

UNFIXING THE DOCTORATE FROM GENDER AND AGE (PART I):
A REPORT ON THE SPECIAL CIRCUMSTANCES OF OLDER WOMEN
PURSUING AN ENGLISH-RELATED PH.D.

A RESEARCH PAPER SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS

FOR THE DEGREE

MASTER OF ARTS

BY

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JULY 2017

Background

Recent studies call into question the traditional doctorate and its application to contemporary contexts in and outside academia, especially for an increasing number of graduate students who also do not fit the historic archetype in that they are neither male nor young. Nontraditional-age women often find the doctoral process not that far removed from what Douglas Archbald describes as the “fixed-term” traditional degree, emerging from longstanding European traditions of scholarly inquiry and research in traditional structures: on-campus residency with subsidized housing, brick-and-mortar classrooms, laboratories, and libraries, two to three years of coursework, plus several more to write the dissertation, often in conjunction with a paid teaching assistantship to help defray tuition and living expenses (8). Historically, the traditional doctoral student was a young adult, white male who continued on to graduate school directly or shortly after obtaining his bachelor’s degree (the latter being a term the *Oxford Dictionary of the Middle Ages* traces to vernaculars signifying a single male).

Archbald suggests that the contemporary definitions of a traditional doctorate should be less fixed, as the demographics of higher education widen, the number and variety of programs of study increase, and more institutions compete for the growing demand for doctorates, while the number of assumptive tenure-track positions at end of the historic doctoral path decreases. The role gender plays in defining the contemporary doctorate has been studied extensively (Bivens et al.; Miller; Enos; Offerman; Perna) as it accounts for one of the largest swings in doctoral demographics. In the 1920s, roughly 12 percent of advanced degree seekers were female (Archbald 14); in 2014, approximately 46 percent of the 54,070 doctorates awarded were to women, according to the annual *Doctorate Recipients from U.S. Universities* report (NSF 2). The total number of doctorate recipients for both men and women has increased every year since

2010, but the growth for men is slower and declining in some humanities programs (NSF 3). Specific to this study, of the 5,599 degrees awarded in humanities and the arts in 2015, 51 percent were to women (NSF Table 6). The total number of completed doctorates in rhetoric and composition has only been reported since 2012, when 154 were identified, compared to 240 in 2015, and of those, 62.9 were women (NSF Tables 13 and 16). The significant increase in female graduate students is, however, only one factor in remapping paths to a Ph.D.

The doctoral population is also aging, tied to growth in adult education with corresponding opportunities for part-time and distance learning in the pursuit of professional doctorate (Archibald 13). The median age of doctoral recipients in 2014 was 31.4 for men and 31.9 for women, but the discrepancy between the genders grows after age 40, with 6.2 percent of female and 5.3 percent of male graduates ages 41-45 and 10.2 percent of female and 5.7 of male recipients over 45 (NSF Table 27). While 72 percent of women earning doctorates in 2014 were 35 years of age or younger (NSF Table 27), this study is interested in the remaining 28 percent, those who have spent significant time outside the academy before pursuing their doctorates. For this group, time-to-degree may fall outside the median, a calculation heavily influenced by young adult students who take a linear path in pursuit of their first career, or what Archibald calls the “pre-career” doctorate reminiscent of the fixed traditional definition (10). Taken as a whole, the time between entering graduate school and earning a doctorate has decreased over the past 20 years, especially in education (from 16 years in 1994 to less than 12 years in 2014); in the humanities, the median time-to-degree decreased from 10 to 9 years (NSF 6). In English, the average time-to-degree is nine years (Golde and Walker 352). Nevertheless, expectations of completion in five to seven years persist among institutional administrations and in-coming graduate students (Archibald 10). This difference of a few years in the expectations and reality of

time-to-degree can be significant for women who get a later start on their studies, and, therefore, may have fewer years to reap the benefits of a doctorate than those who begin in their twenties.

But post-degree expectations may be different for women who begin at a point when other academics their age are reaching the height of their careers or winding down toward retirement, particularly in a contemporary environment with decreasing opportunities for the fixed-traditional goal of tenure. Regardless of age or gender, the proportion of doctorate recipients with commitments for employment or postdoctoral study is in decline, and the percentage with such plans is lower in the humanities, at 55 percent, compared to education, physical or social sciences, at 65-70 percent (NSF 9). Generally, there is a downward trend in the number of tenure-track positions, especially in particular fields and for courses with a large number of sections (Taylor 47; AAUP 170). Tenure itself is under attack in the United States, including legislation in Wisconsin (Flaherty “Wisconsin”), Iowa, and Missouri demanding the elimination of tenure in publically funded institutions (Flaherty “Legislation”). The American Association of University Professors notes a growing number of faculty categories outside tenure-track, with distinct titles, responsibilities, rights, and privileges (170); however, since these categories vary among – and often within – institutions, it is difficult to identify, let alone inform prospective graduate students, about these non-tenure alternatives that now make up the majority of career options they will likely explore.

Specific to this study of fields related to English: although tenure-track positions are not an impossible goal for nontraditional-age academics, contingent employment is more likely, particularly for women in who are place-bound because of familial or other obligations, both of which are likely for older women. The intersection of gender and contingency in composition instruction has been examined for decades. Theresa Enos’ seminal 1996 study of male and

female writing instructors, *Gender Roles and Faculty Lives in Rhetoric and Composition*, touched on age briefly in discussing a question about whether respondents considered their academic careers nontraditional (23). Building on Enos' work, in 2013, Bivens et al. argued that most women in academia still cannot "make it" as defined in 1997 by Ballif, Davis, and Mountford in *Women's Ways of Making It in Rhetoric and Composition*. In 1991, Susan Miller referred to women who took on contingent faculty positions as the "sad women in the basement," valued only for their role in maintaining the comfort of those on the upper levels of the institution: tenured faculty members who prefer to teach graduate courses and support those who will follow their traditional path into academia (121). Such hierarchal segmentation reinforces inequities in compensation and academic recourses, and makes moving from one status to another difficult (Perna 586). While tenure-track appointments of women increased 22 percent between the mid-1970s through mid-1990s, the increase of women in non-tenure track positions increased 142 percent during the same period (Perna 585). This growth is often tied to the demand for undergraduate core classes such as English, which require the kind of trained instructors that doctoral programs provide in teaching assistants and early-career graduates. These roles may be seen as temporary rights-of-passage – a few years paying academic dues, doing research and publishing, until prime positions open up. But, while Golde and Walker report that more than half of English Ph.D.s are eventually able to find tenure-track positions, that leaves almost as many who do not (353). Instead, these Ph.D.s work outside the academy, where they are not recognized members of the profession and are invisible to potential graduate students (353). Taken as a whole, "The life of a doctoral student in English...is characterized by slow progress toward uncertain job prospects" (Golde and Walker 352). While scholarship on these issues is growing (AAUP; Bousquet et al.; CAW 2012), none has been located that

specifically addresses the double-bind for older female students who arrive late to pursue a time-intensive degree program with hopes for advancement during a shorter career span than their younger classmates.

There are also significant gaps in examining a related component of a fixed-term doctorate: how nontraditional-age women finance their studies. Reports do not break down demographics beyond broad fields of study and gender; however, some general trends can be seen. Overall, research and teaching assistantships continue to be the most significant source of funds reported, and fewer doctoral students rely on loans or personal earnings and savings than in past years, while fellowships or grants have remained stable since 2004 (NSF 5). Breakdowns by field reveal higher percentages of financial support in almost all categories for doctoral students in life sciences compared to those in humanities (NSF Table 37). For example, 36.4 percent of women earning doctorates in 2015 in life sciences cited grants as part of their financial support, compared to only 12.1 of women in the humanities (NSF Table 37). While teaching and research assistantships contributed 21.3 and 28.3 percent respectively to the financial support of women in life sciences, these percentages for women in the humanities were 15.7 and 6.9 (NSF Table 37). Loans of any type were reported by 19.1 percent of women in life sciences and 15.1 percent of those in humanities. Personal earnings while attending graduate school were cited by about the same percentage of women in both broad areas: 18 (NSF Table 37). However, the fact that half of students pursue doctorates part-time (many while working full-time) might indicate a need for further differentiation by life-stage, with older graduate students more likely to be financially responsible for themselves *and* supporting dependent children who may be pursuing their own degrees. While some parents may have saved to fund their children's undergraduate studies, few likely had the foresight to set aside funds for their own graduate studies. And, while

Kiplinger's reports that most financial aid programs have no age restrictions, it cautions that older students need to consider how their shorter career life, compared to those who graduate in their 20s and 30s, will affect their ability to pay back loans before their retire. Other funding sources such as company tuition assistance and tuition discounts or waivers for "seniors" are available on a case-by-case basis, as are tax incentives such as Lifetime Learning credit, but there is no evidence of widespread institutional support for nontraditional-age students who are trying to navigate the maze of funding their own graduate education (Sousa 48).

As a group, the older female doctoral student remains under-reported and under-studied. While factors such as gender, race, ethnicity, language, and first-generation students have been examined, especially at the undergraduate level, their intersection with age and the pursuit of an advanced degree has not. The experiences of women who begin their doctoral studies beyond the age of 30, when most women who pursue a doctorate are finishing, bear further examination.

Purpose of the Research Project

The purpose of this study is to identify areas of concern specific to women who begin pursuing graduate degrees in the United States later than a traditional age, to inform revisions in and expectations of higher education for a growing population of adult learners. Current efforts focus on older doctoral students in the field of rhetoric and composition. Results from Part I of the study will be used to plan further research to contribute to the understanding of the terrain women graduate students of nontraditional ages must navigate as they participate in programs that were not designed with them in mind. The following research questions framed Part I:

1. How do self-identifying "nontraditional" female academics describe their motivations for pursuing an advanced degree?

2. What challenges and obstacles have been experienced by those identifying as “nontraditional women in academia”?
3. What support and rewards do nontraditional-age female graduate students experience?

Methodology

In its entirety, this is a mixed-methods study that will analyze three overlapping sets of data, searching for convergence among multiple and different sources of information to form themes or categories (Creswell and Miller 126). The researchers will also use validity procedures that include self-disclosure and collaboration with participants in the study, reflexivity in tracking for bias through thick description, checking-in with responders, and utilizing theories and multiple investigators (Creswell and Miller 127).

The study will include the following sets of data:

1. (Part I) An anonymous survey of academics self-identifying as nontraditional and female. The survey opened on October 25, 2015 and was closed at the end of December 2015.
2. (Part II) In-depth interviews with survey respondents who agreed to them.
3. Literature review of issues related to nontraditional-age female academics. These sources were collected and analyzed during and after the survey.

This report outlines only the findings of the first data set. In order to examine the life conditions of women who pursue graduate degrees at nontraditional ages, a 14-question survey was distributed electronically (via hyperlink to Qualtrics) during the fourth quarter of 2015. The convenience sampling began in connection with a collaborative interactive presentation on the topic “Women’s Ways of Making It (Off the Tenure Track)” at the 2015 Feminism and Rhetoric

conference at Arizona State University, Oct. 28-31 (Evans et al.). Fliers outlining the study and providing the survey hyperlink were distributed during the conference and via email on the listserv of the Coalition of Women Scholars in the History of Rhetoric and Composition, the listserv of Writing Program Administrators, and the Writing Center Mailing List. Respondents were encouraged to forward the invitation to participate in the survey to other women who were pursuing or had pursued graduate work as nontraditional-age students. Each researcher also shared the survey with members of her own institution and with friends and colleagues who then passed it on. Within those parameters, respondents were self-selected and anonymous.

Results

A total of 270 respondents began the survey in late October 2015, and a consistent 207 responses were completed by the end of December 2015. The total number of responses to each question varied, as none were forced responses¹ and the option for “no response” was provided to each question. The population of responders to the survey represented the target of women pursuing advanced degrees related to English or Rhetoric and Composition at nontraditional ages. Of the 206 respondents to the question about what decade of life they decided to go back to school for an advanced degree, slightly more than half (105) were in their 30s, 30 percent (62) in their 40s, 10 percent (21) in their 50s, and two responders made the choice in their 60s or beyond. Another 16 did not indicate their age; nevertheless, it is clear the response population consists largely of women who began their advanced degrees between the ages of 30 and 50 (Figure 1), which puts their graduation age well beyond the 2014 median of 31.9 and within the

¹ Qualtrics Polling Software provides a number of validation options to encourage respondents to answer questions before moving on in a survey. When “force response” is applied to a question, the respondent cannot move forward in the survey without first answering the question. There was concern this tactic might appear coercive and cause some volunteers to abandon the survey, so it was not adopted in Part I.

28 percent minority of women who were older than 35 when they earned doctorates (NSF Table 27). By comparison, and according to their own definition, most survey responders were nontraditional-age doctoral students.

Half the respondents (51 percent of 251 responses to the open-ended question) pursued degrees in English and/or Rhetoric and Composition, another 7 percent in Literature, and 5 percent in fields related to Writing (Figure 2). Education and English Education were represented in 8 percent of responses. Communication and Medical-related fields such as Nursing were identified by 3 and 2 percent of respondents. Eleven percent of responses represented numerous other fields such as History, Library Science, and Psychology. Many of those falling in the latter miscellaneous category also identified English or Rhetoric as a second graduate degree, therefore meeting the survey target group of English-related studies.

Fifty-two percent of responders identified as nontraditional females in pursuit of a doctorate; 41 percent identified as master's students (Figure 3). Some overlap is assumed, in that many of those who pursued a doctorate likely also completed a master's degree.² About 80 percent of English doctoral students earned a master's degree in English, according to the 2006 Carnegie Essays on the Doctorate (Golde and Walker, 352). The majority of respondents identified as full-time students when pursuing their advanced degree (Figure 4). The majority of responders – 65 percent (153) of the 236 responding to the question -- had completed their advanced degrees (Figure 5) and, of the 81 who had not finished their degree, 69, or 96 percent, planned to finish. Here again, some overlap is assumed, based on comments from responders

² The language of the options in the survey was “M.A.” and “Ph.D.” Based on the diversity of programs and degrees reported in other areas of the survey, in future research, questions related to degrees pursued may be modified to allow for master's or Ph.D. only, or both, and an option for “Other” to capture other types of degrees or certificates.

who indicated their status fluctuated depending on work and family situations. One respondent, in particular, explained how her shifting academic role was heavily influenced by funding:

I worked in hourly and clerical staff positions at the university for 17 years, putting my children through college as well as earning my own tuition. The phrase in use by some for women who work like this is ‘tuition whore.’...I tell people I quit my job to become a graduate assistant (and then an adjunct) because I needed to have teaching experience if I hoped to get a job. The older I got the more professors told me this was true; but once I was dependent on grad assistant income, the money dried up because I didn't come into the program as a full-time student with a full funding commitment. I had to apply each year, and was only eligible if someone left the program and there was an unexpected open line. Don't get me wrong! I was grateful when it happened; but the uncertainty and the need to hunt for (adjunct) jobs every year cut into my productivity and lengthened the dissertation process. Some of the health and family issues I encountered might not have happened had I been able to concentrate on teaching and writing more and job hunting less (and thus finished faster).

Answers to a question about positions served revealed that survey responders had or were working across an academic spectrum. More than half the 204 responders identified as past or present graduate assistants, which fits with funding support figures (NSF 5) (Figure 6). Almost 55 percent of responders were or had been part-time contingent faculty; while this is higher than the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) 2011 figure of 41.5 percent of faculty in higher education as part-time (Curtis 1), it can be assumed that some responders were no longer in these positions. Still, according to a study conducted in 2011 by the AAUP, 76 percent of instructional staff are contingent, non-tenure-track, or graduate student employees (2),

with approximately 51 percent of those female (18). This range of positions is represented in respondents to the survey, who also provided further insight into their sometimes-patchwork academic lives, such as: “I am an adjunct here but also served in a tenure-track position in the public schools K-12.”

Additionally, one-third of the survey responders were or had been tenure-track and 17 percent were tenured faculty, as compared to AAUP’s numbers of 6.9 and 16.6 respectively (Curtis 1). One-quarter were or had been non-tenure-track faculty and about the same percent identified as full-time contingent faculty; these numbers are higher than AAUP’s reported full-time, non-tenure-track faculty at 15.7 percent. Almost 37 percent of responders identified as administrative or staff, and another 12 percent selected none of the above. It is difficult to put these numbers into perspective without further details on the types of positions they represent, but the percentages do reflect concerns raised by AAUP and others that the number of administrative positions is trending up, even as tenured positions trend down. Of respondents who offered further details, four percent identified with writing program or writing center roles (tutor, coordinator, or director), several listed administrative titles such as IT director, department head, and endowed chair, and two were employed in full-time non-academic work. Comments included the following:

My “other” position is a full-time staff position as Writing Center Administrator. I am contingent faculty at another university.

I am currently an at-will tutor in a writing center at a for-profit online institution.

I direct a writing program at a small liberal arts college.

Whether answers to this particular query on the survey are generally representative of nontraditional-age women pursuing doctorates in English-related field will be explored in the

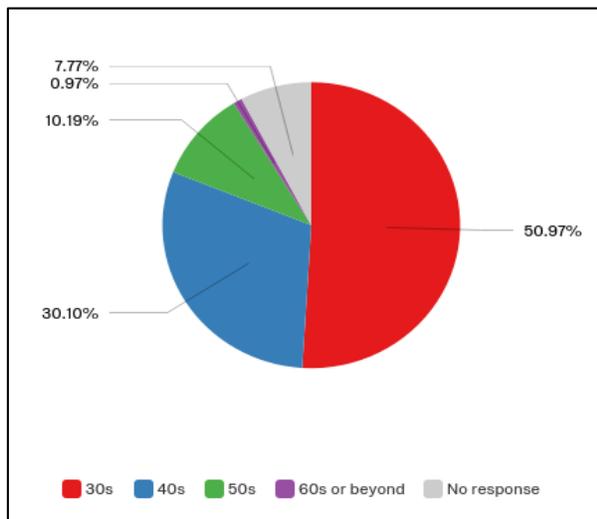


Figure 2 Decade of life pursued advanced degree

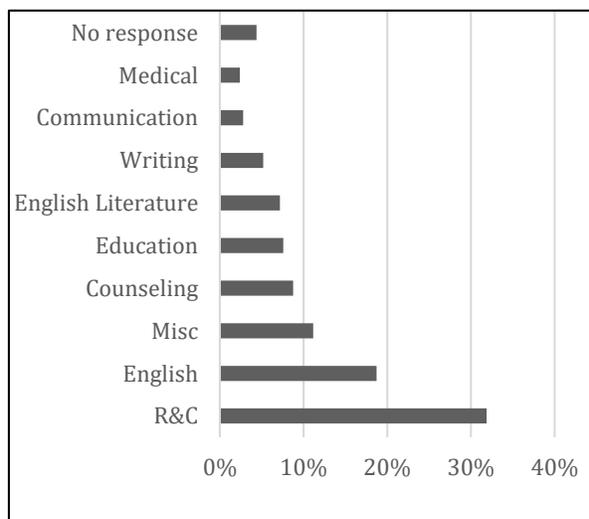


Figure 2 Fields of study

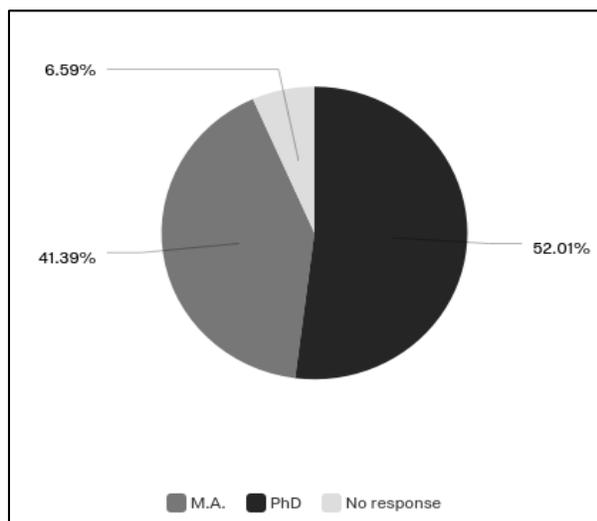


Figure 3 Degrees pursued

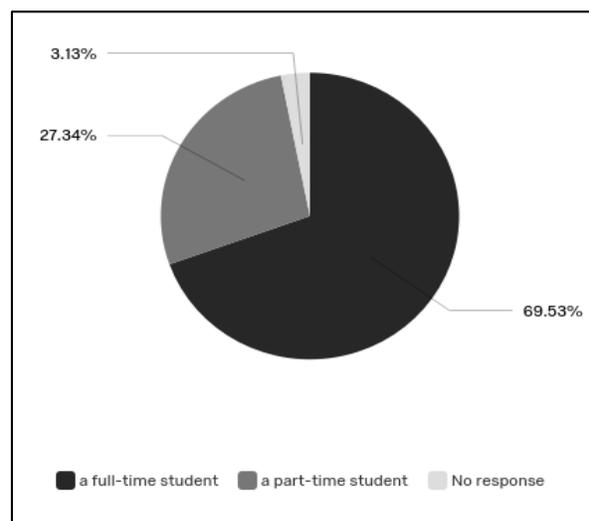


Figure 1 Full- and/or part-time student

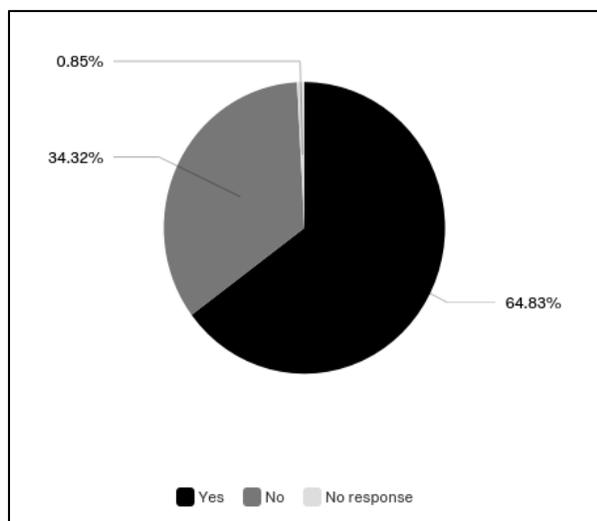


Figure 4 Percent completed degrees

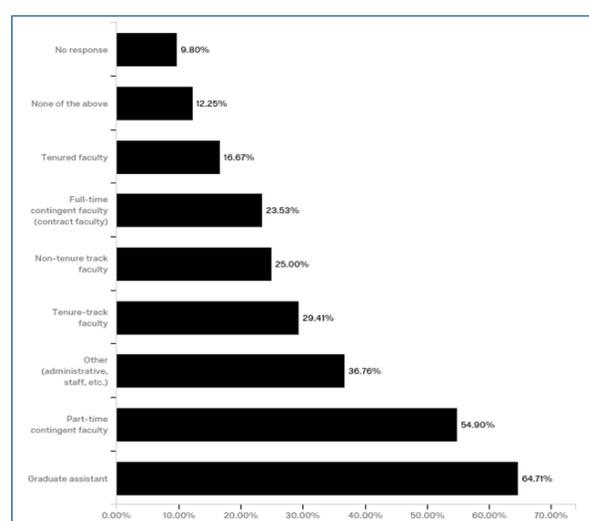


Figure 3 Positions served

study's next stage, but they call into question the fixed-term assumption of a tenure-track professional destination for everyone. Nevertheless, professional advancement was the main goal for survey respondents (Figure 7). A "more satisfying career" was selected by 68 percent. Comments coded to this category mentioned tenure or aspects associated with tenure, such as research, and institutional influence:

Ability to do research and get grants.

Desire to carry out research and publish academic work as a central part of my life, not as a hobby.

I went back to earn an MS...and became very interested in research so I continued to earn a Ph.D.

Recognized the only way to have a tenure track job was with terminal degree.

More influence in institutional structure.

Another 49 percent chose "desire for better employment" as a motivation, and job loss was identified by three percent. Comments coded here were based on a deficit:

Faculty looked down on me as an adjunct, and were verbal about it.

Part-time contingent faculty status sucks.

Working for a for-profit in a smaller writing center absolutely sucks. I have to get out of here.

To be sure to have a back-up plan if my boss who did not like me decided to fire me.

When I finished my BA at age 32 I didn't feel prepared to do anything with my degree in English--so went to an MA program out of desperation. Way led onto way and I ended up pursuing my Ph.D.

Personal rewards also were important, with 43 percent of respondents selecting “long-time dream” and almost as many choosing “life-time learning.” Comments offering further explanation often included these categories, plus changes in family situations:

At age 44, one daughter in college, one a HS senior, and a husband in a successful career, it was time for me to pursue something I'd wanted all my life. Did it for my intellectual growth, knowing there was more to life than the limits I'd put on myself.

Moving to possible obstacles to obtaining an advanced degree, a question about debt incurred revealed that more than one-third of respondents had no student debt, another quarter had debt of less than \$40,000, but 18 percent were responsible for more than \$60,000 in debt (Figure 8). Given these responses, it is no surprise that financial issues were also cited by half the respondents as the biggest obstacle to completion of their degree (Figure 9) and addressed in their comments:

It is tough and embarrassing to be so broke at my age (mid 40s).

Lack of gainful employment with mounting debt. Still living below the poverty guidelines as a single mom. Been on the job hunt almost a year to no luck.

The next most frequently cited obstacle, by 36 percent of those responding to the question, was family relationships. Comments revealed some details about the pressure pursuing advanced degrees puts on respondents' families, including childcare, which was identified as an obstacle by 27 percent of respondents:

My husband's own advanced degree work was at a different institution 400 miles away. Our children lived with me, but the separation was hard on us all. My dissertation director was upset that I chose to move back home and do adjunct teaching while I finished my dissertation.

When I finished my BA I was a single mother, about to remarry. It never occurred to me that being in a marriage and going back to school might come into conflict. As it turned out, my spouse has remained unconvinced of the value of higher education, and it was only because I landed a job at a university that I was able to take courses.

I have adequate childcare, but I am concerned that I am abusing family offers to do childcare and of course I want the time with my children.

Emotional health was identified as an obstacle by one-third of respondents and physical health by 16 percent. Comments indicated the health of others, as well as that of respondents, were concerns:

It was exhausting working full-time while going to school part-time and completing my MSW internships. My mother was also terminally ill at the time and I assisted in her care. My biggest obstacles came from trying to deal with some overwhelming personal tragedies while still meeting my educational responsibilities.

I found some of the physical challenges of being a graduate student (and of being an adjunct instructor) difficult for someone my age. In that regard, I felt the program was not entirely sensitive to the needs of students of all ages.

An institution or program's sensitivity to the special circumstances of nontraditional-age students was coded to the 22 percent of respondents who identified relationships with professors, advisors, and mentors as obstacles. Comments also cited difficult relationships with other students.

Intellectual challenges--I did not realize that a doctoral program would require us all to think alike and spout the same rhetoric--I thought, idealistically, that we were supposed to

think for ourselves--as an older, independent women, I found this nonsense to be most difficult.

It was hard to fit in with my peers who were younger. My instructors were about my age, and while I would say I got along with them, I still did not quite fit in. In addition, I really think my status made it hard to find part time work that would help me pay for school after I got to graduate school. I am not sure what the shift in perception was for those employers, but with all of my 20 years of retail experience, I simply could not find a job much of the time.

One respondent, who also commented on childcare and work, recognized the need to connect with colleagues: “Since I am attending part-time, I know I need to be more overt in building relationships with cohort members and professors/mentors.” But she remained convinced the effort to balance all her roles was worthwhile: “On the other hand, doing this degree scratches my itchy brain and I think it's good for my kids to see me working hard.”

The time required to balance multiple roles was mentioned by 27 of those who added comments to the obstacle question:

Time! Not enough time in the day to do all my schoolwork and take care of my family.

Finding the time between work and motherhood.

Time constraints -- I have a full-time job, and two small children. I often find a strong tension between my professors' expectations and my family obligations.

That is not to say that respondents had no assistance from family, friends, and colleagues in pursuing their advanced degrees (Figure 10). Among the 204 responding to the question about perceived level of support, 63 percent ranked it high or very high, another 28 percent said there

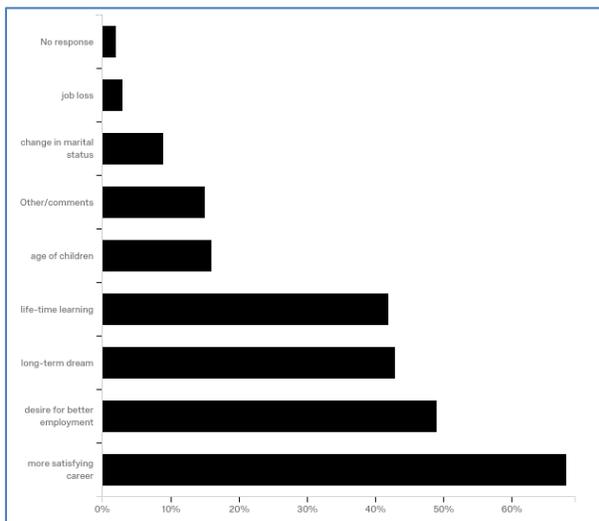


Figure 5 Reasons for pursuing graduate degree

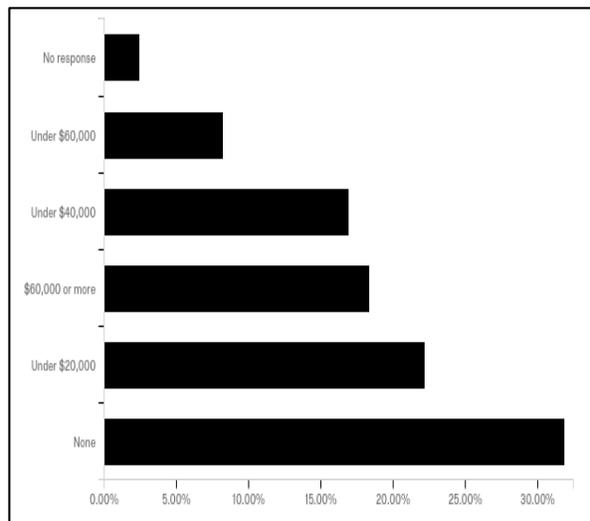


Figure 8 Debt incurred

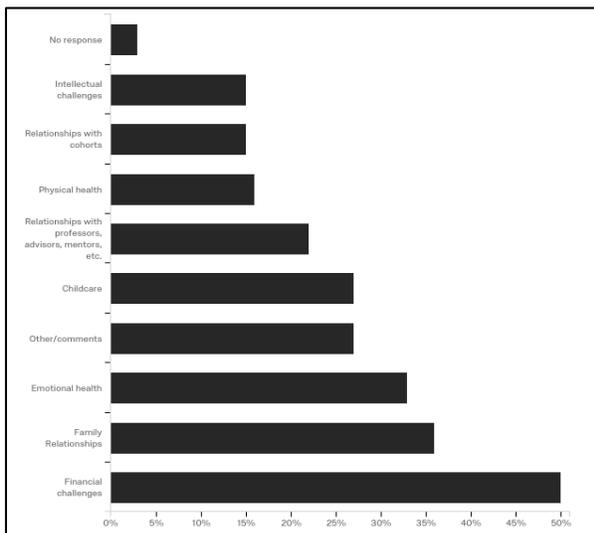


Figure 9 Obstacles

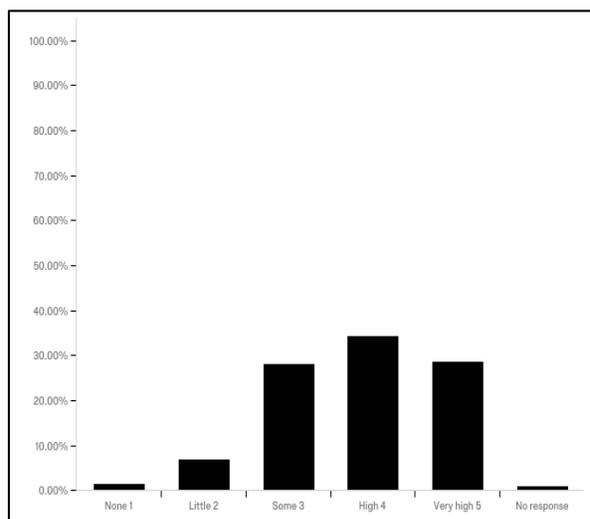


Figure 10 Perceived level of support: family, friends, colleagues

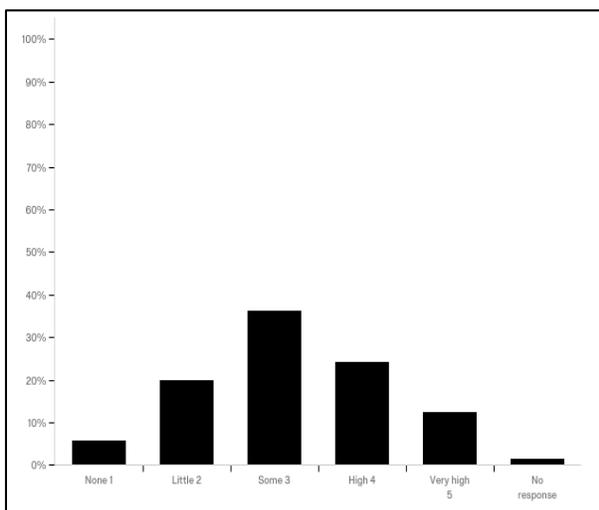


Figure 11 Perceived level of professional support

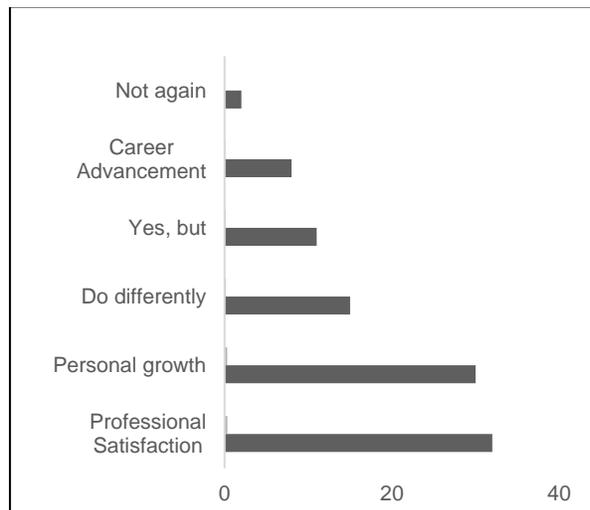


Figure 12 Do again?

was some support, and only eight percent said there was little or no support. Sometimes, however, supportiveness was mixed.

...my husband's support has been very high; other family members, fairly high; lost some friends in the process, namely other wives/mothers/stay-at-home women who couldn't understand why I was doing it.

Perceived levels of professional support from the degree-granting institution (job search advice, preparing for interviews, publishing, etc.) was not as high as that of family and friends (Figure 11). Thirty-seven percent of the 207 respondent said they experienced high or very high support, 36 percent said there was some support, and 27 percent said there was little to no professional support in their pursuit of an advanced degree. Comments included:

Dissertation advisor was not helpful and unfortunately the only one who know anything about my topic.

Objections from home dept (sic) when I reached exam stage; support from interdisciplinary committee overseeing my work. But lack of mentors actually in the field.

When I started, I was working full time and taking courses part time. I was not meeting peers in the corridors, sharing TA training, added to the listservs for departmental news, given a mailbox, or informed of events, opportunities, or warned about deadlines. It appeared to me that I was not considered a "real" student.

Despite spotty support and significant obstacles, more than 88 percent of the respondents said they would pursue their advanced degree again (Figure 12). In examining the more than 90 comments to this question, 33 percent were related to professional satisfaction, such as:

My new degree was a better "fit" for me than my old profession had become...and I was also fortunate in finding professional-level work in my new field.

I can't imagine doing anything else that would be as professionally satisfying.

Time would have passed anyway. It was a challenge but I came out of it with a degree, a job, and a career. I can't imagine where I would be now if I hadn't have pursued this path.

Thirty-one percent of the comments cited reasons related to personal growth, especially intellectually, but also in other ways:

I chose my doctoral program very selectively and was ready to go back full-time at age 30. (I completed my M.A. part-time, evenings and over the summer prior to that.) I can genuinely say that my 5 years in doctoral work were the best 5 years of my adult life in terms of camaraderie, stimulation, and socializing. Many of my peers were also non-traditional. My spouse and I found good community there. My spouse was employed, so that helped his emotional health and our combined financial well-being.

I learned to respect my own intellectual abilities. I have found that many undergraduate women that I teach likewise doubt their own intellectual abilities and I am glad that I am now in a position to nurture them--for whatever they choose to do.

It was very rewarding on both an intellectual and emotional level. It gave me, not only confidence in what I can accomplish, but also security that I will be doing something that I love in my future.

It was one of the most satisfying experiences of my entire life. It continues to help me broaden my view of the world.

Fifteen percent of comments confirmed the respondents would pursue her degree again, but with some different choices in the field they chose and other aspects related to their age:

While I would probably would seek my PhD, I would probably try to finish it prior to having children (although I wouldn't give them back for the world).

I would, but I would have more courageous in seeking out alternatives that benefitted my family while I was graduate school. Instead, I tried to be in school as though I was a traditional graduate student and used loans to accommodate what the traditional model does not allow for.

I might do it again, but differently -- I would be conscious of the job market in a productive way, would have published more, been more active in proactively seeking information I didn't get from my advisors. I would probably try to get an on-campus admin job because there is less age discrimination that way.

Eleven percent of comments fell into the category of “Yes, but...” meaning there were some strong reservations or issues, but not enough to dissuade the pursuit:

I'm really not sure. Returning to school later in life has significantly impacted my retirement options, and the difficulty of finding employment has severely limited my options. On the other hand, I truly love teaching and I am lucky to work with amazing colleagues.

The conflict and emotional, economic and health-related consequences of the PhD process are nothing to the loss of my own identity as a thinking person and a writer if I accept the constraints placed on me by age, gender and class-related expectations.

Part of the process were exciting and exhilarating (the learning and intellectual challenges), but other parts were dehumanizing, damaging, and traumatizing (isolation, toxic relationship with advisor and department).

I'm answering yes today/this year, but during my first two years out of the program, I wouldn't have necessarily answered “yes.” And early in the job market last year, it looked like my only (tenure-track) option would be a job paying less than my (non-tenure-track)

job and all the way across the country from my partner. It worked out where I got a (tenure-track) job I love, making a good bit more money, six driving hours away from my partner. And I just signed my second book contract, so tenure is seeming do-able. So, now, it seems worth it. Even so, I would want to learn what I learned and develop some of the key relationships I now have, but it would be hard to say ‘yes’ to the abuse of some of the advisors I had to work with. I finally found fantastic mentors but not without a lot of heartache and lingering impacts. So, in short: the ends now seem worth the means, but it would be hard to fit/be back in that particular box again.

Only two percent of the comments were about why respondents would not pursue an advanced degree again because they were not convinced the means justified the end. “I wouldn't do it again because of the burden of student loans and because I am missing years of being able to be with my husband during his retirement,” one respondent said.

Discussion

Part I of the study identified several areas of concern specific to women who begin pursuing English-related graduate degrees in the United States later than a traditional age, not the least of which is that this is a population not only worth further investigation, but also highly motivated to participate in efforts to make meaning of their experiences. This eagerness is evident in the swift and significant response to the survey in the short time it was available through limited distribution, and the fact that more than 10 percent of responders volunteered for follow-up interviews. Another dozen women offered to complete interviews after hearing initial results of the survey presented at the 2017 Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) (Evans et al. “Connecting”). Feedback from CCCC’s attenders and survey responders reveals that these women see themselves as members of a community of

powerful thinkers with authentic learning experiences that push back against institutional processes and standards that do not take into account their unique skills and situations – what Belenky et al. call the “tyranny of expectations” (205). In their landmark book, *Women’s Ways of Knowing*, the authors emphasized the importance of women making sense of their experiences outside patriarchal conceptual schemes that marginalize or erase them as outside the accepted way of knowing (203), such as a fixed-term traditional doctorate.

Resistance to pre-conceived notions of the “right” path to a doctorate seems especially strong among women who return to college years after earning an undergraduate degree. There was no question asked in the survey about the age at which a first degree was earned, but responder comments and the literature suggest that many contemporary graduate students are not brand new to academia, but rather what Offerman refers to as “reentry” scholars (24). These older graduate students already see themselves as “knowers,” rather than “potential knowers” awaiting confirmation of their knowledge at graduation (Belenky et al. 195). What is known from this survey of women who began their advanced degrees between the ages of 30 and 50 falls into the three original areas of inquiry: why they sought a doctorate, what obstacles/challenges they faced, and the support/rewards they experienced in pursuing their terminal degree.

Professional, personal motivation

The main goal for seeking a doctoral degree was professional development. While this might seem an obvious reason for anyone to attend graduate school, reentry students in particular have likely already experienced some professional achievement before making the decision to return to academia. Unlike the continuous linear path defined by the fixed archetype, many responders to the survey brought considerable work experience to their doctoral studies, and

expected to build upon that accumulated knowledge and associated skills to create careers that were more satisfying or employment that better met their needs and personal goals than previous work. The need to account for previous professional experience is emphasized in all literature on nontraditional college students, including Michael Offerman's "Profile of the Nontraditional Doctoral Degree Student" (24). He says reentry students are not only more likely to want to take advantage of their professional experiences, they are also more interested in applied, rather than theoretical, research (27). The application of research to the student's context and goals is also what Andrea Lunsford calls for in her chapter in the Carnegie Essays on the Doctorate, "Rethinking the Ph.D. in English" (363). Rather than a program with established rules, conventions, and timetables, Lunsford agrees with Graff's idea of a "do-it-yourself kit" shaped by each student's interests (363). Certainly, women who begin doctoral studies at nontraditional age have already demonstrated the motivation, skills, and self-awareness to pursue a goal traditionally assumed beyond their reach. Given institutional support, they can negotiate programs of study that address their own professional, intellectual, and personal goals.

Personal motivations of life-time learning and achieving a long-time goal ranked high among respondents. Embedded in both these reasons were expectations that these older women were already "knowers," capable of further knowledge construction, and capable of being agents in their own learning (Belenky et al. 213). Given appropriate educational environments, these older graduate students felt they were as capable as their younger counterparts to be "stewards of the discipline" as outlined by Golde: generating new knowledge, critically conserving valuable and useful ideas, and responsibly transforming those understandings through writing, teaching, and application (5).

Financial, health, and familial challenges

The most significant obstacles to completing a degree and moving survey respondents toward becoming stewards in their discipline were financial issues. These included the need to work while attending classes in order to afford tuition for themselves or other family members, and/or to support their families' basic needs. Literature on nontraditional college students in general supports the survey results. According to the fixed definition, early doctoral students made their studies their first priority and only worked part-time as teaching assistants for "sustenance" (Archbald 13). Today's adult graduate students often hold jobs and attend class part-time (Offerman 23). Part-time status significantly extends the program of study and increases the pressure of time-to-degree versus career pay-off for older graduate students. This can be off-set in some fields, where an employer helps pay for tuition and even provides time-off for classes, especially for employees who have risen to leadership positions. But this is rarely the case for English-related fields, where older graduate students are either contingent instructors or seek a degree that will eventually lead away from their previous careers (Enos 24). The only clearly marked paths for advancement – and this is reflected in responses to the survey -- are either tenure-track or administrative leadership positions in the academy, and the latter are usually limited since top administrators are often tenured faculty first. These paths require a time horizon that is shorter for older graduates than those in their mid-30s, who can amortize their investment over a 30-year career (Perna 494).

The reality of not recouping the financial commitment of a Ph.D. was raised by a few respondents, especially considering the disparity in pay and benefits between full- and part-time faculty members. According to the American Association of University (AAUP) Annual Report on the Economic Status of the Profession, 2014-15, professors make less on average than most equivalent nonacademics (Barnshaw and Dunietz 12). Still, the same report showed a mean full

professor salary of more than \$116,000, plus benefits (11), while comparable wage/benefit data for full-time non-tenure-track and part-time faculty is difficult to come by, especially for the latter, where pay is per course rather than per person. The CAW reports median pay per course at \$3,200, standardized to three credits, for instructors with a doctorate; annualized with a load of eight classes over an academic year, that is \$22,400 (31). Meanwhile, a full-time, year-round worker with a doctorate earns a median \$91,900 (31). This disparity is further exacerbated by the fact that many faculty on contingent appointments pay their own professional, office, and healthcare expenses (14) and are not reimbursed for class preparation and administrative time, which the Internal Revenue Service estimates at an additional 1.25 hours for every hour of teaching (17). In these circumstances, it is difficult to realize an increase in lifetime earnings when balanced against the expense of pursuing a doctorate.

Financial pressures can be intensified by two other obstacles identified in the survey: health and family relationships. Physical and emotional health of spouses, children, and parents were identified by respondents as barriers to completion, usually related to unexpected illness that required a woman to take time off classes, work, or both. Offerman, citing Maher et al., says women students are more likely than their male counterparts to take on responsibilities for home and childcare, and cite difficulties balancing the responsibilities of their studies and their families (25). Survey respondents agreed, but added the challenges of being a “sandwich” generation, with responsibilities for their parents as well as their children.

Last, constraints of time is a risk factor that threads through many barriers mentioned in the survey. References to time appeared frequently in comments to several questions, ranging from the career time horizon and time-intensive course work discussed earlier, to the stress of balancing demands of school, work, and family. The latter has been examined in previous

research on women in academic by scholars such as Enos, Miller, and Perna, and may intersect with new studies on women in leadership positions in and outside the academy. For example, Gino and Brooks conclude that women generally have more life goals than men, fewer of those goals relate to power, and they are more concerned than men about how high-level positions might conflict with personal and familial goals.

Mixed support in achieving professional, intellectual, personal rewards

Most respondents said their family and friends were at least somewhat supportive of their pursuit of a Ph.D., although it was often mixed, perhaps as a function of the novelty of an older woman pursuing a doctorate. Only a small percentage of the general U.S population enters a doctoral program and half of those do not finish (Golde 5), so most Americans do not have a first-hand understanding of the sacrifices or support required to earn a Ph.D. When a young person attends graduate school, it is likely their parents and friends who are most affected. When an older woman seeks a doctorate there may be several generations affected, not to mention a host of long-time friends, co-workers, and employers to whom such a decision needs to be explained.

But understanding what it takes to earn a Ph.D. is also no guarantee of institutional support for a nontraditional age women. Both the survey respondents and those interviewed by Belenky et al. complained of being required to fulfill other people's expectations, framed by established curriculum, on timetables set by others – none of which took their own interests, goals, or needs into consideration (207). Relationships with professors, advisors, and/or fellow students were identified as hurdles for 22 percent of those completing the survey. Their “youth” in terms of being in the early stages of an academic career was a liability because their chronological age matched neither the youthful inexperience of their cohorts nor the expectations

of what scholars their age should already know and have accomplished. Younger students may find it difficult to relate to them academically or socially, and older students may see faculty advisors more like colleagues and mentors, than as instructors (Offerman 24).

Perhaps, in part, because of the challenges overcome, the majority of survey respondents found more than professional satisfaction in achieving their Ph.D. Almost as many said personal fulfillment was a reward of completing their program of study, especially in their intellectual development. They found validation in earning their Ph.D. and moving on to share their knowledge. As Belenky et al. put it, “If a woman is to consider herself a real knower she must find acceptance for her ideas in the public world” (120).

Limitations

Part I of the study has several limitations that should be noted. There is a potential selection bias in the sample as respondents may vary from nonrespondents in a convenience sample. Only those with access to the few listservs and email distribution methods chosen had the possibility of answering the survey. Motivations for responding to the survey likely varied; for example, those dissatisfied with their choices or situations might have been more likely to respond than those whose expectations were met or exceeded.

Recommendations

Part I of the study supports the framework of the three research questions in examining the lived experiences of women who enter English-related doctoral programs at ages 30 or older. Answers to these questions identified gaps in existing scholarship specific to this group (such as financial and familial pressures unique to older doctoral students), possible themes to explore further in individual interviews (considerations of time, for example), and to code in qualitative analysis of these interviews (e.g. motivations). There were also some areas that the survey did

not address adequately for comparison or information, and that will be added or structured differently in the interviews completed during Part II, such as: 1) years and ages when undergraduate and master's degrees were earned, and in what disciplines, 2) positions held while in graduate school, and 3) non-academic career paths associated with a doctorate.

The next step in this study is to amend the current IRB with Purdue University to provide for conducting individual interviews by the three primary researchers with those who volunteered after completing the survey, at the 2017 CCCCs, and in subsequent referrals. These interviews will be done in person when possible, but also via Google Hangouts video chat, beginning summer 2017 and coordinated with conferences such as the Feminisms and Rhetorics Conference at the University of Dayton, in Dayton, Ohio, October 4-7, 2017. Questions will follow a similar pattern to the survey questions, but be open-ended (Appendix A).

In addition, CCCCs attendees were enthusiastic about the survey and results, mostly from the perspective that women who pursue doctorates at nontraditional ages had been identified as worthy of study. Many of those in attendance self-identified as members of the target group and expressed relief in knowing others were facing issues similar to them. While they encouraged further study and supported the methodology chosen by the researchers, they were also interested in how the study might spark formation of a community of similar scholars with which they could connect. As a result, interview questions will also include queries about the formation of such a community of scholars, including its role in helping others connect with, support, and advocate for nontraditional-age women who seek to pursue graduate degrees.

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Appendix A

Draft interview questions

1. What is your birthdate?
2. What degrees have you earned, in what disciplines, and when?
3. Describe your career path and trajectory up to this point, and including when you started thinking about attending graduate school and positions you held while in graduate school.
4. Explain why you chose this path.
5. Describe any significant obstacles you faced in completing your doctorate and how you surmounted them. (If not raised, follow-up with questions about financial, time, institutional/program, relationships with faculty/advisors and fellow students.)
6. What types of support did you receive in pursuing your graduate degrees? (If not raised, ask about family, friends, professional, and institutional.)
7. Describe what you see as the rewards for you for pursuing this goal.
8. Looking back, would you say that pursuing a degree has been worth the costs? Why or Why not?
9. What hopes or visions do you have for your further career path, and what are your plans for getting there?
10. What advice would you give other older women who are considering pursuing a doctoral degree?
11. How interested are you in connecting with other women in circumstances similar to yours, or to older women who are considering or are pursuing a doctorate?
12. Do you know someone else to whom you can refer us who began pursuing a doctorate after the age of 30, whether or not she completed it?