Summer 7-29-2022

PERCEIVED BARRIERS TO DEGREE COMPLETION AMONG COMPLETE 2 COMPETE APPLICANTS

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PERCEIVED BARRIERS TO DEGREE COMPLETION

AMONG COMPLETE 2 COMPETE APPLICANTS

by

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A Doctoral Project Submitted to
the College of Education and Human Sciences
and the School of Education
at The University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Education

May 2022

This Doctoral Project was approved by:

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Published by the School of Education

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to explore eligible Complete 2 Compete (C2C) program applicants' perceived barriers to degree completion. A total of 9,345 individuals were invited to participate in the study who applied to the C2C program yet did not engage in the process to complete their degree. Of this number, 167 completed the survey. The survey instrument was utilized to collect both quantitative and qualitative data required to examine the applicants' perceived barriers to degree completion. Data analysis revealed that in addition to the common research-based barriers faced by adult learners, including institutional and situational barriers, issues encountered within the C2C program itself proved to be barriers as well. Specifically, with regards to the C2C program, program representatives' lack of prompt communication with program applicants accounted for over 60% of the cited program barriers. The findings of this research provide recommendations for future research and implications for practice surrounding how both the C2C State Office and other adult learner initiatives can promote degree completion success among nontraditional students.

Keywords: adult learners, barriers, degree completion

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my greatest blessing, my children. You are my world and my air. Thank you for inspiring and motivating Mommy to achieve this dream. I love you with my whole heart.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS

C2C	Complete 2 Compete
GPA	Grade Point Average
IHL	Mississippi Institutions of Higher Learning
IRB	Institutional Review Board
MCCB	Mississippi Community College Board
MPU	Mississippi Public Universities

CHAPTER I – INTRODUCTION

Economic growth has occurred over the last several decades and resulted in millions of jobs being created and becoming available in the United States labor market. Specifically, from 2008 to 2018, 15.3 million jobs were added to the labor market (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019). According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2019), 63% of these newly added jobs, known as middle and high skill jobs, require some form of postsecondary education or training. Current education models that focus on traditional student populations do not have the ability to meet this demand of the labor force (Blumenstyk, 2018). Therefore, increased attention has been placed on static college completion rates among Americans ages 25 and older and on methods to engage and encourage them to return to college and complete their degree.

Background

Increased focus is being directed toward the need to increase the number of U.S. adults that hold a postsecondary credential of value (Gast, 2013). This great attention was a result of a Congress joint session in February 2009, where former President Barak Obama set an ambitious goal to increase the college attainment rate in the U.S. among adults ages 25 to 64 to 60% after recognizing the current labor force demands and the need to fill middle and high skill jobs with individuals who have obtained education beyond a high school diploma. Since then, policy makers and private organizations, such as the Lumina Foundation, set out to analyze how this ambitious goal could be met, which would require each state to establish strategies to improve its completion rate among this population of adults, as two out of five college students are nontraditional adults, and any attempt to improve degree attainment must include them (Pingel & Holly, 2017).

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In response to the call to action set by President Obama, the Mississippi Institutions of Higher Learning (IHL) and the Mississippi Community College Board (MCCB) adopted Complete 2 Compete (C2C) in August 2017. This initiative was developed by the National Governors Association in an effort to raise the number of individuals who hold a postsecondary degree so that the current workforce needs are met (Reyna, 2010). The C2C program focuses on identifying and targeting individuals who appear to be eligible to return to an institution and complete their degree, addressing and eliminating barriers that may prevent degree completion, and developing a web-based application and tracking system that funnels applicants into the institution that is most appropriate for assisting them with completing their degree (Mississippi Institutions of Higher Learning, 2016).

Prior to launching C2C, IHL and MCCB merged their systems and produced a C2C dataset. This dataset contained 15 years of student enrollment and degrees earned across all the community colleges and public universities in the state. From this consolidation of student information, it was found that there were approximately 85,000 individuals identified as potentially eligible C2C participants who could: (a) earn an associate degree with no additional coursework, (b) earn a bachelor's degree with no additional coursework, (c) earn an associate degree with some additional coursework, or (d) earn a bachelor's degree with some additional coursework. While this group of individuals was identified as C2C's target population, individuals outside of this group could also apply to the program.

As a result of the consolidation of student data and the identification of eligible participants, C2C launched a centralized outreach campaign where individuals within the dataset have been directly marketed to by way of direct personalized mailers and emails, outbound phone calls, radio and television advertisements, billboards, social media, and Google search ads.

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From the collective marketing and advertising strategies, almost 20,000 responses have been processed and over 5,000 students have enrolled in college through C2C with the goal to complete their degree.

C2C has several program offerings designed to address the barriers encountered by adult learners that prevent degree completion. Among these offerings are a renewable tuition assistance grant in the amount of $1,000, a degree program exclusive to C2C, and C2C coaches who serve as a single point of contact and assist students from the time they express interest in the C2C program all the way through to degree completion. Additionally, all participating C2C institutions have support services developed to address the needs of non-traditional students and working adults. These support services vary among the institutions and serve as an additional method for Mississippi's public institutions to address the barriers adults encounter when returning to complete their degrees.

Statement of the Problem

Since the program's inception, 19,783 individuals have expressed interest in the C2C program by completing an application. However, not all who have applied to the C2C program engaged in the process to complete their degrees. Of the 19,783 applicants, 5,062 have enrolled in college through C2C, 1,155 of which are currently enrolled, 929 have earned an associate degree and 1,527 have earned a bachelor's degree. In total, 6,363 (32%) of the 19,783 applicants have been served by the C2C program from August 2017 to present, meaning thousands of applicants are being lost in the pipeline. While C2C has identified and implemented program offerings and support services that assist non-traditional returning adult students, the uniqueness and complexity of the barriers faced by adult students require attention to the entire pipeline from contact to re-enrollment to degree completion (Erisman & Steele, 2012).

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study is to identify barriers that prevent eligible C2C applicants from engaging in the process to complete their degree. Understanding the barriers within C2C program processes that prevent re-enrollment and degree completion could provide recommendations for how to better serve adult learners throughout the entire pipeline. These recommendations, in turn, could potentially result in a more efficient and effective program, increased focus in program efforts, and improvements in program processes and procedures. Consequently, an improvement in the C2C program is aimed to result in an increase in the ratio of C2C students served out of the total number of applicants, ultimately infusing the labor force with qualified individuals who hold a postsecondary credential of value.

Research Question

This study was guided by the following research question: What are the perceived barriers that prevent eligible adults who have applied to the C2C program from engaging in the process to complete their degree?

CHAPTER II – LITERATURE REVIEW

To gain a deeper understanding of the scholarship in the areas of adult learners, the barriers they often encounter, and the most effective ways to engage and encourage them to complete their degree, a literature review was performed prior to conducting this study. Utilizing databases such as Academic Search Premier, ERIC, JSTOR, and Wiley Online Library, the following terms were used to locate scholarly journal articles on this topic: "adult learners and withdraw", "adult learners and reenroll", "adult learners and barriers", "adult learners and re-entry", "adult learners and workforce", "adult learner engagement", and "nontraditional students and barriers". Initially, a broad search resulted in 30 articles which were then narrowed down to 16, dating from 1981 to 2019, based on relevancy to the research topic. Upon reviewing the literature, the following strands were identified based on a topical format: (a) defining the adult learner, (b) the perceived barriers of adult learners to degree completion, and (c) institutional responses to barriers to degree completion

The Adult Learner

Adult learner theorists generally describe adult learners as a diversified population of students who widely vary in backgrounds, skills, needs, and preferences (Alshebou, 2019). Hunter-Johnson and Smith (2015) defined the adult learner as, "individuals over the age of 21 entering higher educational institutions for the first time" (p. 70). Exploring the phenomenon of adult learners' transfer and interruptions in enrollments, McGregor (2018) defined the term *swirl* as "a complex enrollment pattern that includes multiple (three or more) transfers and interruptions in college enrollment which lengthens time to degree" (p. 3). However, limited research has been conducted regarding the possible reasons why adult learners who are not first-time college students do not complete their degrees.

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Despite the paucity of evidence on the factors promoting adult learners' degree completion, their characteristics as learners have received considerable scholarly attention. In that regard, adult learners are usually employed full-time and have a family and dependents to support (McGregor, 2018). In comparison to the traditional student population, adult learners have more experience having already started a career or served in the military and are more independent, mature, and motivated (Hunter-Johnson & Smith, 2015). In addition to these characteristics, adult learners are financially independent, are not homogenous, and vary in family life, educational background, and career experiences (Deggs, 2011). So far, however, very little discussion has been produced regarding the possible ways in which these or other characteristics may moderate adult learners' engagement in the process of completing a college degree.

Perceived Barriers of the Adult Learner

Both historical and contemporary literature illustrates adult learners as a vulnerable student group subject to additional barriers compared to their first time in college peers. For instance, Levin (2007) conceptualized adult learners as a disadvantaged group of students due to their identities being in conflict with higher education institutional structures. According to Cross's (1981) model, these disadvantages are reflected in three types of barriers that adult learners encounter: situational, dispositional, and institutional. Situational barriers are those that arise from one's environment or situation such as poor health, lack of finances, and family responsibilities. Dispositional barriers are related to self-perceptions, attitudes about oneself, and intrapersonal attributes. Institutional barriers include procedures and practices of institutions that exclude or inconvenience adult learners and hinder them from degree completion (Cross, 1981). To move beyond these theorized concepts regarding barriers adult learners face and identify

perceived barriers of adult learners, the following sections discuss literature that contextualized the meanings of these barriers among adult learners themselves.

Situational Barriers

Adult learners encounter a number of situational obstacles while in pursuit of their postsecondary degree. Since adult learners are often married, have children, employed, and commute to campus for classes, these multiple roles increase the number of situational barriers they encounter (Genco, 2007). For instance, Deutsch and Schmertz (2011) utilized focus groups to explore adult women's college experiences and found that family responsibilities, childcare, and financial restraints were the most common ones. Flynn et al. (2011) advanced this inquiry by interviewing both male and female adult learners. Their study and the connectedness of the narratives of their participants revealed time management and work demands are additional situational variables that are most commonly faced by adult learners.

Dispositional Barriers

Dispositional barriers are intrapersonal, individual-specific characteristics that influence the trajectories of adult learners and how they respond to situational and institutional barriers. Goto and Martin (2009) interviewed adult learners who attended a community college and the results of their study included anxiety and fear of returning to school as an older student and a lack of confidence in their academic skills as dispositional barriers. While research theorists believe adult learners experience adjustment difficulties as they worry about feelings of inadequacy, Kasworm's (2010) qualitative study design confirmed that low self-esteem and insecurities about their ability to succeed in college were, in fact, perceived dispositional barriers among adult learners.

Institutional Barriers

Institutional barriers can keep adult learners from pursuing further education. Keith (2007) defined institutional barriers as varied factors associated with the structure of educational organizations that may hinder non-traditional students' attainment and fail to meet their needs. Among these barriers are course scheduling conflicts, limited course offerings, and lack of clear institutional pathways (Genco, 2007; Goto & Martin, 2009). Further, Saar et al.'s (2004) quantitative study focused on perceived institutional barriers faced by adult learners and found inconvenient class schedules, fee structure (cost), and limited course offerings to be the most common among adult learners.

Institutional Responses to Barriers

Situational Barriers

Situational barriers faced by adult learners are usually ones beyond their control (Flynn et al., 2011). While institutions cannot resolve or eliminate situational barriers, they can create an academic community that involves faculty support which can be essential to student persistence and success (Deutsch & Schmertz, 2011). One recommendation for accomplishing this objective was for higher education institutions to alleviate situational barriers by innovating ways to better understand students' life experiences and consider who they are both in the classroom and off-campus.

Dispositional Barriers

In his qualitative study, Langford (2019) explored the concept of 'outsiderness', which he defined as "tensions and dilemmas faced by nontraditional students and their feelings of deficiency, confusion, or even despair as they make sense of new surroundings" (p. 2). His interviews with two study participants revealed that while outsiderness is a barrier faced by nontraditional students as they journey the path to degree completion, the institution's response

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to said boundary has the potential to push adult learners to the degree completion finish line. The responses of Demetris, Langford's first interviewee, led to the finding that some adult learners enter postsecondary education classrooms with apprehension and uncertainty regarding their college readiness, leading to isolation and ultimately withdrawal. In response to this challenge, Langford (2019) suggested institutions establish ways in which to assist students with coping with their deficiencies within the first few weeks of classes.

Christine, Langford's second interviewee, shared her postsecondary education experiences and expounded on the multiple times she felt alienated due to the impersonal nature of the college campus. Being unsure of academic expectations and trajectories, coupled with obscure and opaque requests and directions from her instructors led Christine to feel insufficient in her academic capabilities and urged her to the point of considering withdrawing from classes. When adult learners reenroll to complete their degree, oftentimes, they are unaware of institutional policies, processes, and prerequisite requirements in comparison to their traditional student counterparts who have at least a basic understanding regarding what is needed for academic success. In response to Christine's experience, Langford suggested intentionally overemphasizing and overcommunicating policy and process information to ensure adult learners are equipped with the necessary tools that promote academic success.

Institutional Barriers

Many institutions now offer online and hybrid degree programs that give adult learners the flexibility to complete course requirements and assignments in a less time-restrictive environment. However, costs of higher education seem to be an ever-increasing battle for this population of students. In this regard, Pingel and Holly (2017) examined within each state the two largest financial aid programs, and their analysis indicated that adult learners do not qualify

for the majority of these programs due to them being merit-based, excluding two-year institutions, linking eligibility to high school graduation dates, or requiring full-time enrollment status. Recommendations included providing access to postsecondary education to all student populations by restructuring state- and institutional-level financial aid programs to include adult learners.

Institutional-level aid programs made available to adult learners can carry a hefty price tag; however, effective marketing and outreach to make meaningful connections with adult learners is a method to generate income back to the institution and to serve this unique population effectively. As Ryan (2018) stated, the recruitment of individuals within the nontraditional student population to complete their degree is a difficult responsibility; however, it is also one that is a revenue-generating opportunity for the institution. Those who work with adult learners face the challenge of communicating with adult learners during times that are most convenient for them. Unfortunately, these same times are inconvenient for institutional faculty and staff. Ryan (2018) offered suggestions on how to maximize the opportunity to engage adult learners in an effort to increase their enrollment and degree completion rates, including utilizing social media and immediately contacting adult learners outside the 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. work hours.

<div align="center">**Summary**</div>

A common limitation among the studies synthesized in this review was that the findings were deduced on a small sample of adult learners. While each of these studies endeavored to understand adult learners and the most effective ways to engage them so they are encouraged to complete their degree, most studies were conducted within a range of 24-200 participants. Since

the adult learner population is vast in number, it is challenging to generalize the results of studies to the large population of adult learners populating college campuses today.

To address the deficiencies of past research, this study aimed to shed light on a group of adult learners who have not yet been investigated in the contemporary scholarship. As illustrated in this review, adult learners tend to be described as a homogenous student group and very little research has examined potential differing characteristics that members of this group may exhibit. Specifically, the C2C adult learner population does not fit into the standard definition of adult learners in that they are not entering an institution of higher learning for the first time. In that regard, this research aims to identify if adult learners who are not first-time college students have differing perceived barriers to degree completion from those found in the presented research.

CHAPTER III – METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of the perceived barriers to degree completion among C2C applicants. Quantitative research assisted in the ability to analyze and assess the frequency of perceived barriers encountered in the general population of C2C applicants, thus producing more generalizable findings (McGregor 2018). The following sections of this chapter examine the research question, design, participants, and data analysis.

Research Question

The questionnaire utilized in this study was designed to answer the following research question: What are the perceived barriers that prevent eligible C2C applicants from engaging in the process to complete their degree?

Research Design

This study utilized a quantitative research design with a web-based questionnaire administered through Qualtrics. Qualtrics is an online survey tool that allows users to build, distribute, and analyze survey responses. Access to Qualtrics is freely provided to researchers affiliated with The University of Southern Mississippi. For this study, a cross-sectional survey designed was utilized to identify the perceived barriers to degree completion among eligible C2C applicants. This research design was the most suitable as the objective of the study was to obtain current information at a single, specific time (Ruel et al., 2016).

Instrument

The questionnaire (Appendix A) was formulated by the researcher to collect information regarding the perceived barriers of eligible C2C applicants that hindered degree completion. The questionnaire consisted of demographic questions followed by one Likert scale question about potential barriers of adult learners. The last section of the survey consisted of two open-ended

questions designed to allow the participants to further expound on perceived barriers. The researcher made the decision to utilize a survey research design given that C2C applicants are geographically dispersed and utilizing an online questionnaire helped prevent geographical dependence (Keith 2007). Using a questionnaire instrument to collect data also provided a broad capability to describe characteristics of a large population. Over 9,000 applicants were invited to participate in this study and the selected research design allowed the gathering of targeted results to draw conclusions and make recommendations (Saar et al. 2014).

Sample

The C2C program utilizes a lead delivery dashboard that offers a comprehensive marketing process for receiving, managing, and updating the status of C2C applicants. C2C administrators and coaches are provided login credentials to access responses and easily track the progress of student applicants. The target population for this research project was eligible C2C applicants who are currently in the status of 'declined' in the C2C dashboard. Individuals are assigned a declined status when they choose not to move forward in the process to complete their degree. Applicants are marked as declined when they are unresponsive to phone calls, emails, and text messages from C2C coaches after three attempts or if they inform the C2C coach that they will not be moving forward in the process at the current time.

Currently there are 9,345 applicants with a declined status across all 23 public community colleges and universities in Mississippi and the medical center. These institutions include Alcorn State University, Delta State University, Jackson State University, Mississippi State University, Mississippi University for Women, Mississippi Valley State University, University of Mississippi, University of Mississippi Medical Center, University of Southern Mississippi, Coahoma Community College, Copiah Lincoln Community College, East Central

Community College, East Mississippi Community College, Hinds Community College, Holmes Community College, Itawamba Community College, Jones College, Meridian Community College, Mississippi Delta Community College, Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College, Northeast Mississippi Community College, Northwest Mississippi Community College, Pearl River Community College, and Southwest Mississippi Community College. An invitation to participate in the study was sent to all 9,345 applicants via email, and the study was conducted at the state level.

Data Collection

The questionnaire was developed during the Spring of 2021. Since the study involved human subjects, the researcher submitted an application to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and received approval during the Summer 2021 semester (Appendix B). Data were collected through an anonymous questionnaire via Qualtrics and were analyzed during the Fall 2021 semester. The questionnaire was activated, and participants were recruited via email in the first week of September 2021 and a reminder email to complete the survey was sent in the second week of September 2021. The survey closed in the fourth week of September 2021. After this two-week period, a total of 189 surveys were started and 167 were completed for a completion rate of 88.4%.

Data Analysis

Data were collected through an anonymous survey via Qualtrics®. The researcher downloaded the raw data from Qualtrics into an Excel file. The data were then analyzed using descriptive statistics, coding, and frequency analysis. The goals of using these analysis techniques were to identify trends in participants' responses and summarize the frequency of the obtained results.

CHAPTER IV – RESULTS

This study recorded the participants' perceived barriers to degree completion. A total of 9,345 individuals were invited to participate in the study. Of this number, 167 completed the survey, for the response rate of 1.8%. This chapter provides an overview of the results of the study and presents the result of analysis while addressing the question that guided the study.

Participant Demographics

With respect to participants' gender, the sample consisted of 138 (82.6%) females, 27 (16.2%) males, 1 (0.60%) non-binary, and 1 (0.60%) participant who preferred not to identify. The age range of 51 and over was the largest group represented (24%) and range 21-25 had the smallest representation (1.2%). Additionally, the survey results indicated that most participants (120) were employed full-time. Stay-at-home parent was the smallest group represented (4). Table 1 presents the frequency distributions sample tables for the participants' demographic variables.

Table 1

Participants' Demographics

Demographic	n	%
Race/Ethnicity		
Black/African American	95	56.89
White/Caucasian	61	36.53
Multi-racial	5	3.00
American Indian/Alaskan Native	4	2.40
Asian/Pacific Islander	1	0.50
Hispanic/Latino	1	0.50
Total	167	100
Age		
21-25	2	1.2
26-30	17	10.18

Table 1 Continued

Demographic	n	%
Age		
31-35	23	13.77
36-40	32	19.16
41-45	27	16.17
46-50	26	15.57
51 and over	40	23.95
Total	167	100
Workforce Status		
Employed Full-time	120	71.86
Employed Part-time	9	5.39
Unemployed but Seeking Work	15	8.98
Retired	9	5.39
Disabled	5	2.99
Stay-at-home Parent	4	2.40
Other	5	2.99
Total	167	100

Participants' Perceived Barriers

The analysis plan for the study's research objective involved exploring the participants'

perspectives about barriers to degree completion among adults. Participants were asked to rate

their level of agreement with research-based reasons why adult learners do not complete their

degree. The rating choices, on a five-point scale, were *Strongly Agree, Agree, Neither Agree nor*

Disagree, Disagree, and Strongly Disagree. When presented with financial barriers, over 80% of

the participants agreed that an inability to afford costs associated with returning to school is a

barrier to degree completion. Just over half of the respondents (55%) agreed that availability of

time is an additional barrier. However, 77% of the participants agreed that completing their

degree is worth the investment of time and money. Table 2 presents descriptive statistics for each

barrier.

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Table 2

Barriers to Degree Completion

	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard Deviation	Variance
I'd like to return to school but I feel I don't have what it takes to succeed	1	5	3.42	1.42	2.03
I don't think completing my degree is worth the investment of time and money	1	5	3.99	1.09	1.19
I would like to return to school but I'm unsure if I have the time	1	5	2.73	1.33	1.76
I would like to return to school but I can't afford it.	1	5	1.84	1.14	1.30
My employer does not support me going back to school.	1	5	3.52	1.19	1.41
I'd like to return to school but I don't know where to start	1	5	2.73	1.39	1.92
My family responsibilities do not allow me to return to school at this time.	1	5	3.61	1.12	1.24

After reviewing the cross tabulation of race and responses to barrier statements, there were noteworthy similarities and differences in responses by race. Considering the financial responsibility of returning to school, the majority of Black/African American (78.98%) and White/Caucasian (77%) participants agreed that they could not afford it. Additionally, regarding the availability of time needed to return to school, 41% of Black/African American participants were sure they had the time to return, in comparison to 18% of White/Caucasian participants.

Thematic Analysis

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To identify the participants' perceived barriers to degree completion and if any barriers were a direct result of gaps within the C2C program, participants were asked why they decided not to enroll in college through C2C to complete their degree. The qualitative data analysis enhanced the overall purpose of the study by capturing the participants' perceived barriers through an open-ended question. To describe the participants' perceptions on barriers, the researcher used content analysis, which allows for the identification of theme, characteristic, and count patterns found within open-ended survey questions (Johnson & Christensen, 2019). The researcher found that the perceived barriers of the participants could be placed in three categories: institutional barriers, situational barriers, or C2C program barriers.

Institutional Barriers

The participants' responses indicated that institutional barriers attributed to 13.91% of the barriers confronted by adult learners. Among the institutional barriers encountered by the participants, institutional grade point average (GPA) requirements, past debt owed to the institution, and lack of financial aid opportunities available to adult learners were encountered most frequently. Table 3 presents the content analysis themes for institutional barriers.

Table 3

Institutional Barriers Themes

Code	Frequency
Insufficient GPA	3
Owe Past Debt to Institution	9
Ineligible for Financial Aid	3
Immunization Requirement Not Met	1

The following statements reflect institutional barriers and were gathered from participants' responses to the open-ended survey questions: "Did not qualify for financial aid", "GPA too low for school of choice", "The last time I enrolled, I did not get [an acceptable]

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GPA", "My GPA isn't acceptable", "Low GPA", "I am not eligible for financial aid and do not want a student loan", "I have to pay for my tuition, and I owe a balance from having to withdraw during COVID due to my father dying of COVID", "I was not accepted to the institution because of my immunization status", "Previous unpaid balance due at institution of choice". Overall, these responses indicate that participants must possess an academic background, including a minimum GPA, required for admissions to a two- or four-year institution.

Situational Barriers

Situational barriers accounted for 34.78% of the barriers encountered by the participants of the study. Family responsibilities, lack of finances, and lack of time were the barriers encountered most frequently. Table 4 presents the content analysis themes for institutional barriers.

Table 4

Situational Barriers Themes

Code	Frequency
Family Responsibilities	4
Job Responsibilities	2
Lack of Finances	16
Lack of Time	17

The following statements reflect situational barriers and were gathered from participants' responses to the open-ended survey questions: "At the end of my second semester, I had a family tragedy while also trying to balance a full-time job out of town. It did not work in my favor", "I can only take one or two online classes at a time because I work full-time", "I couldn't work school into my work schedule", "I have actually enrolled several times, but I simply cannot afford it", "I do not have the funds, and I am afraid I do not have time", "I am a single parent

with a mortgage, bells, and two children", "I was not ready", "I went through terrible grief (loss of child)."

C2C Program Barriers

Results of this study revealed there are areas within the C2C program that have hindered participants from enrolling in college to complete their degree. C2C program barriers accounted for 46.19% of the participants' perceived barriers. Of the 46 responses, 28 (60.87%) were the direct result of a lack of follow-up by the C2C Coach. These findings suggest that participants rely on being in contact with program representatives as a means of motivation, a path to enrollment, and ultimately degree completion. The most notable participant quotes are reflected in the following quotes: "No one ever followed up. I tried reaching out to my coach on several occasions", "I have gotten zero response from my coach", "The C2C Coach was not helpful", "I had trouble getting someone to stay in contact with me."

Summary

This chapter presents an overview of the results of the study which provided a better understanding of the perceived barriers to degree completion among C2C applicants. The survey instrument was distributed electronically to 9,345 individuals and 167 participants completed it. The results of the study indicate that there were three categories of perceived barriers encountered by C2C applicants: institutional, situational, and C2C program barriers. Of these barriers, C2C program barriers accounted for those most frequently confronted by applicants at 46.19%. The next chapter discusses findings, conclusions, and recommendations for future studies.

CHAPTER V – DISCUSSION

This chapter provides the discussion of study findings and practical recommendations for addressing the issues raised in the study. Limitations of the study are also discussed, as well as the recommendations for future research.

Adult learners are referred to as a disadvantaged population of students due to a combination of their identities, responsibilities, and the higher education institutional processes and procedures that conflict with them (Levin, 2007). Similarly, participants of this study considered different institutional processes and procedures that pose barriers to their degree completion. The qualitative data revealed that GPA requirements, admissions requirements, and lack of financial aid opportunities specific to adult learners impeded C2C applicants' degree attainment. Further, costs associated with degree completion are one of the most common perceived institutional barriers faced by adult learners cited in the literature (Saar et al., 2004). Comparably, this study confirmed that a lack of access to institutional financial aid programs is still a battle for this group of students.

Many adult learners balance multiple responsibilities in relation to being a student and full- or part-time worker, along with the family demands of being a spouse and parent. Consequently, time management is a barrier commonly faced by adult learners (Flynn et al., 2011). This study supports evidence from previous research (e.g., Genco, 2007; Deutsch & Schmertz (2011) that numerous roles held by adult learners positively correlates to the number of situational barriers they encounter. Consistent with the literature, this study found that a lack of time to commit to school was the most cited situational barrier among C2C applicants.

Higher education institutions cannot eliminate all barriers faced by adult learners (Deutsch & Schmertz, 2011), but wraparound services and programs can be created to help

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alleviate them. The C2C program was created in response to the need to meet current workforce demands, and it has several program offerings to address barriers to degree completion among adult learners. However, results of this study revealed that aspects of the program have impeded degree attainment. A program expectation is that C2C Coaches follow-up with applicants within seven days of them applying to the program, and that they establish checkpoints throughout the student's enrollment journey to ensure the student remains on the path to degree completion. Participants of this study shared that a lack of communication with and follow-up from C2C Coaches is a barrier to degree completion.

Recommendations for Practice

The information produced by this study is intended for C2C State Office Staff, C2C Coaches, policymakers, and coordinators of other adult degree completion initiatives. The following recommendations to C2C State Office Staff and C2C Coaches are suggestions based on the findings of this study. These recommendations include quarterly evaluation of the C2C program and a streamlined process of C2C Coach communication.

C2C State Office Staff

It is recommended that C2C State Office Staff evaluate the C2C program on a quarterly basis. By doing so, it is likely that gaps within the program are quickly identified and addressed, resulting in a more effective and efficient program. Evaluations should also include one-on-one meetings with C2C Coaches at all the participating institutions as a means to assess C2C Coaches' performance based on established program expectations and to provide feedback for improvement. Implementing consistent evaluation techniques serves the purpose of strengthening the quality of the C2C program and determining whether the program is achieving its mission and making a difference.

C2C Coaches

For C2C Coaches, it is recommended that a streamlined communications process is established to ensure consistent and timely C2C applicant contact. Coaches should utilize the C2C dashboard to track when an attempt has been made to contact an applicant and to input detailed comments for next steps. Weekly visits to the C2C dashboard to follow-up on outlined next steps is imperative to maintain communication consistency. If a coach is experiencing hardships that result in a backlog of applicants who have not been contacted, this information needs to be promptly shared with the C2C program administrator to advise on the best course of action.

Limitations

A total of 9,345 individuals were invited to participate in this study. Of that number, 167 completed the survey resulting in a response rate of 1.8%. This extremely small response rate did not allow for the results to be representative of the total population, thus indicating that the findings of this study are less generalizable. A possible reason for the low response rate is a lack of incentive for completing the survey; therefore, it is recommended that for future research, an element for incentivizing survey completion is utilized.

While the survey included two open-ended questions that captured qualitative data, the overall study was quantitative in nature. Consequently, this research project did not allow for an opportunity for the researcher to obtain in-depth account into the individual experiences of study participants to gain a better understanding of why they made the decision not to engage in the process to complete their degree. Considering this limitation, it is recommended for future research that data be collected utilizing a qualitative method such as interviews or focus groups. In spite of its limitations, this study certainly adds to the understanding of perceived barriers to

degree completion among C2C program applicants and provides valuable insights into how the program itself, which was designed to address barriers faced by program participants, has elements that have become additional barriers for the very individuals targeted to assist.

Recommendations for Future Research

Findings from this study direct possible opportunities for future research. The information provided will aid coordinators of adult learner initiatives in developing effective strategies for program participants. It is recommended that a replication of this study on another adult learner initiative is implemented to compare results. Additionally, future researchers could follow-up with a selected number of willing survey respondents to conduct an interview. Doing so can lead to more in-depth information shared by the research subject and assist the researcher in better understanding the participants' experiences.

Conclusion

This study was designed to determine the perceived barriers to degree completion among C2C applicants. A survey was utilized to collect both quantitative and qualitative data required to answer the research question. The survey consisted of nine questions and data from 167 C2C applicants was analyzed.

Data revealed that themes of perceived barriers of degree completion among C2C applicants is consistent with the findings of previous research as described in Chapter Two. Furthermore, it was found from this study that failure in program representatives being committed to and following through on prompt communication with program applicants will become an additional barrier encountered by program participants. This study has the potential to equip C2C State Office Staff with an understanding of how to better serve the adult learner population, resulting in a more efficient and effective program.

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APPENDIX A

Questionnaire

Perceived Barriers to Degree Completion Among C2C Applicants

Intro
Thank you for participating in my survey. This survey has only 9 questions and should take you about 5-15 minutes to complete. There are no right or wrong answers. I am interested in how you feel, so please answer truthfully.

Project Information
Title: Complete 2 Compete Applicant Perceptions of Barriers to Degree Completion
Principal Investigator: Amber Palmer
Phone: ███████████
Email: ████████████████

Research Description
Purpose: The Complete 2 Compete (C2C) initiative was developed out of the need to increase the number of adults with a postsecondary credential in order to satisfy workforce demands. To date, over 19,000 individuals have applied to participate in the program. Of this number, 9,345 later declined to participate. The purpose of this study is to identify the perceived barriers of degree complete among the C2C applicants who declined to participate in the program. Doing so will equip the C2C state office staff with an understanding of how to better serve this population, resulting in a more efficient and effective program.

Description of Study: All 9,345 individuals referenced above will be invited to participate in the study by completing a survey. The survey will be launched during the Fall of 2021. The survey will require approximately 15 minutes of the participants' time and will not restrict their normal activities.

Benefits: As a result of participating in this study, future C2C applicants, current C2C students, and stakeholders will benefit. Data collected and analyzed from participants' responses will assist the C2C state office staff with better serving the target population. Additionally, limited

research is available with regards to perceived barriers of adult learners who are not entering college for the first time. Therefore, an added benefit of participating in the study will be the contribution of research related to this specific population of adult learners.

Risks: There are no known risks associated with participation in this study.

Confidentiality: No identifying information will be requested from participants. Participants' survey responses are 100% anonymous and the investigator will not be able to associate the data with individual participants. The website utilized to host the survey does not link an individual's responses to their email addresses.

Alternate Procedures: N/A

Participant's Assurance: This project and this consent form have been reviewed by the Institutional Review Board, which ensures that research projects involving human subjects follow federal regulations. Any questions or concerns about rights as a research participant should be directed to the Chair of the Institutional Review Board, The University of Southern Mississippi, 118 College Drive #5125, Hattiesburg, MS 39406-0001, 601-266-5997. Any questions about this research project should be directed to the Principal Investigator using the contact information provided above.

Consent to Participate

I understand that participation in this project is completely voluntary, and I may withdraw at any time without penalty, prejudice, or loss of benefits. Unless described above, all personal information will be kept strictly confidential, including my name and other identifying information. All procedures to be followed and their purposes were explained to me. Information was given about all benefits, risks, inconveniences, or discomforts that might be expected. Any new information that develops during the project will be provided to me if that information may affect my willingness to continue participation in the project.

Consent
CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

By clicking "I Agree" below, I give my consent to participate in this research.

○ I Agree (1)

○ I Do NOT Agree (2)

Q1 What is your gender?

○ Male (1)

○ Female (2)

○ Non-binary / third gender (3)

○ Prefer not to say (4)

Q2 With which race/ethnicity(ies) do you identify? Select all that apply.

☐   American Indian/Alaskan Native (1)

☐   Asian or Pacific Islander (2)

☐   Black or African American (3)

☐   Hispanic or Latino (4)

☐   Multi-racial (5)

☐   Other (6)

Q3 What is your age range?

○ 21-25 (1)

○ 26-30 (2)

○ 31-35 (3)

○ 36-40 (4)

○ 41-45 (5)

○ 46-50 (6)

○ 51 and over (7)

Q4 How many adults in your home contribute to household income and duties?

○ 1 (1)

○ 2 (2)

○ 3 (3)

○ 4 or more (4)

Q5 How many children do you have?

○ 0 (1)

○ 1 (2)

○ 2 (3)

○ 3 (4)

○ 4 or more (5)

Q6 Which of the following best describes your workforce status?

○ employed full-time (1)

○ employed part-time (2)

○ not working but seeking work (3)

○ retired (4)

○ disabled (5)

○ stay at home parent (6)

○ other (7) _____

Q7 Please rate your level of agreement with each statement.

	Strongly Agree (1)	Agree (2)	Neither (3)	Disagree (4)	Strongly Disagree (5)
I'd like to return to school, but I feel I don't have what it takes to succeed. (1)	○	○	○	○	○
I don't think completing my degree is worth the investment of time and money. (2)	○	○	○	○	○
I'd like to return to school, but I'm unsure if I have the time. (3)	○	○	○	○	○
I'd like to return to school, but I can't afford it. (4)	○	○	○	○	○
My employer does not support me going back to school. (5)	○	○	○	○	○
I'd like to return to school, but I don't know where to start. (6)	○	○	○	○	○
My family responsibilities do not allow me to return to school at this time. (7)	○	○	○	○	○

Q8 What initially prompted you to consider going back to school to complete your degree?

_____

Q9 For what reason(s) did you decide not to enroll through C2C to complete your degree?

_____

End of Block: General

APPENDIX B

IRB Approval Letter

Office *of*
Research integrity

THE UNIVERSITY OF
SOUTHERN
MISSISSIPPI.

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Modification Institutional Review Board Approval

The University of Southern Mississippi's Office of Research Integrity has received the notice of your modification for your submission COMPLETE 2 COMPETE APPLICANT PERCEPTIONS OF BARRIERS TO DEGREE COMPLETION (IRB #: IRB-21-177).

Your modification has been reviewed by The University of Southern Mississippi Institutional Review Board in accordance with Federal Drug Administration regulations (21 CFR 26, 111), Department of Health and Human Services regulations (45 CFR Part 46), and University Policy to ensure:

- The risks to subjects are minimized and reasonable in relation to the anticipated benefits.
- The selection of subjects is equitable.
- Informed consent is adequate and appropriately documented.
- Where appropriate, the research plan makes adequate provisions for monitoring the data collected to ensure the safety of the subjects.
- Where appropriate, there are adequate provisions to protect the privacy of subjects and to maintain the confidentiality of all data.
- Appropriate additional safeguards have been included to protect vulnerable subjects.
- Any unanticipated, serious, or continuing problems encountered involving risks to subjects must be reported immediately. Problems should be reported to ORI via the Incident template on Cayuse IRB.
- The period of approval is twelve months. An application for renewal must be submitted for projects exceeding twelve months.

PROTOCOL NUMBER: IRB-21-177
PROJECT TITLE: COMPLETE 2 COMPETE APPLICANT PERCEPTIONS OF BARRIERS TO DEGREE COMPLETION
SCHOOL/PROGRAM: Educational Research and Admin
RESEARCHER(S): Amber Palmer , Masha Krsmanovic

IRB COMMITTEE ACTION: Approved

7. Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

PERIOD OF APPROVAL: September 7, 2021

Donald Sacco, Ph.D.
Institutional Review Board Chairperson