

WOMEN'S CENTERS AT COMMUNITY COLLEGES:  
BUILDING BRIDGES FOR NONTRADITIONAL STUDENTS

by

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## ABSTRACT

Higher educational institutions in this country are struggling with a variety of pressures including demands for accountability, student success, and fiscal responsibilities. The open-door policies of community colleges mean these issues are sometimes more difficult to confront. As the enrollment trends shift more nontraditional student populations are growing, and community colleges are often the choice for these students. This has sparked increased research on nontraditional student population groups.

Among the groups that have become a focus of research are nontraditional adult students who may have interrupted their educational paths. These reentry students may return to school for a number of reasons, but it is often to improve their employment situations. Women sometimes return to school after life altering events such as divorce or job loss, and community colleges are a draw for these students because they are more affordable, more conveniently located, and offer a variety of programs and certificates. However, the very reasons nontraditional adult women return to school create some specific barriers for their success.

Built on a foundation of the best practices, programs, and resources currently offered by Illinois community colleges, this model describes the components of a comprehensive women's center that a community college could provide as a centralized support site for this growing population. The goal of this work is for community colleges to consider establishing a women's

center to further the institutional mission and culture of inclusion, create a source of advocacy for equality, and address academic and social concerns facing these students. Although every college must adjust such an endeavor to their specific institutional mission, vision, and goals, this model also proposes an approach for implementing the center.

KEY WORDS: student success, reentry students, nontraditional adult women students, campus women's centers, community college student services

## DEDICATION

This project is dedicated to the people who have been by my side and always supportive of my dreams and work: My husband Andrew and daughters Cecilia and Rachel. It is difficult to truly express the gratitude I feel for their encouragement, love, and patience during the process. This work would not have been possible without them.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
LIST OF TABLES .....	vii
LIST OF FIGURES .....	viii
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY .....	1
Introduction .....	1
The Nontraditional Student .....	3
Nontraditional Adult Women Students .....	6
Challenges for Nontraditional Women Students .....	8
Support Services for Nontraditional Women Students .....	11
Women's Centers at Colleges and Universities .....	13
Focus of the Project .....	15
Research Questions .....	20
Definition of Terms .....	21
Conclusion .....	21
CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF LITERATURE .....	23
Introduction .....	23
Student Population Trends .....	23
Barriers for Nontraditional Adult Students .....	25
Social Supports for Nontraditional Adult Women Students .....	29
Institutional Supports for Nontraditional Adult Women Students .....	31
Campus-Based Women's Centers .....	34
Other Campus-Based Services and Centers .....	37
Conclusion .....	37
CHAPTER THREE: STUDY METHODS AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE MODEL .....	39
Introduction .....	39
Study Research Questions .....	39
Existing Models and Services in Illinois .....	39
Developing a Comprehensive Contemporary Women's Center .....	41
Components of the Comprehensive Contemporary Women's Center .....	43
Conclusion .....	44
CHAPTER FOUR: A MODEL FOR A COMPREHENSIVE WOMEN'S CENTER .....	45
Introduction .....	45
Education and Leadership .....	47
Reentry Programming .....	48
Academic Support Workshops .....	48
STEM Fields and Career-related Programming .....	49



Advocacy for Academic Women’s-based Programming .....	51
Financial Aid and Scholarship Resources.....	51
Leadership Opportunities .....	53
Safety, Awareness, and Advocacy .....	54
Center for Advocacy, Activism, and Awareness .....	54
Centralized Approach to Address Sexual Assault and Violence .....	55
Promoting and Encouraging Safety and Wellness .....	56
Support and Community .....	57
Child-Care Facilities and Support .....	57
Social Support Groups .....	58
Community Outreach and Service Connections .....	58
Conclusion .....	59
CHAPTER FIVE: IMPLEMENTATION OF A COMPREHENSIVE WOMEN’S CENTER.....	60
Introduction.....	60
Step 1: Finding core supporters; meeting with interested individuals.....	61
Step 2: Conduct survey, focus groups .....	62
Step 3: Present to wider campus audience .....	62
Step 4: Develop a campus team .....	63
Step 5: Develop an advisory board .....	63
Step 6: Advisory board work.....	64
Step 7: Present plans to leadership .....	64
Staffing .....	65
Space .....	66
Promotion and Making Connections .....	67
Funding.....	67
Assessing the Center’s Success.....	69
Conclusion .....	70
CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS.....	71
Introduction.....	71
Needs and Services .....	71
Women’s Centers .....	72
Recommendations .....	73
What’s Next and Future Research .....	74
Conclusion .....	76
REFERENCES .....	77

## LIST OF TABLES

	Page
Table 1: Fall enrollment trends by age group, 1993-2009 .....	4

## LIST OF FIGURES

	Page
Figure 1: Diagram of Population Breakdown.....	16
Figure 2: Elements of a Comprehensive Women's Center.....	46
Figure 3: Stakeholders in Women's Centers.....	60
Figure 4: Steps for Planning a Campus Women's Center .....	61

## Chapter One: Introduction to the Study

### INTRODUCTION

In this volatile time for higher education in the United States, institutions face increased pressure to support student success. Colleges and universities are subject to financial difficulties, transparency demands, and pressures for completion which has sparked much research and a myriad of ideas aimed at helping institutions confront and solve these problems. Community colleges have struggled as their open enrollment policies add to the complexity of meeting these demands, therefore leaders must pursue transformations in many aspects of their institutions.

Adding to those pressures, enrollment numbers in higher education have been dropping. According to the American Association of Community Colleges (2017), enrollment has declined in most higher education sectors since 2013. Two-year public institutions have experienced a 9.6 percent decrease in this period, with enrollment dropping to about 5.7 million students (AACC, 2017). Although enrollment has dipped, community colleges can be a draw to populations seeking access to improved economic status. This draw is a source of growth in many student population subgroups, which community colleges must consider as routes to increased enrollment and successful completion. Payne, Hodges, and Hernandez (2017) advise that in the 21st century institutions must transform programs and services "to accommodate the dramatic shifts in student demographics" (p. 21).

One of the growing populations in community colleges is nontraditional students (NCES, 2015). Almost half — 46 percent — of all undergraduate students attend community colleges, and a majority of them are nontraditional (AACC, 2015). Nontraditional aged students are defined as those not in the 18-21 age group (AACC, 2015, NCES, 2015). Some experts point to this group as a potential area of expansion for community colleges since about 40 percent of higher education institutions were not meeting their enrollment and completion goals in 2013. Seeking ways to engage nontraditional students could provide an avenue for improvement in these areas (Williams, 2014). To address this demographic successfully, colleges will need to examine the support systems that benefit nontraditional student groups and explore ways to expand and enhance the programs to support the success of these students. Hittepole (n.d.) reports that nontraditional adult students are significantly less likely than traditional age students to complete their degrees within six years (p. 3).

The common approach to student service programs is to use a business model of generalizing about “customers.” Potts (2005) writes that the concept of students as customers has become part of the orthodoxy of higher education. He acknowledged that the college administrators cannot ignore the business and consumer aspects of running an academic institution. However, he argues that treating students as customers can corrupt the mission of education and diminish academic standards. Another scholar Wood (2016) claims: "The 'customer service' model of higher education is an illusory path to real academic reform" (para. 12). One author Mike Rose (2012) suggests instead an approach that mimics a small community where all participants' needs are considered — particularly the most vulnerable (p. 149-150). It

is that model which could bring focus to the varied demographic populations of students at community colleges.

## **THE NONTRADITIONAL STUDENT**

Nontraditional students can be younger than 18 and enrolled in dual education programs, or they may be over age 21 and have interrupted their academic progress because of life circumstances. Those older students may be returning to college to change and improve their employment status; they are often seeking to re-enter the workforce after an interruption of work and education, or to add skills and a credential to enhance positions in their current career. According to 2004 U.S. Census data, about 65 million people aged 25-64 (60 percent of that population) had no post-secondary educational credential (Bosworth, et al., 2007, p. 6). This group may enter colleges to enhance their employability and colleges need to consider them as an avenue for enrollment growth.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2015), the characteristics most common among nontraditional adult students include delayed enrollment into postsecondary education, part-time attendance, financial independence, full-time employment while enrolled, had dependents other than a spouse, were a single parent, or did not obtain a standard high school diploma (p. 1).

Enrollment numbers for Fall 2015 show that the average age for community college students was 28, and 49 percent of the students were older than 21 (AACC, 2017). Table 1 illustrates how age trends of fall enrollment at community colleges show growth in the 25-50+ group for the years 1993-2009 (Mullin, "Why Access," 2012).

Table 1: Fall enrollment trends by age group, 1993-2009

Year (Fall)	Age Group				
	Under 18	18-24	25-34	35-49	50+
1993	87,206	2,817,854	1,373,500	959,270	174,413
1995	165,831	2,519,560	1,331,997	1,037,781	251,421
1997	210,908	2,601,193	1,265,445	1,011,275	275,802
1999	245,098	2,723,307	1,165,575	969,497	288,670
2001	341,457	2,999,947	1,274,368	1,036,567	347,555
2003	344,093	3,663,261	1,445,573	1,094,767	357,696
2005	402,480	3,781,638	1,419,666	1,026,061	356,561
2007	488,009	3,668,993	1,416,268	983,667	370,345
2009	553,573	4,171,251	1,676,121	1,086,888	396,145

Sources: NCES (2011c); AACCC, "Why access" (2012)

The age statistics illustrate an increase in older students who come to community college for a variety of reasons. The circumstances that might lead students to delay their education include family and financial issues.

Any nontraditional student population requires college leaders to consider whether their programs — academic and support — are serving these students well. A report for the U.S. Department of Labor (Bosworth, et al., 2007) found that many millions of adult learners need to earn postsecondary credentials to improve their economic status yet "practices and policies of the higher education system continue to favor traditional, financially dependent, 18- to 21-year-old high school graduates who enroll full time" (p. 2). This short-sighted approach could hamper the enrollment and success of some nontraditional student population groups.

It is essential to consider the needs of these older students to support a stronger, more educated American workforce: "In 2015, the challenge for many community colleges is to

ensure that nontraditional students are served well, given their intrinsic role in the nation's long-term prosperity" (Mullin, Baime, & Honeyman, 2015, p. 6). This population can provide a source of growth for enrollment and achievement at colleges. According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, the U.S. ranks 16th in college completion rates for 25- to 34-year-olds (cited in AACC, 2014, p. 4). Brown (2012) calls for college leaders to be bold in creating new pathways and becoming advocates in adult learning and attainment efforts at multiple levels (p. 24). According to Hittepole (n.d.) the success of many nontraditional students is hindered by a lack of support services (p. 2). McLaughlin and Randolph (2012) argue that colleges must create a supportive environment which can lead to improved completion rates for this 25 and older population of students who often juggle responsibilities of motherhood, employment and schooling (p. 69). An analysis by the Aspen Institute (Conway, 2012) found that supporting adult students is essential to their ability to complete programs and attain credentials at community colleges.

Community colleges are at the heart of increasing credential achievement in the country. The American Association of University Women suggests a focus on community colleges because they "are critical to helping the United States once again become the world leader in higher education, we need to understand and support the students who attend these schools" (St. Rose & Hill, 2013, p. 5). Expanding knowledge about nontraditional adult students will aid them and the community colleges that they attend. According to the AACC (2014), "For many students, particularly those who have not been well served by their prior education, community colleges provide an educational home that can launch a lifetime of success" (p. 4).



Within the nontraditional college groups, several subgroups have become increasingly part of the focus of support services provided at community colleges. In academic year 2013, 100 percent of two-year institutions enrolled military service members or veterans and 58 percent of those had special organizations for students who are military personnel or veterans (Queen & Lewis, 2014). Many institutions provide a designated center for these students to address their specific needs and support. In addition, because the number of single parents enrolled as undergraduates in the country has doubled since 1992 (Rose, 2012, p. 8), many single parents are enrolled in community colleges that provide child care facilities. Within both these groups, women students — now the majority in higher education — have a substantial representation. This increase in women students within both of these target groups is an indicator of the need to focus on meeting their support service needs.

### **NONTRADITIONAL ADULT WOMEN STUDENTS**

Enrollment trends show that women students are the majority in higher education, accounting for 57 percent of students enrolled at community colleges in 2016 (NCES, 2017). Women's reasons for returning to college can range from personal to pragmatic (Firestein, 2002b, p. 334) and the decision affects many aspects of their lives. This element makes such a decision very complex for women who may have many other commitments to juggle if they choose to enroll in college.

Community colleges are often a draw for adult women students because the convenient locations — usually closer to home — and lower tuition rates as compared with four-year institutions are less of a strain on the family balance (Johnson, Schwartz, & Bower, 2000). As

institutions work to meet the needs of the changing student populations, they must consider the needs of nontraditional adult women students and what brought them back to school (Deutsch and Schmertz, 2011).

Adult women who enter community colleges are often seeking to return to the workforce, sometimes after having children, to improve their family's economic status. Many studies have tracked the reasons they take on the challenge of a return to school: "Researchers found that adult women students are often motivated to return to school after the loss of a job, divorce, death of a spouse, or career limitations due to lack of education" (White, 2001; Johnson, Schwartz & Bower, 2000, p. 291). Supporting such a return has historically been a role for community colleges: "They have been the platform from which millions of low- and middle-income Americans have launched their dreams" (AACC, 2012, p. 1).

Historically in the United States, women are more often than men placed in a position of subjugating their career or work goals to take on responsibilities of dependent care. According to Chamberlain (cited in Firestein, 2002b) women's educational and career paths are often interrupted by adult responsibilities from marriage and motherhood. According to research by Deutsch and Schmertz (2011), women students are more likely than men students "to be living in lower-income households, be older, be combining work and school, have children and be single parents" (p. 482) — all aspects that hamper retention and success at colleges. There is an assumption that women who leave paying careers to care for dependents lose skills for success in the workplace, and colleges often offer programs geared to returning to the workforce or getting a second chance at their education (Clarke, 2001). Those programs are intended to bring equality of educational opportunity as they empower women to fulfill their human

potential: “Lack of such empowerment denies the development of our most precious natural resource, our people” (Rodriguez, 1996, para. 37).

In 2013, more than 4 million women attended two-year public colleges, and about a quarter of them were mothers (St. Rose & Hill, 2013). Some of them were single parents, a status that creates additional pressures on them as students. In fall 2015, 17 percent of enrolled community college students were single parents (AACC, 2017). Community college programs for these parent-students — who may juggle conflicting roles — aim to support academic achievement. Child care can be the greatest source of stress for adult women students and many of them don’t feel they can cope with the demands of parenting and school (Johnson, Schwartz, & Bower, 2000, p. 298). Students who are parents find the availability of child care a valuable resource at community colleges (LaPaglia, 1994, p. 87).

### **CHALLENGES FOR NONTRADITIONAL WOMEN STUDENTS**

The nature of the motivations to return to school can also be the source of stress for adult women reentry students. Although such life altering events — divorce, death of a spouse, job loss — can lead them to seek bettering their circumstances through education, the burdens of such stressors can also be limiting to the success of this group of students (Johnson, Schwartz, & Bower 2000). Research by Johnson, Schwartz, and Bower (2000) supports the idea that resolving issues for reentry women early in their academic career will lead to more of them completing their goals. These women face additional pressures of keeping their goals on track as time and finances can be constrictive for them.

Challenges obstruct even the most driven of these students. Many of these women have additional burdens from work and family responsibilities, limited financial resources, and they may be academically underprepared (St. Rose & Hill, 2013). The absence from school — be it for two or twenty years — can cause difficulties and anxiety, even to the point of failure. The consulting firm InsideTrack found in a 2014 study that jobs, finances, and raising families are some reasons nontraditional adult students don't complete (Williams, 2014).

In one study of women at colleges across the country (Calkins, 1993) respondents identified finding time for studies and juggling family responsibilities as the top barriers to academic success. The two groups in Calkins' study expressed different specific needs for support programs. The students aged 30 and older desired child care support, women's health issues information, mentors, and time management programs (Calkins, 1993). Younger participants also wanted career guidance, social interaction, personal development and financial management advice.

The difficult terrain caused by juggling roles is especially prevalent in nontraditional adult women students. Researchers Thompson and Barcinas (2014) state: "The resounding issue at the heart of female adult learner persistence and completion seems to be role conflict" (p. 534). They define role conflict as when two or more roles vie for the attention of the student, for example the mother vs. the learner. Also, often women blame themselves for their inability to address responsibilities rather than question societal expectations (p. 533).

Author Nancy LaPaglia used journals from nontraditional adult women students in her work *Storytellers: The Image of the Two-year College in American Fiction and in Women's Journals* (1994). Twenty-three students described the challenges they faced while attending

community colleges. One student wrote: "There were times I was under so much stress I couldn't deal with it" (as cited in LaPaglia, 1994, p. 83). Others elaborated on the pressure that attending school brought; one wrote that her life "has been in constant turmoil the past few months"; another described the difficulties of trying to persist: "There is always the thought of dropping out drifting through my mind..." (as cited in LaPaglia, 1994, p. 83).

Unlike younger women and most men students, nontraditional women students often face the challenge of primary responsibility for family matters. Rodriguez (1996), found that these students also suffer more stress and guilt about family responsibility issues. His study found that there is a lack of support services to help nontraditional women overcome the barriers to furthering their education, and "the literature indicates that reentry women at community colleges, in particular, confront their own set of challenges" (Rodriguez, 1996, para. 3). These life struggles often interfere with their academic goals; as one student noted: "New wrinkle in my plans for my education. I might be pregnant" (as cited in LaPaglia, 1994, p. 86). It is essential to reduce barriers to success for all students "and, in particular, providing support services that consider women's roles as mothers and breadwinners are critically important to increasing the success of women at community colleges" (St. Rose & Hill, 2013, p. 17).

One study found that stress is the cause of many adult women students not completing their educational programs: "If these women could identify areas of stress and then work with community college staff and faculty members to resolve stress-related problems early in their academic careers, more adult women could complete training or degree programs" (Johnson, Schwartz & Bower, 2000, pp. 289-290). Another study of stress on students (Reisberg, 2000) found that more women than men (44 percent to 33 percent) believed they would need to get

a job to pay for college. The women in that study also reported that they spent more time studying and tending to housework or childcare responsibilities than the men.

### **SUPPORT SERVICES FOR NONTRADITIONAL WOMEN STUDENTS**

Although women are the majority of all higher education and community colleges students, services provided by community colleges to assist them are often the same as those available for all students. The National Center for Education Statistics (2018) reported that women were 56 percent of all postsecondary students in 2015. According to St. Rose and Hill (2013), in 2010 women made up 57 percent of the enrolled populations at community colleges. The perception is that, since so many women attend these colleges and are often successful, their needs are being met. The services — child care, campus safety, mentoring — which research shows are important for nontraditional adult women students are placed outside the usual structure of campus student services. While programs for women students may have been expanded, Garcia (1995) explains that they are often perceived as outside the traditional student support services structure. In spite of the large number of women students, their needs are viewed as special services (for example, child care) rather than basic ones and reentry women students are categorized as a "special interest group" (Garcia, 1995, p. 32-33). This placement has caused services for women students to be considered less essential and may put them at risk in times of fiscal difficulties. Therefore, a change of perspectives on student services may be required; it is important that people in power do not view services for nontraditional women students as expendable (Garcia, 1995).

The combination of many family responsibilities and commitments with the demands of

returning to school can create additional challenges and barriers to academic success for the nontraditional women student. The areas of concern for these students can be situational — employment, family concerns, transportation, and financial, or institutional — scheduling, program requirements, tuition, fees, and other costs. However, two-year colleges do not always help students cope with the stress and juggling demands (LaPaglia, 1994, p. 86). One researcher (Smith, 1998) found that nontraditional women students can feel fragmented and guilty by these conflicts, "but it is likely that she may be viewed as less professional or less committed to goals by faculty" (p. 10).

Among the areas in which a college may offer specific supports are financial programs, academic assistance, support groups, child-care facilities, and career development programs. Some programs that provide support for these students include child care centers, orientation programs geared toward adult reentry students, academic and financial advising geared toward adult reentry students, peer advisers, healthy lifestyles, and early warning assessment tools. Increasing staff and faculty awareness of the pressures and extra demands reentry women experience as they enter college can be encouraging and reassuring (Johnson, Schwartz & Bower, 2000).

Successful programs — some at four-year institutions — that support nontraditional women students have not been replicated at institutions where a majority of these students enroll (Musil, 2012). Musil explains that some colleges view these students as part of their diversity efforts: "They take students' individuality — their histories, cultures, and current contexts — into account to create effective educational environments for nontraditional students, whether women veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, women on

welfare or in abusive relationships, mothers caring for their own children while also caring for their parents, or younger women paralyzed by uncertainty about their future careers” (Musil, 2012, para. 5). Johnson, Schwartz & Bower (2000) advise that a combination of early intervention, deliberate efforts at counseling and advising, and the recognition of specific stressors for adult women students is a necessity (p. 299). These kinds of programs and services can be organized, supported, and promoted by a campus women's center.

### **WOMEN'S CENTERS AT COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES**

The first campus-based women's center was opened at the University of Minnesota in 1948 (Willinger, 2002, p. 47). Precursors to the campus women's centers developed in the 1970s were often labeled Continuing Education for Women Centers (Bengiveno, 2000, p. 2). Nontraditional aged women students were the focus of those centers. According to researchers cited by Bengiveno (2000), "they concentrated primarily on returning women and provided information, education and career counseling for students" (p. 2). Most of the current centers were developed in response to second-wave feminism of the 1960s and 1970s as a resource to provide support for women students. Their missions often focus on academic supports, resources, and opportunities for students, staff, and faculty (Kasper, 2004a, p. 185).

Many centers also developed programs to address needs that Kasper (2004a) explains have "an emphasis on the elimination of oppression and discrimination on the basis of sex, race, age, class, religion, and sexual orientation as well as other barriers to human liberation" (p. 185). Women's centers at higher education institutions can support gender equity strategies across all areas of campuses (DiLapi, Goettsch, Holgerson & Rietveld, 2008). However, while



some institutions have provided these services for their women students, many directors of these centers express that they often face pressures to justify their existence on campuses (Kasper, 2004b). They report that it was important to demonstrate "that they were the main (or only) resource for students dealing with issues related to sexual assault, relationship violence, eating disorders, and sexual harassment" (Kasper, 2004b, p. 496). The University of Minnesota (2018) states that current gender inequities and movements addressing injustices are a driving force for that school's women's center which provides "educational, thought-provoking, and inspirational information and resources via our programs, initiatives, collaborations, advocacy, and our social media" (Why we still need..., 2018).

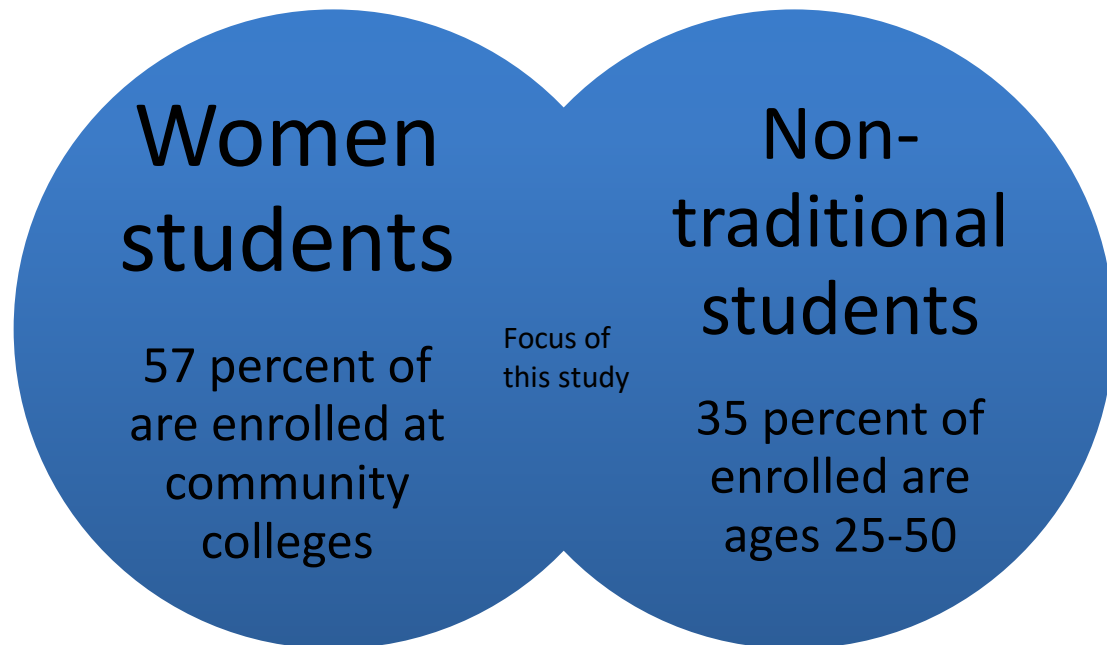
Three major areas of activities and engagement are identified by Sharon Davie (2002) in her guide to women's centers in the 21st century. Transformation, education, and leadership are the streams on which most women's centers focus services for students (Davie, 2002, p. 20). Transformation is explained as the way a center will allow for connections with others that can be mind-expanding (p. 20); the center provides encounters and experiences that may change an individual — a key attribute for all educational institutions. Davie (2002) describes the stream of education provided by a women's center as learning that extends beyond the classroom. For example, when a center provides programs, events, and displays that reach a wider community it serves the mission of education (p. 20). The final strand Davie (2002) identifies is leadership development, which she explains as building bridges for women to grow in academic endeavors and careers through mentorships and training (p. 35). However, every institution will have a different approach to these foci. Women's centers need to match their "mission and services with the mission and culture of the institution in which it is housed"

(Davie, 2002, p. 13). A nationwide survey and literature search by Charlotte Kunkel (2002) revealed that although every college culture is different, the needs of women students on most campuses can be grouped into five areas: safety, education and awareness, support and advocacy, equity, and community (p. 67). These areas are what can be core to the formation of a women's center, but they are "fluid and malleable" as students' needs arise (p. 67).

This dissertation research seeks to examine current services offered by community colleges for nontraditional adult women students and use this research, along with investigations into current practices, to present a guide for building women's centers at community colleges for the new millennium. Just as a bridge provides an easier crossing point on a journey, a women's center can help connect students to their goals.

## **FOCUS OF THE PROJECT**

In 2005, Tinto stressed that community colleges must examine internal factors in their institutions, not just external factors, to support change: "To be serious about student success, institutions would recognize that the roots of attrition lie not only in their students and the situations they face, but also in the very character of the educational settings" (p. 1). St. Rose and Hill (2013) found that more than four million women were attending two-year public institution in 2010 — a quarter of them were mothers and many of them had financial difficulties and were academically underprepared (p. 2). This study examines the current environment surrounding women's centers specifically at community colleges to determine if, and how, they are changing the character of their campuses to support success for nontraditional adult women students, specifically the population illustrated in Figure 1, below.



*Figure 1: Diagram of Population Breakdown*

Although there have been great strides in addressing the status of women in academic institutions, and many argue that we are becoming a more gender-neutral society, there are indications that sexism is still an issue of great concern. A Voices of Diversity study (Caplan & Ford, 2014) found that, "despite recent claims that we are in a post-racial and post-feminist period in which racism and sexism have been eradicated, so that no further attention to these issues is warranted, in fact, as noted, manifestations of racism and sexism have not disappeared but have often become more subtle" (p. 34). Participants in that study also expressed that sexism was viewed as less egregious than racism (Caplan & Ford, 2014) and therefore speaking out about it led to dismissive reactions (p. 55). This study found that subtle attacks, sometimes called microaggressions, can interfere with a student's ability to acquire an education (Caplan &

Ford, 2014, p. 35). As women students have become the majority in higher education, the belief that they do not experience sexism is not supported and a women's center can lead to increased awareness of such situations. In research on role conflict for nontraditional adult women students at community colleges (Thompson & Bacaris, 2014) it was evident that although overall attitudes about women returning to school have seemed to change, the institutional practices have not: "The paradigm shift has affected social beliefs but has not fully permeated the practice of supporting female adult learner return to college" (p. 535).

While some students may associate outdated or negative connotations with the concept of feminism, fighting for equality and protecting rights resonates with most of them as shown by the #MeToo movement. Kasper (2004a) found that women's centers often struggle with students' apathy or "the notion that feminism is not 'necessary' anymore, and some students' negative attitudes toward feminism as a result of various means of backlash" (p. 498). At its worst, "feminists are positioned as un- or anti-feminine women; as women who are anti-motherhood and anti-babies; as women who are against the traditional heterosexual family" (Kleinman & Ezzell, 2012, p. 408).

Kingsborough Community College in New York revitalized its women's center (Miller, E., 2002), and they have been able to show a direct impact on retention linked to their services or connections to community services (p. 3). Leaders at that college said they decided to consider disinterest and negative perceptions as a lack of knowledge and they worked to educate the college and community about women's issues (Miller, E., 2002, p. 4) to combat any negative attitudes against feminism.

Just as most higher educational institutions have moved to provide support and a community for veterans, creating a women's center is a step toward increasing support for groups of students who can benefit from the same types of support. The justification for veterans' centers is that even though offices exist that provide services and support, particular services may require tailoring to address the specific needs of these students (Rumann & Hamrick, 2009). They also recommend that student veterans have easy access to support information and are aware of the services available to them. Similar justification can also be an impetus for a women's center on a campus.

In many institutions, the nature of a support center is gender-neutral and inclusive, offering services to other groups, including men, or student-parents, as needed. Services for student-parents support fathers as well as mothers. For example, at Southern Illinois University, an emergency locator service sponsored by the Office of Women's Services has been widely used for men as well as women (Firestein, 2002b, p. 353). Many colleges are now opening centers that address the concerns of the LGBTQ communities, and a support center could be designed to include this group. The National Survey of Campus Women's Centers reported that 60 percent of the respondents said their center has programming and services for lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals (Firestein, 2002a, p. 227). Women's centers also often organize or support lesbian, gay, and bisexual awareness or pride events on campuses (Firestein, 2002a, p. 248). These support centers recognize that nontraditional adult women students who are lesbian or bisexual may face complex issues involving child custody and perceptions from potential employers (Firestein, 2002a, p. 236) and provide services and campus activities to support and expand awareness.

The mission for most campus women's centers includes working for equality and inclusion on campuses. One suburban Illinois community college identifies these as among the groups that their center serves: returning students; single mothers; nontraditional career seekers; victims of sexual assault, stalking, dating, and domestic violence; women in cultural transition; and LGBTQ+ individuals. Cox and Ebbers (2010) concluded that "The development of a women's center on a community college campus would give female students a safe and nurturing place to learn more about themselves and other women while also sharing experiences and ideas" (p. 357). Women's centers at colleges can become agents of shaping change in the culture of embracing differences. As Firestein (2002a) concluded: "Empowered by a vision of social justice and a genuine love for the women whom they serve, women's centers find themselves in powerful alliance with all in our society who honor difference" (p. 252).

While the nontraditional adult student is a growing population, a report for the National Association for Student Affairs Professionals (NASPA) found despite that fact, colleges and universities still cater to the needs of traditional students (Hittepole, n.d., p. 2). There have been few specific studies of nontraditional women students' use of women's centers or services, but one conducted at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale (Firestein, 2002b) found higher levels of awareness and satisfaction with the services of the women's center than other general campus services — including the nontraditional students' services office (p. 348). One administrator (Dalples, 2012) argues that, "to support student success, community colleges should provide access to financial and legal resources, comprehensive health services, on-campus childcare, and a women's center that actively supports diverse women across their various identities" (para. 6).

To identify best practices in women's center models, services, and support programs, the researcher examined public community colleges in Illinois. Illinois has 48 public community colleges, ranging from the urban Chicago City Colleges to the rural Lewis and Clark College; the high enrollment of College of DuPage (about 46,000 students in 2016) to the less populated (about 1,500) Lincoln Trail College (Illinois Community College Board, 2017). Each school was surveyed to identify current supports, programs, and best practices provided to meet the needs of nontraditional adult women students. Two large suburban colleges that have designated, independent women's centers received a more detailed investigation. The focus of the initial investigation was limited to student services representatives from the 48 public community colleges in Illinois. In addition to written responses from 16 of the 48 schools, the researcher also examined institutional websites to glean additional descriptive information.

This preliminary research into best practices, as well as areas of concern or omission, served as a foundation for a model for a contemporary women's center.

## **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

The overarching questions of this study are the following:

- How should community colleges support nontraditional adult women students effectively?
- What central resources are needed to help nontraditional adult women students achieve their goals successfully?
- What campus environment must exist that will support nontraditional adult women students positively and proactively?
- How can a women's center establish that supportive environment?

## DEFINITION OF TERMS

In this document, several often-confused terms are used extensively; thus, this list of definitions will clarify the researcher's use.

Community College	A public, two-year institution that awards degrees and certificates along with educational opportunities and workforce training for the community it serves (AACC, 2010)
Nontraditional students	Students who do not fit into the age group of 18-21 years (NCES, 2014)
Reentry students	Students who have returned to post-secondary education after a delay of more than a year, often more than a decade
Nontraditional adult student	Students over the age of 21 have delayed enrollment in post-secondary education (NCES, 2015)
Student success	Completing credentials for a degree or certificate program or meeting educational goals (AACC, 2010)
Campus women's center	A designated place or space that provides information and services to students related to women's issues

## CONCLUSION

As institutions of higher education across the country struggle with declining enrollment, accountability pressures, and completion demands, transformations will play a key role in mapping the future. Community colleges have traditionally been the institutions that serve a variety of student populations. Therefore, support programs should focus on a variety of student demographic groups and their individual needs. Women students are now the majority in higher education, and there is an increase of adult returning students. The intersection of these two groups are the focus of this project. Nontraditional adult women students can be a source of enrollment growth and increased success rates at community



colleges. A women's center can provide consolidation and promotion of support services and establish a visible community for this group and this project seeks to provide a guide for community colleges to create such a center.

## Chapter Two: Review of Literature

### **INTRODUCTION**

This review of literature will describe the scholarly body of knowledge surrounding the issues addressed and the research questions posed by the study. This review is organized to address the areas of influence including student population changes and trends; barriers for nontraditional adult women students; social supports for nontraditional adult women students; institutional supports for nontraditional adult women students; and established campus-based women's centers.

### **STUDENT POPULATION TRENDS**

Enrollment data illustrates that the demographics of the higher education student population are changing. Nontraditional student populations are growing, as demonstrated by reports from the American Association of Community College (2014, 2017, 2018) and the National Center for Educational Statistics, leading many researchers to focus on this population. The AACC (2018) reported that 49 percent of students enrolled in community colleges in 2011-12 were over the age 22. Using data from student attendance patterns, a report of trends in student demographics by Payne, et al. (2017) predicts that between 2013 and 2020, the number of students aged 25 and older will increase more than three times than the number of students 24 and under — 16-17 percent as compared to 5 percent (p. 24). Their report advises

that as these changes occur it is essential for institutions to consider the needs of different student demographics (Payne, et al., 2017, p. 21).

The nontraditional adult student is one who delays or suspends seeking post-secondary education; therefore, examining factors for the delays can be important to understanding these students. An article in *Social Science Research* outlined the research of Taniguchi and Kaufman (2007) who studied gender differences in the causes of delayed enrollment of adult students. This study revealed that most of these students return to school focused on attaining economic and employment improvements for them and their families. Their research also indicates differing factors based on gender; for example, divorce was a driving force for women to return to school (Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2007).

A report for the Department of Labor (Bosworth, et al., 2007) noted that adult learners (over age 24) made up 44 percent of all post-secondary students in the U.S. but projected a slower growth rate in the number of those adult students earning credentials. As one examines the trends and factors driving their return the issues of completion must also be considered.

One-third of all higher education students, including 40 percent of undergraduates, attend community colleges according to St. Rose and Hill (2013, p. 7). Their report also showed that women make up a larger portion of the student body at public community colleges than at all other institutions: "Women outnumber men across all races/ethnicities at community colleges" (St. Rose & Hill, 2013, p. 17). A study conducted by Francois (2014) brought focus on motivations of nontraditional adult students who enroll in degree programs and identified the dominant aspects as professional advancement and cognitive interest. The American Association of Community College (2017) study shows the increasing average age of students

along with socio-economic factors that affect these students, such as gender, part-time enrollment, and parental situations.

These sources demonstrate the changing demographic patterns of higher education, showing an increase in nontraditional adult students seeking post-secondary credentials. Therefore, studies also sought to examine those demographic groups closer in order to understand their needs. When examining the factors that drive these students to enter institutions, researchers note some indicators based on gender and suspect that these factors might affect successful completion of education.

### **BARRIERS FOR NONTRADITIONAL ADULT STUDENTS**

A report for the U.S. Department of Labor (Bosworth, et al., 2007) focused on the challenges faced by students over 24 years old. The report noted the issue raised by these difficulties: "Financially independent, working full time, with dependents and family responsibilities to juggle, and back in school after an extended time out — adult learners are at great risk of not achieving their postsecondary education goals" (p. 8).

Spellman (2007) explained the general barriers to enrollment and retention faced by adult students at community colleges. In *Back to school: Why everyone deserves a second chance at education*, Rose (2012) profiled the experience of some of these nontraditional, returning students, especially at community colleges. The subjects of Rose's research provide examples of how nontraditional adult students at community colleges need different kinds of support from traditional aged students, whether in developing their academic skills or in juggling outside commitments. Capps (2012) completed a study on the nontraditional adult

students at Salt Lake Community College in Utah, identifying issues that hampered student persistence including employment, health, and relationship issues (p. 40). Her research indicated that the strongest effects on persistence of adult students was personal circumstances and responsibilities (Capps, 2012, p. 44). Capps concludes that institutions must develop policies and practices to create a climate that addresses some of the stressors created by these factors. An article by Conway (2012) detailed a recent study by the Aspen Institute finding that colleges should support adults in areas of child care, transportation, and finances, all barriers to their ability to attain a degree or certificate. By comparing programs across the country, the study found that programs addressing these factors aided students' abilities to attain credentials, complete programs, and further employment goals.

The literature addressing barriers for nontraditional students includes a rich discussion of the issues faced specifically by women in this group. Johnson, Schwartz, & Bower (2000) examined the conflicting roles faced by nontraditional women students and how the life changes that cause some conflicts often had prompted the return to school. Their work focused on stressors that can cause these students to struggle and fail to complete. Juggling multiple roles, fear of failure, and navigating the campus environment were among the key factors that affect the ability of women adult students to complete their college goals. When faced with these issues, many women make the choice to give up on their education (Johnson, Schwartz, & Bower, 2000, p. 292). Cox and Ebbers (2010) conducted a study of nontraditional women students at a large Midwest community college and found that these students face complicated barriers to completion. Their results showed that positive support systems and experiences on campus were important for this group, as was the ability of the college to communicate about

services with nontraditional adult women students (p. 356). Their study revealed that nontraditional women students at the colleges responded well to personalized assistance with registration, financial aid, and classroom issues. Among their key recommendations was that supporting aspirational capital — defined as the drive to be successful in their goals despite obstacles — of these students can support their persistence (Cox & Ebbers, 2010, p. 358). The study concluded: "The findings of this study also suggest that student affairs professionals, community college faculty, and campus administrators need to be more intentional in taking steps to address the needs of adult women who attend community colleges" (Cox & Ebbers, 2010, p. 356).

In their article about adult women who return to college, Deutsch and Schmertz (2011) presented narratives from these students to focus on the barriers that most affected them. Risk factors that they identified for students failing to complete include being financially independent, enrolling part time, having dependents, and delaying enrollment after high school. The AACC report "Why Access Matters?" (Mullin, 2012) focused on the role public two-year institutions play as they serve a majority of the higher education students who face those challenges.

In their extensive report on women students at community colleges, St. Rose and Hill (2013) reinforced the predominant themes in this literature, stating that the main barriers for student completion are financial difficulties, work and family obligations, lack of academic preparation, and lack of institutional support systems (2013, pp. 20-21). Their report noted that family responsibilities weigh heavier on women community college students — 68 percent reported spending more than 30 hours of caregiving weekly to children (St. Rose & Hill, 2013, p.

21). They also found that adult students are more often unaware of the campus culture and services available to them (St. Rose & Hill, 2013, p. 21).

Another issue that researchers identified for adult returning students is lacking a connection to campuses. According to an article in *University Business* (Williams, 2014), a study by the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators found that many adult, returning students reported feeling out of place on campuses and having prior negative experiences which contributed to a delay in their education. Filipponi-Berardinelli (2013) found that women reported barriers to reentry into education, including guilt over social expectations in other areas of their lives. This study of adult women students included recommendations that college service professionals create greater awareness of these students' needs across their campuses and establish programs and stronger lines of communication with them to address their needs.

Hemmerich (2014) conducted a study of persistence issues for nontraditional adult women at a northeastern community college that found that misinformation from college services; communication at the college; and balancing the roles of parent, provider, and student were the most prevalent and challenging for the students. In their report, Thompson and Barcinas (2014) also gathered data on how role conflict hampers persistence in their study of nontraditional adult women students at community colleges. The students in the study revealed that though many received moral support from family, they did not always get practical assistance in alleviating the struggles that going back to school created. Most women in the study who had children also reported that their role as mother would always supersede their role as a student.

Caring for dependents has been shown by several researchers to be a key barrier to nontraditional women students. St. Rose and Hill (2013) reported that more than one million mothers were attending community colleges in 2008. Their report noted the importance of affordable on-site child care for student parents and difficulties caused by limited slots at the fewer than half of all community colleges who offer them (Rose & Hill, 2013). The Institute for Women's Policy Research brief (Eckerson et al., 2016) examined declines in campus child care facilities and state-by-state availability. A report by Gaul, Noll, and Reichlin (2017) focused on the financial burdens and effects on completion of parent students along with the growth of this population at community colleges. All of these studies show the need for child care facilities and availability to support success of nontraditional adult women students.

A Voices of Diversity study of students' experience of racism and sexism on campuses (Caplan & Ford, 2014) found most participants had "witnessed or heard about incidents on campus involving race-based or sex-based discrimination, harassment, or aggression" (p. 42) throughout their college experiences. The report argues that these issues can affect a student's perception and confidence in the academic setting (p. 35).

## **SOCIAL SUPPORTS FOR NONTRADITIONAL ADULT WOMEN STUDENTS**

One early study by Mumford (1996) of mentoring programs for African-American reentry women students found that the women in the study perceived mentoring programs as important to their personal and educational growth (p. 20). A study of a group of women community college students above the age of 25 found that a personal support group positively impacted the students (VanEvery, 1999).



In their research, Johnson, Schwartz, and Bower (2000) switched the focus and looked at how increasing awareness of these support needs among staff and faculty can improve student success outcomes. Carney-Crompton and Tan (2002) reported on the emotional and instrumental supports that may reduce “the negative psychological consequences that increased roles, demands, and conflicts can have on an individual” (p. 150). Their study also elaborates on the need for social supports with an additional awareness of both quality (perceived satisfaction) and quantity (the numbers) of services provided which may mediate pressures from role multiplicity.

McLaughlin and Randolph (2012) surveyed 240 student-mothers at a community college in the southeastern U.S. to identify supports that aided low-income mothers. Their study developed a scale to measure perceived supports from faculty and staff. The results showed that students needed to receive more information about child care, scholarships, and future plans, and that study "respondents who perceived faculty and staff as supportive were more likely to be committed to college" (McLaughlin and Randolph, 2012, p. 65). Musil's (2012) study stressed how involvement by faculty and staff can be critical in retention and success for adult women students (para. 4). In her study of women reentry students, Filipponi-Berardinelli (2013) investigated how the students coped with challenges and used support systems and groups offered at their institutions. Students in one study (Hemmerich, 2014) reported that a mentor or support group would help them understand the challenges others have also faced and that their experiences are not unique. Hittepole (n.d.) wrote a guide for the National Association for Student Affairs Administrators (NASPA) concerned with aiding nontraditional adult students and one recommendation was that colleges create a space for these students to gather,

socialize and study to establish a sense of belonging, and to form an organization or affinity group to combat isolation that many of them experience (p. 4).

These studies reveal that nontraditional adult students benefit from social supports that counter their challenges of juggling multiple role responsibilities and create a sense of community by establishing connections with faculty, staff, and other students.

### **INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORTS FOR NONTRADITIONAL ADULT WOMEN STUDENTS**

In considering how colleges can integrate services for nontraditional adult students into their established structures, there is research that examines various approaches. For example, Padua's (1994) research focused on the role of counseling — personal and financial — to benefit reentry women students, while Garcia's article (1995) argues that student service professionals should develop policies and programs to maximize the needs of all student populations through assessment and collaboration across the campus. Garcia (1995) studied emerging programs for women at community colleges. She argues that a male paradigm dominates the student services landscape which has relegated some services as extra — for example child care or health and wellness programs. She found that the positioning as “special” or extra of these programs can be detrimental to their maintained financial or institutional support (Garcia, 1995, p. 33). She recommended that institutions reshape the student services landscape in ways that embrace more diverse groups. An example of this approach is a program at Southeastern Community College in Iowa that helped displaced workers feel more comfortable enrolling in college with a crash course on the issues that arise for them (Miranda, 2008). The program resulted in 73 percent of the attendees attending the

college. The course provided these nontraditional reentry students with step-by-step guides to navigating the college terrain, addressing some of the common concerns such as registration, financial aid, and career paths. Career plans are often a concern for nontraditional adult students who return to school to improve their employment status. Therefore, studies like one by Brown (2012) focused on developing programs that will grow the workforce by providing supports for nontraditional adult students, advising that institutions must develop new models and services for these students to support their persistence and success (Brown, 2012, p. 2). Guilford College in North Carolina also had success with programs of mentoring and support systems addressing the needs of nontraditional adult students (Brown, 2012). The programs that were deliberately aimed at supporting adult students increased persistence levels for those students to 86 percent. A U.S. Department of Education study (Hector-Mason, Narlock, Muhisani, & Bhatt, 2017) examined how adult learners are supported in their transitions to post-secondary educational opportunities in the areas of academic, advising, and support services. In a guide for NASPA, Hittepole (n.d.) recommended many strategies for institutions including offering child care services for parent-students, developing specific academic skill supports for reentry students, instructing faculty in engaging adult students, and flexible scheduling of classes and student activities. She provides a "call to action" to address the unique needs of these nontraditional adult students (p. 5).

Johnson, Schwartz, and Bower (2000) found that the areas for support most needed by adult women students were child care, orientation, advising, healthy lifestyles, and early warning systems (pp. 292-294). In 1995, researcher Adair (cited in Deutsch & Schmertz, 2011) and Clarke (2011) examined how gender positioning has shaped women's pathways in higher

education. Both of these studies refer to nontraditional adult women facing more pressures from role conflicts and social expectations that are not often addressed in research or practice in higher education. Musil (2012) also reported that the position and development of programs that address some of these needs has been negatively affected by the increased enrollment of women at community colleges (para. 7), when they are perceived as unnecessary institutions may cut them. The common reasoning is that as women have become the majority of students in higher education they don't need special considerations or programs. Instead these sources examine how college programs and services should address their needs.

The research also found that nontraditional women students may benefit by resolving issues early in their academic careers (Johnson, Schwartz, & Bower, 2000), a fact that is supported by the research of orientation programs that provide a realistic view of time and effort required for success (Carney-Compton & Tan, 2002). Musil (2012) also explains that intrusive advising, which is interacting with students from the beginning throughout their academic journey about numerous issues, has shown to be a support for returning women students (para. 6).

The AACC (2012) report for redesigning 21st century community colleges initiative recommends that colleges "construct coherent, structured pathways to certificate and degree completion" (p. 26). Their report states that these guided pathways should integrate student support with instruction. As institutions consider ways to establish these pathway models, the key components are support through many levels to certificates and degrees and on to transfer institutions or employment opportunities: "Students receive assistance through small group advising sessions that help them set goals and balance school with family and work obligations"

(McClenney, Dare & Thomason, 2013, p. 58). Brown (2012) connects these pathway initiatives to returning adult students saying leaders in higher education "must be bold in creating new pathways and becoming advocates in adult learning and attainment efforts at multiple levels" (p. 24). This literature emphasizes that women's centers can provide information and connections to institutional guided pathway programs. Centers can be integrated into the programs as one aspect of support for nontraditional adult women students to move efficiently through college programs to their goals.

Many researchers (Davie, 2002; Miller, E., 2002; Hemmerich, 2014; Gault, Noll, & Reichlin, 2016) recommend connecting women students to resources — on and off campus — through the college website. Creating a designated web space for nontraditional adult women students could serve to increase communication on topics and concerns that may affect persistence (Hemmerich, 2014). Some other recommended supports include outreach and transition programs, mentoring, peer support, and providing links to outside support services for student parents (Gault, Noll, & Reichlin, 2016).

### **CAMPUS-BASED WOMEN'S CENTERS**

In one of the first studies of university women's centers, Calkins (1993) found that students expressed a continued need for the resources and programs provided by the centers throughout their college careers. Calkins' research involved interviews with college officials at 16 institutions about their women's centers and then focused on students' participation and expectations for the center at the University of Missouri-Kansas City. While at the University of Virginia, Sharon Davie and Nicole Vicinanza conducted a national survey of campus women's

centers that gathered data from one-third of the women's centers at colleges and universities across the country (Davie, 2002, p. 4). Their study developed a snapshot of the structure, funding, and services offered at campus women's centers. Davie (2002) edited a comprehensive guide entitled, *University and college women's centers: A journey toward equity*, which provided perspectives from across the country on how to build a campus women's center and how to deal with many of the challenges in the process. This book compiled reports from 24 leaders of campus women's centers and addressed a variety of issues linked to developing and maintaining centers.

Charlotte Kunkel (2002) of the University of Colorado Boulder conducted research and surveyed other college women's centers to support creating a women's center on their campus (p. 67). Kunkel (2002) recommended that the university create a women's center with a broadly defined scope to address the five needs areas (safety; education and awareness; support and advocacy; equity; and community) her research uncovered. One report by Miller (2002) detailed the expansive revitalization of the Women's Resource Center at Kingsborough Community College in New York. The report explained how the college redefined the center's mission, established broader support, connected to women across the campus, and assessed progress of its revitalization. In her 2002 article, Firestein extended the examination of women's centers to reveal how they might help the institution support nontraditional adult women. Firestein reports that these students are hampered by institutional, social, and personal barriers. Examples of these barriers are institutionally enforced regulations for course load and degree completion, societal pressures for appropriate roles for women, and personal issues from stress caused by multiple role management (Firestein, 2002b, p. 337, 339). She

provided examples of many innovative programs serving reentry women students; support with developmental programs, employment development for displaced homemakers, and child care supports were among those that were developed or promoted through a college women's center. These researchers provide examples of the ways that women's centers provide support and services to women students, and specifically to nontraditional adult women students at all higher education institutions.

Barbara Kasper (2004b) conducted a study of 75 campus-based women's centers in academic year 1999-2000, reporting data on administration, resources, and structures and addressed some key components of funding, structure, needs, and obstacles. Her work also provided perspectives on problems and practices (2004a). The most common problems were associated with funding, attitudes toward feminism, apathy, and time. Her recommendation for best practices for women's centers is to strive for inclusion of a wide range of student populations (men and non-feminist women) in their programs and policies.

In a later report, Kunkel (2007) explained the role of women's centers on campuses as information and support providers to help women negotiate their reentry and progression through higher education. Her comprehensive article addresses mission, financing, status, and history of these entities on campuses. One researcher focused on the educational roles of women's centers (Wies, 2011) rather than what she termed the "often-overemphasized activism aspects" (p. 255). Wies used Xavier University in Cincinnati, Ohio, as an example of a center that has combined thinking and action and made their center a "classroom" (p. 258-259).

## **OTHER CAMPUS-BASED SERVICES AND CENTERS**

The concept of a center is not just limited to women students; other demographic groups have been the focus of specific college services and centers. In a study of veteran students' retention and persistence, Aschuler and Yarab (2018) suggest that colleges need to address the different challenges experienced by this demographic group with programs and facilities including a veterans' resource center. Rumman, Rivera, and Hernandez (2011) stated that community colleges are positively positioned to serve nontraditional student populations including veterans. They recommend that to support veterans, colleges need to initiate programs, policies, and services — including centers specifically for veterans' (p. 56).

Ivory (2005) explored the absence of research on LGBT / LGBTQ populations at community colleges. Only one community college within his study had an LGBT center, and it is a shared resource with two four-year institutions (Ivory, 2005). Since then, major changes have taken place. In 2018, Henshaw reports that over 100 colleges across the country have established LGBTQ centers on their campuses. These examples show that institutions are finding ways to provide specialized services and create a supportive culture for a variety of student population groups.

## **CONCLUSION**

A wide range of sources note the increasing pressures on institutions of higher education to support student success, and report that community colleges are an integral part of this movement across the country. The nontraditional aged student population has also grown at all institutions and community colleges specifically. Researchers sometimes focus on



community colleges, as they enroll more nontraditional students, to examine the ways they provide support for these students. Women students, now a majority in the higher education student population, are a key area of this focus. Many researchers have undertaken a focus on nontraditional adult women students their specific needs. Women's centers, which traditionally were started to address some common concerns for these students, are not often the focus of studies, but some researchers have begun to examine them. Barriers for nontraditional students — especially women — show a pattern of social and institutional supports that may help these students achieve their goals and success at community colleges.

## Chapter Three: Study Methods and Development of the Model

### INTRODUCTION

As the literature review in Chapter Two reveals, there is great concern to increase student success rates at all higher educational institutions including community colleges. Increasing diverse student populations can become the focus of transformations in programs and services. Given that nontraditional adult women students are a significant population in two-year institutions, examining the programs and services that can support them is a valuable contribution. The foundational study and results of the survey of Illinois community colleges provided the basis to create a model of a contemporary, cohesive women's center of support.

### STUDY RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The research questions examined for the women's center model are the following:

- How should community colleges support nontraditional adult women students effectively?
- What central resources are needed to help nontraditional adult women students achieve their goals successfully?
- What campus environment must exist that will support nontraditional adult women students positively and proactively?
- How can a women's center establish that supportive environment?

### EXISTING MODELS AND SERVICES IN ILLINOIS

To identify the current status of women's centers in community colleges in Illinois, all 48 Illinois public community colleges were asked to identify existing services, activities, or groups

for nontraditional women students on their campuses. These contacts with Illinois community colleges indicated that, while most of the institutions provided limited programming for nontraditional women students, few focused specifically on this demographic:

- Only 2 institutions have independent Women’s Centers, while over 68 percent provide veteran support centers.
- Approximately 56 percent of the institutions provide campus child care centers.
- Under 12.5 percent of the institutions have specific advising for these students; however, 87 percent of the institutions offer advising and counseling during evenings and weekends, and 75 percent offer tutoring or study skills in those times.
- 37 percent of the colleges provide scholarships specifically for women students; 31 percent of the colleges offer scholarships for adult reentry students.
- 25 percent of the colleges have materials aimed specifically at nontraditional adult student.
- 19 percent offer support groups for women, and fewer than 6 percent offer mentor programs specifically for nontraditional women students.
- Only half of the colleges have advisers and counselors who have been specifically instructed on how to assist nontraditional adult students.

Some of the colleges offer programs for adult returning students, including one that provides a part-time campus job and tuition waivers to aid those who have financial difficulties. Some colleges mentioned services that benefit broader, more varied populations, and some cited budget concerns as restricting what they offer in terms of initiatives for these student populations.

The two colleges that offer specific services for women work under very different models: one is a program based on academic support, and the other is a women's information center providing all students with information from a variety of campus and community

support sources. One of the colleges also offers advising and financial supports that require students to meet specific criteria to receive the program services. That program becomes the students' main connection point to the college as they navigate their entire college experience. The other college offered more varied services for all students. Both have websites connected to their college's website; one provided many links to resources, programs, and services for students on and off their campus. Another similarity: both colleges' women's centers are partially funded by donations.

### **DEVELOPING A COMPREHENSIVE CONTEMPORARY WOMEN'S CENTER**

This background research into existing services at Illinois community colleges also provided essential components of the process required for community colleges to undertake opening a women's center. These steps include evaluating the college culture for a center; finding and recruiting on-campus and community supporters; surveying students and staff; forming an advisory board to establish mission, policies, and goals; and proposing a cohesive plan to administration and governing entities. Supporting this local research, the historical context and reports from individuals on the forefront of managing college women's centers across the country provided the elements of a roadmap that may be adapted to the culture of any community college.

Initially, one of the key steps is evaluating the college culture. Davie (2002) stresses that "sensitivity to institutional culture" will play a key role in developing a women's center (pg. 10). Part of the culture to consider is the political climate of the college, and Kunkel (2002) suggests gathering information about that can be a way to establish allies and opponents of a center (pg.

75). Kunkel (2002) advises that "reaching out to every political constituency" (p. 69) can prevent conflicts when starting a women's center. One possible avenue for assessing this culture is by conducting a needs assessment study of women students on the campus. In her work at the University of Colorado Boulder, Kunkel (2002) worked with a concerned group of campus leaders in initial discussions about addressing the needs of the women on their campus. A review of literature and a survey of comparable universities were conducted leading to her conclusion that she could identify the specific areas of women students' needs (Kunkel, 2002, pgs. 66-67). Her five common needs areas of (1) safety, (2) education and awareness, (3) support and advocacy, (4) equity, and (5) community provides a framework defining the essential roles of a women's center (p. 67).

A second essential foundational step to development is to form a core group of support by identifying and recruiting a solid working team. Davie (2002) found that planning and development sessions can be very productive especially if "conducted with a group of representative faculty, students, staff, and administrators from across campus, who are often joined by influential community members" (p. 11). These individuals may also become the core group to form the center's advisory board. One of the important initial board tasks will be to write a mission statement and goals for the center. Davie (2002) explains that a center's programming must be shaped by the mission, and the mission must be "shaped by the culture of the institution where it resides" (p. 5). Willinger (2002) further articulates the features of a campus women's center into three main elements: mission, services, and stakeholders (p. 48).

## COMPONENTS OF THE COMPREHENSIVE CONTEMPORARY WOMEN'S CENTER

Every college currently has some of the needed supports in place on campus to build better bridges for nontraditional adult women students. However, a women's center can provide connections to services, on- and off-campus, along with offering programs and supports within the structure of the center.

Diversity is a key aspect of any women's center: A center should aim to support and attract a diverse group of students and offer diverse programs. Kunkel (cited in Davie, 2002) recommends that a women's center should consider its constituency in the broadest range from the onset (p. 29). Davie also states that collaboration with diverse groups and campus departments can allow women's centers to increase their impact (p. 27). Kunkel (2002) views diversity as an essential aspect to any women's center: "A women's center must have at the onset a commitment to multiracial and multicultural diversity inclusive of women of color, bisexuals and lesbians, and all class backgrounds" (p. 70). Kunkel (2002) also addresses the issue of men's involvement in a women's center as being essential to support and inclusion; however, she adds that, because this support can be sometimes problematic, the degree of that involvement must be specifically tailored to each center (p. 71).

Three primary functional roles — education and leadership; safety, awareness, and advocacy; support and community — can provide a structure and framework to guide planning and organizing a women's center.

1. **Education and leadership.** A center should provide information on campus offerings or establish these: tutoring programs, workshops, career pathway plans, STEM opportunities, women's studies courses, research opportunities, financial aid and scholarships, speakers, mentoring, and peer support groups.

2. **Safety, awareness, and advocacy.** A center should support student and college events, or organize these: advocacy for equality, Title IX policies, campus safety, LGBTQ issues' support, health programs, and racial issues.
3. **Support and community.** A center should provide information on campus offerings and establish connections with external community supports for these: child care programs, support groups, internships, career mentoring, and service opportunities.

## CONCLUSION

The impetus for this product dissertation was the goal of improving academic success for one specific demographic student group that faces complex challenges to success. The women's center model presented here was built on a foundation of information from Illinois community colleges, supported by extensive research on nontraditional women students' needs and campus women's centers across the country. The following chapters provide an outline and explanations of the components mentioned above, along with examples from some current institutions with women's centers. An implementation guide in Chapter Five describes important aspects to consider when developing a comprehensive, contemporary women's center at a community college.

## Chapter Four: A Model for a Comprehensive Women's Center

### INTRODUCTION

A women's center can provide support for many students and become a central repository for information and resources for all members of the college's community. It can build bridges for students to find services on campus and in the community that can help increase their success and achievement in programs across the college. Although every college should adapt a center to its institutional culture, there are some common areas to be addressed. Davie (2002) advises that "the house that you build must be your own but open the windows to new ideas" (p. 15). She envisions women's centers as facilitating an opening of doors of the institution for growth for women and men "for learning, for living, for leadership" (Davie, 2002, p. 15). A women's center model presented by Willinger (2002) specifies these features: the mission which is the goals and purpose set for the center; services and programs that are connected to that mission; and stakeholders who are the individuals served by the center or working to achieve the goals of the center.

Reflecting the current research from Davie's (2002) three-pronged framework and Kunkel's (2002) five areas of needs for women on campuses, this figure illustrates an organizational framework for a women's center.



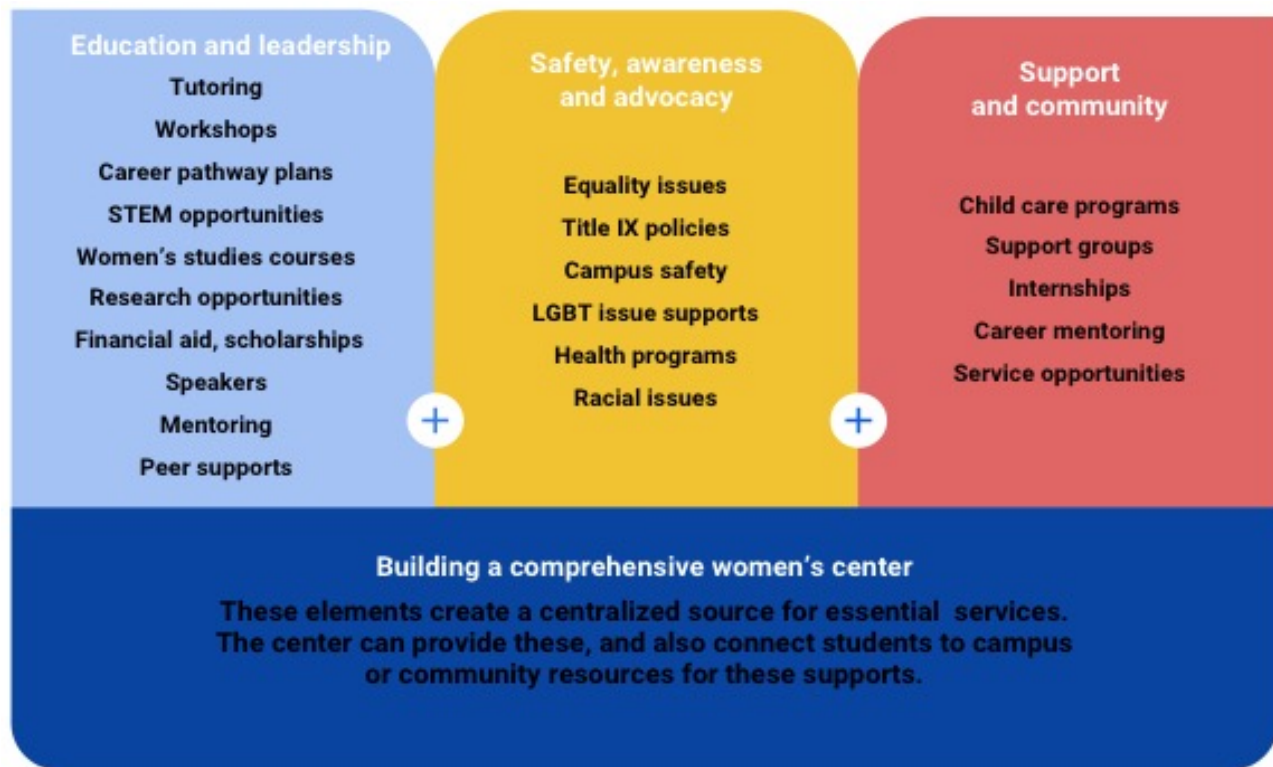


Figure 2: Elements of a Comprehensive Women's Center

As a starting point for planning a campus women's center, leaders should consider the following questions:

- Do we offer these services already? If so, are they offered at times and in places that serve all student populations?
- Is it possible to expand the services to enable them to better serve some student demographic groups like adult women reentry students?
- Would a central space promote knowledge and use of these services by students?

These questions can be answered by research of the college's enrollment and success rates along with student, faculty, and staff surveys. Kunkel (2002) explains that the process at University of Colorado-Boulder involved the formation of first an advocacy office and then a group of faculty, staff, and students who "discussed ways of meeting women's needs" (p. 66).

Focus groups can be formed to illicit specific information on a college's services and needs that could be addressed by a women's center. The overall goal for surveys, listening sessions, and focus groups must be to make decisions about what the women's center can offer to establish, promote, and supplement the current offerings at the college. For example, in a study of two Iowa community colleges, Smith (1998) found that the nontraditional women students had less awareness and use of services than traditional students.

### **EDUCATION AND LEADERSHIP**

Institutions of higher education are certainly focused on the areas of education and leadership, but a women's center can add specific elements to that mission and alleviate some of the challenges faced by nontraditional women students. A campus women's center can be a source for information and connections to the college's support services, along with developing some programs that broaden education experiences beyond the classroom. For example, the center could provide essential training for faculty on identifying and combatting microaggression related to gender and sexuality in classrooms. The women's center can be a support for educational programs such as this by bringing experts and students to share information and professional development. For example, at the University of Iowa's Women's Resource and Action Center, staff members use a variety of delivery methods for advocacy and education including speakers, research forums, workshops, and training programs (Davie, 2002, p. 34).

### *Reentry Programming*

When adults make the decision to return to college after a break in their educational journey, they must adjust their lives in many ways. Women, especially, often return after life-changing events such as divorce, and they can lack confidence in their academic skills or ability to navigate the college culture. A women's center can be a starting point for programs to enhance skills or promote a feeling of belonging. Workshops that center on refresher skills and college processes such as financial aid or career planning have proven to be valuable and successful services for this demographic. For example, a Pittsburg area community college offers a program for reentry women students which includes their group's enrollment in a block of developmental courses, allowing them to work together through the remedial classes (Firestein, 2002b, p. 348). Another institution developed a one-stop advising center for adult reentry students to address admission, degree planning, and financial aid (Brown, 2012).

### *Academic Support Workshops*

While many students express feelings of academic pressure and anxiety about their ability to be successful in college classes, some student groups seem to experience these kinds of doubts and difficulties to a greater extent. Nontraditional students, including veterans and reentry adult women, are among them, as they enter college with different life experiences than traditional students. To help these students, the women's center at Kingsborough Community College in New York hosts math anxiety workshops and reading groups (Miller, A., 2002). A women's center at a suburban Illinois community college regularly offers workshops on skills for school, work, and life. In order to identify the most valuable topics and the most

convenient scheduling options for the institution's students, the women's center must, of course, elicit direct input from students — questionnaires at orientation and registration events can be one method of collecting this information.

### *STEM Fields and Career-related Programming*

Women's centers can provide a logical point of contact for career exploration. As pressures have increased to bring more women into Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) fields, the center can be a place to gather information on careers and programs in those fields. Although women have made progress in some science fields, engineering and computer science are areas where they are still greatly underrepresented. According to the University of Minnesota (Why we still..., 2018), engineering and computer science have the two highest median starting salaries in STEM fields, but only about 18 percent of all graduates in these fields are women. In Illinois, the gender gap in STEM fields is larger; only 15.4 percent of students enrolled in those classes are female (Seitz, 2015). Current initiatives are moving in the right direction; for example, the Illinois pathways engineering program is connected to many community colleges in the state for ease of transfer. A recommendation from the University of Illinois Pathways Program includes providing materials showing women engineers as role models, helping women visualize the potential of careers in these fields (Seitz, 2015). A women's center could be central to these efforts. Mentors and speakers can open students' minds to the possibilities of careers in STEM, and community college women's centers can provide some of these experiences.

According to Miller (2002), a women's center can conduct workshops or career

exploration courses in math and science, promote women's courses in math and sciences that reach beyond traditional approaches, and build connections with businesses or government agencies that support women in those fields (p. 144). In the *Voices of Diversity* study (Caplan & Ford, 2014), women students reported that "they feel out of place in classrooms and majors where there are few women, because they feel they are not taken seriously and/or they fear confirming the stereotype that, for instance, women do not belong in Physics or Engineering" (p. 51). A women's center can also work with faculty in these areas to establish a stronger, more supportive classroom atmosphere for women entering these fields.

Nontraditional adult women students often return to college to grow their career opportunities, and these programs are essential to supporting those goals. A women's center can provide information and connections to a variety of programs and opportunities for this kind of support at the college. Career planning offices should be invited to work with the center to promote employment opportunities as well. One rural Illinois community college offers a program to combat unemployment and underemployment in the region by providing students age 24 or over full tuition if they enroll in a certificate or degree program.

Gaining valuable experience related to the sciences and a potential future STEM career during their college careers is also important to students' career exploration. Many colleges have undergraduate research opportunities; the women's center can help connect students to faculty who are willing to work with students on projects.

### *Advocacy for Academic Women's-based Programming*

While women's studies courses are less prevalent in community colleges than in four-year institutions, the college's offerings should be highlighted and promoted by a women's center. Kunkel (2007) found that women's centers are actively involved in developing curriculum and expanding offerings in women's studies and promoting transformational projects on some college campuses (para. 9). Many participants in the Caplan and Ford (2014) study reported that ethnic and gender studies courses are very often viewed negatively (p. 43-44); thus, awareness and support can be enhanced within a women's center. The National Survey of Campus Women's Centers (Davie, 2002) reported that 73 percent of the participating schools reported having close collaboration with women's studies programs (p. 26). While a full women's studies program may not be part of the community college's academic offerings, courses, speakers, and activities can, and should, be promoted and supported by the women's center.

### *Financial Aid and Scholarship Resources*

Materials and workshops about financial aid resources — scholarships, loans, grants, and aid programs — should be provided in the center. Workshops on requirements and applications can also be a part of the center's regular offerings. Of the Illinois institutions that participated in this study, about 38 percent offer designated scholarships for women students, and 31 percent offer some specifically for nontraditional adult students. Most of these Illinois community colleges do not circulate specific materials aimed at women or adult reentry students, although one large suburban institution reported that those groups are targeted by

recruitment staff. One Illinois community college with a women's program for academic support provides a guide for the student's path with advising throughout their entire college experience. They assist them with course selection for their programs and connect students to other services, including financial aid and scholarship opportunities across the campus. The women's center at Yakima Valley Community College, in Washington state, provides information and referrals to financial aid and social service programs (Firestein, 2002b, p. 351).

### *Mentorship Programming*

Internships and career mentoring can be one of the ways that people on campus and in the community can be a part of the women's center. Mentors can help students establish professional relationships and open their view of the possibilities for careers (Davie, 2002, p. 37). Munford (1996) found that mentoring relationships for the women in her study brought increased confidence, especially in relation to career advice. Dalpes (2012) writes that connecting students to mentors also provides exposure to important role models (para. 11).

While only one Illinois community college in this study reported providing mentors for adult students, one rural Illinois community college works with area employers to offer working internships combined with college enrollment which tripled enrollment in their manufacturing programs. The women's center can supplement the work of the campus' career center by seeking out additional resources for these important opportunities and ensure that students are connected to that office.

Mentoring is only one way to help students gain knowledge about real-world applications for their academic endeavors and help them establish connections for their future. In addition to established mentoring opportunities, short-term opportunities can connect

community women to the center through presentations or events where they can share their experiences and expertise (Davie, 2002, p. 37).

### *Leadership Opportunities*

The women's center can offer leadership development opportunities in variety of short- and long-term instructional programs. Visits and lectures that offer experience and advice of leaders from many areas are beneficial. One example is a distinguished alumna award given by the University of Virginia Women's Center that brings a leader to campus to share her experiences (Davie, 2002, pp. 38-39). Dalpes (2012) points out that women students may be less likely to participate in leadership development activities because of circumstances in their lives which means community colleges must be more "flexible and responsive" to these students' situations (para. 4). Community and business leaders are often good candidates to present to campus groups. A women's center can work to ensure that such presentations cover the kinds of issues nontraditional adult women might face, for example, how to handle a lack of confidence after an absence from the workforce.

Planning and leading campus events or service outreach opportunities can be another way of providing students with leadership experience through a women's center. Hemmerich (2014) advises that creating a support group for adult nontraditional women students serves to provide an opportunity for these students to be leaders and mentors while also giving support to peers facing similar challenges in their academic experiences. In his study of focus groups for adult nontraditional women, VanEvery (1999) found strong connections between support



group participation and the students' academic achievement and a decrease in their anxiety levels (p. 95).

### **SAFETY, AWARENESS, AND ADVOCACY**

An early study of campus women's centers by Calkins (1993) identified the services most often drawing participation and interest as mentor programs, self-defense, career guidance, and health issues. The National Survey of Campus Women's Centers (Davie, 2002) reported that the top three issues of importance for these centers were sexual assault, sexual harassment, and women's health (p. 33). A women's center should engage in programs and set a mission that addresses these concerns, provides support, and increases awareness.

#### *Center for Advocacy, Activism, and Awareness*

Establishing a women's center can be perceived as a politically charged act; however, most colleges and universities are the places where openness to many ideologies and academic freedom are already a part of the culture. The prevalence of current trends — the #MeToo movement for example — has sparked fresh awareness of issues of equality, abuse, and sexual violence. There are often events such as Take Back the Night marches or displays from the Clothesline Project already occurring on many campuses. The center can provide support for students, staff, and faculty to organize and promote such events. Dalpes (2012) says colleges "should strengthen policies and procedures to address sexual harassment and assault, which can severely limit a woman's sense of safety and well-being and undermine her ability to succeed" (para. 6). The presence of a women's center on campus shows a commitment to promoting equality and a part of that will be advocating for policies and programs for students

and staff to support that mission. Broad-based involvement representing diverse groups can spread awareness and should be a priority for a campus women's center (Kunkel, 2002, p. 69).

### *Centralized Approach to Address Sexual Assault and Violence*

Most colleges have a staff or individual in charge of Title IX issues, and the women's center can be an added connection with this staff to support for students, staff, and faculty as needed. In Kasper's (2004a) study, several centers reported they are the campus resource for "education, support, and counseling related to sexual assault and relationship violence" (p. 197). Many participants in Caplan and Ford's diversity survey (2014) reported that they "witnessed or heard about incidents on campus involving sexism of various kinds and/or sexual assault" (p. 52). The University of Minnesota women's center reports that one in five women on U.S. campuses experience sexual assault, and 13 percent have been stalked (Why we still need..., 2018).

Research done by Kaplan, Hindus, Mejia, Olsen, and La Due (2002) revealed four dominant models that women's centers use to address sexual assault on campuses: community-based, student-run, diffused, and centralized (p. 151). In the community-based model the women's center is a referral source for existing sexual assault services outside the institution. This model fits best for community colleges, nonresidential institutions, or when women's centers face limited resources (Kaplan, Hindus, Mejia, Olsen, & La Due, 2002, p. 151). The student-run model allows for students to establish services and lead activism activities, but the women's center provides administrative supports; the diffused model means that sexual assault cases are handled by a variety of campus departments, and the centralized model

means one department is responsible for education and service needs related to sexual assaults. When establishing a women's center, the campus must identify the most appropriate model for handling sexual assault issues and then develop the services and support mechanisms essential for the chosen model.

#### *Promoting and Encouraging Safety and Wellness*

A women's center can also offer programs or workshops on self-defense, domestic or sexual violence, stress reduction, and healthy living (Miller, E., 2002). Jefferson Community College in Kentucky partnered with a nonprofit organization in Louisville to add a youth-oriented program for girls to the college's Women's Center for Growth and Leadership ("Jefferson Community College to...", 2001). Self-defense courses can be a strong element of campus safety efforts and have shown to be not only empowering for women but also helpful to survivor's recovery (Kaplan, Hindus, Mejia, Olsen, & La Due, 2002, pp. 171-172).

While many of these safety, awareness, and advocacy services may already be available on a community college campus, establishing a comprehensive women's center can put them together for convenience and establishing a sense of community for support. Wies (2011) argues that one challenge for women's centers is to create a model that demonstrates supporting a balance of "education and activism" (p. 255). Leaders must be sure that a center's mission maintains a focus on education and supporting students towards their goals, but issues of equality, safety, and inclusion are clearly linked to those goals. Students may not be motivated to learn if they do not feel safe or that they are not receiving equitable treatment and opportunities in classes and at the college.

## **SUPPORT AND COMMUNITY**

While a women's center is a part of the campus community, it should also have its own identity and provide a sense of community for those who seek it. Studies of nontraditional adult women students have demonstrated that child care support, social connections, and community outreach are some of the specific supports that a women's center can provide to address the needs of these women and promote their academic retention and success.

### *Child-Care Facilities and Support*

The availability of child care facilities on college campuses has been shown to have more effect on women students than male students. If a college has an onsite facility, the women's center can be a connection point for those on campus who need child care. In their report on making college family friendly, Gault, Noll, and Reichlin (2016) mention that "community colleges enroll the largest share of parents pursuing higher education or training: 45 percent of all student parents attend public two-year institutions" (p. 2). They also note that almost 40 percent of women students at community colleges are mothers. A need for child care is included in factors that are attributed to low levels of degree attainment for parent students (Gault, Noll, & Reichlin, 2016, p. 6). Within Illinois community colleges, 56 percent have on-site child care facilities.

For colleges without on-site facilities, the women's center can provide information about off-campus child care facilities and help with other parental issues. For example, a program called Emergency Locator Services at Southern Illinois University allows parent students to leave their schedule with the women's services office so that, in the event of an

emergency with their child, they can be contacted immediately (Firestein, 2002b, p. 353).

Students who have made use of the program — women and men — say it has been an invaluable service (Firestein, 2002b, p. 353).

### *Social Support Groups*

Group support programs can be a way for students to form connections with people who are experiencing some of the same challenges. Establishing a sense of community can provide a strong support as students navigate the college requirements to their goals. These groups can be formed as needs are expressed or through program connections. For example, the Community College of Allegheny County provides a support group for "Parenting, Women in Transition, and a Women's Employment" (Firestein, 2002b, p. 355). Currently, however, less than 20 percent of Illinois community colleges offer women's support groups, and none are specifically geared to adult reentry women students.

### *Community Outreach and Service Connections*

A women's center can also make connections with organizations outside the college to provide outreach for students who may not be aware of the opportunities and support available. For example, Goodwill Industries, United Way, and women's groups in the community can provide some information and become partners in serving this group. Presentations on issues that relate to these services can be planned or promoted by the center's staff.

A women's center can also reciprocate support in the community by organizing service events. These events may help establish the women's center value and contribution to the

mission of the college and the community as a whole. Volunteer opportunities that serve a variety of charitable organizations — food and clothing donation events, for example — can promote the visibility of the center and may elicit positive support for it from individuals on and off campus.

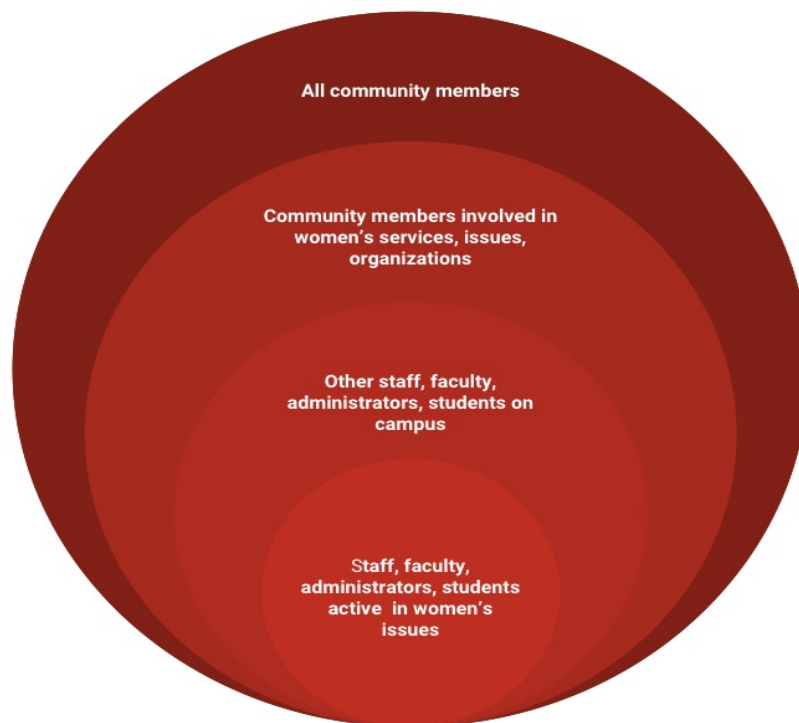
## **CONCLUSION**

The decision to create a women's center on a campus requires a commitment to providing services to students in a way that reflects the needs of women students and the culture of the college. Although these areas may be already available on a campus, as Davie (2002) emphasizes: A women's center has the capacity to open the doors of higher education for women in different ways (p. 15). It means creating a sense of community that can help women develop connected relationships to support their educational journey and show "a visible cohort of supportive people" (Kunkel, p. 67). This dissertation product focused on nontraditional women students who often return to college with the goal of improving their and sometimes their families' lives. However, these students face challenges of juggling multiple responsibilities, handling differences in age and experience, and negotiating the terrain of a system more attuned to traditional students. Nontraditional adult women students can benefit from the establishment of a women's center and as a growing population in community colleges it is a worthy endeavor for consideration.

## Chapter Five: Implementation of a Comprehensive Women's Center

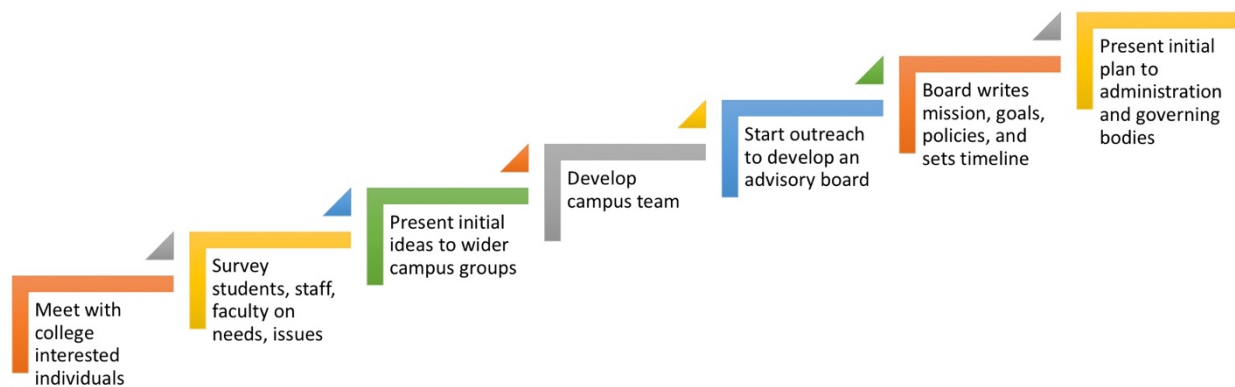
### INTRODUCTION

A women's center can provide support for many students and become a central repository for information and resources. As Willinger (2002) suggests, it is key to initial planning that the mission, services, and stakeholders be the focus (p. 48). Women's centers should reflect the culture of the home institution (Davie, 2002, p. 3). It is essential to begin this process with campus-wide outreach and communication. The creation of a women's center on a campus will require a commitment from stakeholders. Figure three identifies the main stakeholders.



*Figure 3: Stakeholders in Women's Centers*

The process of connecting with these stakeholders and implementing a campus women’s center should follow a well-designed and carefully monitored plan. One approach for this implementation follows the seven steps illustrated below in Figure 4. These seven steps are discussed in more detail in the next section.



*Figure 4: Steps for Planning a Campus Women's Center*

*Step 1: Finding core supporters; meeting with interested individuals*

One of the first steps in this process should be to begin discussions with those at the heart of establishing a women's center on a campus. These will be individuals already active in campus programs, classes, and events that support the essential elements explained in Chapter Four, that are often the focus of a campus women's center. Initial meetings with these stakeholders can help develop a working plan or timeline for proceeding.

One way to find people on campus who would be interested in establishing a women's center is to begin with the faculty who teach any women's studies courses and also find staff who lead and participate in related activities that are already conducted. These people can gather to begin planning and recruiting others who might be part of an initial team.



*Step 2: Conduct survey, focus groups*

Many with experience in establishing women's centers agree that every center must reflect the vision, mission, and goals of the institution (Davie, 2002; Kunkel, 2002). It is also essential to understand the needs of the student populations that the center might serve. This can be achieved by conducting surveys of students in classes, online, or during the registration and orientation processes. Faculty and staff surveys could be done via emails or during large campus gatherings. Focus groups should be gathered to allow for discussions and gain feedback for plans. This research can be used as justification and specific plans for operations at a women's center.

*Step 3: Present to wider campus audience*

Open communication and transparency are essential to garnering support for such an undertaking. As campus resources are often stretched and word of mouth information can transmit false ideas, it is important to be transparent and clear with everyone on campus. This is also a way to connect with others who may want to join in the effort. A brief presentation incorporating research and plans could be a part of any large campus gathering.

Then to maintain open communication and recruit others who may be interested, a presentation to a wide-ranging campus gathering will be an important step. The presentation should include research support for the benefits these centers provide in the areas of degree attainment and workforce development. Kunkel (2002) suggests that to establish and maintain a center it is vital to have open communication, community outreach, and networking (p. 75).

During this gathering, a call for others interested in working on developing the women's

center should be presented and a team should be assembled to begin work on the project. Information technology and advising staff are important groups to be represented.

*Step 4: Develop a campus team*

After the outreach to the wider audience, a group of individuals who might be a part of the team can begin meeting. It would be important to establish some representation from a variety of groups on campus. The team should have a clear structure, leadership, and defined roles. This team should begin formal meetings and set a timeline and plan. Davie (2002) lists some questions can be addressed in the initial stages: What are the goals for the center? What choices need to be made? What practical considerations affect the plans? (p. 5).

*Step 5: Develop an advisory board*

One of the early steps for the women's center at Kingsborough Community College in New York was to gather an advisory board including students, staff, faculty, and community members (Miller, E., 2002). This board was charged with establishing policy, planning, and program development. This board represented an affirmation of economic and political issues that require inclusion, coalitions, outreach, and promotion of changes (Miller, E., 2002). Once an advisory board is formed the group should work to write a mission statement, establish policies, and set a timeline for goals that reflect those of the full institution. As Davie (2002) points out: "Institutional mission and culture have a powerful impact on the choices that women's centers make" (p. 10).

The board can consist of team members identified earlier in the process, but there also needs to be outreach off campus. Once again team members can take on the task of

approaching potential community members to join the board. Women business leaders, educators at area secondary or primary schools, foundation board members, or leaders at charitable organizations could be among the individuals who might consider being a part of the effort. The more diverse this board can be the wider support the center may garner. Kasper's (2004a) study concluded: "Striving for greater inclusiveness (i.e., some centers have clerical, food- service, and plant-management staff on their advisory boards) in the centers' management and programming and offering incentives for nonfeminist women to walk in the door are also part of the 'best practices' found in this study" (p. 197).

*Step 6: Advisory board work*

Once the board is established, it will be important to set long-term goals as well to keep the advisory board dynamic, involved, and energized. This can be the formal step where the group establishes a working process to begin making decisions on how to proceed with plans. Roles and responsibilities for board members can be settled. It will be essential to define the mission to ensure that the center's mission complements the college mission and then establish policies for how the center can operate in the campus environment and serve students. A timeline for how to proceed should also be written.

*Step 7: Present plans to leadership*

Depending on the structure of the college's governance boards, there will be groups who will be making final decisions of funding, staffing, and resources that can be used for a campus women's center. The advisory board should present a proposal to top administrators and governing boards as is appropriate. And then the real work may begin.

## **STAFFING**

Because the initial development stage identifies campus members who are interested in promoting and supporting women adult students, this group may be able to assist in the next stage: identifying and defining the center's staffing structure. In the initial stages, some may offer volunteer hours to establish the center's identity and campus presence. For example, faculty members could be encouraged to use some of their student conference hours in service of the center. Also, advisers could designate some of their work hours to staffing the center. Student life staff could also contribute to promoting programs and materials that are connected to the women's center. It will be important for the center to offer off-peak time availability and accessibility, as many of the center's key users will be those who work full time and who are parents who take their classes in the evenings. Students and other staff could also be recruited to volunteer hours for staffing the center.

The idea is that the center will be an informational storehouse so many individuals can handle distributing materials or referring clients to other sources on or off campus. For example, the Illinois community colleges with designated women centers utilize faculty coordinators and administration support to any full- or part-time staff members. The women's academic program at one community college has three full-time advisors on staff. Most four-year institutions have a director for the center but not all are full time. The University of Oregon is run mostly by student volunteers and a student advisory board selects a faculty adviser to oversee operations (Kunkel, 2002, p. 73).

## **SPACE**

There are different ways that a women's center can exist — physically, virtually, and most likely a combination of the two. A physical space is important to establishing an atmosphere where students can find a sense of belonging and confidence that the institution values them as a group. Kunkel (2002) found that women's needs include ways to combat alienation (p. 67) by establishing a community with the center. There need not be a large physical space, but it should provide a desk for staff member use, a computer station for student use, as well as space for handouts and materials. A physical office also illustrates a commitment from the college to support equality and inclusion; it can be a harbor for students, just as veterans' centers have become places for those students to develop connections and find support from peers and college staff.

A website location must be easily accessible from the college's home page. It must offer key information and connections to the campus and off-site services. It should provide a chat option for questions and answers at various times for students who may find it difficult to come to the office. Online tutoring and review sessions for all students can be offered by the college and linked from this page. Davie (2002) provides examples of ways that campus women's centers across the country are using websites to promote their programs, reach local stakeholders, and provide links to many other useful websites (p. 455-456). She describes the emergence of a virtual worldwide women's center (p. 456), which means that a local center can make use of connections for its students to further missions and goals. The Kingsborough Community College leaders found that connecting with centers across the country allowed them to exchange program ideas and develop more resources (Miller, E., 2002, p. 11).

## **PROMOTION AND MAKING CONNECTIONS**

If a women's center is to become a vital and viable part of a college, it is essential that it be promoted well on the campus and in the community. Student orientation events should include information sharing about the center along with all services available on campus. The center's mission statement should be visible on all published materials. Staff should participate in campus and community events that are related to the mission. The Kingsborough Community College (Miller, E., 2002) used the college's public relations office to develop an image-conscious brochure and provide information in press platforms, web-based programs, and bulletin boards. Kunkel (2002) recommends a broad-based publicity effort including, for example, a widely-distributed newsletter (p. 75).

As the women's center may be a connection point to other offices and services across the campus — registration, career, child care, police, and safety — communication is vital. The center policies should include instructions for how to interact with these other college offices, so the center does not become isolated or overstep its role. Open communication can establish a women's center as integrated into the college and promote a climate of responsiveness to issues of equality and inclusion (Kunkel, 2002, p. 75).

## **FUNDING**

During difficult financial times, too often programs viewed as “outside” or peripheral to the main services of the college are at risk of being reduced or cut. It is important to establish a women's center as central to the success of this majority sector of the student population. This

potential for risk is also why, in the beginning stages, consideration of costs and prudent financial planning will be essential and will be different for each institution.

Sources for outside funding supports can be used, but a commitment for the ongoing support of the center must be met by the administration. Some centers are funded only by administration budgets; others rely on grants and endowed donor funds. For example, Illinois community colleges that have women's centers are partially or fully funded by donors or endowments. Fund-raising efforts require reaching out to the campus community and wider horizons — alumni, community members, and state and national advocates. Plasket (2002) recommends establishing a comprehensive development program that uses the mission and goals of the center and links to activities and services provided (p. 92). She stresses the necessity of articulating the role the center has in supporting students' success. Women's centers are often poorly funded as compared to other units at a college, making a development program difficult. Plasket (2002) recommends that personalizing the fund-raising efforts can be a successful strategy.

The Kingsborough Community College's women's center was initially supported as a part of the president's discretionary budget, but as they developed connections with other programs and services across campus, they were able to make efficient use of other funds (Miller, E., 2002, p. 11). Kunkel (2002) recommends that administrative support, especially from a president and top administrators, is essential to providing a supportive climate (p. 75).

No matter what the source of funding, it is very important that the message of the center's mission be established clearly. Plasket (2002) warns that "if the message is not clear, people make surprising assumptions" (p. 96) about who the center serves and how those

services are provided. She stresses a key point: "Clarity of message is a cornerstone of an effective development program" (Plasket, 2002, p. 96).

### **ASSESSING THE CENTER'S SUCCESS**

If a women's center is to be established and successful, it is essential that a cohesive plan for assessing the center's use and services be in place from the beginning. Staff and administrators of a women's center must become aware of the common language and methods of evaluation (Goldsmith, 2004, p. 128). According to DiLapi, Goettsch, Holgerson, and Rietveld (2008), women's centers must demonstrate that they contribute to student learning, retention, and gender equity on campus with formal and regular program assessment. One of the difficulties with assessing a women's center is that they often offer a wide variety of services and activities, but Goldsmith (2002) advises taking some time to find a practical model that can be adapted to a specific center. The models she describes include (1) context evaluations that can examine the strengths and weaknesses of the center in terms of the needs it is meeting; (2) input evaluations that look at other practices and models for information; (3) process evaluations that study how the center is implementing its goals and mission; and (4) product evaluations that look at intended and unintended results (p. 117).

One Illinois community college center keeps records of visitors and the assistance they receive. They record graduation rates for those students as part of their assessments. The women's program at another college completes program reviews in the same cycle and format as the other programs offered at the college. The Kingsborough Community College women's center identified five areas of evaluation for its assessment plan: quality of programming,



suitability, effectiveness, efficiency, and importance (Miller, E., 2002, p. 9). The center relies on surveys of staff, faculty, and students to gather information in these areas.

## **CONCLUSION**

According to Kunkel (2007), the success of a college women's center requires that staff know their community, acquire broad support and funding, and integrate women's needs into college-wide goals. A plan for implementation should be thorough and documented before the undertaking so that all stakeholders are well informed. The women's center at Kingsborough Community College has flourished and offered activities and services to a diverse body of students — including men (Miller, E., 2002, p. 11-12). Davie (2002) proposes her book as a guide to exploring what a women's center can add to the culture of learning on a campus and to supporting the potential of all its students (p. 15).

## Chapter Six: Conclusions and Recommendations

### **INTRODUCTION**

The climate in higher education in this country is loaded with pressures to improve student outcomes when resources are often already stretched. It is important for leaders at these institutions to evaluate all elements that support the mission and goals that have been established. Student demographics are shifting and, especially at community colleges, there is an increase in adult returning students who seek to change or improve their education and employability. Within this growing student population there are subgroups that have often become the recipients of increased or specific services. The focus of this study is one of these groups: nontraditional adult women who often return to higher education for a number of reasons that can place their success at risk. These women are often mothers, or they may have faced traumatic changes of circumstances — divorce, death, employment issues — that increase their difficulties. Many of these students face similar situations and issues that military veterans who are returning to college are facing. As veterans are recently garnering more and better organized services at many higher educational institutions, we must not lose sight of the needs of the women. An investigation of the supports and services that can assist adult women returning students is worthy of our ongoing consideration.

### **NEEDS AND SERVICES**

Studies of nontraditional adult women students show that their needs are often

different than the traditional, 18- to 21-year old students coming into college directly from secondary education. In her study of students at Salt Lake Community College, Capps (2012) concluded that it is essential to understand how adult students differ from traditional ones and to use "both policy and practice to foster a climate that is welcoming and supportive" of them (p. 44). Hemmerich (2014) argues that the increasing population of adult nontraditional women students at community colleges makes it vital for institutions to understand and respond to their needs.

The life situations and characteristics of these students mean that they may need support and access to services that address those differences. For example, child care services, connections to career mentoring and internships, and health and safety programs are among the top concerns for this group. Although many colleges provide these kinds of services, they are not always promoted or supported by the institution, and they may not reach or assist the students who need them most. If these services are perceived as "extra" and outside the services structure of the college, they may be susceptible to being cut in times of fiscal difficulties. This study proposes that a campus women's center can provide a way for a college to develop and/or promote programs and services for all students, but specifically address the nontraditional adult women students' struggles.

## **WOMEN'S CENTERS**

The history of the increase of campus women's centers is rooted in the second wave feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s. These centers have played many roles for academic supports and advocacy for equality and inclusion. There are many examples of

programs that these centers have developed or promoted at higher educational institutions. Women's centers are sometimes linked to academic or workforce development, but social issues are often also part of the mission.

Current movements about equality and safety — #MeToo and LGBTQ+ activism — have created a new climate conducive to creating a campus women's center. This study brought focus to the nontraditional adult women student with surveys of Illinois community colleges and research from colleges across the U.S. The Illinois community colleges with women's centers use them to create a centralized source for developing or sharing information about their services and programs. A campus women's center can be a bridge that helps a student reach academic and life goals — not a new path, but a smoother one.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

The path to creating a women's center on a campus requires a commitment to time and research. Leaders must work to understand how a center's mission can be supportive and reflective of the entire college mission. The research has examples and advice from people who have developed and led these centers at a variety of institutions. The common threads of advice are to work with individuals across the campus and community to garner a wide base of support; to use demographic and surveyed student information as a basis for services; to develop staff, space, funding, and assessment plans that are viable; and to promote the center on and off the campus to become an integral part of the college's advancement.

## WHAT'S NEXT AND FUTURE RESEARCH

There are many narrative and anecdotal examples in research about the needs of women and nontraditional adult women students that may help college leaders understand the value of offering these programs and using a women's center to create a community of support. Here are some suggested studies that could further examine the roles of women's centers at community colleges.

**Comparison study:** Although there are a limited number of community colleges with designated women's centers, it would be worthwhile to locate two community colleges with similar demographic characteristics with one having a women's center. Then using retention and completion data broken down by gender and age, it might provide some insight into whether the center has affected these trends.

**Case study:** Examining a working model of a college women's center at a community college would provide an example of practices in action. Interviews and research of a specific center could provide answers to important questions about what the center does, what the center doesn't do, who makes use of it, who doesn't make use of it, and how it is integrated in the college culture.

**Nontraditional adult women student focus:** Although there are studies that have identified needs of these students, it would be valuable to gather data on whether students at a college are aware of services that may be available and how to access them. It would be a relevant study for a college that does not have a women's center but provides many of the common services these students may need. Surveys and interviews could be used to show

indicators of whether these students know about or use services and what they perceive as the college's ability to support them.

**Non-completers focus:** One of the issues for nontraditional adult students is that there are more factors that may affect their ability to stay in, and complete, a college program. A mixed methods study of this group could provide some answers to why they might leave school and what supports might be used to assist them under some circumstances. Quantitative measures of the barriers could be used along with qualitative interviews to fully explain some of these students' stories. This information could bring focus to what changes might be appropriate to addressing these issues.

**Completers study:** Just as looking at non-completers might expose some barriers that a college can address, an examination of graduates would provide data on if our programs serve the goals of students. Nontraditional adult women students often return to college seeking to better their employment and career status. A review of these students' situations after they have gained certificates and degrees might reveal how well a college supports that transition out of the college and into the workforce.

These studies may provide a basis for documenting the value of a women's center. However, similar to a veterans' center, much of the value of a women's center will be in investigating how the center improves the overall culture and perception of the institution with stakeholders on the campus and throughout the community.

## **CONCLUSION**

Women are now the majority of students enrolled in higher education, and they earn degrees at higher rates than men. However, the structure and offerings of most student services at institutions remains the same. This research project began with an investigation into how Illinois community college provide support and services to nontraditional adult women students. Research shows that a campus women's center can develop specific supports and consolidate information for this demographic student group and create an atmosphere of advocacy for any stakeholders who need those services or supports. Therefore, as community colleges consider how to meet the needs of their students a women's center may be one answer. This guide provides some suggestions for key steps and considerations but advocates for tailoring a campus women's center to the specific college's mission, vision, and goals.

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