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# Baby boomers attending a community college: Influences, challenges, and social networks

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**Baby boomers attending a community college: Influences, challenges,  
and social networks**

by

**Nancy Peters**

A dissertation submitted to the graduate faculty  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Major: Education (Educational Leadership)

Program of Study Committee:  
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Iowa State University

Ames, Iowa

2010

**DEDICATION**

For  
his love  
of learning,  
belief in me, and  
encouragement toward education,  
this dissertation is dedicated to my father,  
George Aleck Peters  
who, in a similar economic time,  
could only complete his education  
through the eighth grade.

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Finally, and most importantly, I am grateful to my wonderful children and grandchildren, whose number grew from 2 to 5 during this process. I can't wait to spend more time with each one!

*It was a privilege to travel this journey with all of you!*

## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to determine how Baby Boomers make meaning out of disorientating dilemmas and challenges as they enroll in community college for career training. The dilemmas include: retirement, layoffs, shrinking job market, returning to school, and dwindling retirement accounts. Understanding Baby Boomers' processing of this new event can help colleges provide tailored course work, support services, and social networks.

Through the voices of ten participants and the guiding framework of Mezirow's transformational theory as well as theories of student engagement and validation, the following themes emerged:

- Economic conditions influenced Baby Boomers to attend community college and they pursue new careers based on passion and purpose.
- The community college provides a welcoming feeling of inclusion for the Boomer age student through its culture and through support of the faculty; however, rising expectations of Boomers were expressed.
- Boomers form social networks with fellow adult students that support and validate them as students.
- Transformation learning in Boomers is evident in their changed attitude in the classroom. Their process of making meaning out of their dilemmas aligns in part to 10 steps of Mezirow's theory.

Suggestions for practice are meant to strengthen existing programs and create new practices to serve this cohort. Community colleges are in a position to connect with Boomers in a meaningful way by being the primary vehicle to unleash the social capital and talent that our communities and employers need (Zeiss, 2006).

## CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

### Background of the Study

Currently, news reports are driving home the message that older workers are staying in the workforce longer and are seeking new career training. The economic conditions are contributing to a trend that recently became evident (Charness & Czaja, 2006), which predicted higher education would be serving an influx of Baby Boomers whose characteristics would be diverse. Rather than retiring, this group would remain in the workforce due to financial incentives or benefits to socialization.

A 2009 Des Moines Register front-page article indicated older workers are searching for jobs in unprecedented numbers and face new dilemmas. “The U.S. unemployment rate for workers 55 and older hit 6.4% in April, double the rate in December, and the highest monthly rate since 1948” (Eller, 2009, p. 10A). The article highlighted another complication: that in this declining job market, it is taking an average of 22 weeks to find a new job. Deborah Russell, AARP director, surmised the lack of computer skills is part of the problem for these older workers. Lis Buck, the director of Iowa Workforce Development, stated in the article that some of the One-Stops provide computer classes to help meet this eminent need. In conclusion, Russell added that many workers are seeking new careers (Eller, 2009).

Mason City and North Iowa Area Community College (NIACC) made the news in the April 8, 2009 issue of *USA Today*. Workers were featured who had lost their jobs due to plant closings and layoffs, and obtained training funds through Workforce Investment Act (WIA).

Tim Detrick, age 42, was laid off due to a plant closing and qualified for Trade Adjustment Act funding. Detrick was enrolled in a two-year heating program at NIACC:

“Going back to school was hard,” he [Detrick] says, but he made the honor roll every semester and now has a full-time job at a Mason City company. Making sense of his disorientating dilemma he proudly states, fighting back tears, that at NIACC graduation, “I will walk across the stage as an example for my boy, to show him, hey, I can do it.” (Keen, 2009, p. 2)

Tyrone Foster drove a forklift at the plant making recreational vehicles that closed during the summer of 2008:

“I felt sad seeing other people start crying. They didn’t know what to do,” says Foster, 48, “I had been telling everyone in the plant that I wanted to cook.”.... Now he’s the oldest student in a class of nine in NIACC’s two-year hospitality and food service program. Getting up to speed on math was tough, Foster says, but he hasn’t missed a day of classes.... “I made my own luck,” says Foster, who has two children and is able to go to school full time because he collects jobless benefits and student aid. “I never gave up. I stayed out of trouble and did something positive in my life.” (Keen, 2009, p. 2)

According to Keen (2009), “Millions of laid-off workers are being forced to make tough decisions about their futures. Since the recession began in December 2007, the economy has lost more than 5 million jobs. In March U.S. employers cut 663,000 jobs” (p. 2). The NIACC region had the highest unemployment rate for an Iowa county at the time of the Keen article at 9.1% compared to Iowa’s rate at 4.9%. Trends continue as the region is facing more business closings.

There is a convergence of the disorientating dilemmas for this generation, known as the Baby Boomers: lay-offs, business closings, dwindling retirement accounts, declining job market, returning to school, and retirement itself. The Pew research report in May indicated older workers had the largest percentage of loss in their investments in any age group. Forty-three percent of workers 50 and older lost 20% or more (Eller, 2009). These economic factors are swelling the numbers of older adults looking for retraining at community colleges. Prior to these complicating factors, the generation was predicted to return to college, and some colleges were preparing for the onslaught. Looking ahead to retirement, which comes from

the French word, *retyrer*, meaning to go into seclusion, does not fit this generation. Rather than retiring, this group will remain in the workforce due to financial incentives or benefits to socialization (Charness & Czaja, 2006). They will be looking for new opportunities to use their talents and remain in the workforce. This emergence is a great opportunity for community colleges. The National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES, 2008) revealed the percentage of adults age 45 and older who attend career or job related courses had increased from 1995 to 2005. The increase was from 39.6% – 45% for ages 45 – 49, 34.4% – 36% for ages 50 – 54, and 26.7% – 44.7% for ages 50-59. The trend continued through age 70 and older.

Community college education can become the path for this population to be retained and re-engaged in civic and work activities (Zeiss, 2006). To accommodate this growing need, community colleges need to know what draws this cohort to their campuses. The focus of the current study was to determine how Boomers who enrolled in community college made meaning out of their disorientating dilemmas and how they worked through this transformation process. Information gleaned from this study could provide colleges with recommendations for in-depth services for this Boomer group.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The influence of the Boomer generation to the community college is an emerging field where more information is needed. How do Boomers make meaning out of their disorientating dilemmas? How are they working through this transformation process? As the first Boomers are approaching the traditional retirement age, they are facing unprecedented dilemmas in the form of retirement accounts dwindling, layoffs, returning to school, and

shrinking job market. Information is needed by community colleges to strengthen existing programs and plan for those wanting to overcome a deficient to their education (Yankelovich, 2005). There is a growing need from the Boomers for career classes. The Portland Community College Survey of Students over the age of 40 changed the previously considered profile of mature student learners. Rather than looking for enrichment classes, four out of five students reported they were taking classes to upgrade their skills with the purpose of re-entering the workforce or pursuing a new career (*Boomers go to college*, 2007). The economic downturn could only be expected to drive this trend higher. Information is needed for community colleges to provide in-depth services to the Boomer cohort.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to determine how Baby Boomers make meaning out of disorientating dilemmas and challenges as they enroll in community college education programs. The dilemmas include: retirement, layoffs, shrinking job market, returning to school, and dwindling retirement accounts. Understanding Baby Boomers' processing of this new event can help colleges provide tailored course work, support services, and social networks.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions guided the study:

1. What factors influence Baby Boomers to attend a community college for career training?
2. How do Baby Boomers make meaning out of their disorientating dilemmas and challenges?

3. How do Boomers describe the support this community college provided for their educational experience?
4. How do Boomers describe forming relationships and social networks at this college?

### **Significance of the Study**

Higher education will be serving an influx of Baby Boomers who will remain in the workforce due to financial incentives or benefits to socialization (Charness & Czaja, 2006). The boomer wants to combine passion with a purpose. This is an emerging field where more information is needed on what influences will bring the boomer generation to the community college. Information is needed to strengthen existing programs and plan for those wanting to overcome a deficient to their education (Yankelovich, 2005). A gap exists between the best educated population of older Americans in our history and a nation concerned about finding a sufficient workforce. Closing this gap will require a new generation of pathways (Freedman & Moen, 2005). The demographic change of the large number of 55 to 75 year olds seeking college classes will be the most significant and challenging development for higher education today. Strengthening the existing programs for the growing number of adults who wish to overcome a deficit in their education is a strong financial incentive for colleges. Ignoring this opportunity is a risk of losing significant sources of revenue (Yankelovich, 2005). Community colleges are in a position to connect with Boomers in a meaningful way by being the primary vehicle to unleash the social capital and talent that our communities and employers need (Zeiss, 2006).

## **Theoretical Framework**

Considerations for the new wave of students, the Baby Boomers, include: How will what the Boomers bring to the community college be built into the environment? How will the faculty and staff validate and value this new cohort? Theories of engagement lend structure to this research and appear to align with parts of Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory. The combination of Theories of Engagement and Mezirow's Transformation Learning Theory formed the framework for this study (see Figure 1)

### **Astin's I-E-O Model**

Astin's I-E-O Model (input-environment-outcome) has proven both durable and significant as an impact model. College success is based on the function of three components: inputs – demographics, social experience, family backgrounds, academic occurrences; environment – programs, faculty, peers, policies, cultures, experiences both on and off campus; and outcomes – skills, values, behaviors, and knowledge that are evident after the college experience. Inputs shape the outcomes not only directly but also indirectly in the way students engage with the multifaceted institutional environment (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

### **Rendon's Theory of Validation**

Rendon's Theory of Validation suggests that, for nontraditional and underserved populations, validation could be the factor that influences their success and persistence. In the incidents where nontraditional students were transformed into powerful learners and persisters, other people, either inside or outside of class, "validated them" (Barnett, 2007). Validation occurs when faculty and staff impart to students that they are capable learners and the students feel

valued by the institution (Rendon, 2000). Rendon suggested researchers should study designs and practices with the full understanding of what the students bring with them to college (Rendon & Jalomo Jr, 1994).

### **Mezirow's Theory of Transformational Learning**

Researching older workers facing these dilemmas suggest a theory of adult education: transformational learning theory by Jack Mezirow. Changes in life experience and critical reflection trigger this transformative process (Mezirow, 2000). "Critical reflection on experience is key to transformational learning. Having an experience is not enough to effect a transformation" (Merriam, 2004, p. 62). A graphic illustration of Mezirow's transformational learning theory is shown in Figure 1.

Mezirow proposed a 10-stop process for transformational learning:

1. Experience a disorienting dilemma;
2. Undergo self-examination;
3. Conduct a deep assessment of personal role assumptions and alienation created by new roles;
4. Share and analyze personal discontent and similar experience with others;
5. Explore option for new ways of acting;
6. Build competence and self-confidence in new roles;
7. Plan a course of action;
8. Acquire knowledge and skills for action;
9. Try new roles and assess feedback; and
10. Reintegrate into society with a new perspective (Mezirow, 2000).

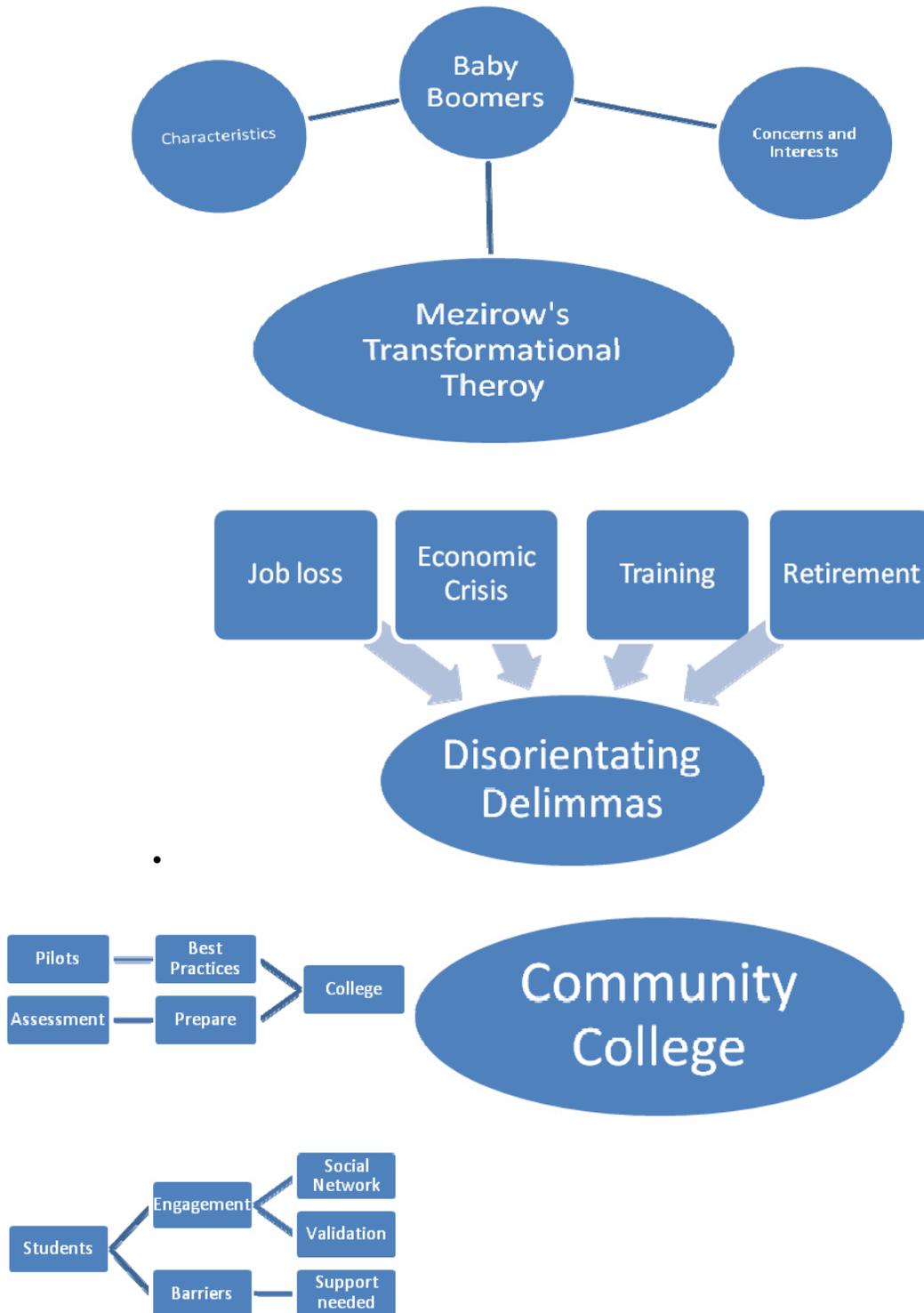


Figure 1.1. Mezirow's transformational theory, and the re-education of Baby Boomers

## Summary

Considering the journeys of dislocated workers, Tryone Foster and Tim Detrick, depicted in *USA Today*, it is easy to imagine they may have worked through many of Mezirow's steps. This study delved into that framework of change. As Baby Boomers consider careers, return to training and seek new employment opportunities, this theoretical framework served as a backdrop for the study. Mezirow named the process of making meaning out of our experiences perspective transformation:

Perspectives are made up of sets of beliefs, values and assumptions that we have acquired through our life experiences. These perspectives serve as a lens through which we come to perceive and understand ourselves and the world we inhabit. While these perspectives organize and make sense of a great deal of information within our internal and external environments, they can also limit or distort what we are able to perceive and understand. To this extent meaning perspectives can be faulty and constrictive. Through critical reflection, however, we come to identify, assess, and possibly reformulate key assumptions on which our perspectives are constructed. (Dirkx, 1998, p. 15)

Boomers' former key assumptions about their abilities as students and as learners could be faulty. As Boomers return to school, they often reformulate their perspectives about themselves.

## Delimitations

Participant selection was delimited by choosing only students enrolled fulltime in Midwestern Community College fall of 2009. A second criterion was that the participants were in the Baby Boomer age group. The term, Baby Boomers, refers to Americans born between 1946 and 1964; thus, in 2009, their age range was 45-63. There were two exceptions to the age category: a woman, age 43, who was married to another participant, and a male, age 38, whose stories were *unique* to the study.

### Definition of Terms

The following terms were defined for use in the study:

*Baby Boomer*: Refers to Americans born between 1946 and 1964, who are now approximately 77 million strong. This cohort is healthier, more diverse, and better educated than previous generations (Charness & Czaja, 2006). This is the largest generation in American history, being twice as large as the generation that precedes it and half again the size of the following generation (Goggin & Ronan, 2004).

*Career Training*: Higher education will be serving an influx of Baby Boomers whose characteristics will be diverse. Rather than retiring, this group will remain in the workforce due to financial incentives or benefits to socialization (Charness & Czaja, 2006). This group wants to combine passion with a purpose that offers new challenges and learning (Goggin & Ronan, 2004). Goggin and Ronan suggested that the cohort is looking for flexible hours and creative plans that use their talents. Research indicates 50% of Americans age 50 to 70 want to be engaged in work that helps others; careers in this second stage are about people, purpose, and community (Zeiss, 2006). The Portland Community College survey of students over the age of 40 changed the previously considered profile of mature student learners. Rather than looking for enrichment classes, four out of five students reported they are taking classes to upgrade their skills with the purpose of re-entering the workforce or pursuing a new career (*Boomers go to college*, 2007). The American Association of Retired People (AARP) concurred, as their research indicated that eight out of ten Baby Boomers expect to work at least part-time (Krane, Salomon, & Gravitch, 2000).

*Dislocated Worker*: Individuals who are laid off from a business that closes or downsizes through no fault of the individual's.

*Disorientating Dilemmas:* Lay-offs, business closings, dwindling retirement accounts, declining job market, returning to school and retirement itself are considered disorientating dilemmas for the purpose of this study.

*Older Workers:* While Baby Boomers are defined as the generation born from 1946-1965, the term older worker is rather ambiguous and is defined in different ways:

- Age 40, as eligible for coverage by the federal Age Discrimination Employment Act.
- Age 62, first age for an able bodied person to collect Social Security.
- Age when a pension begins from years of services on a job.
- Mandatory retirement age: 60 for airline pilots.
- Age 45, when most of the population must use corrective lenses.
- Age 40.6, median age of the U.S. civilian non-institution working population.
- Age 20, peak in ability to process information quickly.

“However, as a recent National Academy of Science report pointed out (Wegman & McGee, 2004), it is wiser to consider that we are all *aging* workers” (Charness & Czaja, 2006, p.1). It is suggested that it is time to move beyond the stereotype of the older learner.

*Social Capital:* “Social capital is an economic metaphor: value is added to the functioning of an individual through social bonds” (Shaw, Valadez, & Rhoads, 1999, p. 16).

*Social Network:* “Social networks serve a number of functions in offline-life, for instance, providing social and emotional support, information resources and ties to other people... a social network may provide users with social capital” (Johnson, 2008, p. 1).

*Social Network Sites:* “Web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by other within the system. The nature and nomenclature of these connections may vary from site to site” (Boyd & Ellison, 2007, p. 2)

*Trade Adjustment Act:* The Trade Adjustment Assistance (TAA) program was created to provide benefits and support to workers who become unemployed due to the impact of international trade. The TAA program seeks to provide U.S. workers who are adversely affected by trade with the opportunity to obtain the skills, resources, and support they need to become reemployed (United States Department of Labor Employment and Training Administration, 2009).

*Workforce Investment Act (WIA):* A program funded by the government that helps adults get education and training they need for future employment. Through the WIA, training for demand jobs is now more accessible for unemployed workers struggling to make end meet. The money beneficiaries receive from the WIA program can be used for career training workers need to qualify for new jobs. In some cases, the money is sufficient for the entire career education (United States Department of Labor Employment and Training Administration, 2009).

## CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

*We all know coming back to college later in life, even with a few years difference, can make students feel awkward, under-prepared or generally frustrated. And, with a predicted influx of adult students returning to higher education during these challenging economic times, higher-ed staff hold a vital role in assisting non-traditional students in transitioning to college and being successful in their academic pursuits...develop programming to better connect them to the campus community, finds ways to inspire and connect them more closely to the college experience.*

(Retrieved from <https://www.paper-clip.com/ME2/>)

### Overview

The review of the literature in this chapter is divided into six subsections: (1) Baby Boomers; (2) Mezirow's Transformational Theory; (3) disorientating dilemmas; (4) community college role; (5) community college preparation; and (6) theories of student engagement. Baby Boomer literature is very current, reaching back only four years. Similarly, social network research commenced three years ago. Theory and college review covers a greater expanse of time.

The first section reviews the characteristics, interests, and goals of the cohort known as the Baby Boomers. Their very numbers are staggering. The second section addresses the theory that informed this study: Mezirow's Theory of Transformation. There is a convergence of the disorientating dilemmas for the generation that is known as the Baby Boomers: lay-offs, business closings, dwindling retirement accounts, declining job market, returning to school, and retirement itself. The third section addresses these disorientating dilemmas that Boomers face. Section four and five review the literature regarding community college's role with this population and how some institutions have prepared with promising

programs. The final section reviews student engagement in light of various theories of engagement, social capital, and social networking groups, in particular, Facebook.

### **Baby-boomer Generation**

There is a significant amount of current literature on serving the adult population referred to as the Baby Boomers (Bank, 2007; Charness & Czaja, 2006; Freedman & Moen, 2005; Yankelovich, 2005; Zeiss, 2006). Most of the research is qualitative in design, and focuses on the emerging needs and desires of this population. With the changing economic climate and the changing face of work, an urgent topic is how community colleges are addressing this issue. A review of the literature provides insight into boomer characteristics, their interests and concerns.

#### **Characteristics**

Baby Boomers refer to Americans born between 1946 and 1964, who are now approximately 77 million strong. This cohort is healthier, more diverse, and better educated than previous generations (Charness & Czaja, 2006). This is the largest generation in American history, being twice as large as the generation that precedes it and half again the size of the following generation (Goggin & Ronan, 2004).

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), 12% of the labor force in 1995 was at least age 55. Recent projections predict that this group will rise to 21% in 2014, which would translate into 34 million persons aged 55+. As a result, these people could be working or looking for work. In 2002, the United States had about 61 million people aged 55+; by 2025, it is expected to be 103 million (Charness & Czaja, 2006). Research by the American Association of Retired People (AARP) concurred that eight out of ten Baby Boomers expect

to work at least part-time according to Charness and Czaja, “Our Country cannot afford to have 77 million Baby Boomers disengage from the workforce in the next 18 years”(as cited by Zeiss, 2006). The demographic change of the large number of 55- to 75-year-olds seeking college classes will be the most significant and challenging development for higher education today (Yankelovich, 2005).

The National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES, 2008) revealed the percentage of adults age 45 and older who attend career or job related courses had increased from 1995 to 2005. The increase was from: 39.6% – 45% for ages 45 – 49; 34.4% – 36% for ages 50 – 54; and 26.7% – 44.7% for ages 50-59. The trend continued through age 70 and older.

### **Interests and concerns**

Higher education will be serving an influx of Baby Boomers whose characteristics will be diverse. Rather than retiring, this group will remain in the workforce due to financial incentives or benefits to socialization (Charness & Czaja, 2006). This group wants to combine passion with a purpose that offers new challenges and learning (Goggin & Ronan, 2004). Goggin and Ronan suggested that the cohort is looking for flexible hours and creative plans that use their talents. Research indicates 50% of Americans 50 to 70 years of age want to be engaged in work that helps others, whose careers in this second stage are about people, purpose, and community (Zeiss, 2006). The Portland Community College Survey of Students over the age of 40 changed the previously considered profile of mature student learners. Rather than looking for enrichment classes, four out of five students reported they were taking classes to upgrade their skills with the purpose of re-entering the workforce or pursuing a new career (*Boomers go to college*, 2007).

Many workers want different choices in their workplaces. According to Czaja and Moen (2004), these choices range from reduced hours or days per week and special projects or contract work to more time off and part-time work. Moen went on to suggest they are interested in starting new careers. MetLife Foundation/Civic Venture Surveys indicated:

- Fifty percent of Americans age 50 to 70 want to be engaged in work that helps others.
- Careers in this second stage are about people, purpose, and community.
- Public policy changes are needed to remove obstacles for this group. (MetLife, 2005; Zeiss, 2006)

Baby Boomers often have three roles: full-time worker, student, and family member; time constraints are obstacles. They are concerned about illness for older workers, themselves, for their children, or for elderly parents. Financial concerns were cited by 60% of respondents in the Portland Survey. There is not much funding available for people with prior degrees who are looking for a career change. Other prime concerns are for support services for persons with disabilities. This cohort may have more physical problems with vision, hearing, and mobility (*Boomers go to college*, 2007).

### **Mezirow's Transformational Learning Theory**

The dilemmas facing Baby Boomers suggest a theory of adult education: Transformational Learning Theory by Jack Mezirow. Changes in life experience and critical reflection trigger this transformative process (Mezirow, 2000). Merriam (2004) posited that "...critical reflection on experience is key to transformational learning. Having an experience is not enough to effect a transformation" (p. 62).

### **Mezirow's 10-step process for transformational learning**

Mezirow proposed a 10-step process for transformative learning:

1. Experience a disorienting dilemma;
2. Undergo self-examination;
3. Conduct a deep assessment of personal role assumptions and alienation created by new roles;
4. Share and analyze personal discontent and similar experience with others;
5. Explore option for new ways of acting;
6. Build competence and self-confidence in new roles;
7. Plan a course of action;
8. Acquire knowledge and skills for action;
9. Try new roles and assess feedback; and
10. Reintegrate into society with a new perspective (Mezirow, 2000).

As Baby Boomers consider encore careers, return to school, and seek new employment opportunities, this theoretical framework will serve as one backdrop for the study. It was interesting to consider the possibility that the community college could help to provide support for students as they moved through Mezirow's steps cumulating in a new career which would fit step 10: *Reintegrate into society with a new perspective*.

### **Disorientating Dilemmas**

There is a convergence of the disorientating dilemmas for this generation, known as the Baby Boomers: lay-offs, business closings, dwindling retirement accounts, declining job market, returning to school, and retirement itself. As disorienting dilemmas converge in Baby

Boomers lives in unprecedented ways, community colleges can play a part in providing answers and help as they *reintegrate into society with a new perspective*.

### **Job loss**

A recent *Des Moines Register* front-page article indicated older workers are searching for jobs in unprecedented numbers and face new dilemmas. “The U.S. unemployment rate for workers 55 and older hit 6.4 percent in April, double the rate in December, and the highest monthly rate since 1948” (Eller, 2009, p. 10A). The article stated another complication is that it is taking an average of 22 weeks to find a new job in this declining job market, and many workers are seeking new careers.

According to Keen (2009), millions of laid-off workers are being forced to make tough decisions about their futures. Since the recession began in December 2007, the economy has resulted in a loss of more than 5 million jobs. In March, 2009, U.S. employers cut 663,000 jobs. The NIACC region had the highest unemployment rate for an Iowa county at the time of the Keen article, or 9.1% compared to Iowa’s rate at 4.9%. Trends continue as the region is facing more business closings.

### **Economic crisis**

Boomers’ retirement savings are evaporating as the economy loses millions of jobs. Going back to school may now not be a choice, but a necessity to secure employment (Bradley, 2009). Without ample time to recover financial losses, this generation needs to extend their working career by remaking themselves and learning new skills. According to Bradley, some retirees are struggling to make ends meet and are scanning help-wanted ads

for the first time in years. The income of households in the U. S. fell by 9% in the last quarter of 2008, which is the biggest decline since record keeping began in 1951 (Bradley).

The May Pew research report indicated older workers had the largest percentage of loss in their investments of any age group. Forty-three percent of workers 50 years of age and older lost 20% or more (Eller, 2009). These economic factors are swelling the numbers of older adults looking for retraining at community colleges.

### **Returning to school for retraining**

Mason City and the North Iowa Area Community College (NIACC) made national headlines in the April 8, 2009 issue of *USA Today*. Featured were workers who had lost their jobs due to plant closings and layoffs, and were receiving training through Workforce Investment Act (WIA) funding.

Tim Detrick, age 42, was laid off due to a plant closing. He qualified for Trade Adjustment Act funding and enrolled in a two-year heating program at NIACC.

“Going back to school was hard”, he says, but he made the honor roll every semester and now has a full-time job at a Mason City company. Making sense of his disorientating dilemma he proudly states fighting back tears, that at NIACC graduation, “I will walk across the stage as an example for my boy, to show him, hey, I can do it ” (Keen, 2009, p. 2)

Tyrone Foster drove a forklift at a plant making recreational vehicles that closed summer of 2008.

“I felt sad seeing other people start crying. They didn’t know what to do,” says Foster, 48, “I had been telling everyone in the plant that I wanted to cook.” . . . Now he’s the oldest student in a class of nine in NIACC’s two-year hospitality and food service program. Getting up to speed on math was tough, Foster says, but he hasn’t missed a day of classes. . . . “I made my own luck,” says Foster, who has two children and is able to go to school full time because he collects jobless benefits and student aid. “I never gave up. I stayed out of trouble and did something positive in my life.” (Keen, 2009, p 2)

## **Retirement**

Charness and Czaja (2006) predicted higher education would be serving an influx of Baby Boomers. Rather than retiring, this group would remain in the workforce due to financial incentives or benefits to socialization. Looking ahead to retirement, which comes from the French word, *retyrer*, meaning to go into seclusion, does not fit this generation. Rather than retiring, this group will remain in the workforce due to financial incentives or benefits to socialization. They will be looking for new opportunities to use their talents and remain in the workforce (Charness & Czaja).

## **Community Colleges and Baby Boomers**

Community college education can become the path for this population to be retained and re-engaged in civic and work activities (Zeiss, 2006). To accommodate this growing need, community colleges need to determine how Boomers, who are enrolling in community college, are making meaning out of their disorientating dilemmas and how they are working through this transformation process. Understanding their unique situations will help college provide the needed support service for student success and engagement.

Strengthening the existing programs for the growing number of adults who wish to overcome a deficit in their education is a strong financial incentive for colleges. Ignoring this opportunity is a risk of losing significant sources of revenue (Yankelovich, 2005). Community colleges are in a position to connect with Boomers in a meaningful way by being the primary vehicle to unleash the social capital and talent that our communities and employers need (Zeiss, 2006). “Older adults comprise a growing population in America’s community colleges. Today, approximately 15% of adults 40 years or older are enrolled in

community colleges” (Laanan, 2003). Laanan’s study concluded that more information is needed about this growing population in higher education, suggesting the opportunity for a qualitative study to provide rich data about this phenomenon. “The results of this exploratory study suggest that more research needs to be conducted to further our understanding of older adult in community colleges. Research designs that are qualitative in nature could provide rich data that cannot be achieved using a survey instrument” (p. 774).

### **Colleges prepare for Boomers**

Tony Zeiss, president of Central Piedmont Community College, noted several colleges are providing pathways for the Boomers to transition into a new stage of life (Zeiss, 2006). Ten community colleges received a \$25,000 grant from a partnership of San Francisco based Civic Ventures and the MetLife Foundation to develop programs to prepare Baby Boomers for new careers (Burnett, 2008). Some examples are:

- Broward Community College, Ft. Lauderdale, FL, is developing an alternative certification for those who have baccalaureate degrees and would like to teach. Over 200,000 teachers will be needed each year around the country (Bank, 2007).
- Central Piedmont Community College, Charlotte, NC, has a program—*from Success to Significance*—which includes career counseling and assessment, with a certified life coach to help with the cultural shift to their encore career. This program will be developed and implemented by an advisory group from business, educators, and career change experts (Bank, 2007).
- Owensboro Community College and Technical College, Owensboro, KY, initiated a partnership between the college and a local hospital, and is retraining retiring nurses

to be nursing instructors. The program meets the needs of those interested in a new career and the workforce shortage of nurses (Bank, 2007).

- Virginia Community College System, Richmond, VA, is working at filling the 1,300 unfilled teaching positions through a “career-switcher” certification. Professionals with bachelor’s degrees and work experience can be teaching in the classroom in less than six months. Partners include Virginia Department of Education, Virginia’s 23 community colleges, the K-12 school districts, and workforce development (Bank, 2007).

### **Best practices of pilot programs in community colleges**

Several community colleges have initiated pilot programs for older students. The best practices of the following schools are provided as follows.

*Philadelphia’s Community Women’s Education Program (CWEP):* CWEP has a mission of bringing low-income, disadvantaged women to self-sufficiency through long-term education. Providing emotional support, advice, information, and mentoring contribute to this program’s success. Through working with mentors who have had the same experiences, participants are able to vision a different future. Storytelling is a strategy used that strengthens the supportive function. Because welfare recipients often feel guilty about their circumstances, these supports negate that burden. Positive appraisals and multiple pathways for involvement promote engagement. Encouraging self-management skills and self-efficacy build the bridge from dependence on initial support systems to competence and self-control (Shaw et al., 1999).

*Brooklyn Child Care Provider Program, NY:* Welfare recipients are provided a five-month literacy-based vocational training program leading to jobs as assistants in childcare centers or self-employment as childcare providers. Relevant training is delivered as basic skills instruction is embedded in the childcare content. Students alternate between work/internships and class work (Miles, 2000).

*Massachusetts Community College Welfare-to-Work Project:* The project is a statewide program that combines academic skills and work experiences that target the population of welfare recipients with less than two years of benefits remaining. Specific employers are used and employment is guaranteed after training. Training times range from ten weeks to five months depending on the program of study. Accompanying the academic work is direct work experience followed by ongoing counseling and support (Miles, 2000).

*Documenting Effective Educational Practice (DEEP) project:* Schools identified in this project were selected because they are strong-performing colleges or universities with higher than predicted graduation rates. Another criterion was the results of the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). The schools selected had better than predicted student engagement scores. Some of the indicators for success that developed from this study:

DEEP schools feature student success in their visions of what they aspired to accomplish with their undergraduate program...DEEP institutions maintained a steadfast focus on students as people who are capable of learning anything the institution teaches. (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005, pp. 298-300)

*Central Florida Community College* has a demographic, with 24% of the county's population being 65 or older. In 1991, they established the Senior Institute to serve persons age 50 and older promoting continuing education in the areas of leisure time activities and social interaction for mature adults. As a response to a challenge from Civic Ventures, a nonprofit

organization working to continue the contributions of older Americans, the pathways to Living, Learning and Service was established in 2003. Services include: Personal Life Planning, Lifelong Learning, New Work Opportunities, Wellness, Significant Volunteer Service, and Friends & Fun. The exemplary addition is the New Work Opportunities program that helps with retooling for a second or third career. Updating skills and job search techniques are offered. Along with the local WIA workforce board, they identify “senior-friendly” employers for their participants. New job training programs are being established (Central Florida Community College, 2008).

*Central Piedmont Community College* is located in North Carolina, a popular retirement destination with the fifth largest 65 and over population in the country. Currently, the college operates a Lifelong Learning Institute for midlife Boomers transitioning into new careers, entrepreneurial opportunities and other transitions. Over 100 life-enriching classes are offered. Career Counseling is a component working one-on-one with a counselor to find a career fit. Entrepreneur assessment is another choice to best suit a business plans. For job seekers, resume writing and job search strategies are provided (Central Piedmont Community College, 2008).

*Cuyahoga Community College (Tri-C)* serves the Greater Cleveland Ohio area. Lifelong learning has been a priority with this college for over 30 years. The Center for Aging Initiatives at Tri-C has provided on- and off-campus experiences and educational alternatives to leisure activities for individuals 55 and over. Their mission statement is to promote successful aging through lifelong learning. Encore Campuses and Neighborhood Scholars are listed in their course catalog. Delivering courses in convenient locations for this cohort is evident. What is not noted is career transition planning or opportunities for such. The college

appears to reach a large number of the 55+ cohort when viewing the breadth of the course catalog, but the classes seem to follow the enrichment and leisure model of previous adult programs (Cuyahoga Community College, 2008).

### **Grant programs**

The following community colleges have each received a \$25,000 grant from a partnership of San Francisco based Civic Ventures and the MetLife Foundation to help prepare Baby Boomers for new careers (Burnett, 2008):

*Baltimore City Community College, Baltimore, MD:* Outplacement programs will target African-American women who are over 50 into careers in education, healthcare, and social services (Bank, 2007). Bank continued that the Prime 50+ Transition Program gives the personal attention Boomers need. The outplace program offers one-on-one career counseling, professional mentoring and a 40-hour transition course.

*Coastline Community College, Fountain Valley, CA:* Using the Orange County One-Stop Center to market their courses to businesses, Coastline will use existing curriculum to develop a series of mastery skills courses. They will serve employed adults who need continuing education units or retirees seeking new skills. Coastline will expand the services of the One-Stop to serve all those over 50 regardless of income guidelines (Bank, 2007).

*Collin County Community College, Allen, TX:* Certifying teachers through a fast-track program is turning telecommunication engineers into math teachers (Bank, 2007). They are able to get certified in less than a year, rather than two years. The first group of 15 graduates began teaching in fall 2009. Collin matches retiring teachers as mentors to students and offers flexible delivery of course work.

*Gateway Community College, Phoenix, AZ:* The GateWay programs partners with businesses to speed the entry of Boomers into a care giving field (Bank, 2007). To meet the need of profession home health caregivers, this project partners with local businesses so participants begin with employers early in the training program and this has positively impacted retention. The total cost for this 42-hour training program is \$150 including materials and CPR/First aid certification (Gateway Community College, 2008).

*Portland Community College, Portland, OR:* A peer-mentoring program will be provided for the students aged 50+. Support will be individualized to provide help in navigating the college system regarding registration, course planning, and general social support. The Career Management Model assists from program entry to involvement in internships and preparation for employment (Banks, 2009).

*Washtenaw Community College, Ann Arbor, MI:* Reacting to the hard-hit corporate restructurings, with mid-career employees being phased out, Washtenaw is offering a series of seminars to promote not only encore careers but also entrepreneurship (Bank, 2007). Utilizing the Small Business Technology and Development Center (SBTDC) to promote entrepreneurial ventures will introduce participants to local resources and opportunities.

In addition, the American Association of Community Colleges (AACCC) selected 15 community colleges to create or expand programs for Baby Boomers. A \$3.2 million grant from Atlantic Philanthropies funded these projects (Burnett, 2008). The grants awarded were to 10 community colleges to launch demonstration projects and 5 colleges, with existing programs, received funds to serve as mentors (Kent, 2008).

## Student Engagement

Baby Boomers share similarities with at-risk students as they encompass nontraditional and underrepresented classifications. Rendon (1994) suggested that higher education will be serving increased numbers of at-risk/nontraditional students, and described the changing student demography in college to include:

- Majority of college students who are women;
- New wave of immigrants;
- Adult students over the age of 25;
- First generation students;
- More students from poverty levels;
- African American, Mexican American, Puerto Rican, American Indian, and Asian students are the majority on some campuses; and
- Non-racial student minorities such as persons with disabilities, gays and lesbians, and person of diverse religions (Rendon, 1993).

Laanan (as cited in Compton, 2006) suggested the current definition of nontraditional student is a student having one or more of the following characteristics: delayed postsecondary enrollment one year or more after high school graduation, enrolled part time, employed full time, financially independent of their parents, have dependents other than a spouse, single parents, or do not have a high school diploma. Higher education will also be serving an influx of Baby Boomers whose characteristics could mirror those of at-risk students and fit Laanan's nontraditional definition. The cohort will be diverse yet have the one constant of being mature students.

## **Social capital**

Social capital is an economic metaphor: value is added to the functioning of an individual through social bond. Research has indicated that students who are most at-risk are not involved in social offerings. Simply providing more opportunities is not adequate (Shaw et al., 1999).

The issue of social capital of community college students has grown to be an area of study. Tinto (2007) suggested that three areas of retention study should be: institutional action, program implementation, and promoting success of low-income student. A question from *Culture of Support for At-Risk Students* (Shaw et al., 1999) asked whether high levels of social support is only attainable in special programs or could it be transferred throughout the college. Rendon and Jalomo, Jr. (1994) suggested researchers should study designs and practices with the full understanding of what the students bring with them to college. Social capital is a consideration for the new wave of students, the Baby Boomers. How will what Baby Boomers bring to the community college be built into their programs?

## **Theories**

### **I-E-O model**

Astin's input-environment-outcome has proven both durable and significant as an impact model. College success is based on the function of three components (as cited in Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005):

- Inputs: demographics, social experience, family backgrounds, academic occurrences.
- Environment: programs, faculty, peers, policies, cultures, experiences both on and off campus.

- Outcomes: skills, values, behaviors, and knowledge that are evident after the college experience.

“The inputs are presumed not only to shape outcomes directly but also indirectly through the ways in which student students engage with the multifaceted institutional environment” (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, p.53). How students are affected by the institutional environment was a question to consider.

Astin’s theory of involvement was developed based on his own research following Pace’s (1988) Quality of Effort theory. How students develop is related to their involvement. “Stated simply: Students learn by becoming involved” (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, p.53). According to Rendon and Jalomo, Jr. (1994), the two basic tenets of Astin’s theory are:

- Talent development is enhanced when more physical and psychological energy is expended by the student; and
- The college experience is improved when students are engaged with connections to academic work, extracurricular activities, and faculty interaction.

According to Pascarella and Terenzini (2005), Tinto’s theory of student departure is similar to Astin’s, but specifically deals with persistence. Tinto characterized his model as an interactive model of student departure, and looked at integration as a direct correlation to increased commitment to student’s institution and reaching goals.

### **Validation**

Rendon’s theory of validation suggests that, for nontraditional and underserved populations, validation could be the factor that influences their success and persistence (Barnett, 2007). Incidents where nontraditional students were transformed into powerful

learners and persisters occurred when other people, either inside or outside of class, “validated them” (Rendon, 2000). According to Rendon, validation occurs when:

- Faculty and staff impart to students that they are capable learners.
- The students feel valued by the institution.
- Students realize they are an important part of their own learning.

### **Social network sites**

Since their inception, millions of users have been drawn to social network sites (SNSs) such as MySpace, Facebook, Cyworld, and Bebo (Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007). While some sites cater to existing social connects such as family, friends, and a defined group, others have helped strangers connect based on shared interests. According to Boyd and Ellison, the bulk of SNS research has dealt with network structure and privacy issues, and vast uncharted waters remain to be investigated.

Social networks serve a number of functions in offline-life – for instance, providing social and emotional support, information resources and ties to other people. Similar kinds of social networks have been identified in online communities, with users turning online for both emotional support and as an information resource. In both cases, an online social network may provide users with social capital. (Johnson, 2008, p. 1)

### **Facebook**

Developed in 2004 by Harvard students to animate the photos of the freshman directories, the site is the ninth most visited (Hass, 2006). As a Harvard-only SNS, one needed to have a Harvard.edu email address to join. As Facebook began to support other colleges the requirement to have an .edu TAG continued to make the SNS a private college network. Facebook grew in steps to include high school students, professional sites, and then

everyone (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). According to facebook.com, with an enrollment of 25,741, Iowa State University has 20,247 Facebook users (Bugeja, 2006). There was a 500% increase of Facebook users in the UK between November 2006 and May 2007 (Johnson, 2008).

### Summary

There is a convergence of disorientating dilemmas for this generation who are known as the Baby Boomers: lay-offs, business closings, dwindling retirement accounts, declining job market, returning to school, and retirement itself. As disorienting dilemmas occur in Baby Boomers' lives in unprecedented ways, community colleges can play a part in providing answers and help as the Boomers *reintegrate into society with a new perspective*. Do Baby Boomers transform through life-changing occurrences along the lines of Mezirow's 10-step process for transformative learning, or do they experience some and not others?

Community college education can become the path for this population to be retained and re-engaged in civic and work activities (Zeiss, 2006). To accommodate this growing need, community colleges need to determine how Boomers, who are enrolling in community college, are making meaning out of their disorientating dilemmas and how they are working through this transformation process. Understanding their unique situations will help colleges provide the needed support service for student success and engagement. Theories of student engagement need to be extended to this cohort and creatively connect them with the college as they find their way through these transformations in their lives.

*We all know coming back to college later in life, even with a few years difference, can make students feel awkward, under-prepared or generally frustrated. And, with a predicted influx of adult students returning to higher education during these challenging economic times, higher-ed staff hold a vital role in assisting non-traditional students in transitioning to college and being successful in their academic pursuits...develop programming to better*

*connect them to the campus community, finds ways to inspire and connect them more closely to the college experience.* (Retrieved from: <https://www.paper-clip.com/ME2/>)

### CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY

This study employed qualitative research methodology. The epistemology is based on constructivism which holds that meaning is not waiting to be discovered, but is constructed. Meanings are constructed through an interaction of human beings and their world (Crotty, 1998). Reality is constructed through the interaction of people and their social worlds (Merriam, 2002). The epistemology fit this study as new meaning of influences on Baby Boomers returning to community college is being constructed. The theoretical perspective is a basic interpretive study which is interested in how people interpret their experiences, construct their worlds, and the meaning they attribute to their experiences (Merriam). The methodology is case study which presents an in-depth, holistic description of a case and is a bounded system. In this research, a case refers to each interviewee and participant, and is bounded by full-time enrollment in credit classes at Midwest Community College. Semistructured interviews are conducted of participants, faculty, and college staff. The semi-structured interview can explore a topic more in-depth as the interview's answers can shape the order of questioning (Esterberg, 2002). Facebook postings were used to further triangulate the data.

This chapter contains a synopsis of the research design that was employed in the study. The justification for the study, the fit with the qualitative approach, and the epistemology and interpretive theoretical perspective are discussed. Case study is explored in depth. Specifics for this research design are delineated, with descriptions of the research site, participant access and selection, data collection methods, data analysis and interpretation

process. In addition, goodness and trustworthiness are addressed along with the researcher's bias. Finally, limitations and the pilot study are discussed.

### **Rationale for the Study**

Higher education will be serving an influx of Baby Boomers. Rather than retiring, Baby Boomers will remain in the workforce due to financial incentives or benefits to socialization (Charness & Czaja, 2006). This group wants to combine passion with a purpose that offers new challenges and learning (Goggin & Ronan, 2004). According to Goggin and Ronan, the cohort is looking for flexible hours and creative plans that use their talents. Research has indicated that 50% of Americans age 50 to 70 want to be engaged in work that helps others; careers in this second stage are about people, purpose, and community (Zeiss, 2006). The Portland Community College Survey of Students over the age of 40 changed the previously considered profile of mature student learners. Rather than looking for enrichment classes, four out of five students reported they are taking classes to upgrade their skills with the purpose of re-entering the workforce or pursuing a new career (*Boomers go to college*, 2007).

The term, Baby Boomers, refers to the generation of Americans born between 1946 and 1964, approximately 77 million strong. For this study, which began in 2009, the population was comprised of participants 45-63 years of age. Baby Boomers are healthier, more diverse, and better educated than previous generations (Charness & Czaja, 2006). They comprise the largest generation in American history, being twice as large as the generation that preceded them and half again the size of the following generation (Goggin & Ronan, 2004). According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), 12% of the labor force in 1995

was at least 55 years of age. Recent projections predict that Baby Boomers will rise to 21% in 2014, which would translate into 34 million persons aged 55+, and these people could be working or looking for work. In 2002, the United States had about 61 million people aged 55+; by 2025 the total is expected to be 103 million (Charness & Czaja, 2006). The American Association of Retired People eight of ten Baby Boomers expect to work at least part-time (Charness & Czaja). “Our Country cannot afford to have 77 million Baby Boomers disengage from the workforce in the next 18 years” (Zeiss, 2006, p.39). The demographic change of the large number of 55 to 75-year-olds seeking college classes will be the most significant and challenging development for higher education today (Yankelovich, 2005).

According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES, 2008), the percentage of adults age 45 and older who attend career or job related courses had increased from 1995 to 2005. The increase was from 39.6% – 45% for ages 45 – 49, 34.4% – 36% for ages 50 – 54, and 26.7% – 44.7% for ages 50-59. The trend continued through age 70 and older.

There is a convergence of the disorientating dilemmas for this generation known as the Baby Boomers: lay-offs, business closings, dwindling retirement accounts, declining job market, returning to school, and retirement itself. As disorienting dilemmas converge in Baby Boomers’ lives in unprecedented ways, community colleges can play a part in providing answers and help as they make meaning out of their challenges and land upon Mezirow’s 10<sup>th</sup> step: *reintegrate into society with a new perspective*.

Boomers’ retirement savings are evaporating as the economy loses millions of jobs. Going back to school now may not be a choice, but a necessity to secure employment (Bradley, 2009). Without ample time to recover financial losses, many Baby Boomers need

to extend their working career by remaking themselves and learning new skills according to Bradley.

Community college education can become the path for this population to be retained and re-engaged in civic and work activities (Zeiss, 2006). To accommodate this growing need, community colleges need to determine how Boomers, who are enrolling in community college, are making meaning out of their disorientating dilemmas and working through this transformation process. Understanding their unique situations will help college provide the needed support service for student success and engagement.

Strengthening the existing programs for the growing number of number of adults who wish to overcome a deficit in their education is a strong financial incentive for colleges. Ignoring this opportunity is a risk of losing significant sources of revenue (Yankelovich, 2005). Community colleges are in a position to connect with Boomers in a meaningful way by being the primary vehicle to unleash the social capital and talent that our communities and employers need (Zeiss, 2006).

## **Qualitative Research**

### **Justification**

Today, approximately 15% of adults 40 years of age or older are enrolled in community colleges” (Laanan, 2003). Laanan concluded that more information is needed about this growing population in higher education and suggested conducting qualitative study to provide the rich data needed: “The results of this exploratory study suggest that more research needs to be conducted to further our understanding of older adult in community

colleges. Research designs that are qualitative in nature could provide rich data that cannot be achieved using a survey instrument” (p. 774).

### **Characteristics**

Several key characteristics of qualitative research fit this study. First was the goal to understand the way Baby Boomers constructed meaning about their experiences at the community college after the loss of a job or other dilemma. Second, as the researcher, I was the primary instrument for data collection and could expand immediately on Boomer nonverbal as well as verbal communications and process information. This study matched the inductive process which uncovers themes, categories, and concepts. Finally, this information lent itself to the richly descriptive nature of qualitative research (Merriam, 2002).

### **Constructivist Epistemology**

Epistemology is the theory of knowledge embedded in the theoretical perspective and, thereby, the methodology. It is a way of understanding and explaining how we know what we know, encompassing the nature of knowledge, its possibilities, and scope. Epistemology provides a philosophical grounding for deciding what kinds of knowledge are possible and how we can assure they are adequate and legitimate (Crotty, 2003). Ontology would sit alongside informing the theoretical perspective. For each theoretical perspective embodies a way of understanding “what is” (ontology) as well as a certain way of understanding “what it means to know” (epistemology). The epistemology fits this study as new meaning of influences on Baby Boomers returning to community college was constructed.

Constructionism rejects the view of human knowledge that there is no objective truth waiting to be discovered. Constructionism believes there is no meaning without a mind. Meaning is not discovered, but constructed. People may construct meaning in different ways even in relationship to the same phenomena. With regard to constructionism and making of meaning, Crotty (2003), discussed the concept of *Intentionality*. He stated that intentionality mirrors constructionism and is a term borrowed from philosopher Franz Brentano. *Intentionality* is not *intent* defined as the purpose of deliberation or choosing or planning but, rather, it is reaching out to the object. It is the interdependence of the subject and object. Embracing this thought rejects objectivism and subjectivism. In his well known essay in 1990, Stanley Fish (as cited in Crotty, 2003) concluded “objects are made and not found by interpretive strategies we set in motion” (p. 45). Fish used the example of different interpretations of a list on a chalkboard by two classes with different orientations. Crotty (2003) made the distinction between constructivism dealing with the individual’s mind and constructionism where there is a collective generation of meaning. The current study dealt with the individual and, thus, incorporated constructivism.

### **Interpretive Theoretical Perspective**

Theoretical perspective is the philosophical stance informing the methodology and thus providing a context for the process and grounding its logic and criteria. It states the assumptions brought to the research and is a way of looking at the world and making sense of it. Theoretical perspective is concerned about how we know what we know (Crotty, 2003). In this study, the theoretical perspective applied was basic interpretive methodology which is

concerned with how people interpret their experiences, construct their worlds, and the meaning they attribute to their experiences (Merriam, 2002).

## **Case Study**

### **Definition**

The definitions from leaders in case study provide insight on “What is a case?” Ambiguity is addressed in the evolution of this methodology, which originated in the ancient art of storytelling. The many adaptations of that art have led to standards including those of goodness and trustworthiness in telling the “story” of human phenomenon in qualitative research. Qualitative case study has evolved as a major contributor to learning in education. Merriam (1998) stated, “In fact, I believe that research focused on discovery, insight, and understanding from the perspectives of those being studied offers the greatest promise of making significant contributions to the knowledge base and practice of education” (p.20).

Addressing ambiguity while exploring in depth is another element in case study. Crotty (1998) confounded the neophyte by stating, “One frequently finds the same term used in a number of different, sometimes even contradictory, ways” (p. 1). Merriam (1998) mirrored Crotty concerning the ambivalence of terms use in qualitative analysis when quoting Hammersley and Gomm (2000) “ the phrase ‘case study’ ...is not used in any standard way” (p. 1), and indicated qualitative analysis is used interchangeably with other qualitative terms” (Merriam, 2002, p.178).

Merriam (2004) cited the following snippets from other scholars that form a framework for exploring case study:

The mature person needs to achieve a new apprehension and an effective uses of contradiction in operations and thoughts. Contradictions should no longer be regarded as deficiencies that have to be straightened out by formal thinking...In particular, they form the basis for any innovative and creative work. (Riegel, 1975)

The dialectical thinker will be able to appreciate the contradictions, accept and even contribute to the process of transformation, and transform his or her roles and commitment accordingly. On the other hand, the uncritical, undialectical pragmatic thinker, oriented only to adaptation to the context in its present form, will perceive the contradictions as threat. He or she is likely to react by denial, entrenchment, and other manifestations of cognitive rigidity, which are likely to interfere with development. (Basseches, 1984)

Exploring the sometimes contradictory research on case study expands the understanding of these concepts when applying this methodology. Developing an *apprehension* and perhaps *appreciation* for contradiction loosens *cognitive rigidity* to reach another level of understanding.

### **Case study is...**

- “Considered any research investigation which analyze a phenomenon in its real-life context” (Yin, 1983, p. iii).
- “The study of the particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activities with important circumstances” (Stake, 1995, p. xi).
- “An intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single instance, phenomenon, or social unit” (Merriam, 1988, p. 21).
- “A method for learning about a complex instance, based on a comprehensive understanding of that instance obtained by extensive description and analysis of that instance taken as a whole and in its context” (United States General Accounting Office, 1990, p. 14).
- “An in-depth study of the cases under consideration, and this depth has become another feature of the case study approach” (Hamel, Dufour, & Fortin, 1993, p. 1). They observe there is confusion of case study, is it a method or an approach? French sociologists, they note, take the later status and describe it as a monographic approach.
- “Employed to gain an in-depth understanding of the situation and meaning for those involved. The interest is in process rather than outcomes, in context rather than a specific variable, in discover rather than confirmation. Insights gleaned from case studies can directly influence policy, practice, and further research” (Merriam, 1988, p. 19).

- “An empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (Yin, 2003, p. 13).
- “Best defined as an in-depth study of a single unit relatively bounded phenomenon where the scholar’s aim is to elucidate features of a larger class of similar phenomena” (Gerring, 2004, p. 214). Case study method is correctly understood as a particular way of defining cases, not a way of analyzing cases or a way of modeling causal relations.
- “A transparadigmatic and transdisciplinary heuristic that involves the careful delineation of the phenomena for which evidence is being collected: event, concept, program, and process” (VanWynsberghe & Khan, 2007, p. 2).

Scholars have described case study as a process, a single unit, cases, complex instance, discovery, real life content, and an approach. Analyzing the definitions is rather like a coding exercise—looking for sameness to form themes and exploring contradictions.

Merriam (1998) noted that part of the problem is confusion of the term *case study* being used both as the process, the unit of study, and the outcome of the study. Merriam remarked that she changed her point of view in the last ten years. This researcher tends to concur with Merriam’s new definition as it includes the idea of a bounded system and the integration.

Stake (1978) denoted case study as the involvement of the reader’s experience:

I have concluded that the single most defining characteristic of case study research lies in delimiting the object of study, the case. Smith’s (1978) notion of the case as a bounded system comes closest to my understanding of what defines this type of research. Stake (1978) adds that ‘the case is an integrated system’ (p. 2). Both definitions allow me to see the case as a thing, single entity, a unit around which there are boundaries. (as cited in Merriam 1998, p. 27).

#### **Case study is not...**

Looking at what a case “is not” sharpens the understanding of “what it is”. Merriam (1998) noted that if it is not a bound, it is not a case study. A case can be a person, innovative program, a group or class at school, or a specific policy (Merriam). Stake (1995) added that a case is not general but specific and is less likely to be an event or a process. He defined it to

be an innovative program, but not the reason for the innovation; a class or school, but not the relationship among them; and a specific policy, but not policies of school reform. To be a *case* it has to have an end, if not, it is not a case. Consideration of how finite the data collection will be needs to be determined. There needs to be a limit to the people who could be interviewed (Merriam, 1998). Case study does not denote a specific method for data collection; qualitative techniques and analysis are employed.

The United States General Accounting Office (GAO) developed a paper on case study evaluations to inform their researchers who conduct research for the U.S. Congress using this methodological approach. Like most governmental bodies, they provided a standard of use:

If we were to study what caused the Three Mile Island disaster and scoped the job to describe whether required safeguards were complied with, this would not be a case study. If, however, we scoped the job to examine in depth events leading up to the disaster, what went wrong, and why it went wrong, this would be a case study (p. 14).

VanWynsberghe and Khan (2007) had a different view on what a case is not that they proposed in an article titled: *Redefining Case Study*:

A case study is a transparadigmatic and transdisciplinary heuristic that involves the careful delineation of the phenomena for which evidence is being collected (event, concept, program, process, etc.) (p. 2).

They provided clarifications for their wording: transparadigmatic, a case study regardless of paradigm; transdisciplinary, no particular discipline; and heuristics, an approach that focuses one attention during learning, construction, discovery or problem solving. They went on to claim that case study is not a method as it is not a form of data collection, and not a research design as it does not provide a prescriptive plan. At this point, they seemed to be providing an

argument that would lead to case study being considered a methodology. However, the authors said it is not a methodology because:

It does not provide a parsimonious theory of how research should proceed with conceptually coherent methods and accompanying data collection procedures that map onto the theory. Thus, it is appears that case study is not a method, a research design or a methodology. (p. 3)

Stake (2005) also severed case study from methodology by stating, “Case study is not a methodological choice but a choice of what is to be studied” (p. 438). Yin (2009) informed that one of the five general characteristics of an exemplary case is considering alternative perspectives; this could also hold true for definitions.

There appear to be evolutions of *what is a case* not only among different scholars but also within each scholar’s work. It seems that many researchers have changed their definition and thoughts about its use. Stake (1995) remarked that his understanding of case study was founded at the first Cambridge Conference: Flyvberg (2006) commented on the 180-degree turn of Donald Campbell, noting Campbell did not hold back in his 1966 article:

Such studies have such a total absence of control as to be of almost no scientific value...Any appearance of absolute knowledge, or intrinsic knowledge about singular isolated objects, is found to be illusory upon analysis...it seems well-nigh unethical at the present time to allow, as thesis or dissertations in education, case studies of this nature (i.e., involving a single group observed at one time only) (Campbell & Stanley, 1966, pp. 6-7).

Flyvberg (2006) pointed out that Campbell went on to be a strong proponent of case study and wrote the forward to Yin’s work, *Case study and research*:

It is a privilege to provide the foreword for this fine book. It epitomizes a research method for attempting valid inferences from events outside the laboratory which at the same time retaining the goals of knowledge shared with laboratory science. More and more I have come to the conclusion that the core of the scientific method is not experimentation per se but rather the strategy connoted by the phrase ‘plausible rival hypotheses.’” (Campbell, as cited by Yin, 2009)

In the fourth edition of Yin's book, the one thing that did not change was that the foreword Donald Campbell had written nearly 30 years before remained.

Donald Campbell's insightful forward remains unchanged ... Within the context of today's research debate, Campbell's work continues, remarkably to speak with freshness and direct relevance. His forward also positions well the role of case study research as portrayed in this book. (Yin, 2009, p. xiii)

## **Types**

Stake (1995) divided cases into three categories: Intrinsic, instrumental, and collective case study. His categories help determine what methods will be use. Intrinsic is a case that occurs not out of our own interest, but when the case is a given. There is a need to learn about that particular case. If the case study grows out of puzzlement and a desire to understand a phenomenon it is instrumental. Collective case study is designed with more representation when a small sample is not enough (Stake).

Merriam (1998) delineated case studies by their disciplinary orientation. Disciplinary orientation refers to a specific purpose such as law, medicine, or economics. In education, it might be an ethnographic case study to determine the culture of a school or behaviors in the classroom. Another example of discipline orientation is a historic case study that provides a description of the object of study as it evolves over time including programs and events that impact the institution, not just a chronological listing of change.

Psychological case studies focus on the individuals. Beyond disciplinary orientations, the intent of a case study can be considered as a type. "Is it intended to be largely descriptive? Interpretive? To build theory? To present judgments about the worth of the program?" (Merriam, 1998, p. 38). Special features can also define a case study. Merriam listed particularistic, descriptive, and heuristic. Particularistic refers to a specific situation,

event, program, or phenomenon. Descriptive describes the end product that would be reported in a thick descriptive manner. Heuristic explains the reasons and enhances one's understanding of the problem.

### **Rationale**

Yin (1982) used a framework based on Gail Sheehy's 1976 book, *Passages*, where adult life is seen as a sequence of passages rather than a stereotypical uneventful plateau. Using a framework in a methodological case study serves as a jumping-off point for general guidelines in the study. Along that line, Yin (1982) remarked that, in his case study, the selected new organizational practices followed "passages" as he traced how a new practice becomes routine.

Research interests are often driven by an autobiographical element. It is the researcher's challenge to demonstrate that this connection will not bias the study. "If direct experience stimulates the initial curiosity, moreover, the researcher needs to link that curiosity to general research questions" (Marshall & Rossman, 1999, p. 28). Personal theories should be driven by existing theory and empirical research. A researcher's personal understanding and the literature review bring the phenomenon or issue into focus. Marshall & Rossman (1999) remarked that "...these coalesce to frame a focus for the study in the form of a research question" (p. 28). Similarly stated, "We wanted to be clear that 'the self' is always lurking in qualitative research, and, indeed, this is what brings tension and ambiguity to the research process (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2006, p. 191). Consider your experience provides grounds for inspiration or concern. What fires you up? Analyzing your past

experiences and interests for research ideas (Jones et al., 2006). In the conclusion of the book by Jones et al., a poem of T. S. Elliot is quoted:

We shall cease from exploration  
And the end of all of our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time. (p. 191)

Simons (1996) used the same passage from T. S. Elliot's, *The Quartet*, in her journal article on the paradox of case study:

Paradox for me is the point of case study. Living with paradox is crucial to understanding. The tension between the study of the unique and the need to generalize is necessary to reveal both the unique and the universal and the unity of that understanding. To live with ambiguity, to challenge certainty, to creatively encounter, is to arrive, eventually at 'seeing' anew. (p. 14).

Selecting to utilize case study as a methodology taps into the insight and knowledge of the participants, the researcher, and the reader. Simons (1996) noted it is the way of the artist – communicating truths through an instance in time. Simon referenced Stake heavily in her article, and this is reminiscent of the title of his book *The Art of Case Study*.

### **Flyvbjerg addresses criticisms of case study**

Flyvberg (2006) capsulated widely noted misconceptions about case study into five statements and proceeds to turn them into positive messages:

1. Theoretical knowledge is more valuable than practical knowledge
2. One cannot generalize from a single case, therefore, the single-case study cannot contribute to scientific development
3. The case study is most useful for generating hypotheses, whereas other methods are more suitable for hypotheses testing and theory building
4. The case study contains a bias toward verification
5. It is often difficult to summarize specific case studies. (p. 221)

1. The thought that *context-independent knowledge is more useful* than context-dependent knowledge is turned to content-dependent knowledge is more valuable by Flyvberg. Simons (1996) concurred that by studying context an innovation can be understood more clearly and determinations of factors contributing to success or failures are exposed. According to Simons, we use case study not to prove something, but hope to learn something.

2. Not being able to generalize from a single case for Flyvberg becomes – the case may be central to scientific development. A famous example by Popper stated, “All Swans are white.” To just find one black swan would make that statement false. So too, can a single case can be an impetus for generalization” (as cited by Flyvberg, 2006, p.228). Flyvberg noted that generalization is overvalued and example is underestimated. Hamel et al. (1993) suggested that one case needs to be considered under a microscopic scope: “Only a single failure germane to the study can be considered” (p. 2). The difference between a micro and macro study deals with the number of cases involved. They suggest others argue: a well-developed single case can meet the objective.

3. Case study is useful for generating hypotheses but is not limited to that (Hamel et al., 1993). The impression of some is that case studies are of little scientific or disciplinary value. It is valued as exploratory treks into uncharted territories by understanding this new terrain through defining and mapping concepts which counter the claim that case studies are down to earth but not suitable for generalizations. Flyvberg (2006) argued naturalistic generalizations are a result of experience. Stake (1978) agreed that case studies can be used to test a hypothesis, can be highly statistical but, in social science, the rich descriptive observations, personal interviews, direct quotes, allusion and metaphors are the important

part of the case. He concluded this method has been proven to add to the experience and understanding of the reader

4. Case study contains no more bias than other methods of inquiry.

5. Yes, cases may be difficult to summarize, but it may not be desirable to do so, as reading the study as a narrative may be more appropriate. In this article, Stake (1995) claimed that case study is often the preferred method of research because of the harmony with the reader's experience. He quoted antipositivists Wilhelm Dilthey, Von Wright, and William Dray, claiming the *truth* in human affairs is best reached by a sense of human encounter.

### **An exchange between Miles and Yin**

An interesting exchange on criticism of case study occurred between Matthew Miles (1979) and Robert Yin (1981) in their articles in *American Science Quarterly*. Miles criticized case study by using the metaphor of an attractive nuisance. He compared an abandoned car in your yard making you liable for injuries to interested children, to the perils of collecting qualitative data through case study wherein the users can get hurt by not reaching their purpose. Miles noted the principle faults of case study were: within-case analysis is unmanageable, cross-case analysis is even more difficult, and participants are more threatened by case study than surveys. The project in question was conducted at six sites with three field workers providing perspectives. Miles indicated that the field notes ran to several thousand pieces of paper and the coding had 202 categories.

Yin (1981) reacted to the article by Matthew Miles by pointing out that several problems were documented but few solutions were offered. Yin suggested that field notes

should not be narratives but, rather, “notes” cutting down on the preponderance of data. Fieldworkers should integrate different responses on the same topic. Yin suggested tabulating meaningful events, remarking that using categories that are too small and too numerous are pitfalls. Yin offered concrete suggestions for improving qualitative research through case study, but concedes that major improvements in case study research are still on the horizon.

### **A good fit**

My personal reasons for choosing case study include the fit with my sociological and educational background bonded with a fascination with peoples’ stories. Merriam (1998) stated a good match results from understanding the philosophical foundations of case study and from considering it a good match with ones personality, skills, and attributes. Further, she recommended a tolerance for ambiguity. Reading examples of case studies had caught my interest on many levels. I loved the analogy of case study being therapy (Jones et al., 2006). I perceived the interactive nature of the participant, researcher, and reader provides opportunity for each stakeholder to pause and consider his or her own lives or thoughts. I consider it a good fit for my area of research, which lies in the generation known as the Baby Boomers and their untapped potential as they reach retirement age. Born between 1946 and 1964, this generation comprises an estimated 77 million Americans. Boomers have caused change in economics, politics and society as they moved through life; their next chapter of defining retirement is yet to be written. I see this emergence as a great opportunity for community colleges to respond to the challenges arising from this new life stage of Boomers. Not only will this generation be a new market for community colleges, but their willingness to remain working or become retrained for a second career will also provide opportunities in

these trying economic times. The purpose of my research was to construct new knowledge concerning how Boomers make meaning out of these dilemmas, most especially job loss and enrolling in a community college for career training. This topic lent itself to case study.

### **Research Design**

The research design for this study is delineated in this section. The research elements are: research site; participant selection; access to participants; participant recruitment; data collection methods; framework for data collection protocol; question techniques; primary data collection methods; three interview model; secondary method; data analysis and interpretation; goodness and trustworthiness; and the researcher's role and reflexivity.

#### **Site**

The research site was Midwestern Community College (MCC), a rural medium-size college that offers vocational and transfer programs, and awards both diplomas and associate degrees. MCC is a pseudonym for the college to protect the confidentiality of the research (Esterberg, 2002). This college has career coaching available along with a specific college work group focused on adult students. An adult recruiter was retained as a suggestion from this college group. Mentors are available for all students. The population of students in the Baby Boomer category (45-63) enrolled for fall term of 2009 was reported as 200 by the assistant registrar. This represented 7.4% of the total campus enrollment, excluding the high school dual enrollment numbers. The research was conducted over a four-month period during the 2009-2010 academic year. As an administrator at MCC, I had ready access to the college staff as gatekeepers and to the campus rooms for interview space.

## **Participants**

### **Access**

As Executive Director of a Workforce Investment Act (WIA) program, I had access to the names, ages, and contact information of adults attending Midwestern Community College (MCC) whose tuition was funded by WIA Title III Dislocated Worker federal dollars. The pool of possible participants shared the characteristic of experiencing the similar disorientating dilemma of being laid off from their most recent job. This pool of students was used for the Facebook pilot, *Engagement of Baby Boomers returning to a Community College: Social Network on Facebook*. In the dissertation research, participants were gleaned from the total pool of the 200 Baby Boomers enrolled full time at MCC fall of 2009. Their disorientating dilemmas, or challenges, would be random and not necessary a job loss. Access was gained to this population through a gatekeeper, the MCC adult student recruiter. Permission to conduct this research as an extension of the Facebook pilot conducted for MCC was approved by the college president. Participating in the research was voluntary and those recruited were assured that their status with the Midwestern Community College or with WIA would not be affected in anyway by their choice to participate or not participate.

### **Recruitment**

Initial recruitment for the Facebook pilot occurred through a letter, approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB), sent to the 30 WIA participants who met the criteria of the study; that is, Baby Boomer age and enrolled fall of 2009 at MCC. Seven participants were selected for the pilot: *Engagement of Baby Boomers Returning to Community College: Social*

*Network on Facebook.* Four of the seven participants in the pilot agreed to continue with the dissertation research and take part in one-on-one interviews. These four signed the Facebook Informed Consent document, along with the dissertation research informed consent document. New participants self referred to the project after learning about the study from the adult recruiter. I contacted by phone those who expressed an interest in participating in the research. The adult recruiter served as a gatekeeper for access to this boomer population. Using gatekeepers and key informants to gain access to people one does not know is a strategy of merit (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2006). Seidman (as cited in Esterberg, 2002) concurred and further delineated that snowballing from peer to peer rather than hierarchically is preferable. Snowballing occurred on two occasions. Snowball sampling is helpful in the beginning stages as one key informant refers you to another friend or acquaintance. During a conversation with a potential participant, a male agreed to take part and asked if his wife could be included. *"She also is enrolled at MCC."* Conversely, a similar peer referral took place when a woman asked if her husband could take part. The idea of having two sets of married couples who both attended MCC resonated as a possible enhancement to the study.

### **Selection**

Participant selection was bounded by enrollment as a fulltime student at Midwestern Community College and falling within the age range of the Baby-boomer generation. For the year 2009, this constituted students who were 45-63 years of age. There were two exceptions to the age category. The female in one of the married couples was 43 year old. Her inclusion was precipitated due to the advantage of having two matriculated married couples who appeared to be enrolled for distinctly different reasons. Another exception was a 38-year-old

male who had been referred from the adult recruiter and was a member of the Encore Learner Group (ELG) on campus. I assumed he was of Boomer age when scheduling the interview. I was also impressed by the rich information he brought to the project that I chose to include him. In quantitative research, this participant's age might be considered an *outlier*. In qualitative, his age is considered *unique*. Merriam's inclusion of a 57-year-old in her study, *Ego Development in The Face of Death*, set a precedent for me. "Respondents were 45 years or younger...one male, age 57, who erroneously slipped through the screening process was retained because of the rich insights he provided" (Merriam, Courtenay, & Reeves, 1997, p. 225).

The selection of participants was a nonrandom purposeful sampling with a maximum variation approach. Sampling in qualitative research is based on the purpose of the study to provide the most information rich participants for the research (Jones, 2002). Seidman (2006) noted the selection of participants by purposeful sampling with maximum variation is the most commonly agreed upon approach. Maximizing variation in the purposely selected sample is another strategy for trustworthiness (Merriam, 2002). For my topic of Baby Boomers, the participants' variance within the age span of Boomers and in gender closely reflected the proportion of the Boomer enrollment at MCC (Table 3.1 and 3.2). Previous educational differences ranged from GEDs to Bachelor Degrees (Table 3.3). After selecting the participants based on purpose, maximum variation, and impartial determination, I made the initial contact, as personal interaction is considered to be most effective if it is made by the researcher (Seidman 2006). All 10 participants selected for this research signed the informed consent document according to the Institution Review Board protocol. As the age group of 60 to 63 did not have representation, I subsequently sent the IRB-approved letter to

Table 3.1. Number of participants by age group

Age group	MCC <i>N</i>	Percentage	Study <i>N</i>	Percentage
45-49	98	49	3	37.5
50-54	70	35	3	37.5
55-59	27	14	2	25.0
60-63	5	2	0	0
Total	200	100	8	100.0

Note: Two exceptions: includes 38-year-old and a 43-year-old not noted on the table

Table 3.2. Number of participants by gender

Gender	MCC <i>N</i>	Percentage	Study <i>N</i>	Percentage
Male	54	27	4	40
Female	146	73	6	60
Total	200	100	10	100

Table 3.3. Summary of participants by pseudonym, gender, age, previous education, and area of study

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Previous Education	Area of Study
Bob	Male	38	GED	PC Technician (Hardware)
Terry	Male	45	GED	Industrial Maintenance Wind Turbine
Jennifer	Female	43	BA	Medical Office Associate Medical Coding Medical Transcription
Kathy	Female	48	1 yr Business School	Administrative Office Associate
Larry	Male	49	2 yrs CC	General Business
Janet	Female	55	Some College	Business Accounting
Blossom	Female	49	Some College	Administrative Office Associate
Charlie	Male	51	GED	Automotive Technology
Jane	Female	53	BA	Medical Coding
Claire	Female	58	1 yr Business School	Administrative Office Associate

the five MCC students who represented this cohort of Boomers. There was no response to this letter from the five.

### **Data collection methods**

The first step was to develop a template to track the time and place of each interview for the participant. Contact information and demographics were also captured on this template. A notebook was used to record memos and to capture ideas. Keeping a journal or recording memos throughout the study while analyzing and interpreting is a goodness of strategy called an audit trail (Merriam, 2002). Specific questions for each participant could be recorded as well as notes jotted during the interviews. While only a few of the pilot Facebook group were experienced Facebook users, much to my amazement, all six new participants already had Facebook accounts. Confirming of times and reschedules was accomplished on the MCC Baby Boomer Facebook site.

Primary data collection was done by three semi-structured individual interviews with each of the 10 participants. Interviews were scheduled over a three-month period, with most being held at MCC. The conference room on the mezzanine overlooking the activity center was not only convenient for students and private for interviews, but it also provided an informal opportunity to view the activity center below and observe the participants' interactions with peers as well as social networking. One participant, who graduated in fall semester, found the workforce center to be a more accessible venue. It is important that researchers include information on the type, setting, and duration of the interviews. Elaborating on the kinds of observation, the criteria for document selection, and rational for method decisions makes a well designed study (Jones, 2002).

Secondary data collection was accomplished through participant Facebook postings, member checking, document analysis, and staff inquiries. Research methods have strengths and weaknesses; therefore, the strongest research designs include multiple research strategies (Esterberg, 2002). This triangulation strategy was met by the author by not only including interviews, but also conducting a document review and including the participants' postings of the topic on Facebook.

### **Framework for interview protocol**

The key technique for interviewing is to learn to listen. Seidman (2006) defined listening on three levels: (a) listening for what the participant is saying; (b) listening for the inner voice versus the public, guarded one; and (3) remaining cognizant of non-verbal clues while maintaining the mechanics of the interview. Concentration is needed for this type of listening. Another technique is to not interrupt the interviewee but take a note of a topic to come back to it at another time. Listening to the audiotapes exemplifies the researcher's techniques which enables continual improvement.

Seidman (2006) said interest in the experience of the participant and containing one's ego can lead to what Patai (1987) described as becoming *absorbed* with them. Having questions follow what the person is saying demonstrates that the interview structure is cumulative. In an interview, one question leads to the next, and interviews build on the previous one. Building on their interests and experiences contributes to a natural flow which brought depth to the interviews. I used an interview guide as suggested by Esterberg (2002) which incorporated some of the concrete suggestions for wording from Seidman (2006).

## Question techniques

An example of question techniques is given in the following:

To clarify:	“Can you tell me <i>again</i> what happened with ...?”
To get the meaning:	What is “stuck” (scared, happy, normal)?
Question-not leading:	“What was ...like for you?”
Grand tour:	“Take me through a day in your work life.”
Mini tour:	“Reconstruct the details of registering for fall classes.”
The echo:	“A while back you talked about.... Would you talk more about that?”
Role playing:	“If you were your spouse (child, friend), what would you say to me?”
Reconstruct:	“What was your experience like regarding ... (school, work)?”

## Primary data collection methods

### Interviews

“It is a privilege to gather the stories of people through interviewing and to come to understand their experience through their stories” (Seidman, 2006, p. 5). This statement kept my purpose in focus; that is, not to answer the researcher questions or test my hypothesis, but to understand and make meaning from another’s experience. It is paramount to value the stories of others and not presuppose what will be heard is the core of interviewing. The idea of privilege of hearing another’s story reflects the researcher’s interest and demonstrates caring. Telling stories in rich, thick description that uphold the significant responsibility of treating the participants in the most respectable way possible is a sign of goodness (Jones, 2002).

### Three interview model

Seidman’s (2006) model outlines three separate interviews with each participant. The first interview focused on their life history drawn by asking the participants how they came

to be involved with this Midwestern Community College. The second interview concentrated on the details of the experience, while the final conversation asked participants to reflect on what they had reconstructed. Participants were making meaning throughout the three interviews. Rather than relying on memory, participants were asked to reconstruct. A question was not posed by asking the participant to remember a specific experience; but rather, "How was that experience for you?" My timeframe was 30-60 minutes per interview, and I kept to that commitment in order to build trust with each participant. Another relationship builder with the interviewee was to meet based on his or her convenience in time and place selection (Seidman 2006). Most selected MCC for the site, and the day and time corresponded to the participants' schedule for being on campus.

Seidman (2006) warned that pitfalls may come in the second interview with persons who may have felt they revealed too much in the first interview. Expecting similar candor, but finding a more reticent participant this time can happen, and it is good to be aware. However, the third interview can be helpful for reflection. This was not the case with these participants. They were very open during each interview.

**First interview.** During the opening phase of the first interview I gave my positionality as an older student returning to school who shared some of the same experiences and challenges they might be experiencing. I continued the conversation by explaining my position at this community college and nature of my research. The relationship between the investigator and the topic needs to be disclosed so interests and possible bias and researcher's position (positionality) is evident (Merriam, 2002). Prior to questions or audio-taping, the participants were given the option of continuing and then signed the Informed

Consent Form. I gave the participants the opportunity to describe themselves which would serve as their profile and the option to select their own pseudonyms. *Blossom* was the only one who took advantage of the latter.

Utilizing Esterberg's (2002) model for creating an interview guide, I developed the interview's main topics and questions from the protocol approved by the IRB on September 11, 2009 and modified on December 21, 2009. Mezirow's theory of transformational learning, along with theories of validation and engagement, informed the guide. Seidman (2006) cautioned about the use of interview guides:

If interviewers decide to use an interview guide, they must avoid manipulating their participants to respond to it. Interviewer should ask question that reflect areas of interest to them in an open and direct way, perhaps acknowledging that the question comes more from their own interest than from what the participant has said. (p. 92)

The first interview covered background information of the participant's previous education and employment history. Influences that brought each participant to this community college were explored, along with the support for the decision they made. Interaction with other students and faculty were also explored.

**Second interview.** Building on the foundation formed in the first interview, the questions were constructed based on the participants' description of student life as an adult on this community college campus: what they liked about it—what they did not like. Other questions dealt with their perception of the support for adults at this college—what was working and what could be improved. What social networks were in place for them? The final question addressed their future plans and goals. Having established their reason for being in college at this age, the disorientating dilemma that brought them here, and their future plans, a last activity was to imagine those two phenomena as step 1 and step 10 of

Mezirow's theory. The participants were asked to reflect on how the other steps played a part in their journey. If losing a job was number 1 (the disorientation dilemma), and the future plans they had just stated were number 10, what steps did they perceive they had experienced, skipped, collapsed, or changed in the process? Each participant was given a copy of the 10 steps as a reference.

**Third interview.** Copies of the transcripts were shared with the participants for their perusal and comments. The participants were given the opportunity to expand on areas that had emerged as important to them and queried on budding themes. Saturation occurred with the redundancy in these interviews.

### **Interview Questions**

The following questions were asked during each interview:

#### *First Interview*

1. How would you describe yourself?
2. Tell me about your work life: What were your experiences?
3. How did you decide to return to school? Did you consider different plans?
4. Describe the support you had in your decision to become a student?
5. Tell me about your expectations about returning to school. What was the first day like?
6. How did you build relationships with other students?
7. Tell me about your relationships with any faculty or staff member at the college.
8. Reconstruct a day at school.
9. If you were your (spouse, child), what would they say about your school experience?

#### *Second Interview*

1. What do you like about being an adult student? What do you not like about being an adult student?
2. What has been your greatest challenge as an adult student?
3. If you could change anything about your experiences at this community college, what would you change? What would you want to stay the same?
4. How has this experience of being a student affected you?

5. Given your history prior to school, and your school experience, where do you see yourself going in the future?
6. Compare your own journey to Mezirow' 10-step process for Transformational Learning.

### *Third Interview*

1. Clarifications
2. Participants reflected on the T.S. Elliott poem

## **Secondary data collection methods**

### **Facebook postings/emails**

One secondary method of data collection was the use of Facebook postings by participants to the discussion board or direct Facebook emails to me as the administrator. This method was piloted in my capstone project. As participants can view others' discussions, this method provided an avenue for synergy of thought. The MCC Boomer Facebook Group was formed as a *secret group* according to Facebook vernacular. The only access to this group was through an invitation by the administrator/researcher. This means the group does not appear on Facebook searches or on an individual's Facebook pages.

### **Member checks**

Themes were posted on Facebook for the group's comments. Participants could either post to the discussion board or respond directly to me by Facebook email. Specific member checking for an individual was conducted through the Facebook email function.

### **Document analysis**

The MCC marketing and registration materials were analyzed with a focus on the adult perspective and how adults are portrayed, if they were.

### Staff inquiries

Discussions were held with key MCC personal to clarify the concerns and issues the participants had brought forth.

### Summary

Tables can enhance the opportunity for criticism and public inspection (Anfara, Brown, & Mangione, 2002). A summary of the data collection methods is provided in Table 3.4). Primary and secondary data collection methods are provided for each interview, along with the topics discussed, research question(s) asked, and framework reference.

Table 3.4. Summary of data collection methods

Method	Topic(s)	Research Question(s)	Framework
Primary data collection			
1 <sup>st</sup> Interview	Self description Previous education and employment history Influences and support for school enrollment	1, 2, 4	Seidman model (2006)
2 <sup>nd</sup> interview	Perception of disorientating dilemma or challenge Classroom experiences Networking experiences  Critique of college support system Future plans Option of Mezirow's 10 steps	1, 2, 3, 4	Seidman model; Esterberg interview guide (2002) Mezirow's transformational Learning theory (10 steps) (2002)
3 <sup>rd</sup> interview	Clarification of themes Reflection on making meaning Expansion on transcribed interviews	1, 2, 3, 4	Seidman model (2006)
Secondary data collection			
Facebook reflection	Written reflection	1, 2, 3, 4	Merriam (1998)
Member checking	using Facebook	1, 2, 3, 4	Esterberg (2002)
Document review	WIA policies	3	
	Course of studies	3	
	Marketing materials	3	
	MCC book vouchers	3	
	ELG's research	4	
	Learning center	3	

### **Data Analysis and Interpretation**

Data collection and analysis occurred simultaneously in a constant comparative analysis to generate categories and build theories (Anfara et al., 2002). Analyzing information shaped some of the questions for the interviews. The interviews were audiotaped and transcribed with the consent of the interviewees. Facebook postings were captured online and were printed for coding work. Preliminary analysis was done after each interview. After the interviews were transcribed, data was coded and recoded until themes began to emerge. I began with open coding and progressed to focused coding (Esterberg, 2002).

Asking question to determine the “so what,” include:

- What are key issues for these people?
- What is important to them?
- How does this fit with Mezirow’s Ten Steps in Transformative Learning?
- Do they experience these steps in order or jump back and forth?
- Are some steps skipped?
- What themes of college support of their educational experience emerged?
- Do findings suggest areas that college can improve to encourage student engagement, validation, and success?
- How are social networks formed?

Using analytical memos will help me to pull together categories that are later collapsed themes (Harry, Sturges, & Klingner, 2005). I utilized a research journal to keep track of immersing themes, ideas, and timelines.

### **Goodness and trustworthiness**

Researchers need to demonstrate validity (goodness and trustworthiness) in their work. Creswell and Miller (2000) provided a two-dimensional framework to select the appropriate procedure to validate a study. They suggested: triangulation, disconfirming evidence, reflexivity, member checking, prolonged engagement in the field, collaboration,

audit trail, thick, rich description, and peer debriefing. The selection of procedures should consider the audiences and the expense of using each procedure. Rigor of the project implies that member checking, research logs, and a clear audit trail should be incorporated at a minimum (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

The interview process assured goodness by gathering information over time. The three interviews allowed for “off days” and/or for consistency over time. After the initial three months of interviews, the Boomer Facebook remained in place to prolong the engagement in the field. Member checking, another example of goodness and trustworthiness, was done on the MCC Boomer Facebook page. Member checks, wherein interpretations are tested with participants, is the most crucial technique for establishing credibility (Jones, 2002). Sampling in qualitative research is based on the purpose of the study to provide the most information-rich participants for the research (Jones). The Facebook pilot ensured the questions were suited for the research. Purposeful sampling with maximum variation of the pool was an additional goodness measure.

Protecting confidentiality with pseudonyms and actively disguising an identity, when needed, was a further method of trustworthiness (Esterberg, 2002). *Blossom* chose her pseudonym. Seidman (2006) cautioned that an absolute guarantee of confidentiality cannot be made; nevertheless, the greatest steps should be taken. Another avenue I focused on was the transcriptionist. Participants should be aware if the transcriptionist is other than the researcher. Care was taken to assure the transcriber did not misuse the information. Addressing confidentiality with my transcriber along with providing training for my research included a word list and the interview guide to view the possible flow of questions. We were

in constant contact to discuss any concerns the transcriptionist had during the typing of the transcriptions.

Information on the transcriber's part in trustworthiness was based on research by Tilley & Powick (2002). It is important to note if the transcribers are trained on the process and the topic to provide assurance of trustworthiness. Training also gives the transcribers the opportunity to question any concerns with dialect or background sounds. This advice is based on a case study on the bounded system of eight participant-transcribers who had been hired as transcribers at Canadian universities. The article posed the question of the role of the transcriber in trustworthiness of the research. Coding and analysis is based on the transcribers' work. The findings of this study revealed that all transcribers made decisions while working that influenced the text. Some admitted to guessing what was said or leaving parts out that did not seem relevant. There is compelling evidence that researchers should take into account the transcription of their work for trustworthiness. The authors offer suggestions including training, developing transcription conventions, and direct involvement of the head researchers (Tilley & Powick).

Semistructured interviews along with secondary data collection are used to triangulate the data collection and strengthen the internal validity (Merriam, 2002). Quotes and references were made from all sources of data throughout this study. The type, setting, and duration of the interviews along with the Facebook interaction satisfied the description of a well- designed study (Jones, 2002). It is important that researchers include information on the type, setting, and duration of the interviews. Elaborating on the kinds of observation, the criteria for document selection, and rational for method decisions ensures a study is well- designed (Jones). Sampling in this qualitative research was based on the purpose of the study

in order to provide the most information rich participants for the research (Jones, 2006). The fictitious name, Midwestern Community College, as well as providing pseudonyms for the participants protected the confidentiality of the research (Esterberg, 2002). Data collection and analysis occurred simultaneously, patterning constant comparative analysis to generate categories and build theories (Anfara et al., 2002). My positionality and bias toward re-training for a new career was also stated. The use of reflexivity is a strategy for giving a critical review of the researcher as a human instrument (Merriam, 2002). I also shared my background to avoid “othering” with my interviewees. Member checks, where interpretations are tested, were also done. They are considered by Jones (2006) to be the most crucial technique for establishing credibility.

The intention of this researcher was to interview participants until saturation. Saturation occurred with redundancy of statements of participants’ own stories by the third interview and themes were reoccurring among participants. My German father’s favorite saying, *Genug ist genug*, capsulates the criteria for determining how many participants are needed for a study and when to stop. First, there must be sufficient numbers to reflect the variance in the purposeful population. The other criterion is saturation, or redundancy, which means hearing the same thing and one is no longer learning something new. Thus, after three interviews of 10 participants, “*genug ist genug*,” or enough is enough!

### **Researcher’s positionality**

My positionality on this topic is that I have a great interest in making a difference for this population in our community. I am an employee in the community college setting and have a leadership role as a member of the President’s Council. The focus of my work is on

dislocated workers who may be seeking training through WIA funding. My own life course has been one of being a lifelong learner. As a female who is on the edge of this first wave of the Boomers, I have returned to school to receive a Master of Public Administration (MPA) degree in my 50s, and I am now pursuing a doctorate in Educational Leadership. I am currently living what I see others will be pursuing. Looking ahead to retirement, which comes from the French word, *retyrer*—meaning to go into seclusion—does not fit the Boomer generation. I strongly feel that Boomers will be looking for new careers to use their talents. My bias is toward career re-training in areas in which Boomers have an interest or passion.

My personal reasons for choosing case study as a methodology included the fit with my sociological and educational background bonded with a fascination with people's stories. Through case study, I perceive the interactive nature of the participant, researcher, and reader gives opportunity for each stakeholder to pause and consider his or her own life or thoughts. The purpose of my research was to construct new knowledge concerning how Boomers make meaning out of these dilemmas.

### **Limitations**

A limitation to this study was that it was focused on just one Midwestern Community College. Another limitation was that participant recruitment and selection were weighted based on Boomers who were recently laid off their jobs. This was a criterion for the pilot study and four of the seven participants from the pilot study who chose to continue in the research. The six additions were gleaned from the total pool of the 200 Baby Boomers enrolled fulltime at MCC during the fall of 2009. The participants' disorientating dilemmas

or challenges were random and not necessary a job loss; however, half had experienced a layoff as their dilemma. Another limitation may be the economy of this particular time. Participants included students who may not have chosen education under less critical financial times. They may have been able to find other jobs.

### **Pilot Study**

The pilot capstone project endeavored to connect Baby Boomers (age 45-63), who were students at Midwestern Community College, *more closely to the college experience*. Student engagement was obtained through a social network site (SNS): Facebook. A special MCC Boomer Facebook group, that was only accessible to this cohort, provided college specific information, as needed. Beyond the purpose of information distribution, Facebook was a place to ask questions for which as the administrator of the site, I could provide answers. The participants were also queried along the way regarding their journey toward further education/re-training. Information gleaned from the capstone project was shared with the college President in a written report.

### **Summary**

This was a qualitative research study. The epistemology was constructivism which holds that meaning is not waiting to be discovered, but is constructed. The epistemology fit this study as new meaning of influences on Baby Boomers returning to community college was constructed. The theoretical perspective was a basic interpretive that seeks to uncover how people understand their experiences, construct their worlds, and the meaning they attribute to their experiences (Merriam, 2002). The methodology was case study which presents an in-depth, holistic description of a case and is a bounded system. In this research,

the case refers to each interviewee and participant bounded by their Midwest Community College enrollment. Methods were semistructured interviews, Facebook postings, document analysis, and staff interviews.

## CHAPTER 4. FINDINGS

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to determine how Baby Boomers make meaning out of disorientating dilemmas and challenges that brought them to enroll at a community college. The dilemmas included: retirement, layoffs, shrinking job market, returning to school, and dwindling retirement accounts. Understanding Boomers' processing of this new event can enable colleges to provide tailored coursework, support services, and social networks to aid in enhancing the educational experience and promoting success for this non-traditional age group.

Four research questions guided the framework for this study:

1. What factors influence Baby Boomers to attend a community college for career training?
2. How do Baby Boomers make meaning out of their disorientating dilemmas and challenges?
3. How do Boomers describe the support this community college provided for their educational experience?
4. How do Boomers describe forming relationships and social networks at this college?

This chapter presents the profiles of the 10 participants in the study which include the background for both their employment and education. A hint at their individual dilemmas or challenges is revealed along with their educational goal at this institution. The four themes that emerged from their voices are presented in depth in the next section. The responses to the four research questions follows, and the data are related to the theories that framed this study are provided. The chapter ends with a summary.

### Participant Profiles

The 10 participants selected to participate in the study were bounded by the criteria of being enrolled as students at Midwestern Community College (MCC) and falling within the age range of the Baby Boomers. For the year 2009, this constituted the ages of 45-63. There were two exceptions to the age category. One of the married couples included a female who was 43 years of age. Her inclusion was precipitated by the advantage of having two matriculated married couples who appeared to be enrolled for distinctly different reasons. Another exception was a 38-year-old male who had been referred from the adult recruiter serving as a gatekeeper and who was also a member of the Encore Learners Group (ELG) on campus. I initially assumed the male was of Boomer age when scheduling the interview. I was so impressed by the rich information he brought to the project that I chose to include him in the study. In quantitative research, his age and data might be considered *outliers*. Because his age was outside the boundary definition in qualitative research, it is considered as *unique*. The inclusion of a 57 year old in a study by Merriam et al. (1997), entitled *Ego Development in The Face of Death*, set a precedent for me. "Respondents were 45 years or younger...one male, age 57, who erroneously slipped through the screening process was retained because of the rich insights he provided" p. 225).

Nine of the participants were married, and the tenth was a divorced male. There were two married couples in the group. Seven of the participants had been laid off from their jobs. The other three represented a woman who had quit her job, a man who considered himself underemployed, and woman who wanted to return to the workforce after semi-retirement. All were first generation college students, with their previous education ranging from GED to a Bachelor's degree. The gender mix was comprised of six women and four men. Interestingly,

three of the men had a GED only, while the remaining male and all the women had some post-secondary education.

In the course of the first interview, the participants were given the opportunity to select their own pseudonyms and describe themselves for their profiles. Only one female took the option to choose her own pseudonym, *Blossom*. The individual profiles are provided as follows.

### **Bob**

The youngest participant in the research, at the age of 38, Bob was included as one of the exceptions for his unique perspective and rich descriptive contributions. Bob is in his 2<sup>nd</sup> marriage, and his current wife has a teenage child at home. When given the opportunity to describe himself, Bob opened up with his life story:

*Umm, I guess what I would say is that I'm extremely outgoing and goal oriented. Uh, I've been through hell in my life. Bad...uh I've been to prison and whatnot. I've had a lot of serious family problems before that. I had a best friend die right in front of me, and I basically been through hell, but somehow I keep bouncing back, and I'm a super positive person, and I'm never negative, especially about myself.*

Bob said he quit high school his junior year, shortly after a friend died. When asked if this was the friend who died in his presence, he responded:

*Uh, 3 days before school started in 1987, were having one last little soiree before school started. We were drinking beer and getting high that day, and uh, we were riding this mini bike around. And [pause] and uh as soon as he pulled out on the highway, he got hit by a car. And uh, he took his last natural breaths, in my arms. I was SO screwed up from that, for so many years. It's still hard.... And I don't know if that helped my heart turn cold, cause for a long time there I didn't care about nobody, nothing period [pause] for many years after that. In my drinking, uh, I tried to drink myself to death every*

*day, and I failed! And, now I look at that, it's good I ended up going to prison.*

When asked if that was related to his drinking, he said:

*Yep and that opened up my eyes. I broke into a grain elevator one night...me and my friend were drunk, we just did it for the kicks, and I ended up going to prison for it, which is [clear throat] probably, honestly, one of the best things that ever happened to me in up to that point in my life. Uh, I was beaten as a child, physically abused, terribly and mentally messed with. Uh, I was at the boy's ranch when I was 12, 13 years old in [Midwestern City]. Uh, many, many jails in between there and prison but yah know...it's funny how ever since then I haven't been in trouble [chuckle].*

Bob went on to explain, “*Yeah and it's kind of good cause my new wife is the head dispatcher of [the] county so, umm she is basically a cop!*” Bob's employment background included construction and work at a recreational vehicle plant. He quit the recreational vehicle plant where he was a welder. “*It was time. Yah know, when you get to work and you slam your car door shut and you stomp into work and you start throwing stuff around, and the day hasn't even started...it's time for a change.*” He was laid off from his most recent employment, a construction firm. Bob was at the community college to pursue a new career. He quit high school in 9<sup>th</sup> grade after his friend died and later received his GED. His goal is to complete an Associate Degree in Science in the field of PC Technician, Hardware Specialization.

*I'm going to do Cyber security stuff. I'm gonna be on the Cyber defense team next fall. Yeah, I'm here to learn. That's it.... Uh, I have a 3.2 GPA, um, so jacked up about that. I was actually upset that I didn't get 3.8, one class, but you know, it's ok. I was never a dumb guy, it was just, I was.... I was going through a lot of bad stuff.*

## Terry

Terry, age 45, is married to another participant in the research, Jennifer, age 43.

While Jennifer is below the age of the Baby Boomer generation, she was included to have the opportunity to cull the insight of a couple who was attending community college together.

Further, their situation was exceptional in that Terry and Jennifer were laid off from the same plant when it closed its doors. Terry described, *“Oh yeah, it hurt. We both went from having decent paychecks to unemployment on the same day. So it hurt a lot!”*

This is a second marriage for both and, between them, they have three adult children. Moving to find work was not a desirable option to them because they wanted to remain near family and their grandchildren. *“Well, I want to be around for them if they need me, which keeps me in the area for one.”* Terry’s description of himself focused on his work history and his reason for being at the community college:

*Well, I’ve always worked; and the last job we had, the plant closed down. There’s no work out there, and the only way to get a job is to get better training. Up until this point, I’ve never had no intentions of ever being back in school. And the only way to get a job, pay the bills, support your family is to have a higher education. So that’s how I got stuck here. And I’ve always enjoyed working with my hands, the more physical the happier I was. And I like to be able to move around when I’m doing it. I don’t like to sit still. I sit still, I fall asleep, so I always try to keep moving.*

The word *stuck* resonated in the air as it did not seem to match his enthusiasm.

When asked what he meant by *stuck*, he responded:

*It means if I could find a job to where I could support my family, I would rather be doing it then going to school. To me school is meant for the younger generation. But I’ve been put into a position to where I have to go back to school cause I didn’t have enough oomph to get up and do it when I was younger. But then again, jobs were plentiful back then to where they aren’t now, not with today’s economy. And personally, I don’t see an end in sight right now with the economy.*

As a high school dropout, Terry later received a GED. Classes at this community college were his first foray into college work. As a first generation student, he said his sister in Germany was “super proud” of him. *“My family never expected to ever hear me being in school; and they just found out during Christmas break or the end of the semester that I was back in school, they had no idea.”* Coming back to school was something he and his family never considered happening. Terry explained how this experience was different:

*I was real apprehensive. In high school, I was a slacker. I didn't care; I had no interest in school. And then coming back this time it was a complete turnaround. I figured I have to be in the top 10% of my class to get my choice of jobs. And that's my goal. And when I was younger, to me an A was something somebody else got. Well for me, this time, an A- was what I averaged. I learned more in one semester I've been here than I ever thought I could.*

He noted that the funding provided by WIA for Jennifer and him to attend school was an answer to their prayers: *“We did some praying and told the good Lord if He came up with a way to send us back to school we would do it. Well, he came up with WIA...and you don't go against Him.”* Terry described with enthusiasm the degree he was pursuing at MCC:

*Well, I'm here getting Industrial Maintenance Technology Degree with a minor in the Wind Turbines...And the wind turbines have always fascinated me. I love being high in the air...where I can see a view. But being able to learn how they work and how to work on them, and eventually get the opportunity TO do it, just all kind of fell into place. But then the Industrial Maintenance degree, if it ever gets to where my body won't allow me to do the climb on the turbines, I have that to fall back on, to get a job where I can still do maintenance work, where I'm working with my hands and doing stuff I enjoy.*

## **Jennifer**

A few years shy of the Baby Boomer generation, at age 43, Jennifer was included in the study to add the couple's perspective. Along with husband, Terry, they were not only

attending this community college together, but were also employed by a circuit board manufacturing plant that closed leaving them both unemployed on the same day. Jennifer described herself in terms of her desire to help other people. She said:

I like to help people out. I mean at one point when I was in 4<sup>th</sup> grade I decided I was going to be a teacher. And then it was the [local 4-year college] that made me change my mind, and told me I couldn't get along with my cooperating teachers so they wouldn't let me finish my student teaching. So [long pause], I like working around people. I can work on my own but I would rather work with other people.

Jennifer's work history was one in which she truly enjoyed her factory job ... with the perception that she and Terry, who came to work [at the factory] a month after she did, were "*set for life*":

*I worked in restaurants, not fast foods...and retail, but REALLY enjoyed the plant. That as far as I was concerned, that's where I was retiring from, and then they closed the doors.... I figured I was set for life soldering at the circuit plant. We did we both love the jobs. The work was great, the people were great. We were both figuring we were set.*

Her collaboration regarding comments Terry had made about his falling asleep were intriguing: "*I don't like to sit still. I sit still; I fall asleep, so I always try to keep moving.*"

She described Terry's work at another company:

*He was falling asleep on the job. He was actually dozing on the machines out at [factory] ...but then he went to [circuit factory], and they started training him, and just as he started training for soldering, a lady that ran a specialized machine called the coder quit. And once he got put there, he was having a blast...he loved it!*

Jennifer's educational background was very different from her husband's GED. She had graduated from high school and had an AA degree from MCC in elementary education. While pursuing a BA in that field at the local 4-year college, she indicated she was not able to continue. Her college advisor suggested a computer program at a local business college.

From there, Jennifer received a BA in Management Information Systems. *“And I am A+ certified. I can take apart a computer. I can even take apart a brand new computer,”* Jennifer proudly exclaimed; however, that was seven years ago she relayed: *“But with that it’s either move to Des Moines or Minneapolis, and at that time ...we didn’t want to leave the grandson and the kids.... So we kind of wanted to stay in the area.”* Her career choice this time focused on an occupation that was accessible and continue to have job openings: *“So I am working on the Medical Transcription, Medical Coding, and Medical Office Associate diplomas all at once.”*

The couple could be observed at *their table* in the MCC activity center with a computer set up and books in array. They were often joined by another couple and could be observed greeting other students. The corner table appeared to serve as a study camp as someone was always there, working and attending to the other’s school paraphernalia which was festooned with Mountain Dew bottles and snacks. Jennifer and Terry lived five miles from campus, but they both stayed for each other’s classes, even if it was all day and the other had only one. Terry said, *“Trying to live off of unemployment and travel out here every day. To be able to have gas the rest of the week, I sit out here and wait, and that gets old real quick.”*

### **Kathy**

Kathy is a 48-year-old female who is married and the mother of two grown children. Regarding her educational background, she was a high school graduate and had one year of business school immediately following. She described business school as: *“Umm, well a lot different...[laughter] there weren’t computers yet. Electric typewriters, we did shorthand;*

*yeah, so it was way back in the day. But I enjoyed it, it was fun, but the pay wasn't there."*

Factory work paid better and attracted her when a recreational vehicle plant opened in her hometown. *"It's a good company to work for...I was there 8 years, and I then I got laid off."* The decision to go to school followed after applying for many jobs: *"Um, no other factories were hiring so, that kind of left me out of that loop. And there just really weren't jobs."* Her field was Administrative Office Associate, which was also her career choice after graduating high school.

*I decided to go to school when I found out I could get it paid for. I mean if I'd had to pay for it myself I probably wouldn't have went back. But through the WIA, knowing I could get it paid and get my books and possibly some gas money, I thought you know what, you just don't ever get this opportunity handed to you.*

Kathy's self-description featured her outgoing nature and her volunteering spirit in the community:

*I enjoy life. I enjoy family, friends, fun! I'm ambitious; and let's see, deacon of stewardship at my church. I am on the board of the Bridge of Hope .... And I enjoy volunteering, enjoy kids, well, my own grandkids.*

## **Larry**

Larry is a divorced 49-year-old male. He has two children. The younger one, who lives with his ex-wife, is still in high school in the area. Larry was the only male in the research group who graduated from high school when compared to the other three who had GEDs. He enrolled in a community college directly after graduating high school; however, he did not complete, as he explained:

*I guess I had the attitude that I knew a lot. I thought I knew what I wanted to go into, and I was going to college for radio broadcasting. I worked at sales at the radio station and once I got out of college, radio broadcasting. I had*

*this attitude, these extra classes, like I'm taking now, I wouldn't ever need them or use them, so I just blew them off.*

Larry appeared positive, happy, with a ready smile. He was very well groomed and had a self confident air about him. His demeanor matched *the* following description of himself:

*Pretty outgoing person. I get along well with most every person that I come across. I work for a little over 12 years in manufacturing motor homes and I got laid off. And with the economy and things the way it was... I went to school right out of college but I decided to quit. I always wanted to get my degree, and I decided the opportunity was there to come back to school, and I wasn't really happy with the work I was doing, and I just wanted to add some value to myself so I would be more marketable out in the workplace.*

Larry took this turn of events as an opportunity to pursue an education and change his career path: *"Really with what I am doing, with being in college I really want to do more professional type work, and they [factory] have hired some people back, but I don't think at this point I would be happy there."* By using credits from his first foray to college, Larry hoped to graduate in one year: *"I hope to graduate in a year's time with a 2 year AA and a 1 year diploma program that will more hopefully diversify myself with my past experience and with my new experience."* Larry's field of study was General Business.

### **Janet**

Janet, age 55, is married and has adult children. Her layoff experience was from a service industry. She was pursuing a Business Accounting Degree at MCC with the assistance of WIA funding. For her, this would not only provide an avenue to a better job, but also satisfy a missing piece in her life: *"Well, I think it's been one of my goals, to get my degree, you know, and I just think it's either now or never."* She had a part-time job as the

director of a small town library, and she could apply new her new accounting information to the library budgets. She described herself:

*Oh, I don't know exactly what to say. I guess, um...I have always you know, been hard working, I guess good work ethic. Um, important things to me are my family, I think the biggest thing in my life is my grandkids you know, but um, I have had two different careers in my life like I worked at [National Survey Firm], then I worked at [Financial service industry]. When [survey firm] closed, and then [Financial Group] I got laid off so those were really long, long term so it was kind of a fruit basket upset when I no longer had those jobs, kind of part of my identity is working, and I enjoy working.*

After her first job disappeared due the business closing in 1990, Janet enrolled in MCC on a fulltime basis for a year and a half, but did not complete her degree. She became employed at the financial service industry and worked off and on at school. With this layoff, she perceived it was a good time to finish: *“Not to brag but I did pretty well [chuckles] but you know, I was just ready, I thought you know that this will get me started and ...it has always one of my goals to complete my degree.”*

### **Claire**

Claire's work history varied from doing real estate, working in a grease gun factory, and being a regional transit dispatcher. Her last job was at a recreational vehicle factory for eight years, until she was laid off work. Claire was the oldest participant, at the age of 58. She was unique in that she completed her program after the fall semester and was now job-hunting. Remarried, she has three adult children from her first marriage. Her husband accompanied her to the first interview. Claire had trouble describing herself: *“Um, I guess I would say I like talking with people um [pause] outgoing. [pause] I don't know...hard to describe yourself. I've never really thought about it.”* Her husband prompted her: *“Probably say dedicated to what you set your mind to do ... Well, not just finishing school, you had the*

*goal that you were going to do the best that you absolutely could, and you finished with all A's."* Claire replied, *"Yeah, that's true, never thought about it."*

Following high school, Claire enrolled in business school, expressing an interest in being a secretary, as she said: *"Forty years ago, you know."* Due to changes in her family status and moving around the area, she did not return to her original career path until now.

She was attending MCC to earn an Administrative Assistant Diploma:

*I didn't think my chances of finding a job in an office was going to be too great after being in a factory so I guess that's why I thought, yah know it [college] might be the only route to go. Either that or it'd be working in a grocery store or something like that.*

### **Blossom**

Blossom, age 49, is the other half of the second married couple taking part in this research. She and husband Charlie have five children, with the youngest still at home attending his senior year of high school. After dropping off their son at school, they travel 60 miles one way to come to the college daily. According to his parents, their son does not have a driver's license due to his lack of interest. This presented a constant problem, especially due to school closings for inclement weather. Getting to their classes on time was a challenge. Charlie did not have a driver's license either, so Blossom drove. Her reason for attending community college was a departure from that of the other participants:

*One, I was going to have to sit over here for 8 hours or whatever Charlie's classes were; and I decided since I was going to be over here, why not do something with the time and learn some more. Cause I've tried going to school before, and it just wasn't the right time. All the kids are old enough and can take care of themselves. Most of them are out on their own. This can just be mom's time. I guess.*

When asked to describe herself, Blossom had difficulty doing so:

*Hmm, I don't know. [Long pause] Usually I have Charlie describe me. I don't describe myself anymore. [Long pause] I'm shy for one, that I will say. I don't like to get up in front of people, at all. Quiet [long pause] kind of laid back [pause] but when it comes to my son's wrestling, I'm very energetic. [long pause]*

As a high school graduate, Blossom did take some classes at a community college off and on, but did not think any of them would transfer to MCC. Her course of study was Administrative Office Assistant, which was a career change from her work history doing restaurant and retail work. Her last job was three years ago at a fast food restaurant. Along with her husband and daughter who also worked at the restaurant, she quit that position due to allegations against a family member. She felt that she was currently unable to get a job due to surgery on her right hand that affected her range of motion:

*I mean I've tried, but I've been discriminated against since then because I had surgery done to this hand [right hand]. I don't have full motion with it and I can't lift a lot. They hear that and that's it. I can still do everything but just because I don't have full motion...*

## **Charlie**

Charlie is married to Blossom, and they are the second married couple in this research. He was employed at a minimum wage job where hours were being cut. Charlie never revealed the work he was currently doing. He readily described himself:

*Well, describe the obvious, I'm 51. I married, have 5 kids, one still living at home who's a senior. Um, was never fond of school period, not just high school, I didn't like school period... the day I started kindergarten till the day I quit high school, I did not like school. So it's very strange for me to find myself here. Uh, I do have a job but its minimum wage.*

He mentioned reluctantly that his previous education was getting his GED. Charlie knew the date he quit high school: *"I made it till, I can be exact, December 19<sup>th</sup> at 1 p.m.,*

1975. *I was in my senior year of high school. Like I said, I never liked school.*” In the Marine Corp., he was required to get his GED: *“They said, ‘By the way, you’re going to get your GED’. Otherwise, I probably still wouldn’t have it.”* His favorite employment appeared to be the 11 years he was a grinder in a foundry.

*I enjoyed it, I really did. Um, one reason I’m not there anymore is [pause and sigh] stuff in my personal life that unfolded in a different direction than what I wanted, and took me away from that situation. So, I ended up leaving, but I was the head grinder.*

Anxious to tell me about his program of study, one of his first questions to me was: *“Are you going to ask about why I’m here?”* I obliged, and his response was, *“It’s a two year program through this college...at the end of it, I will be ASC certified to where I should be able to go into any shop... I’d be qualified to work almost anywhere I want as a mechanic, excuse me, Automotive Technician.”* His grin matched his pride in wearing a MCC-embossed shirt with *Automotive Technology* on one side and his name on the other. He explained what brought him to the college:

*The reason I am here now is I was sitting at home watching TV and I kept seeing this commercial for motorcycle mechanics over and over and... I was like, I don’t know how to work on motorcycles, but I do know how to work on some cars. And it just kept eatin’ at me and eatin’ at me; and finally, one day I looked at my wife and said, “How about we check out [MCC]. Cause I know they have an automotive program there?” So we came over and checked it out and decided that’s what I wanted to do....So, I’ll take what I consider a passion, hobby or passion and make it into a career.*

## **Jane**

Jane is a 53-year-old married female who is new in the area. She is experiencing the empty nest syndrome and is looking for a new career to keep her busy. The fact that she had quit smoking has given her even more time, and she was bored: *“I found out I spent A LOT*

*of time smoking.*” Later, Jane revealed that paying for their children’s educations along with her husband’s education for a third career had caused financial concerns, *“We dug ourselves in pretty deep.”* Her spouse, who retired from Air Force, had a second career as a defense contractor when, at age 50 he spent six years training for the ministry. Jane, who was also in the military, described herself:

*I am going to school because I want something that’s marketable and portable. And I found over the years that I move because of family situations, and I had not worked in my primary degree area since I got it umpteen years ago, so my reason for going to school is just to do that, the portable, marketable; and at my age I’m an empty nester and it’s I need something to do. I need a job [chuckle] I can’t sit on my hands all day, so that’s it.*

She received a BA in Industrial Technology, which she said she had not used in “umpteen” years. She had no interest in getting a Masters Degree, but remarked, *“I want something that I can...I wanna count beans. I want someone to show me how to count beans, and I want to get a job counting beans, and I’ll be able to do that with this.”* Jane was in the one-year Medical Coding and Billing diploma program. She currently worked as an independently contracted soccer referee, traveling in Colorado, Arizona, Iowa, and Minnesota during the season. She said:

*For soccer referee, it is seasonal and limited, but I am also looking at some indoor work instead of that [laughter], getting older and slower [more laughter]. I tell you the kids are getting younger and faster, and I just get older and slower. This may be my last year um just trying to think there really hasn’t been steady employment.*

Moving with their military backgrounds and her husband’s careers changes had left her without a job history. She was now interested in something “portable” to be able to use anywhere.

## **Summary**

Bob, Larry, and Claire recently experienced lay-offs, and each appeared to be considering a different career before the layoff occurred. Kathy, Terry, and Jennifer were also laid off—but from jobs they had perceived they would remain at for the rest of their working lives. All six were doing factory work, and half of them truly enjoyed their jobs. Janet was laid off from a service industry sector and had trouble dealing with the sense of “Why me?” The other three participants were not dislocated (laid off) workers. For Blossom and Charlie, she was planning to come back to school since, as his driver, and she would be on campus anyway. Blossom had referred to having an assessment while in Promise Jobs, which I was familiar with as a state welfare program. Their incentive may have been ignited by their youngest child who was soon to become “of age” and, thus, they would no longer be receiving cash benefits. Finally, Jane was looking for a job after a spotty work history; thus, she required training to be marketable for a portable job. She professed to be bored as she and her husband were empty nesters.

Their voices in the interviews and Facebook postings led to the emergence of the following themes. The next section introduces the themes and provides an analysis of them.

## **Themes and Analysis**

Four themes emerged from the data collected in this research study:

- Economic conditions influenced these Baby Boomers to attend community college, and they pursue new careers based on passion and purpose.
- The community college provides a welcoming feeling of inclusion for these Boomer age students through its culture and through support of the faculty; however, rising expectations of Boomers were expressed.
- This group of Boomers forms social networks with fellow adult students that support and validate them as students.

- Transformation learning in these Boomers is evident in their changed attitude in the classroom. Their process of making meaning out of their dilemmas aligns in part to 10 steps of Mezirow's theory.

The four themes and findings are supported by rationales in the form of statements from participants. According to Jones (2002), this can limit the influence of the researcher's positionality.

### **Theme 1: Economic conditions influence pursuing new careers**

#### **Layoffs**

According to Keen (2009), millions of laid-off workers are being force to make tough decision about their futures. Since the recession began in December 2007, the economy has resulted in a loss of more than 5 million jobs. In March, 2009, U.S. employers cut 663,000 jobs. The MCC region had the highest unemployment rate for a county in this state at the time of the Keen article, at 9.1% compared to state's rate at 4.9%. Newer statistics were equally grim. The *Des Moines Register* headline on January 23, 2010 declared a "Staggering' job losses for Iowa:"

*Iowa's unemployment rate fell slightly to 6.6% in December, but the state also logged the highest monthly decline in jobs in nearly two decades....The state lost 13,200 jobs in December from November [2009] and 40,100 from December 2008....The December loss was the greatest since 1991, when the group [Iowa Policy Project] started collecting data....The state's employment picture is unlikely to quickly improve in the new year. Two meatpackers announced plans this week to eliminate the jobs of nearly 2,000 workers.*  
(Eller, 2010, p.1A)

All 10 participants disclosed an economic dilemma that provided an incentive to return to school. In this sample, seven of the 10 participants had been laid off, one had quit a job and could not find other work, another had a minimum wage job that was not meeting his family's needs, and one participant had just moved to the area and could not find work.

For 70% of the participants, the disorienting dilemma could be characterized as their layoff notice. Jennifer described her feelings upon hearing the announcement of the plant closing: *“I was, for several hours at least, I was kind of like blown away. I had no idea what I was going to do, where I was going to go. Umm it was just kind of, ok, now what?”* Her husband, Terry, concurred: *“Uh, I was scared to death because I knew what the economy was like already.”* Kathy captured the disorienting state of detachment she felt following her layoff:

*When I got laid off that time, I was done; there was no going back. And that was the first time since I was probably eighteen that I didn't belong somewhere, I was not someone's employee, and that, that's hard, especially when you're used to that. You know, you're used to going someplace day after day, you know what you're doing, you know everybody you work with, you know the process...I mean you just built your life on that, and I planned to retire from there. I mean I had, there was no doubt in my mind that I would never work for another job. And so, when that happened, Boom!*

While some of those who were laid off from factory or construction work had experienced seasonal shut downs that constituted temporary layoffs and qualified for unemployment benefits, financial and service industries rarely exercise spot layoffs. For Janet, the experience was an awkward and left her doubting herself. She took her layoff from a service industry firm very personally, and had to work at accepting that it was the economy and not her work or her age that precipitated the layoff. While the company laid off 40 or more employees, she was the only one of her three-person team who was laid off within her job title position:

*Yeah, um... you think about things, and you explore a lot of reasons, and, I don't know, I kind of came to an acceptance of it. What helped me get through, I guess, is that I got my Prim Pay which is something that you get with your previous work, and so if you didn't do a good job, you didn't get any Prim Pay. So, I got my Prim Pay, so I felt like, I had done a good job. I think, as you get older, you get a little slower, you know, you don't get things*

*done as fast, and so I always kind of thought that was it. And, you know, with health issues. You just go through so many reasons; most people don't get that kind of a feeling through their life. They do now, I mean, there are a lot of layoffs now; but I mean, most of the time you leave because it's your choice; and when it's someone else's choice, it makes it a little harder. I never really felt that I was fired, and I know some people kind of felt that way. The whole thing, it was a lot of wondering.*

Terry was anxious to get back to work and not rely anymore on Unemployment Insurance:

*Yep, get back into the workforce and not relying on the state again. Cause this is the first time...I been on unemployment for 3 days before this plant shut down and I'm 45 years old that's a heckuva good record, and if it wouldn't been for the plant shuttin' down I still wouldn't be. I'd still have a better record than that.*

Bob had found a job he enjoyed after quitting factory work. He was subsequently laid off from that job—one he enjoyed. For him, the downtime from being unemployed was difficult to take:

*Yeah, yeah. Um, it really bothered me, because I really liked the job. Ah, that was the first job I think I've ever liked in my life, and I only got to do it for 6 months. Ah, it just sucked really, because that was the first of the year, errr, the first winter technically I've ever been laid off in my life and ah, I always have like a slim case of depression too, and that didn't help matters, sitting around all day at home. I mean, you can only clean the house so many times, you know? I have to keep busy so I know that nothing gets on my mind, that's the way I am. And, it...it was affecting me pretty bad.*

Claire and Larry were both laid off from one of the area's largest employers who was downsizing due to the economy. Two satellite plants had closed their doors, but Claire and Larry were released from the parent company. Claire had been on worker's compensation for a fall on the ice but was laid off when she returned to the factory:

*I was laid off when I was able to go back after my carpal tunnel surgery, but then they didn't want me cause they didn't have any place for me and they had laid off all kinds of people before me...so, but then they called me back this summer and put me in wire prep until both hands were numb and swollen and blood vessels broke in my wrists; and I said I want to see my surgeon and he gave me a 5 pound restriction. That took care of [the factory job], yeah.*

Larry posted on the Facebook page:

*I decided to return to school as I was laid off from my job of over 12 years! I was working doing factory (production) work at [recreational vehicle plant]. I didn't like the heavy labor and wasn't happy and always wanted to get my degree so I got the opportunity to come back to school and loving every minute of it. I am so focused and have such a different attitude than I did right after high school it is amazing to me things I am doing. I didn't think or give myself enough credit for before.*

The three remaining participants had other economic concerns for enrolling in the community college. Charlie was not laid off from a job; rather he had a minimum wage job that was not meeting the needs of his family. Recently, his hours were being cut. When asked how he would portray the disorientating dilemma that had brought him to school, he responded:

*Basically, I am unemployed, you might as well say. Going that long between working is basically unemployment. I would say that is kind of disorientating, I mean it's kind of nice not having to work, but you know, everyone needs to work. Matter of fact, when I decided I was going to come back here, I kind of looked at it as...this was going to be my job. I have taken my disorientating dilemma and changed it into my school experience. I don't have that dilemma, because this is my job.*

Blossom had quit her job three years ago but was having difficulty finding work. Blossom and Charlie had mentioned that they had been on the PROMISE Jobs, which is the state welfare program for needy families. Since their youngest son would soon be aging out of the program, they may also be anticipating that their financial need will be greater. Jane was new to the area and was not finding work: *"I moved about a year and a half ago, and it just wasn't the time to be looking for a job."* All participants had been looking for work in the area and were having trouble finding a suitable position due to the poor job market.

### Poor job market

Replacement jobs for these 10 individuals were not available, either due to their lack of training for openings or the substantially lower pay being offered. After Kathy's layoff, she tried to find another job:

*I'd applied for a lot of jobs but [sigh] the bad thing about it was the pay cut that I would have to take because after I had been at [factory] for 8 years, yah know, you're making some pretty good money there. So then you have to take a pay cut; and at the time, I was carrying the insurance for the family. So, I was looking for something with benefits, which there really wasn't that either and almost everything wanted some type of experience. I mean if I wanted to work in the office, I didn't have enough computer experience, ah, computer knowledge. Um, no other factories were hiring so that kind of left me out of that loop. And there just really weren't jobs.*

Terry compared the changing times regarding his job search: "When I was younger...jobs were plentiful back then to where they're not now. Not with today's economy and personally, I don't see an end in sight right now with the economy." As a Boomer, his needs have changed, as he stated: "...my time's limited." He continued:

*There's no job out there that's gonna be secure enough to support and last long enough. And I want something to where I'm going to be secure where I'm at. Because, I don't have a whole lot of years left to where I can keep moving around from job to job and still have a pension when I get older...so my time's limited. So it's either go all out and get a good job now that will have a pension and where I can build a pension up, something I can survive on when I can't work.*

Jennifer, who was affected by the same plant's closing as her husband, Terry, shared her husband's view on the economy and jobs:

*A lot of it basically is the economy and because there's just ...the jobs that are available I don't have the right training for.... Also, I've heard that even the fast food restaurants will go for someone that's at least working on getting a college education rather than somebody that just got out of high school. Because then they know you're going to stick with something, and it just shows you've got a little – yeah, I'm going to stick it [school] out.*

Her Facebook posting voice a further concern with the job market: *“It's the finding a job in the economy after the classes are done that has me worried.”*

Jane, who has a BA, was new to the area, recounted: *“There's no jobs, or there doesn't seem to be anyway.”* Jennifer, the other participant with a BA, pointed out there were some choices, but not ones that would meet her family's needs *“I was kind of looking around going, ok, the jobs that are out there, require different kinds of training then what I have unless I want to go back to waitressing, and that is NOT what I wanted to do at all.”* Jane and Jennifer did not feel there was a market in the area for their previous degrees. Jane had moved so much that, this time she wanted to learn skills that were portable so she would be readily employable. Jennifer's BA was in Management Information Technology. To use it meant:

*That it's either move to Des Moines or move to Minneapolis...we kind of wanted to stay in the area, and I knew I wasn't going to be traveling a couple hours every day for a job. It was just find something in the area I could live with.*

The economy has kept people from retiring and, thus, fewer job openings are available as

Kathy remarked:

*Well, I hope there is a job out there, that's what I am hoping for, you know I, I mean I...yeah, that's just the biggy there. I don't know, if I, if things were different and people were retiring like they used to, you know, there might even be a place for me at [intern position] to slide right in there, but, people don't retire now they need the insurance, you know, they still need the income.*

Along with lay-offs and the poor job market, participants disclosed they felt there were missing pieces in their lives that college was filling.

### Missing pieces

Beyond the economic pressures as influences to enroll in the community college, emotional needs were being met for some participants. Janet had an underling need to “accomplish something”. Larry and Janet were each feeling a missing piece in their lives. Both had begun college earlier and regretted not completing a degree. Larry shared, “*I always wanted to get my degree and I went back to school, I went to school right out of high school and the focus wasn’t really there um like it is now. That’s my regret.*” Janet lamented:

*Well, I think it’s been one of my goals to get my degree, you know....And I’ve always liked school, and I’ve always done well you know. So it’s kind of, I guess it is regret, you know, because I’m at a point in my life I don’t feel like I can, you know... [Get a B.A.]. I can get my MCC degree, but, you know, that’s probably about it. I know I wish I would have went to...I was like, supposed to go to UNI when I graduated [from high school] and my dad was a farmer, very intelligent man, but he did not think I needed to go to college, you know. And, you know, I just think how different my life may have been if I would have went.*

Janet’s later Facebook posting kept the B.A. possibility in the picture: “*I want to get my two year degree and then re-access my goals.*”

For Blossom, it was “*mom time.*” She had been enrolled in community college classes on two different occasions and had been unable to complete both of those times:

*The fact that I wanted something different in my...to do different in my life, and I decided it was time that I did it for me since I already had the kids through their schooling, except the youngest one. I decided its Mom’s turn! It’s just Mom has always wanted to go to school, back to school, and it’s just time that Mom did it.*

When asked about her earlier efforts, that she was unable able to complete, her response was, *“I did that twice before, so I decided it’s my turn, no matter what [voice trails to a whisper].”* Her husband, Charlie, described in his interview an early experience they shared:

*Um, [I] went back to community college once, when my wife [Blossom] was pregnant with my oldest son. She, while she was pregnant, she apparently had a calcium deficiency and broke her wrist bone so I was trying to do notes for two of us. She was using a tape recorder in class, and I was trying to transcribe her notes for her plus do my own work and I got frustrated and said that’s it, I ain’t goin back. I can’t study for both of us, I quit.*

Her drive to attend school, while pregnant and with a broken wrist, attested to her desire to go to college.

Career dreams were being realized by two of the men whose previous education led to the GED. Terry was pursuing a dream to work on wind turbines. Charlie, a self-described *gear head*, would be doing his dream job of being a mechanic or, as he said with a smile, *“Excuse me, automotive technician.”* Claire and Kathy were returning to the business training they began directly following high school.

### **Financial support influences decision to enroll**

Influences for some of these select Boomers came in the form of financial support of outside agencies. Workforce Investment Act (WIA) and Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) funding provided the decision point for six of the participants. Larry said WIA basically helped him totally the first semester, with money for tuition, books, and gas. When he changed his plan to a two-year program, he found the agency’s policy was to spread the remainder of the financial help available over the next three semesters. With a cap for tuition payments, he needed to come up with the balance. He remarked, *“I gotta come up with the difference, which I would anyway because I want to do this. Whether I wanted to pay for this*

*or not but, they've really helped me a lot.*" Terry, Jennifer, Janet, and Kathy also qualified for help from WIA. Bob, a dislocated worker, did not qualify for financial help from WIA due to the fact that his wife's income was high. Claire did not qualify for WIA as her family income was also high; however, due to a wrist injury, she did qualify for help from VR. Financial help with educational costs played a key role in decision-making. Terry described how the decision to enroll in school was made:

*Well, the Lord came up with WIA, to come up with the funding for us [Terry and wife Jennifer] which we considered a blessing, and that's how I basically came back to school is prayed the good Lord came up with ways to do it, and you don't go against Him.*

In her interview, Jennifer recalled that she had asked God for a sign:

*We were out doing a few errands one night, and uh I looked at Terry, and said uh yah know all I need is one indication that which way God wants us to go. The next day [WIA Counselor] called us and told us we had the funding to go back to school.*

*"Well, I decided to go to school when I found out I could get it paid for, through the WIA.... I thought you know what? You just don't ever get this opportunity handed to you,"* explained Kathy. Her Facebook posting read: *I would have probably worked there [McDonalds] if this had not come about.* She had funding for tuition, books and some gas money to cover her one-year program. That made her decision easy:

*"I guess I wouldn't have even thought of going back to school. Um, but...I guess it was just know that that was a good opportunity not to pass up, that's why I decided to do it so,"* said Claire, whose tuition was partially funded by vocational rehabilitation. Blossom also received funding through VR, yet it did not appear on her current paperwork. She planned to check on it. Others received Pell grants and students loans. Mary, who had a Bachelor's degree, expressed this was the first time she had a personal student loan. She did

not qualify for any Veteran's benefits as she had aged out of them; the VA had different expiration dates depending on a person's dates of service. Financial concerns are cited by 60% of respondents in the Portland Survey (*Boomers go to college*, 2007). Limited funding is available for people with prior degrees who are looking for a career change. (*Boomers go to college*).

Primary influences for enrolling in community college were economic for these participants. Their disorientating dilemmas mirrored the definition for this research: Layoffs, business closings, dwindling retirement accounts, declining job market, returning to school and retirement itself. While there was not a direct reference to *dwindling retirement accounts*, Terry said, "*I don't have a whole lot of years left to where I can keep moving around from job to job and still have a pension when I get older...so my time's limited.*" According to the literature, going back to school may now not be a choice, but a necessity to secure employment. Without ample time to recover financial losses or prepare for retirement, this generation needs to extend their working career by remaking themselves by learning new skills (Bradley, 2009).

The dilemmas that led these Boomers to the community college, though in some cases, extremely painful, could make significant positive impacts on their quality of life. However, whenever posed to Terry, who said he was *stuck* here, that he might look back and see this as a great opportunity, he responded, "*I might, I mean I'd much rather be out in the workforce better than sittin' in a classroom.*" Kathy, Terry, and Jennifer expressed they were very content with their last jobs and expected to retire from them. Jennifer referred to being "*set for life.*" Others looked forward to having a job where people were positive, returning to career goals that were abandoned previously, and pursuing training that fit their interests and

passion. Larry and Bob embraced the layoff as an opportunity to change their lives. Larry and Janet had always wanted to complete their degrees mirroring Yankelovich's (2005), challenge to community colleges to prepare for those wanting to overcome a deficient to their education. Major influences for enrolling in community college were economic, but passion and purpose played a role too for these Boomers. The decisions were confirmed by availability of funding to help with tuition, books, support services, and living expenses.

### **New career “*that I would enjoy*”**

This Boomer group will remain in the workforce due to financial incentives or benefits to socialization (Charness & Czaja, 2006). They will be looking for new opportunities to use their talents and remain in the workforce. While Charness and Czaja's assessment predated the economic downturn, it certainly held true with this select group. Boomers want to combine passion with a purpose that offers new challenges and learning (Goggin & Ronan, 2004).

Larry's layoff provided him the impetus to leave a field of work he was not happy in and pursue a new career:

It's nice to come somewhere where everybody is striving, whether it is an instructor or another student, you're striving to better yourself.... I always wanted to get my degree and I decided the opportunity was there to come back to school, and I wasn't really happy with the work I was doing, and I just wanted to add some value to myself so I would be more marketable out in the workplace.

Bob, a high school dropout and first generation college student, stated, “*I'm trying to break the norm. I got teenage daughters. I'm trying to make it, yah know, 'If Dad can do it, so can I'.... I just want to show them if you try hard you can do it.*” Janet posted to Facebook a

poignant statement regarding enrolling in college: “I love going to school and I feel that nobody can take the education away from you, like a job.”

Financial incentives were important to replace job losses and possible slumps in savings accounts, but the desire to have a career that combined passion with a purpose was evident. Most of the participants expressed wanting to do a job they enjoyed. The Portland Community College Survey of Students over the age of 40 changed the previously considered profile of mature student learners. Rather than looking for enrichment classes, four out of five students reported they were taking classes to upgrade their skills with the purpose of reentering the workforce or pursuing a new career (*Boomers go to college*, 2007).

Terry’s passion for working on wind turbines was conveyed. He coupled that desire with plans for possible physical limitations in the years ahead. Terry described:

*And the wind turbines have always fascinated me but being able to learn how they work and how to work on them, and eventually get the opportunity TO do it, just all kind of fell into place, but then the Industrial Maintenance degree, if it ever gets to where my body won’t allow me to do the climb on the turbines, I have that to fall back on, to get a job where I can still do maintenance work, where I’m working with my hands and doing stuff I enjoy. Rather than having to work at Burger King or McDonalds...I think it [wind turbines] would be fun to work on.*

Blossom wanted to return to work after her job quit, but was unable to find employment. She first expressed her reason for college enrollment was as a time-filler. She recounted that her husband, Charlie, wanted to come back to school and, since he didn’t have a driver’s license, she would be chauffeuring him back and forth for the daily 120-mile round trip:

*One, I was going to have to sit over her for 8 hours or whatever Charlie’s classes were, and I decided since I was going to be over here, why not do something with the time and learn some more. Cause I’ve tried going to school before and it just wasn’t the right time. All the kids are old enough and can take care of themselves. Most of them are out on their own. This can just be mom’s time. I guess.*

Her subsequent interviews revealed a deeper need that just doing something while she was waiting. For Blossom, it was “mom time”. She had been enrolled in community college classes on two different occasions and had been unable to complete those times. She revealed:

*The fact that I wanted something different in my...to do different in my life, and I decided it was time that I did it for me since I already had the kids through their schooling, except the youngest one. I decided its Mom's turn! It's just Mom has always wanted to go to school, back to school, and it's just time that Mom did it.*

Charlie was fulfilling his passion for working on cars by enrolling in the MCC

Automotive Technology program:

*Oh yeah, as back then I believe it was called a gear head; I really liked cars, I enjoyed them yah know. So yeah it's something from my childhood that I actually returned to. Well, my whole life I've went out and tinkered with cars. If something broke on a car, I'd try fixing it before I took it to a mechanic or take it to a shop. So it was just something I enjoyed like what I'm doing now. Figured it was time to grow up to be honest [laughter].*

Larry, who had some college experience and sales work prior to the factory job, recounted that he was growing restless in his factory work before the layoff. While he did some job hunting, he looks as the educational experience as a chance to train for the career he desired:

*I did look for other jobs and the market was real weak, job market was real weak. I really didn't want to pursue, even if I would have been called back to [factory], I didn't want to do that the rest of my life. I decided that with the help of workforce [WIA funding], I should do it. They helped me last summer prepare stuff to prepare for school, brush up skills and stuff. I really think it's the best thing I could've done now.*

Larry's career change was aligned with his goals: “Really with what I am doing, with being in college, I really want to do more professional type work and they [factory] have hired

*some people back; but I don't think at this point I would be happy there.*" Larry summed it up: *"Well, what I want is to get my degree... make all these things fit into place. Basically, when I get done I want to get a job doing something I like and that I enjoy to do."* His statement was echoed over and over by the others: *"Something I enjoy!"* Charlie said: *"Um, I will be doing something that I enjoy doing, I have enjoyed doing, I am learning how to do it so I will be able to enjoy it more... and hopefully being paid more for it."*

Kathy and Claire were returning to careers that they had trained for out of high school. Both attended a business school one-year program to do office work. Kathy could not find a job that paid well enough in that field, and Claire reports that family dynamics put her out of the workforce for a period of time and in order to return to that career, she found that technology had passed her by.

*I mean I like bookkeeping and office work and um the only reason I ended up getting away from it was because when, well, when we got married...I worked up until the first son was born and my husband kind of had it in his head that when you have kids then you stay at home. And so by the time I got done having 3 children everything in accounting with these great big huge machines I used to work on yah know pretty soon it was computers. Um, so I mean technology changed so much through those years.*

Kathy's described her former job at the factory: *"We actually, in our department, put together the lower compartment doors on the [recreational vehicle]."* She later related the toll this type of work was taking on her body. She described her career choice: *"This was the only thing that really perked my interest was, yah know, the computers and be in the office setting and working with people and so....I did have that interest before and.... I guess that's where I belong."* Kathy concurred with Claire's assessment of technology passing her by: *"Umm, well [business school was] a lot different than this [laughter]; there weren't*

*computers yet just electric typewriters; we did shorthand, um yeah, so it was way back in the day.”*

Janet and Bob had bachelor degrees in mind beyond their current career change preparation. Janet described her earlier job:

*I was um, and assistant, it was called a pension assistant and um, before I left I was what was called a QUADRO Assistant, which is Qualified Domestic Relations Order and, with so many divorces and that type of things going on, the pension plans or the retirement plans are also part of a divorces.... You got to be pretty efficient, but you were pretty locked into one type of work.*

She wanted to find a job that she really liked: “*At this point in my life I don’t want to have a job that’s like a stepping stone to something else or anything like that, I just want to do stuff that I like, so.*” Beyond a job she would enjoy, her goal was to get her degree.

*It has been a long-term goal for me to get my degree ...after I get my degree, I may still keep going you know, kind of just, taking classes. I have always just thought, that you hear people talking that well they are professional student, well, you know...I can see, you know people feeling that way. But I think it is very very important to keep you mind active and keeping with the world. I’d love to go on to two more years, but, I’ll make it across that bridge when I get there whether I am really going to do that so [laughs]. I told my husband, I’ve got five more classes, one in the summer, two in the fall, and two right now, so. He was kind of happy with that [chuckles], cause it is kind of a family deal as you get older cause, everybody has to cooperate or you are really, it really hurts your performance in your classes and everything so. And I think for the most part I have had that, I have had support.*

Bob’s goal was to complete an AA degree in the field of PC Technician, Hardware

Specialization. Yet, a Bachelor’s degree was looming in his mind:

*[Student service counselor], she’s from [his hometown] and we all know her and she helps us out a little bit more than...I bring people over her from [hometown] all the time, she says “Man, you oughta just rent a bus.” Well, she was telling my step-daughter, “Bob’s gonna have a bachelor’s before he leaves here; I guarantee it” and I was like. “Oh, I don’t know about that.” But as I was thinking about more and more after I was done with my first two degree, if the job market isn’t that great, I probably will....Yeah I could see myself getting that four year degree.*

On the flip side, Janet and Jennifer had bachelor degrees and were returning for a different career path; each was now pursuing Medical Coding. Both did not use their primary degree. Jane said it was because they moved so much; and ironically, for Jennifer, it was because she did not want to move to a larger city. Jane, who had recently moved to this area, was finding that she was bored at her empty nest stage of life. Her response to choosing medical coding:

*I don't mind the industrial arts or the technology, in fact at one time I wanted to be a carpenter, but I didn't pursue it. If I want to work with my hands, I am going to learn piano and that is something I'm going to do too. It's one of those live each day, cause each day is a gift. Anyway yeah, that's what I am doing here... the umm office type of stuff.*

“Office type stuff” fit Jane’s criteria of portable and marketable. Jennifer was laid off from a factory where she soldered circuit boards. Her lifestyle of factory work called for getting up at 3:30 in the morning. She enjoyed school and was looking forward to a different working schedule:

*Ya know in some ways, I kind of missed school so it's been kind of nice. I'm one that believes that if you can't learn something at least one thing new every day, then you've got an awful boring life, so I enjoy learning new things. I guess it's good I'm going that I feel that way since I'm going into the medical type stuff. I've seen it as a good opportunity to grow. I've had several people tell me that the transcribing with the hospital here that a lot of that is done at home where they just say they want you to make sure you do this number of files today ya know, you have this many files you have to get done this week in order to earn your pay and they provide the computer and I was even told that one of the people thought that they even paid for part of the internet connection.*

It seems Jane and Jennifer echoed Janet, “At this point in my life I don't want to have a job that's like a stepping stone to something else or anything like that, I just want to do stuff that I like.”

## Summary

Career choices for these Boomers are about purpose and passions. Kathy and Claire returned to the training they pursued directly after high school but did not stay in the field. For both, the factory pay and preponderance of jobs enticed them. Charlie was taking a lifelong hobby and interest to be his career. Janet, Bob, Jennifer, and Larry had new careers in mind that would be endeavors they enjoyed; nevertheless, the educational experience was a passion in itself for them. Terry expressed his reluctance to be in school, but his enthusiasm belied his comments. While pursuing new careers, Blossom and Jane appeared to be looking for themselves along the way.

For the dilemma that brought them to college to blossom into reaching their career goals, their college experience is critical. As first-generation college students, these Boomers needed the support of MCC in their experience to be successful.

## Theme 2: MCC support for the Boomer students

Overwhelming feelings of support and of inclusion was expressed by these Boomers for the college. Janet shared, *“I always praise MCC, I think MCC is excellent...I just feel that they are always interested in helping you succeed, and the teachers are always very helpful.”* Participants expressed the experience of being welcome as adult students. *“You know, you don’t feel out of place, I mean, you feel welcome,”* Claire offered. Most were surprised by the number of students who were in their age group. Charlie expressed, *“I was pretty sure I wouldn’t be the only one, but then again I didn’t realize there wouldn’t be as many [Boomer age].”* Kathy described her first day of college:

*Oh... that was kind of scary..um. I think what eased my mind the most was how many people were in my classes that were my age or older. Because yah*

*know, I perceived it to be me and bunch of 18 year olds. And that's not the way it is...um almost everyone of my classes is just about split half between kids just coming out of high school and people returning, so it wasn't scary... You know, ah, because that was my biggest fear was coming back to school and I would be with a bunch of nineteen year olds, you know, twenty year olds. And, they have a different outlook on what they want to get out of college, but there are so many people here that are my age and older; and we have the same goal, we want to learn something and get out there and get a job and, and it's, you know it's IMPORTANT to us...we are not used to not working.*

Larry described how he felt as an adult in the classroom; *"I've been made to feel welcome and haven't had any problems with the younger students. If anything, they respect you and know that you've experienced things and ask your advice on things."* He said that, due to the small classes and contact with faculty, *"At MCC, you are not just a number."*

While some admitted to initially being nervous prior to coming to college as Boomer-age students, most confided they came the days before school started to find their classrooms. Larry was one of those: *"I guess if nothing else, my main concern was to get where I needed to be and at the right time, and we [Larry and Bob] kind of scoped out the rooms before."*

Terry had the expertise of his wife, Jennifer, to rely on since she had already attended MCC. He expressed his first-day jitters:

*I had no idea what the campus was really about. No idea how to find any of the classrooms. And I was so racked up with my own self consciousness that I was literally terrified. Cause I'm not a group person, I don't like being around a bunch of people. Well, there's a bunch of people here. I was real apprehensive on that. But after the first day, I mean everybody was real nice and decent the first day, well the whole time I've been here. It all fell into place. My wife had been here before on schooling so she knew her way around a little bit, to where she was able to help get to classes.*

Janet summed her Boomer perspective: *"I feel right at home with kids, other students; they are all helpful, friendly, and I hope they feel that way about me too.... You know, we are all kind of all on the same path there for a short little time."* Bob echoed that

sentiment as he explained his message to his teenage daughters. *“I told them the truth. I said once you get to college, you are all in the same boat. They are like ‘What do you mean?’ I go you are all poor college students. Doesn’t matter who you are or where you’re from, you are all in the same boat.”*

When asked what their perceptions of the number of Boomer-age students were before they attended, very few had given that much thought. Charlie said he didn’t think he would be the only one, but all were surprised by the number of fellow students their age. A review of the marketing documents showed a proclivity to market to the traditional age students. A billboard pointed at dislocated workers returning to re-career also featured a *Young Boomer*, at best, according to the participants. MCC does produce a very helpful brochure for the mature student; however, only one of the participants remembered seeing it. Two asked to take a copy with them. No one said they were deterred by the young faces on the brochures; yet, most had not really thought about it. Bob said he had read the view book and all materials cover to cover, but thought he was in the minority:

*How I got all the information was me being the anal early person I am. As soon as I signed up for school, I got my schedule and everything. I was investigating on my own the catalog. I was investigating on my own the financial aid packages. I read every word of it, which 99% of them [Boomers] don’t. In fact, that’s probably 99.9% of them because I’m pretty sure none of them read it all. But I did. I just think there’s so much information that some of them need to know.*

### **Faculty support**

Support from faculty contributed to Boomers feeling welcome and comfortable in their classes. Many expressed that they felt the faculty enjoyed the Boomers’ presence

because of Boomers' experience in the workforce and their dedication to their studies. Larry described his thoughts:

*And the instructors tend to seem to look up to you too because they know you're there all the time and they know if they don't see you, then they comment that you must definitely be sick or something because you are never gone. You know, they use you as an example sometimes in a positive way to refer or reinforce what they are saying, like, "Well, Larry can relate to that, he was in sales." That's kind of neat.*

Jennifer shared a similar experience, *"Sometimes it's kind of nice, the instructors will say, 'Well those of you that are nontraditional back me up,' yah know and to kind of show the high schoolers it's not as easy out there as you think it's going to be."*

Boomers praised the faculty for their treating them like adults, with respect. Only one experienced being *"talked down to."* Charlie expressed, *"If I'm older than the instructors they treat like I'm older. They don't talk down to me....They just treat me like I'm another human yah know; they treat me with respect, I treat them with respect...so far it's been a good experience."* Jane had a different experience: *"Being treated like a young one, the same...cookie cutter kind of teaching. I don't like being talked down to; I don't know if that is his teaching style or it's a function of being older versus the immature student."* When asked if this happened often, she replied, *"No, actually no...not much, not much. Just one instance, was....was all it took."* Later she repeated, *"Once, that's all it took."* She demonstrated the importance of feeling accepted by the faculty.

Some faculty members were singled out by several Boomers for their help. Terry's praise was directed at a math teacher: *"Basically, all the teachers that I've dealt with, they were all super good. I mean the uh [Math Instructor], she was exceptional. She would bend over backwards to make sure you could understand.... She was a God-send."* Blossom also

mentioned this teacher by name: “*And if there was a problem I could go and talk to her. And she’s told me that if I have problems in a math course just come over and talk to her again.*”

Kathy described how she interacted with the instructors:

*I don’t know, it’s kind of funny but the group that I’m in, we are all so relaxed and giggly and yah know not real serious types, and we have a good time with the teacher. We laugh with her and she tells us funny stories and so yeah it’s just, I don’t know....we have grown as a class ....the teachers are coming along with us.*

Her comments showed the comfort she had developed at college compared to an earlier Facebook Posting. Kathy posted:

*The staff at the college has been great. I came back to school with a cloud over my head not realizing that I would have homework and tests. It’s been a long time since I have been in school!!! I think that college information is given at a faster rate also, so for me it was getting up to learning at that speed. Everything is working out for the best though now.*

Charlie and Blossom experienced problems being late for class due to snow days or late starts for their teenage son. Charlie reported that he talked to the instructors about it and they understand and were accommodating:

*They will tell me that if it happens, “Just give us a call and let us know, and we’ll make sure you’ll have your assignments to do and you know what they are.” They are very accommodating on that part, uh. They understand that I am a parent first and a student second, and they don’t put me down for it, yeah.*

The severe weather and record snow caused the college to close down on several occasions during this study. Janet concurred with the help and understanding of the faculty:

*You know with the weather problems that we have been having all last week, and with this being the end of the semester that’s been kind of, cause um, one of my classes was Tuesday night, a three hour class, so, that wasn’t so good to miss. But, you know, but anyway I figured out again, I was locked out of my MCC email and, I got some help from that area to get back in there and got what I needed for the class so now I am on track.*

Examples of faculty making sure the students knew of the help and resources that would be available to them were evident to some. Yet, others thought it should be more readily accessible. Larry expressed both views:

*Yesterday was the first day of class and they [instructors] let you know they are not your babysitter either but....one of them was stressing yesterday, we got a lot of avenues that you can utilize, yah know, don't be afraid to ask, we'll help you....They talk about tutors and different things um say there's things available. I suppose you could make it more out there where people would know about it instead of, maybe people are uncomfortable about asking for things like that and if there was some type of communication yah know like that you could do.*

Jennifer concurred with Larry's assessment of the resources being more accessible:

*And the tutoring, whatever help they can offer the students, I mean there's some fresh out of high school that actually care, I'm not saying they're all umm there's a lot of the instructors that are like, "Flounder on your own and figure out what's good for you." And it's I mean yeah you don't want to spoon feed em, but yet why not point out the opportunities that are there so that they can figure out what will help them be successful.*

Claire felt the teacher let students know about the help available. She took advantage of the tutoring service upon recommendation of her advisor:

*The teachers have all been really excellent about saying "This is when I will be in my office; don't be afraid to come see me." Um and they make sure they at least say one thing about...the first week or so they mentioned the student learning center, but um I don't know maybe they do more mentioning of the tutoring and stuff on the one on one's when somebody comes to a big difficulties. I mean, they were all very helpful as far as trying to see you through it before you drop a class or that sort of thing. I know even some of the teachers, um [Business Instructor] mentioned that a lot of times kids just say well I am going to quite a class, you know, they don't really tell you why or anything else I think that if you get the right help you can get right through it.*

The tutoring program really helped Claire as she related, *"There was, I guess, just so much stuff in the ribbon [Excel, 2007] that if you didn't exactly get what they wanted you to do it'd screw the whole thing up. So I just got frustrated and thought I needed the class that was*

*actually maybe simpler.*” Claire had posted to Facebook: “*Do you know anyone that is familiar with "if", "and", and "or" functions in Excel?*” Upon meeting with her counselor, she found out the other class would not relate as well; and it was suggested she try the tutoring program. “*It was a lot of paperwork to it, but it really helped me get through that class.*”

In a document analysis of the view book and catalog, I found tutoring was under the heading of Student Support Services (SSS). It seems one would need to know that was the name of the tutoring grant unless, like Bob, they had read the entire book. Eligibility requirements were listed as “first generation student”, low income, and/or physically handicapped/learning disability.” While all the participants turned out to be first-generation college students, they were not familiar with the term. I had to explain the meaning to each of them when I inquired. When asked if his parents went to college, Larry said he mother went to beauty school. From the wording of the criteria listed in the catalog, they may not have realized they qualified for the tutor program.

### **College support services: Rising Boomer expectations**

**Orientation.** “*The advising, the tools available for what you want to do if you just come in here and say, ‘Hey, I might want to do something, but I don’t know what’ ...those are good,*” reported Jane who was looking for a career change. “*I wanna count beans. I want someone to show me how to count beans, and I want to get a job counting beans.*” From the interest tools she utilized, Medical Coding turned out the “bean counting” for her.

Bob suggested a peer counselor would be more effective for the Boomer group. “*I think someone with a little harsher background and stuff would’ve helped. Yah know, a lot of*

*the ones coming back are like me, who have never been to college. And we're all coming back at much later in life.*" His perception of the instructors and advisors was:

*Most of them went to college to begin with, out of high school. Most of them got a job in their field after that. They don't have a clue what it's like, you know? Work a job for ten years and just up and quit, or get fired, or get laid off, or "we'll hire you back for three dollars less an hour." That's what they're doing to people right now. And, I think if they had like a peer counselor...one of the people who had worked hard in a factory, they would understand what they're thinking about.*

Support for his idea would appear to align with Boomers' comments about enjoying seeing someone who looks like me. Claire said, *"Of course it was kind of nice to see some older people like me, there that had been laid off from other places yah know around the area. So I didn't feel like I was the only one."* Bob suggested a peer counselor could handle the tours for the Boomer group, so they wouldn't be led around by young people who were their children's ages. The counselor would actually show them where their individual classes were going to be rather than just pointing out the buildings. The majority of these participants made return visits on their own to do just that.

**Advising/Class scheduling.** Janet expressed, *"You know it is kind of overwhelming to just look at that and say 'Oh, what do I need for that degree?' Then, you know, work it into a schedule...I am really thankful to have people to help with that."* Yet, she was not enrolled in a course she needed. *"I had a teacher last semester, and they kept saying, 'You're not in computer payroll,' and I said, 'no'. 'Well, don't you have to take that?' 'I don't think so,' but, yeah I do [chuckles]."* I inquired about her not knowing she was supposed to take it, and her response was, *"Well, I knew, if I would have looked at my sheet, I would have known it, I just didn't. It didn't ring a bell at the time [laughs]."* It appeared Janet tended to take

responsibility for things such as the feeling of being personally responsible for her layoff. So, whether this class glitch could have been avoided with some help is questionable. Jane expressed a lack of communication for key situations:

*I withdrew from a class, but I didn't do it in the timeframe to get the full refund. It was suggested, and I am very thankful to one of the advisors, that I should write to the registrar and explain the circumstances. And I did, I got a full refund, but "Did anyone bother to tell me that?" I had to ask. Those are the kind of things that when you get older and pickier are the kind of things that really make a difference for me.*

Another scheduling concern was broached by several of the Boomers. An overarching concern was *"I am here to get in and get out."* Time is of the essence to these students. The issue of time came up again and again. The suggestion from some was to arrange classes to meet the needs of the Boomer students, especially those needing to quickly reengage in the workforce. Terry offered, *"I think they could add more classes. You always hear, well, this class is full, that class is full. If they're so full maybe it's time to get a few more added. That's just my way of thinking."* While this did not happen to him, it happened to his wife, Jennifer. She wanted to find a program that won't take her too long to *"get there."* However, due to the lack of a Medical Coding class the semester she needed it, her program was extended from a year-long diploma class to a two-year program. *"Each diploma is supposed to be a one year program, but getting all three of them together because of the timing of the coding and the transcription classes, I won't be done until the end of spring semester next year."* This required another year of financial commitments and another year out of the workforce. Unemployment payments had been extended during this financial crisis, but the extensions were not guaranteed to continue in this manner. Terry and Jennifer were living on their combined unemployment; an extra year of school could negatively impact their joint

plans. Jane expressed a similar problem with the placement of the Medical Coding class. The semester she needed it, it was not offered and that will extend her time.

For Claire, with this dilemma took a different course, and the instructor offered another option in order for her to complete in the prescribed time:

*Well, they changed when I first signed up for classes. I pretty much had what I was going to take each semester, and then they ended up cutting some classes, Office Procedures was one of them. And that was the only class I needed for my Administrative Office Degree. And they weren't going to offer it till next spring. She [instructor] did it on a one-to-one basis with me so I could have that class...yeah, so I could get the Administrative Office Assistant too.*

Claire was fortunate to have the instructor arrange a solution to her class scheduling problem, while Jane and Jennifer had to add another semester or more to their schedules.

Unnecessary classes were noted by both Bob and Terry who each had a GED background. Bob's retort was, "We're here to learn and get out of here." He recounted a problem with a reading class he felt was a waste of his time:

*I dropped a reading class the counselor thought I should be in at the beginning of the semester. Then I found out that I read at a 16<sup>th</sup> grade level, so I was like, hmmm, I really don't need that, and she said, "Oh I think everybody should take it" ...and I said, "Look, I am not going to pay \$500 for an easy A." And I'm not, yah know. I'm here on my own dime basically, and I'm not gonna pay for classes that I don't need.*

Terry had a similar occurrence with the reading class. When asked what could be changed at the college to improve things for Boomer students, he gave an account of his experience:

*Something the college could change [long pause], they could get rid of that bloody reading class that they made me do. I mean I'm not going to read a manual to a machine, so reading out loud - that was a waste of time and that's basically all that class was. I could comprehend everything just fine before, and yeah, I raised it up to their level a little bit but I was already higher level than where I needed to be when I started. A lot of my issue was, I was out of practice. You read a storybook to a grandkid; you don't think about it. I mean they want you to not use monotones in your voice. Well that's ridiculous to me. Especially for the field I'm going in. So it's a lot of it didn't make no*

*sense. I would not have something silly like that. Teachers were super, they put up with me and they were jolly, they were pleasant. To me, I just don't understand the necessity of that class. I mean my test results was a 13.5 and I brought them up to a 15.7 so there was some improvement yeah, but I was high enough already where I didn't need to waste my time on that to where I could've spent my time elsewhere in my eyes.*

Time, money, and relevance all were issues to these students when extra classes were included in their career schedules. Terry's visual of "reading a manual to a machine" was both comedic yet pertinent. Having relevant training delivered as basic skills instruction embedded in the content (Miles, 2000) is a valuable alternative to consider.

**Financial aid and the business office.** Jane and Terry had concerns about the financial aid office. As Bob pointed out, "*Now sometimes the financial aid stuff like that and everything gets confusing [laughs]. But if you come to MCC and you go through the right channels and do it the right way to begin with it, makes it a whole lot easier.*"

Terry's concern was that for first time borrowers, the financial aid was not available until mid-semester. He needed those funds to have a computer that would support the computerized drafting program he was taking:

*The computerized drafting I'm going to be retaking because I could not get all the designs done in time. One, the financial aid for first time borrower, they make you wait til half way through the semester. Well, to have a computer that would work with the program you have to use, I didn't have one. So I had to wait for my student loan which took half of the semester away which doesn't give you enough time to get caught up. Not with all your other classes, which personally I think that's a real flaw in the system. If they are going to have the student paid, it should be made available, I don't care if they do like a voucher, or what but they should have that finance for something like a computer, because so much stuff is computer oriented anymore and a lot of us don't have one.*

Others expressed a similar concern with delayed loans in order to use the money to buy books. Although a voucher system was in place, it was not known to everyone.

Jane expressed the business office and the financial aid office could be more helpful. She explained, *“Because there is an assumption that I know something, and I don’t. I don’t like that. I also don’t like to be, [sighs] ‘You should have known that; why didn’t you know that?’ ...Well, how could have I known that?”* When asked what kind of things they expected her to know, it appeared to deal with the location of the offices and her propensity for detail, Jane shared:

*Ahhh...just where to even go for something. Just, the finance, well that’s financial aid, that’s business, so I came to the business office, those kinds of things. I don’t know, how am I supposed to know. There are just a few experiences like that were just not real positive. I feel like they could have been more helpful than they were. Maybe it’s my generation’s expectation...the masses coming through, no, you have to go over there...And it’s just little things like that, I think I am very detail orientated having a military background, very very very much so. The detail is what makes or breaks a lot of things.*

**Academic supports.** Terry explained his concerns with the Learning Center:

*It’s just, it’s supposed to be a learning center. Uh, go in and get some help if you need it. But if you got these other kids in there talking and stuff, you’re getting distracted. You can’t hear when you are trying to talk to somebody or having something explained. Well, it’s no longer a learning center cause you can’t hear.*

He indicated he wouldn’t mind seeing classes set up differently to try to keep the older students together:

*That way the ones that are younger and not really giving a darn whether or not they are getting an education aren’t getting in the way of us that HAVE to have this education. We know what we have to have, we’ve been out there. We don’t have time for games, we don’t have time for screwing around. We’re here for a purpose, to where they’re here because they can be. We’re here cause we have to be. Sometimes I think it would be better if they separate us a little bit so we can get that. I wouldn’t mind seeing uh separate learning center or what have you for the older students.*

I visited the Learning Center, and Terry was right! It is very noisy, with younger students caring on conversations in normal voices. It did not appear to offer a place conducive for studying for those seeking a quiet environment for studying or getting one-on-one assistance.

**Computer.** The biggest challenge for attending college was the computer skills required. Larry said, *“I’d get on the internet and get online and stuff like that but nothing like what I’m doing now.”* He thought he would never use a computer or never need a computer for work in radio. *“Now with that, everything’s computerized. [Laughing while talking] So I’d have to learn how to do the computer if I wanted to be a radio DJ again.”* Terry concurred that lack of computer knowledge was a huge hurdle for him. He said:

*My idea of typing is one finger, “Litt” where’d the “l” go? I didn’t know a whole lot about clicking on an icon, dragging it to a different spot. My extent with computers is playing a few games and doing a few emails. I was a lead person at [the factory] where I had to be on the computer all the time getting work instructions helped out a little bit. I really like the fact that they do that online orientation to familiarize you with uhh uhh the MCC advisor for checking your grades, the financial status, uh the email. They have a one credit course that you, all freshmen are required to take and it’s all computers. It’s done online and that was a really good thing. That was a really big help otherwise I’d really been in trouble. Orientation part, that was a lot of help, but going from ground zero, other than turning the critters on, I don’t do you no good. I mean there is so much more that you need to know. I didn’t know and if somebody wasn’t right there beside me to tell me what I was doing, then a lot of this I didn’t know.*

Learning to use the new tool bar on Excel 2007 was Claire’s greatest concern because it was so different from the other 2003 program that she was used to at home. *“Just getting your way around it and finding things; and I think that seemed to be the hardest because by the time I found it, they [instructors] were 10 steps ahead of me, yah know.”* Janet said, *“I really do think, that having something available to help with, you know, the new computer*

*programs, that is very helpful for returning students. If you don't grow up with that, it just doesn't come as easily to yah,*" Having classes on computer programs was also a recommendation that had arisen in the Facebook pilot project.

Charlie said he and Blossom knew Microsoft due to her computer work on genealogy: *"Yeah, that was one less thing we had to learn."* However, he did have a technology suggestion for the college:

*Some of us are not as tech savvy as we would like to think that we are; for instance, the cell phone instant messaging about whether something is going, something is going on campus; for example, they are going to close it down, or close it for the day because the weather is bad or, hasn't happened yet and I hope it never does, where someone freaks out with a gun on campus to where they would have to send out a notification or something like that. Um, maybe give like a small class on how to get your cell phone set up with the college tech department or whoever else it goes through, be um, some of us are not tech savvy enough to do it on our own.*

Jane had concerns about driving in the bad weather and asked how the faculty and college perceived absences. When asked if she knew how to be aware of closings and late starts on her cell phone, she replied, *"Yeah, they said they would have it sent to your phone, but I don't want a text and have to pay for it."* As it can also be broadcast to a computer, she thought she would check on that possibility and could benefit from Charlie's class suggestion.

**Preparation assistance.** Workforce help was referred to by several Boomers. Due to the seamless partnership this local entity represents between the state's workforce agency and MCC, the help was not necessarily attributed to the college. *"Workforce helped me last summer, prepare stuff to prepare for school, brush up skills and stuff. I really think it's the best thing I could've done now."* Larry was not aware that MCC's adult basic education

provided this service at the workforce center. Bob also used these classes to brush up and learn some Algebra prior to attending MCC. Another major free offering that prepared Boomers for college were the beginning computer classes offered at the center. These began through a Literacy Grant jointed administered by the agency and MCC. Successful completion qualified a student to have a free continuing education computer class at MCC.

According to Larry:

*Yah know, I really can't say anything but good about them [workforce] because this summer I took a computer class they had and I got in there and thought, Oh God, this is going to be pretty hard because it was one level up from the intro level. "Why don't you stay in this level and you know we can work at it," and long story short I ended helping people that had been through the class before in the intro class, and I went right to the intermediate one. Had I not done that, I'd had a much harder time with my computer business applications here because at least I had an idea of what some of these terms meant and I'd done some of it this summer without that I'd had a heck of a time. I really would have. So that helped me a lot.*

### **Summary**

Boomer students at this community college in this study expressed a sense of fitting in and inclusion. They felt they were treated with respect by the traditional students and the faculty. Specific instances of being singled out to share their expertise from the "working world" were numerous. Praise for the faculty was widely noted. The few exceptions consisted of Jane's one incident she characterized as "*being talked down to,*" and another participant said she wouldn't give a high grade to a certain instructor.

Rising Boomer expectations were also expressed. Partly, as Boomers coming from the work world, they expected efficiency. They noted the lack of efficiency in classes not offered on a timely basis, loan money not available till mid-semester, classes filling time but

not their needs, a learning lab not conducive to learning for them, and lack of computer training.

### **Theme 3. Student engagement/Social networking**

Social networks for some were ready made. Larry and Bob were from the same hometown and expressed that students from their hometown hung around together regardless of their age. For some, it is a family affair. Jennifer and Terry's son and a nephew were enrolled at MCC, and Jennifer had an aunt who was an instructor. Bob's stepdaughter attends MCC. Small community connections occurred as Claire realized, after several weeks of school, that her instructor had been a classmate of hers in high school. Other ready-made friendships were comprised of the groups of dislocated workers from the various layoffs around the nine counties. For one participant, these relationships were all too evident. Jane said, *"I'm not part of the displaced group of workers, there seem to be those in classes. Those types of folks, they know each other from someplace."*

#### **Through classes**

Larry described his social networks, *"I've had some people from my hometown coming over here. One particular that's a nontraditional, and I know some others that would be more traditional. But I've made a lot of [new] friends too."* He added that some classes do group work and that lets you get to know other people. He had a ready smile when he referred to the number of people who called him by his first name: *"We've done some class projects and assignments together and compared our notes and done research together for different assignments. I get along well, and everyone pretty much calls me by my first name"*

*when they see me.*” Charlie talked about friendships that develop through teams in the automotive classes:

*We were paired up, and there was three of us in a group to start with last semester. Um, we’d work together. One gentleman, I didn’t know when class started, I consider him to be a friend now. We’ve got along good. The other gentleman I was paired up with, he was one of the kids that just graduated high school last year. He just lives in the town I live in, so and I’ve worked with him before, we got along good. And it’s just kind of a good, we mesh good together, all three of us did.*

Terry also mentioned meeting people through classes. In particular, he became friends with a person his age in welding class and a younger one in pre-algebra class:

*One was in a welding class. This guy was experienced, just going in to have the educational sheet saying he did [certificate]. But he was real helpful in giving clues on different types of welding.... And we planned to get together so he can help me out. And it’s kind of nice to have someone my own age to talk to. But then, I made some friends with the younger kids, like in my pre-algebra class. I had an 18-19 year olds sitting beside me; we made a little game out of tests and stuff to see who could get the better grade. So I mean, we kind of made fun of it, made fun of each other had a good time, learned a little bit.*

On one occasion, Terry was very verbal about the lack of respect of the “kids” right out of high school:

*I have a better sense of why I’m there than a lot of the younger kids. Cause they’re there just to goof off it seems like. Me, I know what it’s like out there so to me everything’s a lot more important. Lot of the younger kids is disrespectfulness, uh, goofing off in the classrooms. I’m a little hard of hearing and they start running their chops behind me I can’t hear everything in front of me and that’s one of my biggest pet peeves. I don’t like crowds [pause] so you get in a busy classroom, there’s a lot of people trying to talk, I can’t hear what I’m supposed to be hearing. [laughs]*

Claire’s experience with making friends exemplified the academic support they can be to one another:

*There’s a gal in my electronic spreadsheet class this last semester, she works fulltime, but she’s trying to get her schooling too. She’s about my age. She hadn’t had much accounting, err not accounting but computer um experience I*

guess as far as Excel went; but they told her they thought she could do it, and so she was kind of hedging whether she should or not. And I said, “Well, you can do it, you can do it.” Well, the two of us struggled through it I tell yah [laughter] but we made it. So then after class we would usually go have an ice cream or something just to commiserate.

How did that class work out for them? Claire’s response was, “*It was always funny because neither one of us thought we were doing it well, and we both ended up with an A. It helps a lot to have someone to talk to.*” Kathy made friends in different classes that developed into a steady group of friends. She described:

*I guess for me, ah, it worked mostly with just the people I sat next with to begin with. Um, the one girl was really young ahh; and so it seemed at times she would look to me for maybe some advice on maybe her homework and stuff; and the lady sitting next to me over here was in the same boat I was. We both got laid off and was back in school. But it just...the people that I saw in multiple classes, yah know, I just ask them about homework or ask them what they thought about the test or yah know what they think about the teacher and then we just start rolling into that and you meet...introduce them to the family side yah know and the next thing you know we’re talking and there’s a group of about probably I think 8 of us that are going Carlos O’Kellys to celebrate our first semester so....[laughs]*

While many of the female participants talked about exchanging numbers and email addresses with classmates in order to check on assignments and ask questions, Jane preferred to deal directly with the instructors: “*But mostly, I just direct it to the teachers, and I guess I expect to be treated like a responsible adult...because I am. Social networking that’s kind of hard for some, unless you’re in class with somebody you know.*”

### **Age differences**

Terry vacillated between speaking of his young friend in pre-algebra to suggesting the age groups be separated. Larry felt comfortable with all ages:

*Even if their quite a bit younger, um, I just haven’t had any problem with blending in with everybody ya know. Whether it’s instructors or fellow*

*students, yah know, I don't feel that I'm not comfortable because I'm older than everybody else or something like that....If I have questions with the computers, students sitting next to me will help. It doesn't matter if they are my age or 20 years younger than me. Just haven't had any problem with that at all.*

Bob had 18-year-old friends, which was perhaps a testament to his younger age in this

Boomer cohort and his attitude of inclusion:

*It's funny, I got a couple 18 year old friends now that come over to my house now, and we do computer stuff together, and we cruise around town together and these guys are from the same home town. But these two individuals, they are different than some of the college students because one they work, two they GO to their classes which half don't and these guys are dedicated and they want to do something with their lives. I am friends with 18- 19 year olds. In fact I get along with some of them better than I do the adults yah know. Umm, most of it's my attitude. Uh I don't care where you are from or what you are about yah know. I can see through all that yah know. So when I make friends with people it is real easy for me. Not that you can't tell I have the gift of gab, it works.*

### **Organized groups**

One college sponsored program for adults was the Encore Learning Group (ELG).

Document analysis of the MCC catalog describes the group as a support system for students who have been out of the education system for some time. The purpose is friendship and educational support. The description says it is open to students 25 years and older. While this is the accepted definition in academic circles for non-traditional students, it may be problematic and a barrier for Boomers, who would not consider 25-year-olds in their age group. Claire was not a member; she thought it was a study group. Kathy and Janet had heard of it, but didn't seek out the group. The remainder of the participants in this research were members of ELG. Word of mouth seemed to be the recruitment for this group as most members were Boomers. Charlie described:

*Um, there is a group called ELG, and, which stands for [Encore Learners Group] so, there's people, people that are near my age. I mean, I'm not that old, but, you know what I mean I am one of the oldest. And we have all talked about why we are back in school, because you know we didn't like our jobs, or we lost our jobs, so I would say in that aspect I have shared and analyzed.*

Terry was also an active member:

*Now the ELGs, I kind of enjoyed because that was nothing but my age group. They know the struggles I'm facing and can understand the struggles I'm facing. We all had mutual backgrounds. We've all been out there, we know what it's about. It's kind of nice to talk and hear about other people's experience that's your own age.*

Jennifer echoed her husband's perception of this group:

*One of the things that I have really enjoyed is the group that they have here that's for nontraditional students to make connections with other nontraditional students so that you realize you're not the only one. And then you can also talk about your schedule and other questions you have. And maybe find someone that's basically in the same situation that you can go to for advice or can maybe form a study group and it's been a lot of, that's been a big thing.*

"Yeah, well the ELG thing is okay, but that doesn't get deep enough I don't think," Bob said.

Jane had attended a few times, but she expressed that the time was not always convenient for her, and she felt they others already knew each other from being dislocated workers.

Another group that Bob planned to be involved with was the cyber defense team:

*I'm going to do cyber security stuff.... I'm gonna be on the Cyber Defense Team next fall, like the cyber security and computer forensic and being on the Cyber security team. Yeah, that is going to look darn good on the resume. AND I enjoy it, obviously. I've heard from other people [that] I'll learn more on the Cyber defense thing then I will the entire time I'm here....They [the team] went to ISU and had big Cyber Defense teams from all over and they give you a computer and you gotta defend it. [Ha ha]. [IT instructor] is a hell of an instructor, and I'm sure he had his boys ready and prepared for it. I'm sure he did. He is the one who asked me to be on the team.*

A third group noted by a Boomer was Phi Theta Kappa, an international honor society. Janet became a member:

*I joined the sorority here, the Phi Beta whatever it is. I don't think there is a whole lot to it in Junior College, but I had gotten asked previously and blew it off, and I thought, well that will look great on a college resume so...I am just trying to make everything a positive experience.*

Groups were not only utilized for social networking, but also for resume builders in Bob and Janet's case.

### **MCC Boomer Facebook group**

This group was developed in the pilot for this research study. The 10 participants comprised the current group membership. Upon joining the MCC Boomer Facebook page, Jane said she was happy to recognize someone else on the page. Janet stated that building relationship with other students has come about when you both have questions and our both trying to figure out the answer together:

*One of the gals is in our Facebook group and you just kind of get to know each other. You are both kind of in the same place at life; it's just kind of like a new friend. I don't know if they will be forever friends, but right at the time they are friends.*

Janet also cited making friendships in class with students her own age: *"If there's a question or something, you can, you know, you feel comfortable being able to talk with those other people."* For another class she stated it was *"mostly young people though, so I don't know."*

The prospect of expanding the Facebook Group to other Boomers in her field of study would give her access to students in different sections with whom she could exchange questions.

Her reaction to that idea was, *"Oh that would be great!"* Kathy said she enjoyed the Facebook Group: *"Yeah, I did... I didn't have people come on as friends cause I won't be on Facebook, but for the group that was good. Just read what everybody else wrote and it was a*

good way to keep in touch that way.” Jennifer, an original member of the MCC Boomer Facebook Group, had a good grasp on the importance of social networking:

*If you don't join some sort of group at least get some kind of connection, yah see I've got the group that we've joined [ELG], but I've also got a couple of students that are in my classes, yah know. "Hey, can I call you if I have to miss and find out what we need to do and make sure you do the same if you have to miss? Call me, I'll let you know what's going on." With that, that's helped. And some of those people I've actually even hooked up with on Facebook so that we're talking even things other than the school. We're comparing general life instances and stuff that way. I think um it [Boomer Facebook Group] could be a big help cause if somebody gets on there and says, "Hey, this is something I'm doing, but I'm stuck at this point, does anybody, can anybody help me out?" You're probably gonna wind up getting help from people that took the class 3 semesters ago.*

Larry, who was a member of the original MCC Boomer Facebook pilot, commented on another networking use:

*I'm involved...strictly a friend type thing before, and now I am utilizing is a networking philosophy where you network with professionals that are involved in areas you might be interested in. I've got quite a few from radio, TV Stations, and newspapers; and I've started to expand that and speak to these people all the time and ask them what's new in their field. Some of the people I worked with before. I worked at radio station here. I've gotten some of them on it. I just write a note saying that was the guy that sold advertising and all the people that were on I just type their name in and see if they are on and then I invite them and tell them that I'm using them as a networking tool and its interesting cause you can talk to people that are doing things like I've done before. Let me know what's going on with different things. Nothing can hurt, anyway!*

### **Summary**

Some of the participants described the small-town atmosphere of knowing all ages from their hometown and that they spent time with them. Meeting new people in classes by either sitting next to someone or by doing projects together in class was another common way for Boomers to make connections. Exchanging phone numbers and email addresses

helped them stay informed of class assignments and provide academic support for one another. The intensity ran the gamut, Kathy formed a group of new friends who celebrated the completion of the first semester at a lunch together, while Jane seemed more of a loner. The majority of the participants had experience with special groups offered on the campus. Seven had been members of the ELG at one point, Bob was invited to join the Cyber Defense Team, and Janet was a member of the honor society Phi Theta Kappa. All were members of the MCC Boomer Facebook Group and considered it a good venture upon which to expand.

#### **Theme 4: Transformational learning in boomers**

The change fits the definition of transformational learning as described by Clark (1993), “In short, transformational learning shapes people: they are different afterward, in ways both they and others can recognize” (p.47). Change can be incremental or sudden. The transformation was a stark comparison for some Boomers in this study when related to earlier education. Those with further to come appeared to achieve the more profound transformation.

The greatest recognizable educational changes appeared to occur in the four male participants. Collectively, they represented the largest gap in education. Bob, Terry, and Charlie had been high school dropouts and had GEDs. Although they all professed to not like school, Terry and Charlie both stated their families were shocked that they had returned to school, especially considering their past feelings about education. Charlie indicated it was time for him to “*grow up.*” Bob’s path in high school was interrupted by serious emotional issues with his nuclear family and with having a friend die in his arms. After years of acting out, Bob attributed his time in prison as starting the transformation process. While Larry had

graduated from high school, he realized from the transcript he provided to MCC, that he was near the bottom of the class in ranking. The four men spoke about the transformation in their lives that exemplifies “they are different afterward, in both ways they and others can recognize” (Clark, 1993, p. 47).

### **Charlie**

Charlie stated he did not like school starting with kindergarten. His high school experience amounted to being counted as attending and then leaving. On his “drop out day” during his senior year, he had just learned that he had 2 ½ years of credits to make up in a semester. “*Yah know what, we all know this ain’t happening, so I’ll see you later.*” He explained:

*My idea of going to high school was being there for home room in the morning and getting counted as attending, and then going out to my car and leaving, and then coming back at 3 o’clock and getting counted in home room and being counted as being there and then leaving. I had no initiative in going to school, I didn’t care about going to school, it was a waste of time. Now, I look forward to coming here. To learning more stuff, I guess you would say. I actually enjoy making the one hundred and twenty mile round trip five days a week to be here and learn stuff.*

What a change to hear him compare these two educational experiences! Charlie continued by describing his new attitude in his college experience:

*Feeling of completing something that I set my sight on, what I wanted to do, to come back to school, and wanting...the main thing that keeps me going is my drive to accomplish what I set out to do. Another one is the fact that I know that once I complete my courses and, ah...get my certificate, it will mean, getting more money in my pocket, so would say those are two, the two main factors of life....I’ll be honest, it’s probably the first time in many, many years that we both [Blossom] wake up in the morning, Monday through Friday, enjoying waking up and going where we are going.*

## **Terry**

As a high school dropout, Terry later received a GED. Classes at this community college were his first foray into college work. As a first generation student, he said his sister in Germany was “*super proud*” of him. He stated, “*My family never expected to ever hear me being in school; and they just found out during Christmas break or the end of the semester that I was back in school, they had no idea.*” Coming back to school is something he and his family never considered happening. Terry explained how this experience was different:

*I was real apprehensive. In high school, I was a slacker. I didn't care; I had no interest in school. And then coming back this time it was a complete turnaround. I figured I have to be in the top 10% of my class to get my choice of jobs. And that's my goal. And when I was younger, to me an A was something somebody else got. Well for me, this time, an A- was what I averaged. I learned more in one semester I've been here than I ever thought I could....It hasn't been really that bad. I mean I'm more focused on what I would be if I was younger and that really helps. Uh, I'm more attentive to the teacher, than most are but I know I have to learn, to where all these younger kids they know they got a second chance so to speak. I'm out of chances, this is it.*

## **Bob**

Bob's transformation seemed dramatic. He had gone from being at a boys' ranch for trouble teens as a 12-year-old to now contributing to fundraising efforts to support the ranch. He indicated he knew how little the ranch had for resources through his experiences there as a child: “*The boys' ranch wants me to come down there and speak. The high school in [his hometown] wants me to speak.*” His transformation may affect some of his former friendships due to how others see him and how he views them:

*Well, on the other hand I got friends that are... one lazy, two don't want to do a damn thing and three, the one they gamble their money away every week,*

*they don't even have heat in their house right now. I can't help em no more, but they're not willing to change anything..so it's negative. So I hate to say it but I might not...yah know I'm kind of distancing myself. I'm not going to just go up and say "Hey I ain't your friend no more," but I'm kinda distancing myself...*

"I am here to learn," reverberated through Bob's interviews. He was taking harder classes than he would have to take: "*People don't understand why I want to [states while laughing] brutalize myself that way; but I'm here once, and I'm here to learn, that's it, that's the way I am. And I'll do it till I'm done.*" He pointed out that the classes were not easy, but he had figured out what to do by adjusting his study skills: "*And, I am dedicated; I was never like that, anyways.*" His transformation appeared to stem from a change of attitude since his prison experience: "*I'm so positive now, and I'm trying to get rid of the negatives. And I've been doing that since I got out of prison. I got out of prison a long time ago.*"

He explained his family's reaction, "*They're pretty supportive, they're surprised. They're happy though too cause they know I'm happy, and they know my wife is happy, and obviously my wife thinks it's awesome that I'm going here.*" College has helped to open his mind in other areas:

*Yeah, I think what college has helped me do, is open my mind up a little bit more, and I needed that. I used to be close-minded about everything. The last couple years, I went through, ah, a lot of stuff in the last couple years, really. I mean, nothing too major. I used to be a racist. Ah, my boss at the windmill place was a black guy. We ended up being really good friends....unbelievable.*

### **Larry**

Larry had graduated from high school and attended community college immediately after graduating. He stated he just realized from the high school transcript he provided MCC,

that he had been near the bottom of the class. Larry had set his goals high and reaching them was reinforcing for him resulting in a sense of confidence and pride:

*My goal is to not to be satisfied with anything other than an A, but an A and a B and I never scored that high, I never had that high of score in high school before. In fact, I didn't know this when I had my transcript sent to MCC. We had like 25 kids and I was right towards the bottom of the class. And now I'm looking at A's and B's, and I'm pretty proud of myself.*

In high school and his previous college experience directly following high school, he described himself as, *"I had an attitude."* He didn't see the need for the some classes, so he just *"blew them off."* *"Now, I know these classes mean something; and I put a lot more into it now."* With pride Larry reflected, *"Some of these things I've done I didn't think I would be able ....I'm just going into it with a thought of I don't know how to do something, that's why I'm going back to school so I can learn."*

Each of the six women had some experience with post-secondary education. Claire and Kathy attended a business school to become, in the vernacular of the day, secretaries. Blossom had been enrolled in a community college on two occasions, once right after she was married. Janet, who became a dislocated worker in 1990 when her place of employment closed, attended a community college for 1½ years. Jennifer and Jane had BA degrees. No one indicated school was difficult; in fact, most professed to be good students. Nevertheless, they experienced a transformation in their learning experience and in their sense of self. Each of the women referred to family responsibilities that contributed to their lack of a defined career path. Janet's father did not think a woman needed to go to college. She had planned on attending a state Regent's school and mused about how different her life would have been. Claire's first husband expected her to stay home with the children, and her career's technology passed her by during those years. Conversely, Kathy's need to contribute to the

family finances led her away from her career choice and to a higher paying job at a factory. Five grown children later, Blossom was returning to college after her first attempt when she was pregnant with her first child. The two participants with a Bachelor's degree were not able to find work in their fields. For Jane, the military status of her husband had them constantly moving so she could not become established in her field. Jennifer's degree in Management of Information Systems would have required a move to a larger city. She didn't want to leave family in the area. Following are some comments from these women regarding how, as Boomers, they are changed as students.

### **Kathy**

*I think that I am trying harder...I think that I am **taking it more seriously**. I think that I want to...I think that I want to learn. Not only do I have to, to find something different, but this time, you know I want to. It's not the same as when you just get out of high school, you just do it because that's just what you do, but. Now it's, **I think it's better for ME this time around than it was the first time around.***

### **Jennifer**

*Yah know in some ways I kind of missed school so it's been kind of nice. I'm one that believes that if you can't learn something at least one thing new every day, then you've got an awful boring life, so I enjoy learning new things. I guess it's good I'm going that I feel that way since I'm going into the medical type stuff. **I've seen it as a good opportunity to grow.***

### **Janet**

*I think it um, **gives you a lot of insight into the world today**, more so than your former...you were always, I was always learning in my former job but it was learning that was kind of encased in the [financial industry], you know it wasn't anything outside the box. And now it seems like I'm um, you know, getting **introduced to new things** and new technology, you know just kind of being a little bit more part of the world. I mean, there's a lot more that I could learn, (laughs) from the world, but um, it just seems like, you know, I'm getting more into that and um, learning a lot of that. I am working a part time*

*job, and this, a lot of this is helping me with that, cause I have budgets I have to do and that type of thing so that is helping with that too, so....Some of the things that they were doing, weren't always exactly, you know, correct and so they're kind of, you know, it's kind of nice to be able to understand more so what's going on, so...yeah.*

### **Claire**

*Um, well [school] probably **gave me more self esteem** I mean just everything that you learn in a years time yah know compared to what you...knowledge you did have and I think just getting A's, it just gives you a good feeling I guess to know that you kind of pushed that.*

### **Jane**

*I think I have **more confidence** I would guess that the younger ones in some respects. That this is, I am not worried about the social aspects I guess, because that is a big part of college for younger ones.*

These women expressed more confidence and self-esteem, and taking school more seriously has reflected in their accomplishments. Seizing the opportunity was shared by all five. The sixth woman was an enigma. She was not very responsive, but seemed poised for possible transformation in her life. When asked how college had affected her, she responded she had to get up earlier. The other respondents were quite reflective.

Blossom enrolled at MCC, fulfilling a goal of going to school. Her own account of personal change was not verbalized, but the opportunity for building her self-confidence and her sense of self was apparent. At Blossom's first interview, she had trouble describing herself as she stated, "*Usually I have Charlie [her husband] describe me. I don't describe myself anymore.*" Her demeanor was often quiet, but her face became tense with apparent anger when she spoke of quitting her job:

*There was accusations made about my husband that I knew were false. I had a choice of staying but I knew how I would be treated and there was no way I*

*could stay. So the day my husband quit [fast food restaurant] lost 3 employees because our daughter also worked there and she said that same thing. But the boss listened to his assistant manager instead of to hear his [Charlie's] side of the story or having me say what I needed to say so we just, no I'm not staying to work for someone that gonna say things that are false.*

She first spoke of enrolling at MCC as something to do while her husband was going to school. She said she would be driving the 120 mile round trip as her husband does not have a driver's license. Later, she was more open about her reasons, though describing herself in the third person: *"I decided its Mom's turn! It's just Mom has always wanted to go to school, back to school, and it's just time that Mom did it."* Charlie contributed more information to her obvious desire to go to school:

*Um, [I] went back to community college once, when my wife [Blossom] was pregnant with my oldest son. She, while she was pregnant, she apparently had a calcium deficiency and broke her wrist bone so I was trying to do notes for two of us. She was using a tape recorder in class, and I was trying to transcribe her notes for her plus do my own work and I got frustrated and said that's it, I ain't goin back. I can't study for both of us, I quit.*

Through her husband's voice, Blossom's drive to attend school became more apparent. The visual of a young pregnant woman with a broken wrist audio taping the class work reflected her desire for an education.

### **Summary**

All of the participants demonstrated changes as students, some more than others fitting Clark (1993) definition, "In short, transformational learning shapes people: they are different afterward, in ways both they and others can recognize" (p. 47). Change can be incremental or sudden. How these themes align with theory of transformation learning and Student engagement is discussed in the following section.

### Summary Based on the Research Questions

The four research questions that established the framework for this study were:

1. What factors influence Baby Boomers to attend community colleges for career training?
2. How do Baby Boomers make meaning out of their disorientating dilemmas and challenges?
3. How do Boomers describe the support this community college provided for their educational experience?
4. How do Boomers describe forming relationships and social networks at this college?

A research question must be identified to anchor the researcher to what he or she want to know more about (Jones, 2002). Merriam (2002) noted answering research questions as an indicator of a good qualitative study. The following are summaries of the answers to the four research questions in this study.

#### ***1. What factors influence Baby Boomers to attend community colleges for career training?***

According to Keen (2009), millions of laid-off workers are being force to make tough decision about their futures. Since the recession began in December 2007, the economy has lost more than 5 million jobs. In March, 2009 U.S. employers cut 663,000 jobs. The MCC region had the highest unemployment rate for a county in this Midwestern state at the time of the Keen article at 9.1% compared to state's rate at 4.9%. All ten participants in this study related an economic need as their reason for returning to school. They enrolled in a community college to retrain in order to find employment. Of the ten, seven participants had been laid off, one had quit and couldn't find other work, a minimum wage job was the

concern for another, and the final participant had just moved to the area and could not find work. The economy and job market were impacting their decisions.

All participants had been looking for work in the area and were having trouble finding a suitable position due to the poor job market. Replacement jobs for these 10 individuals were not available either due to their lack of training for openings or the substantially lower pay of jobs being offered. Along with layoffs and the poor job market, participants disclosed they felt there were missing pieces in their lives that college would fill. Influences for some came in the financial support of outside agencies. Workforce Investment Act (WIA) and Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) funding was the decision point for six of the participants.

Primary influences for enrolling in community college were economic for this group. The disorientating dilemmas mirrored the definition for this research: Lay-offs, business closings, dwindling retirement accounts, declining job market, returning to school and retirement itself. All ten participants disclosed an economic dilemma for returning to school. Beyond the economic pressures as influences to enroll in the community college, emotional needs were being met for some. Financial opportunities made the decision possible for six of them.

## ***2. How do Baby Boomers make meaning out of their disorientating dilemmas and challenges?***

These Boomers were making meaning of the dilemma by seeing it as an opportunity. Jennifer said, *"I look at it as a good opportunity to grow."* Charlie summed up Blossom and his experience, *"It's probably the first time in many, many years that we both wake up in the morning...enjoy waking up and going where we're going. It's given both of us a sense of*

*purpose I guess. We have a reason to get up.*” Larry described his making meaning out of the layoff dilemma:

*I’ve got a guy...uh we’ve both decided to come back to school, and we’ve both, yah know, throw things at each other, talk about uh yah know obviously our experiences and stuff; and we’re both just thrilled that we’ve made this decision to come back to school, and we’re both enjoying it so.*

Several of the dislocated workers viewed school in employment terms, as their new job. Larry said, *“It’s like back to work and that’s kind of my attitude. It’s for my betterment, and it’s my job to come to class.”*

The dilemmas that led these Boomers to the community college although, in some cases, extremely painful, had the potential to make significant positive impacts on their quality of life. The optimistic reasons varied from looking forward to having a job where people were positive, returning to career goals that were abandoned previously, and pursuing training that fits their interests and passion. Larry and Bob embraced the layoff as an opportunity to change their lives. Larry and Janet had always wanted to complete their degrees which mirror Yankelovich’s (2005) challenge to community colleges to prepare for those wanting to overcome a deficient to their education. Passion and purpose played a role too for these Boomers. Most of the participants expressed wanting to do a job they enjoyed. Janet said, *“At this point in my life, I don’t want to have a job that’s like a stepping stone to something else or anything like that, I just want to do stuff that I like.”*

Career choices for these Boomers were about purpose and passions. Kathy and Claire returned to the training they pursued out of high school and hadn’t remained in the field. Charlie was taking a lifelong hobby and interest as his career. Janet, Bob, Jennifer, and Larry

had planned for new careers that they would enjoy. For some, the educational experience was a passion in itself.

The participants made meaning out of their dilemmas by focusing on new career goals that fostered a pride in their accomplishments. For some, the dilemmas were the only catalyst that would have brought them to this new direction. Jennifer, Terry, and Kathy thought they would retire from their previous jobs. Instead, they were looking forward to a new career they will enjoy.

**3. *How do Boomers describe the support this community college provided for their educational experience?***

Boomer students at this community college expressed a sense of fitting in and inclusion. They felt they were treated with respect by the traditional students and the faculty. Specific instances of being singled out to share their expertise from the “working world” were numerous. Praise for the faculty was widely noted. The few exceptions consisted of Jane’s one incident she characterized as “*being talked down to,*” and another participant said she won’t give a high grade to one instructor.

Rising Boomer expectations were expressed. Partly, as Boomers come from the work world, they expected efficiencies. Classes not offered on a timely basis, loan money not available till mid-semester, classes filling time but not their needs, learning lab not conducive to learning, and lack of computer training were noted.

**4. *How do Boomers describe forming relationships and social networks at this college?***

Some describe the small town effect of knowing folks from their hometown, and that they spent time with them. Meeting new people in classes by either sitting next to someone or by doing projects together in class is another common way for them to make connection.

Exchanging phone numbers and email addresses helped them stay informed of class assignments and provide academic support for one another. The intensity ran the gamut from Kathy forming a group of new friends this way, who celebrated with lunch together the completion of the first semester to Jane, who seemed more of a loner. The majority of the participants had experience with special groups offered on the campus. Seven of them had been members of the ELG at one point, Bob was invited to join the Cyber Defense Team, and Janet was a member of the honor society Phi Theta Kappa. All were members of the MCC Boomer Facebook Group and considered it a good venture to expand upon. Jennifer described her social networking and the benefits it brings:

*If you don't join some sort of group at least get some kind of connection, yah see I've got the group that we've joined [ELG], but I've also got a couple of students that are in my classes, yah know. "Hey, can I call you if I have to miss and find out what we need to do and make sure you do the same if you have to miss? Call me, I'll let you know what's going on." With that, that's helped. And some of those people I've actually even hooked up with on Facebook so that we're talking even things other than the school. We're comparing general life instances and stuff that way. I think um it [Boomer Facebook Group] could be a big help cause if somebody gets on there and says, "Hey, this is something I'm doing, but I'm stuck at this point, does anybody, can anybody help me out?" You're probably gonna wind up getting help from people that took the class 3 semesters ago.*

## **Summary**

Community college education can become the path for this population to be retained and re-engaged in civic and work activities (Zeiss, 2006). To accommodate this growing need, community colleges need to know what draws this cohort to their campuses. This study strived to determine how Boomers were influenced to enroll in community college and how they made meaning out of their disorientating dilemmas. The researcher questioned the views of the participants to glean how they described the support provided by the community

college along with the student engagement at the college. Forming relationships and social networks were delved into. Information garnered could provide this college with information to accommodate the growing needs of the Boomer group.

## CHAPTER 5. DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to determine how select Baby Boomers make meaning out of disorientating dilemmas and challenges as they enroll in a community college for career training. The dilemmas include: retirement, layoffs, shrinking job market, returning to school, and dwindling retirement accounts. Understanding Baby Boomers' processing of this new event can help colleges provide tailored course work, support services, and social networks. The guiding theoretical framework for this study was Mezirow's transformational learning theory. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews of 10 participants over a 4-month period utilizing Seidman's (2006) three step model. Secondary data were gleaned from document analysis, staff interviews, and Facebook postings. The data revealed the influences that bring Boomers to community college for re-training, how they make meaning out of their dilemmas, how they describe college support, and how they form social networks.

This chapter includes discussion based on the theories, conclusions, contribution to literature, recommendation for practice, recommendations for future research, and reflections.

### Discussion Based on Theories

#### Student engagement theory

*This community college provides a welcoming feeling of inclusion for these Boomer age students through its culture and through support of the faculty; however, rising expectations of Boomers were expressed.*

One of the four themes that emerged from this study related to the cultural validation felt in the classroom and supported by the faculty. However, as customers, they had some expectations that were not being met.

### **Rendon's theory of validation**

I purposed that Boomers share characteristics of at risk students. Rendon suggests that higher education will be serving increase members of at-risk non-traditional student (Rendon, 1994). The student demographics that the participants in this study shared with Rendon's description are: adult age students, first generation college, and a majority of them were women. The Boomers also fit Laanan's definition of at-risk students: delayed post-secondary, financially independent of parents, have dependents, and/or do not have a high school education (Compton, 2006).

Rendon's Theory of Validation suggests that, for nontraditional and underserved populations, validation could be the factor that influences their success and persistence (Barnett, 2007). Rendon (2000) noted that incidents where nontraditional students were transformed into powerful learners and persisters occurred when other people, either inside or outside of class, "validated them."

Bob's path exemplifies the powerful possibility for transformation in a learner. His support systems validated the student he thought he could be. Bob's support began with people outside of class: his wife and his friend. The adult recruiter at MCC echoed their thoughts as he interpreted the results of the assessments Bob took. Bob described what occurred:

*Larry's a good friend of mine. He's a decade older, but we're pretty good friends; and uh, he uh "You oughta go to school," and at first I thought no*

way. That ain't for me. So between the two of them [Larry and his wife], they kind of talked me into going over here[MCC] and talking to the adult recruiter. And between the three of them, they talked me into taking the compass test, and I did pretty good on it, and I go "So what does that mean?" and I go ... "when I took the test I might act dumb, yah know, cause I only had my GED for 20 years. I quit high school my junior year." And uh he [adult recruiter] said "I think you would be a good candidate for college." And I tell yah, it's been very good so far. Uh, I have a 3.2 GPA. Um, so jacked up about that!

And for Bob, that support led him to a new beginning, "I walked into class the first day, and I'm like, this is the right decision." When asked how being a student in this community college affected him, his answer to was inspiring:

*It gave me even more confidence that I already had in myself. Uh, I was a positive person myself but fully confident in my abilities and stuff, but this is a whole different level now. I can learn, and I love it. It's helped me out quite a bit. I mean I'm not saying I am smarter than I was or anything like, I probably am but uh it's just helped me tremendously that way...I just think it's one of the best things I ever did.... When I try my best at something and get a decent grade on it...man, that's awesome. I'm getting rewarded for it by getting that grade. I mean, I'm not getting paid, and I love every second of it. [One of the counselors] told my stepdaughter, "Bob's gonna have a bachelor's before he leaves here; I guarantee it." And I was like, Oh, I don't know about that, but as I was thinking about more and more. After I was done with my first degree, if the job market isn't that great, I probably will. I am here to learn.*

Claire also had support from an outside source that made the education decision both a thought and a reality. She explained how she came to be in school:

*I went to see [advisor at workforce] and tell him I'm going to be drawing unemployment pretty soon, and then I got to telling him about my hand and falling on the ice, and he said, "Well, you should see my wife,[counselor with Vocational Rehabilitation]" and I said "Why? [laughs] what's in Voc Rehab?" Yah know, I had no idea what voc rehab was. And so then I set up an appointment and she said "You should go to college." And I'm going, "You're kidding" [chuckles]. So that's it... just her faith in me "You can do it." Yah know, it was just so, otherwise I hadn't thought about going to school. I don't know what I would've done because with um with my hand the way it was, I didn't know. I surely didn't want to go back to a factory job... As far as thinking it was great. I never thought, I never GAVE it a thought, going back to school [chuckle] it was the furthest thing from my mind but she said,*

*“You can do it, you’re smart. you can do it.” So I said, “Well, ok, see what happens.”*

Rendon (2002) further suggested that validation occurs when:

- Faculty and staff impart to students that they are capable learners.
  - The students feel valued by the institution.
  - Student’s realize they are an important part of their own learning.
- (Rendon, 2000)

All participants in this research seemed to be focused on success and committed to persist.

While this may be considered a limitation for this study; these participants had positive comments about their experience that coincide with all three of Rendon’s criteria.

#### **Faculty and staff impart to students that they are capable learners**

Support from faculty contributed to Boomers feeling welcome and comfortable in their classes. Many expressed that they felt the faculty enjoyed the Boomers’ presence because of their experience in the workforce and their dedication to their studies. Boomers praised the faculty for their treating them like adults, with respect. Only one experienced being “talked down to”. She repeated later, *“Once, that’s all it took.”* Larry expressed the feeling of the majority of the participants:

*I get along well with all the staff. and I really feel like I can talk to them and ask them questions if I don’t understand something or maybe even don’t agree with something. I can ask them, obviously, it is up to them. [Laughs] They decide but it’s...I think they know that and they like it too because you can have a discussion about something, and it doesn’t necessarily mean that you have to agree on everything, but it brings out somebody else’s ideas and opinions. And they might say, “Well that’s Larry’s opinion.”*

#### **Students feel valued by the institution**

Overwhelming feelings of support and of inclusion was expressed by these Boomers for the college. Janet shared, *“I always praise MCC, I think MCC is excellent...I just feel that*

*they are always interested in helping you succeed, and the teachers are always very helpful.”*

Participants expressed the experience of being welcome as adult students. “*You know, you don’t feel out of place; I mean, you feel welcome,*” Claire offered. The atmosphere of the campus and classes contributed to Larry’s feeling validated. His response to how friends would describe his experience was:

*Well, I just have a better outlook on everything. I was doing a part time job where everything was real negative. I would come over her and everything was positive. I would see people who were professionals that are trying, whether it was instructors or the staff, uh professional people. I would work as hard as I could in my classes. I had to get out of the negative with the part time job because it just I just, couldn’t do it. But the positive and just the knowing that I can do it and that’s been a surprise for me. Some of the things I thought would be too tough, I couldn’t imagine a year ago doing em that I’ve done now.*

### **Students realize they are an important part of their own learning**

Succeeding in difficult work validated Terry’s sense of belonging and his pride in persevering. He attributed his math instructor for his success. “*She was a God-send.*”

*I was scared to death of pre-algebra. To me the alphabet does not belong in math. And I’ve never done algebra of any sort that I know of. I was scared to death of algebra to where I’ve spent, what the instructor at first said would take me an hour to do, I would work on for 5 hours trying to figure it out for myself. And by the time the end of the semester ended, at one point I was down to 93% on tests and homework. When I completed I had brought it up to a 96.71. But I had to be able to figure out what she was talking about, implement it into my own way, to get everything to come out correctly. And then everything just started to fall together. I still don’t like integers, but those things are a nightmare.*

The theme “I am here to learn” was pervasive in the interviews. Taking responsibility of their learning, wanting to learn, and enjoying learning were key statements in our conversations.

## Theories of student engagement

*These Boomers form social networks with fellow adult students that support and validate them as students.*

Astin's input-environment-outcome (I-E-O) model has proven both durable and significant as an impact model. College success is based on the function of three components:

- Inputs: demographics, social experience, family backgrounds, academic occurrences.
- Environment: programs, faculty, peers, policies, cultures, experiences both on and off campus.
- Outcomes: skills, values, behaviors, and knowledge that are evident after the college experience, (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005)

“The inputs are presumed to shape outcomes directly but also indirectly through the ways in which student students engage with the multifaceted institutional environment” (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, p. 53). The former educational experiences and vast array of life experiences contributed to the inputs for these Boomers. How students are affected by the institutional environment was a question to consider. The college experience is improved when students are engaged with connections to academic work, extracurricular activities, and faculty interaction (Rendon & Jalomo Jr, 1994).

The environment of feeling welcome on campus, supported by faculty and family, and their interest in programs of study appeared to provide changes in skills, values, behavior, and knowledge in these participants.

### **Social networking**

According to Boyd and Ellison (2007), the bulk of SNS research has dealt with network structure and privacy issues. They indicate vast uncharted waters remain to be investigated.

Social networks serve a number of functions in offline-life – for instance, providing social and emotional support, information resources and ties to other people. Similar kinds of social networks have been identified in online communities, with users turning online for both emotional support and as an information resource. In both cases, an online social network may provide users with social capital. (Johnson, 2008, p. 1)

The MCC Boomer Facebook page was designed to pilot its use as a social network for Boomer students.

### **Mezirow's 10-step process for transformative learning**

*Transformation learning in these Boomers is evident in their changed attitude in the classroom. Their process of making meaning out of their dilemmas aligns in part to 10 steps of Mezirow's theory.*

There was a convergence of disorientating dilemmas for this generation known as the Baby Boomers: lay-offs, business closings, dwindling retirement accounts, declining job market, returning to school, and retirement itself. As disorienting dilemmas occurred in Baby Boomers lives in unprecedented ways, community colleges have provided answers for career changing and have helped Boomers *reintegrate into society with a new perspective*. As these Boomers described make meaning of their dilemmas, I considered whether they transformed through these life changing occurrences along the lines of Mezirow's 10-step process for transformative learning or did they experience some and not others? During the interview process, it appeared that I could fit many of their responses into Mezirow's 10 step process for transformative learning. At the end of the second interview, in order to check my

interpretation, I asked the participants to describe how they each saw themselves going through the steps. I gave them each a copy of Mezirow's steps and asked them to imagine that step 1, the disorientating dilemma, was either the lay off or their individual situations and that the 10<sup>th</sup> step was getting a job in their new career. How they perceived and described whether their process fit these steps follows.

1. *Experience a disorienting dilemma*

Disorientating dilemmas lead each of the 10 participants on their educational journey. For 70% of the participants the disorienting dilemma could be characterized as their layoff notice. Jennifer described her feelings upon hearing the announcement of the plant closing, *"I was, for several hours at least, I was kind of like blown away. I had no idea what I was going to do, where I was going to go. Umm it was just kind of, ok, now what?"* Her husband, Terry, concurred, *"Uh, I was scared to death because I knew what the economy was like already."* Kathy captured the disorienting state of detachment she felt following her layoff, *"When I got laid off that time, I was done; there was no going back. And that was the first time since I was probable eighteen that I didn't belong somewhere."* The dilemmas for the other 3 were as follows: one had quit a job and couldn't find other work, another had a minimum wage job that was not meeting his family's needs, and the 10<sup>th</sup> participant had just moved to the area and could not find work. All of the dilemmas related to the poor economy and the financial downturn. Charlie, who had the minimum wage job, said, *"I have taken my disorientating dilemma and changed it into my school experience. I don't have that dilemma, because this is my job."*

## 2. *Undergo self-examination*

Terry described self examination, *“Undergoing a self examination, that’s deciding whether or not you could handle going back to school, in my case, or whether or not you can go find another job. Whether you have what it takes to find another decent job.”* Terry and Jennifer shared the same experience as a married couple and *“kept talking to each other.”* Terry considered what his interests were and what would be feasible at his age. They both thought about the future and what jobs would be available and lasting. Jennifer described, *“For me, it’s going to be something inside and the biggest field that gonna be around that I can think of, that I would get along in OK would be medical transcription or something like that.”* Terry wanted to work on the wind turbines. Larry explained his self-examination:

*You’re trying to look at what you should do, what am I going to do, yah know. Um, I’m 50 years old and I’ve got 20 years yet to work and I don’t want to ....I wasn’t happy with the job I was doing and I didn’t like doing the heavier labor. It was starting to effect my health and my back and stuff so I needed to really find something better, and I always thought that if I did get called back to that job that I maybe wouldn’t of went back. I still would have done, tried to do the school thing too because.... I, yah know, I wanted to do something I was happy doing.*

Jane thought about her choices and made some decisions based on her age like the others, who considered what they would be capable of for the long run. As a soccer referee, she was now ready to do indoor work and a slower pace: *“I am getting older and slower. I tell you the kids are getting younger and faster, and I just get older and slower.”* Kathy considered the wear and tear the factory work was doing to her body as part of her self-evaluation. She also shared the emotional evaluation of a laid off worker:

*And so, when that happened, Boom. And that’s the first thing you do, is self evaluate yourself. Because, you...tend to have a sense of, of, lack of worthiness, I mean, you know, there is something about being a productive part of society, then all of the sudden, you’re just not.*

3. *Conduct a deep assessment of personal role assumptions and alienation created by new roles*

Blossom considered the limitations of her right hand, *“I don’t have full motion with it and can’t lift a lot.”* She had taken an assessment as part of PROMISE Jobs that suggested she would be good at office work. This was the new role she planned to create. Janet characterized going through this step as, *“Assess your personal role assumptions and um, you know think of yourself in a new light, I guess.”* Formal assessment at the Workforce Center, required for WIA funding, upheld Jennifer and Terry’s self examination as Terry recounted:

*Well, we took a questionnaire type deal at Workforce. We had already decided what we were gonna be or go to school for. We had already enrolled, already had our schedules made up. We went and took the assessment for WIA. Then they have a little questionnaire type deal on the type of work you would be good for. Well, for me it came back high for being able to do and the mentality to do it. Everything I want to do fell right into place. So it worked out great.*

4. *Share and analyze personal discontent and similar experience with others*

Larry did not find the same support that others had from family members; however, he was energized by that. *“In fact some family thinks it wasn’t the brightest move on my part, and you know, I just had to prove them wrong.”* He explains:

*I had some people question what I’m doing, family members maybe uh wonder how I can do this, and not work and uh ya know doing student loans and getting some help with tuition and stuff but just kind of looking at the practical. Yah know you should just be working, you should just be happy, and satisfied and I’m not. I’m the one that’s gotta be so that was in sharing my experience with others....A buddy was doing heavy labor too, and he wanted to, he was into computers and he wanted to not work such heavy labor work too wasn’t able to find anything, and I said, “ Well, I’m going back to school.”*

While others had experienced layoffs, Jane felt “*outside*” the group as she was not a dislocated worker. Her husband had recently taken on a third career, so she had support from him. Kathy had friends with whom to commiserate:

*Well people, you know, most of my friends were still working [plant was slated to close]. And, yup, we shared and analyzed um...I have a group of about four friends, and that's what we did. We analyzed our personal unhappiness with the situation, um, talked about, what we were thinking about we could do, or could do...and how we could live on less money, and...yeah.*

When asked how her family felt about her education, she shared that her husband just hoped there would be a job at the end: “*He kind of remembered the last time [business school]...*” As she reflected on his thoughts, she considered that he did seem proud of her when he said, “*You'll do good at that, you always do.*” With the entire plant closing Terry and Jennifer had plenty of people to share their discontent with. Terry shared that, “*None of us wanted to go on unemployment; we all wanted to keep our job where it was. We just didn't have no say in it.*” Jennifer added, “*Well, yeah, all around the plant, people were talking about it, yah know, what are you gonna do? Yeah, I mean it seemed like a good 75% of the plant was talking about at least trying to go back to school.*” Like Jennifer and Terry, the other couple in the Boomer group had the support of one and another. Blossom said, “*He [Charlie] was all for it. The minute I said that I thought I'd come back. 'Go for it,' and that's the way it's been the whole time that I've tried going back.*”

##### *5. Explore option for new ways of acting*

Most had looked for new jobs, but found the job market lacking as any available jobs were too low paying. The unemployment rate was so high, that they knew similar jobs were not going to be available. Many planned to work at and retire from their previous job, but

now other doors are opening. As students, these Boomers found new ways of acting. Larry described how he learned to be a student:

*When you are in class and sometimes you got the instructor going around helping, "Can you help me with this? Can you help me find this?" You need to really just sit and find it yourself. That's the one thing I've learned. Probably learning the most out of, yeah. I'm learning in every class, but that probably is the most.*

Terry compared new ways of acting with using the computers: *"You have to change with it just like with computers, everything getting automated through em to where if you're not willing to change with it you're gonna get left in the dust."* Terry continued, *"You're not going to know how to do anything in the very near future. And the only way to survive nowadays is to get a higher education and expand."* Charlie concurred, *"In high school, I had no initiative in going to school. I didn't care about school; it was a waste of time. Now I look forward to coming here to learn more stuff."*

Kathy pointed out that a new way of acting would be required from going from factory work to working with the public:

*And there is a difference between being in the factory as an enclosed environment as to working with the public. And, so that's, that was something I had to...had to consider that. PROBOBLY, my next step was going to be working with the public, so I had to, assume a...I don't want to say better personality, but not so rough around the edges, you know. You get a little rough in the factory, so, you have to smooth the edges a little bit. So I did that.*

Charlie shared a similar thought, when asked if there was anything he had to brush up on before he came back to school:

*My language [pause, laugh]. Making it school appropriate to be honest. I mean, I worked for the foundry for eleven years, worked other jobs where watching my mouth was not a big deal. Cause there wasn't a lot of women around or the ones that did work there, they didn't really care. Knowing I was coming back to school or going to a place like this, I guess you could say where there are people of all ages, both sexes around, I had to clean my*

*mouth up. Other than that just deciding, that this is what I'm going to do and doing it, there wasn't a lot I had to change or brush up on. Maybe articulating words better [chuckle].*

His searching for the “right words” was apparent in his interviews. Kathy and Charlie brought forth an interesting consideration. Though Bob didn't mention this outright, he made reference to his language too, and often paused to search for the appropriate wording.

##### 5. *Build competence and self-confidence in new roles*

Competence and self-confidence on their decision to enroll in a community college primarily came after they had started classes. Faculty who validated their presence and learning were boosts to student's self-esteem. Charlie recounted from automotive class, “*In fact, one instructor in particular, um, when he was explaining stuff about some of the older vehicles that they might see, he looked to me and said, 'You might actually know more than I do about them because you were around then.'*” This was something “*everybody got a kick out of.*” He went on, “*It was a lot easier than what I expected.*” Larry described building self-confidence:

*Building self confidence I think that has a lot to do with the people I'm around here at school, and I've just since I quit my part time job in October, I just feel like a different person. I got a better attitude, and it would have been hard to have the good attitude during the day and go back to the crappy attitude job at night and then, yah know, back and forth and stuff.*

Getting good grades for the first time was a confidence builder for many. It answered the questions they had, wondering if they could do it. Two of the men who had dropped out of high school commented on the high goals they had set for themselves and the satisfaction in reaching them. Terry said, “*I figured I have to be in the top 10% of my class to get my choice of job. And that's my goal. And when I was younger, to me an A was something somebody else got. Well for me, this time, an A- was what I averaged.*” Bob, another of the

three high school dropouts, exclaimed: *“Uh, I have a 3.2 GPA, um, so jacked up about that.”* Yet, he expressed dismay at not reaching a 3.8 GPA. *“I’ll do it at least one semester,”* he said. For Larry, the validation of grades mattered. *“My goal is to not to be satisfied with anything other than an A and a B, and I never scored that high...in high school before...Now I’m looking at A’s and B’s, and I’m pretty proud of myself.”*

Charlie said, *“I’ll be honest, it’s probably the first time in many, many years that we [Charlie and Blossom] both wake up in the morning, Monday through Friday, enjoy waking up and going where we’re going. It’s given both of us a sense of purpose I guess. We have a reason to get up.”*

#### 7. Plan a course of action

The participants saw the course of action as enrolling in school. Larry said, *“The hardest thing was in the economy like...when there’s not a lot out there and I’m going to school...I have a deep faith, and I thought that He’s gonna get me through.”* *“I would have been laid off about six months, and then it was, you know, I kind of got out of the Boo who, Poor me, and enrolled in school,”* Kathy proclaimed. Janet concurred, *“I think of going back to school as number seven, part of number seven at least.”* Terry explained his course of action:

*But um I mean, I don’t care what kind of job I’ve ever had, I’ve always went all out. Now it’s just I have to go all out to get the job again. Well, I was always taught you work harder to get a job then to work the job. Well, now it’s just coming true. I mean I got to work harder than I want to for school, but that’s the only way I’m going to get a job, so you just deal with it.*

8. *Acquire knowledge and skills for action*

The skills and knowledge attained varies from person to person, but all commented on their joy in learning in their new career field. Kathy describes her plan of action:

*I did, planned a course of action [joyous laughs], and here I am, right here at MCC, and that's what I am doing, acquiring knowledge and skills, for that action. And um, I actually was, lucky enough to um, to get an internship for this semester, and so that puts me, gives me some real-time experience being in an office setting...um, using you know, the skills that I have here, hopefully building on some new skills. Um...it's a definite, um, resume builder, because I, you know, I don't have any office work on my resume, so this will just be huge for me.*

9. *Try new roles and assess feedback*

Larry's friends would say:

*What would they think I'm getting out of it? Oh I think they think I'm more open. I think they would think I'm happier because I'm around positive people and people that are successful, and I'm trying to develop that for myself. And I was around people that maybe weren't so much like that before and hated getting up in the morning to do their jobs and it's nice to come somewhere where everybody is striving, whether it is an instructor or another student, your striving for to better yourself. And you're not hearing negatives all the time, I guess is the big thing for me.*

Janet said, "That's kind of funny, because the last time I went [to school] both my kids were still in school, and they would say, 'My mom's a nerd, she gets straight A's,' yah know, but in the same breath you could tell that they were proud." Bob shared that his wife thought it was "awesome" that he was in school.

10. *Reintegrate into society with a new perspective*

Claire was the only one of the ten who was at the point of being able to reintegrate into a society with her new job skills. She completed her program in December and planned to attend the formal graduation ceremony in May. She considered her job hunt her next

“dilemma”. Terry added another dimension to reintegrating into society with a new perspective:

*You're gonna be leaving school which you might have one class for two hours in the morning and another class for two hours in the afternoon, but once you get a job, you go in the mornings and you leave in the evenings. Err late afternoon ....you work an eight hour shift constant or longer. You don't do this little spot times stuff to where you have all this extra time in between. You have to get it back into your system of having to do something for a real period of time. To me, that would be reintegrating.*

### **Summary**

Janet said, “Ten, you know, that will probably be at the end of my, when I graduate, but I think that's [Mezirow's Theory] very good, very good. I am memorized by Mezirow.”

Kathy was delighted that she could track her actions through this theory:

*So, I, I guess with everything that seems to be falling in place, maybe I have done the right things, that's kind of what I am hoping [laughs]. So yeah, we did it, right up to Mezirow right there [pointing to the handout]. I, I followed it right to the number, didn't I? Yeah, I had never heard of that before, but, yeah, that's amazing how that works.*

Reflecting on their journey was reassuring to the participants. Only Blossom was not sure she had gone through the steps. Jane posted on Facebook that she had trouble with a couple words and phrases: “*They are very touchy/feely sounding. 'Disorientating dilemmas, transformation learning, making meaning out of their dilemmas.'* Perhaps these are all used regularly in academia.”

### **Conclusions**

The participants in the study were comprised of a group of Baby Boomers who were returning to school with a newly discovered passion for education. The participants in this sample indicated the current economic conditions were the main impetus for them to enroll in

college for re-training. Job loss through layoffs accounted for 70% of the participants' dilemmas. During this economic downturn and poor job market, dislocated workers were finding the need to re-train in order to find a replacement job. The poor job market also brought back a woman who had quit her job, an underemployed man, and a woman new to the area. Participants expressed they were having difficulty finding employment with their current skills. While the economy was the overarching reason for enrolling in college, a deeper look revealed Boomers' desire to be working at careers that fit their interests and passions, and would result in work they enjoyed. For some, a layoff opened the door to an educational opportunity they had been considering pursuing. Three of the individuals had been working at jobs they considered their last job, from which they would retire. Without the layoffs, these Boomers would not be in school for new careers. Now each was looking forward to a new career. The Boomers expressed a love of learning, which was a different perspective from their previous educational experience when they were young.

The greatest gain and demonstration of transformational learning were represented by four men who similarly had what I perceived to be the largest gap in their education. Of the four men, three had GEDs, whereas the 4th had some college but he professed being at the bottom of his class in high school. The three with GEDs were setting lofty goals and meeting them. Terry recounted:

*I figured I have to be in the top 10% of my class to get my choice of job. And that's my goal. And when I was younger, to me an A was something somebody else got. Well, for me, this time, an A- was what I averaged.*

Bob explained his new love of learning: *"When I try my best at something and get a decent grade on it...man, that's awesome. I'm getting rewarded for it by getting that grade. I mean, I'm not getting paid, and I love every second of it."* Charlie said he NEVER liked school

from kindergarten on, but now exclaimed: *“It’s probably the first time in many, many years that we both [Blossom] wake up in the morning, Monday through Friday, enjoy waking up and going where we’re going. It’s given both of us a sense of purpose I guess.”* The perception, that a GED is something *less than*, needs to be revisited. Receiving a GED, in itself, shows an initiative and the ability to pass the proctored, timed, standardized tests. Bob took all five tests in a row and reported he scored high. Yet, Bob’s perception was revealed when he talked about the results of the Compass Test he took prior to enrollment in college: *“So what does that mean? When I took the test I might act dumb, yah know, cause I only had my GED for 20 years. I quit high school my junior year.”* Bob’s reflection gave a pause for thought:

*I don’t know how to explain it, like, you know, everybody goes through phases in their life, and if one little thing ....Sometimes there’s one little, one bad day, can ruin a whole phase, you know? And it did, and that day was a very bad day, and it ruined a whole phase of my life.*

What some of these Boomers brought with them to college was negated by unleashing the talents within them to pursue a new phase in their lives.

Boomers’ descriptions regarding college support were glowing for many of the faculty and for the general climate of the institution; however, Boomers had suggestions for improvements. The frustrations this group shared concerned their own limitations in computer literacy. An overarching theme emerged for the need for digital literacy training that would best be accomplished prior to starting school. Computers should be a tool rather than a frustration. Other frustrations included rising Boomer expectations. Partly, as Boomers coming from the work world, they expected efficiency. They noted the lack of efficiency in

classes not offered on a timely basis, loan money not available till mid-semester, classes filling time but not their needs, and a learning lab not conducive to learning for them.

Social networks were formed by these participants, which they considered to be important parts of their experience. Claire explained her friendship with a classmate: "*It was always funny because neither one of us thought we were doing it well, and we both ended up with an A. It helps a lot to have someone to talk to.*" It is important for the college to provide the opportunities for social networking to take place.

### **Contribution to the Literature**

This study had the unique feature of being conducted during the recession that dramatically impacted layoffs and the job market for manufacturing jobs. While dislocated workers in better times take advantage of career training, this economic upheaval made it necessary for a new breed of individuals to seek retraining. Under different circumstances they would have been able to find other employment. Now, going back to school may not be a choice but a necessity to secure employment (Bradley, 2009). Terry, Jennifer, and Kathy expected to retire from the jobs they had; however, now they were looking forward to new careers.

The sample of participants' created an interesting *case within a case*. The four men had what may be perceived as the greatest gap in their education compared to the six women. Interestingly, the transformational learning of these four men was extremely apparent. While it is true one might consider each had further to go educationally, the fact that three had GEDs presented a remarkable consideration to revisit the GED perception.

### **Recommendations for Practice**

Suggestions for practice are meant to strengthen existing programs and create new practices to serve this cohort. Community colleges are in a position to connect with Boomers in a meaningful way by being the primary vehicle to unleash the social capital and talent that our communities and employers need (Zeiss, 2006). The following recommendations and proposed solutions are made based on the findings of the study:

#### ***Communicate policies and procedures***

Participants expressed a need for better communication on available resources. Some remarked that tutors and other help were mentioned the first week by faculty, but the Boomers felt these resources should be readily accessible in written form. Although resources can be found in the view book, they are listed under the grant title and in educational language that may not be easy for Boomer to interpret. Larry and Bob both expressed that, “*Adults don’t always ask questions.*” Bob went on to express he did not think others read the book: “*I read every word of it, which 99% of them don’t. In fact, that is probably 99.9% of them.*”

Other policies and procedures that should be shared are the fact that appeals can be made for full refunds upon dropping a class. Jane pointed out she had to find this out on her own by asking questions. This might have helped Bob, who dropped a reading class he didn’t feel he needed, when he found he was reading at a 16<sup>th</sup> grade level.

*And the only thing that irritated me about that was my instructor... gave us the results back from the Nelson-Denny test the day after I could have gotten the full amount back. So I only got half of my money back for that class. But, not mad about half, I’m just mad she told me a day late.*

Terry had concerns about first time borrowers not receiving loan money until mid-semester. He needed to use the money to buy a new computer that would support the software he was using in computer-aided drawing. Others expressed similar concerns regarding buying their books. The college had two different ways to address this. The VP for student services could vouch for the purchase in the bookstore by a phone call, and the Financial Aid Director explained another procedure for receiving a voucher. However, the participants were not aware of these possibilities.

Larry suggested the Boomers publish a monthly newsletter. Another possibility was to share information on a Boomer Facebook page. If pertinent information does not come directly from administration, it would be a vehicle for students to share their experiences and knowledge among themselves.

### ***Appoint a specific adult counselor***

Bob explained the reasons for advocating an adult counselor. Looking at the recommendation for practice from a student's viewpoint is worth consideration:

*I think I would have somebody like myself talk to the older people. I'm not saying like a big seminar when they come in. Have an older person giving the tour. But they [Counselors] were normally traditional students back in the day, and we're all nontraditional....It's just that I think someone with a little harsher of a background and stuff would've helped. Yah know, a lot of the ones coming back are like me, who have never been to college, and we're all coming back at much later in life. As part of the work experience goes, I think a lot of the instructors here have either one good job before or they've been teaching the whole time. Whereas I was a welder, yah know, and some of the other people were working hard in another factory, so I understand what their thinking about. Some of them are nervous. How many older adults would want to be led around by someone their kids age or younger grandkids age?*

***Consider their timelines for course completion***

*“Here to get in and get out,”* was a constant thread running through the conversations. These Boomers needed to be back in the workforce in order to support themselves and their families. They expressed a great desire to learn to skills and new careers, but in the shortest period of time. Terry offered, *“I think they could add more classes. You always hear, well, this class is full, that class is full. If they’re so full maybe it’s time to get a few more added. That’s just my way of thinking.”* While this did not happen to him, it happened to his wife, Jennifer, who needed to extend her programs another year. This couple was living on unemployment insurance as they both had been laid off from the same plant. Money was tight for them as they indicated they stayed at school all day for each other schedules, rather than spend the gas money to drive the five miles home. Providing more classes to accommodate the need in popular programs is one recommendation. Others would be to consider the pilot and exemplary programs referred to in Chapter 2. Many colleges are shortening the requirements for re-training.

***Address the hearing concerns of Boomers***

A prime concern was support services for persons with disabilities. This cohort may have more physical problems with vision, hearing, and mobility (*Boomers go to college*, 2007). Hearing concerns from several of the participants was the main health issue for this sample of Boomers. *“I do have part of a hearing loss in one ear, but I do try and sit up front,”* shared Janet. However, one class does not always have enough chairs, so she realized that arriving early was the only alternative. Terry explained his experience at the learning center:

*It's just, it's supposed to be a learning center; uh, go in and get some help if you need it. But if you got these other kids in there talking and stuff, you're getting distracted. **You can't hear** when you are trying to talk to somebody or having something explained. Well it's no longer a learning center cause you can't hear.*

Jennifer shared a similar experience with outside noises affecting her ability to hear the instructor:

*I don't have a hearing problem, but they were doing enough typing and stuff like that, and I was far enough back to where they [kids] were right behind me. I was hearing them [kids] a lot clearer than I was hearing [the instructor] .... I've not been diagnosed with a hearing difficulty, but things fail as you get older, yah know.*

It is recommended that community colleges take this invisible disability into account for older students. Providing training for faculty regarding hearing loss would be helpful. Several Boomers in this sample mentioned not being able to hear when others were talking around them, yet they did not perceive themselves to have a hearing loss. Providing “quiet only” areas for study and interaction with tutors is another consideration. A visit to the Learning Center revealed how loud it was, especially for anyone with a hearing difficulty. The director was very receptive to providing a quiet area upon request for those requiring it. She immediately posted signs letting students know they could request the “quiet” anteroom to work with a tutor if they wished. Several other quiet rooms would be available in the library across the hall. This new development was also posted on the MCC Boomer Facebook page for the Boomer group.

### ***Provide for social networking***

The faculty has an opportunity to engage Boomers in social networking by offering classroom experiences that encourage interaction among students. Charlie enjoyed the team to which he was assigned in Automotive Technology and considered them friends. While his

program was a hands-on training that specifically utilized teamwork, all classes could provide the opportunity for groups to discuss questions or work as partners. Several Boomers made contacts with other students in their classes, but some did not. Jane seemed to try to be a part of activities; however she expressed, “*Social networking, that’s kind of hard for some, unless you’re in class with somebody you know.*” Janet provided an example of building relationship through class work:

*You know, and um, I think, um, everyone is scared to take Communications cause they, um, are worried about getting in front of people talking. And looking back at it now, those were actually the most fun classes, and the people that you got closest to because everybody was kind of in the same boat, and they were up there bearing their soul, and you really got to know who they were as a person, and, what they thought, and, that ended up being a really good experience, not a, not nearly as scary as you thought it would be. [chuckles]*

Targeting the specific group for Boomers is recommended. The one at MCC was effective in bringing students together.

#### ***Establish Facebook as a social network for WIA***

A new model of integration for this state will be limiting the one-on-one case management with WIA clients who are dislocated workers attending college. A Facebook group could provide a way to get in contact with clients when the new integration model is inaugurated in the area. If the groups are career specific, the clients will benefit from this social and academic networking. It is recommended that WIA develop career pilots to assess the benefit for the clients. Janet concurred with her Facebook posting:

*As far as keeping in contact with workforce through possibly Facebook would be awesome and would stop my having to drop off my "sheets" at the office. Definite time-save in this fast-paced life we live.*

***Establish computer training for Baby Boomers***

It is recommended to pattern the first digital literacy classes after the successful Workforce model that could be delivered on site at a community college campus. While the workforce classes were first developed with the purpose of giving job-seekers a tool to have a better chance at becoming reemployed, it will greatly benefit to pre-train Baby Boomers who are returning to college. While students may need to get up to speed in other areas to return to the classroom, computer skills should be a ready asset rather than a frustration. As Kathy posted to Facebook:

*I spend time with the computer doing e-mail, but workforce also signed me up for an eight-week computer course. It was very helpful to me being able to come to class and have some basic knowledge. I don't know if I would have been doing as well in my classes now if I had not taken that course.*

Returning students have these challenges to overcome that traditional students, who have just left the classroom, do not experience. Most traditional students in the Boomers' classrooms have been on-line since birth—at least their baby pictures have been! It is recommended that basic computer classes be offered on a lower/slower level than the basic classes that are currently offered. These should be available throughout the summer at no cost or a lesser cost to students.

***Screen for computer literacy at MCC***

Computer training is needed for Boomer students prior to starting classes. When querying a student services staff member to determine if the college assesses students' computer skills prior to matriculation, her reply was, "MCC doesn't do that." Students could have an opportunity to work on needed skills if screening takes place prior to enrollment in a class.

***List the computer literacy level needed for specific courses***

A vocational faculty member at MCC indicated that the dislocated workers did not know PowerPoint for his class. The entire WIA staff was surprised to learn that one of the MCC vocational programs required PowerPoint to complete class assignments. Knowing in advance the literacy level that is needed for a particular class would give students time to learn to use the applications that are required. The student services staff member was also asked if a course syllabus requiring computer usage indicates the level or type of computer skills that are required for the class. The reply was, *“We don’t do that either. I am thinking this would be helpful!”* Course descriptions that list the computer literacy level needed as well as the applications (i.e., specific software programs) that are required for each class would be beneficial.

***Provide a short course on application of computer software and a drop-in lab***

A drop-in computer lab for questions/answers would be beneficial for students. *“My gosh, just figuring out Microsoft 2007 was an effort.”* Claire went on to comment, *“Learning flash drives was another step. I had to learn to copy files to a flash drive and was use to a floppy disc.”* Learning to use the new tool bar on Excel 2007 was Claire’s greatest concern because it was so different from the 2003 program that she was used to at home. *“Just getting your way around it and finding things; and I think that seemed to be the hardest because by the time I found it, they [instructors] were 10 steps ahead of me, yah know.”* Janet said, *“I really do think, that having something available to help with, you know, the new computer programs, that is very helpful for returning students. If you don’t grow up with that, it just doesn’t come as easily to yah.”* It is recommended to open a drop-in lab with

hands-on assistance to alleviate these hurdles for Boomers. Offering short-term software application classes would also help Boomers learn, in advance, the computer skills needed for certain classes. This could also provide help, as Charlie suggested, “*on programming your phone to get the Alerts.*”

### **Recommendations for Future Study**

I was personally curious about the amazing transformation of the males in this study. Would this be replicated in other research? The gap between their previous education and their new goals was tremendous. Three men had GEDs and the 4<sup>th</sup> had some college experience following high school, but expressed he was one of the lowest in his high school class and did not complete his community college venture. Yet, these four men seemed to make the greatest transformation in their learning experience. Perhaps it is time to reframe the GED as a sign of commitment and ability, and add the completion of a GED when focusing on recruitment.

Future study is needed on digital training for older students. While the Boomer age group was defined as 45-63 for this study, digital training was not a concern for only this age group. The techie youth of today may be baffled when they are adults returning to college. If Moore’s law, which described a long-term trend in the capacity of computer hardware to double every 24 months, continues, then colleges can anticipate an ongoing technology gap.

### **Reflections**

*We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time.* (Elliot, 1944)

As I researched case study, I became fascinated with the ambiguity of the definitions, the use of the words, and the philosophies of the scholarly writers. The T. S. Elliot poem was cited in articles written by Simon (1996) and Jones (2006), and a striking metaphor of my exploration. At the conclusion, I came back to where I started, which was contemplating my uneasiness with ambiguity. I had hoped to develop an *apprehension* and, perhaps, *appreciation* for contradiction and loosen my *cognitive rigidity*. Merriam (1998) noted that a good match for case study research results from understanding the philosophical foundations of case study and from considering it a good match with one's personality, skills, and attributes. Further, Merriam recommended a tolerance for ambiguity. Simon (1996) expressed it as:

*To try to live a little more with uncertainty and ambiguity in the modes of thought we employ, to question appeals to rationality if this only represent one mode of thought and to seek different modes for exploring and telling the "truths" of situations. (p. 11)*

I found my favorite writers shared these insights, and I came to appreciate the open-ended nature of this methodology.

Critical reflection is significant in transformational learning. Mezirow (2000) stated that changes in life experience and critical reflection trigger the transformative process. Merriam (2004) posited that "...critical reflection on experience is key to transformational learning. Having an experience is not enough to effect a transformation" (p. 62). When asked to reflect on the T. S. Elliot poem, some of the responses of the participants were:

***Charlie***

*I will be honest with yah, one of the reasons that I don't read poems is that the way that they are worded sometimes is they don't make sense to me. But in a way yeah, from high school you learn everything you need to know, and when you get out in the workforce and life and you realize that learning*

*wasn't that bad [chuckles], so you go back and start over, and you basically go back to where you started. You know it's the same place, but you're looking at it a different way. The poem fits me pretty good.*

**Terry**

*I don't a whole lot out of it, but what I do get is the exploration is your whole life cause it's nothing but exploring. You go from toddler, grade school all the way up through, now a lot ems in college. Well at the end of the exploring, to me that's retirement or death. And that's where we arrive where we began, with our maker.*

**Blossom**

*Well, like the one at the end of all you're exploring. Exploring what you're trying...wanting to do. You know, whether you're older, you're younger...what you want to do with the rest of your life.*

**Claire**

*Um, yeah I mean, you kind of feel like you are starting from scratch again, that you've worked and worked, and, I mean I enjoyed [the factory], but didn't really feel like I was improving myself, sort-of-thing. And then, you feel like you kind of are...at the end. Like there is no place to go, and then going back to school, and learning things all over again and you feel like your, "Oh, okay, [chuckles] I feel a little smarter again", so now I can kind of start over, so its going back out there to try and find that job to match what you learned, and then learn all over again, learn more things that you didn't know, so I would say that hits it pretty good.*

**Kathy**

*Um well, I guess when I began exploring out of high school; this is what my guidance counselor told me in high school. That um, I don't know did they just call it, secretary, back in the day? That he said that would be the way to go, and that was where I first went to college at. But of course, back then, there wasn't much money in it, yah know, I don't even know, yeah they might have got paid minimum wage. I don't know. But that's when I got into the factory; there was money to be made there. But yep, [chuckle] now here I am back again, going back to school one more time, try the secretary route again. Of course now they are administrative assistants so yah know.*

**Jennifer**

*Well, I think in a way, for me it's kind of like I'm going back, and I'm in school. Sort of re-entering the workforce, so it would be kind of like going back to the first time that I got a job...but you're going to know more from the experiences that you have gone through to get you back at that starting position. And I mean, so it's like, it's going back where you started, but yet because of these experiences having changed things along the way, it's being there for the first time.*

I arrived where I started with the combination of my original studies: education and sociology. I also experienced returning to my first job at the college, tutoring court adjudicated youth for the GED, through the words of one of my participants. After the second interview with Bob, I was certain our paths had crossed before. It wonderful experience to hear of his transformation and hoped somewhere my GED students had experienced something similar.

“Each person, expert or novice, has great stores of tacit knowledge with which to build new understandings” (Stake, 1978, p. 6). A story makes an event more memorable and case study can develop these stories to be interpreted by not only the researcher, but by the reader. This was an interactive experience between the researcher and participants and also, hopefully, the reader. I perceive the interactive provides an opportunity for each stakeholder to pause and consider his or her own lives or thoughts. I appreciated the privilege of gathering the stories of these awesome people.

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