

Title: Voices from the College Classroom: Portraits of
Seven Successful Nontraditional Female Students
in a Small State Operated University

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The composition of the college campus has changed and women are now the majority with almost half (42%) being 25 years or older. Most research on nontraditional female students returning to college focused in the area of services with fewer studies regarding the classroom experience. This study, unlike many others, focused on the classroom as a large part of the community.

Research documented that women and men respond differently to specific teaching methods, classroom organization, questions and discussion. Research also revealed that educators often treat women in ways that limit their experience and participation in the classroom.

This qualitative study examined the learning experiences and perceptions of successful, nontraditional female students and identified the barriers and facilitating factors to their learning.

Using the tradition of phenomenology and a process known as portraiture, in depth interviews of seven volunteer participants were conducted. While each participant's experience was unique, the participants shared similar challenges and resources for coping with multiple roles, time management, faculty and peers. From the data collected, patterns emerged revealing barriers and facilitating factors for success in the classroom. They fell into the following categories: preconceived perceptions of the classroom, interaction and connection with peers and the community, opportunities that support participation, and persistence and perseverance to successful degree completion.

The results of this study provide insight to the research institution regarding the environment of the classroom from the perspective of the nontraditional female student. The data acquired from the study enables the university to be better prepared to meet the needs of incoming nontraditional students by providing the proper supportive tools to help create opportunities for early success and generate academic confidence. It will also encourage a more supportive classroom environment, free from gender bias, where students can thrive and reach their goals.