of the presence of this gentleman in the class.”*

Dr. Purdy smiled as she finished her story, eyes twinkling.

*“And I was the proudest person on earth when he graduated. It was just such an amazing delight to have him in the class. It offered far more benefits than challenges and he communicated that he felt that way, too. That it was really just an enriching experience, and really energizing for him to be in this context with these people from all different walks of life who really wanted to learn.<sup>124</sup>”*

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<sup>124</sup> From Dr. Purdy’s stakeholder interview (see Chapter Three for the rest of the interview).

I loved this story when I first heard it, seeing the smile on Dr. Purdy's face as she shared it with me. Hearing of the respect from both faculty and classmates for the knowledge and life experience that a mature returner brings to the classroom was inspiring, too. Younger students sometimes misunderstand a mature returner's desire to get the most out of higher education, taking exception to their eagerness to take part in class discussions, ask questions, and their likelihood of coming to class prepared<sup>125</sup>. However, some, as is clear through Dr. Purdy's story, appreciate it and gain as much from the mature returner's presence in the classroom as the mature returner does.

### **'Practical' Belonging**

As a working professional and part-time graduate student, Chantal, an African American single mother in her 40s, had much to say about her experience as a returning graduate student, particularly the preparation for graduate school she knew she needed but did not receive—an oversight that greatly affected her sense of belonging on campus.

*"We don't get the new student orientation like undergraduates get. We don't get the tour. We don't get the 'here's the resources.' Like 'here's how you use...EVERYTHING!' Right? And I'm still learning and I'm so glad that I'm with people who have actually been here for a while, who are, like, 'Do this, do that. There's a microwave on floor three of this building.' You know, it's just stuff like that. They're just like, 'You should already know this.' And I didn't know any of that. It's been 25 years...<sup>126</sup>"*

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<sup>125</sup> See Simi and Matusitz (2016) for an extended discussion about older students and the attitudes of their younger classmates toward their presence in the classroom.

<sup>126</sup> From Chantal's individual interview.

As her comment hung in the air, unfinished—or so it seemed—I considered the issue she mentioned. As a graduate student, Chantal knew she needed new student orientations, or something that could connect her to campus resources. However, in her program (or, to her knowledge, at least)—those things do not exist. From my own experience as a former graduate student and current professional staff on the UWT campus, I know that graduate orientations *do* exist (at least in many programs), typically including program information and a spiel on available services from both librarians and representatives from the Writing Center<sup>127</sup> (I have done many of these myself). However, as a new graduate student, I do not remember anyone offering tours or the kind of practical information students need to find their way on campus.

This sense of not knowing what’s expected or how things happen in the university was something much of my research uncovered as a major reason some students don’t succeed: “because they never feel like they belong in the first place<sup>128</sup>.” This absence of belonging seems most likely to result from a lack of an institutional outreach that purposefully focuses on mature students, or from an assumption that ‘someone’ will fill them in on the things they need to know to survive on campus.

Policies and/or practices created to support mature students are not enough if those policies do not account for the ways individuals actually live and work. For example, administrators and student activities coordinators work hard to encourage a sense of community by engaging students through campus-wide events. However, if those events take place at times when mature students are not able to take part in them, then they are essentially marginalized—

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<sup>127</sup> In these program orientations, we often tell new graduate students—who are bombarded with up to six hours of research and writing ‘refreshers’—that our best hope for what they’ll remember out of this decontextualized information is the location of the writing center and our faces. Although these information-intensive orientations are meant to be useful, they are no real replacement for a program that makes direct connections with student writing as needed. I am currently formulating a plan for an expanded graduate writing support program in collaboration between the UWT writing center and the library as a way to better meet this need.

<sup>128</sup> (Strayhorn, 2019, p. 168).

made to feel as if their presence is not important to the university. If campus advising centers are only open during standard 9-5 work hours, students who work 9-5 are not able to easily meet with their adviser, making it much more difficult to ascertain whether they are meeting the requirements of their major and possibly affecting their ability to graduate in a timely manner<sup>129</sup>. If there are personal or academic obstacles they need help to overcome, these may never be addressed if the student is unable to meet with an adviser due to incompatible schedules. A lack of awareness of, or worse, an unwillingness to address these issues facing mature returners typically comes from a deliberate view of students as fitting a single mold—young and without responsibilities to either family or job. However, by enacting campus policies and practices that acknowledge the diverse ages and levels of responsibility among students, many of these issues could be solved—something that should be understood by the university as part of “an ethical responsibility” toward all of its students<sup>130</sup>.

Yet, in these not-quite-post-pandemic days, we can already see the future of the university—if we are looking for it. Because of the ways COVID-19 has changed the delivery system for courses, orientations, or student meetings with advisers, tutors, and so on, we have all learned that things that seemed undoable before can be done after all. If mature students need to meet with advisers or tutors after work, platforms like Zoom© make that a viable option, without requiring those advisers to stay on campus into the evening hours—and such work-from-home-in-the-evening hours might be advantageous for advisers and their own families, as well. The way we understand the workday may need to change, but over the last year and a half, these

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<sup>129</sup> Mature returners are not the only students caught in these policies. Even younger students who work during the day are affected. Sissel, Hansman, and Kasworm (2001) claimed that these policies are based in an assumption of privilege on the part of students—that they are supported by parents, come from a certain level of wealth, and that they have no outside responsibilities such as jobs or family that would keep them from fitting easily into the structures of the university.

<sup>130</sup>(Carruthers Thomas, 2018, p. 12).

changes have already begun. Although we are all eager for a return to ‘normal,’ it might be time to consider that normal is no longer enough—and never really was.

All of us had experienced some of the practical issues Chantal mentioned: was there a convenient time available to meet with our advisers? Do classes meet at times that take into account that fact that mature students often have jobs and family responsibilities? Are there spaces on campus that take into account the schedules of working or parenting students? And then there were those ‘student-focused’ campus events that seem much more geared toward students who are...well, not us.

Jane picked up the thread, saying, “*Chantal is so right.*” Turning toward me, she said, “*I think I’ve said this to you before. When I came here for my RN to BSN<sup>131</sup> program, I noticed that when they have Husky Week, for example, the activities are all during the day, like 9-1 or something.<sup>132</sup>”*

Again, I could hear a hum of agreement fill the room as Jane continued.

“*But we...work! Adults work! And you get off at five-something. There’s no activities. You want to be a part of it and enjoy the festivities, but...<sup>133</sup>”*

Ironeyes muttered quietly in response: “*But there’s nothing to do<sup>134</sup>.*”

“*Yes!*” Jane agreed, fist pumping the air. “*And I voiced that during the senior class meeting, that maybe just one day out of the Husky Week could be planned for working students or families. You know... maybe a weekend event? But just in general, if they could be mindful of adult learners, that we have family obligations, we have lives, we have jobs.<sup>135</sup>”*

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<sup>131</sup>Jane was speaking of the two-year ‘RN to BSN’ program for students who are already Registered Nurses (RN) to gain a Bachelor of Science degree in nursing (BSN).

<sup>132</sup> Jane’s comment was from first group interview.

<sup>133</sup> Jane’s comment was from first group interview.

<sup>134</sup> Ironeyes’ comment was from the first group interview.

<sup>135</sup> Jane’s comment was from first group interview.

Whether our sense of disconnect on campus came from time away from school, the things you never learned (or forgot, if you had)—orientations and campus events geared toward the traditional, right-out-of-high-school student, or just the assumption adult learners often carry, that ‘everyone knows this but me’—the expectations of the university, whether real or imagined, can interfere with a mature student’s identity as a student rather than an interloper who doesn’t quite belong.

### **Assignments and Expectations**

As we continued to talk, our conversation shifted toward the demands of assignments and expectations of faculty that sometimes clashed with the realities of life for each of us—mature women with responsibilities beyond coursework. But expectations work both ways, as the expectations of mature returners regarding college learning do not always line up with the kinds of assignments they are given. This conflict can too often leave mature students feeling as if they don’t belong, simply because they are unable to easily make time for what it seems all the other students are doing, or they feel they don’t meet the expectations of the university about what an incoming college student should know. While belonging can look different for a mature returner, as aspects of engagement, imagination, and alignment cannot be measured by the same ruler, sometimes belonging (or not) can be found in something as simple as learning that you can use on the job.

Ironeyes, a graduate student of social work, spoke first of her own expectations for what she hoped would be more practical projects. Focusing on what she saw as the value of quality over quantity, she yearned for deeper and more useful learning of skills that might be valuable in

a future workplace, rather than trying to complete more assignments over the course of the quarter.

*“There are. Too. Many. Projects. Not focusing on doing one thing well but doing a lot of different things instead. In some classes, they have this project, then that project. It would be more powerful if they gave us one project and expanded it so we could really learn and really dig our heels into it. For example, how to write a grant proposal. There was so much more I would have liked to get done about that versus writing a reflection about my practicum experience.”*

Ironeyes’ frustration over the issue of what she considered useful learning experiences evoked memories of studies<sup>136</sup> I read speaking of mature students’ preference for practical application—useful skills and information that can be put into practice in their careers or everyday lives, rather than just another project done in too little time to create real learning. Whether this desire comes with age or is related to the responsibilities they carry, mature students—no matter how much they may enjoy learning for its own sake—need practical ways to apply their knowledge to make education seem worthwhile.

Rather than addressing her own expectations as a student, Shelly recalled those she faced as an incoming graduate student. *“I would come home from class and literally have to look up many of the terms that were given to us in class, I would have to look them up with Google! And then, I’d have to even go further and get more background information because there are gaps in my learning as opposed to a younger student who’s coming fresh from high school into college.”*

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<sup>136</sup>Bash (2003) talked about the need of adult learners to find connections between “curricular concepts and useful knowledge and skills” (p. 72). Heagney and Benson (2017) discussed the value mature returners found in learning that could be linked to real world challenges and/or work opportunities; Jacobs and Hundley (2010) mentioned that mature returners were more likely to “focus their learning” on knowledge that could be useful in the context of their lives and professions; see also Knowles, Holton, and Swanson (2005) for their work on andragogy and adult learners.

Chantal laughed as she agreed with Shelly's comment.

*"I literally downloaded the Merriam-Webster dictionary on my phone!"* Turning to Shelly, she whispered, a bit conspiratorially, *"There's an app for that, in case you didn't know..."*

We all laughed as she continued her story. *"So, I have the app on my phone and I would literally be in class, like, 'Ok, what does that word mean?... Ok, what does that word mean? Ok, what is she saying? But that wasn't all. I also didn't know APA or MLA, or what have you. There were barely computers when I graduated from college and my career is such that those are not the tools I need.'*<sup>137</sup>"

Chantal was right. Even beyond undergraduate-level reading, graduate school brings a new vocabulary that many mature returners have not been exposed to in decades—if ever. The vocabulary of academia is scarcely used in the workplace. And extensive knowledge of APA—or any citation style—is rarely required on the job, even for someone like Chantal who works in higher education. And yet the demands it places on students' writing abilities—as a literacy tool they must grasp in order to succeed—becomes a challenge they are too often unprepared for, even as they wonder if it will ever be used outside the walls of the university. This lack of alignment between the practical needs of a job and the literacy expectations of the university, even beyond the experience or skills mature students may not have, can leave them feeling like outsiders among their classmates who, at least in their eyes, appear to be well prepared for college.

Murmurs of agreement at Chantal and Shelly's comments brought me back to the moment. All of us remembered the surprises we faced on returning to college, the pressure we

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<sup>137</sup> This exchange between Shelly and Chantal came from the second group interview.

felt over expectations about the things we didn't know. Hazel, a part-time graduate student and full-time university employee, stated that her greatest struggle came via the sudden awareness of the workload she'd be facing.

*“The amount of reading that I had to do—articles that I had to read and the gathering of resources to create a paper? It could be so discouraging,” she said. “This is something I knew I would have to do, but I think I was shocked at how much I would have to learn in such a short period of time. I mean, I asked myself more than once, ‘how am I gonna understand all this?’ I might have a dictionary right beside me... looking up every other word and I realized there's no way I can learn this and understand it.”<sup>138</sup>*

...

I could so easily picture Hazel's predicament: weekends spent tucked comfortably into the corner of the couch, a dictionary open across her lap with the articles that must be read before Monday's class perched on top. Pen at the ready to jot definitions and insights in the margin, every few paragraphs—or sometimes every other sentence—she stops to search for the meaning of yet another word she has never even seen before, wondering if she'll ever understand any of them.

However, in assessing this image, I realize it is not Hazel's face I see; it is my own. Like Hazel, my earliest grad school days were spent with a dictionary at the ready, while I struggled to understand even half of what I was reading in the introduction of “Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning.”<sup>139</sup> I had graduated with honors a mere three months earlier, confident in my identity as a successful university

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<sup>138</sup> Hazel's comment was from her individual interview.

<sup>139</sup> (Barad, 2007). This book, after my initial battle with it, sparked my imagination with its feminist view of science and philosophy and changed much of the way I viewed research—but that was quite a bit later!

graduate—yet, on that couch, in that moment, I felt like an imposter<sup>140</sup>: outclassed, in way over my head, and secure only in the feeling that I’d ultimately fail.

Thankfully, I did not.

...

### ***Bridging the Gap: The Need to ‘Self-Teach’***

So much of what counts as literacy in higher education is based in skills that are rarely used in the work or home lives of many mature women returners, leaving them feeling behind before they even start class. Just as Chantal spoke of the citation practices that she had not used since her undergraduate experience decades before, and Shelly of lacking an even more basic skill, Hazel spoke of knowledge gaps—between the literacies of the workplace and the literacies of the university—even more fundamental than the intricacies of citation practices.

*“I had to teach myself how to type,” Shelly said, eyes wide. “Really! I couldn’t even type, and I realized that was not going to work. When I first started back to school, it took me eight hours to write a two-page paper. But just being able to navigate on a computer... you know, you have to have those skills to thrive in school. It’s something that you didn’t have to have before. But you do today. I think I had to put in a lot more work just to catch up because there are gaps in my learning, as opposed to a younger student who’s coming fresh from high school. I would come home and watch YouTube videos to see how to use an Excel spreadsheet, you know?”*

*“With the time gap in my education, I know things have changed. The way they teach has changed. Content has changed. The way they teach history has changed. The language has*

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<sup>140</sup> Sherman (2013) discussed imposter syndrome as common among women leaders who feel that they don’t deserve the success they’ve had and are afraid that at any moment someone will discover that they are a fraud, but this same sense of self-doubt crowds the hallways of academia. Chantal also mentions this same feeling in a later subsection.

*changed, right? Which, I think, is wonderful, but I had a lot to make up. I spent many, many, many, many hours at home, you know, researching and reading and ...basically teaching myself.”*

...

Shelly’s remarks shook loose a memory of my own. After scoring my final exam (27 words per minute with four mistakes), my high school typing teacher promised to pass me if I would just agree not to take the second semester of the class—an offer I didn’t resist. Although this teacher’s promise made for a funny story—one I often used to poke fun at my near-miss failure—the knowledge that I couldn’t even pass high school typing still occupied a shelf in the inner library of stories that challenged my self-confidence when it came to meeting the demands of higher education: certainly, this was proof that I just wasn’t up to the task. Sure, I had owned and *used* personal computers for decades before I plunged back into college. I was pretty adept at navigating the internet, able to find what I needed when I needed it—even if I was usually satisfied that Wikipedia was a ‘good-enough’ source of information. And I could cut and paste information with the best of them. But none of that prepared me for the kind of technical or research skills I would need to write a college paper.

Thankfully, my community college adviser suggested I take a Word class my first quarter—a suggestion that was a complete lifesaver for me. Although I never quite caught up with classmates’ typing speed or the computing fluency of classmates (or colleagues) who are “digital natives,” I managed pretty successfully—at least, after a while. Lacking any confidence in my ability to think and type at the same time, however, I spent my first three years in college writing all my papers out in longhand first and then typing them up—meaning that everything took twice as long as it needed to. I did, *finally*, gain the confidence to compose on the

computer—thinking and typing at the same time—just in time to write my undergraduate honors thesis. It was a victory of sorts, I suppose. However, to this day, I am still more comfortable writing with pen and paper than I will ever be with a computer keyboard!

...

Like Shelly and me, Hazel also faced the need to educate herself.

*“I had to dig deep and kind of look for my own resources...do my own research. I found that I actually enjoyed that, but it took me a while to catch on. Then I realized that in graduate school, you have to teach yourself. You have to learn... to spend time, carve out time in your schedule, and you have to be consistent with that... At the same time, I think finding the balance between work and school and having the energy for all of it was the biggest barrier for me, not having physical energy to come home and do all the assignments.”*

Even for students like Hazel or Chantal who had completed baccalaureate degrees as traditional-age students and have worked in higher education for years, the amount of time and brainpower involved in taking on college work after being away from school for a long time was daunting. And for a full-time employee and part-time student (and, in Chantal’s case, a fulltime single parent, to boot), the time required might be more extensive than anyone could expect, simply because of faculty expectations of ‘what a college student should know.’ Although mature students often recognize the gaps between the literacies they bring with them to the university and those that the university values (and expects students to have), the shift from “writing for the boss to writing for the teacher<sup>141</sup>” is a difficult transition for those who have been away from academia for long periods of time. Leaving the places where they feel like competent professionals to enter a classroom where their knowledge—the literacy practices and

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<sup>141</sup> (Michaud, 2013, p. 245).

cultural capital they've spent a lifetime cultivating—might not be appreciated can leave them feeling inadequate and ill-prepared. Shelly recognized her own knowledge gaps and set out to fill them for herself, as did Hazel; I had a university mentor who pointed me in the right direction from the start, and Chantal understood for herself that despite her college degree and profession in higher education, the rules and requirements of education had changed. These changes complicated her transition and left her frustrated over her lack of competence in things she felt she ought to know<sup>142</sup>.

For mature students who have gained a sense of competence in whatever field they have come from, the anxiety over not knowing something you are certain everyone else knows—whether it is a physical skill like typing, the indicators of academic knowledge like an extensive vocabulary, or even how to cite a source in a paper—can be challenging, even humbling. Asking for clarification or help isn't easy for someone who otherwise sees themselves as a competent adult. And this lack of alignment between this previous view of ourselves as capable and the requirements we felt ill-prepared to meet left most of us wondering whether we even belonged in the university.

### **Mismatched Expectations**

One of the biggest challenges mature returners face is in finding ways to balance the responsibilities they carry for work and home with the demands of coursework, particularly

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<sup>142</sup> Michaud (2011, 2013) discussed the difficulties of the changing literacy skills required as students move from the workplace to the classroom, a situation acknowledged by Rounsaville, Goldberg, & Bawarshi (2008) who claimed that student “incomes,” or the writing skills they carry from life outside the classroom, are often overlooked or unrecognized as skills in the university (see also Brandt, 2001, regarding the challenges for students of merging workplace literacies with academic literacies).

through what they see as faculty expectations—especially expectations about their available time.

Ironeyes, speaking of all the different responsibilities of her life that sometimes collide, noted *“Sometimes you think, ‘I have to do a 40-hour work week and don't have time. I just got home and need to sleep because I'm so exhausted.’ But I still have to cook dinner and do laundry and check homework. And sometimes it's 9 or 10 o'clock at night—after classes—and I have to do not only my homework, but I have to make sure my grandkids' work is done. But I have to look at myself my inner self and say, ‘You know what? ‘Everybody's exhausted.’”*<sup>143</sup>

Musing a bit, Chantal said, *“I know what you mean. I feel like if I had done Western Governors University or something completely online, they would have understood that I was a working professional. I think—here—the assumption is ‘You're going to be a full-time student, no matter what. And you have to read 700 pages and you have to write four pages every night. And good luck to you.’ I hate to say that it's unreasonable because, obviously, it's not. People are doing it. But for somebody like me, had I known the sheer amount of work, I would have probably looked at another program. And that's unfortunate because I love learning.”*<sup>144</sup>

Feeling the strain of the workload that many mature returners carry, Ironeyes reminded us that we were all in the same boat, expected to add one more thing on top of an already strained schedule. Students—especially those who are working while raising children (not to mention, during a global pandemic)—are carrying multiple overlapping responsibilities that sometimes threatened to overwhelm them, even as they are pursuing a college degree. Yet, Chantal saw in those same expectations an assumption of privilege on the part of faculty—that students had no commitments beyond their studies (or at least none that might take precedence over coursework).

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<sup>143</sup> From Ironeyes' individual interview.

<sup>144</sup> From Chantal's individual interview.

Still, she could also see that, despite how impossible the assignments seemed to her, others were doing them—which meant that faculty were not asking for work that was beyond possibility, no matter how impossible it felt to her. But, at the same time, she understood this supposition of available time—time that any ‘real’ student would clearly have—as proof she was not a legitimate member of the program.

For every student, no matter their age or preparation for the task of education, there are only 24 hours in a day. Regardless of how many (or few) courses they carry, there is always work that needs to be done. But for mature students who add that coursework to the responsibilities they shoulder beyond the classroom—work deadlines, paying bills and doing the family shopping, or helping their kids with their homework—and then hear comments from faculty, as Jane had: “‘*Don’t work. School is number one. Family is second,*<sup>145</sup>’” how many will give up before they even begin?

Jane’s comments brought to mind a book I once read, where the author talked about the choice many women feel they must make: whether to have a career or a family. And for those who choose to mix the two—like Jane—the author noted the larger social sensibility that “one ought to work as if one did not have children, while raising one’s children as if one did not have a job.<sup>146</sup>” This sensed obligation to perform identities as both mother and employee without one impinging on the other, while at the same time adding another layer of identity as student, not only leads to the challenge of juggling them all to get things done, but a constant feeling of guilt that you are doing none of them well. This guilt can construct a barrier to mature women’s successes as students as the time and emotional labor required by motherhood is too-often at

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<sup>145</sup> Jane’s quote is from the first group interview, but she said something very similar in her individual interview, as well.

<sup>146</sup> (Crabb, 2015, p. 11).

odds with the time and intellectual labor required in higher education. This is not to say that men who are mature returners do not experience some of the same time constraints on returning to higher education but, in a society such as ours, which still views women as primary caregivers for the family, their sense of guilt over their absence from the family is typically less; meanwhile, because of their family obligations, mature women returners are too-often viewed as less committed and reliable students<sup>147</sup>.

Months before, Chantal had shared with me a story similar to Jane's, about an exchange with one of her professors that left her feeling that she had no place in the university. Struggling to complete the amount of reading and writing the class required, she admitted her predicament to the professor and was told a story in return. This professor told her that when she had been a graduate student (as a single woman a decade or so earlier), she had to take out loans to support herself so she could find enough time to get all her reading done.

Aside from sting of the tone-deaf reply to her concerns, Chantal—with tears in her eyes—asked me, *“Does she think that I, as a single mother, should be ok with quitting my job and taking out loans to support my family just to be able to read hundreds of pages a week for her class?”*<sup>148</sup>

I have no doubt that faculty—many of whom are parents themselves—are well aware that family and work responsibilities don't disappear just because you have reading to do or a paper to write by Monday morning. Yet there seems to be an assumption built into higher education that a student's life is somehow different, that any student is able to set aside outside

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<sup>147</sup> Merrill (1999) argued that the family responsibilities carried by many mature women returners had faculty and administrators viewing them as less committed to learning and more apt to fall behind in their classwork. Yet because they were viewed as less committed, some faculty were less likely to offer accommodations or help if they did fall behind.

<sup>148</sup> From my field notes written after a conversation with Chantal in the writing center in fall 2019.

responsibilities and focus solely on their coursework. That might have been true a century ago when only young and wealthy white men attended universities. Yet no one who is a (single) parent, who cares for elderly parents, or works to financially support themselves and their families is going to be able to put their education before everything else—nor should they be expected to. And as growing numbers of nontraditional and mature students who are also single parents, like Jane and Chantal, make up a sometimes-invisible majority in any classroom, assuming that a students' primary responsibility can be coursework could doom most students to failure—no matter how much these students might want the degree they are working for or how motivated they are to succeed. It makes much more sense for faculty to let go of expectations that mature students are always able to prioritize their coursework like their more traditional classmates for whom school *is* their vocation.

### **The Value of Faculty Support**

As the afternoon passed, our conversation shifted once more, this time to stories about the high levels of support these women felt from many of their professors. Although some studies claim that mature returners can be reluctant to seek out contact with faculty, these women all spoke of how important the support they felt from UWT faculty was to their success as students, whether that support came in the form of academic advice, valuable feedback on assignments, research opportunities, encouragement to seek out opportunities like study abroad or graduate school, or just mutual relationships of respect, empathy, and care. For mature returners, experiences with supportive faculty have been linked to greater retention, higher self-esteem, better academic performance in class, greater resilience, and higher overall satisfaction with their

university experience,<sup>149</sup> often resulting in more confident learning. And for many mature returners, supportive relationships with faculty can help them overcome the negative educational experiences in their past.

Shelly smiled as she talked about the supportive relationships she had found with her professors at UWT.

*“I’ve really connected with some of them. Like Tylir McKenzie, Danica Miller, and Linda Ishem. They have been such wonderful support and delightful to get to know, to develop relationships with. They talk like real people because they are real people. And just being able to share with them and be transparent and be open with them—it’s been amazing<sup>150</sup> ... I’m more comfortable with the professors than I am with the younger kids, I guess. It’s probably the age thing!<sup>151</sup>”*

Lupita agreed, saying, *“Yes, the age helps. To me, that has been amazing, and I cherish those moments because there were wonderful, wonderful talks that I had with different professors, like Tony Perone or Vanessa de Veritch Woodside. And going to study abroad? I never expected that.”*

Setting down her coffee cup, Lupita leaned in as if to emphasize her words. She said, *“I was not expecting the professors to be so open. That’s why I can say with so much passion that I never expected going out to have coffee with a professor.”* Looking in my direction, she added, smiling, *“or with my tutors, to go out for some coffee. But a professor that will sit down to talk*

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<sup>149</sup> Wyatt (2011) discussed the important role that faculty-student interactions play in engaging mature returners; Pascarella and Terenzini (1998) considered the value of mature returners relationships with faculty mentors for their success as students. Lundberg (2003) also spoke of the influence of faculty relationships on the learning of mature returners.

<sup>150</sup> From Shelly’s feedback after reading the initial draft of this chapter. Faculty names are included with permission—as are all faculty and staff names included in this dissertation.

<sup>151</sup> From Shelly’s individual interview.

*about my future, or explain the project in different ways so I could understand? I didn't expect that.*<sup>152</sup>”

Nods and murmurs of agreement filled the room as Jane spoke up.

*“That’s what’s amazing about this university. Their willingness to go above and beyond to help you decide who you are.”*<sup>153</sup>”

*“Yeah, definitely,”* Robin, a married White woman in her late 30s, added. *“My experiences, at every turn, have contradicted my preconceptions...I thought of college as elitist. But everyone I've met, every teacher I've ever had, for the most part, has contradicted that in some way. It's been very inclusive and, you know, accepting of people's motivations and all of that.”*<sup>154</sup>”

...

With one ear on the back and forth of conversation, I thought of the many faculty across the UWT campus who had supported and encouraged *me*—people who had made a marked difference in the depth and breadth of my education. I remembered the Thanksgiving weekend, during my first quarter at UWT, when Katie Baird worked with me to write an op-ed, exchanging probably 15 drafts by email—over a holiday weekend, no less—as we readied it for publication the following week. I thought of the many times Divya McMillin had pointed—and sometimes prodded—me toward opportunities like internships and study abroad trips that I would have otherwise let pass me by, assuming they were meant for someone younger. I recalled Anne Beaufort’s gentle nudge to “write the hard things” in a creative nonfiction class, her invitations to Starbucks after class to discuss my plans for graduate school, and her

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<sup>152</sup> Lupita’s comments on this page are all drawn from the first group interview.

<sup>153</sup> From Jane’s comments during the first group interview.

<sup>154</sup> Robin’s comments here are drawn from the first group interview.

encouragement to take the path I ultimately did, convinced the alternative I was considering was not the right one for me. I especially appreciated those conversations because they felt like advice shared between friends—being treated as an adult by another adult. I also thought of the many other faculty—people like Cynthia Howson, Riki Thompson, and Asao Inoue—who had offered advice or written letters of recommendation for me: for awards, for internships, for graduate school—and for the job I now hold. I couldn't help but smile as I recalled Anna Salyer, a UWT librarian who supported my research by helping me find virtually 'unfindable' resources through my undergrad years and brought balloons to my office to celebrate my acceptance into the English Ph.D. program at UW Seattle.

There were so many instances where, as a mature student—and sometimes the only one in a classroom—the connections I found with faculty made a difference, not only in the trajectory of my education, but in making me feel supported. Like I was a valued member of the UWT community.

Like I belonged.

...

This idea of belonging—despite situations that are not always ideal—not only echoed through our conversation on that rainy afternoon, but brought to mind so much I had read about mature returners, literature that maintained that the classroom was “the focal point” that defined their college experience, surpassing even peer relationships or the “campus experience<sup>155</sup>” so many student affairs offices focus on. Positive and reinforcing interactions with professors—including research experiences, and even office hours chats about personal concerns or

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<sup>155</sup> (Jacobs & Hundley, 2010, p. 9)

educational goals—were found to have the effect of causing mature students to go out of their way to meet faculty expectations.<sup>156</sup>

Faculty support is especially vital to mature students, who—because of age, parenthood, or work status—are often left with few true peers in their classes. The importance of finding another adult to talk to about academic or personal concerns, even one who is in a position of authority over you, cannot be underestimated. A faculty member is more likely to understand adult concerns and responsibilities in a way the average 18–22-year-old does not, and that kind of support can be exactly what a mature student needs to keep them going when life throws unexpected—and painful—curveballs.

...

*July 10, 2020:* I met with Ironeyes today, over Zoom©. Though I knew she was concerned about an upcoming assignment, I could see in her face—even over the screen—there was something else going on with her. Her only daughter is in the hospital, diagnosed with COVID-19—although other health issues initially brought her in. She is—and has been—seriously ill, even before the virus. Of course, Ironeyes is worried about her, but there was more than just fear about her daughter’s health: she is caring for her daughters’ children—and they want to see their mother. And on top of everything else, Ironeyes is struggling with a paper...

She told me her story and we cried together for a little while before we finally moved on to discussing her assignment. But even once we had said goodbye, I couldn’t let go of the feelings our conversation had raised in me. In moments like these, a looming assignment seems so small, so insignificant. I remembered getting the news of my mother’s death the night before

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<sup>156</sup> Lundberg (2003) claimed that because of the limits outside responsibilities place on the time of mature returners, they have little time for peer interaction outside the classroom (although study groups do tend to be an exception). However, she did find that “high-quality relationships” with staff, faculty and administrators on campus will enhance the learning and engagement of mature returners (p. 668).

the first of my winter finals my first year back in college—feeling so heartbroken and helpless 800 miles away from my family and hoping my professors would understand and allow me to reschedule exams<sup>157</sup>.

I know that life doesn't happen just to older students; younger students also deal with ill relatives and countless other life stressors, especially during a pandemic. But they are rarely worrying about whether their children will live or die, while raising their grandchildren and fostering other peoples' children, working to support their families—and trying to understand assignments at the same time. If professors really took the time to recognize the responsibilities and burdens adult students carry, it could make a huge difference in the level of support they offer mature returners—and in their ultimate success.

*July 23, 2020:* Ironeyes cancelled our appointment for this afternoon. Her daughter passed yesterday...<sup>158</sup>

...

Dealing with grief is difficult enough but doing so while gathering enough of your wits about you to keep going with classes that feel even more overwhelming than usual requires a level of support that—thankfully—most students rarely need. Sharing a story with us about how she made it through this difficult time and still stayed on track to finish her program, Ironeyes spoke gratefully of the kind of faculty support she never expected:

*“I emailed Dr. Ronnie San Nicolas to let him know about my daughter, that I didn't think I could complete my assignments on time. But he said, ‘Don't worry, I will get you through this. All I ask is you do is your best, and I will take care of the rest.’ If not for Dr. Ronnie, I genuinely*

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<sup>157</sup> Which they all willingly did!

<sup>158</sup> This vignette was inspired by my field notes, written after the Zoom meeting with Ironeyes; the entry dated July 23<sup>rd</sup> was written after reading Ironeyes' email cancelling our appointment that day.

*believe I would not have been able to complete my MSW. His empathy, compassion, understanding...encouraging me along the way, telling me that I was doing great.*

*“But he did more than just offer encouragement. He gave me some options: I could continue, and he would help me through the process, or I could take an incomplete and finish later. But I knew if I stopped, I probably would not have completed my degree. I am so thankful for Dr. Ronnie. I don’t think he realizes how he had saved my sanity and mental health... The quarter was a blur for me, but when you have someone in your life who inspires you to keep going, you remember that moment... you will value them for the rest of your life. They will be in your testimony forever”*

Finding the faculty support she desperately needed to continue with her degree program in the midst of one of the most painful moments of her life, Ironeyes was intensely grateful. But finding that level of support isn’t always easy—or even likely. Her experience with another faculty during that same time left her feeling alone and disappointed.

*“When I mentioned my daughter had passed, she did say, ‘I am so sorry,’ I believe. But that was all. When it came to my assignments, she gave me two extra days to complete them. She did not let me know I could take an incomplete and come back to it later. I believe she did not want to have to go beyond the quarter.<sup>159</sup>”*

Even beyond an apparent lack of empathy, Ironeyes reminded us that sometimes faculty will say they understand a mature student’s life circumstances, but it doesn’t always feel true:

*“I hear a lot of professors saying, ‘I know! I know what you’re going through. I’ve been there. You can do it!’ Which is good...”* Her voice faltered a bit, thoughts left hanging with an unspoken, ‘I guess?’ *“But they also need to reflect back on how it really was versus just saying*

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<sup>159</sup> Ironeyes’ comments on this page were written at my request after she told me this story in a Zoom meeting we had a few weeks after her daughter’s death.

*'I've been there.' They'll say, 'It's going to be a sacrifice, but if I did it, you can do it!' I think that spiel is good, but it's kind of like, 'Ok, if you really do understand, then why are you giving us all this homework?'<sup>160</sup>''*

Laughter filled the room at Ironeyes' question, giving all of us a moment to wipe our eyes after her last story. And based on the nods of agreement, there wasn't one among us who couldn't remember asking ourselves that question at least once.

As the conversation shifted once more, Chantal expressed her bewilderment over class discussions of real-life issues that included seemingly endless sessions of 'academic talk' that goes nowhere:

*"I have a job that is...action oriented. And so, I was just kind of ...puzzled, I guess?"*

Chuckling to herself, she continued.

*"I was puzzled by the amount of talking that we do in this program. I wanted to say, 'Ok, we have talked about this. What's next?' Like, I wanted to know, 'what are we going to actually do about this problem?'"* Pausing, her voice deepened as she channeled an imagined response.

*"Oh, we're not going to do anything. We're just going to keep talking about it."*

Returning to her own voice, she slapped her palm to her forehead and laughed with the rest of us.

*"I was just like, 'No!' This is not computing for me. I feel like...somebody who has been out into the workforce or dealing with a family or dealing with just life... When they come back to school, they don't have time for this. I want to know, 'why are we still talking about theory? What does this have to do with real life? Where is the action?'<sup>161</sup>''*

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<sup>160</sup> Ironeyes' remarks here came from the first group interview.

<sup>161</sup> Chantal's comments within this dialogue came from her individual interview.

After more than a decade spent along the edges of academic circles, I can relate to Chantal's frustration over too much 'talk.' It is such a common feeling, not just that there is more work to do than there is time to do it, but also the sense that some of it feels like spinning wheels just to spin wheels. How many times can a problem be dissected and discussed—while nothing ever happens to solve it? How many pilot projects have I seen organized and implemented, but never reviewed, until the idea resurfaces a few years later and the cycle begins again? Although I am certain this happens outside academia, as well, there is something intrinsic to the habitus of the university that seems to make this scenario infinitely repeatable.

### **'Challenging' Faculty Interactions: Another View of Support**

Just as with any other human relationship, interactions between students and faculty can occasionally be challenging to navigate. Sometimes, students and faculty are a near perfect match—whether it is because of teaching/learning styles or personal affinity, but at other times, students discover something that looks like a mismatch that can make learning 'challenging.' Robin shared a story of faculty support, wrapped as a challenge:

*"It was one of Joe Sharkey's literature classes—his Shakespeare class, I think. I'm pretty sure it was the first paper. I thought I was a pretty good writer, and I got a high grade on it, but... he's very specific about the structure: your thesis, the topic sentences, the final insight at the end. But I thought, 'Ok, that's nice, but I'm gonna do my own thing. I'm a good reader; I can do this.' I do look at things very creatively, so when I would write my papers, I would have these sort of off the wall ideas.*

*"But after I turned it in, he said something like 'This is really smart, really intelligent, but I can't follow your ideas. You need to guide me through your thinking a little bit better. I got*

*lost in the forest. There are so many interesting trees, but I kind of got lost.’ He had graded it in the low 90s, but I knew I could do better. He nudged me toward revision, saying, ‘Don’t settle for this grade. You can do much, much, much better than this.’ It was humbling because I thought, ‘I’m still a good writer, but I also have a lot to learn.’ But it was...really, really empowering because...with the right skills, the right tools, I realized there’s no limit to what you can do.<sup>162</sup>”*

...

As I listened to Robin’s story, I had to smile. I saw in her experience echoes of my own—and with this same professor. As a community college student, I had found great success with my writing. I had received *As* and accolades on every paper I wrote, no matter the class or topic; I wrote articles for the campus newspaper, had several creative non-fiction pieces published in a national journal, and joined the editorial team for a student publication. Writing had taken a central role in rebuilding my identity as a student. And after leaving the foundation of my sense of self behind in a career that no longer existed, it was the one thing I knew I could do.

But when I transferred to UWT, I came crashing into a realization that I still had a lot to learn about writing.

...

Shaking my head and chuckling over the once painful memory, I looked at Robin and said, “The first paper I wrote for Professor Sharkey? I got an 86 and I ended up almost crying in his office! It was terrible... He started his feedback with a lovely little line telling me that I was ‘a very elegant writer’ and then proceeded to tell me I was doing it all wrong—or at least that’s what it felt like...”

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<sup>162</sup> Robin’s comments come from the first group interview.

...

“I don’t understand. How can this be wrong?”

As petty as it sounds to me today, this was—as nearly as I remember—my incredulous response as I sat in Joe Sharkey’s office having a conversation that almost broke me. Coming face-to-face with what—in that moment—I could only see as a vilification of the one thing my still new-and-tender student identity was wrapped up in was...emotionally devastating. I sat in my car after our meeting and cried—and I don’t cry easily. If I couldn’t write a decent paper about a book that I really enjoyed, how could I possibly be a good student?

What if I really wasn’t a good writer, after all?

Over time, though, overcoming that self-doubt (and what I saw as his low opinion of my writing) became a personal challenge—one that drove me to prove myself as a writer. I’m not proud of the way I reacted to what I now recognize as the same tool of empowerment that Robin described, but our conversation that day led me to discover that, while learning the ropes of literary writing might be difficult, it would add another tool to my belt. That with those tools (and many others), there was no limit to what I could do as a writer. And I am not ashamed to admit the challenge I felt that day probably led me directly to where I stand today. Coming face-to-face with the fact that I did not know everything ultimately helped make me a better student—one who learned that the strongest support sometimes comes wrapped as a gently worded nudge to become more than you are.

...

Although both Robin and I had faced circumstances where what we thought we knew wasn’t enough to carry us through an unfamiliar educational situation, Vera spoke of a different sort of blow to her identity. As someone who had been in a position of leadership and authority

as the manager of a large retail store with more than 150 employees—and then found herself in a classroom where not only was she no longer the authority figure, but no one knew she had ever been in such a position—the transition was painful.

*“I had been in a management position where I knew everything, had the answers to everything. I was going from this teaching mindset to a learning mindset and that was really difficult for me at first,” she said. “And now, nobody knows me, knows who I am—who I was...I’m a student all over again, and that was really hard. Because I had worked so hard to get where I was, and it was not easy. I had to overcome a lot of barriers and then when I didn’t have that anymore... So, yeah. I think that was kind of my initial thought was like, ‘This is going to suck because I’m starting all over again.’”<sup>163</sup>”*

It was clear from Vera’s story that an individual’s sense of themselves as a person who has a certain kind of knowledge suffers when no one knows who they are—who they *were*. Because of this, there is a strong need on the part of many adult students to find a link with other mature adult(s)—and in a classroom, the professor is often the only one who fits the bill—to be acknowledged as a competent adult who knows things and is good at them. This was probably at the heart of my struggle with Joe. He was the first to tell me—no matter how gently—that I didn’t know something I thought I did. Others had seen my strengths and overlooked my weaknesses; he gently called out my weaknesses (even as he acknowledged my strengths) and challenged me to learn something new. Robin talked about this same issue—the challenges of being an adult who has done something a certain way—and done it well—then being told that it wasn’t quite right.

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<sup>163</sup> From Vera’s individual interview.

Situations like these can be challenging, but coming through on the other side, I realize they made space for me to align my new and old identities, contributing to my sense of belonging as a member of the university.

Yet, sometimes, experiences with faculty, like interactions with any human being, can be distressing or painful—whether “rigid, impersonal, [or] bound by regulations,<sup>164</sup>” or just a poor personal ‘fit.’ Faculty-student relationships are strong predictors of student success and, in the case of negative interactions, can damage a student’s feelings of support and belonging both in the classroom and as a member of the larger campus community, therefore, their persistence to graduation.

Vera shared a story about one such interaction, saying, *“I had an issue with one of my instructors. I mean, it was okay. He was not my favorite. We were giving end of the quarter presentations and I full on started arguing with him because he was like, ‘Well you didn’t think about this,’ And I was like, ‘Yes, I did, it’s right here.’ And I kept trying to explain myself and he kept cutting me off, and I was like, ‘Please stop. Let me explain why you’re being rude.’*

*“I generally don’t call people out like that, but he rubbed me the wrong way, like kind of a mansplainer. I don’t know... but he irritated me. And my group members were all like 19, maybe 18, you know? They’re like, ‘What is she doing?’ and I was like, ‘No, you don’t get to talk to me that way... and you shouldn’t be talking to them that way either. I’m gonna tell you, you can’t.’”*

*“I have an area of expertise, as well, is what I’m trying to say. So, it’s not necessarily like I know more than them, or whatever. I just have a separate area... like, ‘This is my expertise. I’m an expert at something,’ right?”<sup>165</sup>*

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<sup>164</sup> (Lundberg, 2003, p. 682).

<sup>165</sup> This entire interaction is from Vera’s individual interview.

As she told this story of her experience with this professor, I could see that Vera's need to be acknowledged as an adult with expertise in a particular field—as having life experience that most students (and maybe even professors) do not have—was essential to her identity as a competent adult. When mature returners do not feel that their knowledge and experience—their embodied cultural capital—are valued within the habitus of the university (as viewed through their relationship with the professor, who is seen as the university's representative in the classroom), they are less responsive to learning opportunities, making it more difficult to feel they belong.<sup>166</sup>

Chantal shared with us two similarly impactful experiences with faculty—one which was exactly what she hoped for from graduate school and the second which was...well, disappointing and hurtful, to say the least.

*“My first class in fall was amazing. The professor was... well, we kind of spoke the same language and we're both...verbal processors and hand talkers. And I was just like, ‘Yes!’ She kept saying ‘I’m not super academic but I’m going to teach you this!’ And I was like ‘That’s the kind of person I am,’ right? This is great. And I felt really positive. I felt really smart. I felt really valued in my classes with her because all of my colleagues were like ‘Yeah, what you’re saying matters.’”<sup>167</sup>”*

Chantal's experience was a great example of a perfect personal and academic fit with both her professor and her classmates. She could easily imagine herself as a member of the academic community because of a professor who viewed and interacted with the world the way

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<sup>166</sup> Bash (2003) claimed that mature returners must feel they are respected in the classroom—that their knowledge is valued—in order to feel they belong. He also acknowledged that this can be a problem for some instructors who may feel their authority is being threatened by other adults in the classroom (see pp. 29-30).

<sup>167</sup> From Chantal's individual interview.

she did and validated her adult experience; there was a sense of mutual engagement with her classmates. New and old identities aligned, and her sense of belonging was clear.

But then came winter quarter.

*“And it was completely opposite,” she said. “I didn’t feel valued. My voice wasn’t heard. It was extremely academic and, um... high falutin’. And I was like ‘Dude, this is so not me!’ I literally had to lean on Margaret and Anna to get through winter quarter—because I wanted to quit! I had never felt as stupid as I felt in that quarter...ever in my life. I’ve never let anyone talk to me the way that I was talked to... or the way that I was treated, you know, in my professional career, in my personal life. It was just so...such a 180 from fall to winter. I was just kind of like ‘Am I in the same institution right now?’ For me to come through that unscathed for the most part and to realize, ‘Yes, I am an academic. I am a scholar, I’m just not that kind of scholar.’ And there is a program out there that makes sense for me. It’s just not the program I thought I wanted—or that wanted me.”<sup>168</sup>*

Chantal’s remark: *‘no one had ever spoken to me like that...’* was silent on content, but the feelings the professor’s words engendered in her came through loud and clear. She was left feeling “*stupid*,” incapable, and painfully aware that she was somehow doing it wrong. The subtext? She didn’t belong in the university. And for someone whose identity was linked to her own professional competence, the feeling that she wasn’t up to the challenge of graduate school was devastating to both her identity and any sense of belonging. She could no longer imagine herself as a worthy member of the university, nor could she find alignment between new and old identities any longer.

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<sup>168</sup> From Chantal’s individual interview.

However, as she shared her story with us—a few months after the event she spoke of (and after changing programs)—I was glad to see she had come to the realization that the difficulty was not a lack of capability. It was a question of fit—and probably a bit of human misunderstanding, as well. Her identity as a competent professional adult may have faltered a bit, but it did not crash. Once she found the right fit—and a way to engage that made sense to her—her new identity as student and scholar re-aligned with her identity as a competent professional and she recaptured her misplaced sense of belonging.

### **Staff Support**

The encouragement that helps a mature student construct a sense of belonging on campus can also be found through relationships with staff. Lupita mentioned the importance of librarians and tutors—people who not only helped her academically but were also *“knowledgeable... caring and understanding—always positive and encouraging. They allowed me to vent about my projects without judging or criticizing, and were always supportive, focusing on my wellbeing to get my projects done!”*<sup>169</sup>

*“When I started at UWT, I had my fears of being judged and discriminated against by young White students for being older and a Mexican student. They spoke English very professional, which made me intimidated. But people in the TLC embraced me and that gave me confidence to express myself... I met wonderful people that do not judge my writing and my English. They embraced my Spanish and I felt honored.”*<sup>170</sup>

Chantal also talked about the support she found from TLC and library staff—after finding them through the recommendation of her graduate program adviser. During her first quarter on

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<sup>169</sup> Lupita, email exchange, March 2021.

<sup>170</sup> From Lupita’s literacy narrative.

campus, she was advised to “*talk to the reference center. Talk to the Teaching and Learning Center. Get your people. Set up your team.*’ As a result, I found Anna Salyer and Margaret<sup>171</sup>. I would meet with them every week and talk with them. And they’d be like, ‘You’re ok, you’re ok. You can do this!’ And if it wasn’t for the exterior support system. I’ll be completely honest; I wouldn’t have made it. It was because of my accessory team that I was like, ‘Maybe I can do this!’<sup>172</sup>”

“Yes, the tutors are wonderful,” Shelly said. “I can’t say enough about tutors! I use the resources that are at my disposal. I have no shame in asking for help. I need it.”

The individual connections that can be found among library and tutoring staff can be vital for mature returners—not just because of their need for the academic supports they offer, but on a personal level, as well. As a staff member in the writing center, the interpersonal aspect of learning is always at the forefront of my mind in a tutoring session. Humans—especially mature adults—learn best when they feel their opinions are heard and concerns noted.<sup>173</sup> As a mature returner, I know this is true. My own experiences with the staff in advising and the library—people who treated me like an adult, who acknowledged my experience, but at the same time helped me find ways to fill in the gaps in my knowledge, without making me feel somehow ‘less

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<sup>171</sup> Anna Salyer is a UWT research librarian (retired, June 2020). She was a wonderful supporter for mature returners who are finding their way back into the academic demands of academic research and writing. The ‘Margaret’ mentioned here is me. Chantal is speaking here of our first meeting in the Teaching and Learning Center during fall quarter 2019. Anna knew of her struggles with returning to academic writing from a more business-oriented setting and brought her to meet me.

<sup>172</sup> Chantal’s remarks are from the second group interview.

<sup>173</sup> See Bash (2003) for his discussion of the characteristics of adult learners. Chen (2017) spoke to the need for faculty, staff, and administrators to recognize that mature returners are not “blank slates” as students but bring with them life experience, opinions and knowledge that may differ from that of their professors. But this experience is not always applicable to the academic setting, which can leave mature returners feeling a bit lost in a system which appears to challenge their knowledge (Baxter & Britton, 2001).

than' for what I didn't know—made me feel valued and ultimately supported my learning<sup>174</sup> and sense of belonging on campus.

### **Belonging as a Family Matter**

The final turn of our conversation centered on the disruptions returning to college has caused to our families, even as we depended on their support. Speaking for myself, I can only say education has—at the very least—taken over my life. For the last 12 years, I've been at least a part-time student, even while working almost full-time for the last six. As a full-time student for most of those years—including a few quarters where I carried 18 credits as an undergraduate, while also working part time and doing an internship—I would never have made it through without the support of my husband who retired shortly before I went back to school. He has carried the bulk of the domestic responsibilities that had previously been shared between us and has done so while cheering on my efforts and successes—leaving sticky notes of encouragement on my computer screen and occasionally 'talking me back from the edge' when I was discouraged and wondering why I was doing this at all.

As we talked about the people who have supported us and those our choices have imposed on most of all—our families—I spoke up, saying, "I think about this all the time. As an adult, you absolutely can't take on the commitment of college alone. I swear, if my husband got up one morning and said, 'You know what? I'm kind of done with all this,' I would have to quit! Because...who would take care of me?"

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<sup>174</sup> McTaggart (2016) argued that it was incumbent on institutions of higher education to recognize the differences and needs of mature students, creating in the process a space that will support their learning needs and acknowledge their cultural capital.

Everyone laughed at my comment—because we all identified with its reality. It might take a village to raise a child, but it definitely takes an intricately balanced support system to be a successful student as a mature adult—especially for those with family responsibilities.

Jane knew exactly what I meant. *“There’s a lot of guilt in deciding to become a student, you know? Because of the sacrifice and the guilt of you not being there for your children. It does take away from my identity as a mom, knowing that while I’m in school I couldn’t be that mom.”*<sup>175</sup>

...

Ah yes, mother guilt! I knew this would come up. In spite of her desire to gain the degree that would not only fulfill her dreams and assure her future career, but make life better for her children, Jane wrestled with guilt over the time and energy that school took away from her children and the disruptions it caused in their family life when she couldn’t make it to their games or missed out on important events because she had to be in class. Although my sons are grown, I faced the same guilt over focusing my time and effort on my education, knowing that it takes away from the time I could (should?) be spending with my family—time that I can never get back. I think about all the times that grandkids begged to sleep over, and my (too-often repeated) response of “Sorry, honey, this is not a good weekend. Maybe another time?” I wonder sometimes if this degree is worth the price we have *all* paid for it.

So much of what I’ve read declares that women, much more than men, wrestle with balancing work and family responsibilities; adding time to study to the mix can be especially challenging for them. Because of this ‘gendered construct[ion]’<sup>176</sup> of time, mature women students are more likely to drop or stop out of higher education because of work and family

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<sup>175</sup> From the first group interview, although this is a topic Jane raised in her individual interview, as well.

<sup>176</sup> (Stone & O’Shea, 2013, p. 100)

responsibilities, but even those who persist struggle with guilt over that decision.<sup>177</sup> Although the university can do nothing to increase the time mature returners have available to meet their numerous responsibilities, they *can* acknowledge the realities of mature women returners' lives and construct the supports that can help them reach their goals—just as they do for traditional students.

Jane had more to say about the price that mature returners and their families often pay to make it possible for them earn a degree.

*“Our nursing teacher always says, ‘You know, I’ve seen divorces and stuff happen and you know because it’s so intense, it takes you away.’ ... You know, I go to work. I get off at 4:30 or five. Class starts at six and I get home at 10. And then I try to, somehow, do homework. And even though my children are right there next to me, I’m not there... Definitely, education is more than just the person itself. It is a community. It takes the whole family. They’re all in it together.”*

Lupita also spoke of how important her husband’s support has been to her—through both her undergraduate and MSW programs. But in spite of the demands of that work—now behind her—she was eager to share that she still feels his enthusiastic support of her goals:

*“So, my husband asked me, ‘Are you going to pursue your doctorate degree?’ And I said, ‘You know, I think I like research ...’<sup>178</sup>”*

*“And then he said, ‘I knew it! I knew... there she goes again. I see that Ph.D. coming!’<sup>179</sup>”*

“Definitely!” I said. “You’ve had that written across your forehead for years!”

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<sup>177</sup> Stone (2008) discussed the disadvantages mature women returners faced (as opposed to men) in struggling to balance family responsibilities with their role as a student, noting that education was too often considered a personal “leisure activity” by employers, partners, or other family members who may have no background in higher education and not understand its demands.

<sup>178</sup> From Lupita’s individual interview, although she mentioned the same conversation in the first group interview.

<sup>179</sup> From the first group interview.

We all laughed at that. After all, each of us had to admit education was more than a bit addicting—as every new bit of knowledge brings with it the desire for more. Maybe that desire came from putting education off for so long, maybe our life experiences have shown us how valuable it could be—or maybe we have always had the desire to keep learning. But whatever the reason, continuing in higher education just wouldn't be possible without the support of our families.

Speaking of the commitment required of our families, Jane noted, *“It takes something away, too. To do the journey, to go to school, or think about going to school. It takes work.”*

Robin also acknowledged the family challenges inherent in a major life change like returning to college, saying, *“There’s been a shift. Like before, like everything was just kind of focused on what he needed to do. And now there’s been a shift to both of us focusing on what I need to do. She laughed at that, before continuing. “And that’s been kind of an adjustment for both of us. Like, how do we relate to each other? How do we express ourselves? But it’s been good, like...we’ve both grown a lot.”<sup>180</sup>”*

Every member of a family—and every relationship in it—is affected by the decision to return to higher education. There is the time it takes away from other things, the shift in focus from the needs of one member of the family to another. In my own family, I cannot think of a single family event over the last 12 years where my education—and whether I would *ever* be finished—did not come up in the course of a conversation. My husband has even learned to describe narrative inquiry and the value of stories!

Vera, likewise, talked about the challenges that such a major life change brought.

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<sup>180</sup> Robin’s comments come from the first group interview.

*“Absolutely. My husband has been very supportive, but I am the household manager in my house. I also do most of the childcare, most certainly the emotional labor. There’s a whole different workload with kids. Teaching them how to be compassionate, thoughtful, loving humans takes a lot of patience and time. My husband just doesn’t provide that like I do. He is getting better, but I usually have to ask him to do particular chores or help with the kids. He has gotten better about doing certain things like washing dishes without me asking, but other things like doctor appointments or school paperwork falls on me.”*

...

I hear in Vera’s words an echo of my own thoughts. Although I don’t have young children at home, I am most certainly the household manager. I pay the bills, purchase birthday and Christmas gifts for kids and grandkids, make certain that household responsibilities are handled on time—although I do not have to do the dishes or the laundry or take out the garbage (most of the time). Finding a way to balance all of those responsibilities with the work of being a student is challenging at times. Even today as I write (finishing the last of my revisions in this chapter), I am working from too-little sleep, too much sitting, and I am monitoring my husband who is undergoing a medical procedure later this afternoon.

I am tired.

When I think of the stories shared with me by the women who—figuratively—sit beside me in this room, I hear that same exhaustion. Too much. Due too soon. In the midst of too many conflicting demands on our time. Yet the life of a mature returner is one we’ve chosen and one we revel in—for the most part. Still, that doesn’t make it any easier to find a balance between the demands of two lives. Like Jane, we worry about feeling ‘motherly’ in the classroom. Like Ironeyes, we worry that the time we take for our own education might be undermining the time

we should be focusing on the children in our care. We worry about the time that study takes away from our families. So, we take on that extra labor—because it is expected of us as women, as wives, as mothers,<sup>181</sup> as workers—feeling guilty all the time that *everyone* is being shortchanged in the process.<sup>182</sup> Although research is beginning to be done regarding the emotional labor of women and persons of color in academia, there is considerably less that considers the experiences of mature women who are students. It’s a gap that ought to be filled.

...

Vera’s voice pulls me out of my thoughts as she acknowledges another issue that many mature returners face—increased expenses at the same time that income typically decreases.

*“There is also the financial burden of returning to school. You know, I’m not paying necessarily out of pocket for school. I mean, I do have school loans... But I was making a pretty decent salary before, and that’s gone now. So that’s put a strain on my family, on my husband. Luckily, he’s a Union carpenter, so the money he makes, we can float on. He is the primary income earner despite me working two very part-time jobs. Usually that doesn’t really come into play in our relationship, though, because he knows I’m working toward a better future for all of us.”<sup>183</sup>*

Financial concerns play a role in the life of every student. Higher education is expensive! Many mature returners continue to work at least part time while attending classes, which can help with family finances even as it decreases the time available to study. Others leave their jobs behind to become full-time students, even though that typically means squeezing family budgets

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<sup>181</sup> Britton and Baxter (2001) talk about the challenges that a student identity can place on “established gender roles and identities” and the risk they can pose to the status-quo in relationships with friends and family (p. 89).

<sup>182</sup> Smith (2018) discussed the experiences of student-mothers and their management of guilt. Although these students’ experiences in education were predominantly positive, their happiness with their situation was “frequently jeopardized by familial and workplace guilt” (p. 170).

<sup>183</sup> Vera’s comments on this page come from her individual interview.

to accommodate fewer resources *and* increased costs—not just tuition and books, but transportation, parking, and sometimes childcare.<sup>184</sup> But Chantal reminded us that the decisions that lead mature returners back the classroom involve more than just finances and include others beyond the student.

*“Returning to college includes more than just the person in the classroom. Yes, I made the decision to go back, but I didn’t make it lightly. We had a family meeting because we have family meetings for all of our major decisions. Like, when I took my current job. Every big thing, we decide together. And I don’t take their positions lightly. Like, if they had said, ‘Don’t do it,’ I wouldn’t have done it, because it’s more than me. We’re a team.”*

I appreciate Chantal’s remarks about including her children’s voices in her decision to return for a graduate degree. I remember having that same conversation with my husband more than once—before I started at the community college, before I transferred to UWT, when I was considering going on to earn a master’s degree, and once more when I was thinking about applying to the Ph.D. program in Seattle. Even now—after 12 years—he still has my back and I know I could never have done any of this without his support and encouragement. But I also know he is as impatient for me to finish as I am!

Deep in conversation, we hardly noticed as the sky darkened and the hands on the clock swept toward 5 pm. Suddenly, the responsibilities that lay outside the room came back into focus: Robin, and then Vera, announced their need to leave—one for class and the other to make it to work on time; Hazel, Chantal, and Shelly had final papers to finish; Jane mentioned one last final the next morning; Ironeyes needed to pick up her grandkids; and Lupita was stopping at the

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<sup>184</sup> I discuss these issues surrounding finances and childcare at length in chapter three.

grocery store to grab something for dinner on her way home. Still, inside this room—once filled with relative strangers—bonds had begun to form. Even as we gathered coats and backpacks, preparing to leave, our conversation continued, shifting focus one last time.

*“I really enjoyed this!”* Hazel said, draping a napkin over a plate of cookies to take back to her co-workers in the library.

*“Me, too,”* Lupita added, checking her phone for the list of items she needed at the grocery store. *“Just talking to each other. We’re all in the same boat!”*

*“This was really helpful. I don’t know if there are other groups like this. Well, there is First-Gen, I guess...”*<sup>185</sup> Hazel’s voice trailed off as she realized that groups like the one we had just spent the past three hours engaging with did not really exist on this campus.

Shelly agreed. *“This is honestly... I see this kind of group as something that could be incredibly helpful.”*<sup>186</sup>

*“Oh my, yes!”*<sup>187</sup> Jane agreed.

“Definitely,” I said. “Just to sit down with people who are in the same position as you and share ideas and say, ‘Yes, you are not the only one who felt like an idiot the day you walked into that classroom for the first time. Or just felt old.’ You know...whatever! ‘And these are some of the ways that we overcame that.’ I see so much value in that.”

*“Oh, yeah!”* Chantal said.

“It’s the whole idea behind First-Gen,” I said. “They are students who don’t have family support or background in higher education. But, like them, until I came here and met other women who were doing the same thing I was, I didn’t know of anybody other than my parents

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<sup>185</sup> Hazel’s comment is from the first group interview.

<sup>186</sup> Shelly’s comment is from the second group interview.

<sup>187</sup> Jane’s comment is from the first group interview.

who'd gone back to school. I knew people who had gone to college when they were young, but none when they were older."

*"Do you think our going back is affecting or influencing people like us to go back to school?"* Lupita asked.

We all laughed at Lupita's 'people like us' comment, but we recognized its truth: we might feel alone in the classroom, but across the nation—and around the world—mature women were heading back to higher education in increasing numbers, a trend that is projected to continue at least through the end of the decade.<sup>188</sup>

*"We should start a support group for mature students!"* Jane said.

*"Yes! Yes!"* Lupita clapped her hands together, clearly excited by the idea. She turned toward me to ask, *"Can we do this?"*

"We absolutely can," I said. "And you're so good at this sort of thing, Lupita. You can recruit people. But I'll bring the snacks!"

Lupita, always the extrovert, laughed at that. *"Really? Would you sponsor me? Somebody has to sponsor me!"*

"Look how excited she is," I said. "Of course, I'll sponsor you."

*"You'll be president,"* Ironeyes looked toward Lupita as they gathered up coats and backpacks. *"And I'll be vice-president!"*

Lupita laughed at that, before turning to Jane. Knowing of her daily commute to Seattle, she asked, *"Would you come?"*

*"Of course! I'd love to do that!"* Jane assured her.

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<sup>188</sup> (NCES, 2019, Table 303.40)

*“It’ll be during the day, though!”* Ironeyes said with a straight face, although we all caught the joke.

Laughter filled the room as I offered the final punchline:

*“We’ll make it at noon. That’s a good time for everybody, right?”<sup>189</sup>*

### **Coda**

After the last of the group left, braving the rain to make their way toward the responsibilities of the evening, I stopped at the TLC tutor table to steer them toward the remaining coffee and cookies. Returning to my office, I jotted a few notes about the afternoon’s conversation while the voices of my participants still rang in my ears. As diverse as the paths that led us here, it was clear we had many common experiences on campus. We were women, mothers, professionals in a variety of fields, and we shared the unique experience of entering a university habitus that “mark[ed] and read”<sup>190</sup> us as outside the norm. We talked about our experiences within this habitus as ‘aged,’ not just ‘gendered,’ as we entered spaces not designed for us alongside classmates (and sometimes faculty) who did not expect to see us. About how we gained a sense belonging through relationships—with faculty, staff, peers, and family—even though a few of those relationships had not been positive (or had not seemed so at the time). We discussed what appeared to be a lack of institutional concern for mature working students—whether seen in incompatible scheduling, evening classes that don’t reflect the realities of a working person’s life, a mismatch between expectations and the embodied cultural capital<sup>191</sup> that

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<sup>189</sup> The dialogue on this final dialogic interaction came entirely from the end of the first group interview.

<sup>190</sup> (Inoue, 2016, p. 96).

<sup>191</sup> Bourdieu’s (1986) discussion of informational capital—an embodied experiential knowledge, collected over a lifetime—as a form of cultural capital is applicable here as the sort of capital that mature returners carry into the academic field of the classroom. Unfortunately, these forms of cultural capital and the field in which they exist are too-rarely recognized within the university habitus, leaving mature returners feeling invisible as they struggle to adapt.

mature students bring with them into the academic field, and a lack of understanding of the lives of mature students—particularly for women like us, who bear the greatest share of family responsibilities and sometimes struggle with conflicting gender roles and expectations, as they attempt to find balance between resources and responsibilities<sup>192</sup>

For myself, I thought of all the faces that expressed surprise at my presence in a classroom, of classes where I bit my tongue to avoid discussing life experiences that would have tagged me as ‘old’—as if my age wasn’t written on my face. Still, I loved the years I spent in the classroom as a student, finding great joy in the free exchange of ideas, in writing papers, in sharing insights on topics I had scarcely considered earlier in my life—and I know that the women I spent that winter afternoon with did, too. Their stories represented the successes of mature women returners at UWT. Each had entered spaces not designed for them and despite their struggles, overcame them and succeeded. Although they might never have expected it to happen, they are college graduates today. Some now hold graduate degrees—or are working toward them. They are building new careers. Like me, each of them loved the learning environment and the challenge of new ideas they discovered at UWT. Yet, they also had to admit, even beyond the work required to complete a degree, it was sometimes exhausting to be that person standing on the margins, trying to figure out where—or if—they could fit into the university.

Where, or *if*, we fit... That was the question at the heart of the dialogue shared that day. Yet, through it, we discovered each of us did find a sense of belonging—through relationships,

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<sup>192</sup> Mikolaj and Boggs (1991) discussed role conflicts that mature women returners faced as they (re)entered higher education, struggling to balance the gendered expectations of both family and self, as well as expectations of the university. These struggles, they noted also fall in the midst of what they described as the “relationship between load and power” (p. 13), or the resources and responsibilities that any individual has at their disposal at any given time. One of these resources is time—something that each of my participants confronted at one time or another.

through campus spaces, and, as Wenger<sup>193</sup> claimed: through engagement with our campus community, through imagining ourselves as part of it, and through discovering ways to align a new identity as a student with the multiple identities that we already carried. In the next chapter, I will specifically consider that alignment as part of the identity-construction process—the process of becoming—that played out in each of our lives over the years these eight women and I spent as students at the University of Washington Tacoma.

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<sup>193</sup> Wenger (2000), cited in the start of this chapter, discussed belonging as understood through three modes: engagement, imagination, and alignment, and questioned how organizations could best be designed to encourage them.

## Chapter Five

### Becoming: Identity in Transition

In this chapter, I explore the idea of identity as a process of becoming, as it is viewed through the narratives of my focal participants. Each has been actively (re)constructing a new identity as a student, examining and storying a view of self-difference. Although none of my study participants used this terminology in their storying, the idea of ‘becoming,’ or the difference resulting from their return to college appeared again and again across the narratives shared in this project. In this chapter, I examine the transitions of identity in their return to higher education, considering some of the barriers and/or negative positionings—those ascribed by others or through their own internal dialogues—that each faced as they set out on their own unique journeys of becoming.

Examining the concept of becoming with a philosopher’s eye, Grosz (2005) defines it as “the operation of self-differentiation, the elaboration of a difference...in duration”, meaning that—at its heart—becoming is difference over time. She describes duration—time—as “the ‘field’ on which difference lives” (p. 4). In the becomings my study participants depicted in their stories, the external difference of time and space demonstrated an internally open-ended “process of differentiation” as they become “something other than [their] past” (p. 7). Although these processes of differentiation are continuous for each of us, there are certain ‘durations’ in life that mark us with difference—and for mature returners, one such duration takes place within a (re)turn to higher education. I see this same idea of difference over time undergirding James’ (2013) view of becoming as “the relationship between learning and identity,” (p. 109). something she likens to the process of drafting a paper. Just as writing changes over the course of composition—*becoming* something different than it was at the start—our identities, as human

beings in general and mature returners in particular, shift as well. Duration—*time*—is the field on which this difference plays out.

In this chapter, as I consider my participants' processes of becoming through the lens of their identities as literate persons, I examine their stories of difference, particularly as related to their learning within the context of their return to higher education. Listening closely, I observe their (re)imagined and (re)visioned 'old selves' into new identities, building "theory of out of relationships—out of stor[ies]" of their lived experiences (Riley-Mukavetz, 2012, p. 2). Just as a draft becomes a final paper through an iterative process of writing and revision over time, the subject each person creates through their stories 'becomes' through "the inevitable force of differentiation and elaboration," which Grosz (2005) called "another name for becoming" (p. 4). Yet, because writing is always unfinished (Schwartz & Schwartz, 2018), I also work from an awareness that their processes of becoming are perpetually partial. For a mature woman returner, the challenges of transitioning identities that result from returning to higher education cannot be underestimated. For all the life experience that they carry into the classroom with them—experience that can inform their contributions to class discussions, writing assignments, and even their understandings of course readings—there can be a discomfiting sense of difference as a new identity sits uneasily with the old.

In the last chapter, I focused on the meanings my participants and I created collaboratively within a group dialogue. In this chapter, I examine the constructions of identity and difference laid out within stories primarily shared dyadically: in individual interviews where the dialogue was collaboratively constructed with me, in literacy narratives written as a response to a prompt, in culture sketches in which they directed their replies to me, or email conversations that took place between two. Taken together, these narratives not only open windows on the

learning, identity, and difference each discovered over time, but they also consider the voices of ‘others’ incorporated into their stories, as well as the ways that each narrator drafts a new identity through an internal dialogue with those who have spoken before—and will continue to speak after. In a format *different* from the last chapter, taking a more individually-focused view of the data, I have structured the analysis here through a reflective response to each participant’s narration of their journey of becoming as mature women returners.

**Lupita: “*Sí, se Puede!*”<sup>194</sup>”**

In the first of these individual narrative interactions with my focal participants, I address Lupita’s journey through higher education as a process of becoming. In this dialogue, I observe Lupita’s transition from a “*scared mature woman*” who had been discouraged from continuing her education by both family and circumstances, to one who is determined to show those around her that with focus and determination “*we can make the impossible, possible.*”<sup>195</sup>

Matcha tea in hand, I sit down with stacks of narratives—and the notes I have taken throughout my reading—spread across the table in front of me. Picking up the nearest one, I see Lupita’s name at the top. I read for a moment and listen for her voice within the pages. As with every text I have ever read, its author always speaks if I listen—and this one is no different. Clear and strong, as if she is sitting in the room, Lupita’s words begin to bubble up within my brain, sharing with me the person she is becoming through the transition education has brought to her life.

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<sup>194</sup> ‘Yes, you can!’ From Lupita’s individual interview.

<sup>195</sup> From Lupita’s literacy narrative.

*“How did I enter the classroom?”* Lupita asks, leaning in for a moment before she speaks again. *“As a scared mature woman...The classroom was as big as a theater and it was full of students, mostly young...<sup>196</sup>”* I can imagine her, eyes wide as she relives the moment—the ache of it written on her face. Then, as if steeling herself against the memory, she speaks again.

*“I experienced impostor syndrome, trying to avoid being judged or criticized... I remember in Dr. Perone’s class, Adult Development, sharing my thoughts and feelings about returning to school as a mature woman, about how strange I felt being around younger students, the same age as my three children.<sup>197</sup>”*

But instead of sitting silent in her fear of being judged an imposter, she spoke up about her feelings. She told her story in the classroom that day, sharing her discomfort with her classmates—the very people whose view of her difference she most feared. And despite her concerns over criticisms and feelings that, as a mature returner, she didn’t belong, her honesty—grounded in the *“support, trust, and love my children and husband expressed to me for attending college<sup>198</sup>”*—cleared the way toward something different for all those there with her that day:

*“As I listened to younger adults share their stories, I found out most new students have similar experiences. Students coming from abroad and others who were too young felt intimidated like myself. I will always remember having the courage to share my fears as a new mature woman student and letting it all out of my system made a huge difference through my career. I found out I was not alone.<sup>199</sup>”*

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<sup>196</sup> From Lupita’s response to the emailed question about the aspect of her social identity that she feels enters the classroom first.

<sup>197</sup> From the first group interview, however Lupita told this same story in her individual interview.

<sup>198</sup> From the first group interview.

<sup>199</sup> This comment was drawn from an email conversation with Lupita about her sense of belonging on campus.

Lupita’s early experiences with education had not always been positive, so I was not surprised to discover she expected the worst as she returned to higher education. Yet, she “*listened*” to the younger students and “*found out*” they struggled with the same fears she did: a sense that they did not belong. Yet, there in the spaces of higher education—communicating in a language that had been a source of distress for a majority of her life—she overcame her fear and shared her story—finding assurance that she was not alone.

But I knew her sense of being alone was deeply rooted. It began when she left behind not only her home, but her language when she, her mother, and younger siblings emigrated from Mexico after her older sister’s death.

*“I went through a long period of confusion for not going back to my native country, the culture shock and the language barrier affected my learning process. Elementary school did not have ESL classes. It was all in English, which made me feel uncomfortable and embarrassed when the teacher asked me questions. I remember I walked home from school crying...<sup>200</sup>”*

For Lupita, English had been an embarrassing hurdle to overcome—not because she was incapable, but because it was the center of criticism she faced growing up. This internal distress began with a move—not just from place to place, but from culture to culture. The pain of it grew through elementary school experiences she didn’t understand and continued within her own family—the family for whom she had been obliged to abandon her childhood. She wrote:

*“My mom compared me with my other siblings, stating that they did not have to read to pass a test, meaning that they were very smart. She would say that I was a slow learner, and this did not help me to feel confident. I felt sad because I not only took care of my*

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<sup>200</sup> From Lupita’s literacy narrative.

*brothers to do well in school, but I felt criticized by my own mother for not being able to be to my siblings' English level or academic performance.<sup>201</sup>”*

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As we settle into the window seats in the campus bookstore, coffee steaming the rain-streaked windows, Lupita gathers her courage to speak. I watch her face as she searches for just the right words. She had wanted to meet this afternoon so she could share her story with me, face to face—to be sure what she had written in her narrative was what I wanted. I assure her that whatever she has written is exactly what I need. Ready at last, her words tumble over each, rushing like water over rocks as she shares the pain and embarrassment she felt as her English was compared to her younger siblings’.

*“My brothers learned to write, read, and speak English very well; in fact, my nieces one day questioned my English accent when I spoke. They compared me with the rest of my siblings and that was embarrassing to me also.<sup>202</sup>”*

As if mirroring the glass behind us, tears cloud Lupita’s eyes as she shares her nieces’ words. She was just eleven years old when her sister’s death irrevocably changed her world and made caring for her family her primary responsibility. She became *“my mother’s right hand,<sup>203</sup>”* making sure her younger brothers did their homework before she took time for her own. She started a part-time job at 13 to help support her family—all of this leaving her own schooling in last place. And in the midst of taking on responsibilities no child should have to bear, she dealt with the constant comparisons: that her brothers were smart, but she was a slow learner; that her brothers’ speech was appropriate, but hers marked her as different—even within her own family.

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<sup>201</sup> From Lupita’s literacy narrative.

<sup>202</sup> Although these words are drawn from Lupita’s literacy narrative, this conversation between Lupita and I actually did take place in the UWT bookstore, and this was the experience we talked about.

<sup>203</sup> From Lupita’s literacy narrative.

It is a pain she still carries.

Years later, after Lupita has moved to Washington to, at long last, fulfill her dream of a college degree, her worries over language surface once again.

*“I had my fears of being judged and discriminated by young White students for being older and Mexican. They spoke English very professional, which made me intimidated. But people embraced me here and that gave me confidence to express myself during classes. I met wonderful people that do not judge my writing and my English at the TLC [writing center]. They embrace my Spanish and I feel honored.”<sup>204</sup>”*

Again, comparison and difference rear their ugly heads. She is afraid of the judgments of students who are young and white, while she is “*older and Mexican*.” She views their speech as “*professional*,” which leaves her feeling “*intimidated*.” But the judgment she fears doesn’t come. Instead, she uses words like “*embraced*,” speaking of those who give her confidence to express herself, of feeling “*honored*” by those who do not judge her difference, who do not compare her to others. At last, her worries over language can subside. Once more speaking of difference, she smiles as she calls out a transition in her identity resulting from her return to college, saying:

*“I see more knowledge. I see confidence... I feel empowered. I am proud to show my family, my friends and my culture that we can make a difference, no matter how difficult, or how much adversity... As long we have the determination, focus, and passion we can make the impossible to be possible. Sí, se puede!”<sup>205</sup>”*

Lupita has repeated those last words to me so many times—sometimes with a smile, sometimes through tears—they have become a mantra of sorts. Every time I hear them, they remind me of

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<sup>204</sup> From Lupita’s literacy narrative.

<sup>205</sup> From Lupita’s literacy narrative.

her determination and strength. Lupita doesn't give up. Period. She has pursued her education despite shifting cultures and languages. Despite being told 'no!' by a former husband. Despite overriding commitments to work and children. Despite obstacles like age and people—including her own family—who compared her to others, who didn't understand her drive to learn. And in spite of all of it, she keeps moving forward. Pleased and a bit surprised, she notes:

*“There have been a few friends who have been inspired ... seeing me continue my education at an older age. Even my sister-in-law! At one time, my brother criticized me. He said, ‘You should stay at home, taking care of your husband instead of going to school. You’re too old for that.’ Well, now my brother’s wife is going back to school—in the Nursing Program.<sup>206</sup>”*

Unexpected by Lupita, the inspiration of her education has extended to her family. She sees it in her sister-in-law's decision to return to her education, but she shares that influence through the ventriloquized denunciations of her brother. Her influence on others is offered through reports, but in this story, she allows her brother to speak for himself. With not the slightest hint of irony, she voices his criticisms that she is too old, his reminders that her responsibilities lay in taking care of her husband—just as she had once sidelined her education to care of him. And then she speaks for herself. “*Well, now...*,” she begins, stating with great pleasure that her brother's wife is following in her footsteps and returning to school.

Woven through the words on the page, I see Lupita's smile as she describes the ripples her education has made among those around her. She has not only—*finally*—accomplished her own goals, gaining baccalaureate and graduate degrees and a job in the field she is most passionate about, she is seeing the fruit of her efforts reach even farther. She watches as other

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<sup>206</sup> From Lupita's individual interview, but she told this same story in the first group interview.

women begin the same journey, reaching toward their own goals. And she ends her narrative with these words: “*I am proud to show my family, my friends, and my culture that we can make a difference, no matter how difficult adversity can be...*”<sup>207</sup>

In a becoming that is ever ongoing, the joy she finds in her accomplishments is personal—“*I am proud*”—yet it immediately extends to include her family, her friends, and her culture: “*...as long as we have the determination, focus, and passion, we can make the impossible possible.*”<sup>208</sup> The glimmerings of transformation—the drafting process of her becoming—may have once seemed (almost) impossible to her, but Lupita has come to understand that it is within the relationships of her life—with family and friends, with professors, staff, and others within the university—that what she long viewed as impossible has become possible for her.

### **Jane: Overcoming Old Scripts and Self-Talk**

In this second dialogic interaction, I consider Jane’s journey of becoming as one of learning to overcome the dialogue inside her own head—voices from her past and the presence of those voices within her own self-talk. Bakhtin spoke of these internalized voices of others as “social viewpoints, or ‘voices’ that circulate across time and space” before taking root in our own thought processes<sup>209</sup>. In Jane’s narratives, I can sometimes hear the echoes of these voices that followed her throughout her childhood, even as her journey through higher education begins to shift her self-talk.

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<sup>207</sup> From Lupita’s literacy narrative.

<sup>208</sup> From Lupita’s literacy narrative.

<sup>209</sup> (Hamston, 2006, p. 57).

Picking up the second stack of narratives, I think about my relationship with Jane—a relationship that began in writing and has continued, for the most part, through writing. For a long time, it was as if we were pen pals, trading fragments of our lives in the margins of her papers and class assignments. With as busy as her life was—and remains—we have seen each other face-to-face very little. So, I have to admit I was surprised to discover within her stories how much she dislikes writing. Yet the inescapable fact is that her writing is wrapped in disdain for itself: Jane hates to write! Her narratives reveal the lack of confidence in her identity as a literate person that reaches back to a childhood loathing of her handwriting:

*“I’m not saying that everyone I encountered since elementary school thought my handwriting was ugly or that they thought what I wrote was horrible. But...I think these early comments/judgments/criticisms/critiques are the reasons why I hate writing so much. I feel my writing will be negatively judged when read.”<sup>210</sup>*

Jane’s negative feelings about her writing—both the words on a page, and the messages those words carry—were born in criticisms that came to her early. Knowing that Jane came to the United States as an immigrant during her elementary school years, I can’t help but wonder if this is where the judgments began. Did she wrestle with English, whether speaking, reading, or writing? Jane claims she *“can’t remember if I struggled with speaking as much as I struggled with writing,”<sup>211</sup>* but childhood scars can run deep. Wherever this disdain for writing came from, it has left her with the sense that the cultural capital she carries—embodied in her handwriting and a subsequent hatred of writing itself—is not enough. The criticisms she heard early—and carried with her since—have battered her self-confidence and told her she doesn’t have what it takes to be successful within the habitus of the educational system. Even after completing her

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<sup>210</sup> This quote came from Jane’s literacy narrative.

<sup>211</sup> From Jane’s emailed feedback to this section of the chapter.

nursing degree and gaining admittance to the Doctor of Nursing Practice program (DNP), Jane's view of her writing skills still led her to say, *"I should be better."* She is lacking, she fully believes, among classmates who *"are just way above me...on top of their game."* Her self-talk offers impersonal comparisons with others—from the *"everyone"* who said her handwriting was ugly, to the classmates she claims are *"way above me."* She equates a childhood sense of her handwriting as *"ugly,"*<sup>212</sup> to an absence of beauty<sup>213</sup> and her identity as a literate person as lacking in comparison to others. She is convinced that she should be better (not just *could*, but *should*—and not just her writing, but her *self*). A sense of 'less than' is the difference against which she compares herself: as the 'first draft' of her becoming, it is an identity she still wrestles with.

Yet woven through the intersections of identity<sup>214</sup> Jane carries as a mature returner, she claims one aspect—a core identity—as taking precedence over all others:

*"I walk into the classroom with my 'mother' identity first. For me, this identity helps me put family first, be patient, have resilience, and empower those around me. I found myself a single-income mother in 2002 when my daughters were 12, 3, and 2... I needed to make plans/set goals that would improve my family's future, as well as lead by example."*<sup>215</sup>

Despite her struggles over feeling like she is good enough and facing the challenges of becoming a mature returner while raising her young daughters as a working single mother, Jane's primary

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<sup>212</sup> The quoted material in this paragraph comes from Jane's literacy narrative.

<sup>213</sup> In both casual conversation and interviews, Jane speaks often of her love for the "beautiful words" of English literature—particularly those of Jane Austin and Charles Dickens. Despite her love for them, she is convinced she cannot produce them.

<sup>214</sup> In Jane's view of herself, I see an example of Prins' (2006) discussion of the constructionist approach to intersectionality, one that sees identity not as a list of characteristics that can be used to categorize an individual, but a narrated identity contextualized by "social, historical, and symbolic factors" (p. 279). Jane's self-view includes all these aspects of identity— as a literate person, a social being, a mother, an immigrant, a woman of color, and a nursing professional (among so many more).

<sup>215</sup> From Jane's emailed response to the question about the aspect of her identity that enters the classroom first.

view of herself as a mother is what keeps her going. She writes of caring for her daughters or her parents, attending class, doing her assignments, or working a nearly full-time job to support her family, as her attempts to “*lead by example.*” She views her mother-ness as empowering “*to those around me,*” too—including her classmates. Unfortunately, at least in Jane’s eyes, this sense of herself as a mother also leaves her feeling like a mother to her classmates, as she speaks of the social difficulties this creates for her:

*“I always felt like, ‘Oh wow, I wish I could be included more,’ but then when they do invite, I feel like, ‘Oh, they’re just inviting me to be nice.’ And then I feel like I can’t go hang out with them because I am like their mother. And so, I also put that on myself too. But you know, I do see, like, you know, they’re like 27 or 28, you know, and some may be 31 or 32 but still, I feel like I am a mother or an auntie.”<sup>216</sup>*

I chuckle for a moment at Jane’s self-talk—first wishing to be included and then second-guessing the motives behind the invitation when it comes. But I understand it—Jane is a social creature and want to feel included. Yet, despite her desire to interact with her classmates outside the classroom, she pulls back from it—naming her mother identity as the obstacle to her inclusion.

However, she does admit there might be just a bit more to it: “*I still lack confidence in myself in some areas,*<sup>217</sup>” making it hard to believe that her classmates might actually want to spend time with her. At the same time, through her return to higher education, she is slowly gaining a more grounded sense of self. Her voice clear and strong, she continues, discussing the difference her education has made for her:

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<sup>216</sup> From Jane’s individual interview.

<sup>217</sup> From Jane’s individual interview.

*“...I am a strong, confident woman. That’s how I feel. And I’m like, nobody can tell me I can’t do something I’ve set my mind to. I could do it. I can achieve it. Prior to going back to school when I was 30, I lacked confidence in whether I could achieve something, you know? Back then, education had little value in my life, compared to now when everything is about education. And I really tried to instill that in my girls. Somebody told me once, ‘Nobody can take your educational attainment.’ ... And it’s so true. You can lose your job, but they can’t take away your credentials. You earned it.”<sup>218</sup>”*

Speaking with pride, Jane assures her reader—and herself—using the ventriloquized words of “somebody,” that her “*educational attainment*,” her “*credentials*,” are something she can never lose—they cannot be taken away. They are tangible proof that she is a capable person who can do what she sets out to do. As Jane compares her present self with her younger self, she mentions the lack of value she ascribed to education then and her skepticism over whether she could achieve “*something*”—a lack of confidence that seems to extend beyond just gaining a degree, even calling for understanding from her audience with her, “*you know?*” But accomplishing her goals—completing her nursing degrees—represents more than just finding her confidence through education; through this achievement, she presents herself as someone who is unstoppable—someone that “*nobody*” can stop. “*Nobody*” can tell her what she cannot do. This statement is the one place where she includes another voice. She wants to be sure her daughters understand that her act of assigning of value to education is what lies behind this newfound identity, a value that can never be lost.

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<sup>218</sup> From Jane’s individual interview.

Jane's sense of her own becoming—a growing confidence in herself as a literate person and someone who has overcome not only the criticism of others (and her own self-talk)—can be seen in the way she signed her literacy narrative: “*Jane, RN, BSN, OCN*<sup>219</sup>.”

(And if she were writing today, Jane would, no doubt, be pleased to add that “*nobody*” could stop her from signing it with DNP<sup>220</sup>, as well.)

Jane's final comment adds a perfect example of her continuous becoming when she says: “*I know that I am getting up there in age (about to turn 48 years old in Feb), but I still have a lot more living and learning to do. For instance, in the next 2-3 years I want to return to UW Seattle to obtain a master's certification in palliative care and a master's degree in public health.*<sup>221</sup>”

In Jane's story of becoming a student, she speaks from the standpoint of one who struggles to overcome the voices of her past, even as she works to construct a new vision of herself as a successful student. Although the struggle to overcome may be ongoing—identity is never fixed but is a lifelong process of drafting and revision along the road to becoming<sup>222</sup>—she sees herself now as an individual that ‘*nobody*’ can stop.

### **Chantal: Becoming her own Kind of Scholar**

In this subsection, I take the opportunity to ‘sit’ with Chantal, revisiting her storied observations of her return to graduate school. In the narrative that follows, she offers a view of

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<sup>219</sup> From Jane's literacy narrative. The designators here stand for Registered Nurse (RN), Bachelor of Science (BSN), Nursing (BSN), and Oncology Certified Nurse (OCN)—all of which Jane is extremely proud.

<sup>220</sup> Doctor of Nursing Practice.

<sup>221</sup> As part of the member checking I used for all the narrative text in this dissertation, I returned all of chapter four, the biographies, and individual sections of this chapter to each participant for any corrections or feedback. Jane left this response in the email that accompanied her feedback and corrections for this chapter.

<sup>222</sup> James, 2013. See the introduction to this chapter for James' discussion of becoming as a drafting process of identity.

persevering through unexpected challenges to her identity as a student and a professional in becoming someone she describes as a different sort of scholar.

Turning once more to the narratives scattered across the table, I meet Chantal within their pages. She begins with a description of the identity she carries into a college classroom, calling it out as that of a “*Mature, Professional Black Woman—the same as every room that I step into. I was/am confident in my professional and personal identities.*” But, in the very next line—after this self-assured statement—she adds, her voice subdued, other identities that intersect with the first: “*Secondly, or maybe thirdly, a scholar or student. Fourthly, an imposter.*”<sup>223</sup>

Each of the identities Chantal claims on entering a classroom—mature, professional, Black—are visible to anyone who meets her. As much as none of us want to admit it, our age as mature women *is* written on our faces. A mature woman entering a classroom as a student cannot be invisible: she wears an identity that may not fit easily into the space—but it is *there*, nonetheless. And a Black professional woman? Again, easily recognizable by anyone who sees Chantal. She is a Black woman who carries herself with intelligence and professionalism and speaks with a straightforward<sup>224</sup> confidence about the things she cares about. These are identities she wears with pride.

Yet as Chantal continues her self-description, adding scholar and student as other aspects of the identity she wears into the classroom, she can’t seem to decide where they fall on the list. Is she a scholar—an identity that carries some level of knowledge or authority—before she is a

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<sup>223</sup> The quotes in this paragraph came from Chantal’s response to the emailed question about the aspect of her social identity that she felt entered the classroom first.

<sup>224</sup> One of the things Chantal noted in the feedback she offered as part of the final member check on the narrative inquiry in chapter four was a comment that “Chantal sounds way smarter than I am!” I assured her that “Chantal IS that smart—just like her counterpart!”

student, or someone who is still working to accumulate that knowledge? Even her professional identity seems not quite settled as she writes, “*I was/am confident in my professional and personal identities.*”<sup>225</sup> These identities have been comfortable and familiar to her; she has worn them for years. But she still expresses an uncertainty over whether they still belong to her as they once did. However, the identities of scholar, student, or even imposter—someone who is pretending to be someone or something they are not? She names them, but without the “I am” that would lay claim to them as part of her identity. It is almost as if she feels they come from somewhere outside herself, rather than being something she ‘owns.’

But the expression that grabs my attention is her “*was/am.*” Though I recognize this as a common academic construction, covering past and present tense in an effort to be inclusive of both, it seems a bit misplaced in the story of self she is telling. “*I was confident?*” “*I am confident?*” Is this her way of saying—*without* saying it—that her confidence in her identity is shaken and is no longer what it was? Or perhaps there is another rationale behind this seeming discrepancy. Turning back to the narrative in my hand, I listen in as Chantal explains:

*“I feel like I have a split personality. In my professional career, I’m respected as a professional. I’m looked to as a leader. My voice is heard and respected. And then I came to UWT, and I was just like, ‘I don’t know anything!’ Like, ‘What has happened to me over the past 25 years?’ I had never felt stupid... as stupid as I felt in that quarter. EVER in my life. I’ve never let anyone talk to me the way that I was talked to, or the way that I was treated, you know, in my professional career, in my personal life...I didn’t feel valued. My voice wasn’t heard.”*<sup>226</sup>

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<sup>225</sup> From Chantal’s response to the emailed question about her social identity in the classroom.

<sup>226</sup> From Chantal’s individual interview.

In her words, I hear echoes of Knowles' claim that "nothing makes an adult feel more childlike than being judged by another adult<sup>227</sup>"—a feeling that is especially hard to bear for someone who, in a different context, is an authority figure herself. The difference she calls out as she moves from her professional career to a new position as a returning student leaves her feeling deeply divided at her core—like having a *"split personality."* In the more familiar location of her work, she is a respected leader, someone whose voice is *"heard and respected."* Yet, in her new position as a student, she feels like someone who has been judged and found wanting, whose voice is no longer listened to. Someone without any claim to knowledge.

*"And it was ridiculous. I almost quit. It did feel like 'You're not good enough. You're just a stupid girl from Western Pennsylvania.' And it really wiped away all of my compliments over the past 30 years... in seven weeks! That's how it made me feel. Like nothing else mattered except how dumb I felt in that class."<sup>228</sup>*

Many of the mature women returners I have met—no matter how ultimately successful they were in their educational efforts—have spoken of feeling, at times, like 'a fish out of water' in the university. Like Chantal, they discovered that the cultural capital they had spent a lifetime accumulating has little real value in this space. But habitus is not fixed; it is "a never-ending process of construction" that, although it can be exclusive and marginalizing, can also be "permeable and responsive"<sup>229</sup>—something that Chantal came to experience for herself:

*"I came to realize that, yes, I am an academic. I am a scholar... I think that as an adult learner, one of the amazing things we can bring to the table is that, when we're reading*

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<sup>227</sup> Knowles (1980) further described this sense of judgment as "the ultimate sign of disrespect and dependency" between an adult's sense of self-directedness and a teacher's assessment of their work (p. 88).

<sup>228</sup> From Chantal's individual interview.

<sup>229</sup> (James

, Busher & Suttill, 2015, p. 17). The authors were speaking of personal habitus, but I believe that even institutional habitus can also change, given the right motivation and effort.

*Foucault, we're looking at it through such a different lens. Even some of my teachers have said, 'I would never have thought about it the way you just said. And thank you because that broadened my horizon.' Even though we're reading the same thing, what we're getting out of it and what we're sharing is so different. And we can learn from each other, and I think that is amazing.*<sup>230</sup>”

Chantal, a storyteller by avocation *and* profession, so often includes the voices of others in her words—in this case the voice of one of her professors—taking me back to Bakhtin’s claim that the “ideological becoming of a human being” involves a “process of selectively assimilating the words of others”<sup>231</sup>. The multiplicity of voices in Chantal’s stories makes them more interesting to hear and, at the same time, opens a window on the way she positions herself—offering a view of how she wants others to see her. But here, she uses these voices to reclaim and rebuild an aspect of her identity that had been buried under her previous sense of being judged unworthy by other teachers. She offers me, as her audience, a glimpse into the way she adjusts her identity, simply by making a choice about which of her professors she would listen to, whose words she would incorporate into the self-talk of her new student identity. Chantal, seeking assurance that choosing to stay at UWT was the right decision, once told me she was “*never going to be that type of Foucault scholar. I’m just not. That’s not the way that I talk, the way that I think.*”<sup>232</sup>” Yet, here, she claims her identity as a mature returner is what makes possible a different understanding of Foucault—a difference that broadens not only her own viewpoint, but also the views of those tasked with teaching the theorist’s work. She calls out her own transition across

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<sup>230</sup> From Chantal’s individual interview.

<sup>231</sup> (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 341).

<sup>232</sup> From Chantal’s individual interview.

difference—her becoming—by ‘selectively assimilating’ the words of others—claiming a new identity as the scholar she previously declared she would never be.

Yet, the difference she claims goes beyond just seeing the world—and social theorists like Foucault—differently. She states that:

*“I feel like I have grown. I will say that. I feel like, as a person, I have started to give myself and other people more grace. I have started—at 47 years old—to develop more patience than I’ve ever had in my life. Before this year, I probably would have just quit when school got hard. So, I feel like I’ve worked on my perseverance. But not just for me. I’m not just doing this for me. I’m doing this for all the people who believe in me.”<sup>233</sup>*

Grace, patience, and perseverance. The self-difference Chantal has discovered is not just what she has found within herself, but over time, it is moving beyond her, too. The ability to persevere through discouragement and what could have been the decimation of her self-confidence kept her moving forward when she wanted to quit. But grace and patience are aspects of her identity that look outward toward those around her. And this is the greatest difference she sees—that she can stick to her goals because of *“all the people who believe in me.”*

*“I keep trying to look at this thing—returning to school—as a growth opportunity. And I’m hoping that people see in me a person who is more confident. In myself. In my writing. In my academic skills. In my job. And that I can take those skills back into my real life and be a better person.”<sup>234</sup>*

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<sup>233</sup> From Chantal’s individual interview.

<sup>234</sup> From Chantal’s individual interview.

In the end, Chantal’s new identity as a student is something that she sees as useful in her “*real life,*” skills that will help in her job, in her writing, and will ultimately make her “*a better person.*”

Chantal’s story of becoming speaks to a growing understanding of herself as a scholar—but not what she considers a typical scholar. Chantal, always a confident person (at least until she re-entered graduate school as a mature returner), comes to recognize herself as someone who brings something unique and valuable to the table: the ability to see the world from a different standpoint. And although she wrestles uncomfortably with that feeling from time to time, she comes to realize its value as she recognizes “*we can learn from each other, and I think that’s amazing.*”<sup>235</sup>

### **Robin: Becoming Her Own Person**

Robin’s stories of becoming beautifully express the thoughts of someone who has overcome childhood experiences that left her feeling deficient and anxious. She views her return to higher education as a tool, not so much as re-invention, but one that allowed her to find herself in the first place. Robin is extraordinarily forthcoming about the anxiety and depression she has suffered since childhood, as well as her difficult transition(s) into higher education—starting and stopping a few times before finally entering UWT and completing her bachelor’s degree.

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<sup>41</sup> From Chantal’s individual interview.

In the pages of Robin's narratives<sup>236</sup>, I see an expressive and thoughtful writer. Her thorough and well considered answers to my questions speak loudly to the identity struggles she has faced throughout her life, but also of the difference she sees since she has returned to college. What stands out the most through her stories of 'becoming' is the sense that she has used the experiences of higher education as a tool to reclaim her identity and make something of herself. Robin's 'self-making' is not told in a rags to riches type of story, but as one in which she reclaims her identity from a long-time struggle with mental illness. Yet, as I read her narratives, I must admit one of her observations surprises me. Although the youngest of my study participants, Robin's view of herself is primarily focused through her age—at least when she first entered a college classroom:

*“My thirtysomething-ness was in sharp relief at that moment. I'm not sure what I mean by that, but I felt it was a liability rather than an asset, which is unfortunate. Shouldn't the experience and determination that I had as an older person be an asset?”<sup>237</sup>”*

As surprised as I am at finding Robin's discomfort over her age, I understand it. I have never been able to leave my own age-awareness behind when I enter a classroom as a student. And even as staff in a department where my colleagues are about the same age as my older son, I am sometimes all-too-aware of myself as an 'older woman' in a society where—as Robin notes—age is viewed “*a liability rather than an asset.*” While the feeling is less pronounced now than it was as an undergraduate, it is still a part of my identity that I struggle with. Although a good deal

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<sup>236</sup> The narratives I refer to in this chapter are Robin's literacy narrative, her written responses to the transcript of her individual interview, and an email that asked one of the additional questions I asked all participants: about the aspect of her social identity that she felt entered the classroom first.

<sup>237</sup> From Robin's emailed response to the question about the aspect of her social identity that entered the classroom first.

younger than I, Robin clearly feels the same. Yet, as Robin continues, her focus is on the physical aspect of age, rather than the life experience age brings with it.

*“I think that it was the absence of youthfulness that I was feeling. I felt overtly conscious of my physical presence: my body, its appearance because of my gender, my weight, my age... This was the thing that I felt set me apart: the way I looked as an older adult. In most other things I felt I could blend in. I could play the role of a student because I had done it before and was pretty good at it. I had the inexperience that most students have. But when it came to the way I look, or, at least, the way I thought I must look to all these students who were basically kindergartners in comparison, I felt that I stuck out like a sore thumb!”<sup>238</sup>”*

Speaking of her sense of ‘age’ in entering a classroom—not just as a woman, but her embodiment of age as a visible trait (“*the absence of youthfulness*”), she calls it a difference that sets her apart from others in the classroom. Although she is able to ‘blend in’ (i.e., not stand out) in other situations, that sense of ‘sticking out’ in the context of the university is the aspect of her identity—in her eyes, at least—that is primary in those moments. Age and experience ought to be considered an asset, she writes, yet in this place they are seen as a liability. It is as if she is asking her audience, ‘How can I expect to construct a positive identity as a student if it is based in yet another negative experience of my identity?’ But Robin also speaks of the things that helped her along the way to gaining a positive sense of self as a mature returner.

*“There was one thing that was really helpful to me. During orientation day when I first started at UWT, they made us listen to a presentation where somebody was talking about imposter syndrome, which I had heard about in the distant past but had never connected*

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<sup>238</sup> From Robin’s emailed response to the question about the aspect of her social identity that entered the classroom first.

*to my own situation. I almost burst into tears during the presentation, because here I was, surrounded by teenagers, feeling like an idiot, feeling disconnected. Then someone told me what I was feeling was normal: that it was just a feeling, an illusion.*

Many of Robin's struggles were internal, rising from a childhood sense of deficiency: of a self she saw as "*behind...late...unintelligent...outcast*"<sup>239</sup> amid battles with a mental illness she didn't yet understand. She speaks of the "*internalized sense of inadequacy*"<sup>240</sup> she carried, of the imposter syndrome that had her mentally tied up in knots, until... "*someone*" told her it was normal. With just a few words, she came to recognize her feeling of being an imposter as "*just a feeling, an illusion.*" But another someone—a speaker in an orientation for transfer students—led her toward leaving that sense of herself as a failure behind and helping her find her way toward the person she is becoming:

*"I have had many experiences that made me feel like my contributions were valuable. I had an instructor who didn't just forward the email telling me that they were offering the Writing Center Theory class; he told me that he thought I would be a good tutor. If he hadn't told me that, I wouldn't be working at the writing center. And I wonder if I would've got into my graduate program, because my resume was a big fat blank until I started working there. It's like a little chain of opportunities that were offered to me that led to bigger and bigger opportunities."<sup>241</sup>*

She writes of the understanding that drove her back to college and kept her going through it as realizing "*I needed to be my own person...to take my life back for myself...to do something to feel like a competent adult.*"

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<sup>239</sup> From Robin's literacy narrative.

<sup>240</sup> From Robin's written response to the individual interview transcript.

<sup>241</sup> From Robin's written response to the individual interview transcript.

And in doing so, Robin claims she has gained

*“...concrete proof I’m able to accomplish things, proof that I didn’t have before. That person I was...doubted herself a lot. And I don’t doubt myself as much now. And that’s, that’s huge. That’s incredible... I just feel better about the world in general, about other people. Like I’m able to feel like more connected with other people because I don’t have as much insecurity. And that’s been pretty important. Now I just have a lot more confidence in myself.”<sup>242</sup>*

While she recognizes that her identity is still in process, Robin, through her experiences at UWT, has come to view herself as someone different than she was, someone who can accomplish what she sets out to do. As a person who has faced the inner talk that led her to doubt her abilities, telling her she was never enough, Robin has come through on the other side—because of her education. More secure in her identity, she is better able to connect with other people. Her experiences in higher education have not only brought her a job as a writing tutor in the writing center, but enabled her to see herself as someone who has something to offer to others:

*“I think this is like the only period of my life where I’ve ever felt like I’m competent at something...like I have something to offer other people. You, know, seeing that I can be good at something that people will benefit from. That’s been just huge for me.”<sup>243</sup>*

Coming to view her “*university experience as something culminating, building, always in process,*” she also realized, “*I don’t have to know or be everything all at once...one step builds on another.*”<sup>244</sup> Just as Robin has come to understand her educational experiences as part of an ongoing process, knowing that she does not have to ‘*be everything*’ in any given moment, she

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<sup>242</sup> From Robin’s individual interview.

<sup>243</sup> Robin’s comment here was drawn from the first group interview

<sup>244</sup> From Robin’s individual interview transcript.

sees her identity—as a human being, not just as a student—as someone in the process of becoming.

Robin's stories of becoming portray a deeply thoughtful individual who has found meaning within her experiences in higher education, using it to discover her identity, even beyond the classroom. She began her journey through higher education with sense of self that was mired in deficiencies, but because of her experiences as a person who discovered proof of her abilities, to see the value of her contributions to the campus community and in the process discover her own ability to accomplish things. Her journey to becoming a student may have been rocky at times, but along the way, she is learning to become her own person.

### **Shelly: Making Peace with Her Past**

Shelly's narratives are, on the surface, at least, the most focused toward growth and difference over time—and perhaps that's because today she understands herself best as someone deep in a process of transition. But her stories of transition are foregrounded by grappling with difference. Shelly's identity as an indigenous Hawai'ian was born in that feeling of difference. Life experiences that were alternately comfortable and awkward followed her parents' divorce when she was just three years old. Living most of the year with her mother, she attempted to “*acclimate and blend into*” the majority white community, in a place “*where being brown was a noticeable difference.*” And when returning to the mainland after summers spent with her father in Hawai'i, she found herself on the other end of warnings to: “*Remember, when you return to*

*the mainland, don't talk pidgin. Haoles will think you are illiterate.' Even as young as five or six, I understood what my aunties were saying.<sup>245</sup>*"

With her view of herself as a literate person grounded in the view that her speech must be guarded to be acceptable, she learned to avoid using language that would set her apart in specific communities—even if that same language was appropriate in others. Unfortunately, this avoidance also led to the “*distorted identity I felt as a child,*” an identity, she notes, that still “*shows up today. Culturally, I was raised in two different parts of the US, which created a child who would adapt wherever I was.*” Yet her ability to adapt, Shelly noted, resulted in “*unresolved trauma that would shape and mold my relations moving forward.*”

Still, Shelly found a way to nurture her literate self. During her high school years (and beyond), despite too-easy academic work and the boredom that accompanied it, Shelly discovered the magic of writing.

*“I would write of the fantasy world of the life I wanted. Other times I would journal write...to try to maybe understand some of the problems I was having...knowing nothing of the therapeutic aspect of such practices. There was a freedom to writing stories, an escape from real life issues.”*

Early experiences with writing brought her freedom, a chance to revise her life into what she most wanted it to be. Stories became a way to try to make peace with some of the problems she could not escape in her everyday life. But her writing practice wasn't enough to ease her transition back to higher education. She recalls her first day on campus as terrifying:

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<sup>245</sup> From Shelly's literacy narrative.

*“I was full of trepidation. I was terrified to go back to school. I felt like an imposter at 45 years old, having been out of school for 20 years. I didn't finish my degree then, you know, and so some of those old tapes started playing...<sup>246</sup>”*

She speaks of those ‘old tapes’ as the voices in her head saying, ‘You can’t do this. You aren’t enough.’ All the people in her past who belittled her efforts, telling her ‘You will never succeed’—even if all of those voices were merely her own self-talk echoing her fears back to her. Those voices she speaks of become part of our self-talk—the ongoing dialogue that will continue, unless something intervenes, bringing other utterances that become part of our own. But Shelly also speaks gratefully of those who helped her move past her fears when she returned to college:

*“A dear friend and close confidant ...walked me around campus and shared his own experience of returning to school. That day was crucial because I was full of fear. I needed another who understood what I was dealing with and help me.”*

Looking once again at the process of becoming through James’ metaphor of revision,<sup>247</sup> I see in Shelly’s words the acknowledgement that ‘seeing again’—re-visioning—is often a matter of looking through someone else’s eyes, even when the focus is our own life. Because of the presence of one person who understood, Shelly was able to see beyond her fears—finding the difference between who she was in that moment and the person she wanted to become. Taking the step to move past *her* past, she came to the realization

*“...that I had the capacity and the passion to go in a different direction...You know, when you do something, when you make a decision and everything just kind of unfolds? You don’t have to fight it? That’s exactly the way it’s been for me at UWT...I just kept doing*

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<sup>246</sup> From Shelly’s individual interview.

<sup>247</sup> (James, 2013).

*the next right thing and doors just kept opening and that just reinforces this belief that I have that I'm on this path. It's the right path. And it's ...it's a good path. My identity is different today than it was when I first started school.”*

Shelly writes of her return to college as a journey—taking a different direction, finding doors that open in front of her and a path just keeps unfurling as she walks. She has a guide of sorts—“*my own Higher power and faith in spirituality*”—that paves her way as she moves ahead. “*My identity continues to evolve due to the recovery process*” she says. “*I continue to grow into the woman I am today, and for me, it's the journey that's important.*<sup>248</sup>”

Because of this belief in the directedness of her journey, Shelly's identity has changed. She is different than she used to be. Although she is a very private person, Shelly shared with me that she was in recovery, something she claims is “*more meaningful because I chose to return to school.*<sup>249</sup>” Through this personal revision across difference, she has come to understand the meaning and value of her experience as it extends beyond just herself:

*“My experience is worthy insofar as my capacity to help others; to empathize with those who have experienced similar stigmatized oppressive dominant narratives; and be more compassionate towards myself and fellow persons. If my past can help one person, then it is for a purpose greater than me.”*<sup>250</sup>

In considering her return to college, Shelly's focus was on the things that broadened her world view, opening her eyes to “*new perspectives that I'd never really considered before, which has really been kind of beautiful... to see the value in how other people see things.*”

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<sup>248</sup> Rather than completing the culture sketch I sent to all participants, Shelly chose to write a narrative addressing the same topics but not directly answering the questions. This quote came from that narrative.

<sup>249</sup> From the narrative that replaced Shelly's culture sketch (see footnote 55).

<sup>250</sup> Same source as previous quote.

“And how do you see yourself today?” I want to ask her. Although she can’t hear my unspoken question, Shelly responds—a smile splashed across her words:

*“It is all so different. My identity has evolved since returning to school... Now, I see myself as a smart strong woman. I am empowered. I love learning. I’m capable. I’m able. My confidence is ... well, I keep my confidence in check because I believe humility is an important quality. One of my most treasured qualities, one that I work on, is to stay humble and right size. But the girl I am? I’m feeling great. I feel great about myself... I can draw from experience, and because I am empathetic, my work areas allow me to give back in areas that some are not as comfortable. This journey is not about the destination. I remind myself of this every day.”<sup>251</sup>*

Speaking of all the events and experiences of her life that led to her decision to return to college, as well as all those that have happened since, Shelly reiterated the idea of a journey—the difference over time that Grosz<sup>252</sup> spoke of as becoming. But she also speaks of the identity she met along the way: one of empowerment, knowledge and strength, confidence and humility, empathy. And the meaning she found? That the journey is about more than just arriving at some fixed end; it is about giving back. It is about learning, she says in the end, to “*hold my values close and my ideas loosely.*”

“*Mahalo,*<sup>253</sup>” Shelly writes as she closes her story. The word carries not just gratitude, appreciation, and respect, but also brings an end to our dialogue. A turning of the page. Yet, in this moment, I continue to ponder her story. Because of painful aspects of her past, Shelly’s self-identity has been a difficult subject for her to talk about. However, she notes, this is changing

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<sup>251</sup> From Shelly’s individual interview.

<sup>252</sup> (Grosz, 2005).

<sup>253</sup> The quotes on this page all come from Shelly’s literacy narrative.

because of her growth as a person—through her journey, as it were. In her words, I hear echoes of Barnett’s description of knowledge as a process with “person forming properties<sup>254</sup>” —like the knowledge seen in the shifts of what Dumais called “one’s view of the world and one’s place in it.<sup>255</sup>” Shelly’s personal habitus has been—and continues to be— revised across a difference, yet this transition is one in which she, as its subject, is becoming “more than [her]self or other than [her] past.<sup>256</sup>”

### **Hazel: Writing Her Own Story**

Hazel’s storied journey of becoming as a mature woman returner appears to begin on the UWT campus where she has worked for nearly 30 years, but like most stories, actually begins much farther back—in the moment she discovered a love of writing. But Hazel’s journey also moves forward as she learns to use her writing as a tool, not just in school but in her work, as well—in writing letters of recommendation for the students she supervises in the library, or posts for the library blog. More than just a useful tool, however, writing—for Hazel—has come to light the path of her becoming.

Hazel’s narratives brim with stories, her voice strong in each one. There is a sense of wonder as she writes of her earliest school experiences with writing, “*as if someone opened up my head and dropped a story inside.*” Tasked with writing a story for an elementary school assignment, the whole thing—beginning, middle, and end—fell into place in just minutes. “*I couldn’t stop,*” she said. “*It flowed out of me like water. It felt incredibly liberating, I think,*

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<sup>254</sup> (Barnett, 2009, p. 435)

<sup>255</sup> Dumais (2002) described this contextualized sense of self as habitus (p. 45)

<sup>256</sup> (James, 2013, p. 111)

*because I recognized that this short story was coming purely out of my heart.*” Another short story, this one written in high school, allowed her to combine her experiences as a new student in a new town with events that sprang from her imagination—and with that, she said *“the taps were opened! I left that class feeling like I just drank a tall glass of refreshing water.”* Writing, in those childhood years, defined and fulfilled her. And when her story was published in the school newspaper, *“I think that’s when I discovered that writing was more of a pleasure for me than a chore.”*<sup>257</sup>

Until she returned to college a few years ago, Hazel had viewed her writing as a form of creative expression and one she used well. But in considering graduate school—decades after she had finished her bachelor’s degree—she worried about whether she’d be able to express her ideas in academic writing *“where everything has to be documented and cited. It’s a skill I’m still learning and there’s a lot more at stake,”* she says. *“But I’m optimistic I can make it, and hopefully, even get good at it as time goes on.”*

As in everything else in her life, Hazel focuses on the positive—even when she worries. Citation practices worry her, but she is *“optimistic.”* She even sees academic writing as something she might even get to be good at. Yet, Hazel’s experience of becoming a mature returner is:

*“kind of unique because, as you know, I work 'on campus' and I've encountered first-hand the different demographic populations that study here. When I first started working for UWT, the campus' focus was educating the returning student...transferring to UWT to finish up a bachelor's degree. So many students were older, mature...”*<sup>258</sup>

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<sup>257</sup> The quotes in this paragraph come from Hazel’s literacy narrative.

<sup>258</sup> The quotes in this paragraph come from Hazel’s literacy narrative.

I had forgotten that Hazel had been at UWT for so long—almost from the beginning when mature returners were the majority on campus. She had even attempted a first return to the classroom as a student during those years when any age difference between her and her cohort would have undoubtedly been less—because she was younger and most of the students were past traditional age. They would definitely have felt more like peers at that point.

But, at the time, the Master of Education program wasn't exactly moving in the direction she was interested in,<sup>259</sup> so she let the idea go—until just a few years ago when she chose to give it another try. Still, she was concerned about “*entering that first Master of Education course...wondering if I could juggle working a full-time job and taking classes, even if it was just one class at a time.*” Although she did admit to taking “*a good look around*” to assess the ages of her fellow students, she also adamantly states:

*“...even if I was the oldest, I wasn't going to stop because of my age. This was my dream, my goal, and if it took this long to get here, that was still okay. I also looked around to see if there were other students of color in the room, and yes, there were. That is always another form of encouragement. All these observations were positives for me and let me know that I wasn't alone in this journey.”*

She writes that many in her cohort are of similar ages and that knowing that she is not the only student of color in the room was all the encouragement she needed to begin her journey as a mature returner in graduate school. Knowing you aren't alone can be encouraging for any student, but for mature returners in systems and spaces designed for those much younger, the

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<sup>259</sup> Hazel also noted that in those early years, university employees could not use their tuition waiver in the M.Ed. program, and she couldn't afford the expense on her own. As someone who used the program to at least partially fund my current degree program, I certainly understand her hesitation to take on the expense and have been so grateful for this valuable assistance with the cost of tuition.

feeling of some level of solidarity is reassuring. But for Hazel, her love of writing is what really moves her forward in her program, even if the type of writing isn't what she is used to.

*"I still enjoy writing, mostly about real-life student experiences, ways to reach and educate students. Telling their personal stories and challenges to learning...I was surprised that I could use more of my life and telling my own stories in my papers. I love to be able to use real-life experiences as evidence for whatever assignment I have, like telling the stories of military-connected children in the classroom. I can hear my voice and my passion again whenever I write from a familiar place."*

Although Hazel never once calls herself a writer or a storyteller, she constructs her identity as such through her words. Writing is a tool she uses well, particularly when she can use her own experiences as inspiration. But writing, even academic writing, is more than just a tool to her—it was the source of “*awesome experiences*” in her earlier schooling, as well as her “*voice*” and “*passion*.” Writing offers her a space to tell stories, including paper topics that her professor has never considered—yet fit perfectly with her knowledge and life experience. Discovering that her experience counts and her writing talent matters makes a huge difference in the way she views herself, her program—and the university at large. And today, after being part of the UWT community for nearly 30 years as both an employee and a student, she says:

*"I think I feel like I have a clearer purpose or understanding of my gifts and, I guess, of my passion for writing and research. Before, I was working and I wasn't as focused on me ...I was like, 'Okay let me just do the work. Let me just do my nine to five.' I'm doing my social activities, but I didn't really do anything personal for me. But now, I do have something to say. I have something to contribute that's of value in the academic world. I'm not just helping others achieve, but I'm actually a part of that now for myself. And I*

*see myself in that light. Whereas before, I was just, you know, helping others get to where they wanted to get to, to graduation or to their ends.”*

Once again, Hazel’s identity, her sense of becoming as a student—and a person—is tied up in her literacy experiences. Through her writing, she finds she has “*something to say*,” something that has “*value in the academic world*.” She sees herself now—in a way she did not through her work—as taking an active role in the university where she has worked for so long. And she has come to see herself as someone who has something to contribute—an idea that I heard time and again in the stories of other participants: Ironeyes, who sees her journey as one of a role model for her grandchildren; Lupita, whose journey has inspired her sister-in-law to return to college for a nursing degree; Shelly, whose journey of becoming is leading her out into the community to help and inspire others; Robin, who hopes to teach English to speakers of other languages. Each of them, like Hazel, has gained a larger view along their path of becoming.

### **Ironeyes: Becoming through Adversity, Heritage, and Strength**

Ironeyes’ journey of becoming is illumined with hope yet carries within it remnants of personal and cultural scars. Her stories tell of someone who revels in her accomplishments even as she doubts her abilities. As a Native American woman, Ironeyes is proud of her heritage, discovering within it the strength to overcome the adversities of her past and move through the transition of reconstructing her identity as a successful mature woman returner.

Shuffling through the narratives Ironeyes shared with me as part of this project, I stop at one that is both autobiography and goal statement. Here, she writes poignantly of her childhood experiences with “*oppression, homelessness, and substance abuse*,” experiences that could have

*“destroyed my spirit,”* but instead *“helped me become more resilient in the face of hardships.”* But she also speaks of her desire to use the lessons and experiences of her past, as well as those of her present, in her chosen profession as social worker through a *“commitment to social justice”* and a *“capacity to change the lives of individuals in a whole new space.”*<sup>260</sup> She looks toward her future through the lessons of her past.

Ironeyes’ lived experience as a Native American woman who grew up on a reservation and attended an Indian Mission boarding school is as central to her identity as her marriage and motherhood—and as a mature returner who spent the past twenty years catching up on the education she never received as a child. Yet, she says, when she enters a classroom, it isn’t her age that sets her apart. It is her identity as a Native American woman.

*“I felt I had to prove that Indigenous women were just as capable as any other ethnicity or race... that they can get a master’s degree. I believed, as an indigenous person, I had to prove that I can handle myself in a classroom/professional setting... As you know, only 1% of Native/Indigenous people get their master’s degree—and I AM ONE OF THEM!!!”*<sup>261</sup>

Ironeyes’ pride in her accomplishments—obvious in not only the words she has written in the final line above, but in her formatting—is set in contrast to the line above it, where she admits feeling a constant need to prove herself, both as a student and a professional. For all her accomplishments, she still wrestles with the feeling that others doubt her abilities. Her view of herself as a Native American woman is prominent, a part of her identity easily observed through

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<sup>260</sup> Quotes in this paragraph came from Ironeyes’ autobiographical statement for the MSW program. She graciously gave me permission to use this document, in addition to all the rest of the data collected in this study. She also spoke of her personal history in her literacy narrative and individual interview. I chose to include this version because of its more detailed story.

<sup>261</sup> This quote came from Ironeyes’ feedback on the draft of the narrative inquiry in chapter four.

her research interests as a graduate student. There, she focused on missing and murdered indigenous women and girls, and issues of intimate partner violence among native women—projects that came to constitute her MSW capstone project. From her own standpoint as a Native woman, she said:

*“I have taken the path of my ancestors and paved the way to educate myself through the setbacks in life. Therefore, I want to grant the credit to my ancestors to honor their hardships, allowing me to be where I am today. I accept the harsh words and empowering words that built the reliance and courage to even step into a classroom or apply to a university. Even after my own mother said to me, ‘you are stupid, and you will never be anything in your life.’ These words built resilience in me; even when my mother spoke negative and positive comments in my life, I know I am where I am because of her. I love, respect, and honor my mother because she paved the way for where I am today.”<sup>262</sup>*

Ironeyes’ comments here, about her heritage and the strength that she finds in it—even when it has been difficult—speak to her own sense of becoming. And not just as a mature woman returner. She speaks of acceptance of both *“harsh words and empowering words,”* acknowledging that each resides within her, and both—together—are making her who she is in this process of becoming. Becoming is rarely a smooth path forward. Grosz spoke about *“seizing...provisional becomings from the chaos of being,”<sup>263</sup>* something I see so clearly in Ironeyes’ acceptance of the positive and negative forces at work in her life and the transition they brought over time within her own process of becoming.

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<sup>262</sup> As a part of my member checking, each of the individual sections in this chapter was returned to the participant. This paragraph is Ironeyes’ response to my writing in this chapter and is included at her request.

<sup>263</sup> (Grosz, 2005, p. 12).

Yet, even now that she has graduated and proudly counts herself among that 1% of Native women who hold graduate degrees, Ironeyes still feels the challenge of both her Indigenous identity—as she views it through the eyes of others—and the sense that she must continue to prove herself “*worthy*” of her position as a clinician and case manager, just as she did as a student:

*“It's challenging to be in this position...the looks I get from the other case managers. They make you feel like, ‘What? You think you are better than me?’ But it's not like that at all. Entering the classroom for the first time was like entering this position for the first time, always having to prove yourself worthy of being where you are.”<sup>264</sup>*

*‘Always having to prove yourself worthy...’* Like Lupita, Jane, Robin, and Shelly, Ironeyes’ identity as a literate person, no matter her recent academic accomplishments, is still stained by the literacy experiences of her past. As an example, while we were reviewing the final draft of her capstone project, Ironeyes shared her anxiety over a recent job interview, saying something along the lines of *“You know me. I did what I always do and doubted my abilities. I was sure I wouldn’t get the job”<sup>265</sup>.*

But a few hours after our interview, she received a call offering her the position.

She was so excited and proud of her accomplishments. This job was exactly what she wanted—and one she was highly qualified for. But at the same time those old childhood scripts—originally written by teachers who had cared little for her learning and even less for her identity—told her she wasn’t competent enough and didn’t know enough, overwhelming the knowledge that she really *was* good enough for the job. Although she struggled to believe she

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<sup>264</sup> This quote is drawn from Ironeyes’ response to the question about the aspect of her identity that entered the classroom first.

<sup>265</sup> This is a paraphrase, based on field notes jotted during and after our conversation over Zoom—included with Ironeyes’ verbal permission.

had learned enough to do a good job and would continue to learn in performing this new position, she now had her proof.

It may be easy to think that returning to college and earning a degree (or in Ironeyes' case, several—from a GED, an AAS, a BA, to an MSW—all earned as a mature returner) would lead to confidence in your abilities—and in some ways it does. Accomplishing something so big does change the way you see yourself, but this shift in identity is not 'one and done.' It is more like throwing a blanket of confidence on top of layers of precarious identity. They may no longer be so easily visible, but those old insecurities and self-doubts are still there—and sometimes they poke their heads out, baring their teeth and reminding you of their continued presence. The intersecting strands of Ironeyes' identity exist as they always did; they just look a bit different as they carry an additional layer that will eventually become another settled aspect of her identity.

In Ironeyes' stories, the interactions between those various levels of identity don't always rest easily, even as she speaks of the resilience she thought she already had because of some of the hard experiences of her early life:

*"... I overcame a lot of life stuff and challenges back then, before going back to school. Today, I believe I'm more educated and have built up my resilience toolbox—that encouragement and confidence, to not only advocate for myself but for others... Now, I have this sense of value for myself, to want to do better in life and be a role model for my grandkids so they can see me studying. They're my biggest encouragers. They'll say, 'Don't you have study group tonight, Nana?' They are always wanting me to do my work and all that. So, it's kind of like I have a purpose because of my grandkids. So, I feel I'm a*

*better person, you know? And I'm stronger when it comes to speaking up for myself and talking about things...<sup>266</sup>”*

After a life spent working to overcome the challenging experiences of her childhood, Ironeyes wants to assure a better life for her grandchildren, to be a “*role model*” for them. But this desire for better seems to work in both directions as she calls them her “*biggest encouragers,*” ventriloquizing their voices in reminders to study and urging her to get her homework done. They give her purpose, she claims. Because of them, she is a better person—a stronger person—one who has learned to advocate for herself, but also for others. And as she lingers on this idea, she calls out her past self once more, noting that she would

*“...call that little Native<sup>267</sup> girl brave, optimistic, resilient, resourceful and a survivor who advocated her way to an MSW program. I have learned how to collect tools to ultimately help the families and clients empower themselves, by empowering families to change the outcomes by knocking down the barriers that bind them from their full potential, making them change agents.<sup>268</sup>”*

Even as she names the child that she was, Ironeyes also identifies the person she is becoming: “*a survivor who advocated her way to an MSW program.*” In drafting and revising her identity through the experiences of her life—both positive and negative—she speaks of her education, not as *giving* her the tools to help others, but *teaching* her how to assemble them for herself. She offers credit to the program, even as she maintains that the learning and its outcomes belong to her. Yet, beyond this, Ironeyes sees her identity as an advocate as one meant to help other people

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<sup>266</sup> Quote drawn from the first group interview.

<sup>267</sup> Although this term can be viewed as derogatory, these are Ironeyes’ own words—chosen to speak to and of her past self.

<sup>268</sup> From Ironeyes’ literacy narrative.

overcome the barriers that keep them from finding the potential in themselves that she found in herself.

### **Vera: Finding a New Purpose and Identity**

As the last participant to join my study, Vera's story is less familiar to me than many of the rest. Yet in her narratives, I often see glimpses of myself. Vera returned to college after decades in a profession where she was considered the 'expert'—an identity that does not always rest easily with the role of a student. Still, Vera's journey of becoming, while not always smooth, is leading her toward a new purpose through research and writing and an identity that more comfortably melds old and new.

Reaching the last stack of papers on the table, I see Vera's name at the top. Once again, I scan through the narratives<sup>269</sup> and notes that I've assembled over the course of this study, looking for the identity constructed within their pages. Vera, whose confidence and competence can be read in every line, begins with a tale of school experiences that point to an early love of writing and awareness of its value.

*“My earliest memory of writing is from the fourth grade. I worked on a play called ‘Atlantis,’ writing it with my classmates. This was not an assignment but something we did for fun in class. We would write and then act out our stories and it was encouraged by our teacher. I remember loving the idea that my classmates were acting out my lines, the lines I wrote for them. While I, too, played my part, it was the writing that I*

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<sup>269</sup> The narratives referred to in this section are Vera's literacy narrative, her culture sketch, answers to additional emailed questions, and the transcripts from her individual interview. Vera was not present for either of the group interviews.

*remember. I think this experience set up writing as an expression of self for me. I loved writing in early childhood and through high school. I wrote poetry in middle school, persuasive essays in high school, and philosophical analyses my first time in college. What I remember about these assignments, as opposed to others, is that they were a reflection of who I was or ideas I wanted to present. They served a purpose. This is what I draw from ‘Atlantis’; that my words can have meaning to other people.<sup>270</sup>”*

In sharing this story of two school writing experiences, Vera addresses the impact writing—and her discovery of its power and meaning—had on her life as an important factor in her identity. Looking back at her childhood self, she reflects on the pride she felt as she heard her words come from other people’s mouths and her awareness that they carried a meaning even beyond her own intent. Writing assignments in high school also made her aware of the responsibility that accompanied the power of writing, and she calls out the ways these two papers changed “*how I situated myself as a writer.*” About these papers, she said:

*“One was a persuasive argument in which I argued a stance that I didn’t agree with. The second was supposed to be a true story about myself, but I made up a story to pass as true. In both cases, what I wrote was either blatantly not true, or not true in my opinion. On both papers, I got an A, and the teacher even believed the untrue story. This opened my eyes to how persuasive writing can be and that words on paper hold great responsibility...Yet, the fact that I am involved in research now is built on this idea that what I write can change the way people look at my topic of interest...I feel a strong sense of duty to accurately depict experiences, whether they are my own or belong to someone else.<sup>271</sup>”*

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<sup>270</sup> From Vera’s literacy narrative.

<sup>271</sup> From Vera’s literacy narrative.

Beginning with a story about high school papers that changed the way she viewed writing, Vera pivots to the meaning she sees in them today. Through these experiences, she recognizes her skillful use of the power of writing to persuade, but also depicts herself as careful and meticulous, a responsible researcher who acknowledges her duty to accurately portray experiences that “*belong to someone else.*” In telling the story of her high school writing experiences, Vera somewhat guiltily admits to feeling—at the time—“*a small sliver of satisfaction from deceiving her teacher with writing that was so believable,*” but she also acknowledged a current awareness that “*I have a responsibility to never do that again.*”<sup>272</sup> Although she, somewhat sheepishly, admits the pleasure she found in penning an essay persuasive enough to paint a veneer of truth over something that wasn’t, she also speaks of the weight of responsibility that led her to promise herself to never do such a thing again. These two memories anchor her current sense of duty as a researcher and shape an important aspect of the identity she has constructed as a student.

In moments like those she has recorded here, it is tempting to see Vera as someone who moved effortlessly from her profession as the manager of a large retail store to the university. Yet, Vera’s transition as a mature returner wasn’t an easy one.

*“Difficulties in school came from ego. I was 36 when I started school again. As a store manager, I was the person that knew everything. All of my achievements and my entire identity was tethered to being a store manager. I was really good at what I did. When I first went back to school, I felt lost. I would talk a lot about my “past life” as a store manager in an attempt to gain respect from peers and instructors. I didn’t feel I had an identity outside of being a store manager (at least in how it pertained to school) and*

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<sup>272</sup> From Vera’s literacy narrative, although she also discussed this same topic in her individual interview.

*therefore I felt like a nobody. It was an adjustment to be patient and rely on those same abilities that got me promoted, to help me build an identity in school<sup>273</sup>.*”

I recognize the arena of Vera’s struggle here, through an identity shift that came not only from a change in environment but from the realization that the person you have always been is suddenly invisible. In my own experience, I felt that all my previous expertise was just...gone. The knowledge, skills, and talents I had honed over a 20-year career as an artist and small-business owner no longer mattered; I was adrift in a place where I had no past. And my future? Well, that depended on *others’* opinions of what I was capable of in areas I had no familiarity with. I can easily imagine this is at least part of what Vera felt: her sense of being “*a nobody*”—lost, without the respect and recognition she was accustomed to. But just as I had, Vera finally came to see that whether her past accomplishments and skills—the cultural capital she had spent a lifetime accumulating—seemed invisible or not, they still existed. In the same way this realization helped me put myself back together, reconstructing my identity in new fields, Vera came to the same understanding.

*“My previous experience as a store manager was helpful in that I had established solid working habits, prioritization abilities, and time management skills. I was able to complete my assignments and manage my workload no problem. What I thought would be difficult, in adjusting from a “teaching” mindset to a “learning” mindset wasn’t as difficult as I thought. My leadership skills brought confidence in my experiences and gave me advantages in class in that I had life experience to relate content to. Overall, I feel*

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<sup>273</sup> This quote is drawn from Vera’s literacy narrative, but she discussed this same topic in her individual interview, as well.

*that I was far more equipped to be successful in a higher academic setting at 36 than I ever would have been at 18<sup>274</sup>.*”

As she continued writing, though, Vera spoke of another barrier she had faced in her return to college—her diagnosis with “*bipolar disorder and generalized anxiety disorder*” as a young adult—but added that she did not consider it “disabling.”

*“Although it was, at one point... Now, it serves me well in school—applying for things I normally wouldn’t consider, having loads of ideas for research, and the ability to overanalyze something. In psychology, it means I can see things from many perspectives. Because of these (and other) experiences, I learned how to advocate for myself. But I can advocate for others as well, and I think that makes a huge difference in where I was and where I am now. I wouldn’t be able to do the advocating now because I wouldn’t even know what that looked like until I went through it myself.<sup>275</sup>”*

Like Ironeyes, Robin, and Shelly, Vera regards the difficult experiences of her life, even her mental health struggles, as the force behind her motivation and success in college. They also became the means of enabling her advocacy for others who have had similar experiences with mental health. But, more than that, she acknowledges the role of maturity in her life experiences, noting that some of it comes with just being older:

*“I needed to have life experiences and mature in order to do the self-reflection required to write... While my ego took a blow in the beginning of my college experience, the confidence I have now is beyond anything I could have imagined when I was younger... Writing has helped me identify the purpose and meaning I was looking for.<sup>276</sup>”*

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<sup>274</sup> This quote was drawn from Vera’s individual interview.

<sup>275</sup> This quote was drawn from Vera’s individual interview.

<sup>276</sup> This quote was drawn from Vera’s individual interview.

Vera's identity—once tightly entwined in her profession as a retail manager—has found a rebirth in her new identity as a student. Built on the skills that came via life experience—both personal and professional—and combined with her awareness of the rhetorical power of persuasion, writing has centered her identity as a successful student. But her awareness of this power has also made her conscious of something else:

*“Words on paper hold great responsibility...If I'm not careful, thorough, and accurate, then I have done a great disservice.”<sup>277</sup>*

An appreciation for the responsibility that comes with writing is a great example of the identity Vera has constructed for herself—as a serious and thoughtful researcher and writer with an awareness that words carry great power—and a ‘discovery’ of purpose and meaning that will carry her forward into graduate school and beyond. The literacies she has gained in her return to higher education—combined with those she brought with her as part of her life experience—have given her a new, and in some ways, different, identity and purpose in life—one that I am certain will continue to shift and change as she moves toward a new set of goals.

### **Coda**

Reshuffling the narratives back into their respective folders, I pause a moment to consider what I've learned. The eight women who took part in this study opened their hearts and minds to me, sharing difficult experiences but also sketching a view of themselves as persons in a process of becoming. As with James' (2013) metaphorical view of becoming as a drafting process of sorts, the stories shared in this chapter represent a “coming to know” for each of us (p. 110). For these women, sharing their stories became another way to know themselves; the construction of

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<sup>277</sup> This quote was drawn from Vera's individual interview, although she discussed this same topic in her literacy narrative, as well.

meaning from experience and the self-understanding they found within those stories was another step in their individual process of becoming. As both researcher and participant, I discovered *myself* in their stories as much as I found *them*. The stories I gathered have shifted in meaning: first as they were shared by their tellers, and second, as they were interpreted and retold by me, even as each of these participants have spoken from their own experience and I, from mine.

Through their stories, I have observed their interactional and dialogic processes of becoming. In the same way that James (2013) discussed drafting as “writing differently” (p. 111)—not a journey from imperfection to perfection, but rather a discovery of potential within the writing, I have considered their transitions of identity as if a process of drafts. I have noted their struggles, as well as their successes, observing as their identities as literate persons shifted and grew stronger across difference and over time. Through each of the stories—tales of one person’s journey of literacy in process—I, and now we, became privy to struggles and pain. But we were also granted a window on the discovery that there was a different way they each could ‘be’—a potential becoming to be gained through the struggle. Yet, discovering this potential does not guarantee a smooth transition from identity to identity—in fact, there is no *true* transition from one thing to another. The transition is from difference to difference—a process of drafting and interpreting experience into identity that is ongoing throughout the course of life.

Lupita spoke of this transitioning identity—her becoming—as a growing awareness of her abilities over time. Despite her fears that she would not find belonging in a classroom filled with students younger than her own children and her concerns over language, the discrimination and judgment she feared didn’t come. Relationships with fellow students, staff, and faculty grew up instead, contributing to her feelings of belonging on campus. But even more than that, she came to trust in her ability to accomplish her goals.

In considering her own journey of becoming, Jane found an ability to reach her goals despite her own self-talk. Although she admitted the transition across difference is still in-process—the self-confidence she has gained is not (yet) complete—she holds a strong belief that she can do whatever she sets her mind to and the certainty she is becoming “*unstoppable*” as she reaches toward her goals. She may not yet be the fully self-confident person she wishes she was—a person who views herself in the same positive light in which she views her classmates—but she can see that the education she worked so hard for is helping her clear the way before her.

Chantal’s narrative gives us a view of someone who, in some ways, has moved from a place of comfort and stability in her identity to one who finds her sense of self on shaky ground. We see her working through the levels of an intersectional identity that stumbles a bit when she reaches the level of ‘scholar.’ Yet, within her transition from professional to student, her path of becoming leads to the realization that she can be a different sort of scholar—one whose voice and experience can enhance her scholarship, not detract from it.

Robin also speaks of her becoming as a transition across difference. Beginning with a childhood sense of self she described as distorted, deficient and unintelligent, her return to education has allowed her to (re)story her identity as one who moved from doubt of her abilities to “*proof I’m able to accomplish things.*”<sup>278</sup> Along this journey of transition, she has drafted and revised her way to a more positive sense of herself and her world and, as a result, she is finding connections with those around her. She is—in her own words—“*becoming her own person.*”

Having traversed a somewhat turbulent path earlier in her life, Shelly’s journey to becoming moves from “*unresolved trauma*” over a “*distorted identity*”<sup>279</sup> resulting from growing up caught between cultures to a recognition that her education has led her toward a

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<sup>278</sup> From Robin’s literacy narrative.

<sup>279</sup> From Shelly’s literacy narrative.

transition. She is becoming someone who is constructing a new identity as she makes peace with her past, *noting that “for me, it’s the journey that’s important.”*<sup>280</sup> Her return to higher education helped her discover her capacity for change and passion for learning, even as she found the tools to extend her becoming toward those around her.

Hazel—unfailingly optimistic—painted her becoming as a growing recognition that she has something *“to contribute that’s of value in the academic world”*—a world whose borders she’s circled for nearly 30 years, but not really been part of. Yet in returning to her own education, she’s moved beyond *“just helping others achieve,”* gaining a *“clearer purpose or understanding of my gifts”*<sup>281</sup> in the process. Coming to see herself in the light of what she has to give has moved her toward her own becoming through writing her own story.

Across their stories, these women speak of similar transitions of becoming, despite their differences in background and self-confidence. Both Vera and Ironeyes’ crafted narrative views of an ongoing sense of self—their becomings—as those of someone who has overcome a lifetime of challenges to become an advocate for herself and others. While Ironeyes is occasionally still full of doubt over her abilities as both student and social worker: *“always having to prove yourself worthy”*<sup>282</sup>, she finds the ability to say of herself: *“I’m more educated and have built up my resilience toolbox—that encouragement and confidence, to not only advocate for myself but for others.”*<sup>283</sup> The meaning that Ironeyes constructed in her experience as a student—even in the midst of self-doubt and a sense that she is always needing to prove herself—is seen in her claim that the resilience she gained through her education has led her to a

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<sup>280</sup> From Shelly’s literacy narrative.

<sup>281</sup> From Hazel’s individual interview

<sup>282</sup> This quote is drawn from Ironeyes’ response to the question about the aspect of her identity that entered the classroom first.

<sup>283</sup> Ironeyes’ quote is from her literacy narrative.

place where she can advocate for herself and others. She maintains that the difficulties themselves are what led to her resilience, giving them meaning. Similarly, Vera also claimed that overcoming the challenges she faced—both in her life and in her return to the classroom—have led her toward advocacy for herself and others. She viewed her struggles with mental health—her diagnosis with “*bipolar disorder and generalized anxiety disorder*”<sup>284</sup>—and not only overcoming but learning to channel them, as leading her toward success as a student. In this way, she gives her experience meaning.

Stories shared by Vera, Chantal, and Jane presented the challenges of conflicting identities—between mother and student for Jane, and student and professional for Chantal and Vera—as well as the difficulties each had in balancing them. Ironeyes, Shelly, Robin, and Lupita—each beginning their journeys of becoming from different locations, whether social, physical, mental, or emotional—shared stories of the challenges they faced in integrating a past sense of themselves as deficient in some way with a new sense of themselves as capable and worthy. Hazel’s stories offered a window on her discovery of the potential within her talents. And despite her worries over fitting in and finding enough time to gain the understanding she needed to succeed, she spoke of finding a way to balance her love of writing and passion for stories with contributing something to the academic world she had been on the edges of for decades.

In the stories each of these women shared, their experiences of “self-differentiation” (Grosz, 2005, p. 4)—their recognition of transitioning across time and difference toward a becoming that made a difference beyond just themselves—demonstrated one constant: that returning to school created benefits beyond just themselves but spread outward to those around

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<sup>284</sup> This quote was drawn from Vera’s individual interview.

them. Each of these women acknowledged their return as a path to becoming an extended advantage to someone else, whether family, friends, or coworkers. This was also made clear in the literature about mature returners, women in particular: they return to school for a fresh start, a new career, or to fulfill a dream. They have their eyes on the future and see their return to college as a way to secure their children's future and wellbeing, as well as their own<sup>285</sup>. They do it to make a career that will support them and give them enough money to retire comfortably, but also for the pure love of learning.<sup>286</sup> But they also see themselves as role models for family and friends, and sometimes the larger world.<sup>287</sup> They have each come to see themselves as someone who has something to give.

Although I have reached the end of my own (re)storying here, I want to once more make the point that research—particularly narrative research—is always a snapshot, a depiction of a moment, a single link within a chain of dialogue. These links hold flashes of meaning and identity caught in that moment of time. Inferences are always conditional and contextual because the stories contained within a narrative will always generate more stories—in other moments, in other places, and hopefully, in the minds of readers. Frank (2012), echoing Bakhtin, contended that “storytelling is a dialogue of imaginations, one that always continues” (p. 49). Narrative research, Frank (2005) adds, is never the final word, but, is instead, “an engaged witness” (p. 972) of “unfinalized” persons (p. 971; see also Bakhtin, 1984). My hope is that the experiences

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<sup>285</sup> Wilsey (2013) claimed that mothering students made the decision to return to higher education for a variety of reasons: to improve their chances for a better job, to better support their families, and for personal fulfillment—but also to become a role model for their children and other women they knew.

<sup>286</sup> Reay, Ball, and David (2002) claimed that mature returners are more likely than younger students to attend college simply because of a desire to learn.

<sup>287</sup> Reay, Ball, and David (2002) spoke of mature returners desire to “make a difference” in the lives of others through their own experiences (p. 9); see also Wilsey's (2013) discussion of mature women returners as role models for their families.

of these mature women returners, as shared through their stories, will continue to be shared again and again, shifting their meanings as they create new contexts, for new purposes, becoming a part of an on-going story.

Moving ahead to the final chapter, I tie all my findings together and discuss the implications of my study, drawing conclusions and making connections between the stories my participants shared with me. In this way, I consider not only the ways that my study participants have sketched out their understandings of personal belonging and becoming, but also how they understand these aspects of their identity within the habitus of the university. I then offer recommendations and suggestions for areas of future research before closing with one final story regarding the difference between fitting in and belonging among the students of the University of Washington Tacoma.

## Chapter Six: Conclusions and Recommendations

*“...[W]e’re not going to reimagine our economy with skillsets that will lead to the innovation this new economy requires on the backs of 18-year-olds alone. We actually have more adults with work-based skills, experience and willingness. They just don’t see themselves being successful in higher education often because our messaging doesn’t appeal to them, and our processes don’t honor them...I think our country’s future rests on our ability to engage these adults with the same veracity and intentionality we do a graduating high school senior.”*

(Lowery-Hart, 2021, para. 11)

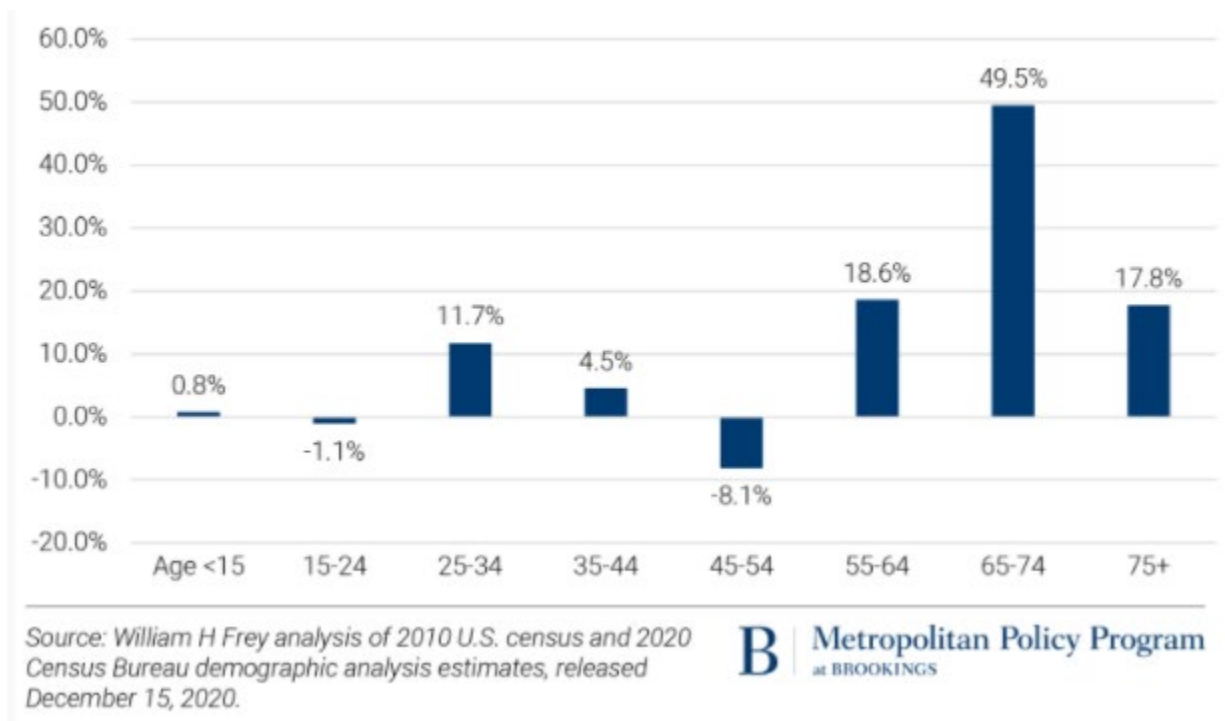
Parry and Johnson (2007) made the claim that “[r]esearchers can ‘change the world by the way they make it visible’” (p. 125). In this study, my aim has been to construct knowledge about a certain segment of the student population at one particular university—the mature women returners at the University of Washington Tacoma. Yet, my ultimate goal is ‘changing the world’ by making this one population visible in a very specific way. With this in mind, I have sought to represent this group of individuals through sharing their stories, their voices, and seeking to understand why they have chosen to return to higher education at a time in their lives most still consider outside the norm.

In the national consciousness, college is typically understood as a descriptor of a population (*college-age*), a location designed for that particular population, or an important rite-of-passage to adulthood—and institutions of higher education have been structured and maintained accordingly. Vast resources have been marshalled to support this ‘college-aged’ population—from advertising and outreach, campus orientations and housing, athletic programs

and other physical education venues (gyms, etc.), to a variety of student life programs and activities meant to stimulate a sense of belonging on campus—all geared toward engaging the 18–22-year-old standing on the brink of adulthood and in need of shepherding toward adulthood. Diversity resources like UWT’s Center for Equity and Inclusion have begun to appear on campuses nationwide, intent on supporting student populations who have previously been overlooked or marginalized (first generation, racial/ethnic minorities, and LGBTQIA individuals, for example). As necessary, valuable, and long-overdue as the programs and resources offered through such centers are, they still carry what Chen (2017) described as a “youth-centric feel” (p. 3), privileging the students who fit a traditional image, garnering the majority of awareness and funding, and leaving those who do not fit that ideal on the sidelines.

However, according to de Bray, Snyder, Zhang, and Dillow (2021), this younger, more ‘traditional’ population is shrinking in the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, while numbers of potential mature returners are remaining stable and becoming a larger percentage of the U.S. population (see Figure 6.1). Because of this current and projected trend in higher education—and in order for student enrollments and budgets to continue to “survive and thrive”—Lowery-Hart (2021) argued that colleges and universities across the nation need to expand their support for working adults pursuing higher education (para. 1). While Lowery-Hart acknowledges that “higher education is built on decades, if not centuries, of tradition,” he also claimed its “future depends on [its] ability to adapt” itself toward reaching these learners (para. 2).

Figure 6.1: Estimated U.S. population growth (by age group), 2010-2020 (Frey, 2021)



*Note.* This figure shows the percentage of growth (out of the entire U.S. population) by age group. Frey (2021) noted that overall declining of population growth among younger age groups over this 10-year period meant that those among older age groups were becoming a larger percentage of the population. Figure is reprinted from Brookings.edu, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/what-the-2020-census-will-reveal-about-america-stagnating-growth-an-aging-population-and-youthful-diversity/>

With a still large group of Baby Boomers, Millennials, and Gen Xers<sup>288</sup> who have not yet completed (or even begun) college degrees—but are members of a society that increasingly requires a college degree for a good-paying job—these potential students will remain a viable pool for university growth over at least the next decade (or more), even as the number of traditionally-aged students plateaus or declines due to a drop in early 21<sup>st</sup> century birth rates and

<sup>288</sup> Frey (2021) defines these age groups according to birth year: Baby Boomers (1946-1964), Gen X (1965-1980), Millennials (1981-1996).

an increasing lack of confidence in the value of higher education—although primarily along political party lines (Parker, 2019).

Across the country, nontraditional<sup>289</sup> students already make up a majority population of undergraduates in institutions of higher education; yet, continuing with ‘business as usual’ in structures and programs across campuses is, in effect, marginalizing the majority for the sake of a more familiar minority. Although some of the marginalized groups represented among ‘nontraditional’ undergraduates are gaining attention, Coulter and Mandell (2012) argued that mature returners too often remain an invisible population, especially in four-year institutions. According to Lakin, Mullane, and Robinson (2008), less than half of institutions surveyed by the American Council for Education exhibited any intentions for outreach, services, or programs geared toward mature returners, despite a growing community need for workers with baccalaureate or graduate degrees and a large group of mature workers who lack them—the primary reason that metropolitan/urban campuses like UWT were founded in the first place.

### **Back to Where We Started**

As I mentioned in the introductory chapter of this dissertation, the seed of this study was planted in my childhood, germinated through my parents’ experiences as mature returners, and sprouted a dozen years ago when I returned to college. Yet, the roots of this research project grew deeper and stronger through the voices and stories of other mature women returners I met along the way. I met these women in classrooms, in the library, waiting in line at Starbucks, as well as in the UWT writing center where I work. Despite vast differences in their life

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<sup>289</sup> Mature returners are but one subgroup of nontraditional students, a term I discuss at length in chapter one.

experiences and educational backgrounds, these women shared with me the stories of the paths that each of them took toward fulfilling the lifelong dream of a college degree.

I opened this dissertation with my own story of becoming a mature returner. I laid out the questions I hoped to answer—seeking to understand a mature returner’s construction of identity and meaning, obstacles and supports, marking and reading within the university—questions I considered every time I heard another woman’s story. I offered evidence that among student populations across the nation (and around the world), the traditional 18–22-year-old student who lives on campus and bears no responsibility beyond attending classes and studying for exams is no longer the rule but the exception (Choy, 2002; Christiansen & Evamy, 2011; Hagedorn 2014; Kasworm, 1994, 2014, 2018; Kasworm, Rose, & Ross-Gordon, 2010; Malm, 2018a, 2018b; Wyatt, 2011). I discussed the findings of researchers who examined the university experiences of mature returners and considered the various barriers to their success (Gallacher *et al.*, 2002; Given, 2009; Merrill, 1999; Munro, 2011; Stone, 2008; Stone & O’Shea, 2011). I also examined research surrounding the construction of identity among mature returners through the lenses of gender (Cameron, 2005; Rahilly, 2020; Weedon, 1999; Yelland & Grieshaber, 1998) and intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991; Collins & Bilge, 2016; Diamond & Hartsock, 1981; Hekmen, 1997). I also considered themes of belonging (Aron *et al.*, 2004; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Brah, 1996; Braidotti, 1994; Vygotsky, 1978; Walton & Cohen, 2011; Wenger, 2011) and becoming (Bøe *et al.*, 2013; Braidotti, 2011; Guyotte, 2018; James, 2013) in the lives of mature returners. I ended the chapter with a discussion of the challenges of researching this group of students: primarily, the majority of research has been done outside the United States or among mature returners at community colleges; conflicting terminology or definitions of “mature” students; or research focused on adult literacy outside university settings. Additionally, I

explained my purpose in using narrative as listening to the voices of those most affected by the research. In this way, I sought to gain a more complete view of their efforts to (re)construct identity and meaning from their lived experience as mature women returners—an understanding that can inform university policies and practices going forward.

Chapter two laid out the design of my study, including a brief introduction to the site of the study, before introducing the women who participated in my research—eight focal participants and five staff, faculty, and administrators—all of whom sat for interviews about either their experiences on campus as mature women returners (focal participants) or their preparation for and interactions with mature returners through their campus positions (staff, faculty, administrators). I then discussed my view of narratives/stories as data, the multiple types of narrative data included in my study, as well as explanations of the theory and processes involved in (re)storying the collected story data using an amalgamation of narrative inquiry and autoethnography through a view of writing as inquiry (Richardson, 1994, 1997). Finally, I explained my view of the power of story as a tool for social justice—enabling us to see and respond to both successes and inequities through the voices of those who experience them.

In chapter three, I examined the site of my study—the University of Washington Tacoma (UWT)—in an intrinsic case study that began with a look back at the founding purpose and goals of the campus and moved forward through time as the campus established itself with a focus on transfer students, many of whom were mature returners, seeking to complete degrees they had left behind years earlier. As the campus grew and its original mission expanded from upper division courses/programs for transfer students to the addition of lower division students and courses 16 years later, the founding emphasis on mature returners shifted toward the establishment of a more ‘traditional’ four-year university. Although UWT administrators vowed

that support for the original student “clientele” of “placebound and timebound citizens” would remain at the forefront of university goals (Olswang, 2004, p.3), this focus began to shift with the 2006 addition of lower division students and courses. Looking at this shift through Bourdieu and Passeron’s (1990) concept of habitus, I studied a variety of campus documents—for example, student surveys, campus master plan reports and self-studies—and examined a variety of issues of student concern raised in these documents. I explored UWT oral history interviews from the founding years of the campus and interviewed a group of current campus stakeholders (staff, faculty, and administrators) to gain a fuller understanding of UWT’s ‘personality’ and culture to see just how and whether mature returners find belonging within its attitudes, policies, and practices. Finally, I analyzed one campus document—the UWT Transfer Student Guidebook—as a way to discover how mature returners are ‘marked and read’ by the university. Although a single document cannot tell us everything we need to know about the habitus of an institution, I believe it offered a window on UWT policies and practices—or at least the impressions of campus values it might leave on a mature returner.

In Chapters four and five, with an eye on my understanding of the habitus of UWT, I set out to explore two of the major themes that arose as I reviewed and interpreted the narrative data constructed in collaboration with my study participants. These chapters represent the heart of my analysis, built around dialogues between my participants and me, whether written or spoken.

In chapter four, I (re)storied the story data shared with me into a single narrative exploring the concept of belonging as identity in relationship, seen in campus spaces; classroom interactions; practical aspects of belonging; conflicts between the demands of work, family, and school. I also addressed the idea of belonging through academic preparation and the need to self-teach; mismatched expectations between mature returners and faculty; the value of staff, faculty,

and family support in student success—all through the eyes of mature women returners. In sharing the stories of my focal participants, my objective was to build a knowledge base surrounding the experience of returning to college as a mature woman (age 35 and over) by observing the ways they used narrative to (re)construct meaning and identity as they considered how, where, or *if* they felt they belonged within the habitus of UWT.

Chapter five took on a second major theme that surfaced through my interpretation of the narrative data gathered from my participants: that of ‘becoming’—a view of identity as an ongoing *process* of transitions. In interpreting the stories of my eight focal participants as individuals, I focused on the central topics that arose for each in their process of becoming a student.

- Lupita viewed her own sense of becoming as a growing trust in her identity as a learner and the accomplishments it brought—not just for herself, but for those around her—as she came to recognize that she could do whatever she set her mind to.
- For Jane, the process of ‘becoming’ as a mature returner centered on learning to listen to a new set of voices as she discovered what she was capable of.
- Chantal’s process of ‘becoming’ a graduate student was focused through a growing awareness of herself as a different sort of scholar than she felt she was expected to be.
- Robin’s childhood view of herself was that of someone who felt like an outcast as she struggled with anxiety and depression in an educational situation that left her “*adrift*.” Yet her ‘becoming’ as a mature women returner offered a view of herself as someone who had something to offer others and could accomplish the things she set out to do.
- Shelly’s early struggles with an identity that never seemed to quite fit the spaces she inhabited served as the foundation of meaning behind her own ‘becoming’ as a student:

using those early struggles and even her own fear of returning to school as motivation to move beyond her past and down a path toward helping others.

- Hazel, who thought she had finished with higher education early in her life, returned to graduate school to reach for a long-abandoned dream. Becoming a student again empowered her to use the gifts and talents she had discovered earlier in her life to write her own story as a mature returner.
- Ironeyes, overcoming a youth filled with experiences of “*oppression, homelessness, and substance abuse*,<sup>290</sup>” found meaning and identity in those experiences, but also the pride and strength she needed to prove herself and her abilities as an indigenous person in graduate school.
- Vera, like Robin, had wrestled with mental health earlier in her life, but her return to education not only gave her a chance to finish her degree, but to find meaning in the experiences of her past. This led her to construct a new identity as not only a mature returner and a dedicated researcher and writer, but also a renewed purpose as an advocate for others.

Through the stories shared with me by these eight women, I sought to discover answers to the questions that drove my research. In the next subsections I will address what I have discovered through this study. First, I consider the stories shared by my focal participants and what they showed me about how mature women returners theorize meaning and construct identity through their stories. Next, I consider the obstacles faced by these eight women, and what their stories tell us about the kinds of supports mature women returners need to succeed as students. Finally, I consider how the institutional habitus of the University of Washington

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<sup>290</sup> From Ironeyes’ autobiographical statement for the MSW program.

Tacoma ‘marks and reads’ these mature women returners—and how their stories can help us understand them and better support their success as students and their (re)construction of identity as students. In this way, we—as the university—can work to create more inclusive and socially just ways to support their growing presence at UWT, as well as on campuses across the United States.

### **Belonging and Becoming: Constructing a Student Identity**

Through careful listening and analysis of the stories shared with me, I discovered much about the ways that my participants constructed meaning from their experiences as mature returners, as well as how they reconstructed their identities as students. Meaning, Gergen (1994) claimed, “is always a rough reconstruction of the past... [through] a precarious insertion into the realization of the present” (p. 270)—an ongoing process of bringing past experiences into the light of the present to make sense of them for a new purpose. For example, in the last chapter, Ironeyes shared stories of experiences from her childhood “*that could have destroyed my spirit,*” but instead fueled her resilience and a “*commitment to social justice*”—a desire she has put to work in her new profession as a social worker.

Similarly, Robin storied her younger self as deficient and always behind. Struggling with anxiety and depression in adolescence, she also spoke of these feelings as her ultimate motivation to return to college, admitting her need to “*do something to feel like a competent adult.*” In the process of taking her “*life back*” through education, she discovered “*concrete proof*” of her capabilities to set aside her self-doubt and make something of herself—a goal that is leading her toward a career as a teacher.

Shelly, too, spoke of the challenges of an ethnic identity that forced her to attempt to “*acclimate and blend*” in one location, even as it led to acceptance and comfort in another. Sharing stories of the struggles that followed this challenge throughout her life, she uses her return to higher education to give it meaning. Despite the fears she faced in her return, Shelly came to understand “*that I had the capacity and ...the passion to go in a different direction.*” She describes her path as meant to be—one that just opened in front of her, letting her know she was moving in the right direction.

In reconstructing their pasts to make meaning in the present, Ironeyes, Robin, and Shelly used story to revisit their experiences, creating meaning from difficulties and (re)constructing their identities as successful students. And, as Holland, Lachiotte, Skinner, and Cain (1998) argued that our identities are never fixed and unified, but are “composites [of] often contradictory, self-understandings and identities” that surface across the various circumstances of our lives (p. 8), we see this contradiction throughout many of the stories of experience shared by my focal participants. For example, Jane’s story tells us that she has gained a sense of herself as “*unstoppable*”—someone who can do the things she sets out to do—but she also admits she is not always so self-confident. In her final feedback to the dialogue in chapter five, she admitted that she still wrestles with the sense that she is “*not as good as my other classmates...that I will not be able to handle things [with my job] as well as they have.*” Yet, she ends that same comment with the statement that in her roles as nurse and nurse practitioner: “*I strive to be the very best I can be...*”

Chantal, although a visibly self-confident individual, also viewed herself through a contradictory lens: claiming personal, professional, and even scholarly confidence, yet in her

very next breath describing herself as “*an imposter.*” Although this contradiction would make it appear that Chantal is trapped by a sense of herself as a failed student, this inconsistent self-identity is exactly the sort of composite that Holland *et al.* (1998) set forth—a sense of holding more than one identity at a time. Yet, despite the seeming paradox of viewing herself as both scholar and imposter, Chantal was still able to (re)construct a view of herself that incorporated the two into one that she could lay claim to. Although she acknowledged (in that moment) that she was “*never going to be that type of Foucault scholar,*” her path of becoming allowed her to come to recognize herself as a scholar that could offer a different viewpoint—even on Foucault.

### **Learning from Stories: Obstacles and Support Systems**

In listening closely to the stories of lived (practical) experience of these eight mature women returners at UWT—I learned a great deal about the obstacles that they faced as returning students and the kinds of supports they needed to become successful students. But I was interested not only in discovering *what* they needed, but whether they felt their needs were met—and how. Clandinin (2020) maintained that “[p]ersonal practical knowledge is...experiential, embodied, and expressed” (p. 6), and this experiential knowledge was borne out in the stories of my focal participants and again through the (re)storied narratives in chapters four and five. The stories of these mature women returners tell us a great deal about not only how they view their experiences as students at UWT but about the kinds of obstacles they faced in their return. The first obstacles discussed by my participants often overlap for mature returners: the need for childcare and reduced family finances

As a woman whose income had played a large role in the financial stability of her family before she returned to UWT to finish her degree, Vera acknowledged the “*financial burden of*

*returning to school*”—seen, in her case, in a reduction in family income when she quit her job at the same time her family took on the expense of paying college tuition, leaving few funds available for childcare. Chantal and Jane, both single mothers with older children still living at home<sup>291</sup> (at the time of our interviews), did not leave their jobs to return to college as Vera did, nor did they need assistance with childcare,<sup>292</sup> but the expenses of tuition and family followed all the same. Lupita (married, but without young children in her home) and Ironeyes (married, a foster parent, and raising two teenage grandchildren) both entered a three-year full-time graduate program that incorporates a year-long, typically unpaid practicum—making it difficult, if not impossible, to be employed at the same time.<sup>293</sup> The financial instability likely to accompany such a situation is an obstacle that mature women returners must somehow overcome on their way to becoming successful students. Living expenses like food, housing, clothing, utilities, medical insurance, and transportation do not end or lessen because a woman decides to become a student; the expenses of college are added to that list at the same time their incomes drop. This leaves mature returners little choice but to try to maintain challenging work schedules while attending classes part-time or working part-time at reduced pay in order to attend full-time. And for someone like Jane, who continued to work part-time to support her family—while taking classes and performing 412 hours of clinical rotations in less than six months—it also meant taking on the challenge of managing a household on reduced pay and not enough time. Ironeyes also spoke of her concerns over taking out loans for her own education at a time she felt she should *“be waiting and paying for my grandkids’ college”*—asking herself if she should really

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<sup>291</sup> In addition to her responsibilities to job and children, Jane was also caring for her elderly parents.

<sup>292</sup> Both Vera and Jane had family members who pitched in to help with childcare. Vera’s mother took care of her not-yet-school age child, and Jane’s elderly parents watched her children when they were younger.

<sup>293</sup> Ironeyes ended up quitting her job when her second year MSW practicum started as she didn’t have enough time to meet the needs of her family, get her coursework done, and still have time for her required 2 yr. practicum. MSW practicums sometimes lead to employment, but this is not always the case. Thankfully, for Ironeyes, it was.

be going herself. She also addressed her worries that, in time, she might want to be looking forward to a “*semi-retirement*” but wouldn’t be able to because she would be paying for college for a long time to come. Situations like these—whether overly full schedules or worries over the costs of higher education—could force many mature returners to either forego a fulfilling career change or to take out student loans that might be difficult to repay in a shortened time to retirement age. Either way, taking on the extra costs of higher education is a difficult decision for someone supporting a family.<sup>294 295</sup>

Yet, my conversation with Vice Chancellor Hynes-Wilson gave me hope as she assured me that the university was aware of these issues.<sup>296</sup> She noted that one of the greatest barriers to college completion for many mature returners was financial and told me about a program UWT was piloting in the fall of 2021: the offer of small “*completion grants*” to students, along with completion coaches who will “*work with them to persist and to graduate.*”<sup>297</sup>

Although any amount of financial aid would always be welcome, I can’t help but wonder how much help a thousand dollars is when it would cover barely one-fourth the cost of undergraduate tuition for a full-time student (for 2021-2022, tuition for a full-time student is over \$4000 per quarter<sup>298</sup>). But tuition isn’t the only cost that many mature returners face in completing their degrees. For mature women returners with children—particularly young children, like Vera’s—returning to college can also bring the additional expense of childcare. Many parenting students do not have family members who can fill the gap, either because they

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<sup>294</sup> I discuss issues surrounding finances among mature returners—particularly in childcare—in Chapter Three.

<sup>295</sup> Heagney and Benson (2017) acknowledge the financial disadvantage that mature students sometimes faced by having less time to pay off loans over the course of their lives, lessening the financial benefits of higher education for them.

<sup>296</sup> See my conversation with Vice Chancellor Hynes-Wilson in Chapter Three for a more complete discussion.

<sup>297</sup> Hynes-Wilson stated that these grants are “probably no more than \$1000 per student” but they are hopeful that they can help retain students who might not otherwise be able to complete their degrees (from her interview).

<sup>298</sup> UW Tacoma. (2022). Tuition Rates. <https://www.tacoma.uw.edu/registrar/tuition-rates>

do not live nearby or because family members are working, too—making their need for childcare support essential to their ability to attend classes at all. In chapter three, the issue of childcare on the UWT campus was raised in a discussion of the UWT office of Childcare & Family Support Services and their quarterly assistance grants that are insufficient to cover the cost of childcare for even one child for a month.<sup>299</sup> The need for childcare on the UWT campus—first raised in 1992 on the brand new campus—was also addressed in 2009 in the *Campus Life Facilities Master Plan Final Report*, which noted that a “large percentage of UWT students had children” (p. 4), and again, five years later, in the 2014 Student Assessment survey (University of Washington Tacoma, 2014). In this second document, students called the then-current Childcare Assistance Program “an important student service” (p. 4). Yet, in 2022, nearly a decade after students placed this value on childcare on the UWT campus, it still does not exist.<sup>300</sup>

Meeting these two obstacles to the successful retention and graduation of mature women returners—childcare and financial concerns—is undoubtedly costly and is likely among the main reasons that the university has done little to address them. However, there are support for student success and a sense of belonging on campus discussed by my focal participants (and some of the campus stakeholder interviewees, as well) that are not so costly for campuses to address, including:

1. Flexible class schedules that include online, hybrid, and weekend classes, as well as those that start later in the evening (Hazel, Jane, and Chantal both mentioned these, as did UWT academic adviser, Karin Dalesky and Senior Transfer adviser, Navia Winderling [see chapter three]).

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<sup>299</sup> More information is found in the subsection titled *Childcare*, but the amount of the UWT grant, *per family*, comes to approximately 17% of the average cost of childcare, *per child*, in Tacoma.

<sup>300</sup> For more information about how childcare is handled on the UWT campus today, see the subsection titled *Childcare* in Chapter Three of this dissertation.

2. Academic support services such as libraries, tutoring, and advising were also mentioned by my focal participants as important to their success as students. The value they found in helpful librarians and tutors who mentored them as budding researchers and writers was mentioned specifically by Lupita, Hazel, Ironeyes, Chantal, Shelly, and Jane.<sup>301</sup> Encouraging these mentoring relationships between staff (and faculty) and mature women returners is of great value but little cost.
3. Orientations and other student life campus events that consider the needs and interests of mature returners—or at least are less exclusively focused on the ‘traditional’ student, including campus tours that introduce the practical aspects of campus life (Chantal mentioned this) and student-centered events (like Husky Week events that Jane suggested might occasionally be held at times working students can attend).
4. Spaces that are welcoming to mature returners in the same way *The Dawghouse* is to younger students and student groups that focus on the social and other support needs of mature returners (Lupita, Ironeyes, Hazel, Robin, Jane, and Shelly all mentioned their desire for these).

Addressing these issues is vital to the success of mature returners. Siarzynski-Ferrer and Pillar (2021), examining the value of evening courses and programs to students at their small, private university, noted that when these courses/programs were reduced, this single institutional barrier caused the population of “post-traditional students<sup>302</sup>” to decrease by half in just nine years (pp. 156-57). Other such barriers can be seen in the availability of few (or no) courses for mature

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<sup>301</sup> Robin and Vera also mentioned the importance of mentorship in writing, but both worked in the writing center themselves, so their view of it was a bit different than the others.

<sup>302</sup> On the authors’ campus (1733 students), approximately 20% are defined as post-traditional. Unfortunately, they did not define this term. However, it does appear to correspond to UWT’s demographics: 20% of all students are 30 and over in 2020-21

returners who may lack familiarity with the technologies and other academic literacies that staff, faculty, and administration assume all college students are adept in—something mentioned by Shelly and Chantal. It is important to remember, however, that while courses like these can benefit mature returners, they can be valuable for students of any age whose academic and technology literacies are limited.

Myles (2017), in discussing mature returners as an “underrepresented student population” on campuses across the country, discussed ageism as another ‘invisible’ issue on many college campuses (p. 42). Ageism, she claimed, often creeps into the planning and implementation of campus events—and sometimes even campus spaces—overlooking the interests of mature students in favor of a focus on entertaining the ‘traditional’ student. This ageism, she says, is evident in the type of activities offered (bouncy houses, anyone?) or the type of music played at campus events—all chosen with the assumption that such offerings are what a ‘college student’ would enjoy. And with the largest group of students on any given college campus still falling between the ages of 18-22, this assumption makes some sense. But when more than 40% of all postsecondary students in the United States are age 25 and older (NCES, 2019)—at UWT, approximately 35% of students are 25 and over<sup>303</sup>—it is important to consider that any group of students who is continually overlooked in planning activities or events will come to feel they do not fit—diminishing their engagement and constructing a psychological barrier to their sense of belonging on campus (Siarzynski-Ferrer & Pillar, 2021).

And students who do not find a sense of belonging on campus are more likely to leave<sup>304</sup>.

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<sup>303</sup> See Table 3.1 for student age breakdown over the 30 years since UWT was founded.

<sup>304</sup> Mallman and Lee (2014) noted that students who do not find social connection on campuses are less likely to be retained, yet make the point that there has been little research considering the kinds of social connections that mature returners want or need.

## **Inhabiting the Habitus: Mature Women Returners and the University**

In considering the interactions between mature women returners and the habitus of UWT, I began with its origin story—viewing it through a variety of documents, both archival and virtual. These documents highlighted the intentions behind UWT’s founding as an urban university with a mission to serve “older, non-traditional, place- and time-bound working adult students” (Carwein *et al.*, 2001, p. 68), then followed this history through the addition of lower division students/courses 16 years after the campus opened. I examined chancellor’s reports, campus surveys and assessments, transcripts of oral histories from those connected with the launch and development of the campus; I interviewed current campus stakeholders with differing connections with the history of the campus and its students, and finally, studied a single campus document—the *2020-2021 UWT Transfer Guidebook*—to observe the discourse of the campus community and how UWT students were constructed rhetorically within its pages. In this way, I was able to gain some understanding how mature returners at UWT inhabit its habitus.

The support needs of mature returners on any campus are clearly different from those of traditional age students. What they want out of their college experience is different as well. Obviously, the ways they inhabit the habitus of the university are different from those of a more ‘traditional’ student. Beginning with Inoue’s (2016) view of habitus as “the ways that people are marked and read” (p. 96), and Çelik’s (2021) understanding of habitus as a way to understand how “schools adopt certain dispositions and influence students’ educational trajectories” (p. 522), I considered the influence of habitus on mature women returners through their stories of experience, making note of the ways they felt the institutional “dispositions” of UWT “marked and read” them as students.

“Stories,” Baker and Irwin (2021) claimed, “can offer potent ways to explore how meaning is created, constituted in and through relations of power” (p. 358). So, to discover how my focal participants inhabited the habitus of the University of Washington Tacoma, I began with the stories they told about their experiences as students on the UWT campus. As I discussed in chapter three, Reay *et al.* (2001) claimed that the institutional habitus of a university “generates its effects” through curriculum, pedagogical practices, and the attitudes of faculty, staff, administrators, and even students (p. 13). Yet these effects are maintained through assumptions and expectations about student age, knowledge, and literacies, as well as the design and/or structure of university spaces and practices—all of which impact that way that mature students are marked and read on the UWT campus. We see an example of these assumptions and expectations in Vera’s story about arguing with one of her professors<sup>305</sup> who, she felt, rudely cut her off in a class presentation. Vera’s expectation as a mature adult was to be listened to, her ideas respected—an expectation that her professor no doubt shared. But at the same time, the professor expected that a student should never challenge anything he had to say and the classroom was his place of authority—leading to a clash of expectations, power, and authority. Yet, expectations aside, the disposition of power and authority in classroom spaces can leave mature returners feeling that their expertise and cultural capital are without value in the university.

Jane experienced a different sort of assumption built into the habitus of higher education, one seen in comments from professors in her nursing program. She told a story about a professor who advised a room full of students—most of whom were working nurses—that they should not work or prioritize their family responsibilities because “*School is number one. Family is second*

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<sup>305</sup> See Chapter Four, subsection about challenging faculty, for the complete story.

<sup>306</sup>” This is another example of assumptions built into the university habitus—at least as it can be viewed in one degree program. Like Jane, most mature returners do not have the luxury of quitting their jobs to focus all their efforts on coursework. And for those who are also parenting, they are also not likely to be able to set family responsibilities aside to focus exclusively on their education. When the habitus of the university is constructed around an assumption of a certain type of student—young and single, without work responsibilities or adult expertise—these assumptions can lead to attitudes and dispositions among faculty, staff (and university practices) that can leave mature returners feeling marginalized and their concerns invisible.

However, these are not the only ways that the habitus of the university marks and reads mature returners. On a campus like UWT, where the student body is more than 50% non-white, the race or ethnicity of mature women returners marks them in different ways. Ironeyes spoke of feeling a need to prove herself in the classroom as a Native/Indigenous woman, while extending that same need to her workplace—which begs us to remember the habitus of the university exists within a larger *cultural* habitus that affects each one of us wherever we are. The attitudes and dispositions of the university are not exempt from the effect of culture. Thankfully, Ironeyes’ experience was not absolute on the UWT campus. She spoke more than once of the support she felt from faculty, staff, and fellow students as the inspiration to keep going when things were difficult: *“First thing, you’ve got to believe what people say to you, especially when they’re good things. And you hold onto it and you take it in like a sponge and don’t wring it out. You hold onto it until it becomes part of you and then you can release it to let others know. To tell them about the thing that’s positive about them.”*<sup>307</sup> With these words, Ironeyes shared both the

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<sup>306</sup> Jane’s quote here is from her individual interview.

<sup>307</sup> From the first group interview.

positive and negative ways that she felt marked and read on campus. But rather than focusing on the negative, she chose to hold tight to the good.

Other intersecting social identities—gender, parent or caregiver, employment status, age, socioeconomic status, etc.—also act as identity markers for mature women returners within the university habitus, with each affecting their performance of identity and difference and seen in the stories they tell. Hazel, for example, shared a story of looking over the faces in one of her first graduate classes and finding comfort in recognizing *“a mixture of different age groups and different backgrounds and ethnicities, and because of that I didn't feel out of place in that way at all.”*<sup>308</sup> Robin talked about how her age affected her sense of belonging—setting her apart within the habitus of the university—leaving her feeling like *“I'm 100 years old and I'm middle aged.... like this really, really old man sitting with a bunch of kindergarteners.”*<sup>309</sup> Although Robin eventually discovered other ways to belong within campus spaces, she noted, *“This issue with my physical appearance and my age still plagues me as a student: when am I supposed to start “dressing my age” and what does that even mean?”*<sup>310</sup>

In telling their stories, my focal participants sometimes identified themselves as ‘this, not that’—acknowledging difference not only between themselves and others, but between past and present selves. The points of view and subjectivities they shared through their stories acknowledge “the way [they] make sense of the world”—presenting a sense of sameness or difference (Ludvig, 2006, p. 249), even as they storied their becomings.

## Looking Ahead

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<sup>308</sup> From Hazel's individual interview.

<sup>309</sup> This comment was drawn from Robin's response to the transcripts of her individual interview.

<sup>310</sup> This comment is drawn from Robin's response to my question about her social identity in the classroom.

When student populations change, but the “pedagogies, curricula, and orientations” of the institution (byrd, 2019, p. 174) remain the same, any group beyond the ‘standard’ is likely to be overlooked by institutional structures, something that too often happens with mature returners. While working to meet the educational needs of these mature returners may have been the focus and mission of UWT in its earliest days, the current habitus of the university—the norms, assumptions, and expectations that are embedded in the university structure like an invisible mortar—too often leaves them feeling sidelined. Although I believe this is largely unintentional and appears to be under current (re)consideration by campus administration, its effects are the same: most individuals who feel overlooked and ignored...leave. They are not retained; they do not graduate; they never become the ambassadors for the value of higher education that universities hope all successful students will become.

In these next subsections, I will discuss areas I see as ready for future research regarding the growing presence of mature returners on campuses as traditional student numbers begin to decrease, as well as practical recommendations for the kinds of actions the university should consider implementing both now and in the years to come. And to conclude this dissertation, I offer one last story with the intent of asking my readers to look at the university and its students a bit differently as we look ahead to the future.

## **Future Research**

As I mentioned in the first chapter, there has been little research into the construction of a new student identity, particularly among mature returners in four-year universities in the United States. Much of the literature on mature returners that does exist comes from the British Commonwealth countries and is focused on the “widening participation” that opened higher

education to those of lower socio-economic status that had previously been unable to access it. In the U.S., the research spotlight on mature returners has been focused primarily on those attending community colleges, or on the teaching of literacy skills in adult education programs, although among more recent dissertations, this focus seems to be shifting. Yet, looking ahead to the future of higher education—particularly noting the lower birthrates in the early 2000s that are leading to dropping enrollments among traditional-age students—it becomes clear that the mature returner, as well as international students, will come to play a larger role or many institutions of higher education may not survive.

Table 6.1: Projections of fall enrollment in U.S. degree-granting postsecondary institutions, 2019-2029 (NCES, 2018; in thousands).

|                     | <b>2019</b> | <b>2020</b> | <b>2021</b> | <b>2029</b> |
|---------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| <b>All Students</b> | 19,720      | 19,744      | 19,778      | 20,115      |
| <b>14-17</b>        | 204         | 205         | 207         | 204         |
| <b>18-19</b>        | 4091        | 4029        | 3996        | 4025        |
| <b>20-21</b>        | 4467        | 4519        | 4537        | 4517        |
| <b>22-24</b>        | 3551        | 3540        | 3547        | 3619        |
| <b>25-29</b>        | 3058        | 3033        | 2996        | 2957        |
| <b>30-34</b>        | 1565        | 1597        | 1632        | 1625        |
| <b>35 and over</b>  | 2785        | 2821        | 2864        | 3166        |

As the number of mature returners has either increased or held steady over the last decades—an increase projected to continue at least through the end of this decade (see Table 6.1), it becomes

obvious that this group must be included in plans for the future of higher education. Mature returners (35 and over) are projected to make up nearly 16% of all students enrolled in postsecondary institution by 2029, up from 14% in 2019. Of these projected students, women 35 and over are expected to make up 63% of all mature returners by 2029. Thus, this group of potential students is simply too large to be overlooked. Because of this, there are several research areas surrounding mature returners that I believe would be worthy of future research:

- An examination of the rhetoric of university texts, whether websites/pages or advertising/marketing materials, specifically considering the inclusivity of language and images used for outreach to potential students. This could be of great value for universities that include—or hope to include—mature returners among their student populations.
- The transfer of workplace literacies into higher education practices and pedagogies. Along this same vein, I would recommend a qualitative study that followed mature graduates back into the workplace after graduation, examining the transfer of academic literacies into the workplace, and considering how pedagogies might change to better support the literacies of the workplace.
- Qualitative studies that specifically question mature returners about their attitudes toward help-seeking on campus, ease of access to, and use of academic support services, such as tutoring, writing groups, and/or research help.
  - Similar studies involving international students would also be valuable to the university as they plan ahead for lowering enrollments.

## **Practical Recommendations**

Aside from my suggestions regarding topics for future research, I have several practical recommendations as well. Although none of these ideas are new—even on the UWT campus—they are undeniably ideas whose time has come for universities that seek to support mature returners.

1. The university should make campus-based childcare available to students. Funds dedicated to childcare should also be made accessible during summer quarter. For single parents, indeed, any parenting students with young children, affordable campus-based childcare is essential to their ability to succeed and graduate in a timely fashion.
2. The university should work toward finding sources of financial aid that can meet the needs of part-time students with full-time work and family responsibilities. With most financial aid available only to full-time students, part-time students who are already working to support themselves and their families must find alternative ways to pay for tuition. Currently, sources of financial aid are limited for students who register for fewer than 12 credits per quarter. Those who take one class at a time are considered less than half-time<sup>311</sup>,
3. The university should construct quarterly course schedules, degree programs, advising, or academic supports that are compatible with the demands of work or family, including greater availability of online or hybrid courses, weekend courses, or courses that begin after 6 pm. This would make completing a degree more accessible to those who might not otherwise be able to do so.
4. The university should build out annual course schedules in advance, allowing mature returners (and all students) to plan out their entire year's schedule at the start of the

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<sup>311</sup> According to the 2021-22 UWT course catalogue.

academic year and making it easier for working students to arrange course schedules around work and/or family schedules.

5. (Re) design campus events like orientations or other student-oriented activities to be more inclusive toward mature returners, thus making them feel more welcome and included on campus. For example, since mature returners are more likely to be transfer students, campus orientations for this student population can be restructured with a more mature student in mind.

### **Coda**

In considering how this dissertation will end, I stare at the blank white screen, hoping the words will come. ‘What *is* my point?’ I ask myself. ‘What is it that I want you, the reader, to take away from all these words?’ There are many things, I realize, but I will begin with just one—and to do so, I need to consider one last story.

### **From the Stepsisters’ Standpoint**

I have long had an affection for fairy tales—the Cinderella story, in particular. Not the Disney version with its fairy godmothers, singing mice, sewing birds, and docile heroine, but the 19<sup>th</sup> century German version collected by the Brothers Grimm—the one that quite literally drips with blood at the end.<sup>312</sup> Over the years, however, I have come to see this version—with its focus on Cinderella getting what she ‘deserves’ despite her stepsisters’ ill-will and attempts to steal it from her—a bit differently. And I hope you will, too.

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<sup>312</sup> Grimm & Grimm (2006).

In considering my (re)vision of Cinderella's story, I ask that you think of this familiar story not as the morality tale fairy tales are often made out to be—where Cinderella's virtue and goodness win out over her stepmother's avarice and cruelty—but rather from a standpoint that considers the impacts of Bourdieu's cultural capital and Foucault's social power on the lives of the characters. Although fairy tale enthusiasts have traditionally viewed Cinderella's stepsisters as the secondary villains of the tale—scheming impostors pushed by their mother to steal away the prince's attention and affection—keeping Cinderella from the thing she most desires (and *deserves*), I ask that you view the story from a different location—taking instead the standpoint of the sisters. In order to gain the one thing that will make possible the future *they* most desire—the personal and financial security made possible through an alliance with the prince who represents the seat of power in their land—the sisters do all in their power to squeeze their feet into a shoe made for someone else. Unable to embody the ideal, they alternately cut off heels and toes in an effort to fit. Yet, despite the desperation and pain that accompanied their efforts—even when it momentarily appeared they had been successful in their quest—their alterations of self were not enough; the shoe was designed only for one. No one else would be able fit, to align with the power it offered—no matter how hard they tried.

Cinderella, on the other hand, fit her foot into the shoe easily—because (thanks to her fairy godmother) it had been designed just for her. Although the moral of the Grimm Brothers' tale is that Cinderella was inherently more 'worthy' than her stepsisters, she was really just a girl who had the *habitus* of a shoe on her side, making it possible for her to find belonging in a social location tailor-made for one who 'fit.' Fitting that standard ultimately gave her a place within a cultural system built around the capital she carried—a system that connected her with the social power to make her dreams come true.

Although my inverted fairy tale should not be examined too closely lest its theoretical moorings begin to crumble, what I hope to make clear is the difference between fitting in and belonging. ‘Fitting in’ requires great effort on the part of the one who is *different* than the norm—the one who does not find ease within its habitus, or comfortably occupy the structures of its social power.

For mature students seeking entrance into the institutional habitus of higher education, finding a way to fit into the systems and structures of the university too-often falls on them; they must make it (or not) on their own power. The institutional glass slipper was designed for a specific type of student; another sort of student could not squeeze into that shoe without altering themselves and/or denying their needs in some way. But for the model student—the right age, gender, class, or color, with the proper academic skills or abilities, employment status, family responsibilities (or more specifically, their lack)—the fit was practically perfect. The glass slipper of belonging fit them effortlessly because it was literally designed with them in mind. Molded to their feet, as it were.

Maybe it has always been this way...*but it does not have to be.*

The historic view of higher education was that, like glass slippers, institutions were not expected to alter themselves to benefit individual students. It was the student who must adapt. Those who did not easily fit the mold were, at first, denied entry altogether and only later given notice they might enter but must somehow adjust themselves to fit. However, as student populations have and will continue to shift, the university must recognize that the timeworn model no longer applies; the glass slipper of student identity must acknowledge its need for alteration. And universities *are* coming to understand that they can—and indeed, must—revise themselves to be more inclusive of a wider range of student identities. This is the purpose of

campus diversity programs like the Center for Equity and Inclusion, like first-generation support groups and veterans' services; and I would suggest that this attention be extended to include mature returners as well.

**‘And in the end...’**

As I finish this dissertation, there is one more crucial issue to address in this consideration of the issues mature students face, as they are viewed in the storied experiences of these eight women: each of them is a success story. Despite the obstacles they faced along the way, every one of them successfully returned to higher education and found their way within its systems. They assimilated into the culture and habitus of the university—at least deeply enough to graduate. They learned the discourse, wrote the papers, did the projects, earned the grades, and found a way to overcome and thrive—even if it was despite the barriers they faced. Each one of them now holds a baccalaureate and/or graduate degree. They have all gained—or are still preparing for—careers in the fields of their choice.

They fulfilled their dreams and are reaching toward larger goals.

They have succeeded.

Yet not every mature woman who returns to the university finds success as they have. For some, the obstacles are just too great to be overcome. Many will stop out—or drop out. What have we learned about *those* women—the ones I did not meet, did not talk with as part of this project? Who are *they*?

They are individuals:

- Who couldn't find or afford the childcare that would allow them to attend classes.

- Who couldn't rearrange their work schedules to attend classes offered overwhelmingly during the daytime.
- Who couldn't find someone to direct them to an adviser, a librarian, a tutor—someone who could mentor and assist as they learned to do research and write like a university student is expected to.
- Who enrolled and even attended classes but couldn't find belonging among the people or spaces of a campus that sometimes seemed to view them and their needs as invisible.
- Who struggled with curriculum and assignments that seemed focused on students half their age—those who didn't have to balance coursework with the demands of work and family.
- Whose desire to succeed as students went unsupported by partners, employers, or campus policies.
- Who couldn't find financial aid to cover part-time tuition, allowing them to take one class at a time so they could continue to work to support their families.

These are the individuals I didn't talk with, the ones I never met—maybe because they never attended a class or were unable to continue if they did. Maybe they will return someday—if not to UWT, to some other institution of higher education. Maybe then they will find the support they need, the people who can help, the program that will accept their differences.

Someday, *maybe*, they will become some other university's success story.

But in the meantime, we cannot rest on the successes of just a few. If higher education is to thrive over the next decades and into the future, it must find better ways to support the students who have become the majority minority on campuses across the country. If mature

women are looking to return to higher education to complete degrees and create a better future for themselves and their families, we cannot wait.

And, as the larger university begins to prepare for this future, I'd like to see the University of Washington Tacoma lead the way.

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**Appendix A**  
Project Information and Writing Prompt for Literacy Narratives

Project summary:

Beginning with the notion that our literacy experiences have a great effect on our identity—both personal and educational—and particularly how adult learners formulate that identity as it applies to their current literacy practices, I am examining the stories that adult learners tell about themselves and the ways those stories affect their current learning and writing practices, as well as how they perform as a (re)construction of identity. In order to do this, I am gathering literacy narratives from mature returners (at least 35 years old).

Preliminary research question:

What sort of self-identity do returning mature adult students reconstruct for themselves, based on the literacy stories they tell—or have previously told—about themselves as writers, and how does this identity affect them as student writers? My research project includes the collecting and analysis of students’ written literacy narratives and oral interviews based on the written narratives, as well as demographic questionnaires. Through this data, I hope to discover how returning mature adult students reconstruct their identities as they transition to a new status as “college student” through the stories they tell about their experiences of returning to academia.

Writing Prompt:

Can you reflect on some of the formative experiences that shaped your sense of self as a literate person? With your reflections written as a “story” and arranged in chronological order, what conclusions can you draw about your personal literacy history and its connection to your current experiences as a mature adult student?

Examples of the kinds of things you might want to discuss could include events such as:

- Early experiences with reading and writing
- The most difficult or enjoyable writing assignments you had in school
- Positive or negative comments on your writing from teachers or peers and how you feel about them
- Anything that you believe effected the way you see yourself as a literate person either in the past or present

What I am looking for is not just a list of literacy events, but a reflection on what those events mean to you today. What kind of connections can you make between your early literacy experiences and your experiences as a mature adult student who has returned to college?

Finally, can you reflect on your own transition as an adult from “the real world” literacy experiences of home and/or work into the academic world? Has the experience been: (Mostly) Positive? Negative? What you expected it to be? What have been some of the highlights/difficulties of your experience? Do you feel that it has changed you in any way?

If you are interested in taking part in my dissertation research, I ask that you write a narrative based on any (or all) of the ideas above—I am hoping for a 500 word minimum, but feel free to write as much as you'd like. And please don't worry about "perfect" writing—no one is going to be examining your grammar or punctuation—honest! My interest is in the stories you tell about your earlier experiences with writing and how you see their affects—positive or negative—in your literacy experiences today.

Once you've written your narrative, I'll approach you about setting up a face-to-face interview. If you are not interested being part of an interview, please let me know and I won't contact you further.

As I am looking to include my research participants in the process as much as possible, I'll also happily share my study results with you—if you are interested!

Thank you so much for your help! To express my gratitude, I'd like to offer you a Starbucks gift card for your efforts—just let me know where to send it.

For more information, please contact:

Margaret Lundberg

Ph.D. candidate, English Language and Rhetoric University of Washington

[margal3@uw.edu](mailto:margal3@uw.edu)

## Appendix B

### Group interview Timeline Information

(to be read before start of interview)

In the interest of full disclosure, I want to share with you all just what I'm doing in this project and the part I hope you will all play in it.

First, my project examines the construction and reconstruction of identity in returning mature adult women students, looking at both written and oral texts. I haven't even taken exams yet—that's planned for next quarter—but I am trying to be proactive here and get started on gathering my data early. Hence, this interview as one of the preliminary steps!

Once gathered—this interview, your narratives and another individual interview based on your written narrative—I'll be working on coding, analysis, and then writing. But since I am working primarily in a method called narrative inquiry, I'll be taking all that data and turning it into another narrative. At that point, I'd like to bring the narratives back to all of you and we can talk through them. The theory that drives my research is based on the idea that the creation of knowledge, meaning and identity are social acts and so my construction of this knowledge must involve you! You will own what we create as much as I do, so it's important to me—and my work—that we go through my analysis and interpretation together, to be sure that we can agree on it. Which essentially means, one more group meeting to discuss it.

This is a lot of involvement on your part, I know, so I will certainly understand if any of you aren't willing to commit to that additional part of it. But I hope you will. I want to believe that you will have almost as great a stake in this work as I do!

Returning adult students are the fastest growing group in US universities—and women are the largest percentage of that group. You are in many ways, a trailblazer, and I believe your voice needs to be heard!

Are you in?

#### **Interview 'ground rules:'**

There is only one—if you haven't filled out a release form, I need you to do that before we begin. If you haven't written the narrative or filled out the survey, I'll need you to do that, but it doesn't have to be done first.

I have 8 questions I'd like us to discuss—although we probably won't get through all of them—but I also want you to feel free to respond to and ask questions of each other. The best interview is like a conversation, so let's talk!

**Appendix C**  
**Interview Consent form**

**Release and Clearance**

I, \_\_\_\_\_, enter into this Release with Margaret Lundberg of the University of Washington (“the University”). I authorize Margaret Lundberg to create recordings of my image and/or voice (“recordings”) and to use survey information in connection with her project involving the literacy narratives of non-traditional students. I agree that she may use the writings and recordings at her discretion, in their original and/or edited form, along with biographical or other information in connection with these, for any and all educational uses. I understand that the use of the writings and recordings may include, but not necessarily be limited to, the following:

- Internal use at the University of Washington and other educational institutions
- Inclusion in Lundberg’s dissertation research/writing and presentations in the writing center, classrooms, or at conferences

I hereby waive all rights and release Margaret Lundberg and the University (including its officials, employees, representatives, agents, licensees, successors, and assigns) from liability, and shall neither sue nor bring any proceeding against any such parties for, any claim or cause of action, whether now known or unknown, for defamation, invasion of right to privacy, publicity or personality or any similar matter, or based upon or relating to the use and exploitation of the writings and recordings. I agree that I have read and understood the contents hereof, and that I have the right and the authority to execute this Release.

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Releaser’s Signature

Date

---

Recorder’s Signature

Date

For IRB ID# STUDY 00000663  
rev. 2/22/2019 mll

## Appendix D

### Group Interview questions

1. Tell us about yourself

- What did you do before you returned to school?
- Educational background & what you are doing now
  - Work?
  - Family?
  - Hobbies?

2. What brought you back to college? How did you get here?

3. Can you describe how you felt walking back into a college classroom for the first time? A first day back memory?

4. Can you talk about whether or how your return to school led to a sense of disruption in your life? How have you handled it?

5. Thinking about the literacy skills you brought with you from the workplace? How have these transferred to college writing?

6. How has your sense of identity changed as a result of turning to school? Fitting in? Belonging? Have you found these—and if not, how have you handled that?

7. Can you talk about the logistics of how you fit school into the rest of your life?

8. Advice for administration on how to better support returning adult students

- What do you wish they knew about you and your life?
- For example, have you taken any hybrid/online courses? (If so, what is your opinion of them? How could they be made more useful—or are they great as is?)

**Appendix E**  
**Individual interview questions**

1. Could you tell me something about yourself? How do we know each other?
2. Can you speak about a specific early experience with reading or writing that had an impact on you?
3. Tell me about your decision to return to college as an adult. What led you to do it?
4. Can you remember a particular experience that you had on returning to school?
  - a. What was that experience and how did you feel about it?
5. What did you expect college to be like? Were there any surprises in the reality of it as an adult student?
6. Can you tell me about some of your experiences as an adult student that you believe are different from what a traditional age student might experience?
7. Have you dealt with imposter syndrome at all? Can you talk about that?
8. Can you talk about what you did in the years before you returned to college?
  - a. Can you talk about your prior literacy experiences in the workplace? Did those experiences help as you transitioned to the classroom?
9. How do you see yourself now as a student and a writer?
10. When you think about the person you were before you started back to college and the person you are today, do you see any differences? Can you tell me about them?
11. Would you say that attending college as an adult has caused any disruptions to your life—whether positive or negative? Can you talk about some of those?

**Appendix F**  
**Literacy Narratives of Mature Returners**  
**Questionnaire**

**Personal Information**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ email: \_\_\_\_\_

Age (circle one): 35-39 40-49 50-59 60+

Years out of school: \_\_\_\_\_

Immigrant? Yes No From where? \_\_\_\_\_

Is English your first language? (circle one) Yes No

**Education information**

Circle One: High School graduate? GED?

Year of HS Graduation \_\_\_\_\_

Some college after high school? (circle one) Yes No Degree earned? \_\_\_\_\_

Current student status: Undergraduate/Year \_\_\_\_\_ Graduate \_\_\_\_\_

When do you expect to graduate? \_\_\_\_\_

Part-time student? Full-time student?

Are you employed? \_\_\_\_\_ part-time? \_\_\_\_\_ full-time? \_\_\_\_\_

Reasons for returning to college:

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## Appendix G

### Culture Sketch Survey

Thank you for taking the time to complete this exercise. As participants in my study, we all have a different set of life experiences, and therefore represent a vast array of intersectional identities. This framework will provide me an opportunity to reflect on our identities, biases, and assumptions.

1. Before you begin, review the Framework below and the questions on the next pages, which list and unpack the cultural influences and intersecting identities that impact our life experiences.

| <b>Cultural Influences</b>                     | <b>Dominant Group</b>    | <b>Nondominant Group</b>   |
|--|--------------------------|--|
| Age/generational influences                    | young/young adult        | Mature adults  |
| Developmental disabilities/ other disabilities | nondisabled people       | people with cognitive, other Disabilities sensory, physical, and/or psychiatric disabilities         |
| Religion/spirituality                          | Christian and/or secular | Muslims, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, other minority religions   |
| Ethnic and racial identity                     | European American        | Asian, South Asian, Latino, Pacific Island, African, Arab, African American, & Middle Eastern people |
| Socioeconomic status                           | upper & middle class     | people of lower status by occupation, education, income, or inner city/ rural habitat                |
| Sexual orientation                             | Heterosexual             | identifying as gay, lesbian, or bisexual   |
| Indigenous heritage                            | European American        | American Indians, Inuit, Alaska Natives, Métis, Native Hawaiians, Chamorro people of Guam            |
| National origin                                | U.S.-born American       | Immigrants, refugees, & international students   |
| Citizenship                                    | U.S. citizen             | Non-U.S. citizen (includes permanent resident status)  |
| Gender   | men                      | Women & transgender people   |

\*Since I am using this framework in the light of “traditional college age,” if you are 35+, please consider yourself a mature adult in this survey.

2. Answer the following questions regarding each influence on you. Try to approach the exercise with curiosity, letting go of judgments of yourself or what you think you "should have" experienced. There are no right or wrong answers, no right or wrong identities, because every individual is unique. The point is to increase awareness of the influences on your values, decisions, behaviors, and opportunities that you may never have considered. When you finish, you will have outlined your own Culture Sketch.
  - a. **Age and generational influences:** When you were born, what were the social expectations for a person of your identity? Do you identify with a particular generation (e.g. baby boomers, Gen X or Y, second generation immigrant, etc.)? How have your values and worldview been shaped by the social movements of or influences on your generation (e.g. the Great Depression, World War II, the Vietnam War, women's movement, Stonewall, Americans with Disabilities Act, civil 3 rights movement, social media, an economic downturn, political events in another country)?
  - b. **Developmental or other Disability:** Do you identify as someone living with a visible disability, or a nonvisible disability (e.g. chronic pain, psychiatric or learning disability)? If no, has your personal or professional life been affected by others with disabilities (e.g. friend, family member, partner, or coworker with a disability)? How has disability status -- either your own disability or that of someone else in your life -- affected your life and opportunities?
  - c. **Religion & spirituality:** Were you brought up in a religious or spiritual tradition? Do you identify with a religion or have a spiritual practice now? How were your values and goals shaped by your religious or non-religious upbringing?
  - d. **Ethnic & racial identity:** What do you consider your ethnic or racial identity? If you were adopted, what are the identities of your biological and adoptive parents? How do other people identify you? Are these the same? Are there ethnic or racial differences within your family?
  - e. **Socioeconomic status:** What social class did you grow up in, and what do you consider your socioeconomic status now? When you were in high school, what kinds of educational and work opportunities were available to you?
  - f. **Sexual orientation:** Do you identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or heterosexual? If you are heterosexual, do you have a family member or friend who is gay? Is your family accepting of a gay member?

- g. **Indigenous heritage:** Do you belong to a Native tribe or nation, for example, Native Hawaiian, First Nations, Alaska Native, or American Indian? Did you grow up on or near a reservation or Native community? Are you now connected with your Native community?
- h. **National origin:** Are you a U.S. citizen, an international student, or immigrant? Were you born in the U.S.? Do you (and your parents and grandparents) speak English as a first language? If not, what is your first language? How has your nationality affected your life and opportunities?
- i. **Gender:** What were/are the gender-related roles and expectations for you in your family of origin and current family, in your work setting, and in relation to your other cultural identities? How have these expectations affected your choices in life?
3. Now return to your Culture Sketch and put a star next to the influences in which you are member of the dominant group (you can do this using the \* symbol)
- If you are a young adult, put a star next to Age and generational influences (because you are not a member of the minority group of mature adults).
  - If you do not have any disability, put a star next to Developmental and other Disabilities (because you are member of the nondisabled dominant group).
  - If you grew up, or currently identify as, Christian or secular, put a star next to Religion and spirituality.
  - If you are of Euroamerican heritage, put a star next to Race/ethnicity.
  - If you grew up middle-class or are currently middle-class, put a star next to Socioeconomic status.
  - If you are heterosexual, put a star next to Sexual orientation.
  - If you have no Indigenous (American Indian, Alaska Native, or other Native) heritage, put a star next to Indigenous heritage.
  - If you were born in the US, put a star next to National origin.
  - If you are currently a US citizen, put a star next to Citizenship
  - If you are a man, put a star next to Gender.

If, after looking this survey over, you are willing to take part in this exercise, please fill it out (brief answers are fine). If there are any questions you prefer not to answer, please write NA in the answer space rather than leaving it blank. When you have completed the survey, please return the return it to me with your pseudonym in the file title. If you can't remember your pseudonym, just ask and I'll remind you!

I will not be directly including any of this information in my final dissertation (any cultural identifiers therein would come only from information you have already given me in either your interview or written narrative). The information in this survey is meant primarily for

demographic purposes, allowing me to consider some of the intersectional identities that you all represent in my study—particularly where they intersect with the institutional habitus of the university.

Thank you—so much!!

Margaret Lundberg  
PhD candidate  
University of Washington

Adapted from: Hays, P.A. (2013). *Connecting Across Cultures: The Helper's Toolkit* (pp. 15-16). SAGE.

## **Appendix H**

### **‘Restorying’ as a Research Inquiry in Various Disciplines:**

#### **A Bibliography**

##### **Agriculture:**

Arthur, M., & Porter, C. (2019). Restorying Northern Arapaho Food Sovereignty. *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development*, 9(B), 1-16.

Abstract: Communities in Indian Country across the U.S. are reconnecting to traditional and healthier food systems, often working explicitly for food sovereignty. This paper contributes to these reconnection efforts by (re)telling the story of the Northern Arapaho food system and the path we are creating toward health and our reclamation of Northern Arapaho food sovereignty. With support from my co-author, I approached data gathering and analysis in a blend of traditional native and conventional western research ways. I use the phrase “foreign intrusion” to help re-name eras in our history when our food system was altered by colonialism, forms of physical and cultural genocide, and assimilation. This “restorying” of the food system history of the Northern Arapaho people provides an indigenized frame for understanding our food system history, impacts of intrusion, and paths for reclaiming Indigenous food sovereignty. My methods include interviews with tribal members (N=16), three talking circles (N=14, 11, and 6), autoethnography, seven years of participation and observation in food sovereignty work, and document analysis, in addition to extensive literature reviews.

##### **Disability studies**

Broderick, A., Hawkins, G., Henze, S., Mirasol-Spath, C., Pollack-Berkovits, R., Clune, H., . . .

Steel, C. (2012). Teacher counternarratives: Transgressing and 'restorying' disability in education. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 16(8), 825-842.

Abstract: This inquiry aims to explore the disconnect between the disability studies in education (DSE) perspectives on inclusive schooling held by a group of dually certified inclusive educators and the everyday, lived experiences of these same teachers who find themselves teaching students with labelled disabilities within the confines of the special education bureaucracy. Through a collaborative inquiry circle (with a teacher educator who is a faculty member in a dual-certification programme informed by a DSE perspective and seven teachers who are graduates of this teacher education programme), this study aims to: (1) articulate the dominant narratives or storylines about disability in education that may 'discipline' teachers' practice within the special education bureaucracy; (2) illustrate some of the ways in which teachers do resist and transgress the discursive structures of schooling in ways that enable them to 'restory' disability in education; and (3) explore the implications of this work for preparing teachers to be dually certified, inclusive educators of all children in public schools.

## **Education**

Kawalilak, C. & Groen, J. (2016). Restorying the present by revisiting the past. *Journal of Adult and Continuing Education*, 2, 152–167. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1477971416672325>

Abstract: Two adult educators, guided by autoethnography as methodology, share the restorying of their own lifelong learning narratives and unexpected insights gained from having experienced the powerful potential of museum learning and culture. Having previously regarded museum visits as an experience that primarily tapped the intellectual, cognitive domain,

the authors, drawing from experiencing the Pier 21 Museum in Halifax and the War Brides installation exhibit at the Glenbow Museum, Calgary, were thrust into multiple ways and dimensions of how we learn, how we view the world, and how we locate ourselves in the world. Shared stories illuminate the potential for museum education to animate, breathe life into and offer a deepened understanding of our own personal, lifelong learning narratives.

### **English**

Barlow, W., & MacGregor, J. (n.d.). Forging new realities: Using drama conventions and poetry to explore the issue of terrorism. *English in Education (Ahead-of-print)*, 1-12.

Abstract: This conceptual paper examines the possibilities for restorying the self through drama conventions using narrative poetry as a stimulus. Using the poem "The Terrorist, He's Watching" by Wislawa Szymborska to engage with drama conventions, we illustrate how educators might support young and marginalised people to participate in the process of restorying. In doing so, we argue for the importance of using poetry and drama to create meta-narratives of discourse which empower participants to restory themselves into the dominant forms of narrative through creative exploration. Szymborska's poem has been chosen as a stimulus due to the poet's use of multiple perspectives and roles, in different times and places, which enable people to reshape and reimagine their identity and explore dominant narratives about terrorism. The authors intend to follow this conceptual piece with an empirical study.

### **Environmental education**

Adsit-Morris, C. (2017). *Restorying environmental education: Figurations, fictions, and feral subjectivities* (Curriculum studies worldwide). Palgrave Macmillan.

Abstract: This book examines a performative environmental educational inquiry through a place-based eco-art project collaboratively undertaken with a class of grade 4-6 students around the lost streams of Vancouver. The resulting work explores the contradictions gathered in relation to the Western educational system and the encounter with "Other" (real and imaginary others), including the shifting and growing "self," and an attempt to find and foster nourishing alliances for transforming environmental education. Drawing on the work of new materialist theorists Donna Haraway, Rosi Braidotti, and Karen Barad, Adsit-Morris considers the co-constitutive materiality of human corporeality and nonhuman natures and provides useful tools for finding creative theoretical alternatives to the reductionist, representationalist, and dualistic practices of the Western metaphysics.

### **Instructional Science:**

Slabon, W., Richards, R., & Dennen, V. (2014). Learning by restorying. *Instructional Science*, 42(4), 505-521.

Abstract: In this paper, we introduce restorying, a pedagogical approach based on social constructivism that employs successive iterations of rewriting and discussing personal, student-generated, domain-relevant stories to promote conceptual application, critical thinking, and ill-structured problem solving skills. Using a naturalistic, qualitative case study design, this study describes and analyzes how restorying promoted learning and transfer for master's level students in two sections of a conflict management class. Data sources included course documents, course assignments, class observations, interviews, focus groups, and surveys. An inductive analytic approach using constant comparative methods was employed for analyzing qualitative data, and course section assignment performance averages were calculated for analyzing quantitative data.

The restorying approach emphasizes learning new content through personal story application and story sharing among course participants. The restorying approach offers a potentially viable alternative for those not satisfied with conventional case studies. Conventional case studies may fall short in providing the desired range or complexity of problem space elements or may embed problems in contexts that are not learner relevant. Moreover, the sustained analysis of a past personal experience may result in deeper internalization of domain content and transfer of learning. While restorying may not be appropriate for some learning contexts, it holds promise for settings that can incorporate the key elements and address the adoption considerations described in this paper. The restorying approach invites one to consider how personal, student-generated, domain-relevant stories may be employed, shared, reflected upon, revised, expanded upon, and redeployed to promote achievement of desired learning outcomes.

## **Literature**

Lam. (n.d.). Engaging with critical literacy through restorying: A university reading and writing workshop on fairy-tale reimaginings. *Language, Culture, and Curriculum, ahead-of-print(ahead-of-print)*, 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07908318.2021.1979577>

Abstract: This article presents the findings of a university reading and writing workshop on fairy-tale reimaginings. Fairy-tale reimaginings, understood as rewriting fairy tales using alternative narrative techniques, can be introduced into a literacy classroom where learners read reimagined fairy tales that stimulate their critical response and subsequently reimagine new stories that interrogate presumptions in the traditional tales. To justify the design of the workshop and its effectiveness in enhancing student learning, I combine restorying and critical literacy as the theoretical framework. By theorising fairy-tale reimaginings as a form

of restorying, I foreground fairy-tale reimaginings as acts of resistance that reflect more diversifying perspectives in the society (Thomas & Stornaiuolo, 2016). I have chosen the four dimensions of critical literacy (FDCL), synthesised by Lewison et al. (2002) to illustrate how the workings of fairy-tale reimaginings befit the general principles of critical literacy. For a fuller realisation of critical literacy through consumption, production, and distribution of texts, understood as action and reflection upon the action, I contend to develop a reading/writing pedagogy that places emphasis on reading and rewriting followed by sharing and reflection. To this end, I hope to offer teacher-researchers insights to bring the fantasy genre into their literacy classroom.

## **Nursing**

L. Garcia, L. (2018). Restorying the lives of famous individuals: a narrative inquiry. *The Malaysian Journal of Nursing*, 10(1), 42-48.

Abstract: The Late Life Success Theory assumes that people go through a process of development, wherein these certain feats highlight the different ages. These highlights form the stages that people go through similarly as they pass through life but the experience behind is unique to each of them. This study aimed to create a list of life stages people go through based on their individual perception of development and achievement so as to allow for identification of stages towards a satisfying late life. This study used narrative research design where the researcher gathered documents about the life story of famous individuals who are respected and recognized for their contribution in their various fields through their published biographies. The biography included the experiences of the subject beyond 60 years old. The researcher then recorded their life experiences and collected information about the background of these stories.

Thereafter, the stories were analyzed. The researchers then “restorying” them into a context that makes sense. The following stages have been identified: Stage 1-Overcoming a Misfortune Beginning Life; Stage 2-Teenage as the Constructive Passage to Adult Life; Stage 3-Becoming Part of the Adult World; Stage 4-Expanding Influence and Commitment; Stage 5-Leaving a Legacy. Looking into the lives of famous individuals, a certain pattern of similar experiences has been created. They went through a process of development towards the end of life wherein there are certain challenges which highlighted the different stages. These are to be experienced and faced positively. Once successfully handled, these are considered milestones of success which lead towards the full exploration and understanding of the human lives.

### **Organization Studies**

Phillips, N. (1995). Telling Organizational Tales: On the Role of Narrative Fiction in the Study of Organizations. *Organization Studies*, 16(4), 625–649.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/017084069501600408>

Abstract: In this article, I argue for the benefits of encouraging the use of novels, short stories, plays, songs, poems, and films as legitimate approaches to the study of management and organization. In particular, I argue that these forms of narrative fiction provide a useful addition to our ways of thinking about organizations and an indispensable approach to strengthening the connection between organizational analysis as an academic discipline and the subjective experience of organizational membership. I begin by arguing that the division between narrative fiction and traditional forms of organizational analysis is overdrawn — that organizational researchers and writers of fiction share important interests and use complementary methods in investigating social phenomena. In the latter portion of the article I suggest some specific

applications of the techniques and products of narrative fiction including narrative fiction as a teaching tool, as a source of data, as a method for exploring the applicability of theoretical perspectives, and as a resource useful in embellishing papers and presentations.

## **Qualitative Research**

Nasheeda, A., Abdullah, H., Krauss, S., & Ahmed, N. (2019). Transforming transcripts into stories: A multimethod approach to narrative analysis. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 18, 160940691985679.

Abstract: Stories are essential realities from our past and present. As the primary sources of data in narrative research, interview transcripts play an essential role in giving meaning to the personal stories of research participants. The pragmatic narratives found in transcripts represent human experience as it unfolds. Analyzing the narratives found in interview transcripts thus moves beyond providing descriptions and thematic developments as found in most qualitative studies. Crafting stories from interview transcripts involves a complex set of analytic processes. Building on the first author's personal experience in working on a doctoral thesis employing narrative inquiry, this article presents a multimethod restorying framework to narrative analysis. A step-by-step progression within the framework includes choosing interview participants, transcribing interviews, familiarizing oneself with the transcripts (elements of holistic-content reading), chronologically plotting (elements of the story), use of follow-up interviews as a way to collaborate (an important procedure in narrative inquiry), and developing the story through structural analysis. It is hoped that this article will encourage other researchers embarking on narrative analysis to become creative in presenting participants' lived experiences through meaningful, collaborative strategies. This

article demonstrates the fluidity of narrative analysis and emphasizes that there is no single procedure to be followed in attempting to create stories from interview transcripts.

Ollerenshaw, J., & Creswell, J. (2002). Narrative Research: A comparison of two restorying data analysis approaches. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 8(3), 329-347.

Abstract: People telling stories about their life experiences has rapidly gained legitimacy in educational research. This article presents seven elements of narrative research that represent the aspects of a narrative study and the criteria that might be used to assess the quality of a narrative project. The article focuses on one phase in narrative data analysis: "restorying" or "retelling." By highlighting restorying narrative, researchers can see how an illustrative data set, a science story told by fourth graders about their experiences in their elementary classroom, was applied to two analysis approaches. A comparison of the two narrative approaches, problem-solution and three-dimensional space, shows several common features and distinctions. As narrative researchers decide which approach to use, they might consider whether the story they wish to report is a broader wholistic sketch of the three-dimensional approach or a narrower linear structure of the problem-solution approach.

### **Women's Studies:**

Mozeley, F., & McPhillips, K. (2019). Knowing otherwise: Restorying intuitive knowing as feminist resistance. *Women's Studies*, 48(8), 844-861.

Abstract: The article discusses research which examined link between feminist resistance and women's ways of knowing or intuition. Topics explored include the understanding of intuition as realization of wholeness according to women's studies scholar Margaret Blanchard, the systems

of power associated with the production of knowledge noted by philosopher Michel Foucault, and the elements associated with intuition on a societal level such as meditation, ecofeminism, and various forms of spirituality.

Prior, M. (2019). I am an adult now: Restorying an ‘abuse’ narrative through categorization. *Pragmatics and Society*, 10(3), 423-451.

**Abstract** This narrative-based study employs membership categorization analysis to address the following question: How does a victim of abuse formulate and manage various categories and related descriptive details to story past trauma in ways that bring about new endings or insights in the present? Drawing on data taken from a larger research project on immigrant identity, the analysis centers on a Cambodian-Vietnamese man’s narrative of childhood abuse and adulthood confrontation. It shows how the teller, by recalibrating person (e.g., ‘father-son’, ‘victim-abuser’), age (e.g., ‘young-old’), place (e.g., ‘North America-Vietnam’), and other categorial resources, re-stories people and events and their psycho-social and moral inferences and outcomes. By tracing how this narrative teller reconstitutes himself from ‘victim’ to ‘hero’, this study offers insight into how a local interactional event (e.g., a research interview) may be transformed into a therapeutic exchange. Insights for therapeutic (re)storying, narrative research, and second language (L2) research are discussed.

**Psychology (Narrative Therapy):**

Rafaely, M., & Goldberg, R. (2020). Grief snow globe: A creative approach to restorying grief and loss through narrative therapy. *Journal of Creativity in Mental Health*, 15(4), 482-493.

Abstract: This article describes a creative counseling intervention we call the grief snow globe. The purpose thereof is to assist grieving clients in externalizing emotions and restorying grief and loss experiences through narrative therapy. Narrative therapy allows clients to give new meanings to their stories and life experiences. In this article, we explain instructions for making the grief snow globe, offer suggestions for process questions to support the exercise, and present application of the grief snow globe through a case study.

Combs, G., & Freedman, J. (2012). Narrative, poststructuralism, and social justice: Current practices in narrative therapy. *The Counseling Psychologist, 40*(7), 1033–1060.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0011000012460662>

Abstract: This paper is a review of current practice in narrative therapy with a focus on how it is attractive and useful for therapists who wish to work for social justice. The authors describe narrative therapy's roots in poststructuralist philosophy and social science. They illustrate its major theoretical constructs, including *the narrative metaphor*, *Foucault's notion of "modern power,"* and narrative therapy's emphasis on *problems as separate from people*. The authors then describe specific practices: narrative questions, externalizing conversations, utilizing the "absent but implicit," the development and "thickening" of preferred stories, the documentation of preferred stories, outsider witness practices, and practices for connecting people around shared purposes. After reviewing research that supports narrative therapy as useful and effective, the authors specifically address the ways narrative therapy deals with issues of social justice, showing how its focus on the discourses of modern power helps therapists be especially attuned to these issues.

## **Dissertations:**

### **Education**

Guthrie, B. (2011). Reflecting and Restorying Personal Stories of Experience: A Narrative Inquiry into My Search for Meaning Making and Identity Formation, 50(2), 0724.

Abstract: In this thesis research, I excavate memories which draw a strong connection between my personal and professional lived experiences. I re-examine some of my narrative texts, and investigate how these texts autobiographically intersect. In addition, I explore my historical experiences as a black female, both as a student and a teacher in the Canadian school system, using stories of my past to help guide the discussion on how issues of schooling, culture, performance/drama, family, and gender all contribute to meaning making in my life. Through the narrative frame of personal journals, I discovered and demonstrate my learning as an aesthetic experience. Ultimately, the thesis culminates in a reflection on narrative and identity as it comes to shape the curricular decisions I make in designing a Remembrance Day Project for my Grade 6 class.

Wiebe. (2012). Restorying in Canadian Mennonite Writing: Implications for Narrative Inquiry.

*In Dissertation Abstracts International, Section A: The Humanities and Social*

*Sciences* (Vol. 72, Issue 7, p. 2308).

Abstract: This thesis is about restorying, a writing-driven process that narrative researchers use to analyze the personal narratives-the general descriptions and stories about life experience-that form their data sources. Through four narrative research studies, I seek to synthesize and broaden the discussions of restorying and narrative analysis found in research textbooks. Together, these studies ask what novice narrative researchers can learn about restorying from the personal

narratives of two award-winning Canadian Mennonite authors, Di Brandt and Miriam Toews. While narrative inquiry has been described as a literary form of research, the voices of professional writers like Brandt and Toews are seldom heard in textbook discussions of narrative inquiry. My thesis also adds to the small but growing body of literary scholarship pertaining to these two acclaimed writers. I conclude by suggesting six approaches that novice narrative researchers can use to restory personal narratives: 1) Wiebe (2010) through narrative re-presentation, (2) restorying by thinking through narrative, (3) restorying through character, (4) thematic restorying, (5) structural restorying, and (6) functional restorying. I offer examples of these approaches from the personal narratives of my research participants (Brandt, Toews, and Toews' fictional character Nomi Nickel) and from my analyses of their narratives. In addition to restorying, I demonstrate several other strategies for using one's narrative research writing as inquiry or a method of discovery and analysis: (1) revising, (2) conversing about writing in progress, (3) writing in journals, (4) keeping readings logs, and (5) experimenting with narrative form. Keywords: Di Brandt, Canadian Mennonite, narrative analysis, narrative inquiry, Nomi Nickel, personal narrative, restorying, Miriam Toews, writing as inquiry.

### **Science Education**

Segura, P. (2011). *Using Inquiry to Teach and Learn Science: A Narrative Inquiry*. Proquest Dissertations Publishing.

Abstract: The focus of this inquiry was to further the understanding of what happens to science teachers' beliefs about inquiry-based science instruction, as well as their ability to conduct inquiry-based lessons, as they are systematically immersed in professional development

designed to model teaching science as inquiry. Additionally, barriers that prevent science teachers' abilities to teach science as inquiry were explored. Study participants were rural school science teachers who were part of a Texas Teacher Quality Grant and who completed a 45-hour graduate course and 60 hours of professional development over 8 months. As part of the grant activities, the teachers participated as learners in authentic, inquiry-based science activities which focused on physics principles; explored inquiry as a pedagogical approach to teaching science; and developed inquiry-based lesson plans to teach in their classrooms. The narrative inquiry research method, a collaborative approach involving mutual storytelling and restorying as the research proceeds (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990) was utilized. Two teacher participants' stories were expressed through journaling, interviews, conversations, and the researcher's observations. The research stories generated from the experiences of the three teachers will inform how science instruction in the teachHOUSTON program will unfold in the future as well as the knowledge base concerning how and what teachers learn through inquiry-based teacher professional development.