

“EXPLORING EFFECTIVE ACADEMIC ADVISING FOR MATURE WOMEN:
Autobiography and Personal Vignettes Based on Interviews with Seven Mature
Female Students and Two Academic Advisors at a University in Montreal”

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ABSTRACT

EXPLORING EFFECTIVE ACADEMIC ADVISING FOR MATURE WOMEN: Autobiography and Personal Vignettes Based on Interviews with Seven Mature Female Students and Two Academic Advisors at a University in Montreal

Katarina Stembera

The purpose of this thesis was to explore the academic advising available to mature immigrant women over 45 years of age who return to university studies. In addition to my autobiographical account, I interviewed seven mature immigrant women enrolled in graduate studies and asked them about the role of academic advising in their choice of the university program to follow. I also interviewed two professional academic advisors in order to gain insight into their practice to meet the needs of this particular student group. The following themes emerged from the analysis of the data: Academic achievement was a product of very strong inner motivation combined with the support of families and friends. In turn, academic achievement helped women in improving their self-esteem and self confidence which enabled them to achieve an important degree of satisfaction and self-realization.

The results indicated that the majority of the women interviewed did not receive adequate academic advising and upon graduation they were not able to find jobs in the areas of their specialization. They also pointed to the importance of a humane, warm and friendly relationship with the academic advisor in order to disclose personal issues and get the needed help. Each one of the two academic advisors had a different approach to their practice. Nevertheless both advisors underlined the lack of university resources for in service education and upgrading of credentials. The results of this exploratory study point to the following recommendations: a) The importance of providing career advising parallel to academic advising in order to help the students make choices which will lead to job opportunities upon graduation; b) setting evening office hours for students who are employed full time during the day; c) making available on the job education and training to academic advisors and faculty advisors in order to update their skills and knowledge to better advise mature immigrant women returning to university education.

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Thank you for generously giving your time, and sharing your stories and personal experience. I enjoyed immensely our conversations, gained insight and learned a lot.

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I would like to express my gratitude for your patience, encouragement and understanding. Special thanks to my husband for his moral and financial support without which I would have never achieved personal and academic accomplishment. Today, I am a better person because you gave me the chance and opportunity to return to higher education.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Although education plays an important role in a person's life, going back to school and obtaining an academic degree in higher education is not a realistic priority for many women; or so I have concluded from both my personal experience and the information gathered from my participants in the following study. Women are already preoccupied with raising children, completing household chores, and working in order to financially support their families. In addition to these everyday challenges, immigrant women in particular often struggle to adapt to a new society. As an immigrant woman coming from a completely different political and social background, I myself had to overcome many difficulties and still continue to establish my personal "place" in Canadian society.

All the participants in this study, including myself, had to put their desire to further their education on hold because of family commitments. When they decided to go back to university, one of the main factors that influenced them in choosing the appropriate program of study was the academic advising they received at their particular universities. The focus of this study is to explore the academic advising received by seven mature women students interviewed for this study and comparing their experiences with my own experience, in the light of insights gained by exchanging with two professional academic advisors. I focused on the significance and effectiveness of academic advising and how it relates to academic achievement, and how the quality of academic advising received affected the educational choices of seven mature women students. Of particular interest to me was the advising approach and advising theories

that professional academic advisors rely on when advising mature student-immigrant women entering university.

The women I interviewed for this study were interested early on in obtaining a university degree. Their personal circumstances however did not allow them to pursue their studies until later in their life. Five of the participants are from a European cultural background, where the acquisition of a higher education is highly respected, is associated almost exclusively to a higher social class, and usually means a better job as well as life style for those who have it than those without. Since universities are very selective, only the best students get the opportunity to obtain a BA, MA or PhD. Most significantly, all the participants believed that obtaining such a diploma would ensure better financial status and give them also a sense of personal accomplishment.

Some women/mothers who participated in this research ended up having more free time and also felt a sense of personal accomplishment upon completing their degrees. After spending many years working for lower wages at jobs that required little skills, they decided to go back to school prompted by the possibility of enrolling in a university program—even at the age of 45 and over.

Not being adequately advised at the beginning of my own university studies, I saw a definite need for improvement in the quality of academic advising provided to mature women. My encounters with other women in similar situations who also shared their frustrations with me revealed that many women acknowledged the problems associated with the lack of proper academic advising and being left alone to try to find their own ways in dealing with academic and personal issues.

Overview of the Chapters

The following research was motivated by my own life experience with academic advising prior to entering into an institution of higher education. During my six years of being a student in the program for a *Family Life Education Certificate*, as well as the bachelor degree program in *Human Relations*, and presently at the point of obtaining a master's degree in *Educational Studies* with a specialization in adult education, I noted the shortcomings of the academic advising system. Hence, the first chapter includes my own autobiographical details as an immigrant woman who entered university as a mature student at the age of fifty-one, and serves as background for the genesis of the overall study.

The second chapter is a literature review focusing on previous research conducted on women as learners; their life stories, values, beliefs, and expectations, with emphasis on transformational learning. This review also incorporates aspects of counseling and academic advising on mature students returning to higher education.

Chapter three contains a description of the methodology applied to this study, and the reasons for my choosing this particular technique.

In the fourth chapter, the information gathered about the students and professional advisors, and their personal experiences is presented in the form of various narratives.

The final chapter includes the results and findings and analyzes the significance of those findings. The conclusion recapitulates this qualitative exploratory study, and offers hypotheses generated by the research. Furthermore, recommendations are given for the scope and breadth of how and where these findings can be applied, with particular

reference to academic advising for mature women; but not excluding all other women returning to higher education, regardless of age.

My Autobiography

Slovakian Society

I was born and raised in the European country of Slovakia, which was part of the former communistic/socialistic republic of Czechoslovakia. This particular kind of political and social regime reinforced the virtues of strong teamwork and group belonging as compared to North American society where individualism, independence, and self-realization are the guiding philosophies.

In addition, European culture holds higher education and family as the primary concerns of life. Therefore, all efforts should be directed towards achieving a university diploma, which is believed to be a ticket to a better life. Also, focus is on building good, strong family relations. Hence, personal satisfaction, and a feeling of personal achievement, depends on one's success in those two areas. Even though both genders, including children from a lower social class, had equal opportunities and access to a university education in communist Slovakia, for a woman it was particularly hard to gain, let alone maintain a high position in Slovakian society.

The universities in Slovakia are still using well-established authoritative and conservative ways of learning and educating with predetermined programs and courses. They do not have elective courses or a combination of major and minor specializations, for example, which exist in Canadian universities.

My sociability and eagerness to learn was felt from an early age; whether through helping new Czech or international students in learning the Slovak language or participating in school fund raising campaigns and the collection of old paper and iron.

In the year 1971, a recovery from a complicated kidney surgery held me back from studying at university for more than six months. This was indeed a hard blow, because I greatly enjoyed my studies. Soon after, I gained employment as a Teaching and Research Assistant at the university in Bratislava. This job gave me nine years of invaluable experience working with students—especially experiencing with them their energy and satisfaction when they graduated—and introduced me into the society of a number of highly educated and dedicated professors, doctors and university researchers.

The political communist regime with many restrictions which affected my career advancement ultimately influenced my decision to leave my country of origin. Personal freedom was hindered by a political regime that was constantly controlling people's movements, especially those who were labeled as "dangerous" (i.e., individuals with relatives living in Western countries, or who had traveled to the West and visited capitalist countries).

At the age of 30, my boyfriend and I decided to illegally leave our country of origin, not anticipating the life circumstances that were waiting for us in Canada. At the point of leaving, I did not realize that my children's life will also be affected. They grew up without knowing and developing a relationship with their paternal and maternal grandparents as they were only able to see them very infrequently.

New Immigrants

Canada, with its internationally recognized liberal and democratic reputation and its political neutrality offering equal opportunities to all, regardless of their background, seemed the best country in which to start a new life for our young family. Leaving my country after having already established a career, and leaving behind my parents, two sisters and a brother (as well as nieces and nephews), knowing that I will not be able to keep in touch with them or see them, meant a great sacrifice.

Under the guise that I was merely planning a vacation, only with the help of connections, I obtained permission to visit France. Using different means of transportation, my boyfriend and I met in Paris, where 11 months later we obtained an immigrant visa to enter Canada, a promised land for many immigrants.

Upon our arrival to Canada, we faced numerous new challenges. Our expectations were very high. Both of us—my husband with his background in journalism and being a polyglot, and myself as a chemist—thought that we would enter into the Canadian workplace right away. Unbeknownst to us, our previous experiences and education were not recognized in Quebec. Almost immediately, my husband had to accept any job in order to support the family financially. While working as a school cleaner, he enrolled in the distance education program at the University in Ontario and completed his second university degree, a BA in Geography. After that he started to work in the field of geology, and 15 years later became a specialist geophysicist working most of the time overseas.

For many years we lived a very simple life as a family split apart, without the comfort that we had dreamed about. My role as an immigrant woman and wife, mother,

and employee was different from my previous experience as a professional chemist conducting research in a university. In our culture, a wife is expected to contribute financially to the family. However, we had to concentrate on survival, and the idea of a professional career was definitely not on my mind at that time.

My marriage was affected greatly by my inability to contribute equally to the family financially, which, along with other difficulties that immigrants must endure, ultimately forced my husband and me to live away from each other for 15 years.

My Professional Career in Canada

One of the main obstacles for me in building a career was learning the French and English languages at the same time, which was not an easy task, and for long time I felt unable to speak confidently in public. This subsequently lowered my self-esteem and self-confidence. For these reasons it never occurred to me to go back to a university to further my education and possibly obtain a better job and a higher salary. Instead, I went down the path of isolation, feeling ashamed of myself, unable to study at a university, and submitting to abandoning my professional career and dreams.

Being an immigrant woman with self-esteem almost at the freezing point, all my effort and concentration was on my husband and his future, and securing the future of the whole family. I became an emotional support for him, as well as for my two boys, who were actively involved in hockey and other sports activities. I was helping them to develop new friendships, which would facilitate their integration into Canadian society, and build relationships in their new environment. Canada became our new homeland.

Even if my professional life was put on hold, I still managed to hold low-paying jobs and contributed to the family income. Starting as a manufacturing assembler, then a

laboratory technician, and later as a supervisor of the labels department in a chemical company, at the age of 42 I was diagnosed with melanoma skin cancer, which led to the end of my profession as a chemist. It was a shocking and difficult period of my life. Not only did we eventually have to sell the house, the only security we had, but having worked as a chemist for the last 22 years, it was hard to see myself working in any other field. Consequently I felt lost, and my self-confidence plunged even lower.

Not having many choices, I started to search for a new job and learned eventually many new management and people skills. One of the jobs I tried was being a Mary Kay Beauty consultant, but being allergic to cosmetics and not wearing make-up it lasted only for three years (and also I really hate selling). Having new skills, two years later I decided to search for a profession that was closer to my own field. That led me to training in dental assistance. Working long hours, evenings, and weekends for a full year began to interfere with my family obligations, so I had to quit that job also.

At the age of 44, while thinking on changing professions, the idea of becoming a teacher or physiotherapist was not plausible at that time. I was full of doubts concerning my ability to be academically successful and therefore going back to university was not a realistic option for me. While sales associate was my only choice, which I performed for a few years and did not really enjoy, I felt the need to develop a new career. I registered at the French Massage Therapy School and become a massage and acupressure therapist. One year later with the business skills I learned while working as a sale associate and professional diploma as a massage therapist I opened my own health clinic—Women's Alternatherapy Center, providing health services for the next eight years.

During that time I was mostly alone with my children. Being a massage therapist was a nice and convenient job that involved working directly with people, mostly women, discussing their personal life issues and circumstances; women searching for positive change. While that drained my energy on the one side, it also brought a personal fulfillment and satisfaction on the other. I was able to arrange my schedule according to the needs of my family, while helping women with various health problems improve their quality of life. I pursued that line of work with a real passion. The only problem with the profession was not having financial security and the fact that it was physically demanding. At the age of 50, due to arthritis and osteoporosis it became hard to work in this domain and I had to think about changing my career again. Throughout the years, I have tried to adapt to all situations and obstacles that I am faced with, whether internal or from the outside.

I believe that life circumstances make immigrants mentally strong, so that each time some obstacles arise people are capable of getting back on their feet; determined to start from zero again. The process of transformational learning can be long and painful, but I was ready for another change and a new beginning.

Going Back to University

In comparison with the former Czechoslovakia, Canadian society offered (and still offers) many opportunities for career choices regardless of age, status or nationality. Today, 57 years old, being married for 25 years and having two wonderful boys aged 19 and 26, I look back at the difficult and significant decision I had to make six years ago.

After being diagnosed with osteoporosis, I contemplated which direction was most suitable for me at that point in my life. After sharing my ideas about starting a new

career with my husband and a friend, I was encouraged to study auxiliary nursing in order to find a secure job position in the field. However, my two English speaking women friends—who are in the same age group as me—helped ignite my desire to enter into higher education at this mature stage of my life. They saw the potential I possessed to contribute to society with my extensive experience and knowledge that I had gained by working with people, mostly women, in difficult life conditions.

I still remember the first moment when I stepped onto the university campus. It was a very emotional moment for me and I could not stop the tears from rolling down on my cheeks. The second I walked into the university admission building I felt the energy that I once had felt when I had entered the university in Slovakia. I knew that I could not turn back. At that moment there was nothing that could stop me from pursuing university studies and obtaining an academic degree.

At the beginning my husband worried about how my going back to school would affect the children (at that time aged 14 and 20 years old). I negotiated to be given two years to prove that I could perform successfully academically while taking care of my family. If I could not, I would agree to quit.

At the age of 51, I was at another turning point on my life's journey—the sixth significant point, in fact—and busied myself deciding about my profession and future (i.e., what kind of job I would like to do for the rest of my life). This most important question had to be answered initially by choosing the right university degree program; something which would lead me to my ideal profession. I began to rule out certain programs. For example, I knew that I did not enjoy working with computers. I liked to work with people, had developed a passion to help them as much as I could, so my dream

to return to my original area of employment in a university environment as a researcher or student advisor was reignited.

Academic Advising Experience

The next logical step was to receive advice from a professional advisor at the university, namely the admissions officer. She suggested that I enroll in the science program since I had already previously studied mathematics, physics, biology and chemistry. But since it had been a full 25 years since I had pursued that line of work, I did not have all the prerequisites to start at the undergraduate level in that particular program; a fact which I wasn't made aware of.

Although the mixed advice left me very confused and disappointed, my perseverance and determination to pursue university studies and fulfill my dream to work with university students again as I had done in Slovakia 25 years ago was far from quelled. While the advising officer provided me with some useful information on various programs, I took it upon myself to read the pamphlets made available in the office and conduct my own research.

After having taken time to carefully read and examine all the available programs, the certificate program in *Family Life Education* seemed to be most aligned with my personal interest and goals.

Even though other students discouraged me from attending the "Welcome New Students Orientation Day", saying it was a waste of time in general, the workshop helped me discover the various services that were available to students. Consequently, I registered with every possible learning workshop offered at the student center to improve my academic learning skills.

A faculty member from the program in which I registered failed to answer my questions concerning the significance of core courses. I also asked about job opportunities for graduate students in that particular program, but again did not receive the answers that I sought. Another advisor (who was unhelpful and moody) told me with a smirk that success or failure in the program depends on me alone. Her job at that moment, by the way, was to help me register for my core courses. She was overwhelmed with work and had very little time to concentrate on my personal issues and nagging questions. Altogether, in the program we were about 120 freshmen students, so I felt like “just a number” at the university and one of many in a faceless crowd. Somebody, it seemed, who should not ask so many specific questions, but should pay my fees, verify my schedule and follow university instructions.

The beginning of my new university career was not easy. Often, students would think that I was their new teacher. Much to my chagrin, that would have been the case if I had stayed in Slovakia. While I felt ashamed in those moments, I ultimately enjoyed learning side-by-side with the much younger students. We shared our knowledge and skills while preparing our group projects and, furthermore, I had the opportunity to learn about new cultures, individual students’ values and beliefs, and eventually accepted each student as an equal without judgment and prejudice.

This was a great opportunity then to experience life in a multicultural society, not using my own cultural background as a prejudicial starting point. I must mention here that criticizing, judging, and comparing other cultures and perspectives was and still is an outstanding characteristic of my own culture.

University presented many new experiences for me and helped in my personal growth. My self-confidence increased from 0 (low) to 4.5 on a scale of 0 to 5 (highest). However, I believe that there is always space for improvement.

The *Human Relations* program helped me deal with issues of low self-esteem and insecurity. For example, I found the courage to speak to other students when I needed to clarify the homework or essays. I spent time with the peer group to prepare for my first exams and developed a better relationship with the faculty members. At home I tried to avoid any conversation surrounding school work, especially with my husband. My confidence was growing slowly, and I attributed it to the recognition I gained from my professors and fellow students when they praised the fruits of my hard labour.

Because English was my fourth language, I carried with me at all times a dictionary from course to course. Although I understood the meaning of the words, I was not confident enough in myself to commit to interpreting concepts. Thus, I often checked the meaning of the words to verify if I understood properly and was on the right track. My self-confidence is still challenged by reading and writing, and I still continue to use spell check all the time when I write academic papers.

After successfully completing my certificate in *Family Life Education* I continued on with my academic career and obtained a Bachelor of Arts degree in *Human Relations*. A year later, I enrolled as a graduate student in the master's of arts in *Educational Studies* program offered by the same university.

My first experience with academic advising at the graduate level was again not as helpful as I expected it would be. Once accepted into the program each student was randomly assigned to one member of the faculty who was to act as their academic

advisor, guiding their studies. Many students shared with me their inability to discuss sensitive issues with their advisors because of fear of being misunderstood or judged.

In my own case, I found that at the beginning of the semester I was matched with an incompatible advisor. Besides the cold relationship we shared and the confusing guidance I received, the advisor's concerns regarding my language skills left me feeling uncomfortable; as if I had been labeled as a stereotypical immigrant. That contributed further to my fear of speaking in front of others and ultimately affected my academic performance in a negative way and lessened my overall participation in the classes I attended. But I was determined to continue with my studies; and I took my first experience with my faculty advisor as an opportunity to observe more carefully the techniques and personal approaches of each professor I was assigned.

Although the first experience left me uneasy, I asked other professors who seemed to be more open to the concerns of students to be my academic advisor. One agreed, and at the end of my first year as a graduate student I officially changed advisors. Later on, when talking to other students and sharing our advising experiences, I came to realize that it was the best decision I could have made.

From that time on I was properly guided and evaluated by my new advisor, and was able to share even my deep family problems and personal situations as they surfaced. I always had her support and encouragement to work hard and gain confidence.

I also discovered that the advisors who had similar backgrounds as mine were also the most knowledgeable in the areas of their particular field of interest as well as being more approachable, warm, and understanding of the values and beliefs of people

from other cultures. They helped me to regain confidence in myself and encouraged me to continue to develop my area of interest, which was and still is academic advising.

I recall a meeting with one of my philosophy professors. The professor asked me various questions like what my area of interest was, how I liked being at school at this age, and how my family was. It was a short, but pleasant conversation. Then, a few minutes later he said: “You are already a good advisor; just continue building your knowledge, there is a place for you somewhere. I am sure about it.”

I left his office happy, encouraged and enthusiastic. Each moment I doubt my future I remember his words. Nevertheless, I must say that until now I have only partially achieved my goals. Although I have an excellent education and knowledge and have been trying for the last five years to find an opportunity for work or some kind of internship in an educational environment, preferably as an academic advisor or in student services, I am still unsuccessful in finding the job of my dreams.

The only job that I was able to get was part-time contract work, reserved for the students of master’s programs, which lasted for only two years. I worked as a research coordinator at the school of social work at UQAM (University of Quebec at Montreal), and at Concordia University as a teaching assistant.

Today, at the age of 57, I find myself competing for a job position with others who are my children’s age. They have many advantages: they are young, they are perfectly bilingual with excellent computer skills, and they expect lower salaries. At this moment I am a graduate student, wife and mother still looking for the opportunity to work.

In conclusion, my university studies have taught me the skills that I have used to improve my family relationships and my ability to communicate. Nevertheless, they have not helped me in finding the job of my dreams, a job where I can share my extensive knowledge and personal experience as an immigrant woman who has lived and studied in different cultural and educational systems.

My husband was especially proud when I received the award for completing both degrees with distinction. Despite these distinctions, my goal to get a better paying job—which was my main reason for returning to university—still remains only a dream.

Although there are a large number of immigrant mature women who have graduated from university, the numbers of those who have completely fulfilled their dreams remains very low. I must admit that I am recently coming to terms with the possibility that the university program I chose was not the best for me in terms of securing a degree that is in high demand by employers. In this sense, it may not enable me to find a job. Perhaps I should have spent more time searching for where the demands for jobs lie (other than in IT field), or, wonder whether to place at least some of the blame on poor advising that did not help me in making an adequate career choice? Unfortunately, academic achievement alone without an opportunity to work professionally is not satisfactory for me or the other women who participated in this research study.

My negative experience with the academic advising I received stimulated a desire to find out more about the advising experiences of other immigrant women students. Specifically, I wished to explore the impact that advising had on their academic and personal achievements, and if it effected other students in a similar fashion. I still hope

that one day I will become a professional advisor for immigrant and adult students of minority background and have true opportunity to help them avoid dissatisfaction by providing them with good advice in their academic and career choices.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Women's Role in Society / Women as Learners

Previous research findings on women as learners in social contexts show that the effects of academic advising on choosing a professional career at the university level are significant (Hayes & Flannery, 2000). In order to understand the importance of an academic advisor's role in the academic achievement of mature women, I will introduce some basic points and explore previous findings concerning women learners.

Specifically, I will look at women's roles in society related to higher education, the importance of identity and self-esteem, aspects of transformational learning and finally academic advising in relation to mature students.

Women in North American Society

North American society is made up of people who come from diverse backgrounds, and first generation immigrants are generally bound to their customary obligations. Women have different roles and relationships specific to culture, and these lead to different learning experiences. Dissatisfaction with existing family structures and roles and a desire for change can be a motivation for outside learning (Hayes & Flannery, 2000, p. 39).

Immigrant women who earned university degrees in their country of origin have to face the fact that their job experiences and educational degrees may not be fully accepted in Canada. When pressured to provide for their family, they often face the first barrier to finding employment, and that is language. Thus, they have to take language

courses and, at the same time, they are expected to be good mothers, wives and homemakers.

Those who choose to pursue higher education face new and unique challenges. According to Rosalind Edwards (1993) in "*Women as learners*", one of those challenges is that family and higher education are both "greedy institutions" (Hayes & Flannery, 2000, p. 47) demanding a total commitment of time and energy from women. Women are expected to attend to the needs of the family, while men usually provide financial security. In addition, university studies are also mentally and physically draining and demand dedicated intellectual effort. This situation is obviously very difficult for immigrant women especially who also have families to support (p. 47).

Balancing school issues with domestic obligations plays an important role in women's lives. Edwards also remarks that women find ways of dealing with this tension by linking or separating family and education. For example, some women discussed their schooling with their partners while others were unable to. Some separated their school life from their family life completely, never mentioning it at all, while others professed to enjoy having "separate" identities as students (p. 48). In Edwards' study, women who placed more emphasis on integration tended to report more problems with their marital relationships than did women who relied more on separating family and school (p. 49).

The feminist argument for the right to higher education for women professes that educated women reach equal status with men and ultimately improve their personal relationships. Rockhill (1987) states that, "women want to be independent and also gain more power in the relationships" (Hayes & Flannery, 2000, p. 49).

O'Brien (1983) notes that a primary problem for women in education is in the public definition of the educational process. The ideology that women and men are biologically predetermined to assume certain roles in the family supports the premise that men should hold positions in the "public spheres of the economy, politics, religion, and education" and connect the family to the "wider social system" (Gaskell, 1987, p.23).

Consequently, women "carry out the expressive roles as housewives and mothers inside the home; they were to be responsible for the emotional and physical care of family members" (Gaskell, 1987, p. 23). Thus, they were to remain homebound. However, because of today's economic reality women are expected to contribute financially in order to secure or improve the family income.

Women often attempt to distance themselves from their traditional roles and relationships by learning new things and improving their knowledge of themselves and their situations. For some women education is a deliberate attempt to escape from these restrictive roles and relationships; for others, education itself provides new insight. As one woman put it: "I think that going back to school has helped me realize that you can be strong, you can be powerful, you can speak out, and you can still be a woman, and that is okay, and that feels good, you know that the two can co-exist" (Saltonstall, 1989, as cited in Hayes & Flannery, 2000, p.50).

However, distancing oneself from established cultural norms can be a long and difficult process. For example, one woman stated, "I have changed but nothing has changed at home.... and it hurts more when you have a taste of what things could and should be like" (Adams, 1996, as cited in Hayes & Flannery, 2000, p.50). This aptly

captures the essence of the severity of gender related issues that women have to face and how traditional roles are deeply embedded in their psyche.

Tom Heaney (1995) writes that higher education provides women with professional as well as social skills, including “implicit and explicit lessons about themselves as women and, more specifically, about themselves as women of a particular race, class, and culture” (as cited in Hayes & Flannery, 2000, p. 51).

Identity, Self-Esteem and Higher Education

According to Flannery (2000) and Miller (1986), a person's sense of identity is linked very early with her or his own sense of being female or male. A woman's sense of self is formed around building and maintaining relationships (Flannery, p. 61). Anderson and Hayes note expressions of positionality among oppressed people, including women, as they survive by attending to the needs and feelings of others, keeping those who have power over them happy. They argue that the capacity for autonomy may result more from one's location in the social structure than from one's own efforts: “Economic responsibility for one or more children may rule out the realization of autonomy for women, while societies that pressure men to be good providers seem to rule out affiliative roles for them” (Hayes and Flannery, 2000, p. 63).

Adulthood Identity and Self-Esteem

The gender-specific expectations communicated to women during childhood and adolescence continues to be reinforced and challenged as women grow up to become adults. As Mary Catherine Bateson (1989) has shown, “Somebody’s got to be the mommy. In our society, it’s usually the mother who has to be the mommy, whatever other responsibilities she may have” (p.139).

Marriage and motherhood, as well as women's roles in the working world continue to be influenced by gender-specific expectations, although those expectations may take on new forms. In dealing with these gender-specific expectations, women continue to unlearn and relearn who they are and how they feel about themselves. Danielle Flannery (2000) noted that women are not just passive recipients of these societal prescriptions; rather they are often very proactive, choosing change.

Women are agents in fostering their own self-esteem as well as in developing their own identities. In studying the process of how a personal sense of control over identity affects the overall cultural identity of women, Lucy Earle Reybold (1997) found that women respond very differently to conflicts between personal and cultural identity. Some women construct their own personal models of self and ignore cultural expectations; others adapt their personal models of self in a compromise with the culture. Some confront the culture directly; others choose not to confront the culture at all (Flannery, 2000, p. 68).). Cherri Moraga (1983) noted how women with multiple cultural identities must learn to deal with sometimes-conflicting expectations. An important aspect of women's identities is how they view themselves as learners. Women often contrast their identities as learners in school with their identity as learners out-of-school (Hayes & Flannery, 2000, p. 70).

As is often the case, women suffer many kinds of abuse in their relationships, marriage or otherwise. There has been increasing awareness of the effects of abuse on a woman's ability to advance her education. The negative effects are reflected in some women's low self-images as learners, self-images that include a lack of confidence in

their learning abilities and a perception of themselves as "voiceless and mindless" (Gowen & Bartlett, 1997, as cited in Hayes & Flannery, 2000, p. 50).

Women-learner's success in a professional career depends to a great degree on how they perceive themselves and the level of their self-confidence. Such self-perception is impacted by a woman's upbringing, life experiences and their desire to improve their self-image. Women often revisit, unlearn, and recreate their own self-definitions as well as consider the ways they are perceived by others (Hayes & Flannery, 2000).

Bateson (1990) calls this constant learning the "act of creation that engages us all, the composition of our lives". She writes that people for the most part don't set out with a certain particular self in mind but are in the process of improvising and discovering the "shape of our creation along the way" (in Hayes & Flannery, 2000, p. 55). Women often try to find their own particular definition of self, battling at the same time with the demands of society that attempt to define her feminine characteristics. Each woman's perception of herself is influenced by her "personal histories, culture, and meanings". Thus, women are "all sorts of combinations of identities" (p. 55).

As I have already mentioned, self-esteem is how people feel about themselves. "Core" self-esteem has to do with people's conviction of "being loved and lovable, valued and valuable as [they] are, regardless of what they do" (Steinem, 1993, as cited in Hayes & Flannery, 2000, p.56). This most basic sort of self-esteem is believed to be formed early in life. However, "specific" self-esteem is situational; which means it is based on "people's awareness of what they can do well, from expectations of others (relatives, teachers, coaches), and from particular contexts in which they find themselves" (p. 57). For example, a person who had low self-esteem in high school but now achieves

good grades as an adult will experience changes in his/her self-esteem. This means that for immigrant mature women, especially those that did not have high self-esteem to begin with, returning to higher education is an opportunity to improve their own self-perception as well as get recognition from others.

Women's identities and self-esteem as learners are influenced by their experiences in many different social contexts. As illustrated by Gorback's work (1992), the negative effects of previous schooling, and hence feelings of low self-esteem, can be diluted under some conditions. In addition, for some women, attending an adult education program can enhance their self-esteem by giving them the socially acceptable status of a "student;" a status that legitimizes them in the eyes of their children and the broader society and reduces their feelings of inadequacy (Hayes & Flannery, 2000, p.73).

Experiences in the home are another source of self-doubt for women that can influence their learning in a negative way. These experiences begin with a woman's upbringing and extend to their adulthood. Self-doubt can be compounded when women return to school as adults and feel guilty or inadequate, blaming themselves for the difficulties they experience in handling multiple roles (Rice and Meyers, 1989; in Hayes & Flannery, 2000, p.74). In fact, such feelings of inadequacy and guilt are often portrayed as major barriers to women's persistence in formal education. Often, the power issues between men and women, and the "double day" for women, are experienced acutely (p. 75).

In the case of immigrant couples, the power issues reflected in a woman's tendency to submit to their husbands as the more proficient speakers of English are easily

observed. Women see themselves as unable to communicate in English; they are unsure of their abilities and, subsequently, of their identities. They are actively engaged in reinventing these identities, just as they continually reconstruct other aspects of their lives. The value placed upon being a “successful” learner, particularly in formal education, is identified by women as something to build upon. Women's identities as learners can have a significant impact on their general sense of self-esteem and on their identities as a whole (Flannery, p. 77).

There is a considerable stigma attached to a failure to achieve high marks in formal education and schooling. Women who have not done well in school may be especially prone to self-doubt with respect to their learning abilities. Therefore, it becomes important for educators to help women become more aware of the learning they accomplish outside of formal educational settings in order to validate this learning and apply it to the classroom.

According to Knowles (1980),

Learning is described psychologically as a process of needs-meeting and goal-striving by the learners. This means that individuals are motivated to engage in learning to the extent that they feel a need to learn and perceive a personal goal that learning will help to achieve; and they will invest their energy in making use of available resources (including teachers and readings) to the extent that they perceive them as being relevant to their needs and goals. (p.56)

There is little doubt that education is something that people ought to pursue for their own good, the good of an organization, or for the good of society. “There is a gap between present level competencies and a higher level required for effective performance as defined by themselves, their organization, or society” (Knowles, 1980, p.88)

Thus, adults over the age of 45 often find themselves in some life crisis or other which serves as a transitional period—a turning point—providing an individual with an opportunity for personal growth as well the danger of increased vulnerability to mental disorder (Moos, 1976, p.13). Mature individuals, especially women over 45, who have had to take care of their families for many years have to now adapt and cope with rapid technological and social change; like the change which has taken place over the past 25 years. Hence, “each individual is adapting to major life changes” (Moos, p.15). Consequently, this adaptation is the major factor that affects the successful transition from one stage to another. This can have fundamental effects in the personal, social and professional realms of women.

Relocation and Migration

Migration, as a specific stage in life’s transition, has its own particular characteristics. The move from one country to another “requires individuals to deal with a loss of the old and known, to adjust to the strange and unfamiliar, and to cope with the stress generated by both tasks”. Fried (1976) in “*Developmental Life Transitions*” discusses how feelings of “grief” were found in 46% of women and 38% of men interviewed. These people were noted as experiencing fairly severe grief reactions (Moss, 1976, p.189).

Migration across cultural and international boundaries has been and continues to be a prominent feature of modern life. According to the research findings, heightened emigration has a significant impact on the adjustment experience, as does the nature of the cultural differences encountered as well as the kind of reception people meet with in their new environments (p. 190).

Adaptation Process

Adaptation is also an important stage in developmental life transition especially for immigrant (Moos, 1976). According to Saul Levine (1976) the process of adaptation has four stages. “Disorganization” is the first stage, which is a time of confusion, ambivalence, loneliness, and general distress. In the “acting out” stage the individual emphasizes noninvolvement, building superficial and exploitive interpersonal relationship and sometimes displaying aggressive antisocial behavior (such as pushing drugs and acting violently). The third stage is a period of “searching”, taking stock, maturing, and looking for closer interpersonal ties. In the fourth phase, “adaptation and integration,” the individual has become totally involved in his new life and sees himself as a Canadian (Moss, 1976, p.191).

Women’s Transformative Learning

Although only a few studies have focused specifically on women's transformative learning, these studies and other research on women's development suggest that many women may not experience transformative learning as pre-existing theories showed. Transformative learning has been described by Ann K. Brooks (2000) as learning that leads to some type of fundamental change in the learners' sense of themselves, their worldviews, their understanding of their pasts, and their orientation to the future (p.140). In addition, Carolyn Clark (1993) explains that;

Transformational learning produces more far-reaching changes in the learners than does learning in general, and these changes have a significant impact on the learners' subsequent experiences. The transformational learning shapes people; they are different afterward, in ways that both they and others can recognize. (Hayes & Flannery, 2000, p.140)

This type of learning can take place gradually over time, or it can happen as a result of a particularly significant and dramatic experience. Specifically related to women's development there are few findings. All in all, it can be concluded that returning to higher education has an important impact on the future lives of immigrants; women in particular (Hayes & Flannery, 2000, p.142).

Research described in "Women as Learners" (2000) has shown that the lives of women generally seem to have unique characteristics that make women's lives distinct from those of men. In particular, women traditionally have lacked control over their lives. Bateson (1990), and Jean Miller (1986) state that women tend to place the needs of others before themselves (Hayes & Flannery, p.142). Gilligan (1982) has distinguished women's moral development as centered on a movement toward increasing responsibility to and caring for others. Noting the conflict that women may encounter in developing their identities, Ruth Josselson (1996) has pointed out that women create their identities at the intersection of competence and connection. And finally, specifically addressing women's development as learners, Mary Belenky, Blythe Clinchy, Nancy Goldberg, and Jill Tarule (1986) have theorized that women move from silence to a form of constructed knowing that includes both connected and separate knowing (Hayes & Flannery, 2000, p.142).

Perspectives on practice, described by Jane M. Hugo is an important aspect that should be taken into account when considering a women's future, and academic advisors need to be aware of the following facts when advising adult women (Hayes & Flannery, 2000, p.185). They have to take into consideration that there are many women who are entering the job market in North America. In addition, they must understand that women

are often victims of violence, they are often single parents, and they often live on low incomes. Ultimately, many women are returning to school because of a sense of self-realization and want to improve their personal, social and professional status. Research has shown that women feel good about themselves if the learning they encounter is related to their lives and also if they are respected as “equal partners in the learning process (p.199).

Another specific issue regarding women is that higher education, according to a nineteenth-century feminist argument, raises women into a position of equality and frequently improves their relationships with their husbands (Adams, 1996, in Hayes &, Flannery, 2000, p. 50).

Tom Heaney (1995) has stated that learning is not simply an “individual-in-the-head” process, but; there is a social dimension of learning, in terms of both “the social relations, which are reproduced in us and the transformative consequences of our learning [for] society” (as cited in Hayes & Flannery, 2000, p.51).

One form of social relation which occurs between a student and society is the counseling service provided known in today’s educational institutions as academic advising. In the next section I will explore definitions of academic advising and examine the roles played by academic advisors.

Academic Advising

From a historical point of view, counseling services were incorporated into public schools at the beginning of the twentieth century. The roots of academic advising in higher education date back to the 1930s. Its development as a profession progressed with the development of societies, and the tremendous changes that went along with this

progression make advising a fundamental resource to meet the needs of students in the 21st century.

In contrast to teachers, who focus primarily on academic performance, evaluation and discipline, “counselors encourage open and nonthreatening dialogue that recognizes and affirms the importance of holistic personal development” (Dynkmeyer & Dynkmeyer, 1984; in 2004, p.382). Moreover,

By helping students gain awareness of their personal responsibilities, their own talents, and the talents of their peers, counselors encourage students' thoughtful reflection about present and future goal. “...School counselors contribute to social and academic excellence by reinforcing careful decisions that lead to the actualization of students' potential. (1998; 2003)

It is evident that all school personnel need the skills to reach out and support a diverse student population. While the teaching and learning cultures of the institutions vary, they help to define the structure of the advising program. It is essential to define the value system of the institution and, subsequently, to determine the subsequent system adopted by the advisors who will be working with the students:

It might contain ensuring that an advising program provides opportunities for students to assess their interests and their academic abilities; encouraging the fullest intellectual development of students; and providing an environment in which students can learn about the full selection of educational opportunities available to them. (Gordon, p. 182)

In my personal opinion, I agree with the conception that university advising should be “a relationship between student and advisor, between student and institution, and between advisor and institution” (Gordon, Habley and Associates, 2000). Within each of these relationships various responsibilities are inherent. These are the development of appropriate informational systems, especially electronic media to support both advisors and students in the advising endeavor, and a comprehensive training

program. Also, the implementation of strategies to accommodate the special advising needs of all students in the institution is essential (p.183).

According to Gordon and Habley (2000), all the components of the *Academic Advising Standards and Guidelines*, when implemented, help to improve and deliver a high quality advising directive that can help students in their academic careers. We need to understand that both advisors and advisees are involved in making the advising relationship successful. Since advisors play a crucial role in students' achievement, the following are some specific guidelines for advisors on how to be well skilled and educated to meet the needs of students:

1. Help the advisee to understand the academic and administrative processes of the university and the nature of its academic programs.
2. Help the advisee to understand the expected standards of achievement and likelihood of success in certain areas of study.
3. Discuss the educational and career objectives suited to the advisee's demonstrated abilities and expressed interests.
4. Help the advisee to plan a course of study and give advice about courses and the adjustment of course loads.
5. Refer advisees to other resources when appropriate.
6. Participate in the advisor training sessions provided by each college or department to keep them informed and current (p.185).

While advising depends on the mutual responsibilities of advisor and student within the institution as well as the institution's imperative to ensure that successful

advising occurs, the final determinant of any student's program of study and of how that student uses the educational opportunities available to him/her ultimately rests with the student themselves.

Since much of academic advising involves making decisions for many students, developing decision-making skills is a huge step toward becoming a good advisor. How students are assisted in making academic decisions may provide the basis for determining whether or not they are able to make additional reasonable decisions in their lives.

Eric White (2000) has noted that all students should understand that once they commit themselves to higher education, they need to remain learners throughout their lives. This is not only to benefit themselves and to enrich their own lives, but it is also required to achieve the level of career to which they aspire (Gordon, Habley and Associates, p.189). This might vary in the cases of mature women who have entered higher education under different circumstances than younger men or women.

Literature findings on effective advising for mature women learners demonstrates that counselors are there to encourage open and nonthreatening dialogue that recognizes and affirms the importance of holistic personal development (Dynkmeyer & Dynkmeyer, 1984; in 2004, p.382). They aid students in gaining an understanding of their personal responsibilities, talents, and the talents of their peers.

Since school counselors contribute to social and academic excellence by reinforcing careful decisions that lead to the actualization of students' potential (Glasser,1998) counselors should encourage students' thoughtful reflections about present and future goals. Thus, in relation to the quality of academic advising, Eric White

believes that “the primary purpose of any advising program is to assist students in the development and implementation of their educational plans” (Gordon, 2000, p.182).

It is important to make certain that:

an advising program provides opportunities for students to assess their interests and their academic abilities; encouraging the fullest intellectual development of students; and providing an environment in which students can learn about the full selection of educational opportunities available to them. (p.182)

To review, the conceptual notion that “academic advising is a relationship between student and advisor, between student and institution, and between advisor and institution” is perhaps the most apt summary of the role of the advisor (Gordon, Habley and Associates, 2000, p.182). In order to expand this notion the following responsibilities were added as parts of that relationship: the development of appropriate informational systems, especially electronic media, to support both advisors and students in the advising endeavor; a comprehensive training program; and the implementation of strategies to accommodate the special advising needs of all students in the institution (p.183).

Despite the fact that the main purpose of any advising program is to help students determine their educational strategy, an educational institution should also provide a type of counseling that offers opportunities which enable advisors to evaluate students’ academic abilities, encouraging their full intellectual development and provide a setting that offers students a complete information of existing educational opportunities (Gordon, 2000, p.182).

The National Academic Advising Association (NACADA) has established a recommended theory, delivery, application and improvement of academic advising to

increase students' development (2000). Therefore NACADA'S task includes "Affirming the role of academic advising in student success and persistence" (Gordon, 2000, p. X). As a referential note, this information was taken from *Academic Advising: A Comprehensive handbook*, which describes the complexity and involvement of many elements in the advising process.

In Martha L. Farmer's (1971) book *Counseling Services for Adults in Higher Education*, Clarence H. Thompson analyses the "unique nature of the adult who approaches institutions of higher education in an effort to further extend his learning experience in a direction or for purpose of his choosing." Adults also have "different body characteristics, different learning histories, different reaction speed, different attitudes, values, interests, motivations, and personality" (1971, p. 17). In addition to that, in the study by Malcolm Knowles (p. 18), adults and youths are shown to differ in their roles, one being independent and the other dependent. There are five significant differences which have a great influence on the advising approach to adult learners. Those are:

1. An adult learner is more independent, so he/she wants to be treated as an adult and make his/her own decisions.
2. Having more experience, an adult can contribute to certain learning situations in unique ways.
3. Not having too much time to waste, an adult learner wants to apply immediately what he/she learns, and requests immediate solutions for present life problems (p.19).

4. The goals an adult wants to reach are often linked to self-realization and achievement at the level of higher educational. Often they are facing career changes that require new knowledge (p. 20).

5. Adults are self-motivated and want to achieve and update their skills.

By understanding the characteristics of adult learners and what sets them apart from young students, academic advisors and counselors can help adults overcome obstacles and reap the benefits of a higher education. It seems that post secondary institutions are still more equipped for and dedicated to dealing with young students. In order to provide better counseling for adult learners these institutions need to create new and better services (Farmer, 1971, p.21).

With this last comment in mind, a working definition of "counseling" was developed by a participant group at a conference on "The Training of Counselors of Adults" held at Chatham, Massachusetts, in May 1965. It defined "counseling" as

a systematic exploration of self and / or environment by a client with the aid of a counselor to clarify self-understandings and /or environmental alternatives so that behavior modifications or decisions are made on the basis of greater cognitive and affective understandings (Farmer, 1971, p. 21).

Also provided were three main counseling categories: *educational, professional or vocational, and personal counseling*. Educational counseling is advising concerning the courses and programs that students wish to register for. It involves mainly directing students to the different services available. Most counselors are efficient in this type of student academic advising (Farmer, p. 22). *Professional or vocational counseling* links educational counseling and personal counseling. This includes: "vocational counseling, career information, placement, occupational information, testing for vocational purposes,

periodic growth assessment, and long range counseling aimed at the attainment of maximum self fulfillment for the individual” (p.23). This type of counseling is usually *not* provided to adult mature immigrant women *or* men who wish to pursue higher education. My research, however, demonstrated that that is *exactly* the type of advising mature students are looking for prior to their registration in a university program. *Personal counseling* involves the awareness of and concern for a student’s personal situation in order to adequately guide him/her successfully.

According to the author of the study, the majority of those students who seek academic advice are part-time and credit-oriented adult students; those who want to obtain academic vocational advice (Farmer, 1971, p. 24).

Counseling Mature Women and Students from Different Cultural Backgrounds

One specific academic category that requires special attention is the “adult women” category. Regarding the “housewife-mother category” Thompson (1988) believes that the majority of these women seek advice in order to improve their social status (p. 27). Usually they worry about their ability to measure up to younger students and are found lacking in self-confidence (p. 28). Often these women are not supported by their family members and may feel academically inadequate. Hence, “an educational experience can help her evaluate her abilities as well as determine her goals and objectives and get her started toward their attainment” (1988, p. 27).

The ongoing changes in global economic structures as well as the informational technology revolution have produced an environment where knowledge and skills become increasingly important values (Scott, 1998, p.128). Such demands for ever-changing technological advancement increase the need for “lifelong learners.”.

Continuing education is a source which sparks lifelong learning, considered by Malcolm Knowles a “social process that involves the total personality of the learner.” It is really the unifying theme, the basic fabric, upon which college personnel services, including counseling, can and should become effective for the adult” (Farmer, 1971, 30). This is why those who are involved in counseling need to advance their own education to improve their knowledge and skills in order to be more effective as counselors.

With this last point in mind I shall examine briefly Abraham Maslow’s “theory of motivation and human needs”, which is based on personality development (1968, 1970a, 1970b, in 1971). As Maslow stated,

The far goals for adult education, and for other education, are to find the processes, the ways in which we can help people become all they are capable of becoming...To help the client achieve such intrinsic learning is the far goal of counseling. (1971, p. 37)

Maslow’s theory has five levels of personal needs development. Level 1 relates to the surviving needs of the body, referring to physical safety at an early age, while Level 2 is connected with social safety that comes from family and work. Level 3 relates to needs for love and desire for affection and belonging that requires communication and relationship skills. The need for recognition from others, which is Level 4, incorporates important personal values such as self-respect and acceptance, and self-esteem and self-confidence.

The fifth level of needs, which relates to self-actualization or self-realization, concerns the moment when a middle-aged adult often experiences the desire to reach the fulfillment of his/her goals and dreams. This last level of motivation and behavior includes aspects of creativity, acknowledging that an adult possesses enthusiasm, enjoys

challenges and loves to see results when working toward goals (denmartin/maslow.html, 2005).

For women of a mature age, especially immigrant women, it is important to acknowledge that in living under certain threatening circumstances, isolated from others and lacking confidence in their abilities, they may still continue to survive, however they will not fully actualize their potential. Therefore, getting help in their journey to accomplish what they desire in Levels 4 and 5 plays a major role in their capability to integrate into a new society. I believe that personal success affects the level of each person's self esteem, helping individuals move forward instead of backward and avoiding the pitfalls of being mired in stagnation and insecurity.

Adult Student and Vocational Counseling in Higher Education

According to Goldie Ruth Kaback (1971), vocational counseling plays a major role in an adult student's attitude toward higher education. I can conclude from my research that, 30 years after Kaback's study, it is safe to state that vocational counseling for mature students, both men and women, can often lead to the attainment of a better job position, a better salary, more free time, moving up the social class ladder and a more secure retirement (Farmer, 1971, p. 60).

A greater demand for computer and other technical skills has meant that many job positions have been, and will continue to be, abolished. So the question which arises is "how might a vocational counselor help (a student) to prepare for a world of work that is as yet unnamed and technically unknown?" (Kaback, p. 60).

Adult students, therefore, expect much from vocational counseling. Mature students in higher education need advising that will aid them in realizing and articulating their motivation, capacities and skills. In addition, they will expect to find work to fit their competencies, while being satisfied at the same time with the job they have been advised to pursue (Farmer, 1971, p. 61).

Patterson (1971) also sees a “client-centered approach” as an effective way of building a relationship with the advisee (p. 62). He believes that a good advisor is there to support adults by helping them improve their academic and overall social lives; particularly since they are (presumably) armed with the knowledge that career choices influence student’s social class, and their overall sense of well-being (Farmer, p. 65).

A mature student is more than likely to have plenty of job experiences but needs guidance related to the particular profession suited to them at this point in their lives; they need access to all the information necessary in order to make a good career choice. He or she may need assistance in articulating his or her projected vocational goals. Furthermore, the vocational advisor should have sufficient knowledge of the current job market as it relates to the advisee’s particular profession, and should be able to provide names of employers who offer free training (Farmer, 1971, p. 68).

A mature woman has the same “vocational needs and drives for social and monetary positions as does the male adult student”. In short, women who have returned to school for personal or financial reasons expect vocational counselors to assist them in their struggle to find a career (Farmer, 1971, p. 70).

Changes in family dynamics such as “divorce, physical violence, sexual abuse, alcohol and drug abuse, and other problems that are on the rise, have a great influence on

today's students" (Gannon, 1989, in Gordon, 2000, p. 77). Although many women students suffer from "emotional distress, self-destructive behavior, violence against others, anxiety, depression, eating disorders, as well as being victims of date and acquaintance rape, and courtship violence" (International Association of Counseling Services, 1998; in 2000, p. 77) they wish to change their life for better. According to the Chronicle of Higher Education Almanac (1999), 55.4% of undergraduate students were women (2000, p. 107).

Ruth Kaback (1971) also notes that "too little time has been spent in developing a Philosophy of counseling for the adult [or graduate] student", and states that the "counseling programs in many institutions of higher education have been geared for the adolescent or undergraduate student"(Farmer, p. 90). This indicates a need for change and improvement in order to better accommodate mature student and women in particular.

Kenneth Sproull (1971) wrote that many graduate students express concern that there is often no one to turn to when they experience personal problems. And yet often they do not try to get help for fear of showing "weakness" and therefore admit that this is a factor which has influenced their academic performance. This is particularly the case for those pursuing a degree in psychology and education, where the counselor or advisor also teaches courses in which the graduate student is enrolled. He insists that a graduate student should be offered "a different educational experience including specialized student personnel services to enhance his personal growth as well as his academic progress. Therefore, although "a counselor" may be available to the graduate students on

campus, the likelihood of the student using the service is minimal unless the service is designed specifically for him or her” (Farmer, 1971, p. 90).

In addition, graduate students, especially women returning to school and the workforce after fulfilling their duties as wife and mother, are concerned mainly about job placement (p. 93). After completing their degrees, graduate students are compelled to enter the competitive job market; a job market that they may lack direct knowledge of and, more importantly, a connection to. Immigrant mature women are particularly threatened by this prospect.

These then are the issues that should drive counselors: advice, support and assistance in making appropriate career decisions. The existing literature and informal student surveys concerning counseling suggest that a better planned program of counseling services is needed to assist graduate students in successfully completing their academic graduate program (Farmer, 1971, p. 94). The major areas of concern for graduate students, beyond those of the existing academic program, i.e. their social and occupational worries and fears, would suggest that specialized counseling services should be integrated to better meet their needs.

For starters, colleges and universities offering graduate programs could:

1. Provide one or more counselors to work specifically with graduate students.
2. Provide within the counselor education program appropriate background and training for those wishing to work in the area of graduate and foreign student counseling.
3. Provide appropriate housing or housing services to meet the needs of graduate students.

4. Provide procedures within existing offices and/ or separate services to minimize red tape to accommodate the adult graduate student.
5. Provide job placement services for graduate students (1971, p. 95).

Counseling and Mature Women

Mature women, especially immigrant women, have special needs when it comes to academic counseling. Even though women are taught from an early age to embrace the role of wife and mother and all that comes with it, Elisabeth Hayes (2000) suggests that after immigrating to a new society women are "often very proactive, choosing change" (p.67). However, not being familiar with the new educational system making decision concerning the future study is not a simple task.

North American society is made up of many different cultures, and sometimes immigrant women are subjected to the expectations of more than one culture, which may produce tensions and insecurities. One of the biggest obstacles for women is their "self-doubt", experienced when studying interferes with the familial role that they've grown used to (Rice & Meyers, 1989, in Hayes 2000, p. 69). Furthermore, immigrant women tend to be less skilled in learning foreign languages. This may negatively influence a woman's perception of herself, her self-confidence and self-identity. For those women who have not been successful in previous educational settings, it is crucial to acknowledge that they possess knowledge that successful students may not possess. Hence, educators and counselors should help women become more aware of the learning they have accomplished and secured outside of formal educational settings (Flannery, 2000, p. 57).

The Quality of Academic Advising

All advising programs need to operate from and promote the assumption that learning occurs both inside and outside of the classroom; therefore, the quality of the advice is extremely important. Since the mission of any advising program is to serve the student populace, exactly *how* these students are to be served should be the main priority. Students need to have experiences that will enlighten them intellectually, taking them farther than they could have possibly gone before entering higher education. Students need to see not only the value of higher education as it relates directly to their own lives, but also understand why society as a whole needs a college-educated workforce. Two essential features should determine caseloads for advising: first, the types of students being counseled. For example, freshmen, or first-year students, who are generally less sure of themselves and undecided academically need more advising time than seniors already enrolled in major programs. Secondly, the amount of time an advisor has available for each appointment should be noted up front. Full-time faculty members with courses to teach, research to conduct, and other administrative obligations, cannot realistically handle the same-size student roster as professional, full-time advisors. Therefore, the quality and effectiveness of advising can be guaranteed in the synergism between separate mission statements, in which the goals and criteria of an advising program are made explicit, and the implementation of such a program is systematic and involves all constituents (Gordon, Habley and Associates, 2000, p. 191).

I believe that advising is predicated on the mutual responsibilities of advisor and student within the institution and on the institution's assurance that successful

advising will occur. Although advisors play a significant role, it is the student who applies the advice of the counselor and takes the appropriate steps to succeed academically.

In view of the fact that our society, economy, and technology have changed drastically, it is important to remember that the needs and quality of higher education has changed accordingly. Timely assessments and research in new and diverse areas of academic advising can help to improve the quality of service that advisors provide; which will lead to better student academic performance. It may also lead to the development of additional services that educational institutions can offer their diverse student population.

According to Creamer (2000), “Academic advising is an educational activity that depends on valid explanations of complex student behaviors and institutional conditions to assist college students in making and executing educational and life plans” (Gordon, Habley and Associates, 2000, p. 18).

Since academic advising is a form of teaching that occurs outside of the classroom there is a belief that its effectiveness depends on the sound use of multiple developmental theories about students and the educational institutions in which they study (Gordon, 2000, p. 19).

Creamer (2000) describes five widely held beliefs establishing the practical boundaries of academic advising, which are grounded in the *Statement Core Values of the National Academic Advising Association* (1994). Taken together, they express why, how, and under what circumstances academic advising is undertaken in higher education.

1. The purpose of academic advising is student learning and personal development. Promoting student learning and development is clearly not the sole purview of academic advisors. All educators share this purpose for education; advising is a responsibility shared by all members of an academic institution.

2. The art or science of teaching includes the pedagogy of academic advising. Teaching methods that employ active or collaborative learning tactics and recognize the social nature of learning are more effective than tactics that depend solely on didactic methods.

3. Academic advising provides an opportunity for the formation and implementation of educational and life plans. Advising practices within educational institutions are affected by policies and practices that shape the limits and potentialities for achieving student goals.

4. The focus of academic advising is on the whole person.

5. The content of academic advising is constructed knowledge about students' educational and life plans. Together, students and advisors construct knowledge about the students' opportunities and how they can be realized; each student devises a plan containing certain unique features, including dreams and perceptions of reality. Advisors must recognize this aspect of educational planning and incorporate such features into each student plan.

Although no particular theories of academic advising are currently available, the need for such theories is increasingly evident. While it can be concluded that advising is a developmental function and involves teaching in out-of-class settings to promote student learning and personal development, additional studies and further research is

needed to examine the association between multiple theories and the relationship between students and advisors and the goals that each hopes to achieve (Gordon, 2000).

Academic Advising Approaches

Two well-known and often used advising approaches are “The Prescriptive and Developmental Academic advising approach.”

According to Crookston (1972),

the traditional relationship between the academic advisor and the student described as prescriptive, is based on authority relationship. The advisor plays a similar role as a doctor who after making a diagnosis prescribes a patient necessary medication or gives a counsel. Thus, in this case the advisor “teaches” and the student “learns”. (12).

This method is similar to the executive authoritarian teaching approach that helps students who require step-by-step guidance.

Observing that students in the 1960s and 1970s were demanding more personalized attention in their academic planning, Crookston (1972) and O’Banion (1972) linked together theories of student development and used that link to explain advising as a form of teaching. They developed the developmental theory to facilitate a more humane relationship between advisor and student that differed from the previous paradigm: *The Prescriptive Authoritarian Model*. Crookson’s concept was based on that role that higher education played in achieving self-fulfilling lives and concluded that teaching contributed significantly to individual growth; a growth that could be evaluated. As a consequence, many institutions began to realize the importance of advising students effectively, especially during the process of enrolment. (Gordon, 2000).

As Crookston (1972) explained in his second article, the developmental academic approach had the advisor and student engage in a series of developmental tasks, successful completion of which resulted in varying degrees of learning by both parties. These developmental tasks included reaching an agreement on who takes the initiative, who takes responsibility, who supplies the knowledge and skill and how they are obtained. This method focused on helping students recognize their goals in life, as well as acquire skills and attitudes which encouraged intellectual and personal development, and helping them become successful students in a way that is exclusively theirs (*Journal of College Student Personnel*, 13).

Fielstein et al. (1992) explained how a national survey conducted by the NACADA Task force on Adult learners compared differences in traditional and nontraditional student's preferences for advising services, and their perceptions of the services. Although college and university administrators consistently highlighted academic advising as the most appropriate support service for meeting the needs of student (Polson et al.1986, Polson & Eriksen, 1988), according this survey "it was criticized for ineffective responding to the needs of college students, particularly returning nontraditional students" (Lighner, 1984, p. 5). In terms of preferences, a survey of 103 undergraduate and graduate students found that both traditional and nontraditional students rated prescriptive advising as more important and more satisfactory than developmental advising, but both groups also found the advising they received (of either kind) less satisfactory than desired (*NACADA Journal*, p. 5).

Brown and Rivas (1992), in their article argue for a developmental approach in the academic advising of ethnic minorities at two-year colleges. They identified

challenges in developmental advising, including things like cultural differences, values conflicts, and identity development, and suggested reviewing academic intervention strategies for minority students.

Several articles in the book *Approaches to teaching* by Fenstennacher and Solis (2004) propound that there is no greater reward than knowing that a teacher or academic advisor is the one who helped the student identify his or her life goals. No greater goal than knowing they have helped students acquire their skills and attitudes that promote their intellectual and personal growth, and in so doing provide the necessary direction for them to become successful in all walks of life.

Advising indecisive students, however, is not an easy task, particularly mature women immigrant students who have experienced a different education in their home countries and are not familiar with the methods and strategies of foreign institutions. They often expect great help in making decisions on their future profession and program of study. They also expect to get some kind of personal advice. Students have various beliefs and values specific to their cultural background and advisors should be aware of this and change their strategies accordingly.

Creamer (2000) defines academic advising as “a form of teaching that is both complex and puzzling, and its effectiveness depends on the sound use of multiple theories about students and educational institutions in which they study” (Gordon, Habley, p.18). Generally, this process occurs outside of the classroom. Because advising focuses on helping individuals achieve their own goals and interests, it has moral implications (Goodlad, in Gordon, 2000, p. 18). In addition, there are *three main*

characteristics that impact the effectiveness of advising. These are *availability*, *knowledge*, and the *helpfulness* of the advisor (2000, p.339).

According to McCalla-Wriggins, (2000) *In surveying college freshmen*, Alexander Astin and his colleagues discovered that one of the main reasons that students come to college is “to get a better job” (Astin, Parrot, Korn, & Sax, 1997; in Gordon & Habley, 2000, p.162) To get that better job, they need a degree. A specific degree may be required for specific jobs, but for other positions any degree may be appropriate. Having a goal as abstract as “getting a job” means that many students entering colleges and universities do not come with carefully thought-out academic and career goals. About 50 percent of students are undecided about their major and need special assistance with answering basic questions (Gordon, 1995). What are their interests, skills, values, and goals? Often these questions amount to “What careers can I pursue with a degree in X?” Therefore, there is a need to do self assessment-inventories, which is the main focus of career advisors. Referring students to other professionals, making appointments for them, and referring them to other departments can be a frustrating process. Students often refuse to take that important step and end up leaving university all together.

This trend indicates that there is a strong need to integrate these two professions with the goal of benefiting everyone involved: students, faculty, and the campus community at large. A need of multiple, diverse theories can incorporate trait factors, developmental, personality based, social learning, and economic and sociological factors into the debate (Isaacson & Brown, 1993 in Gordon, Habley & Associates, 2000).

Usually, people express their personalities through their choice of vocation. A study identified six personality classifications: realistic, investigative, artistic, social, enterprising, and conventional. In order to assess individual career preferences, *Self-Directed Search* and the *Strong Interest Inventory* are two instruments that can help to identify a student's predominant types of vocation.

Super's "life-span" approach is a developmental theory that concentrates on the differences in people's abilities, personalities, needs, values, interests, traits, and self-concepts. Since these are subject to change as a person moves through different stages of their life, they are good indicators for determining their best professional field of work. Once a theoretical framework is established, the basic elements of career and life planning, self-assessment, career exploration, reality testing, and job search need to be understood as they relate to the individual's interests (Gordon, Habley, 2000, p.164).

The developmental advising model underlines the advisor's role as someone who facilitates the student's growth throughout their educational career and personal life. The main point is to try to keep a balance between these three domains that have such an impact on the social and emotional lives students (Winston & Sandor, 1984).

In addition, Winston and Sandor (1984) found that students prefer advisors who are dedicated to building a personal relationship with their advisees. This hints to a great need to improve the quality of advising, in reference to indecisive students in particular, but perhaps more so for adult mature women who have all but lost contact with the job market and economic trends.

Additional Factors That Can Affect Advising

Another positive move forward that can affect the advising departments of universities relates to generational differences like age, race, gender and culture. According to an article (*NACADA Journal, 2005, p.26*) on generational differences, there are four types of advisors that face generational challenges: traditionalist, Boomers, Gen Xers and Millennials. Each type has a different approach and developmental relationship with students and with other colleges. For example, “traditionalists”, born between two World Wars and the Great Depression are described as conforming, logical, disciplined, and conservative; respecting history and law and order. Therefore, they prefer to stick with traditional ways of advising.

The “Baby Boomers”, the postwar generation familiar with political changes and economic and technological developments are optimistic, competitive, spiritually-oriented and driven to please others. They are also good team players and work to create a harmonious relationship. They will easily accommodate the needs and demands of both students and staff. They are very adaptable, committed to their peers and will support them in difficult times.

”Gen X” advisors are adaptable and independent, working to their own taste, and are usually not “clock-watchers”.

“Millennial” advisors are competent, goal-oriented multitaskers committed to authenticity and truth telling. As a side note to each of these categories, I should state that it has been maintained that distinctions of race, ethnicity or gender are not important (Leo, 2003). However, indecisive and nontraditional students also included student immigrants or students with LD, who often experience social and emotional issues.

Hence, the behavioral differences of these four types of academic advisors may serve to emphasize how certain attitudes toward advising affect students' success, and how they go about planning the achievement of their personal and educational goals.

The rapid expansion of computer technology has not only influenced our daily lives, it has also had a profound effect on how advisors interact with students and how administrative advising tasks are performed. Many advisors believe that technology will completely revolutionize advising, teaching and learning (Gordon, Habley and Associates, 2000; *NACADA Journals*). I am convinced that this research will help those involved in advising, either directly or indirectly. It will not only help to underline the importance of effective advising on student's lives, but also determine how it can contribute to the overall quality of the institute of higher education itself. Fundamentally, educators as well as advisors should help women students become more aware of the learning they accomplished outside of formal educational settings which can help these women positively attune themselves to the educational process (Hayes and Flannery, 2000).

Advising Multicultural Students

Although many of us have a tendency to label people according to our own culturally inherited values, cultural differences should not be confused with individual differences. Multiculturalism, as the fourth force, combines the alternatives of universalism and relativism by explaining behaviors of people from different cultures as simultaneously both similar and different. In other words, people are different only to the extent that each culture teaches different behaviors to express universal expectations (Pedersen, Draguns, Lonner, & Trimble, 2002, p. xiii).

Existing literature on culture, diversity and the understanding of multicultural populations has helped to enhance the quality of academic advising. Priest and McPhee in Gordon's handbook explained that "The study of multicultural advising and counseling has evolved into a major area that focuses on all elements of the different cultural environments in a democratic society, including: relevant theories, techniques, and practices"(Axelson, 1993; Terenzini and others, 1994; Upcraft, 1996, as cited in Gordon, Habley and Associates, 2000, p. 105).

The student population of most universities is becoming more diverse with the growing number of students from visible minorities who are enrolling in institutions of higher education throughout the United States as well as in Canada.

Academic advisors have a unique opportunity to explore with students their reasons for considering a particular area of study: "Due to lack of information, some ethnic minority students may consider a program of study that does not lead to a career that is commensurate with their college degree (Gordon, Habley, 2000, p.109).

Advisors can help students in developing a plan of action, as well as encourage students to change their academic major, if need be. However, there is a distinction between advising undergraduate and graduate ethnic minority students. While some undergraduate students may be more interested in simply graduating as soon as possible than in seriously considering their choice of academic major, graduate students usually have a greater level of maturity and a specific goal to achieve. Many graduate students face serious obstacles in their careers and often have no one else to turn to other than an academic advisor to express their frustrations. Sometimes they may even withdraw from the program before seeking help, and may regret it later.

Pederson (1994) suggests that counselors have a responsibility to reflect upon their own knowledge, attitudes, perceptions, and feelings as they relate to interacting with ethnic minorities. To acquire expertise in this area, there is a need for "functional advising". This calls for the requirement of academic advisors and counselors to have both training and practical experiences in working with students from different ethno-cultural background (Lee, 1991, in Pederson).

Arredondo and McDavis, (1992) and Sue and Sue, (1990) have each focused attention on the critical need for counselors to possess and utilize "multicultural competencies" (as cited in Gordon, 2000, p. 112). These specific competencies can be understood in the context of three major classifications: attitudes, knowledge, and skills. Sue, Arredondo, and McDavis believe that "advisors' interaction with advisees should include but is not limited to observing both the verbal and nonverbal actions of advisees. In addition, effective advisors should be knowledgeable about their advisees' racial and cultural backgrounds" (as cited in Gordon, Habley and Associates, p. 112).

Therefore, developing multicultural competency skills is perhaps the biggest challenge confronting advisors in our diverse society. One of the six recommendations mentioned by the authors is that "after the advising session, the advisee should be better informed, and in some cases more emotionally or psychologically relieved, than they were prior to being advised" (as cited in Gordon, 2000, p. 114).

Although academic advising is not seen as a caretaking profession, according to Bateson (1989) the fact remains that: "Caring for the faculty is vital to promoting their continuing growth, which in turn supports the growth and development of students....still, different administrators interpret their role in caring for other differently"

(p. 154). Caring, manifest in many forms, is essential to every life, and it is important to learn to care for another, to allow for the “need of understanding and empathy” (Bateson, p. 160). Therefore academic advisors should have regular training in caring to keep them up to date with the changing needs of a world of diversity.

Conclusion of Literature Review

After reading much material related to women as learners, as well as the academic advising of mature students, vocational counseling of students in higher education and other literature related to women students with different transformational experiences, I believe that I have gained support for my assumption that the needs of students, particularly nontraditional mature students, have changed fundamentally. Particularly in the last 25 years new advising approaches and training programs have been developed and modern educational institutions need to recognize this. In order to meet the needs of today’s students that are living in different societal and multicultural environments, it is evident that the role of academic advisors must be multidimensional. Advising is undergoing continuous changes and will continue to undergo changes as society’s development progresses. Hence, there is a need for a constant re-evaluation of the knowledge academic advisors have gained in their initial training in order to adequately inform students and help them achieve personal growth as well as succeed in realizing their academic and personal goals.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

This chapter outlines the methodology that I used for this study. First I explain why I decided to use a qualitative, naturalistic, exploratory case study for this research project. Following that, my research design and data analysis is presented, and I show how the interview questions were influenced by the literature presented in the previous chapter. And finally, I describe some of the issues and concerns that affected the study's design and its implementation.

When I returned to university to complete my higher education degree my personal needs were not satisfied by the service I obtained from academic advisors. Subsequently, I had to find information and guidance at the university by myself.

From that time on, academic advising has been an area of personal interest for me. While observing other students' struggles, I started to wonder what the source of their problems may be, and I concluded that it had to do at least partly with inefficient academic advising. This realization motivated me to learn more about the subject and discover what effective academic advising entailed. I decided to conduct research that integrated my personal experience with the experiences of other mature female students at the university and, together with the literature review, determine how to manage and maintain an effective advising strategy.

Qualitative, Exploratory Case Study Research

The findings of many researchers demonstrate that, in many circumstances, “conventional social science assumptions and quantitative methods are not sufficient [or, in some case, appropriate] to the task” (Whitt, 1991, in Creswell, 2002, p. 406).

Merriam (1988) notes that the main goal of qualitative research is in understanding rather than recognizing causes and effects of phenomena. In addition, she defines exploratory case study research as descriptive study, generating “a rich, thick” description of the phenomenon under investigation (p. 29.) Furthermore Burke Johnson and Larry Christensen (2004) have written that: “Qualitative research is the research that relies primarily on the collection of qualitative data” (p. 30).

These assurances of effectiveness inspired me to use the qualitative research method to determine whether other immigrant, female students of mature age have had the same difficulties as I’ve had. I was interested in what needs to be improved in order to help these women. According to Bogdan (1984), qualitative research includes inductive, generative, constructive, and subjective processes, which offer greater understanding of the results. The most common categories used in the interactive method are exploratory, observation, interviewing, and content analysis of human artifacts. For my study specifically, naturalistic, exploratory, life story methods of qualitative research seemed to be the best choice of method.

Methodology

While working as a teaching assistant at the department of *Applied Human Science*, I had many opportunities to speak with students who shared their life experiences with me. Using the qualitative research method, I discovered what kind of experiences others had with academic advisors, what motivated them to return to university, and what obstacles they needed to overcome. This helped me to find out what the best solutions for these problems were.

During my first semester of graduate studies, I began to ponder and plan slowly my naturalistic, exploratory research in the academic advising of female mature students. In my fourth semester in the master's program, I started to talk to my friends as well as to my student colleagues about my research idea. Some offered to participate in my research and gave their contact information. When my thesis proposal was accepted, I arranged an appointment for the interview at the convenience of each participant. Through elicitation and personal interaction I was able to obtain data for my study. While some interviews were done at the university privately in an empty classroom, others were conducted at the participant's home; one was done at my home. The interviews with the professional academic advisors were conducted in their offices. I employed a deep understanding of the impact of settings on students and professionals and the guiding advising philosophies throughout my research.

While conducting naturalistic, exploratory research my understanding of context was enhanced by information gathered through a variety of data collection methods such as telephone discussions, e-mails, formal and informal interviews, and my field notes.

After having my thesis research questionnaire approved, I was ready to schedule and conduct my personal interviews with the participants. Most of the interviews were completed during the summer, before the end of August 2006. One interview with a professional advisor was conducted at the end of spring. Due to a family emergency the second interview with the academic advisor was rescheduled for September.

Process Case Study

My study of mature women at Concordia University included seven students participants, and although I tried hard to have more academic advisors involved in my study, I was able to recruit only two professional university academic advisors.

Using my own autobiography for comparison, I was interested to find out what motivated each mature woman to return to university, what obstacles they needed to overcome and what kind of expectations they had, whether they used the services of academic advising, what they expected from it and whether they were satisfied with it, and if they had any suggestions for improvement of academic advising for women in their situation.

Taking into consideration the topic of my study, and the fact that I was familiar with the field and knew most of my participants, I decided to start with a *case study*. A case study is defined by Bogdan and Biklen (2003) as a “detailed examination of one setting, or single subject, a single depository of documents, or a particular event” (p. 258). The particular case study I employed was the “life story” which, according to Helling (1998), is the type of study where the researcher focuses on conducting extensive interviews with each person with the purpose of gaining insight into a person’s narrative (in Bogdan & Biklen, 1998, p. 56). In addition, Merriam (1998) also defines an exploratory case study as descriptive, generating “a rich, thick” description of the phenomenon under study (p. 29). In my case, seven mature women students and two professional advisors were interviewed. By asking general questions in the beginning and then eventually moving deeper into more personal data I was able to get a well-rounded sense of the interviewee.

Most of the interviews I had with student participants were scheduled in the morning, before lunchtime; sometimes I had two interviews in the same day. The interviews were recorded with the use of a simple tape recorder. After each interview, with the conversation fresh in my mind, I made some field notes about the process, environment and the participants themselves. Later, I typed this data into my personal computer. Rewriting participants' stories in the form of narratives gave me valuable information not only about their academic advising experiences, but also about how these women felt about themselves and about their situation as mature students who have returned to higher education in order to achieve their goals.

While collecting the data regarding effective academic advising practices, I discovered that there are many indecisive mature women students who are searching for advising suited to them. They needed guidance concerning what to do in their life and which area they should pursue to be happy and successful human beings. I did not want to saturate my data information, so I decided not to delve too deeply into the subject of vocational/career counseling, the same goes for problematic mature women students. I believe that conducting extensive research about career counseling is beyond the scope of this thesis and would deter me from the topic of my research.

However, an understanding of the meaning of effective academic advising and the impact of the quality of academic advising on students can act as a springboard to formulate further hypothesis, such as: "Is one particular advising approach more effective than the other when advising mature women student returning to university"? Or, "is vocational/career counseling a type of service that should be automatically offered by universities to potential mature students, especially women over 45, who are returning to

university?” Or, “can regular, updated training of professional university advisors guarantee better student satisfaction with student services?”

Research Design

Two of the most prevailing forms of data collection associated with qualitative inquiry are interviews and observation (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984).

Interviewing is defined by Bogdan (2003) as “a purposeful conversation, usually between two people, but it can involve more than that, uses the open-ended questions that allow for individual variations” (p. 94). My purpose was to gather descriptive data in the subject’s own words in order to better comprehend their interpretation of their personal experiences. I prepared my list of questions for the subjects based on topics that I wanted to explore.

This strategy ensured that I would obtain the same information from each person. But there are no predetermined responses, and the participants were free to speak their minds as they pleased. They spoke about personal experiences related to the questions asked, but the majority of them went off on tangents not related or linked directly to the question asked; something which is not an unusual occurrence in qualitative research.

In order to understand deeply women’s living experience I had to be flexible; I often had to be satisfied with collecting imprecise answers. This, of course, made it more difficult for me to write a narrative and extract from their answers the relevant information related to my topic. However this was not a problem of great concern. I often politely guided the subject back to the topic when they digressed too far. Yet as an

inexperienced qualitative researcher, I felt as if I was listening to and taping more information than needed for the study.

Each participant scheduled a specific time for the appointment. Although I had previous opportunities to get to know my participants, I began the formal interview with small talk, and then moved from questions of common ground into more personal and in-depth inquiry (De Vault, 1990; Stacey, 1988, in Bogdan, 2003). The subjects were aware ahead of time of the purpose of the interviews, and were guaranteed confidentiality. Each signed a consent form agreeing to participate in the research that we had discussed. I was intent on staying on topic and grew to be flexible and capable to adapt to the situations as the interviews progressed. I gained a sense of how the participant felt at certain times, which is an important aspect of interviewing process (Bogdan, 2003, p. 96.)

Keeping in mind that “good interviews are those in which subjects are relaxed and talk freely about their points of view” (Briggs, 1986, in 2003, p. 98), and the fact that data can be overwhelming, with words upon words that reveal the respondents’ perspectives, I tried to create an environment which was conducive to a good interview. I showed the subject that I was interested by being attentive, nodding my head, and using the appropriate facial expressions. If there was a need to clarify a certain point, I asked questions like: “What do you mean?” “Could you explain that?”, or I used paraphrasing to make sure that I understood the subject’s meaning. When it was necessary, I encouraged the participant/subject to elaborate.

During the interviews, I listened very carefully to what the subjects were saying in order to understand their point of view and how they interpreted the experiences they were relating. Good listening, I soon found out, stimulated good conversation. I

concentrated on being empathetic, expressing appropriate feelings when the subject shared the ups and downs of their lives with me. Good eye contact contributed to getting the subject to open up. I was flexible and ready to change my plan if and when situation occurred. For example, circumstances that involved unexpected family needs, bad weather, noise, or heat and humidity often interfered with the process. However, I never felt distracted or bored.

Understanding how the subject thought and felt was the goal of the interview. I also followed standardized procedures in collecting interview materials such as using the questionnaire. If during the interview the subject appeared stressed or emotional, I avoided probing them to elaborate on memories that might have hurt or humiliated them. Instead, I encouraged them to seek professional help, if necessary.

Data Collection Technique

Applying multiples investigative techniques, sources of data and collection methods confirmed the emerging findings. The techniques I refer to are interviewing, observation and field notes, narratives, as well as outside literature to support my hypothesis (i.e., that those who receive effective academic advising are more successful in achieving their personal, academic, and professional goals).

Furthermore, I collected further data from many other subjects by engaging in random discussions when the opportunity arose. This helped me to improve my knowledge in the area of advising.

Qualitative Data

Data refers to the rough materials researchers collect from study sites. Because they are the particulars that form the basis of analysis, keeping the data physically well

organized was an extremely important aspect of my study. The variety of data that I used for my study included: tape recorded interviews, transcripts of participants' narratives, observation field notes, and findings of other researchers, such as peer-reviewed journal articles. I gathered the data carefully and used them as the basis for my reflective writings. The tapes are kept safely in my office, but I also stored all the information locked on the hard drive of my computer and also saved them on locked diskettes for backup.

According to Bogdan's (2003) definition of the term, fieldnotes consist of two kinds of materials. The first is "descriptive". Here the concern is to provide a word-picture of the setting, people, actions, and conversations as observed in the study. The other is "reflective". This is the part that captures more of the observer's frame of mind, ideas, and concerns (p. 112).

My descriptive fieldnotes represent the record of what occurred in the field while the interviews were being conducted. My goal was to capture a segment of people's lives. I refer here to Bogdan (2003): "The questions serve to increase curiosity and to broaden your range of vision" (p. 113). I have created a separate file for each set of fieldnotes containing descriptions of people, objects, places and what happened in each formal interview I transcribed.

Recording the interview helped me to quote participants in detail rather than simply summarizing what they said. They are proof of what I heard, saw, experienced and thought in the course of collecting and reflecting on the data in this qualitative study. Keeping files arranged in the directory in the order they were collected made my writing

and analysis progress more smoothly. Following the instructions of Bogdan and Biklen (1998), I named the files in a way that makes them easily accessible when needed.

Most methods of analyzing qualitative data require a procedure called coding. Coding and other aspects of data analysis are more easily accomplished if the field notes consist of many paragraphs (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). Since my research data contain my own autobiography and the narratives of the nine participants, I used simple coding. My coding system contains numbers and names of files that represent for example the action (Interview #1) or topic (Chapter 2: Literature Review). This strategy helped me to organize my data into systematic classification.

When I began my research, I created a folder labeled “Thesis” which contained all the individual files according to their topics. These files included “Questions for student participants”, “Contact information” and “Fieldnotes # 1, 2, 3”.

I am the only person who knows the real names of the participants, so in order to ensure their confidentiality I labeled them by alphanumeric code indicating their nationality. I coded the interviews data according to the alphanumeric code of each participant. Furthermore, while I was writing the narratives and analyzing the stories I replaced the alphanumeric codes by pseudonyms. Consequently, I am the only one who knows which name corresponds to which alphanumeric code.

This coding helped me to find immediately any file that I wished and enabled me to construct a research table of contents with a clear description of each chapter.

Statistics and Other Quantitative Data

While conducting research, the qualitative researcher often comes across quantitative data that others have compiled (Bogdan, 2003). University libraries and other

resources keep and generate tremendous amounts of data, but for some unknown reason I was unable to obtain statistical information about the percentage of women enrolled in the university. Specifically, I searched for women who had withdrawn from their programs and later completed their degrees. Because of this lack of information the quantitative data included in my study is presented in the form of descriptive statistics representing and including only female students participants of this study. I developed my own descriptive categories (age, marital status, family support, satisfaction with academic advising) which I've included along with various figures.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Bogdan (2003) has written that, “data analysis is the process of systematically searching and arranging the interview transcripts, fieldnotes, and other materials that researcher accumulates to enable him/her to come up with findings” (p.148). Data interpretation refers to the development of ideas around the findings and relating them to the literature and the broader concerns and concepts of the researcher.

After the collection of all the data from the interviews was completed, I identified the overlapping issues that mature women face with specific reference to their expressed concerns about ineffective academic advising. According to LeCompte & Schensul, (1999) in Bogdan (2003) “Data analysis and interpretation moves the researcher from the rambling pages of description to those of products. Analysis involves working with the data, organizing them, breaking them into manageable units, coding them, synthesizing them, and searching for patterns” (p.148). Data analysis also involves explaining why the findings are important and making them understandable to the intended audience.

Before I moved to the official analysis phase after data collection I reflected upon the data and wrote additional notes, comments and ideas as they came to mind. I linked the information I had gathered to the previous literature, and formulated conclusions and recommendations for the improvement of academic advising for the mature women based on these ideas.

More precisely, I was interested specifically to determine mature women's motivation for returning to university and focused on the reaction of their families and the support they received from their families, friends and academic advisors. This led me to ponder issues of self-esteem, what women expected from academic advising, and how satisfied they were with their academic advising experiences at the university.

Despite this concentration of interest, the professional academic advisors' perspectives were very important for my data analysis as well. Their experiences, suggestions, and practical wisdom figured prominently in my data interpretation. The two perspectives (of advisor and advisee) helped me to pinpoint the problem which arises from the expectations of mature women and their actual encounters with advisors who employ specific strategies.

Merriam (1988) has noted that, "the outcome of the data analysis is influenced by the information gathered and the analysis that accompanies the whole process" (p.124). In my case, the creation of narratives was a step towards sharpening the process of data analysis. And by incorporating the knowledge from the literature review I fell upon four particular issues that I perceived as crucial to this study: (a) motivation(s) for enrolling in university, (b) obstacles faced during my own research, (c) influence of higher education

on students' self-esteem and self-confidence, (d) experiences, expectations, and satisfaction with academic advising.

As previously mentioned, the majority of interviews I conducted were sympathetic to the participants' need to express their thoughts freely. In this way I could better understand their situations from a human point of view. The questionnaire was used more as a guide, or a reminder of the importance of addressing the effectiveness of the academic advising received.

I noted that the choice of the rendezvous for the interview had an impact on the behavior of the subject. I had experienced this phenomenon before from my time working in task groups. In these groups students often mentioned in their reports how they were affected physically and emotionally by the physical environment. As I conducted the interviews, I did so with all these factors in mind "in order to stimulate critical thinking about what you see and not to be just a recording machine" (Merriam, 1988, p. 125).

My analysis of the findings was enhanced by the literature I had reviewed which focused on adult women, women as learners, the academic advising of mature students, and the counseling and advising of adult students returning to higher education (p.125). Each interview inspired me to better articulate the issues raised during our conversations. I was particularly interested in finding out more about self-esteem in women and the role that advising played in this process.

Issues and Concerns

Recruiting the participants and professionals at the university was a sensitive issue. For example, some of the students expressed the fear of being "found out" by their teachers, which indicated to me that the suggestion of having an academic advisor who is

not a teacher might be appropriate. In addition, finding professionals for the interviews proved extremely difficult. I can only assume that some advisors are afraid of being criticized for not having sufficient knowledge of personality issues, or that the philosophy they employ is not applicable to some immigrant students. It goes without saying that each individual has a unique personality which might affect the development of a relationship between the advisor and student. At any rate, I appreciated the students' participation greatly and guaranteed them confidentiality.

Time

The study was conducted at the end of the 2006 winter semester. Originally, the interviews were scheduled for June, 2006. This was convenient for the participants since the semester was over and summer vacation was still ahead of them. But an illness in my family and an impromptu journey overseas forced me to rearrange some of the scheduled interviews. The last professional interview was conducted at the beginning of September 2006.

The collected data to be analyzed was overwhelming, and I have spent the last 4 months writing and rewriting the narratives. I hope that my interpretation of the participants' experiences, based on their own words, accurately demonstrates the academic advising needs of mature women students over the age of 45.

CHAPTER 4 : NARRATIVES

This chapter is a presentation of the personal narratives from the interviews that I conducted and concluded in two sections.

Section A: Student Participants

Ines

I met Ines in one of my classes when I was an undergraduate student. Although we knew each other, I never really got the chance to talk to her about private matters. Since she lived outside of the city she was always in a hurry to go back home after class. Only later on when I was a teaching assistant did our relationship become friendlier.

At that time I was already planning the topic of my thesis and asked Ines if she would be interested in participating in my research. The quality of academic advising she obtained at a turning point in her life had been ineffectual so she agreed to my proposal and we exchanged telephone numbers. At the end of April we scheduled an appointment for the interview and it was done before summer vacation began.

We conducted the interview at the university and used an empty classroom on a floor which is usually quieter than any other floor in the building. Although the room was full of tables and chairs, we created a comfortable corner. The room didn't have much light, but that only made the atmosphere more intimate and private. We sat facing each other as we spoke.

Ines was a little nervous at the beginning, and I had to reassure her again about the guarantee of confidentiality and my ethical responsibilities. I explained to her again in

detail the topic of my thesis and the nature of the questions. After this reassurance she appeared more relaxed.

Ines is 45 years old, married, and has two children, 19 and 14 years old. Before she became a stay-at-home mother she worked part-time for many years at a local radio station. She also had work experience as a customer service representative in different places, including the local English language daily. She expressed to me that as she raised her children she felt a deep inner desire to change her life. I understood her feelings very well because they were so closely related to my own experience.

While a stay-at-home mom, in order to earn a bit of money Ines decided to offer private English lessons to young francophone children. Although the job was quite stressful, she pressed on as a language tutor for two years. The downside was that Ines could not attend to her daughter's needs while being occupied with the other children whom she tutored. Because of this she decided to stop teaching at home.

Then one day, while reading the newspaper, Ines noticed an ad from the University which offered the opportunity to obtain a certificate in Family Life Education. This seemed like just the right thing for her. She knew that it would not be easy to go back to school and reorganize her life yet again but she was determined to do so all the same.

Ines had to overcome many obstacles. First of all, her husband feared that she would neglect her duties as a housewife: "he feared he would have to change, something would have to change around the house and he's used to having a stay-at-home wife". Ines and her husband have deeply rooted traditional family values and he felt more comfortable with her as a housewife and a mother who is there to respond to the needs of

her family.

Since her husband was planning an early retirement, Ines' plan of going back to school might have led them in opposite directions. For Ines, studying and taking care of her family were both very important, and she wanted to be successful at both. Finally she succeeded in convincing her husband that this move would be good for both of them. She enrolled at the University and started slowly by taking one course at a time.

Entering the university made her more aware of the importance of knowing how to successfully manage her family life and personal time. She recalled that at the beginning of her studies even small changes in the schedule stressed her out. Although having to meet assignment deadlines was often difficult, her strong determination and willingness to finish her studies kept her going. Initially, her daughter expressed her unhappiness about Ines' absence, but Ines explained to her that she was taking only one course per semester and there was still time for bonding. One course, she explained, would not negatively affect their family life. Ines made sure that she still had time for her daughter and husband. The adjustment period was a very difficult time for her and she seemed sad as she recalled those moments. I encouraged her by reminding her that it is normal to feel guilty in that situation, but the many benefits, including her family becoming proud of her academic achievements, always eventually outweigh the costs. Predictably, with time everything became settled in Ines' house once the family realized that nothing had really changed.

Prior to enrolling in the program, Ines did try to get academic advice. She approached her appointment full of enthusiasm, but to her surprise the advisor was not very empathetic or helpful. She related her experience with her first academic advisor as

follows: “I found that the first academic advisor was not hearing what I was saying...was encouraging me to move along as quickly as possible...nothing could have scared me more.”

She felt discouraged and disappointed after this encounter but was determined to find an advisor who would help her answer her questions, and finally she did. The next advisor she met with aptly assessed her needs and was able to direct Ines to an appropriate area of study. The advisor saw Ines’ previous experience as a tool that could help her as she pursued a certificate in family life education. This counseling approach had a huge impact on Ines. She felt even more enthusiastic, in her words like a baby bird eager to take her first flight.

In response to my question about what, in her opinion, accounted for good academic advising, Ines replied: “a good advisor should have excellent listening skills, and be able to assess the needs of a particular student, while encouraging him/her to study at their own pace”. In her case, after meeting with the second advisor, Ines felt that she was on the right path. This of course had a very positive effect on her self-confidence and her drive to complete her studies.

In comparing the qualities which are necessary to be a good advisor, Ines informed me that the second advisor had extensive experience in working with people and was adept in so called “people skills”, while the first one was not. Also, with a background in psychology and education, the first advisor had worked in all kinds of environments. Hence her good advice stemmed from a combination of personal skills, experience and knowledge.

In evaluating the quality of advising, the first advisor received a very low grade from Ines: two on a scale of zero to ten. The second advisor however was graded by Ines as a nine out of ten. Because the second advisor was responsive to Ines' needs she returned for advice many times. "No matter how busy she was; this advisor was capable of engaging fully in offering her counsel". This advisor had a significant positive impact on Ines' academic success and personal satisfaction with her choice of going back to university. She was so overjoyed at the positive guidance and proud of her decision that she burst into tears. I stopped the interview at this point because her joy also brought tears to my eyes. I empathized completely with her because we shared the same feelings.

Ines recommended that those who are counseling women over 45 years of age should have extensive experience in that department in order to comprehend fully what women over 45 are going through when they re-enter school at this time of their lives. This goes double for immigrant women: "As far as women coming from other countries, certainly, some knowledge about what that entails is something that would certainly be useful." She believes that in order to help students one has to be able to relate to their personal views and needs. Regarding my personal experience with advisors, I felt that there was a lack of understanding on their part of the very complex and particular circumstances I was faced with as a mature immigrant woman.

At the beginning of her university endeavor Ines was full of anxiety. After being at home for so many years her self-confidence was very low. However she was determined to succeed and her level of self-confidence changed from zero at the beginning to a 4 on a scale of 0-5, which is how she rates it at this moment. "Every course I passed, with every paper I managed to hand in and did well at, my confidence

became greater...certainly have 90% more confidence than all those years I was staying at home”. Her words had a great effect on me, because they reminded me so much of my own experience.

Ines expressed that she now feels that her hard work is valued and recognized by her family and friends. I can relate to those feelings specifically because my husband also expressed how impressed he was by my own academic achievement.

Today Ines is in the final stages of her studies and needs only two more courses to obtain her certificate. She even plans to continue her journey and obtain a postgraduate degree: “I want to be out there in the world and doing something that I value and find important.”

Ines’ desired to work with children and earn a decent living which eventually led her to pursue a degree in higher education. At her age changing professions is not easy, and choosing a good and appropriate program of study is very important. She sees herself as involved in lifelong learning, whether in school or in the workforce or taking a class in creative arts. Ines’ achieved her goals slowly by “putting one foot in front of the other”, which differed from my personal situation because I had only two years to prove my academic success in order to continue with my studies.

While working as a volunteer at a nearby school, Ines discovered that many children have very low self-esteem. I felt her enthusiasm and love while we spoke about her desire to work with children and develop programs to help them with this problem. She expressed her desire to create some stories on self-esteem for children.

Finding a job at a mature age often poses a problem since companies are generally looking for younger and inexperienced employees. After all, inexperienced workers can

be paid lower salaries as opposed to those who have valuable life experience. Therefore, Ines suggests: “something...an internship, at least to find a place for few months where you can practice the learning you have gained from your studies ...it promotes the university.”

By offering remunerated internships to mature graduate students, especially women, the university can help them gain experience in the workforce. This would serve as a repayment for the money and time students invest in the university. It would also undoubtedly attract more mature students. In my personal case, I would have liked to have gained some experience in the area of advising, because every job I applied for asked for some kind of experience in that particular field.

Svetlana

When I worked as a teaching assistant I noticed a very special student in my group, Svetlana. Although she seemed old enough to be the mother of her peers, she was always very respectful in observing others and sharing her ideas. She offered her knowledge and experience in a way that inspired her group members to develop projects which recognized each other's strengths. In the class she always sat near the window so she had enough light due to her poor eyesight.

I approached her and explained my research to her. She was delighted to be able to share her personal experience as a mature student and her thoughts about the academic advising at the university. We scheduled an appointment in the afternoon between her class and a group meeting. I must admit that Svetlana provided a lot of details in our interview. Even though she answered all of the questions asked, she always verified if she had adequately addressed my needs.

Svetlana came to Canada from the Ukraine. Now, 54 years old, she is a full-time student, and is married with two children. Svetlana enrolled in university in order to finish the studies that she had started back in 1976. After two years of university studies, she had found out that she would eventually become legally blind. This caused her to rethink her future and she eventually felt that it would be better to drop her studies for a time. Giving priority to her family, she decided to stay home and raise her children. Eventually her children grew and became more independent, and Svetlana ended up having a lot more free time. So in 2003 she decided to finish her studies and fulfill her dream.

The unconditional love and support Svetlana received from her husband and both of her children helped her a lot when she was going through hard times at the university. In her words: “I had a great deal of support from my husband and my two children and I still have...and I think that having that support helped me to get through the hard times that we sometimes have as mature students”. The biggest obstacle for Svetlana was her eyesight. Being legally blind she had to adapt to different ways of learning.

Svetlana’s take on academic advising is that the advice differs from one advisor to another. She notes: “I think another barrier was the way that the advice I was given was handled... I find that most of the time, academic advice was not standardized...even contradicting”. Hence, even after speaking to three advisors, Svetlana was forced to find out for herself what was best for her. Svetlana found this very difficult. Her encounters reminded me of my own experience, where I had to search on my own for the program that best suited me.

The first advisor Svetlana met with was actually the chairman of the department, and he gave her excellent advice. The second advisor was quite cold, very abrupt, and the meeting was very short. The experience was quite insufficient for obtaining the necessary information.

This meeting left Svetlana feeling like she would never get any support at the university. However, even after this unsuccessful meeting, she continued to see the same advisor on a regular basis, and this helped develop a better quality relationship between them. Svetlana grew to feel at ease with the advisor, and the communication between them improved until she felt more comfortable to ask all sorts of questions; questions she was afraid to ask at the beginning. Thus, more frequent advising sessions helped in developing a friendlier relationship between advisor and advisee. This experience had a positive influence on Svetlana's attitude which also affected her studies.

Svetlana is a very self-managed learner who knows well the contents of the program. She has also developed excellent relationships with her teachers. These kinds of relationships, she feels, "opens the doors", and the teachers remain approachable. Being surrounded by younger students was also a very positive aspect of learning which helped Svetlana to develop relationships with people of all ages.

This sparked in her a desire to work with young people. More specifically, she said that she wishes to work with troubled youths and kids. Svetlana praises the *Applied Human Science* program by saying: "I am truly self-actualizing the awareness that this program has brought to my understanding of my personal self....made me feel very confident about my ability to understand, not only myself, but the people around me".

According to Svetlana the field of *Applied Human Science* is a really good area of study for women over 45. “Coming in as a legally blind student, not feeling very comfortable whether I would be able to get through my first course and getting an A+ really boosted my ego”. Svetlana has met many fellow students who have been victims of domestic violence and suffer from very low self-esteem.

Having completed the same program as her, I definitely agree with Svetlana. The *Applied Human Science* program encourages everyone’s input, even when working in groups. In comparison, in Slovakia for example, academic achievement is marked not only by knowledge but by the way the teacher perceives an individual, and success often depends on a good teacher-student relationship. It is unfortunate that at times some teachers have unethical intentions, a phenomenon which I have experienced personally. The experience left me in fear and fed the insecurity that I would not be treated fairly at university. Thankfully, the *Applied Human Science* program helped me to cast those fears away by teaching me that failure or success depends solely on my academic achievements and not on superficial relationships.

According to Svetlana, academic advising is crucial in helping students choose an appropriate field of study. An academic advisor should possess the following skills: “Communication is on the top of the list; another aspect I find is that they should be resourceful and give you information that you did not think you would even need”. Svetlana elaborates on this last point: “maybe suggesting another type of program you may not want to look at that you may not be familiar with, making the eye contact, and having a great deal of respect for the student”. Furthermore, Svetlana claims that academic advisors should take into consideration the fact that the student may not “feel

comfortable about asking some specific questions ...make them feel that they are there for them”. Svetlana believes that this kind of approach would “encourage students to come and see advisors more often if they had a good relationship with them”.

Moreover, Svetlana believes: “I have seen a lot of students making decisions on their own because they just avoided going to get the advice that they really should have gotten and I think the role of the academic advisor is extremely important in an academic setting like this”.

Often many students get tired of waiting in front of the advisors office, so according to Svetlana it would be helpful to have more advisors on staff. As a consequence, students would not have to miss classes to see an advisor. Svetlana believes that seeing the same person allows a student to feel more comfortable with the advisor, and helps in constructing a relationship with them.

In addition, Svetlana also thinks that some sort of a career-advising program would help many students: “Unfortunately, I’ve seen some students who are very close to graduating and feeling like they were totally lost, they got so far and they really did not know what they were going to do with it and actually going into a panic state”.

Svetlana sees some students as “institutionalized”, those who have become “very dependent on the atmosphere that they had at the university and are afraid to leave.” I see this as a fault of advising because no information is being provided concerning what are the job opportunities related to degrees in particular programs.

In my case, fears such as these arose in me after graduation when I tried very hard to find a job but was unable to do so. Having a master’s degree did not improve my chances of finding the job position I desired.

Svetlana continues: “An internship, after the graduation, would give students an opportunity to gain experience in what they’ve been learning, a hands-on type of experience, will give them a better understanding of what they might be doing in the future. I am talking about practical internship here. I think it would be better for the students because there are students who sometimes don’t really understand what they’re getting into”.

Bringing back these memories was a very emotional experience for Svetlana. But she expressed happiness about sharing her academic accomplishments. Before we ended our interview, she asked me with a smile “Did I answer all questions? If there is need, just call me.” I was very happy to obtain more information than I had hoped for.

Vedrana

One day while sitting in the graduate students’ lounge preparing for a presentation, I engaged in a conversation with the other students who were sitting around. The conversation moved towards working opportunities, and I mentioned that I was conducting research on the advising of women over 45. One student noticed my European accent and mentioned that she knew a woman in one of her classes who came from a similar background as mine. She gave me her contact information and, even though she is not over 45, I found her very interesting because she has the other characteristics that I encountered in my literature review.

Vedrana represents a new generation of immigrants who come from a different political system than mine. This system was developed after the fall of communism, and enables individuals to gain knowledge of different languages. In Slovakia, when I was a

student, this was impossible because an interest in foreign languages, especially English, was considered “suspicious”.

Although this younger generation of immigrants with university diplomas has excellent knowledge of English, they also have difficulties finding jobs and often have to go back to university to prove their worth. They also require good advising in order to be able to find a job that matches their educational level and personal needs.

When I called Vedrana and explained my research, she was very interested in giving an interview. So I scheduled our appointment at her apartment on a Sunday after supper—when her daughter usually went out for a walk with her grandfather.

I placed my tape-recorder in the kitchen. It was a very small and uncomfortable kitchen and the sound was bad for recording. But being familiar with the lives of immigrants, I understood and respected the circumstances and living conditions of a younger immigrant family.

Vedrana was always smiling, and she seemed very open, often laughing and joking while talking very fast. She offered me tea and biscuits, which is a European custom when greeting visitors. Her life seemed to be stressful, but she has a lot of determination and a strong will to overcome anything that would stop her from getting back into her previous professional field. She is currently at the end of her master’s program. Vedrana is very independent, quick, and knows what she wants; she will achieve it with or without the help of other professionals and she will do it as quickly as possible. She demonstrates a completely different personality and cultural value system than the women of my generation. She came to Canada after the war in former Yugoslavia.

Vedrana had a tendency to talk about a lot more than the questions I asked. My tape recorder stopped a few times during the interview and I felt uncomfortable, thinking maybe that I was appearing unprofessional. I was also in a hurry to finish the interview so that Vedrana could spend Sunday evening with her family.

Vedrana is a married woman in her late 30s and has one child. She already has a university degree from Croatia but her education is not fully recognized in Canada, so she needs to redo her master's program completely even though she has 10 years of experience in her field.

Her motivation for going back to university is due to the fact that she could not find a suitable job. "I could only work packing underwear; so I decided to go to university and *again* pursue higher education". She expressed to me her disappointment with the fact that she could not find a job in her field. Her husband was an English teacher in Croatia, and he also has to redo his university study. So both Vedrana and her husband are presently enrolled in an education program.

Vedrana works part-time, pursues her studies, and subsequently has absolutely no time for her family life. While she and her husband are at home, instead of spending time together, they are each preoccupied with working on their individual assignments. Vedrana's father came to Canada for six months to help them take care of their five-year-old daughter.

As we discussed her experiences with academic advising, Vedrana mentioned seeing an advisor whom she found to be open and very helpful in choosing her program. On another occasion she saw another advisor, but that was only for a brief moment to check and make sure that she had taken the right courses for her program

Prior to starting her program, Vedrana did seek advising, but she says: “I met supposedly my academic advisor for less than 2 minutes, he checked if my choice of courses is adequate for the first year and that was basically all I had for two years of academic advising.”

Regarding her academic achievement, Vedrana claims: “Did I feel like quality of advising impacted my success, I would say absolutely not because my dedication and drive to finish the program had nothing to do with support of the university”. In my case, I also had an inner drive to improve my chances to get a better job suitable to my educational level and work experience.

Now at the end of her studies, Vedrana has a supervisor whom she sees as a figure who has to help her with her internship. “Every single piece of initiative is on my part, there is nothing on the part of the advisor”. This is due to the fact that the advisor has many other engagements in and out of the university. Hence, the advisor has very little time to spend on counseling students. Consequently students are directed toward administrative assistants, who are themselves overloaded, and otherwise not fully qualified for academic advising. A major problem is that students do not ask any questions to obtain the information they need because they feel that nobody cares. Once again, there needs be more academic advisors on staff, as Vedrana also suggests.

Vedrana is a very energetic woman, and I had mixed feelings after our interview. I was surprised by her strong dedication to getting back into her field, and for putting her career before her family. This is hard for me to comprehend because I was raised differently and perceived my family as a priority even to the point of sacrificing my personal aspirations and needs. This case proved to me that changes are taking place in

the way women are perceiving their roles in today's society. There is a certain amount of economic pressure to gain a good salary, which can take precedence over familial commitments.

Luisa

While the school was closed for vacation I was doing some administrative work, replacing the secretary of the faculty, when Luisa came. Luisa was a full-time student in the same undergraduate program I had just completed, and one day she approached me and asked me questions regarding my future plans. She knew that I had been accepted into a master's degree program, but didn't know any details concerning the program itself. She told me she was searching for work opportunities and expressed her doubts about the "great future" that was in store for graduates. Being already 50 years old, making the right move was very important for her.

Since we had taken a counseling course that we had both really enjoyed, the possibility of working in the field of social work was always considered. There was only one problem: a BA in *Human Relations* is not applicable to that field, and more specifically, specialized courses would be needed to gain employment. I obtained the information that Luisa needed if she wished to complete the specialization in social work, but ultimately the decision making was up to Luisa.

Although she seemed to have a more reserved personality, she was always laughing and in a positive spirit every time we spoke. As we got to know each other better I asked her if she would like to participate in my research, and she gladly accepted.

Originally, our interview was scheduled for the Saturday before summer vacation in a coffee shop, but then it was rescheduled for July. It was again on a Saturday, but this time at Luisa's apartment.

It was a very hot day, over 34 degrees Celsius. Luisa's apartment was quite dark, as she kept her curtains closed. A fan was whirling at full speed, which was a bit noisy, but I managed to tune it out. I was more concerned about my tape recorder, as it hadn't been running smoothly and I had had to change the batteries.

We sat face-to-face, near each other on the sofa in the living room. There were many decorations revealing her German cultural background. Luisa offered me a cup of coffee or tea, but I asked for a glass of cold water instead.

Luisa is a 52-year-old student of German background, but she considers herself first and foremost as a Montrealer. She is a very calm woman who often smiles. She has been divorced for many years and has raised her two children as a single parent. Her children are 27 and 33 years old.

In 1996, Luisa decided to enter university after spending many years trying to please everybody around her. As a result, she herself was not receiving the recognition she deserved, which negatively affected her self-confidence. As a single mother with her children grown up, she now had the perfect opportunity to go back to school. Moreover, she didn't feel the need to ask anyone's permission. She had the freedom to organize her free time in any way that she pleased.

When I asked her what inspired her to pursue higher education, she responded: "I was just fed-up of being a secretary....one day I met somebody who is a social worker

and she told me what she did, she went back to university for three years and then to a special BSW and I said to myself, that's what I'm going to do and that's what I did."

Luisa seemed to me to be very independent, with a strong personality and a dedication to changing her life. At the same time she was also gentle, passionate, smiling, full of humor, and liked to laugh. While studying human relations helped her to learn many new skills it also introduced her to a career. And yet it was not through university advising but via information provided by a colleague from work which introduced her to this new career. Becoming a social worker was Luisa's dream, and a university degree was a way to learn new skills in order to fulfill that dream. She claims that her self esteem grew because of her university experience and she now feels that she has achieved something in her life.

Having a bachelor's degree and working towards a postgraduate degree provided Luisa with a sense of accomplishment. Her self-described level of confidence is at about 4.5 on a scale of 0-5 and is steadily increasing with the help of people like academic advisors, counselors, and friends.

At the beginning of her university studies, Luisa met an academic advisor who was very helpful by steering her in the right direction, and was always available. This advisor's friendliness and personal interest in her plight helped Luisa a lot. Concerning her advising experience at the university, Luisa says: "I used the services of an academic advisor maybe once or twice; I was lucky enough to meet somebody who works at the university as an academic advisor and became friendly with me, so, although she was not in my department, I would usually call her when I needed some help or advice."

Luisa did not need the help of the advisor in her department because her friend gave her the advice she needed. But she mentioned how her fellow students complained that they could not get in touch with an academic advisor when they needed one. And even if they did track one down, the advisor was often not in a good mood, or gave them a hard time, and students did not see the need to return for advice.

Frequently many advisors are also teachers and subsequently do not have the time to devote themselves fully to the students. As Luisa put it, “The workload of an academic advisor is already very demanding and having other obligations may hinder him/her to give good counseling service to students”.

Getting advice from a friend helped Luisa a lot, and she expressed her satisfaction with her friend’s advice as scoring a nine out of ten: “she checked the information for me and gave me appropriate guidance each time”. In contrast, Luisa recalled one occasion when she asked the help of an advisor in her department. When she asked a question that the advisor could not answer the advisor merely apologized for not knowing, instead of referring her to someone who might. “The advisor just said: I’m sorry, I think it’s this but I don’t know and sort of”. Luisa thanked her politely and never returned.

When describing what should be the qualities of an academic advisor at the university level, Luisa said:

I think that there should be advisors who are specialized in dealing with the mature and immigrant women; it should be a person with passion to help others, who can give detailed explanations, and do the research when necessary in order to well inform the student. It should be someone who is capable to develop friendly and trustful relationship; with whom student can share and disclose some personal issues that might affect their academic achievement if necessary. Someone, who is available when the student needs him/her;

Having professors serve as advisors is not an ideal solution for Luisa: “And again I wonder, the quality of the counseling that these students got because again, these professors just jumped in to help, did they have the knowledge, did they give the right information, were they up-to-date on what was going on.; I have my doubts about it”.

Luisa also told me that advisors should always be on the cutting edge of effective new techniques. Considering the fact that society is constantly changing, Luisa believes that it is important that academic advisors get regular additional or updated training. They should also be subjected to the same evaluation criteria as professors in order to ensure quality. According to Luisa, “the student population at the university is rapidly growing, so there is a need to hire additional academic advisors; presently, they do not seem to have enough counselors for all the students”.

Although she did not have success finding out about career opportunities from the department advisor, Luisa’s friend gave her the valuable information about the necessary documents she needed to apply for continuing education at McGill University. She also discussed job possibilities and showed Luisa where other students have found success. Luisa enrolled in an intensive thirteen month program to obtain a degree in social work at McGill University. After she completes the course she hopes to get, “a real, serious job”.

I feel that Luisa has the same expectation that I have. Mature students are not expecting to be led by the hand like small children, but we do expect an advisor who has shared our experiences and knows where the opportunities are. I believe that all mature students expect advisors to provide valuable information and address our concerns for the future more seriously.

Maria

Six months after I had arrived in Montreal, I was reading the dictionary and studying English on the bus on my way home from work. A young smiling woman approached me and asked me if I was studying English or Slovak. Her name was Maria. She worked in the engineering field, a field that is usually occupied by men. We shared innumerable similarities. We had emigrated from the same country, we were both married at that time, and we both had sons of the same age.

We became very good friends and supported each other, especially during the hard times. Although our lives led us in different directions, our bond remained strong.

Today Maria is 49 years old and divorced. Unfortunately, her husband did not support her or his son financially after the divorce was finalized. My husband, on the contrary, did offer financial support, so our situations differed somewhat. Since she was the only provider, Maria was dedicated to improving her skills in her profession by taking many courses. Her son's education was her top priority, so she worked excessively long hours to pay for his university degree in computer engineering.

Although she worked long hours with little to no complaint, Maria wished she could find work in a field where there was less pressure. Maria likes helping people and working with them, especially with women in similar situation to hers. As a single mother, having gone through a divorce, as well as all the courses she completed, Maria felt like she had something to offer. After her son finished university, she felt it was a good time for her to go back to school and work toward a job that would give her more of a personal sense of accomplishment.

Maria enjoys music, theater, and dance, and spends time playing in her national cultural folkloric group. Since she is involved in community cultural activities, Maria doesn't have a lot of free time. When she agreed to participate in my research she asked me to come to her home due to time restraints. One hot and sunny summer Saturday, we met for the interview. We sat down at her kitchen table under the ceiling fan because that was the coolest spot in the apartment. The kitchen was very bright and the atmosphere was very positive altogether. Outside of the kitchen window I gazed at her beautiful garden full of flowers in full bloom.

Maria was in a good mood that day, smiling and offering me her full attention even though she had to prepare for her theatre group which was scheduled after our meeting. Her little dog observed our conversation and poked his nose in from time to time to check on us and help himself to some water.

As soon as I started asking my questions, Maria's mood changed. She expressed feelings of frustration when she related the negative experiences of advising she received at the university. At one point she even stopped taking courses related to her program. She admits that she fits into the category of an "extremely indecisive" student.

Maria works all day at a computer, and although she receives a good salary she would like to work in a profession like counseling where she is in direct contact with people. This way she could help them improve their personal lives. Her desire to succeed is strong because her profession does not offer job security or financial support. She is under constant pressure to study and enhance her knowledge in areas she is not particularly interested in.

Maria's anger and disappointment has been bottled up inside. She does not understand why the advisors she met with did not help her to make the right decision in choosing a program suitable for her needs. They only suggested that she try different courses to see which one she likes best. Maria said:

I have no time to lose on taking the wrong courses or a degree just to discover that that program is not good for me; also taking courses and then not being able to get the job (as some of her friends) it is like being ripped of by university who cares only about getting money from student but not offering any help with job especially to those who are at age of around 50.

Maria is a typical student who expects effective vocational/career advising.

Maria seems to be very unhappy and frustrated with her current situation. She had a lot to say. According to Maria, someone who returns to school after so many years is entering a completely new phase of their life and needs a specific kind of help. Maria comes from a different kind of school system, and, North American schooling being completely unknown to her, expected the kind of guidance needed in her particular case. .

Even though she made the decision to change her career, Maria still had to work in the meantime, and take care of her son. She had no relatives to support her emotionally and was in need of someone who could understand her circumstances. The people she ran into at the university were, according to her, very unprofessional. "They (were) not interested in me at all, Oh my God; if I would be sitting in their position, I would do a much better job in helping others, much, much better job".

At one point Maria was given an aptitude test, but nobody analyzed the results. There was no follow-up session, so she didn't know what step to take next. Maria feels that someone should have been there to inform her about the possibilities and interpret the test results. Instead, the test ended up on the shelf at her house.

This “paper approach” was not what she needed; she needed a “human approach”. She expected the advisor to “coach” her; she wanted to develop a relationship on a professional basis. Maria stressed her need for a guide sensitive to the needs of an immigrant, mature women in an unknown school system. Hence, a personal approach by a well- informed academic advisor would have been greatly appreciated.

I feel that Maria’s is a sad case, more so because hers is not the only case. Not only did the university lose a potential student but society lost out as well; a society which could benefit from her life experience. All this happened because she did not receive the academic advising she needed. Maria did not obtain her degree, and maybe she never will.

Once again, this reminds me of my own experiences with academic advising. I had to search by myself for the right program and courses. Even today, after I’ve completed all my courses in the Master’s program, I am still left wondering whether I made a good decision because I remain unemployed.

Paula

In one of my first courses at Concordia University, I made a comment about students not shutting off their cellular phones. These phones were constantly ringing their different tunes, which I found extremely impolite. It was distracting and disrespectful to the teacher who seemed very discouraged by the constant interruptions.

So I decided to stand up and express verbally my dissatisfaction, to everyone’s surprise. In my culture, I said, it is important to respect authority, and this kind of behavior I found very unacceptable, especially at the university level.

After this frustrated outburst, one of the students, a woman, stood up and said: “I apologize to the class, but in my case, keeping a cell phone open is a matter of life and death, I need to be contacted in case of emergency.”

This was the first instance where our personalities clashed, but we kept meeting after in other classes, and we eventually started talking. I discovered that she is a very good student and when we did group work I always preferred working with her. We were very organized and worked diligently on projects together. Also, we had similar family situations, so despite our initial encounter we became the best of friends.

At the end of our certificate studies we became partners in our fieldwork project. Paula, now 45 years old, was very busy and enthusiastic during our time as co-workers. Paula is a foster mom and is completely dedicated to her children. Being adopted herself, Paula chose to foster children that no one else wanted. I admired her generosity and caring spirit.

Paula also has a learning disability. She never finished high school, something which is so contrary to my experiences in Slovakia. Someone who had never completed high school would never be able to get into university in Slovakia. I was impressed by her academic achievement despite all the problems she had faced. Paula taught me that even people with learning or other disabilities can achieve success in academia.

We met at my house for the interview, because a fire had almost destroyed her house and it was still being renovated. I can relate to her situation because we once had an oil spill and were unable to live in our house for six months.

Paula initially wanted to become a physician. But running a foster home made her want to go back to school and study education in order to set a good example for the

children she was looking after. Years before, Paula applied to a local College CEGEP to study child care but was not accepted because she did not have a high school diploma. When she saw an admissions officer at the college she was told: “Why would we want you, you did not finish high school?” These words, she said, made her cry for 24 hours straight. After this experience she felt very discouraged.

One day while reading the newspaper she saw an advertisement from the university offering university degrees to mature students who had not completed a college degree.

Paula told her husband: “You know what? I am going to go back to school.” Her husband was supportive and encouraged her. He believed in her and saw her potential. Her children also were very happy and supported her, especially during her more anxious moments. She recalled her first day of school, and how she had called her son who told her: “Put your foot in front of the other and go forward!” So she did.

Going back to school was not an easy decision for Paula. “I was called nonachiever, underachiever that I wasn’t trying, I was called stupid, I was called dumb all through high school” When her son went to school he was also diagnosed with a learning disability so she wanted to be there to support him.

Paula’s strong determination to pursue higher education was strengthened by her belief that she is capable to succeed academically, despite her disability. She refused to believe she was stupid: “I’m not. I’m intelligent, everybody always tells me I’m intelligent and the thing is I was terrified.”

We spoke about her experiences with academic advising at the university. After she enrolled, she called the mature students center and told them who she was and what

she needed from them. The center responded by saying, “You’re exactly what we’re looking for”. During the meeting with her advisor Paula was given the information about the program that she was interested in, including which courses she had to take. Later on she received a pamphlet in the mail. But that ended up on the bookshelf, because Paula could not make sense of the words or numbers and needed someone to explain what needs to be done.

When I asked if she was satisfied with the advising that she received, Paula answered: “Well, she told me basically a, b, c what I needed to do. Really telling me about courses, she told me about a program and she told me about a certificate, she said I could ...she told me exactly what to do a, b, c and d.”

This is very similar to my own experience, when I saw the advisor who just told me which courses to take and to register for, even doing the registration for me.

According to Paula, good academic advisors should possess many qualities: “I think they have to have an understanding, you’re a counselor and there has to be a positive attitude and giving support”. In addition: “As immigrant, or nonimmigrant, or whatever, I think carrying different “baggage” might be certainly disadvantaged... I think everybody has their baggage and just being female is a baggage in itself.”

People counseling women of a mature age should have an understanding of the particular issues that these women face. As Paula put it: “You are the housekeeper or the glass ceiling is happening, and you have not been able to get anywhere because of the circumstances”.

According to this outlook, an academic advisor has to be able to adapt his/her counseling approach to different kinds of students. Academic advisors must be able to

access a combination of different approaches, whether they are prescriptive, authoritative or developmental personal approaches to learning.

With her learning disability it is difficult for Paula to set goals for the future. She needs further counseling and good advice on how to deal with the obstacles she faces. An academic advisor should also be able to understand the variety of disabilities that students might have. In Paula's case, she was not advised appropriately at the beginning, and she is still wondering what she should do and what kind of services are available to her. Paula has great personality qualities and it would be a shame for her not to be able to become a counselor just because "numbers mean nothing to her". But numbers play a part in the process, and Paula is afraid of not being able to successfully complete a course in statistics.

Paula's self-esteem was boosted when she heard that she is the type of student that the university is looking for. However the advisor did not give her information on how to deal with her learning disability, and she had difficulty processing all the information provided.

The many problems that Paula had to face while going back to school as a mature student were familiar to me. My lack of adequate knowledge of English "impaired" me and negatively affected my self-esteem. I was afraid that I could not understand and not be understood properly. I encouraged Paula to search for help from other advisors, and encouraged her to continue her studies in order to reach her goals.

We were both able to get back on our feet after many drawbacks, and we both started from scratch again. Paula provided a pleasant interview; she was honest, open and

trustful. She also offered to help in case I needed additional information from her in the future.

Maja

Learning a fourth language at a mature age is not easy, and there is always room for improvement. Being a part-time student and unemployed, I searched through the student services for an editor and contacted a few people. Eventually, I chose to meet Maja, who is 45 and came to Canada from Croatia. She is a university graduate, a mother of three, and presently looking for a job.

While working together, I told Maja about my intention to do research on the academic advising of mature immigrant women. She responded very favorably and expressed her desire to participate in my project. We held our interview at her home while her children were at the community center. Maja was very open, honest, and showed her emotions. We discussed our common experiences as women immigrants with a BA degree who are struggling to find a full-time job in our profession.

Maja has a BA in sociology and is having a hard time finding a job which will allow her to support herself and her children. She also has loans to pay off. She has been receiving welfare for a few years while she continues to search for a job in her field. "In Croatia, my home country, at the time when I grew up women were looked at as being homemakers, taking care of kids". This is contrary to Slovakian society, where women's higher education was and still is very important. Women receive a high level of encouragement to pursue a university degree.

However, the family background Maja came from valued high education.

“I came here about 20 years ago with a college degree in Interior Design, spoke fluently English and German, but it was difficult to get into that field because of my language barrier; in Quebec, you need to know French and my French was very minimal, so my priority was to learn French.”

I related immediately to Maja since I also had this barrier and not having a decent knowledge of the French language means there are no good job opportunities in Quebec.

When I asked Maja what inspired her to go back to school she responded:

There were a few reasons,...every job that I worked at, I saw that I could do more and I was promoted very quickly...but, one thing really made me change my profession; when I worked as a dental assistant, I was standing up on my feet all day and when I broke my ankle, that really caused me to think about what I'm going to do next. ...that environment was also not very secure and the salary was not that great ...the work in the evening, which because of the kids was very difficult... So I was thinking maybe I should sacrifice my free time and everything and go back to school...and I just decided, well I'm getting older, if I don't do it now, I will never do it. So I think that I decided a little bit late, but I did decide to go back to university to improve my education. I had a big hope for a “great future”.

Her words reminded me of my own experience in searching for better jobs—even working as a dental assistant like her—and always having to search for another job that would be more adequate and enable me to take care of my family.

Concerning her family's reaction to her going back to school, Maja says:

My children are my family... it was very difficult for them, actually... they were pretty young and they did not understand at all that I have to study, ... take time off and if I want to have somebody to baby-sit them, not having a financial support from my ex-husband... that financial part was also very difficult, but I had to deal with.... I had to concentrate very hard and I tried to explain to them, but you cannot explain to very small children your situation, so it was a very difficult time for me.

I felt great empathy for Maja and recognized her strong determination and inner desire to change her life and her children's lives for the better. Despite the many

obstacles she still continues to believe that: “if you go to university you improve your status, your financial and social status; that presents a strong cultural beliefs and values”. Furthermore: “Every one in my family has a university degree ... I don’t have brothers and sisters, but I have cousins. So I’m the youngest one and I said, why not, if they can have, then I can have too. For me it was personal accomplishment because over the years I’ve learned a lot and I am a learner”.

I agreed with Maja and reminded her that at the beginning of her undergraduate studies she had said:

My self-confidence was about 2, maybe 1 and a half – 2 on a scale of 0-5, but as I progressed and as I discovered or re-discovered my potential and my grades being pretty high ... this has helped ... to boost my self-confidence to about 4.5 and at this point,... I have gained lots of self-confidence... it has helped me to understand the society, it has helped me in personal grow...I believe in lifelong learning, there is so much knowledge out there that you cannot stop learning. I remained in touch with intellectual work by doing proof-reading/editing jobs which elevated me from my undergraduate to the post graduate level.

I also entered university with very low self-esteem and the success I had in my studies helped to boost my confidence. Thus, university studies do help certain women to gain self worth and see themselves as capable individuals who can offer their talents to society.

Although Maja has been living in Canada for the past 20 years, she still notices negative attitudes towards her as an immigrant:

I don’t feel as an immigrant anymore, but I am reminded of being an immigrant by those who underline that, who point out at me that I am an immigrant when I go for a job interview, or when somebody ask me where I’m from or they ask just things like, what kind of name is this name, you know, right away they notice, they see I’m different, but I don’t see I’m different...I don’t even belong to the visible minority.

I understood what Maja was saying, being a mature woman and also an immigrant with a name that differs from others. It poses many problems, and we never know what people are thinking and what kind of opinion they have about our culture. In reality, we are all individuals and it is not fair to generalize to all people from a particular country. Canada has a policy against discrimination, but still sometimes people have biases towards befriending and hiring immigrants.

From the standpoint of lifelong learning, Maja's experiences demonstrate how educational opportunity in Canadian society differs from that of the old communist regime countries. Educational opportunities are offered to anybody regardless of their age or gender in Canada.

Maja continued to express her feelings about her life in Canadian society:

I want to be seen for what I'm worth, not for my name... asked where am I from... I speak five languages, in Croatia, people would be running after me to give me a job....what I found here that there is lack of recognition of experience and knowledge... and I feel that I'm trying to surpass that obstacle by education. I want to be given the same chance as everybody else, doesn't matter what I do, I want to be the best I can.

These words show how important education is for immigrants like Maja, and how much education relates to career opportunities and a desired life style for many women immigrants; especially those from a European background.

I asked Maja if a university degree will help her achieve her goal: "We are the first generation of immigrants; obviously there have been struggles...It is the way, I think there still is a lot of work to do and lack of connections, but I believe I will make my way through somehow."

This made me realize how lucky I was that my husband never stopped financially supporting my children and me. I always felt financially secure and could concentrate on my studies.

While the improvement of her financial status was one of the reasons for going back to school, matters relating to age, health and physical capability also figured in.

Because as you're getting older, you know... well you're not strong enough, you cannot do the physical work which was actually my first work, my first jobs, it was physical ...I expect with my experience and knowledge that I can find intellectual work and all this study that we do, all this sacrifice that we do, I do expect, it's kind of logical to expect to improve financially.

Listening to Maja's story, I realized that my participants had similar experiences and that we all have very much in common, being mature students returning to school later in our lives. Also, like Maja, I had to change my career because of health problems, and after all the studies I have done I still am struggling to find a job that involves more intellectual work. All the previous participants, including Maja and myself, expressed a desire for working in an environment where we can show our personal strengths and knowledge, and in return gain a feeling of accomplishment and recognition for our work by receiving a decent salary.

Maja's experience with academic advising was average when she enrolled in the undergraduate program.

At first, I saw the academic advisor for mature students, even before I attended university. Secondly, I did see her for my courses registration, I saw her ... once a month and then after that, at the end, in the last year of my study, I think I saw her once for the whole year. Because in the beginning it was more necessary for me to guide me, but I can not say I was not satisfied or I was not given what I asked, but I was not completely satisfied, I would say maybe 25% ...She was available most of the time, it was not a problem of availability...she was friendly, she tried to help but there was still something missing...the time spent with her was not very long. I needed a little bit more detailed approach, a more personal approach I

think the way, that she could guide me, give me as much information or let's say I could call her and say "ok, I need information on that, can you provide it for me?"

Like other students, Maja had to do research on her own. She was overwhelmed with responsibilities and said that she needed "somebody who's going to tell me what to do for the next step, so that I don't waste my time and everything for nothing, it's very important."

While Maja is considering enrolling in a postgraduate degree she is also searching for a good advisor and for information about a program in which she would be assured employment. She realizes that she has to plan carefully her next academic move: "I need to obtain more information about the programs and courses; I would need a good counselor to help me with that, because we don't know everything, we do need to consult somebody with better knowledge, it's very important." At this point for a mature individual, it is extremely important to make good decisions, and an academic advisor should be able to give all the necessary information. This is important for them because students in this kind of situation wonder what they should do, and which course to take in order to improve their chances of finding a good job.

Maja also feels that it would be good if universities had an academic advisor who can help immigrant students: "Someone with empathy and similar immigration experience—women from other cultures don't like to share their difficulties with stranger-advisor, with someone who has no idea what means being an immigrant."

This confirms my own thoughts that it is so important to obtain good quality advising and to keep in contact with an advisor who also shares your doubts and achievements.

Nevertheless, although Maja's experience with her academic advisor was not the best one, it did not affect her willingness to complete her studies and her hope for a better future. The interview was enjoyable; we shed tears and shared laughs. Although life is not easy, Maja remains enthusiastic and optimistic. She is, however, considering the possibility of moving to another province and enrolling at a university there.

Section B: Professional Advisors Narratives

I am involved in volunteering at the university, and as a member of NACADA, I've met a few professional academic advisors from Canadian universities and colleges. While trying to find an academic advisor to participate in my research, and trying to collect information from experienced advisors, I was surprised with the reaction of the majority of advisors at the university. Many were unwilling to allow me to conduct an interview with them.

This left me wondering about the reasons behind this decision. Some of them responded that they have to ask the permission of the department before they participate, and others just flat out refused. One director of the academic advising department explained to me that some advisors might have a fear of being criticized for not being good advisors. My intention was not to evaluate or judge the advisors, but rather to find out what is available to students and identify what needs to be improved from the point of view of both advisors and students.

Alex and Dominique, the advisors who accepted my invitation for an interview, were both from the same university. The former I knew from my experiences as a

student, and as a volunteer involved in the university activities, as well as working as a TA and administrative assistant.

Dominique I met at a seminar in Montreal that was held by NACADA, which 350 professionals attended from Canada and the United States. The seminar was about updating skills and training opportunities in advising, since it is not unusual that administrative or untrained staff offer academic counseling at most universities. North American society has changed and there are more so called “nontraditional” students enrolled in universities; academic advising has to be adapted to their specific needs.

Alex, Professional Advisor

The best place for holding an interview with professional academic advisor seemed to be at their office. I scheduled my interview early in the morning before the students started to arrive for appointments avoiding to interfere with her daily routine.

The office had beautiful large windows and was sunny with lots of light. There was a box of toys near the chair, just in case a student arrived with a child.

I was welcomed by Alex with a warm smile. She was eager to participate in the interview. I was thrilled and felt immediately comfortable with this person. If she was not able to give an answer immediately, or so she said, she was ready to do research and get back to the student within 48 hours. It was very impressive.

This advisor had a warm heart and a love for her profession. I sensed her willingness to help every mature student to reach their potential, to help in their personal growth and to answer any question that the potential student asked. In short, Alex was not just good, she was an excellent advisor. I hope to be like her, if I become an advisor before I start my pension plan.

The following thought went through my mind: if all advisors were like her, there would not be any unhappy students and the university would be able to retain all mature students (by age, not by the prerequisites to be accepted for university studies).

I left with very good feelings and a lot of information on practical experience and about advising adult students, women in particular. There was no distinction between immigrants and any other students of different multicultural backgrounds. This advisor did not see that as very important.

Once I got settled with my tape recorder, I started to ask my first question related to her perception of effective academic advising. She responded: “I think...I see myself very effective; because I try and go beyond what they are coming for; I try to look at the whole picture and give recommendations to support them; not just answer that question they came for.”

This seemed like an excellent advising approach. Knowing that mature students come to see this advisor, I asked her what was the main concerns of mature students. She confirmed what I have heard from the student participants by saying:

Mostly they are very afraid, they are very scared, think that they are doing things alone, that they are looking old, that people are going to look on them funny, they think they won't know how to learn, just feel terrified; so ...we try and let them know they won't be alone... When they realize that they are not an isolated case they feel more comfortable and then we invite them and at the same time for the orientation and workshops to help them in their learning and to support.

When discussing the special needs and issues that mature immigrant women have, Alex said:

A, special needs; ... sometimes it's just basic writing, and language, ... we recommend them a ESL, or English composition courses to help them with the writing; at the same time we recommend library research. Often they might be the first generation of immigrant women entering the university for the first time, so they don't have the knowledge to study well, so we try to help them to

give them tools either gave them the courses or to counseling and development, department that offers students services and workshops in improving reading and writing skills, taking notes and studying effectively. Many students who took those courses showed the improvements in their grades. This boosts their self-confidence. They are high energy, high in motivation they know what they want and they want to get there so we think about that together. For example, last Friday we had a full day of September fest where we invited our all-mature students to a full day of workshops, a lunch, and orientation speeches. It was a wonderful way for the people to connect with other students and to connect with other professionals from mature students and counseling and development. So some very, very high needs are there.

This advisor had a very good approach, so I wanted to know which theory she has been applying.

I don't know the approach or theory, for myself I find, I really would deliberately give them more time, 30 -60 min is often not enough time when someone is really scared, especially first generation, second language, I will be deliberately more patient more clear, more careful in my conversation and really talk about what they are here for and guide them to that, so I just find myself between the 21 y old who maybe dropped out of the College, and a 41 year old who never went past high school, my approach is different, I am very gentle, I want to be careful, friendly, a welcome approach is what helps them when they come back, and you can see they are afraid to walk in, so I invite them , have a seat, how can I help you and make them feel comfortable.

It was interesting for me to find out what kind of obstacles mature students usually face and what kind of help they can get from their advisor.

Well helping them how they could register for the right courses, if their academic goals require certain courses, for example if someone would like to go into business, they think that business is for them, maybe they are running a 'dépanneur' for some time and they want to go into business: well math is a prerequisite; so we recommend the lowest level math which is similar to grade 10 math is for people who have math anxiety, and at the same time we refer them to the math tutoring at the math help center to get all the help they can, some people think if is unattainable they close a door for some degrees, so we look if they are struggling, they hate it, are unhappy then it is a wrong program for them, so we look ok, what are you good at, what do you like, so instead, of focusing on what they cannot do, let us look on what they can do and then we recommend a course to try it, and they often come back and go I love ...we always want to help them to know that there are other options, and we get them into those options.

Regarding the personal growth, we feel like cheerleaders, motivators,...we support them 100%, and they really appreciate that; and sometimes professional counseling should be provided and we have counseling and development department, so they have a personal counseling, learning counseling, career counseling.

Alex gave me very valuable information, so I was eager to find out more from her.

Regarding the need for improvement in counseling given at the university, the advisor answered:

I think there is a lot improvement needed;...availability number one is a very important part; we have a large part-time population, a lot of students are studying after working all day, it is very difficult for them to come in for advising, every department is empty. We are here from Monday to Friday, usually from 9-5; so if they do not take time off work they are basically having a telephone or e mail advising which in some cases works, but not all the time. So, I think, that the university should expand their hours, which would mean more support stuff, we need more people to give more help, I think.

Another important quality of academic advising that is needed is, looking at what is hindering the students mostly, for example, I went to the conference in May, and it was very exciting on attention, and I found out practically every university in North America has a problem with math, students are failing math terribly because they are not prepared. At this university in their admission, they get exemption for courses they took 10 years ago; when they come to me they do not remember the work 10 years ago. Let us say, "Precalculus", so my problem is not supporting them jump forward, but reviewing what they forgot, and I think that universities needs to really look into redesigning their admissions policy and not giving a blank exemption and sending them in already a 'failure'. So I think, admission needs to address problems and departments need to address availability.

Concerning the need for additional professional training, Alex responded:

I do not think that is offered, we learn by doing, we learn by shadowing, we learn by our colleagues, we are not learning from more experienced professionals, so in terms of the university providing training, my satisfaction would be low. However, university supports professional development, so I feel very fortunate to have gone on a few conferences so that has given me a great awareness and training so overall, within the university a lot needs to be done, a lot! I have to say it is very difficult, I was lucky, I was trained in the way by my previous director talking in the 80s, and she was a master in advising, she is the one who just developed my complete interest in helping students, so if people are lucky to connect with someone with the tools, we are very fortunate.

Knowing that the university is on a tight budget, and assuming that an update in training may be costly, I asked whether the university finances training on regular basis.

Our budget does not allow professional advisors to go to the conferences, so only if they pay from their own pocket...I was fortunate to have my union to support my membership in the conference, so the union, professional union definitely supports training and they are trying to help all the professionals, so without the union, I would have no outside conferences, the university does not allow it within the budget.

With the constantly changing conditions in North American society, and new technological developments, advisors need to get constant training to gain knowledge on how to comprehend different issues that students face at colleges and universities.

Being a graduate student and searching for employment, I wondered about other students' concerns pertaining to choices of careers. Alex was familiar with this issue as well:

They ask a lot in their first appointment, about how they want degrees specifically for a well paid job, and they are looking at that focus, but then when we do kind of tie in how no degree can guarantee any job and how every degree can give you great skills, how a degree in history can still open doors in business, for example because of skills, we bring in career , a little bit of employment in our conversation, but a career counselor that we refer them to will work with the interest test to find out what is a right career for them and how to get there. But when they know what exactly they want, we can help them with courses that can support that; but we do not give them obviously the career advising.

For an advisor, it is important to be able to assess his/her own competence, so I asked Alex whether she feels that she needs to improve her personal skills; more specifically in the area of advising mature women who return to university studies and seek to obtain jobs in their chosen profession.

Alex smiled and admitted:

Definitely yes, I do not think anybody should rely on their skills, and become rusty, and that is why continuous professional development is so important so

whether it is a conference, meeting advisors from other universities, and talking about what can we do to help our students, or whether is talking to people within our university, even it is faculty or chairs, maybe it is still in my own interest in studies, I think it is definitely important and absolutely necessity for me to improve my advising, I have to keep up with the students' demands and the university requirements.

A student who seeks advising, especially a mature woman like myself, is very interested in getting information about the job market. I was interested to know whether advisors give that kind of information to the students who come to them.

I will give a little, maybe one minute talk about career in a way, very general, and let them know it is not a professional opinion, and tell them to speak about that with the career advisor; so I do refer them to counseling and development. I might give them an idea of a student who graduated in a particular field that they are interested in, let them know what they are doing as an example, and that often makes them interested and excited.

This advisor impressed me with her warm attitude, readiness to help and willingness to find a solution for any kind of student need. She seemed flexible and had a welcoming attitude, which made her a very approachable person. Alex tries to make a student feel comfortable so that she/he feels free to ask any question they have. I asked if Alex had any additional comments and suggestions regarding academic advising. "I think it is one of the most rewarding professions, if I may say that, really we are vital in making a difference, it is not just the faculty members who move a student to graduation. Without advising students would not know what to do, and so I think the two go hand in hand, it is very important."

Dominique, Professional Advisor

This interview was also done at the advisor's office, after lunch time when the department was quieter. The office had artificial lighting, was small in size, and had some

flowers and pictures on the wall. The secretary, who answered one phone call after another, seemed overwhelmed with her workload. She was cold and distant toward me. The impression that I was dealing with cold people and an unfriendly environment made me feel less enthusiastic to conduct my interview.

I got into a chair facing the advisor. She was sitting on the other side of a huge desk covered with papers; the interview started. My first question was about the kind of students that come to see her, she answered as follows:

When mature students come, they are really, really afraid, and one of the things you need to do as an advisor is calm them down and help them to not do a full course load, but they can come to university in gradual stages, maybe do one course and if that goes well, then we move to the next. One of the things I do with mature students is rather than coming directly into a degree program, I advise that they should come in as independent students; it is very helpful, it gives them a sense of whether university education is for them, do they really need it and they can explore courses in different departments and sort of guide whether they want to go into sociology, psychology, applied human sciences, arts, or maybe other field. I think they should do at least 1 year as an independent student just to get a sense of the university life before getting into a degree program.

Her answer made me wonder whether mature women have the financial means and time to explore the many courses before registering for a degree. In many cases, these students are mothers and have to fulfill many different and very demanding roles. The next question I asked was about giving career advice to students: “Well, the rule of university is that you must be a university student to be eligible for career counseling. I don’t know if career counseling at the beginning is helpful, perhaps career counseling is helpful when they get into a degree program or when they are deciding which degree they want to follow.”

Many mature women who go back to university have different motivations, and I wanted to find out about this advisor's experience in that area.

The advisor said:

They have different motivations to come back, some of them they are in a job and they are stuck and they need that piece of paper to move up the ladder, other people have always had this wish about having a degree, a university degree and so now I think have a little bit of money, a little bit of time to do it and others, there can be several reasons, very individual and personal.

Dominique's answer to the question of how often students come to visit her was: "we encourage them to come once during a semester."

The self-esteem of mature women is usually quite low when they start their studies so I wanted to know if the mature women's self-esteem grew while at university.

According to the advisor, it does, and she explained:

They are happy that they've accomplished something for once in their life, they've completed something; they also come without a university degree, just a school education. I think it boosts their self-esteem, they are very happy, especially I noticed ... The thing is some of them fail miserably because they want degrees, they take on a full course load and they aren't ready for a full course load.

Dominique believes that mature women who have a family do need constant family support "because how are you going to study with so many family obligations?" Women in their mid- to late 40s and 50s need a similar type of advising.

There are many advising approaches, and I asked Dominique what she sees as important in her profession.

Personally, I feel that academic advising is a common sense thing, you use your common sense, your gut feeling and of course, you use your head, because each individual is different and you can sit for hours in a class room, but out there in the field, things are very, very different because it is a very common sense approach and you got to deal with each case differently. But you know, essentially, to be an academic advisor, you have to have empathy and you have to be able to empathize with the person who's sitting across from you and you need

to have a good, good knowledge of the rules and regulations of the university, you have to have a good knowledge of the curriculum of the department, you need to know who to approach for what, so it has to be the academic advisor that needs to take the initiative concerning those things. And each institution is different, there are different rules and regulations and the way you approach advising at this university can be different than the way you approach advising at another university, but I think for the most part, it's a common sense approach and the advisors must keep themselves informed.

I then asked Dominique what she thinks needs to be improved and whether she has enough time for students.

I think there are some students who are very motivated to make sure they are on track and there are others who just register for courses because they have to and think they know it all and they need to see an advisor when they are in trouble, so you cannot force to go to an advisor, it has to come from the student's own, at the same time your job as an advisor is not to spoon feed students but to put them on the right track and let them do the work for themselves. I think there has to be a balance between student motivation/advisor motivation and I think helping the student to do his or her own thing and not sort of spoon feed the student, I mean this is university, how is that student going to function in the real world if you sort of force the student to do every little thing.

The advisor-student relationship is a very important part of good advising, and I wanted Dominique's opinion on that. She responded: "I don't know, I think as an advisor you can't be too-too friendly, but at the same time you can't be too rule-bound, there has to be a compromise."

I then asked her how she thought advising affected a student's academic success: I wouldn't say there is a clear difference; there are some who come to see me regularly and end up doing their own thing and doing things badly, there are some students who come to see me regularly and ask me every little question and there are some others who come once a semester, they do this and do it right. I wouldn't say that just because a student comes every second day that he or she will do better than others.

There are some programs in which students can obtain internships, so I posed the question about the idea of providing internships to mature women upon finishing their degree.

I don't think that the mandate of university is to provide guaranteed job placement with their degree; now internship? I think is helpful, for example; in some department students go into field work, but I don't think that because students will go on internship or fieldwork, that that will provide them with final interest for a career choice. It is just to have an opportunity to have an experience in the field of their studies, and to identify their passion, and to do something in that field.

After the last question, I thanked the advisor for her time and sharing her experience with me.

Advisors have many years of experience with students of all ages. This advisor seemed to be very busy and overwhelmed by the students who wished to see her. Students want to discuss not only program prerequisites, but often issues related to job availability—something which is not considered by this advisor as part of the academic advisor's job. According to Dominique, career advising professionals should deal with these types of questions.

My impression was that Dominique was conducting advising as a job. While there is no doubt that she has an excellent experience and a good knowledge, the passion, enthusiasm and excitement I noticed when interviewing the first professional was not so noticeable in the presence of this second professional.

I feel that this advisor has too many students to see and is overwhelmed by their needs; therefore she cannot offer the service that students are expecting. A mature immigrant student would likely feel uncomfortable and go searching for help somewhere else.

CHAPTER 5: FINDINGS

This study was conducted to evaluate the academic advising needs of women who returned to higher education at the age of 45 and over. I wanted to find out what it means to be an effective academic advisor for that particular group and how the quality of advising received by the participants of this study affected their success or failure in obtaining their academic degrees.

The experiences of eight women participants, including myself, were studied, compared, and analyzed. In order to improve the academic advising of mature students, students themselves were asked to give their opinion on the subject. In addition, interviews with two professional academic advisors helped in gathering information about advising approaches and the services at the university that are presently offered to mature women.

An examination of students' academic progress through their programs helped to evaluate institutional practices. Such analyses may also lead to the revision of advising policies and encourage the additional training of academic advisors. The findings from each group, students and professional advisors, are presented in two parts. The first part concentrates on the answers of the mature women, and the second on the professional advisors' points of view.

Student Participants

To begin with, at first I was interested to know who my participants were. That is shown in demographic data on student participants as summarized in Table 1 as well as in the graphic Figure 1.

Table 1
Demographic Data on Student Participants

Name	Age	Status	Kids	Family support
Ines	45	married	2	NO
Maja	45	divorced	3	NO
Myself	57	married	2	Negotiated/YES
Louisa	52	divorced	2	Independent
Maria	49	divorced	1	Independent
Vedrana	38	married	1	YES
Svetlana	54	married	2	YES
Paula	45	married	7	YES

This Figure 1 shows that of the eight participants, aged from 45 till 57, three of them (38%) were divorced, and five of them (62%) were married.

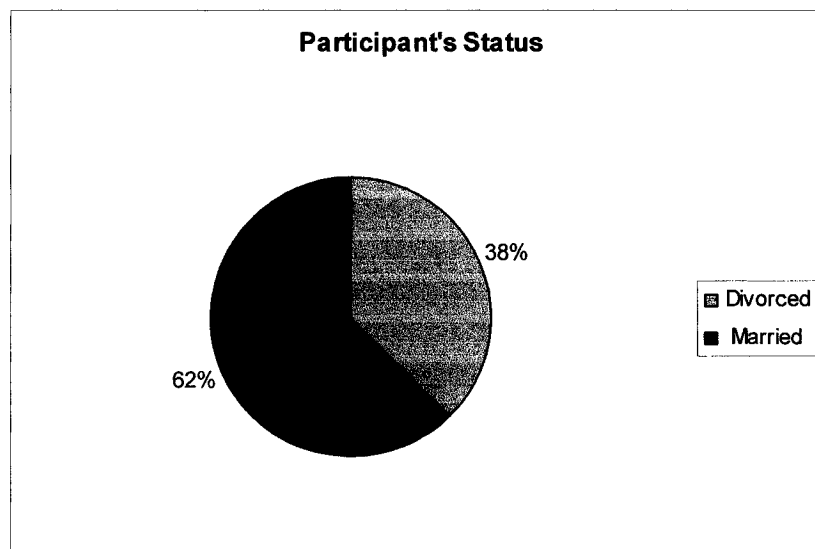


Figure 1. Participant's marital status.

To find out if marital status of the participants in my study affected in any way their decision to return to school I had to ask particular questions as seen in following paragraph and described later in the *Significance of the Findings* section of this study.

The answers given by the participants were based on the following six questions (complete interview questionnaires are included in the appendix B):

1. What motivated them to enter university?
2. What kind of problems did they face upon their entrance to university studies?
3. What specifically affected their self-esteem and self-confidence?
4. Did they use the services of academic advising at their university?
5. If yes, what did they expect from it and were they satisfied with the service provided?
6. Do they have any suggestions for improving academic advising for women in their situation?

Significance of the Findings

During the course of this research, I discovered many particular issues that affect the personal lives of women who decide to go back to school at the age of 45 and over. The most significant issues are self-esteem and self-confidence, family support and the quality of academic advising received. I tried to find out the relationship between these four issues and identify a link in order to suggest more effective academic advising techniques and strategies for women over 45. I examined each woman's motivation, obstacles faced, and their expectations from advisors; taking into consideration their suggestions for improvement, as well as the suggestions of the professional academic advisors themselves. My conclusions are based on the answers garnered from the interviews and the self-assessment evaluation. I provide explanations using Tables and Figures in the following pages.

As a final note, I will offer my recommendations for improving the academic advising of mature women who return to higher education. These improvements will be suggested in order to make advising more effective and to help students to achieve not only their academic but also their personal goals.

Interview questions and findings

Q1. What Motivated You to Enter University?

The majority of women interviewed are immigrants like myself. For many women, immigration did not bring the opportunities for personal growth and intellectual advancement that they were expecting. Instead, it represented a period of stagnation, insecurity, and isolation, which negatively affected their self-esteem and self-confidence. According to Maslow's (1978) theory of motivation and human needs, adults at a mature age are known for higher levels of creativity, enthusiasm, and generally enjoy challenges and love to achieve results. Often, mature students cultivate an inner desire for advancement and self-realization in order to reach the fulfillment of personal goals and dreams.

With the help of an interview questionnaire and self-assessment form, participants responded openly to the question of their motives for returning to higher education.

Finding 1. Some women had a desire to finish what they had started 25 years before. For others, the need to find an adequate job and to feel a sense of personal accomplishment and recognition from others was their inspiration to return to school. Mostly, I identified a longing to reach their full potential. All these mature women participants of this study wanted to change their lives for better. The women demonstrated that any personal obstacle can be overcome with hard work and help from others.

The following are examples of comments made:

Maja: Every one in my family has a university degree ... I don't have brothers and sisters, but I have cousins. ...For me it was personal accomplishment because over the years I've learned a lot and I am a learner.

Svetlana: I think my biggest motivational factor was to finish something I had started back in 1976.

Myself: Dealing with unexpected health issues, after being a chemist for 25 years I was back at the starting point to change my profession again...when I put my mind in to something, with my determination I would not quit...

The need for recognition from others was an important motivating factor.

Returning to higher education was a great opportunity for these women to gain acceptance as equal partners and contributing members of modern North American society. Their motivation for entering studies at the university is summed up as follows:

Ines: While I was staying at home, I taught French children to speak English for 2 years, but with my own children complaining about helping other children, I stopped doing it, but never stopped dreaming about doing something to help young children. Then, I saw an ad in the paper for Certificate in Family Life Education and so I thought I really felt like the ad called to me... I started that certificate program, very slowly one course at a time and I've been working my way through, and I have two classes left. I recently have thought about working with children, particularly in the area of self-esteem, something I had trouble with in my life, possibly in a school environment, as a facilitator...

Luisa: What inspired me to go back to school is, at one point in 1996, I was just fed-up of being a secretary. ...I took care of the elderly and I did some other very menial tasks until one day I met somebody who is a social worker and she told me what she did, ...I said to myself that's what I'm going to do and that's what I did...I always wanted to be a social worker and you do need to have a university degree to be a social worker.

At this stage in her life, Luisa felt that she needed a sense of accomplishment, and she believed that a university degree would help her achieve that.

Luisa: Yes, I feel like I need to do something....

Maria: I wish to change my engineering profession for less stressful... after 25 years going back to school, never mind that I came from a totally different background, not knowing anything about the system in North America...I was

excited.

Paula: Guts, because I didn't have high school diploma...

Vedrana: I couldn't find a job at a level except packing underwear...

Maja: There were few reasons, every job that I worked at, I saw that I could do more and I was promoted very quickly...but, one thing really made me change my profession; when I worked as a dental assistant, I was standing up on my feet all day and when I broke my ankle, that really caused me to think about what I'm going to do next ...that environment was also not very secure and the salary was not that great ...the work in the evening, which because of the kids was very difficult... So I was thinking maybe I should sacrifice my free time and everything and to go back to school...and I just decided, well I'm getting older, if I don't do it now, I will never do it. I think that I decided a little bit late, but I did decide to go back to university to improve my education. I had a big hope for a "great future.

Maja's words especially brought back the memory of my own experiences in searching for better jobs. I even worked as a dental assistant like her; I was always searching for a more adequate position that would enable me to take care of my family.

Maja: It's not just the question of improving the financial status, it's a question of my ability, what can I do, what I cannot do so I'm looking for something that is more intellectual, but I also have experience, and knowledge, ...all this sacrifice that we do, I do expect, it's kind of logical to expect to improve financially.

All these answers demonstrate that although each woman's motivation to return to higher education might be different, their desire to change the quality of their own life and for those around them was a common feature. At certain points in their lives, these women were willing to do anything to reach their goals.

Q2. What Kind of Problems and Obstacles Have You Faced Upon Entering University Studies?

Deciding to return to university was not an easy decision for the women who participated in my research. Many faced obstacles that they did not expect when returning to university first came into their mind.

Finding 2. Some had disabilities, others financial and social difficulties. Some received negative and nonsupportive reactions from family members. Some women even had to face additional problems and obstacles such as changing the established routine of their daily lives, namely, their relationships with their husbands and their children. Whatever obstacles these women faced, however, there was nothing to stop them.

The participants were so dedicated to achieving their goal that they overcame all of the above mentioned difficulties. They convinced their loved ones that their lives would not change dramatically, and they started university and kept going until they reached their goals.

Ines: Well, yes I had a number of obstacles, first obstacle, my relationship with my husband, there was not a lot of encouragement from him,... his fear he would have to change, something would have to change around the house and he's used to having a stay-at-home wife ...he was afraid I will be involved in school just as he would begin to think about retiring, ...I really needed to convince him it was a good thing for the both of us. The second was managing my life and my time. What I found about staying at home, the more time I had, the more time I took and the smallest things I had to do that were different were huge and in a way... any little change was stressful and made me nervous, but I would just keep going. And the children... my daughter wasn't really happy, but I pointed out to her many times that I was taking 1 course per semester ...those were really what I had to face as obstacles.

Svetlana: I was at Concordia and after spending 2 years here I found out I was going to be legally blind and I dropped my studies at the time, raised a family and decided in 2003 to come back to finish I hadn't finished back then...

Paula: I found out later on in my life because of my biological children or as I call them my main kids...learning disability that all through high school, I was called nonachiever, underachiever that I wasn't trying, I was called stupid, I was called dumb and I said: you know what? I'm not. I'm intelligent, everybody always tells me I'm intelligent and the thing is I was terrified. You think someone would have guided me, but no one, because everybody thought I was dumb and stupid so why ask her?

In my own case, a lack of proficiency in English presented a huge additional barrier which made me feel frightened and incapable of succeeding in an academic

environment. My self-esteem was almost at the bottom of the self-assessment evaluation scale from 0 to 5. To my surprise, the participants from an immigrant background did not feel as incompetent in English language as me.

The second big obstacle for me was that I could not see myself doing something else after working as a chemist for 25 years. I was already forced to change my profession a few times and going back to school meant economic uncertainty. It also demanded enormous financial and intellectual investment. In this way, entering university studies meant great sacrifices for my family and me.

The findings showed that fear and discomfort were felt by most of the participants as well. Through perseverance they continued to study at university, but there is no doubt that factors parallel to my situation had negative effects on each woman's self-esteem and self-confidence.

Q3. What Affected Your Self-Esteem and Self-Confidence?

The level of self-esteem is based on a measure of success or failure. From the participants' answers and self-assessment evaluation, there is evidence that the self-esteem of each individual can go higher or lower according to their life circumstances.

Finding 3. Having so many obstacles to overcome it was obvious that at the beginning of their university studies these women experienced anxiety and showed signs of very low self-esteem. By working hard on improving their lives and successfully achieving an academic degree, the women's self esteem improved significantly.

While the women who entered university with low self-esteem had some doubts concerning their capability to learn new skills, they eventually gained confidence and their continued academic success boosted their self-esteem. For example,

Ines: Self-esteem, its something that's close to my heart, its something that I've had to work, something that has given me a lot of trouble in my life.

When asked the following question: Has your self-esteem improved with the education you have completed at your own pace?, they responded in this way:

Ines: I think that every course I passed, my confidence became greater, with every paper I managed to hand in and do well at, my confidence became greater, so it's the experience and the actual doing that has increased my confidence and I certainly have 90% more confidence than all those years I was staying at home because it was depleted and I've gained a lot of that back...

Svetlana: Through my own experience coming in as a legally blind student, not feeling very comfortable whether I would be able to get through my first course...

Furthermore, the mature women participants, including myself, doubted that they could pursue higher education after so many years of being out of school. Neither Maria, Maja, Vedrana, nor myself had any previous educational experience in Canada.

The benefits of enrolling in university later in life are many. University study helped me make the transition from being a shy, insecure woman with low self-esteem and low self-confidence to becoming an equal partner to my husband and an equal member of Canadian society. I gained self-confidence and improved my academic knowledge and personal skills which resulted in great personal benefit, positively affecting my family and everybody around me.

In answer to my question about higher education and its effects on self-esteem and self-confidence, the participants all gave similar answers.

Ines: In the beginning of study at university was full of anxiety and doubts on my capability after being at home for so many years and my self-confidence was very low...

Svetlana: To get through my first course and getting an A+ really boosted my ego, I've had many friends, older students who've had wonderful experiences coming in with fairly not stable backgrounds due to violence or low self-esteem

and coming through this program has literally changed the way they see their lives and changed their lives through a triple-loop learning. It's amazing,...

Luisa: I think my self-esteem has improved because of university, of achieving something, it's definitely good for the self-esteem... the fact that I've achieved one degree and am working on another one, that definitely has improved my self-esteem, knowing that I'm going to be a professional social worker soon. Well, my self-confidence, probably starting out was 1 and it slowly improved and it's probably at 4.5 on 5...

For Maja, life was not easy. She was a single mother of two young children struggling to survive in a new society. She also had to deal with economic and social problems while trying to fulfill her need for recognition and find work in her field. Because of this, her self-esteem was very low before she entered university. Maja did not answer my question on self-esteem right away, but reflected for a moment then she said:

Maja: Well, at the beginning my self-confidence was about 2, maybe 1 and a half – 2, but as I progressed and as I discovered or re-discovered my potential and my grades being pretty high and being a successful student, this has helped me to boost my self-confidence to about 4 and at this point, I would say, it has remained 4-4.5 on 0-5. I have gained a lot of self-confidence.

I asked Paula the same question:

Paula: Going back to school was not an easy decision. In fact, ...I was called nonachiever, underachiever that I wasn't trying, I was called stupid, I was called dumb all through the high school....I'm not. I'm intelligent, everybody always tells me I'm intelligent and the thing is I was terrified.

Later in her life, Paula found out that she had a learning disability. But Paula's strong determination to pursue higher education was strengthened by her own conviction that she can succeed academically. Being refused entrance into a college program did not discourage her; she applied to another university and was accepted. As she recalled:

Paula: My self-esteem from crying for 24 hours, laying it on the line exactly how I felt what happened to me and her saying to me: You're what we're looking for, you're exactly what we want, it scraped me off the ceiling, I was ecstatic.

While this study proved that women who entered university with low self-esteem eventually gained confidence through university study and that their academic success

helped to boost their self-esteem, none of them mentioned if academic advising had any effect on their self-esteem. Analyzing the answers I received from these participants, I can positively declare that women's families also benefit from the knowledge they acquire while at university.

Regarding women and caring, Mary Catherine Bateson (1989) has written:

“...what is important, to think about self-care....in this society we have also become increasingly thoughtful about the question of self-care. Some of this is fashion, some of it can be dismissed as narcissism or a new way of expressing affluence, but some of it is an investment in to autonomy and in sustaining the quality of life through a longer maturity....But self-care is important for its own sake as well. It is intimately tied to self-esteem, with the implication that the one who is cherished is important and valuable for his or her own sake” (1989, p.145).

I remember my graduation ceremony, how happiness and pride illuminated the faces of my family members when I received my degree with distinction, together with an “Award” for my work and input in faculty development. At that moment, all the sacrifices I had made and difficulties I had faced seemed insignificant and a feeling of accomplishment erased all my doubts. I saw the same happiness and facial expressions on all families who were in attendance. In addition, as more people obtain university diplomas and gain valuable knowledge, all of society can likewise benefit.

Using a scale from 0 (*lowest*) to 5 (*highest*) as a measure of self-assessment, my second Figure shows how successful academic achievement in higher education affected the women's self esteem and self-confidence in a positive way.

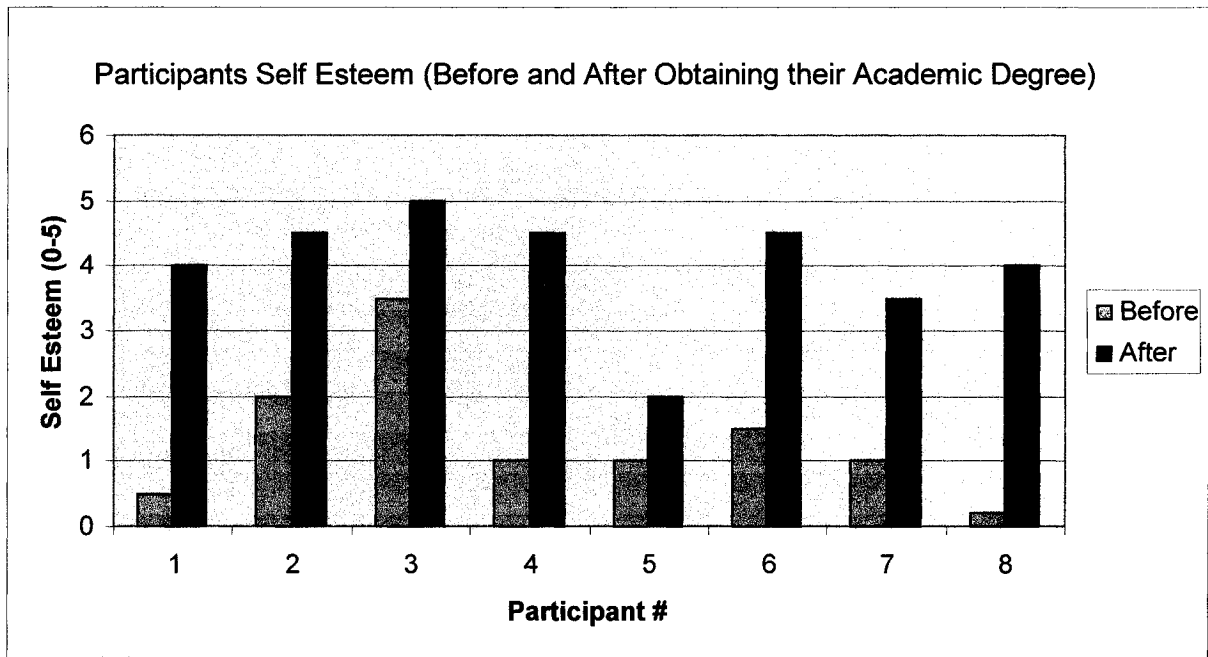


Figure 2. Self-assessment evaluation of participants' self-esteem levels before and after obtaining their academic degrees.

The name of students and their self-evaluation and changes are shown in the next

Table 2

<u>Student name & Self esteem before and after obtaining the academic degree:</u>				
1. INES	from	0.5	to	4 / on 5
2. SVETLANA	from	2	to	4.5 / on 5
3. VEDRANA	from	3.5	to	5 / on 5
4. LUISA	from	1	to	4.5 / on 5
5. MARIA	from	1	to	2 / on 5
6. PAULA	from	1.5	to	4.5 / on 5
7. MAJA	from	1	to	3.5 / on 5
8. Myself	from	0.2	to	4 / on 5

All eight participants admitted that their self-esteem and self-confidence were very low before returning to school. In some cases, it was at 0.2 out of 5, but improved with every successive grade, every successful group project, and by learning new skills

and becoming more self-aware. Good academic performance, a successful completion of study, and finally obtaining their university degree all contributed to raising the women's self-esteem and self-confidence level to 4.5 to 5 on a scale from 0 to 5. The student whose self-confidence and self-esteem rose only from 1/5 to 2/5 is the one that withdrew from the university unsatisfied with the academic advice given.

All other student participants, including myself, felt like equal partners who deserved the opportunity to share their valuable experience.

Family Support

As expected, family support played an important role in each student's university performance. While some participants did not get much family support, findings proved that a strong determination to achieve their dreams and a love for their family drove them to work harder. While taking into consideration family support, I separated my participants into three groups:

1st group = Married students with full family support

2nd group = Married students with no family support

3rd group = Divorced students, independent, did not matter

Taking into consideration only women students participants of this study demographic data showed in Table 1 (p. 119) and Figure 3 demonstrate that 25% of these women experienced a negative reaction from their husbands immediately after announcing that they wished to return to university. That changed later. Four out of five of these married students, which presents 50% of all participants involved in this study, obtained full support from their husbands and families, although some after the negotiation.

Particularly two of them known as nontraditional students; one woman has been diagnosed with LD, the other is legally blind, obtained immediate support and encouragement from their husbands. The women who were divorced (25% of participants) felt free and independent in making a decision considering their future studies.

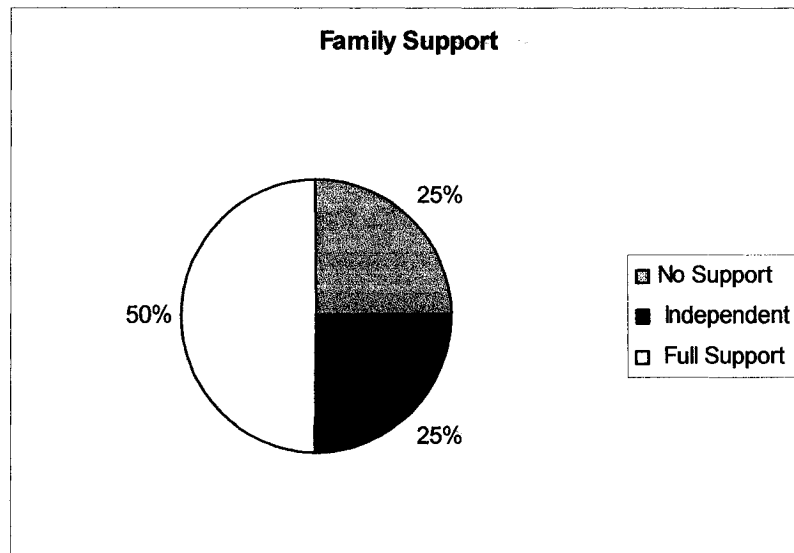


Figure 3. Family support in % for married and divorced women participants.

The first group of participants was able to discuss their university experience with their children and their husbands and obtained feedback from them on their assignments.

They felt happy and personally satisfied:

Svetlana: I had a great deal of support from my husband and my two children and I still have a great deal of support and they are very, very proud of me and I think that having that support is what helps me get through the hard times that we sometimes have as students...

Paula: My husband came home one day from work and brought the newspapers with the Concordia University's add on education for mature students...so, we talked... I worked in fostering home and was rather bored, but I looked at him and

said: you know what, I'm going to go back to school and he went: Good for you and I felt like million dollar winner...I was ecstatic..."

During the interview, Paula expressed her love and care for her children, even those who were not her biological children. On the one hand, she served as a great example of perseverance to her children, while on the other hand, she had their support which reinforced her decision to finish her degree.

A good mother is always ready to do what needs to be done for her family and is prepared for any kind of emergency. She is always rearranging her life to accommodate each family member by putting the needs of others first. As Bateson (2001) has written: "Somebody's got to be the mommy...in our society, it's usually the mother who has to be the mommy, whatever other responsibilities she may have" (p.139).

Another immigrant woman determined to work in her desired profession at any cost was Vedrana.

Vedrana: Because they were very shocked I couldn't find a job with the educational experience I had, they were supportive... However, I have no time for my family, absolutely not and by studying, I can't support myself or my family ...My partner is in the exact same situation so that's why there are no greater conflicts, because he is in front of the computer as well, all the time we're at home, so we're like strangers.

The second group, composed of married women who did not have their husbands' moral support, experienced more pressure and psychological tension. They also had to double their workload, at home and at school. The findings from this group are congruent with Edwards' (2000) study on *Connecting or Separating school*: "...others separated their school life from the family life completely, never mentioning it and some even liked having 'separate' identities as students" (p.48). In the case of Ines and myself, that meant convincing and proving to our husbands and children that their quality of life would not be negatively affected. Ines explained:

Ines: Well, my family, I had a few difficulties... my husband...not a lot of encouragement from him; his fear that he would have to change, something would have to change around the house and he's used to having a stay-at-home wife so I meant that he didn't need to do much around the house and as well he informed me that he was afraid she'd be getting involved in school just as he would begin to think about retiring, he saw me to go in to different directions and I really needed to convince him it was a good thing for the both of us ... Change was stressful, uncomfortable, having papers due, particularly made me nervous, but I would just keep going. And the children weren't really problem, but my daughter wasn't really happy, (made me feel guilty at the beginning) but I pointed out to her many times that I was taking 1 course per semester and it was not as though I was always gone here. So in the end, those were issues really that I had to face...

Her words reminded me my own experience since my husband also feared that our family life would suffer because of my returning to school. Nevertheless, being driven by the internal desire to succeed academically, all the participants' reorganized their lives and adapted to the new life circumstances with great success.

The third group was composed of divorced women who made a decision independent of family. They had to accept their life situation and deal with it on their own terms.

To the question "What was your family's reaction?" the women answered:

Luisa: My children seem to be ok with it, I mean, they don't live with me so it doesn't really matter, they have their own lives and I have mine.

Maria: I am on my own for many years, divorced for 20 years... I came from different structure, I went back to school after 25 years and I was still a working mother, I was a professional, I had a son at the end of his university studies to take care of, I have a social life different than others, I have my life completely different than other...

Regarding her family's reaction to her going back to school, Maja said:

Maja: My children are my family... it was very difficult for them, actually... they were pretty young and they did not understand at all that I have to study, ... take time off and if I want to have somebody to baby-sit them, not having a financial support from my ex-husband... that financial part was also very difficult, but I had to deal with... I had to concentrate very hard and I tried to explain to them,

but you cannot explain to very small children your situation, so it was a very difficult time for me.

Understanding her cultural background, I felt huge empathy for Maja and recognized her strong determination and inner desire to change her life and the life of her children for the better. Despite her many obstacles, Maja still continues to believe that a “university degree can help improve your financial and social status”. This underlines her strong embedded cultural values and belief system.

I was also wondering if the marital status of the participants in this study affected in any way their decision to return to higher education which is described in the following findings.

Findings 4: Marital status did not play a major role in deciding whether to return to university, but those with husbands did have to discuss their decision with them. Thus the husbands’ reaction in these circumstances *did* have an effect on the women’s psychological well being.

Experiences shared from the interviews indicate that to overcome obstacles and reach their academic and personal goals mature women students definitely needed to obtain positive support from their loved ones. Table 1 (p.119) shows which participant received the family support, how many children they have and their marital status.

The participants who noted their husbands’ or children’s concern about having to get more involved in housework and chores confirm the fact that women in the 21st^t century are still seen as the main caregivers for the entire family. Bateson (2001) has stated: “At one time, men could assume that their wives would devote their lives to caring for them and their children. Now, the problems of giving and receiving needed care force everyone to improvisation and patchwork” (p. 143).

While their family members adjusted in time, the women in the study continued to place their families' needs first. Along with previous research findings, this shows that mature women students remain caregivers while at the same time studying diligently and obtaining high grades at the university. Each woman was able to make the transition from caregiver to a self-respected, independent academic; thinking about their own needs while looking after their families at the same time.

It can be concluded that the continuation and success of their university studies was not really affected by the mature women's marital status, family situation, or the quality of academic advising received. Surprisingly, once the women had made a decision to change their lives for the better, they were ready to reorganize their life and convinced their husbands to accept their decision to enter university.

Even though the participants had many assignments to complete, they "can tell the same story of a sudden demand for caretaking surprises of every upheaval in family life". In addition, "individually we underestimate this need, and as a society we make inadequate provision for it. Women take up the slack, making the need invisible as we step in to fill it" (Bateson, 2001, p.145).

When I was a massage therapist, I also took care of my two sons. By carefully organizing my tight schedule, I accommodated everybody's needs. Another example of this ability to accommodate is Paula, who kept her cell phone opened in class. I criticized her initially, but I later understood that she always had to be on stand-by to answer the phone in case of an emergency involving her foster children. Ines and Maja also had to take care of their children during their studies.

In such difficult circumstances, I believe that these women deserved some help and support from the university. The next question explores this issue.

Q4. Did You Use The Services of Academic Advising at Their University?

The participants did in fact use academic advising services at the university and each had similar experiences as I recounted. Returning to university at the age of 51 did not allow for error in choosing the right profession. My choice of study involved a desire to work with people, preferably in an academic environment as an academic advisor, by helping them to achieve their dreams and find a good job. However I was forced to do research on my own, because I did not get the advice I needed at the university.

The female student participants were also not satisfied with the services offered to them. However, most of them continued to search independently for or with the help of other advisors and faculty members. The students expected to receive resourceful information from a professional academic advisor; the kind of information that would regard both academic and career issues. In their own words they explained their experiences with the different academic advisors:

Maria: I came back to school after 25 years. My background is a totally different... I'm going to this school expecting to get the kind of guidelines I needed in my case, not in the case of general students of North America, but as somebody who needs a special attention, who needs special direction I was hoping to obtain from the academic advisor ... I came from different structure

To the following question, Did you see an academic advisor at the beginning of your studies?, the participants said:

Ines: Yes, actually two... I did early on, and the first academic advisor I saw was not really very empathetic... I was fortunate enough to go see another academic advisor and it made a world of difference, on the one hand, I probably would have gone home and thought it was a bad idea, but this other academic advisor, she just knew what I needed and she was able to point out to me that the things I have

been doing could be of use in an academic situation and in the certificate in family life. Her help had a huge impact on me. Yes, I just went forward from there.

Luisa: When I applied to university I did seek the help of an academic advisor who was very helpful, steered me in the right direction, she was always available and she was very friendly personable and she really helped me a lot. While at university I used the services of an academic advisor maybe once or twice; I was lucky enough to meet an academic advisor and became friendly with her and so, although she was not in my department, I would usually call her when I needed some help or advice.

Svetlana: My first experience with the academic advisor was excellent, as a matter of fact. I was taking only 1 course to see how I would do and I had excellent advice from the chairman of the department at the time... later, I went to see other advisor, I find that most of the time, academic advice was not standardized: you would go see one advisor and you would be told one thing and you'd see another advisor and you'd be told something else. You kind of had to, basically, fish for yourself and find out what the true information was and sometimes you'd have to go see a 3rd one and then sort of juggle your way through...

Maja: I saw the academic advisor for mature students, even before I attended university... I saw her on an average maybe, at the beginning, once a month and then after that, in the end of my last year, I think I saw her once; the whole year...in the beginning it was more necessary to guide me...

From these statements it is clear that all the mature women interviewed for this study needed some kind of guidance from the university. Since they all had seen an academic advisor, I decided to find out what they expected initially from the advisors, and what their level of satisfaction was with the help received.

Q5. What Did You Expect From Academic Advising and Were You Satisfied With the Service Given?

Finding 5. The women participants had an expectation of receiving some kind of vocational/educational advising at the beginning of their studies. This contradicted the advisor I interviewed who referred students specifically to career advisors and didn't see this aspect as part of their job. In addition, according to one professional advisor, university policy prevents students from referencing career/educational advising unless they are enrolled in a program at the university. The students also expected to have a warmer welcome and a more sensitive

personal relationship with the advisor. They wanted to be able to discuss their private concerns or issues.

The women's expectations were quite high, since at our age we knew what we wanted and felt we had no time to waste. Again, self-assessment evaluation was used to evaluate the women's satisfaction with the quality of the advising received. They explained their expectations as follows:

Ines: I found that the first academic advisor was not hearing what I was saying; I was coming in a little worried, I was not in a hurry to take a load of courses but that's what this academic advisor was encouraging me to do, move along as quickly as possible. Nothing could have scared me more. The second academic advisor, more empathetic, did spend a great deal of time listening to what I was saying and what I needed and encouraged to go along at my own pace. That was extremely important, it made me feel as though, whatever I did, it was OK...that was what I needed to hear because I was not going to jump into school taking four classes...I never could do that...

The following responses were given to this question: So, what kind of help did you receive? Were you satisfied with the results? With your self-assessment evaluation on a scale from 0 to 10, how you can compare just the two advisors?

Ines: Well, the 1st advisor, I would say at 2. The second advisor, at 9 or 10, I've seen her a number of times and each and every time, I always got a good advice from her and she made me feel that no matter how busy she was, she was able to fully engaged in our conversation and ready to help me...even with my private matters...she was more friendly...

So she is actually a part of your success and happiness?

Ines: Yes, definitely.

Paula: I think academic advisors have to have an understanding...as a counsellor and there has to be a positive attitude and giving support and to be able to move on after that, sort of like a life-cycle when after the cocooning, there's what you are because there's maybe an emptiness, underachieving, and then you're kind of cocooning and hibernating to decide what you want to do and you're on the upside of the circle and that's a hard place to be. It's like a change, it's really hard, you don't have the experience or if you do in a meaningful job because

you're the housekeeper or the glass ceiling is happening and you haven't been able to get anywhere because of your education...

To this question: Were you satisfied with the advising service you received? they responded:

Paula: Ok, I was told about the learning, they sent me pamphlets... but it was no help at all and I explained to him, I can't do that... You must have a learning disability, I said yes, I've been trying to look at the summary, it means nothing to me. I have no linkage in my head, I have nothing... I kept trying to put it together, I couldn't do it...He was so strange, not very friendly...

Additionally to the question: What did you do then? Some said:

Paula: I heard about a mature students' center thing and I said: I think I'm going to phone. And I phoned and after 24 hours of feeling sorry for myself, she called... I said: That's it, this is what I want and she said: You're exactly what we're looking for...she told me basically a,b,c what I needed to do. Really telling me about courses, about a program and told me about a certificate, she said I could ...I got a whole pamphlet mailed to me ... I think I've been asking for that for 5 years, but I believe I had to go see them too.

Paula evaluated her advisor as follows:

Paula: She told me exactly what to do a, b, c and d ...first one was 7 on 0-10 and second 3 on 10, and the third advisor 2 on 10...then, I relied more on the help of my peer students friends...

Since I felt that the quality of academic advising affects students' academic performance, I was interested in finding out what was Paula's experience in this area. I asked her following question:

Did advising service, I mean, meetings with academic advisors influence your academic performance?

Paula: No, on the first certificate, I was on a mission of prep..., but my performance was my performance. These are my marks; it has nothing to do with advising ...

Other participants also had problems in finding a good advisor.

Maria: I had a feeling, as a person, I was not important. Their time was more important than me, and getting the help I really truly needed. It was like, ok, here she is, she has an appointment, maybe she needs some direction, but maybe, she's not really clear what she wants so why should I waste my time here... She's absolutely wrong because I came there as a mature woman, who just needed a clarification through discussion and see different possibilities.... Yet, I ran into people who were totally unprofessional, not even as academic advisor, but as a human being, because nobody asked me: Madame, what do you really need?

...

Vedrana: Actually yes, I should say yes because at the moment now I am at the end of my studies and in order to finish of course, either internship or thesis, in my case its internship, but at the end of the program, there has to be a supervisor, that is, an academic internship supervisor, that is the person we choose once we are ready to commit to either thesis or internship...but I do feel as though I am doing all the advising myself, their role is less than..., its just like figure that has to be there for my internship to be fulfilled.

How did this affect your motivation throughout your studies?

Vedrana: The academic advisor I liked was before I started the program at Concordia University,before getting into the program, before being admitted, advisors they were open, you can reach them, you can make an appointment, you can talk to them as many occasions as you needed...the day I was registered for the program, I met supposedly my academic advisor for less than 2 minutes... he checks if my choice of courses is adequate for the first year and that was basically all I had for 2 years of academic advising...If that impacted my success, I would say absolutely not because my dedication and drive to finish the program had nothing to do with support of the university would offer in that sense... approve my report, my internship report, so again my drive and motivation... Every single piece of initiative is on my part, there is nothing on the part of the advisor.

Is this because advisors are very busy (i.e., there is a problem with low availability)?

Vedrana: Yes, they don't have time...so many engagements within the university and outside the university...research, teaching, workshops, their own life...

The availability of academic advisors is directly linked to the feeling of satisfaction with the advising services provided. I wanted to find out whether the students were able to get counselling when they needed it. Luisa answered as follows:

Luisa: I really didn't need that academic advisor that much because I have my friend, but I heard from other students that the academic advisor was very hard to

get in touch with and when they did have an appointment with her... was usually not in a good mood and gave them a hard time, some people were afraid to go see an advisor. I mean, maybe with teaching they are overworked...so maybe this person just had too much to do and didn't have the time to devote to the students.

In Luisa's case, the academic advisor who she befriended seemed to be exactly what she needed. She explained her reaction as follows:

Luisa: I did see the academic advisor in my department a few times, but, I don't know, I have to say I didn't find that helpful, I was confused when I left her office... I don't think academic advising helped me that much, overcoming my issues or going back to school, I didn't feel comfortable, not with the person in my department, with my friend, yes, but, you know, that's an interesting point, maybe they should have people who are more specialized in dealing with mature students, because this person had seemed to be not necessarily sensitive to that.

The following are responses to the questions listed:

On a scale of 0 to 10, to what extent were you satisfied with your advisor?

Luisa: Well, with my friend, the academic advisor, I'm very satisfied, 9, she was definitely a 9. She knew a lot, you know, she knew a lot, even though she wasn't in my department, she checked things and confirmed things for me so she was definitely very knowledgeable where as the person in my department, I remember there was one time I asked her something and she didn't seem to know the answer to it.

Did she refer you to somebody else or simply let it go?

Luisa: She did not refer me, she just said, I'm sorry, I think it's this but I don't know and sort of; Thank you very much, Have a nice day, so I left.

It seems to me that you were lucky because you had your friend who was there for you anytime you needed some information or help...

Luisa: Yes, that is exactly what happens...not all students are lucky in getting appropriate information at university...it causes unnecessary frustration...

When Maria talked about her expectations and experiences with academic advising, her facial expression indicated great frustration and disappointment:

Maria: I thought that they will ask me: What do you really like or show me something, some interest as a human being or show me: Oh, Madame, you have

these possibilities, or can you do that? Show some more interest about who I am and what my needs are, that was ZERO, ZERO interest. Absolutely zero interest. And I can tell you when I watched them, I found myself thinking: Oh my god, if I would be sitting in their position...I would do much better job of doing it than they did and that discouraged me absolutely..... In reality, nothing was done, there was no follow-up. I expected a follow-up, ... I needed somebody who can sit down with me, you know...To get more clarity where you want to be. I expected this,... I needed much more personal approach than just paper-approach... where I wanted to go. The courses, I can find it myself, I don't need academic advisor to tell me there are these courses and there is... now on the internet you can do everything...I needed an academic advisor who is like your coach, with whom you can disclose your personal situation and find solution...

You mean to develop some kind of more personal relationship?

Maria: Exactly, absolutely, and especially, this is very important, for people like in my case who go to school 25 years later, who are from different background... immigrants, who come from different structure. These people need extra help, we are not like American people; they've been brought up in this system, we were not, we don't know their system and because we don't receive this help, this is for us a big blockage and I feel the academic advisors don't have a sense of interest in these special circumstances...maybe even not fully informed and knowledgeable in this area...

On a scale from 0 to 10, to what extent were you satisfied with your advisor?

Maria: Even one is high...

Being completely disappointed with the quality of service obtained at the university, Maria stopped taking courses and withdrew from the program.

Concerning Svetlana's own expectations and experiences with academic advising, she responded:

Svetlana: I expected the advisor to have excellent communication skills...someone that is very resourceful and will give you information that perhaps you didn't think you would even need. In the form of guidance, maybe suggesting another type of program you may want to look at and that you may not be familiar with, making eye contact and having a great deal of respect for the student and understanding that the student might be in a position where they are not feeling very comfortable about asking specific questions and being aware of this and making them feel that they are there for them I think is very, very important, it would encourage students to come and see the advisors more often if

they had a good relationship with them. I've seen a lot of students making decisions on their own because they just avoided going to get the advice...

Do you feel that the number of available academic advisors is not sufficient and cause time restrictions for counselling and that their availability to the student is compromised?

Svetlana: I think it would be helpful if we could have more academic advisors, there have been times where I have seen students wait in line and give up, there's always these crunch times where we absolutely need to see them and sometimes we have to get to our classes. If we had academic advisors that were there on a steady basis, I think it would be an opportunity for students to build better relationships and it would make them feel more comfortable. I know we have open-house days but it is not the same when you're seeing different advisor every time you go for advice, sometimes it does get very confusing...

On a scale from 0 to 10, to what extent were you satisfied with your advisor? You mentioned that you went to see three different advisors?

Svetlana: If I will grade the quality and knowledge I would say, the first one was 10 on 10, the second was 2.5 on 10, and the third advisor was 5 on 10.

Pertaining to Maja's level of satisfaction with academic advising, she told me:

Maja: Actually, I went to see two advisors, one at the beginning and then later during my studies I saw the other one....I would say, the first one, 5 on 10, the second was only 2.5 on 10. In my case it was not the question of availability, it was more the quality and her knowledge that was limited, I felt that way... I can not say I was not satisfied or I was not given what I asked, but I was not completely satisfied, I would say maybe 25% of what I needed I was given... it was not a problem of availability... it was good, she was friendly, she tried to help but there was still something missing, it was not complete, the time spent with her was short, I needed more, I think, I needed a little bit more detailed approach, a more personal approach that she could guide me, it was like, there was no contact there, no interaction, it was like I go to depanneur when I need milk...you go there, you buy milk and then come home and that's it, it was not very organized in my opinion.

To my question on satisfaction with the academic counsellor Maja continued:

Maja: It was good...but again, maybe it's a question of her own limitations, what she knows, what she doesn't. I did search for the help... I always want to consult somebody, I'm not going to decide by myself especially if its something I don't

know and this involves lots of sacrifice, studies, you know, you must sacrifice financially, emotionally, psychologically, intellectually, so for me, it was very important that for every step to have somebody who's going to tell me what to do for the next step, so that I don't waste my time and everything for nothing, it's very important.

Did the quality of the academic advising you received affect your academic performance or personal life?

Maja: Not really, it was me and my children who sacrificed, it was my performance... satisfied or not I was determine to complete my academic degree...

The effect of academic advising on the academic success of mature students and whether or not it influences students' satisfaction with their program of study and personal accomplishment interested me even before I started this research. My suspicions that there is a direct correlation between the quality of advising and academic success seem to have been at least partly confirmed.

Table 3 and Figure 4 on the next page demonstrate the level of each student's satisfaction with the quality of advising that they obtained prior to their studies at the university. Zero (0) means total dissatisfaction and 10 represents maximum satisfaction from the beginning of their studies until graduation. Table 3 and Figure 4 also show that some students saw more than one academic advisor. All participants went to see their first academic advisor prior to their registration at the university and continued to search for answers to clarify their questions. They saw advisors either from the admissions office, or the chair of the department, a faculty member, or someone from another department.

Table 3

Number of Times Visiting Advisors

Student	Advisor 1st	2nd	3 rd
INES	2 / 10	9 / 10	-
SVETLANA	10 / 10	2.5 / 10	5 / 10
VEDRANA	5 / 10	3 / 10	-
LUISA	4 / 10	10 / 10	-
MARIA	1 / 10	1 / 10	-
PAULA	7 / 10	3 / 10	2 / 10
MAJA	5 / 10	2.5 / 10	-
MYSELF	2 / 10	3 / 10	7 / 10

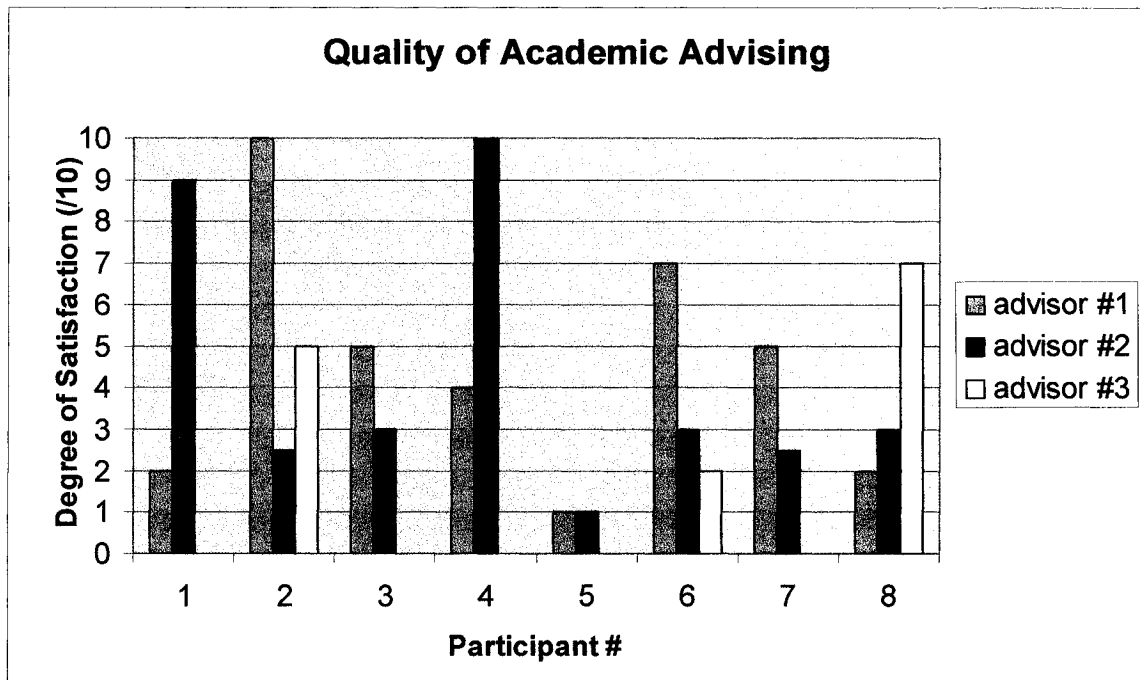


Figure 4. Self assessment evaluation of quality of academic advising received by students from 1st, 2nd, or 3rd advisor (using the scale from 0 [low] to 10 [high] quality).

The findings show that although the quality of academic advising from the students' point of view was not always high, it did not affect the mature women's desires to obtain university degrees. Neither did it affect their academic performance. The only exception was Maria, who wanted to change her profession. Maria had two friends from the same program who were still looking for a full-time job, so she was not sure that she would find a job after completing her university studies. Guidance from an academic advisor at university of her choice was extremely important for Maria.

The majority of students, however, were not discouraged by their first negative experience with advising. This is contrary to my initial hypothesis that low quality academic advising affects women's academic success and might cause their withdrawal from their program of study. In reality, inefficient academic advising may cause some women students to enrol in the wrong program, but they did not ultimately leave their university studies because of poor advising.

Figure 5 shows that out of eight students, seven eventually obtained their bachelor's degree. Therefore, 87% of them were not discouraged by any obstacles. Their determination was stronger than the obstacles they needed to surmount, and the new skills that they learned helped them to organize their time better and cope with the many difficulties. Only one student withdrew from her program. She is divorced, but, according to her, she left due to her disappointment with the academic advice given to her in the first year of her study at the university, and not because of her divorce.

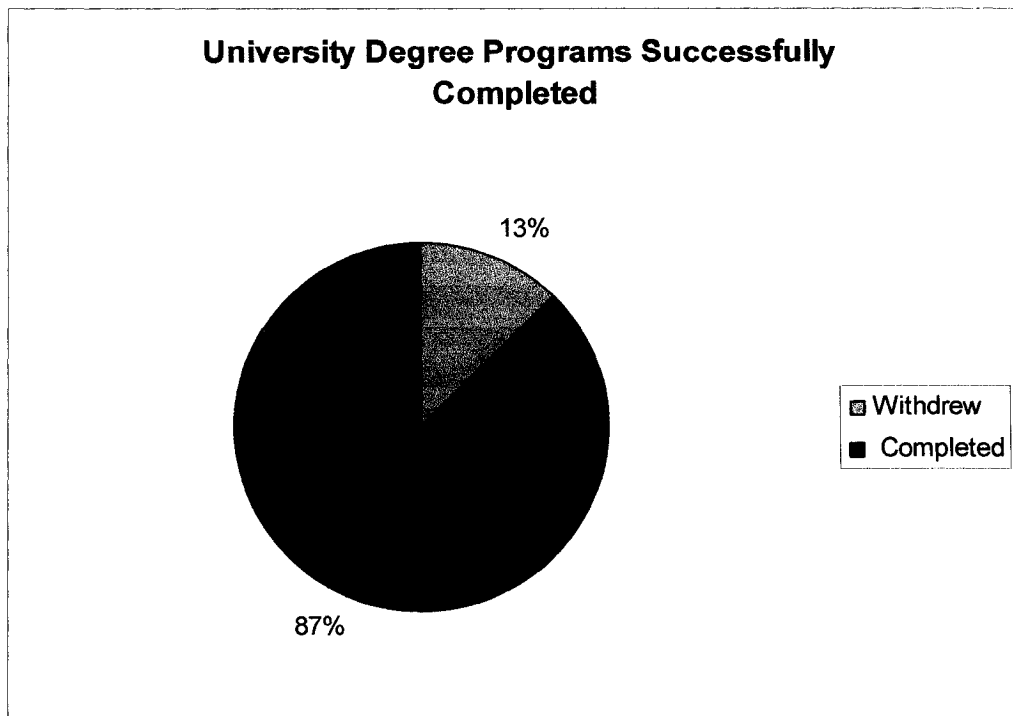


Figure 5. Evaluation of successfully completed university program.

In many cases, there is a discrepancy between the needs and expectations of mature women students and the advice given. Almost all the student participants wanted to make sure that they were registered in the right program in order to find employment in the field that they wanted to work in. For example, Maria feared that she would end up giving up her present job for total uncertainty, and would be much worse off after finishing her degree.

Thus it is crucial that mature women are given the appropriate advice. Furthermore, it is definitely advantageous for the university to keep mature students enrolled. It is important to investigate mature women's suggestions for improvement in the quality of academic advising specifically for their needs.

Q6. Do You Have Any Suggestions for Improvement in the Quality of Academic Advising for Women in your Situation?

From the students' point of view, the main dissatisfaction with academic advising was linked to the absence of proper career advising. The advisors themselves mentioned that they always refer students to career advisors, who in turn have no knowledge about courses and programs. This results in an incomplete advising experience. Mature women must compete against the younger generation in finding a job, and if they are in the wrong program and unable to find a job because of this, they may suffer negative psychological effects.

Students' Suggestions

The following is a list of questions and the responses to those questions:

Do you see any need for an improvement in the academic advising of mature women, and more particularly, of immigrant women?

Ines: The first thing that comes to mind is the young age of the admission or the academic advisor. I certainly think it's helpful to have women of a certain age, at least 35, I think it must be quite challenging for a very young person with limited life experience to be able to comprehend what it is a lot of women over 45 are going through when going back to school. As far as women coming from other countries, certainly, some knowledge about what that entails is something that would certainly be useful. I believe that your ability to help someone has a great deal to do with how well you can relate to what they are saying and to what their needs are...

Luisa: I think they should probably have people that are more specialized to deal with mature women and immigrant women, somebody's who's very patient and really explains things thoroughly...somebody who's going to do the research and get back to that person and take the time with the person....

Did you discuss your future career with your advisor?

Luisa: I discussed it with the one in my department and she said 'well I don't know if that's a good idea, anyway', but thank God I didn't listen to her, but I

discussed it with my friend and she was very supportive... she helped me to make sure everything was on track.

It seems that you Luisa, you were lucky, because you had your friend...

Svetlana: I think any type of extra resource that an academic advisor can apply to, meeting the needs of the student would be a huge plus..... I think that a lot of us come in and we're not quite aware of what is available to us. I've seen a lot of students take the degrees and not even know what type of work they might want to do or how they're going to apply this...there is this gap or misunderstanding somewhere...someone having a great deal of respect for the student and understanding that the student might be in a position where they are not feeling very comfortable about asking specific questions...and making them feel that they are there for them I think is very, very important, it would encourage students to come and see the advisors more often if they had a good relationship with them...

I asked if advisors need to constantly update their training in an ever changing modern society.

Luisa: I think it's important that academic advisors update, get additional training, because a lot of them have been doing the same job for maybe 30 years and during those years things changed and I wonder if they do get additional training because as I've told you, one in particular didn't seem to have all the answers to some of the questions I asked her and I wonder whether she was updating her information on a regular basis. I think it's important that they get sensitivity training, training on new developments and that they're up-to-date on what's going on.

What is your opinion about the availability of advisors; is improvement needed?

Luisa: Yes, that's a good point and now that reminds me that in my department there were times of the year where some of the professors were actually doing academic advising because the academic advisor didn't have enough time to see everybody, there were too many students at the time, so teachers were helping. And again I wonder, the quality of the counselling that these students got...there is a definite need to hire some additional academic advisors, they don't seem to have enough advisors for all the students.

Svetlana: I think it would be helpful if we could have more academic advisors, there have been times where I have seen students wait in line and give up, there are always... times where we absolutely need to see them and sometimes we have to get to our classes. If we had academic advisors that were there on a steady basis, I think it would be an opportunity for students to build better relationships and it would make them feel more comfortable...

Vedrana: It would be more human if that kind of community would exist, in our program, all students are more directed toward the administrative assistant of the program and that's an enormous burden on the person and on the students because you don't want to ask all the questions that you have because you know that it will really make the life of the administrative assistant more difficult so you're withholding and searching for pieces of information wherever you can find them and you don't feel that anybody cares, but on the other hand you do care if nobody cares so it would be easier for students, it would be easier for the support staff of the departments and on the other hand...

One of the main concerns of these mature women, whether immigrant or not, was whether they will be able to find a good job after graduation. In a cut-throat society, being fresh out of school they may not satisfy the demands of the employers. Thus, the participants gave me suggestions about how universities could help them achieve their goal of finding a job in their chosen profession.

Ines: One suggestion I do have is that the university should provide an internship, that it is something worthwhile, it is something that is of value and it is something that the university should be funding it...-Something at least to find a place for a few months where you can practice the learning you've gained from your studies its pay back for the value of money you've invested into your education and it promotes the university.

...

Svetlana: I highly agree with that, any type of program that's going to expose the student to, actually, the experience of what they've been learning, a hands-on type of experience, will give them a better understanding of what they might be doing in the future. The sooner this type of experience would be introduced, I'm talking about practical internship here, I think it would be better for the students because there are students who sometimes don't really understand what they're getting into...

...

Vedrana: I'm doing all the work, preparing all papers for procedure for approval, I am submitting my 100 hour reports, I'm asking for feedback, I'm asking for reviews, whatever is needed, because I understood it can also be the case that once... Every single piece of initiative is on my part, there is nothing on the part of the advisor.

...

Maja: The internship would be a great opportunity for students like me to get practical training in our field of studies. Including our previous experiences with different jobs, as mature women, we can integrate more easily and make connections for finding employment. The future employers will look at us more

seriously if they see that we have participated in an internship that was organized by the university. One of my friends, whose internship was arranged by the university, worked on a contract and later became a full time employee at the same company.

The opinions expressed above support my own conviction that internships would be highly appreciated by mature women. As an immigrant, I do not have the necessary connections to obtain job positions, and I do not have the practical experience employers are looking for. Hence, my chances for finding a job are very poor. I searched for any university or college internships in Montreal but did not find any.

Conversely, Luisa is presently enrolled in a graduate program where an internship is a part of her program, and she feels hopeful and confident that she will find work in her field after graduation. Another example is Vedrana, who is in a program that also offers internship, but it is up to her to find an employer. She also feels quite convinced that this will help her to find a job later. As Mary C. Bateson (1989) has stated: "One of the things that an internship teaches you is what it means to take care of person, to be confronted with the responsibility" (p.154). However, an internship that is provided by the university would be more beneficial and helpful to students, because the employers would see it as a more serious professional experience as they are getting trained employees.

While applying for positions as an academic advisor at universities and colleges, I was refused because I did not have practical working experience in that field and my volunteer work at the university was not recognized as such. Thus, an internship in the academic advising position would have given me the opportunity to obtain some practical experience and improve my chances to gain employment as the university or college academic advisor.

In order to offer an objective analysis and offer both sides of the story, two professional academic advisors were interviewed in their offices. Their experiences and points of view are described in the next section.

Part 2: Academic Advisor's Interviews

From the interviews with two professional advisors, Alex (A-1) and Dominique, (A-2), it becomes evident that each academic advisor has a different philosophy regarding academic advising and uses a different approach toward advising mature women. The first question I asked the advisors was about their own perception of their advising effectiveness. Although both advisors saw themselves to be effective, the first advisor, Alex, answered with pride that she sees herself as "*very effective advisor*".

Alex said: ... because I try and go beyond what they are coming for; they might be coming with questions or a concern and then I try to look on the whole picture and give a recommendations to support them.

Dominique said:

One of the things you need to do is to give them a sense of whether university education is for them, do they really need it and they can explore courses in different departments and sort of guide whether they want to go into sociology, applied human sciences, or maybe other field. I think they should do at least 1 year as an independent student just to get a sense of the university life before getting into a degree program.

Discovering that mature students have many concerns, I wanted to know which the main ones are according the professional advisors. Alex pointed out that those students "are very scared", feeling alone and old, having doubts in their ability to learn and fit into an environment with much younger students. Especially immigrant mature

women have often problems with basic writing; but, “they have that thirst for knowledge but they may lack some of the learning tools”.

One of the main issues that mature women have to deal with at the beginning of their study in higher education is definitely their low self-esteem. Dominique agreed that their self-esteem rises with the academic accomplishments and they feel happy. However, to be academically successful family support plays an important role especially for those who do not disclose their thoughts and feelings easily because of their cultural beliefs. Dominique explained;

A-2: They always need family support because how are you going to study with so many family obligations. Having a heavy academic pressure and feel being alone is more difficult for anybody...

When I was probing for the advising theory they use in their practice, none of the advisors could identify a specific approach being used while advising students. They follow their instincts and with their own personalities their approaches are very different. One used a more prescriptive approach, just giving information about courses, while the other tries to guide students in a more personal manner. This is what they said:

A-1: I don't know the approach or theory... I really would deliberately give them more time... I am very gentle, I want to be careful, friendly, a Welcome approach is what helps them when they come back, and you can see they are afraid to walk in, so I invite them , have a seat, how can I help you and make them feel comfortable... I do not have a name for what I really do, I know it works what I do because so many people come back to thank me, I think I just work with each student based on what will work for them, so I am just 100 percent there for them, and I design my advising for their best needs, according to their personality, (instinct which gives you feeling this student needs more developmental friendly approach, maybe some other students need more directive approach ...)

The second advisor does not feel that an advisor should be “too-too friendly, but at the same time you can’t be too rule-bound, there has to be a compromise, they are not anymore small children and one can not feed them like with the spoon”.

One of the advisors seemed to be aware of the obstacles that prevent the mature women students from personal growth and academic achievement and offers her help in choosing a right program by asking them about their personal interest and by giving them options that are the most suitable for them. Alex also said that advisors should be like “cheerleaders, motivators. In case where professional counselling is needed, there is a counselling and development department at the university; they are always ready to help students in any situation”.

The other advisor answered:

A-2: When mature students come, they are really, really afraid, and one of the things you need to do as an advisor is calm them down and help them to not do a full course load, but they can come to university in gradual stages...it gives them a sense of whether university education is for them or not.

According to my own and the other participants’ negative experience with advising, it is clear that there is need for improvement of quality advising services for mature women. Particularly, advisors of those women should be experienced professionals from an immigrant background who can understand their special circumstances. Both advisors admitted that there is need for improvement. Firstly, as there is a growing number of mature female students entering university, advisors should be available also in the late afternoon to those who are working during day time and studying at night. The first advisor said in her own words:

A-1: Availability is number one... I think the university should expand their hours after 5pm, which would mean more support stuff, we need more people to give more help...university should higher more experienced professionals...

Another problem is linked to the lack of continuing in service professional training of the advisors offered by the university to update their knowledge according to needs of a rapidly changing student body at the beginning of the 21st century.

A-1: ... we learn by doing, we learn by shadowing, we learn by our colleagues, we are not learning by higher professional...

Alex said that the advising seminars organized by NACADA outside of Montreal are not included in the university budget so they have to pay from their own pocket and that “she was lucky, I was trained in the way by my previous director talking in the 80s’... and at last time it was my Union who pushed for payment to update my personal knowledge and skills...”

The second advisor thinks that “ the academic advising is a common sense thing, you use your common sense, your gut feeling and of course, you use your head, because each individual is different ...essentially, to be an academic advisor, you have to have empathy and you have to be able to empathize with the person who’s sitting across from you and you need to have a good, good self-knowledge of the rules and regulations of the university, you have to have a good self-knowledge of the curriculum of the department, you need to know whom to approach for what, so I don’t think learning would be helpful for that, it has to be the academic advisor that needs to take the initiative concerning those things.

Evidently, the second advisor did not see a necessity for continuous professional Training, and she explained why. Here is how she sees the situation.

A-2:...each institution is different, there are different rules and regulations and the way you approach advising here can be different than the way you approach advising at other university, even department approaches in advising can be different... but I think for the most part, it’s a common sense approach and the advisors must keep themselves informed.

My research theme was to explore an effective advising model for mature women like myself so I wanted to find out if advisors themselves see a need for improvement of their own professional skills in a new more diverse educational environment where the

number of nontraditional students is growing according to the needs of society in the new economy. The first advisor agreed that there is need and said:

A-1: Definitely yes, I do not think anybody should rely on their skills, and become rusty, and that is why a professional development is so important so whether it is a conference, meeting advisors from other universities, and talking about what can we do to help our students, or whether is talking to people within our university... I think it is definitely important and absolute necessity for me to improve my advising, I have to keep up with the students' demands and the university requirements.

All student participants expressed their disappointment, including myself, for not receiving the type of information they expected at their first meeting with the advisor. They all had an expectation to obtain some kind of combination of academic-career advising concerning their future career and job opportunities after the completion of the program of their study. Both advisors agreed with me that:

they ask that a lot... they ask a lot at their first appointment, about how they want degrees specifically for a well paying job... but then when we do kind of tie in how no degree can guarantee any job and how every degree can give you great skills, how a degree in history can still open doors in business... we bring in career, a little bit of employment in our conversation, but a career counsellor that we refer them to will give them the interest test to find out what is a right career for them and how to get there... they know often exactly what they want so we can help them with courses that can support that but we do not give them the career advising...

Unfortunately, the advisors are not trained to give career advising and they answered;

A-1:"I will give a little, maybe one minute talk about career in a way, very general, and let them know it is not a professional opinion, and tell them to speak about that with the career advisor"

...

A-2 said: "Well, the rule of university that they have to be accepted in the program at the university before they are eligible for career counselling make career advising prior to studies impossible. I don't know if career counselling at the beginning is helpful, perhaps career counselling is helpful when they get into a degree program or when they are deciding which degree they want to follow".

Meanwhile, mature women students have no time to waste taking different courses and exploring the different university programs. Thus, they need and expect a very clear and efficient advice concerning their future career and the job market opportunities. Therefore, today's academic advising should combine academic and career advising in order to help students to make a good choice and avoid disappointment with the quality of university advising presently offered.

Unexpectedly, the idea about an internship came up while interviewing the mature women students. They suggested that the university should provide an internship for mature female students in variety of programs so that they can obtain some experience before the job search, and also believe to have better chances of finding an employment. The two interviewed advisors had opposite opinions about the internship. One said that it would be helpful and it is a very good way for gaining the experience in the field, but the other disagreed:

A-2: I don't think that the mandate of university is to provide the terminal university degrees, now; internship? I think is helpful, but I don't think that that will provide them with final interest for their career. It is just to have an opportunity to have an experience in the field of their studies, and to identify their passion, and to do something in that field.

From this interview, it is evident that the first advisor is very dedicated to her profession, and is very passionate and ready to improve her own skills by learning new methods and techniques to offer help to students. She is a good example of an effective academic advisor. However, the answers given by the second advisor show that personality is an important factor that plays a direct role in the professional practice process given that one advisor did not acknowledge the need for the improvement of her advising skills. Thus, it should be mandatory that all university advisors are offered and

provided in-service training by their university on a regular basis. This is imperative in order to offer good effective advising for all students and especially immigrant mature female students.

When I asked both advisors for any additional comments and suggestions regarding advising, one of them left me inspired even more than I was before to pursue the same career with at least the same passion as she has.

Alex said:

A-1: I think it is one of the most rewarding professions, if I may say that, really; we are vital in making a difference, it is not just faculty, who have moved a student to the graduation. Without advising students would not know what to do, and so I think the two go hand in hand...

I totally agreed with her, yes, academic advising is a very rewarding profession. Definitely, if the opportunity arises, I would like to be trained by her.

Analysis of the Findings

Based on the answers of both students and professional advisors, it is obvious that the different cultural value systems, as well as personal and social life circumstances of each particular student, create diverse needs. However, the study showed that there are many similarities in terms of the need for academic counselling, and the expectations of academic advising by the women that were interviewed.

While the motivation for returning to higher education varies, all eight students had an inner drive and desire to improve their lives. With their own determination and hard academic work, the women-participants upgraded their knowledge and skills by studying at the university. This helped them to overcome the obstacles that they faced,

particularly at the beginning of their studies. Although many did not have the support of their families upon their entrance into university, these same family members later acknowledged the academic and personal accomplishment of their mothers, wives or friends and were happy and proud of them.

Furthermore, seven of the women participants stated that their academic achievement helped to improve their self-esteem and self-confidence which enabled them to achieve self-realization. A third finding is that six of the women returned to school in order to get a better job. The majority of the mature women did not receive adequate academic guidance from their academic advisors prior to their registration in their specific program. Hence, they obtained a BA or MA in the program of their study, but without the specialization they needed to get their dream job after their graduation.

A fourth finding is related to the fact that mature women did not receive appropriate academic advising at the university, which they defined as “poor quality academic advising”. Consequently, they did not find a job in the field of the university program they graduated from.

Five of the eight participants can be considered as “indecisive mature women students” of different cultural backgrounds. These women had no Canadian educational background and needed specific, personal guidance. What they expected was to be well informed about their future job possibilities and a reassurance that they are in the right program to meet their needs. Specifically, seven of these women expected some kind of career/educational advising.

The fifth finding is that mature women are looking for more humanistic, warm, and friendly relationships with their advisors in order to be able to disclose their personal issues and get the help they need. Not having this opportunity, they feel alone.

I strongly suggest that the training on regular bases to update and improve the skills of academic and faculty advisors would be seriously considered in order to improve the quality of academic advising services offered to mature women students. For students who are employed, it would be beneficial to set evening office hours. Another suggestion is that advisors be well informed about the needs of mature women and be able to empathize with and understand the special life circumstances of mature immigrant women enrolled in the university.

The personalities and advising approaches of the advisors did affect the students' personal feelings, such as in Maria's case, who ultimately left the university. However, the rest of the participants were not affected because they continued to find the information they were looking for from someone else, or even on their own.

All of the eight students, including myself, recommended that an internship be arranged for them by the university. They also expressed the need to hire more academic advisors in order to improve the availability of advising service at the university.

While reviewing the findings of this study, I came accross some information from the 91st meeting of the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada, (CMEC), held in Toronto, on February 13, 2007, which comform the findings of my study regarding the nedds and suggestions to improve the quality of educational services. Premiers from every province discussed the study '*Competing For Tomorrow*' organized by the Council of the Federation on the quality of postsecondary education and skills training

offered to college and university students, business and labour organizations, and representatives from under-represented groups including immigrants, Aboriginal persons and persons with disabilities. Ministers reaffirmed the importance of improving knowledge and skills to achieve a brighter future in society. They outline five key priorities for education and skills training which are: improve access, enhance quality, increase participation in the labour force, develop workplace skills and expand research innovation.

Increasing the quality of post-secondary education, offering training to professional advisors, and rewarding employment opportunities, especially for those who currently face unfair barriers, i.e. immigrant women, comply with the desire of all mature women student participants of my thesis research study. Providing an internship by university can be one of the strategies to help mature women to increase opportunities for sustainable employment.

Keeping promise to increase federal funding for improving the quality of post-secondary education and training will positively affect also the quality of academic advising and training offered to all university students and academic advisors to satisfy the personal, economic and social needs and will provide the opportunity for a better future in the society of 21st Century.

CONCLUSION

Implications for Future Research

Throughout this study, several interesting and relevant topics presented themselves. However, due to the limitations of this exploratory design and a hesitation to participate from the professional advisors' side, these issues were not explored deeply enough. Here are some suggestions for future research on this topic.

Based on the data analysis, the study showed that mature students expect advisors to be very well informed about the programs offered at the university, and the opportunities in the job market related to the program of study. Their main goal was to find a better job believing that obtaining an academic degree is the best way to realize their dreams. Therefore, academic advising for mature women should also involve career advising. The mature women interviewed do not have time to waste in exploring the variety of programs and want to be sure that their university diploma will help them to find work in a well paid occupation in the field of their studies. Thus, mature women, including the ones from an immigrant background, require specific guidance and information regarding their university studies.

Concerning the academic advising received at the university; dissatisfaction was expressed surrounding the quality of academic advising obtained. According to existing literature on the subject, and confirmed by the findings in this research, the core elements of effective academic advising for mature women should include (a) *availability* of the academic advisor, (b) *knowledge* of the academic advisor, and (c) *helpfulness* of the academic advisor.

These characteristics are central to the evaluation of advisors (as cited in Gordon, Habley & Associates, 2000, p.339). “Availability” means having flexible office hours in order to offer advising for employed students. “Knowledge” includes being well informed, and constantly up to date on effective training techniques. (p. 340).

Furthermore, academic advisors need to be “helpful” and caring individuals, in order to efficiently counsel mature women who have to face particular obstacles linked to their gender or their cultural background.

Regarding the theoretical aspect of any academic advising method, women have a preference for humanistic, developmental type of advising. The women who participated in this research expressed the need to discuss their personal issues, concerns, and problems with their advisor. Not having their issues dealt with may cause some to feel alone, stressed out, and they may withdraw from their university studies as a result. Also, the participants declared that academic advisors should aid them in setting personal, career, and life goals rather than merely offering information about the required courses for a particular degree.

Based on the findings and results of this study, I propose that future research on the training and improvement of academic advisors’ skills be seriously considered. Professional advisors need to be sensitive to specific issues faced by many nontraditional students entering universities. One advisor claimed that mature students should do their own research prior to registering at the university, which indicates that they are not aware of the specific needs of these women who are not familiar with the Canadian educational system. From the interviews with the two academic advisors, I discovered that the university does not provide additional training and workshops on regular basis. The

regular workshops should be organized and up-to-date, and improve the overall skills of academic advisors. Hence, results from this explorative study indicate that academic advising services for mature women need to be improved to fulfill their needs and expectations.

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Appendix A – CONSENT FORM

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN

**"EXPLORING EFFECTIVE ACADEMIC ADVISING FOR MATURE WOMEN:
Autobiography and Personal Vignettes Based on Interviews with Mature
Female Students and Academic Advisors"**

This is to state that I agree to participate in a program of research, leading to an MA degree, being conducted by Katarina Stembera, a student in the Educational Studies program of the Department of Education at Concordia University.

Phone #: Concordia University: 848-2424 ext. 2034

Katarina Stembera: Home Tel No. : 514-486-3908

E-mail: KL_Stembera@hotmail.com

A. PURPOSE

I have been informed that the purpose of the research is to examine -- through the stories they tell in the interviews -- the experiences of mature women returning to university education in relation to academic advising.

B. PROCEDURES

I understand I will be interviewed once, for a period of 60 – 90 minutes. The interview will be taped and will be conducted at a place of my choosing in Montreal, in spring and summer 2006. Unless I so choose specifically, my real name will not be used in the write-up of the study; a pseudonym will be given to me. The researcher, Katarina Stembera, has explained that every effort will be made to keep my name confidential. Once the data have been analyzed and themes emerge, Katarina Stembera may get back to me for comments and further feedback.

C. RISKS AND BENEFITS

The risks to me as a participant in the study are minimal. The benefit may be that my story, along with the stories of my peers, will be used to better understand our experiences with academic advising as mature students returning to university education, and hopefully to improve academic advising for other students. The benefit to me personally will be the knowledge that I have contributed to this process.

D. CONDITIONS OF PARTICIPATION

- I understand that I am free to withdraw my consent and discontinue my participation at anytime without negative consequences.
- I understand that my participation in this study is CONFIDENTIAL (i.e., the researcher will know, but will not disclose my identity). The tape of the interview, along with the names of participants will be kept in a locked cupboard in the home of the researcher until no longer needed, and destroyed at that time. (Following the MA thesis defence hearing).
- I understand that the data from this study may be published.

I HAVE CAREFULLY STUDIED THE ABOVE AND UNDERSTAND THIS AGREEMENT. I FREELY CONSENT AND VOLUNTARILY AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY.

NAME (please print) _____

SIGNATURE _____

If at any time you have questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact Adela Reid, Research Ethics and Compliance Officer, Concordia University, at (514) 848-2424 x7481 or by email at areid@alcor.concordia.ca.

March 31, 2006

Appendix B

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR STUDENTS PARTICIPANTS

1. Tell me about yourself; age, occupation, cultural background and marital status?
2. What inspired you to pursue higher education at this time of your life?
3. As a mature (immigrant) woman, do you feel that you need to have a sense of accomplishment in your life and obtaining a university degree will help you achieve it?
4. Is the improvement and independence of your financial status a reason for returning to university?
5. What are your goals?
6. Do you feel that your self-esteem and self-confidence were affected by your personal situation (stay-home mother, lower paid job, exclusion from the professional life)?
7. On the scale of one to five, how do you grade your self-confidence and how did you think this might have affected your academic success?
8. Did you seek help from a professional advisor at the university and how often; what was his/her availability?
9. Do you see the same advisor each time you need to approach one?
10. Does the academic advising help you in dealing with your personal issues?
11. On scale from one to ten, to what extent are you satisfied with the knowledge and skills of your academic advisor?
12. Do you see any need for the improvement of academic advising of mature immigrant women?
13. Do you also discuss with your advisor your future career or potential field of work?

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR ACADEMIC ADVISORS

According to your experience:

1. As an experienced academic advisor, how effective do you see yourself to be as an advisor?
2. What is the main concern of mature students who come to see you?
3. How do you help them to make decision about their field of study, do you use a special approach or theory?
4. Can you identify some special needs, and issues that mature immigrant women have?
5. Are you using any specific approach in your advising of immigrant women?
6. How can you help them to overcome some obstacles that prevent them from personal growth and academic achievements?

7. What kind of theory and philosophical approach do you use to develop a relationship with the advisees? Can you elaborate on your relationship to them?
8. In which areas, do you think, there is a need for improvement in quality of academic advising offered at the university such as availability, time and so on?
9. On the scale of one to five what is your personal satisfaction of the additional training provided by your university?
10. Do you feel the need for improvement of your personal skills in this particular area of advising women students who return to university studies with the intent to obtain a job in their chosen profession?
11. How often they ask questions related to their future employment?
12. Do you give information about the job market, future career to the advisees or do you refer them to the career advisor?
13. Do you have any additional comments or suggestion?