Benedictine University

Redefining Aging:

A Phenomenological Study

of

Alaskan Boomers’ Pursuit of Higher Education

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To my wife Mary and to my daughters Carmen and Susannah

To the memory of Aunt Randi Numme Petrovich
Whose Christian faith expressed through countless unselfish acts of kindness and love,
continue to inspire me.
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ABSTRACT

The world’s population is greying and living longer. In the U.S., societal understanding of the aging process seems to be changing along with rapid changes in economic and sociocultural contexts. Inevitably, these changes have significant implications and ramifications for the baby boomer generation in the United States. Historically, the persons who are between 48 and 69 years of age comprise the baby boom generation. Many in this generation are choosing to continue working later in life and attend college for work-related purposes. This phenomenological study explores the ways in which Alaskan baby boomers perceive aging and experience their pursuit for higher education and career change as a unique group of non-traditional students. The participants were adult college students identified as baby boomers who reside in the Anchorage/Matanuska-Susitna region. In-depth interviews with the participants provided major data for analysis and interpretation with the purpose to uncover meaningful structures of experience of these students as they made their choices regarding new learning experiences and changing careers. Higher education faculty, students, and administrators can benefit from this study in terms of a more nuanced understanding of motivational and identity factors of adult baby boomer college students. The study contributes to the existing motivation, college choice, adult learner, adult identity, and career development theories and literature in adult and higher education.
CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

As I trace the contours of my life, I cannot help thinking of the extraordinary and fast-paced changes that this country has been going through for the past few decades, along with the metamorphoses of my own life. The story of my personal journey begins with the writings expressed by two authors whose words convey much of how I view my own life journey, vocation, and current avocation. The first words are from Parker Palmer’s (2000) book *Let Your Life Speak*:

> Vocation does not come from a voice ‘out there’ calling me to become something I am not. It comes from a voice ‘in here’ calling me to be the person I was born to be, to fulfill the original selfhood given me at birth by God. (p. 10)

The second are words in the poem *The Way it Is* by William Stafford (1998):

> There’s a thread you follow. It goes among things that change. But it doesn’t change. People wonder about what you are pursuing. You have to explain about the thread. But it is hard for others to see. (p. 42)

I, too, believe everyone born has a purpose for living and, when realized, people can live happy, fulfilling lives. The process of discovering one’s vocation can involve traveling down foggy, enigmatic roads to an unknown destination. Sometimes life changing events serve as an impetus for change along the way. A significant event that shaped my life occurred in the spring of 2004 when doctors discovered an aneurysm in the middle of my brain. I was reminded of the frailty of life and the reality that at some point we are all destined to leave this earth. The four-month recovery period after surgery, that July, offered a time for reflection about who I was and what I wanted to do with the rest of my life. During subsequent periods of reflection, I discovered my interest in older adult learning and began to envision how higher education could
be a vehicle for improving the lives of middle-aged and older adults in our society – and thus my own life.

Truly, American society is changing. All age-specific mortality rates have declined and life expectancy is continuing to increase (Longino, 2005). We are living longer and working later in life. This study explored the lives of Alaskan baby boomers that currently reside in the Anchorage/Mat Su region and attend college to improve their career prospects and the quality of their lives through performing work that is satisfying while making meaningful contributions to society. “Today the focus is on preserving lifestyles, not ensuring basic quality of life” (Longino, 2005, p. 80). As the participants in this study conveyed the accounts of their lives, hopefully, they reveal their deepest thoughts and feelings about the experiences that have led them to pursue college and their future career aspirations. These moments of revelation are moments of truth, their personal truths about their lives rooted within the U.S. economic and sociocultural contexts. Simultaneously, the participants’ experiences convey considerable transitions in their lives during transitional historical periods in this country. It follows then that their interactions with the changing conditions entail a deep introspective analysis of how they believe they are perceived by society and how they negotiate their identities in light of significant societal changes. Understanding the lived experiences of baby boomers at this point in our nation’s history is important for those concerned with the issues in higher education and its future.

Differences of opinion exist regarding the definition of who is part of the baby boomer generation. Howe and Strauss (2007) identify baby boomers as those born between 1943 and 1960, while MetLife (2012-2013) and the U.S. Census Bureau (May, 2011) define baby boomers as those born between 1946 and 1964. For the purpose of this study, baby boomers will include the combined age range of these two sources—or those born between 1946 and 1964. However, a broad definition of baby boomers goes beyond chronological years. This is born out in the research discussed as part of this study, as Ryder (1965) pointed out when he acknowledged that:
“Each birth cohort acquires coherence and continuity from the distinctive development of its constituents” (p. 843).

Generally speaking, the baby boomer generation possesses certain characteristics that include: (1) individuals with an inner-life focus, (2) a desire to understand life on a deeper level, and (3) close relationships with their children (Howe & Strauss, 2007). Given they are significantly healthier than previous generations, countless boomers will remain involved in the workforce when they reach retirement age. One of the main reasons for their continued engagement in the workplace relates to current U.S. social and economic considerations. This is a generation reaching retirement in a time of declining financial prosperity. Furthermore, Howe and Strauss pointed out that “boomers have neither saved as much nor been as well insured by their employers” as their previous generation (Howe & Strauss, 2007, p. 48). Consequently, there is a need for many of them to continue working beyond what has been considered the traditional retirement age.

There are also philosophical reasons for delaying their retirement. For the boomer generation, retirement has “negative connotations of indolence and mindless consumption” (Howe & Strauss, 2007, p. 48). Financial considerations are only part of the reason why many baby boomers want to do more than simply remain in the workforce: many also want to give back to their community. Many boomers are choosing encore careers that will contribute to the wellbeing of humankind (Freedman, 2011; Howe & Strauss, 2007). There are a number of reasons why baby boomers want to remain working while having a willingness to contribute to the community in their later years. An important reason is that “baby boomers, on average, have had higher incomes and accumulated more wealth than other generations” (Easterlin, Macdonald, & Macunovich, 1990 as cited in Keister & Moller, 2000, p. 74). In addition, social idealism that characterizes early boomers is an important motivating factor. This phenomenon represents a convergence of low birth rates among those between the ages of 18 and 44 (U.S. Census Bureau, May, 2011). Our nation can benefit from boomers as well as those in the Silent Generation.
working to meet labor market demands and choosing to fully retire later in life; thus, offering the prospect of appreciably changing the composition of our nation’s workforce:

Compared with all other age groups of the labor force, the 55-years-and-older group has the most potential to increase its labor force participation rate further, and that may contribute to an increase in the growth of the labor force in the future. (Toossi, 2006, p. 29)

Boomers remaining in the workforce for more than financial considerations are representative of a broader trend among the world’s developed nations—that of adults remaining healthier, living longer, and retiring later (Maestas & Zissimopoulos, 2010; Tepe & Vanhuysse, 2010). Maestas and Zissimopoulos (2010) argued that: “The principle supply-side explanation for the trend reversal centers in the change in the skill composition of the workforce” (p. 145). This has coincides with increased educational levels of baby boomers and a growing number of two wage earner families. Retirement leisure is “valued less if one’s spouse is still working” (Maestas & Zissimopoulos, 2010, p. 146). The fact that one partner chooses to continue working essentially serves as an impetus for the other partner to remain in the workforce. Moreover, the societal roles for this age group are changing in the wake of an ever-expanding older population.

In light of these factors, the participation of baby boomers in higher education is part of a larger trend that involves older adults remaining in the workforce later in life. The exploration of some of the facets of this trend is imperative for this study, since it examines authentic experiences and points of view of individual baby boomers, particularly the experiences of Alaskan baby boomers that are adult college students. The study participants added “faces” to the general demographic trend of boomer engagement in the labor force during the later years of their lives.

**Alaska Demographic Data**

Alaska’s population in 2010 was 710,231 (U.S. Census Bureau, State & County QuickFacts Alaska, September, 2012). A breakdown by age groups for 2010 reveals that the number of those between the ages of 45 and 64 was 196,935 and those 65 of age or older was
The median age for Alaskans was 33.8 years (Hunsinger, 2012, p. 4) while the median age for the United States was 37.2 years (United States Census Bureau, May, 2011, p. 6). These numbers indicate that as of 2010 Alaska’s population was younger than the rest of the nation. However, this appears to be changing to some extent because Alaska’s population is aging as increased numbers of baby boomers are choosing to remain within the state. Alaska demographer Eddie Hunsinger (2012) reported:

Alaska’s 65-plus populations grew at a faster rate than any other state between 2000 and 2010. That rate is still on the rise, largely due to aging of the ‘baby boomers’ born during the high birth rate years between 1946 and 1964. The first boomers turned 65 in 2011. (p. 4)

The major reason for this change is the large boomer influx into the state that occurred in the 1970s and 1980s. “The construction of the Trans-Alaska Oil Pipeline was nearly four decades ago, but it drives much of the current population change, particularly for the older age groups” (Hunsinger, 2012, p. 4). Hunsinger (2012) reported that while many boomers left after the pipeline’s construction in the 1970s, many chose to stay “so the age structure remained and was reinforced when oil revenue and the economy expanded in the 1980s” (p. 4). Thus, economic factors, fueled by this nation’s need for crude oil, played a direct role in shaping Alaska’s current age structure.

Another significant trend relating to Alaskan baby boomers and the elderly population is the percentage in these age groups participating in the labor force. According to Hunsinger (2012), the percentage of Alaskan adults 65 years of age and older participating in the workforce “grew to 22 percent in Alaska between 2006 and 2010” (p. 8). This same report also pointed out that if the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics projected trends continue, senior participation in this nation and Alaska’s workforce will be “markedly higher in 2020” (p. 8).

The increased workforce participation rate by older Alaskans is consistent with broader national trends. Maestas and Zissimopoulos (2010) stated:

A constellation of forces, some just now gaining momentum, has raised labor force participation at older ages at just the time it is needed. Age-related health declines and
the reluctance of employers to hire older workers present challenges, but the outlook for future gains in labor participation at older ages is promising. (p. 139)

The estimated 2012 population of the Anchorage/Matanuska-Susitna region of Alaska is 295,570 within the Municipality of Anchorage (U.S. Census Bureau, QuickFacts Anchorage, September, 2012) and 91,946 for the Matanuska-Susitna borough (U.S. Census Bureau, QuickFacts Matanuska-Susitna Borough, September, 2012). Furthermore, the combined population of these two areas represents 53.6 percent of Alaska’s total adult population—with adults between the ages of 45 and 64 constituting 27.7% of Alaska’s total population and adults 65 years of age and older representing 7.7% of the state’s population.

**Statement of the Problem**

Alaskan baby boomers are poised to make significant contributions to society. Hunsinger (2012) stated that “the senior work force rate grew to 22 percent in Alaska between 2006 and 2010” and have made other positive contributions including involvement in “volunteer work, subsistence, and the care of family members” (p. 8). As mentioned earlier, older adults in the U.S. are living longer and staying in the workforce later in life. This is part of a bigger trend that is redefining the meaning of retirement. Alaska is a culturally diverse state and increased access to the rest of the world has come about due to the expansion of the Internet and air transportation. Conversely, Alaskans lead different lives, at least in part, from the rest of the nation by virtue of their geographical isolation and harsh winters. Alaska’s population is aging and this trend presents both challenges and opportunities. This study intends to examine the lives of those Alaskan baby boomers that choose to return to college and continue to work during the later years of their lives. The common characteristics of this study’s participants are that they are 49 to 63 years of age or older and are taking college classes for a variety of purposes that will be explored in this study.

There is a need to learn more about baby boomers attending college, their life experiences in the midst of significant societal change, and their perceptions of their shifting roles
in American society. Baby boomers are facing both challenges and opportunities as our society is aging. According to the 2011 U.S. Census Bureau report entitled *Age and Sex Composition: 2010*, the nation’s population growth between 2000 and 2010 for older adults was substantial. It increased 31.5 percent for those between the ages of 45 and 64 and 15.1 percent for those 65 years or older (p. 2). As noted earlier, Alaska is not exempt from these changes. Boomers everywhere are facing the challenge of an uncertain future exacerbated by a changing view of retirement.

Nevertheless, even though changing societal expectation impact baby boomers, they also play a part in reshaping their identities and roles on both personal and societal levels. Baby boomers are living in an environment where they are able to make meaningful contributions to society and live more fulfilling lives. Longino (2005) noted the income and education levels of this age group are increasing. This offers the prospect of delaying retirement and “less prospect of dependency” (Longino, 2005, p. 81). However, they face significant challenges that can make this a daunting process. For example, those in this age group deal with personal and family health issues, including caring for their elderly parents (Freedman, 2011). In addition, many boomers enter their 60s serving as primary caregivers for their grandchildren. Finances, education, and social status may also be contributing factors. Freedman (2011) stressed, “longevity itself is deeply linked to education and class” (p. 103). It is in this vein that the educational experiences of Alaskan baby boomers are examined in light of their everyday lives.

**Research Purposes and Questions**

American society seems to be in a state of transition signified by changing norms related to aging (Foner, 1996; Settersten & Hagestad, 1996a; Settersten & Hagestad, 1996b). There is a sense of role uncertainty among the general U.S. population and especially among the boomer generation that seeks to redefine itself in the midst of these changes. The number of baby boomers going to college to improve their work-related skills and expand their career options is increasingly growing. Some baby boomers have high motivations, even desiring to leave a
legacy that extends beyond their lifetime. Preparations during the middle years in their 40s and 50s can have a significant impact on their trajectory in the later years of their lives. In the words of Freedman (2011), “in the past when people hit their sixties or seventies, the default legacy option was to donate money” (p. 97). This particular preference is changing however. “Now more and more individuals have the opportunity to live a legacy—not just leave one” (p. 97). In this vein, higher education can serve as an important component in an individual’s preparations and decision-making.

The purpose of this study is the uncovering of the structures of experiences of American baby boomers that are aspiring to continue their education and change careers in a contemporary, fast-paced changing American society. Specifically, the motivational factors of Alaskan baby boomers returning to college are explored with regard to their individual experiences. The participants of this study—a small group of Alaskan baby boomer college students—are given the opportunity to tell their stories in order to shed light on how they perceived aging and how they saw their roles in today’s American society.

This study contributes to the body of research relating to baby boomers making the transition from the second age to the third age of their lives, as defined by Laslett (1991). This research inquires into the questions of what it is like to be today’s baby boomer enrolled in college courses and how they define themselves in relationship to established norms regarding aging and retirement. I sought to gain meaningful insights into the individual participants’ lives in order to share their experiences with higher education administrators and faculty as well as with broader audiences interested in the generational story of the American baby boomer.

The following are the research questions that guided this study:

- What is aging and how is it viewed and experienced by Alaskan baby boomers as they pursue higher education and change careers?
- What are the motivational factors behind their educational, career, and life decisions?
Significance of the Study

This study is contributing to the body of knowledge about the aging process, global and American societal changes, and the ways that U.S. higher education meets the needs of different groups of adult learners, more specifically baby boomers. Furthermore, the study is contributing to a better understanding of an expanded definition of retirement and the changing roles of older adults in American society. Challenges, successes, and aspirations of the baby boomer generation will be examined in various economic and sociocultural contexts of their lives. The insights that are gained from the first-hand accounts of individual baby boomers about their life experiences, their views of aging, and their educational, career, and life choices can inform the policies of higher education leaders and provide a nuanced view of adult learners for higher education faculty and student services staff. Qualitative studies are indispensible in this regard because they afford an opportunity for members of societal groups to present intimate pictures of their circumstances and the effect of policies on their lives.

Clearly, this study is unique in its very nature by focusing on a group of Alaskan individuals whose life experiences can be enlightening to many Americans who might be largely unaware of the lifeworld of urban baby boomers living on the Last Frontier. This study informs and reveals the differences and commonalities Americans across the country have with those living in Alaska.
CHAPTER II
LITERATURE REVIEW

The research literature reviewed in this chapter focused on important themes that inform the context of the study pertaining to the American baby boomer generation and the ways baby boomers make sense of their continuing education experiences leading towards career change and life satisfaction. The three main themes intersecting the content of this chapter are: (1) aging and society, (2) the psychology of aging, and (3) higher education and older adults. They encompass the broad interchange between the individual and society, the individual and his or her perception of self, the individual and higher education, and higher education and society. These themes are central to providing a framework for understanding the lived experiences of those participating in this study.

Societal factors serve as an important frame of reference when defining the behavior of individuals. Settersten and Lovegreen (1998) pointed out the need to modify our conception of the division of roles and activities over the course of a person’s lifespan due to changes in “key demographic parameters” that include “longevity and fertility” (p. 520). Dannefer and Settersten (2010) contended that there is “substantial evidence that life course patterns that were once relatively standard are now crumbling” and that trends show movement towards individualization (or destandardization) of the life course” (p. 11). These pointed to changes relating to work, retirement, and education. According to Mishler (1979), “human action can be understood only within its own context of socially grounded rules for defining, categorizing, and interpreting the meaning of our conduct” (p. 8). The ambivalent relationship between motivation and behavior becomes further complicated by our expectations of consistency. In this vein, attitudes can be a predictor of future behavior (Kraus, 1995). For example, there is a tendency to associate with
others possessing similar attitudes and beliefs. People exhibit this tendency out of the need to belong, gain esteem, and receive encouragement and reinforcement of their attitudes. The attitudes and beliefs of those with whom we associate, therefore, can often serve as important determinants of behavior (Kraus, 1995; Snyder & Kendzierski, 1982). This carries over to the larger context of society. According to Inglehart (1997), “global attitudes are relatively good at predicting global patterns of behavior” (pp. 51-52), and behavior patterns develop when motivation and opportunity for behavior are present. However, it is important to note that attitudes and behaviors are often transitory. Distinguishing between those that are temporary and those that are long-term is necessary.

Furthermore, individual and collective behaviors typically are purposeful in their intent. “Culture is not just a random collection of the values, beliefs, and skills of the people in a given society. It constitutes a survival strategy” (Inglehart, 1997, pp. 52-53). For instance, Becker (1992) stated: “What is known, perceived, or believed is influenced by the standpoint of the knower, perceiver, or believer” (p. 23). Furthermore, there are instances when individuals cannot articulate their reasons for acting. Individuals and social groups may act first and offer explanations later (Becker, 1992). Survival is a motivator that ensures the long-term viability of a society (Inglehart, 1997). It seems that people learn from their experiences with one another and with social groups. Individuals and groups within any society seem to engage in a mutual give and take relationship for ensuring each party’s survival. The interaction between individuals and society is an important consideration in the examination of this study’s primary research purposes that focuses on an aging boomer generation and its relationship to society.

Aging and Society

The Second Half of Life and the Baby Boomer Generation

**Generation and cohort.** A general definition of generation is the procreation of the human race. Laslett (2005) described generation as the “interval between birth of the parents and the births of their children” (p. 207). In the broadest sense, Laslett (2005) defined generation as a
“body of individuals born about the same period” (p. 207). Pilcher (1994) noted that the term *generation* has a chronological meaning that is used to “make sense of age groupings in society and to locate individual selves and others within historical time” (p. 481). Furthermore, Corsten (1999) asserted that “age can serve as a marker of social differentiation, and thereby social conflicts” (p. 250) as “the ideas, sentiments, and values of members converge” (Ryder, 1965, p. 855). This, in turn, permits scholars to assign certain group characteristics based on their age. As Corsten pointed out, “The ‘generation gap’ has a long tradition in the social (cultural) sciences” (p. 250). Pilcher (1994) “advocate[d] the use of *generation* when reference is made to kinship relationships and *social generation* when reference is made to any cohort related phenomena” (p. 483). Finally, generation is a common term used in the discussion of the life cycle.

Ryder (1965) defined *cohort* “as the aggregate of individuals (within some population definition) who experienced the same event within the same time interval” (p. 845). This distinction stresses the importance of cohort experiences in the societal setting transcending the closeness of chronological characteristics that may exist between generations. Ryder (1965) contended “‘self-socialization’ is to be expected during social change, because this makes the experiences of the peer group (the cohort) unique, and develops similarities within and differences between cohorts” (p. 854).

The chief distinction between cohort and generation is that generation is more about date of birth while cohort is more about life experience. Pilcher (1994) promoted using the term *generation* “when reference is made to kinship relationships and *social generation* when reference is made to any cohort related phenomena” (p. 483). This distinction stresses the importance of cohort experiences in the societal setting, transcending the closeness of chronological characteristics that may exist between various generations. The scholarly discussions relating to the concept of age in terms of chronological age and within the broad context of societal activity serve a valuable purpose. Accordingly, cohort and generation invite
the examination of life issues involving relationships between younger and older age groups and peers. These relationships involve responsibilities based on perceived roles and expectations.

**Laslett’s Four Ages.** According to Laslett (1991), dividing life into numbered stages “is as old as the study of age and ageing” (p. 3). Laslett’s (1991) work *A Fresh Map of Life: The Emergence of the Third Age* describes four stages of life and focuses on the significance of the third phase. Laslett (1991) described the first age as one characterized by “dependence, socialization, immaturity, and education” (p. 4). During the second age, a person becomes independent, earns wages, and raises a family. This study, however, primarily will focus on the third and fourth ages of an individual’s life, as depicted by Laslett (1991). The term third age was first used by the French in the 1970s and subsequently spread to other countries. The third age is one of personal satisfaction—when a person is largely free of responsibilities associated with raising their children. Activities associated with this age group include delaying retirement, full or part-time employment, obtaining additional work-related training, starting new careers, and leisure activities. The fourth age was described “as an era of final dependence, decrepitude and death” (p. 4). Increased longevity and improved health, however, offer the prospect of baby boomers remaining productive into their later years and redefining what constitutes being old.

**The boomer generation and the third age.** The baby boomer generation began during the second half of the twentieth century. The cohort of people born in this period moved into adulthood during the turbulent, youth-oriented culture of the 1960s. In addition, Howe and Strauss (2007) reported, “During the Boomers’ youth, crime rates, substance abuse, and sexual risk taking all surged while academic achievement and SAT scores fell” (p. 43). This was a period of changing social roles when women challenged the “glass ceiling” and “both genders designated themselves as the arbiters of the nation’s values” (p. 45). The period spanning the 1960s through the 1990s was a time when cultural norms were questioned and challenged. The depth and scope of societal change during these years is unprecedented in history, and social scientists have yet to fully comprehend their significance (Gilleard & Higgs, 2002; Marwick,
Consequently, the boomer cohort is socially and culturally “different from the earlier birth cohorts they had grown up with” (Gilleard & Higgs, 2002, p. 376).

There were significant differences between the boomer generation and its preceding generation. The rate and scope of change were in marked contrast to those occurring in the fifteen years immediately following World War II. The Silent Generation became adults and parents while boomers were beginning to enter the adult phase of their lives. The sudden events that occurred in the 1960s were the culmination of incremental changes taking place in the late 1940s, 1950s, and earlier (Gilleard & Higgs, 2002; Howe & Strauss, 2007; Inglehart, 1997). The prior generation, known as the Silent Generation (born between 1925 and 1942), entered late life and subsequent retirement with ample pensions and savings. Many moved into retirement communities upon retirement. This is in direct contrast to the Boomer generation where many are entering retirement and later life with inadequate pensions or savings. Strauss and Howe (1991) pointed out: “Were it not for employed women (and dual-income households), Boomer family incomes would be well below what the Silent earned” (p. 307). This need to maintain a similar lifestyle in their later years is a further impetus for older boomers to continue working. In addition, boomers tend to prefer living in their homes and closer to their children (Howe & Strauss, 2007). A consequence of this phenomenon is that the boomer generation will need to navigate unfamiliar waters as part of a larger society that continues to experience significant change in many areas. These events are a reflection of underlying trends that have created an environment reflective of transformation and change within our society and in the thinking of the boomer generation.

The boomer generation, in essence, has been blazing a new course through the second half of their lives (Gilleard & Higgs, 2002). “Instead of the steady emergence and integration of successive birth cohorts, each sharing in a fundamentally unchanging culture, a mid-century generation emerged who would set a new and distinct course through adult life” (Gilleard & Higgs, 2002, p. 376). Ryder (1965) pointed out that while “new cohorts provide the opportunity
for social change,” they are not the cause; they “permit it” (p. 844). Inglehart (1997) found evidence of traditional cultural norms being in a state of retreat for several years. Furthermore, Gilleard and Higgs (2002) maintained that future cohorts would not go back to former ways of thinking and acting. The transitions of the boomer generation into the third and subsequent fourth age are fraught with uncertainty because of the breadth and depth of societal changes that occurred in the mid-twentieth century.

The Fourth Age and understanding old. Disagreement exists among scholars regarding the concept of old in our society. The characteristics of the fourth age, as noted by Laslett (1991), include dependency, decline, and death. Laslett (1991), however, also insisted that chronological age does not define whether a person has transitioned into the fourth age, stating: “Many healthy people have been at the high, higher, and even highest calendar age” (p. 5). Furthermore, often people advanced in years continue to lead active and productive lives. Frequently, older adults continue to work and make tangible contributions despite perceptions by some members of society who associate old age with decrepitude (Laslett, 1991). Other researchers discussed the concept of old in terms of association, location, and income. The concepts of age, generation, and their implications are discussed further in the paragraphs that follow.

Age. The scholarly discussions relating to the concepts of age in terms of chronological age and within the broader context of societal activity serve a valuable purpose. The notion of age has relevance as a demarcation point between groups engaged in societal conflict. The identification of age is useful because it provides a structural point of reference that improves our understanding of social interactions. Chronological years serve as convenient markers, which add clarity of definition when describing the interactions between different generations.

Taking a closer look at the concepts of cohort and generation invites the examination of life issues involving relationships between younger and older age groups and their peers. These relationships involve responsibilities based on perceived roles and expectations. Unspoken
cultural expectations can serve to discourage individuals from challenging norms. Conversely, they can provide reinforcement that binds groups together. There are also cross-age connotations regarding the respective roles of age groups. Peers within an age group can play an important role in the reinforcement of age-appropriate behaviors for those who may be tempted to stray. Further reinforcement may come from non-peers imposing sanctions in the form of either spoken or unspoken withholding of approval. These nuances offer a multifaceted picture of individuals and groups within society based on birth, age, time, geography, and politics, and form a framework for explaining the operation of society and the inter-relationships between individuals within the societal context. These sociological constructs provide insight into the study of Alaskan baby boomers and their lived experiences while attending college. These constructs lead into a discussion of how the current aging phenomenon creates challenges and opportunities for our society.

Aging: Social Problem or Opportunity?

The nation’s population is aging. According to the 2011 U.S. Census Bureau report *Age and Sex Composition: 2010*, population growth between 2000-2010 for ages 45-64 was 31.5 percent and the rate of growth of those 65 years or older was 15.1 percent (p. 2). Data presented in this report confirm the growth rate for these two older groups was higher than all other age groups. Given that boomers range between to 48 and 69 years of age, based on the definitions of Howe and Strauss (2007) and MetLife (2012-2013), these numbers illustrated the magnitude of baby boomer population growth in this country over the first ten years of the current century. Obviously, statistics alone do not provide a comprehensive picture of individuals who comprise the baby boomer population.

Research indicates a number of issues surrounding this age group. Freedman (2011), for example, reminded his readers that there are multitudes of baby boomers wrestling with core issues “about their lives and futures while simultaneously attempting to make sense of an outdated life course stretching midlife or retirement beyond recognition” (p. 29). This is a
generation in the process of reinventing itself while at the same time society is undergoing constant change.

**The problem of aging.** Societies are aggregations of generations that possess unique characteristics (Howe & Strauss, 2007). Longino (2005) described the ambivalence of public sentiment towards aging in American society. Changes in governmental and social policies have created an environment where relationships between age cohorts are in a state of flux. There have been expressed concerns about the potential detrimental effects of an increasingly aging population on society because of the needs and services older adults require. Cheng and Heller (2009) stated “the conceptual orientation of many policymakers, practitioners and citizens towards older adults is to view them as a problem population” (p. 169). Conversely, there was also a realization that older adults can contribute to society when people recognize aging as a normal part of the life cycle. The questions focused on the nature of these contributions in light of the changes occurring within society as a whole. Therein is the dilemma: the opposing perceptions of long life being both a disaster and a benefit. An aging population thus poses challenges to governmental, social, and educational policy makers as they grapple with the burgeoning social, economic, and political ramifications of an aging society in a time of societal upheaval.

Exploring societal views regarding the roles and expectations of its members is an integral part of societal thinking. Manheimer and Snodgrass (1993) asserted that, “Only a few short years ago, the United States was a country of youth and youthfulness” (p. 594). This has changed as our society has increasingly evolved into one that is graying. The resulting tensions between the new aging reality and existing rules have created some friction between younger and older generations. Manheimer and Snodgrass (1993) reported that:

> Neugarten, on the other hand, disregards the belief that age norms are intrinsic to later life, instead showing how they are socially and culturally imposed and hence, subject to modification. She posits the possibility of an ‘age irrelevant’ society that is free of fixed expectations. (p. 594)
Societal norms relating to aging are in the process of change in our nation and around the world. This opens vistas for potential growth and transformation on both individual and societal levels.

**Aging: Opportunities for Individual and Societal Transformation**

Freedman (2011) pointed out that there is an issue of identity in the baby boomer population, attributable to confusion over what constitutes being old. Freedman (2011) coined the phrase “young old” to illustrate ambiguity of their age identity (p. 36). This stems from the fact that those who are turning fifty are facing the prospect of living an additional fifty years. Adults in this group have largely finished raising their children and are not earning wages to support and educate them. Their parenting and work responsibilities mainly defined their prior roles. This raises the question of what is next for them. They are neither young nor old. Laslett (1991) called this period of a person’s life the third age and characterized it as one primarily of fulfillment. Defining this fulfillment, however, has become part of an important identity issue and some are resolving it by starting encore careers. According to Freedman (2007), these careers reflect a reality that includes boomers serving as the “backbone of education, health care, nonprofits, the government, and other sectors essential to the national well-being” (p. 4).

Boomers have received encouragement from their like-minded peers to venture into meaningful careers that enrich their lives while making valuable contributions to society.

Mainstream culture is an important factor in this shift towards later retirement and the subsequent increase in the number of baby boomers remaining in the workforce. The underlying value of the so-called postmodern era is that survival no longer is the overriding concern for their lives. A key characteristic of this era is adults are seeking “self-fulfillment through their careers, rather than childbearing” (Inglehart, 1997, p. 56); and this, in turn, has resulted in declining birth rates in nearly every advanced industrial society. Moreover, the decrease in population replacement rates has resulted in a shortage of skilled workers in the workforce. This scenario has created an environment that is conducive for older baby boomers to remain in the workforce or re-enter after retirement. The data contained in *Age and Sex Composition: 2010* shows the
population growth of those between the ages 18 and 44 was a mere .06 percent and the rate of growth of those between the ages of 25 and 44 actually declined by 3.4 percent (U.S. Census Bureau, May, 2011, p. 2). The result is an environment conducive to boomers making significant contributions in this nation’s labor force. Boomers can accomplish this through delaying retirement or re-entering the workforce after they have retired the first time.

Figure 1 contains data showing a projected progression of baby boomer participation in the labor force from 1990 to 2030. This chart graphically illustrates the projected impact older baby boomers can have on our nation’s labor force through 2030. Their involvement in the workforce can help to alleviate the shortage of qualified workers.
Figure 1. U.S. population by age and labor force status in 1990, 2010, and 2030.

Up to this point, the discussion of prior research has focused on the overall societal picture of the issues associated with aging. The research included a review of sociological concepts of generation and cohort along with the benefits and challenges to society associated with an aging society. Demographic data was also presented. What follows is a review of
research related to the psychological aspects of aging as they relate to personal identity and the individual’s interactions with society as they transition into the second phase of their lives.

**Psychology of Aging**

The research reviewed in this section advances the discussion from the societal and generational contexts to an individual level, focusing on the individuals who comprise these larger units. A dynamic interplay exists between the individual and the environment. The actions of society as a whole and the individuals who comprise these various subgroups reflect a give and take on both sides. Society and group norms affect individual behavior, while individuals together exert their collective influences to bring about societal change. The four main topics addressed next are: human identity, societal roles, and career and life planning, which shift the focus towards the individuals within society and their desire and/or need to work in later life.

**Human Identity**

**Norms and socialization.** Sociologists, including Laslett, Mannheim, and Pilcher, discuss the relationships between generations and the societal implications of these interactions. Age-related norms and their incumbent constraints affect how individuals or groups within a particular age grouping interact with each other (Neugarten, Moore & Lowe, 1965; Settersten & Hagstad, 1996b). Peers play a substantial role in the establishment of group norms and may do so apart from actions of “institutional authorities” (Ryder, 1965, p. 854). Ryder asserted: “An increase in such ‘self-socialization’ is to be expected during social change, because this makes the experiences of the peer group (the cohort) unique, and develops similarities within and differences between cohorts” (p. 854). However, Neugarten et al. (1965) observed that there has been little conversation about the relationships between age group generations and “the ways in which age groups relate to each other in complex societies or to systems of norms which refer to age-appropriate behavior” (p. 710).

Embedded within human beings is the innate desire for security and need to belong. Kraus (1995) pointed out: “We typically associate with others who have similar attitudes and,
therefore, find ourselves in situations in which acting on our attitudes will be encouraged, reinforced, or perhaps even enforced” (p. 71). Furthermore, this enforcement can go beyond attitudes to include personal choices and their resulting actions (Snyder & Kendizierski, 1982). This involves making decisions to act, determining the appropriateness of intended actions or whether one should not act at all. The “considerable freedom to choose where to be, when, and with whom” determines personal choices (p. 281). While freedom exists to make individual choices, unspoken group constraints play a significant role, too. Attitudes, action, and decisions relating to these choices reflect the influence of others. There is a social aspect that provides security and restraint for those choosing membership in a particular subgroup within a larger age group.

According to Neugarten et al. (1965), “Expectations regarding age-appropriate behavior or an elaborated and pervasive system of norms governing behavior and interaction is imbedded throughout the cultural fabric of adult life” (p. 711). The result is a close relationship between an individual’s actions and society’s expectations, which in turn, serve to regulate individual behavior (Neugarten et al., 1965). Accepted norms and expectations serve to encourage behavior that is consistent with accepted norms while exacting penalties on those who violate them. Neugarten et al. (1965) went on to say that enforcement mechanisms “operate in many less clear-cut ways and in more peripheral areas of adult life” (p. 711). Some mechanisms are more direct, such as in the form of ageism that encourages adults to retire at a certain age or discourages them to continue working. Ageism may be enforced through an older adult’s employer, social group, or one’s children. The age-related norms and their enforcement, according to Neugarten et al. (1965), “are relevant to a great variety of adult behaviors; they are both systematic and pervasive in American society” (p. 712).

Table 1 illustrates the pervasive influence of norms in society across a broad spectrum of age groups from the perspective of middle-class, middle-aged adults in the United States. While there have been subsequent studies by Neugarten et al. (1965), Settersten and Hagedst (1996b)
reported over 30 years later that the 1965 published work of Neugarten et al. “is still one of the most frequently cited articles in our time” (p. 602).

Table 1

*Consensus in a Middle-Class Middle-aged Sample Regarding Various Age-Related Characteristics*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Range Designated as Appropriate or Expected</th>
<th>Per Cent Who Concur</th>
<th>Per Cent Who Concur</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Men</strong> (N = 50)</td>
<td><strong>Women</strong> (N = 43)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Best age for a man to marry..........................</td>
<td>20-25</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Best age for a woman to marry..........................</td>
<td>19-24</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When most people should become grandparents..........</td>
<td>45-50</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Best age for most people to finish school and go to work ....</td>
<td>20-22</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When most men should be settled in a career ..........</td>
<td>24-26</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When most men hold their top jobs..................</td>
<td>45-50</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When most people should be ready to retire...........</td>
<td>60-65</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A young man.............................................</td>
<td>18-22</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A middle-aged man....................................</td>
<td>40-50</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An old man ................................................</td>
<td>65-75</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A young woman ..............</td>
<td>18-24</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A middle-aged woman...........</td>
<td>40-50</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An old woman...................</td>
<td>60-75</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When a man has the most responsibilities...............</td>
<td>35-50</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When a man has accomplishes the most..................</td>
<td>40-50</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The prime of life for a man......</td>
<td>35-50</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When a woman has the most responsibilities..............</td>
<td>25-40</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When a woman accomplishes the most...................</td>
<td>30-45</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A good-looking woman............</td>
<td>20-35</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Furthermore, Neugarten et al. (1965) found that, unlike other age groups, “Only for old people is there a high level of congruence between personal opinions and the opinions ascribed to others” (p. 717). The authors attributed this to a combination of long-term adult socialization, when age norms become internalized and solidified. The implication is that older adults have become the main supporters of the expectations placed on their own age group. Consequently, older adults who violate these prescribed norms face the prospect of sanctions from their age peers as well as from those in younger age groups.

Changes in age-related characteristics are reported in earlier research. For instance, Neugarten and Neugarten (1987) provided findings that reflect changes in our society relating to marriage, raising children, work, and marriage. They reported that:

It is not only in the second half of life that the blurring of life periods can be seen. Adults of all ages are experiencing changes in the traditional rhythm and timing of events of the life cycle. More men and women marry, divorce, remarry and divorce again up through their 70s. More stay single. More women, have their first child before they are 15, and more do so after 35. The result is people are becoming grandparents for the first time at ages ranging from 35 to 75. (Neugarten & Neugarten, 1987, as cited in Neugarten, 1996, p. 74)

The findings reflect a change in societal norms that occurred over a 30-year time period. Neugarten and Neugarten (1987) found, for example, the age that men and women marry and remarry has expanded over time. Societal expectations has become increasingly flexible regarding what constitutes “normal” times to engage in different activities over a person’s life span. Settersten and Hagestad (1996b) further illustrated in Table 2 how age-related attitudes continue to change in this country. The data contained in this table supports the notion that “contemporary American society may have multiple cultural age timetables within it regarding educational and work transitions” (p. 610). Settersten and Hagestad (1996b) found nonprofessionals, nonwhites, and those with lower education levels were more sensitive to cultural age deadlines and “generally gave earlier deadlines” (p. 610).
Table 2

Percent of Modal Age and Percent Within 6-Year Age-Band for Each Family (Age value in Parentheses)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Transition</th>
<th>About Men’s Lives</th>
<th>About Women’s Lives</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% Mode</td>
<td>% 6-Year Band</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leaving home</td>
<td>20.9 (21)</td>
<td>72.3 (20-25)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Returning home</td>
<td>26.7 (30)</td>
<td>53.3 (25-30)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marriage</td>
<td>25.8 (25)</td>
<td>74.2 (25-30)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parenthood</td>
<td>22.7 (30)</td>
<td>60.8 (25-30)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Completing childbearing</td>
<td>34.7 (40)</td>
<td>51.1 (40-45)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grandparenthood</td>
<td>27.6 (50)</td>
<td>43.6 (50-55)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Settersten and Hagestad’s (1996b) research did not support the existence of “a strong set of general and cultural timing norms . . . for educational and work transitions” that are ‘enforced through informal mechanisms of social control” (p. 611). Instead, their research indicated social norms tend to be loose and flexible and “their influence may instead be secondary in nature and more flexible than researchers had assumed” (p. 612). Foner (1996) corroborated Settersten and Hagested’s findings and stated, “there is clear evidence of age norms” while suggesting “there is a considerable flexibility in age norms” (p. 222). Moreover, Foner affirmed, “a combination of informal age norms and formal age rules continues to make age a relevant element of social structure” (p. 222).

Identity development. According to psychosocial developmental theorists, such as Erik Erikson (1982), a person’s identity continues to evolve through different stages of one’s life. Erickson “described the progressive development from birth to old age through eight [psychosocial] stages” (Rennemark & Hagberg, 1997, p. 222). “These stages, and Erickson’s proposition that psychosocial development is a cumulative process, suggest that developmental change takes place during the adult years” (Leidly & Darling-Fisher, 1995, p. 169). “In
Erickson’s framework everyone traverses all stages, assuming that they live a full life span” (Slater, 2003, p. 54). The themes of these stages are: (1) trust versus mistrust, (2) autonomy versus shame, (3) Initiative versus guilt, (4) industry versus inferiority, (5) identity versus diffusion, (6) intimacy versus isolation, (7) generativity versus stagnation and (8) integrity versus despair (Rennemark & Hagberg, 1997, p. 222).

Leidly and Darling-Fisher (1995) asserted that, “Adulthood is seen as a ‘developmental and conflictual phase in its own right,’ dominated by two themes, generativity versus stagnation and integrity versus despair (Erickson, 1982, p.9)” (p. 169). Butler (1970) found that “there are people in middle life who are caught up in questioning their capacity to be generative and constructive rather than stagnant. . . . [and] one of the greatest dangers in life is being frozen into rigid roles that limit one’s self-development and self-expression” (p. 124). Butler also stressed the importance of enhancing “both the reality and the sense of personal growth throughout the course of life until its very end” (p. 124). Butler’s statements insinuated the role of society is to promote the continuous growth of the individual, and the individual’s responsibility is to take advantage of those opportunities for continual growth.

The themes of generativity versus stagnation have societal and individual implications for middle-aged and older adults. Slater (2003) contended that, at the family level, “parents show generativity through interest and care for their children” (p. 57). Erickson (1950) stated that “generativity, then is primarily the concern in establishing and guiding the next generation . . . the concept is meant to include . . . productivity and creativity” (p. 267). Generativity applies in the organizational context where leaders “will be able to care about both the mission and the employees” (Slater, 2003, p. 57).

Erickson’s theory provided insight into how individuals progress through their life course. “In order to have a sense of who we are, we have to have a notion of how we have become, and of where we are going” (Taylor, 1989, p. 47). The process of shaping a person’s identity can be described as a combination of processes that involve the assessment of the
environment and oneself that is followed by actions. Becker (1993) explained that “intentions are quests for meaning and are essential parts of life” and because people are intentional, they “live in ways that are meaningful to them” (p. 15). A phenomenological perspective is that actions, which contribute to the shaping of a person’s identity, are rooted in the concept of intentionality (Becker, 1993). In this regard, Becker posited that humans can be viewed as intentional beings and their actions can be described as either reflective or prereflective in their origin. Becker stated: “Reflective intentions are those of which we are explicitly aware” (p. 15). Actions coming from reflective intentions are consciously articulated before the actions take place. According to Becker (1992), “Prereflective intentions are lived out versus thought about; we express them in our actions and think about them later” (p. 15). In other words, people may act first and provide the rationale later. Every individual is unique—and this is reflected, to a great degree, by the manner in which persons make sense of their environment and respond to circumstances. Personal actions shaping a person’s identity and their environment seem to reflect a combination of reflective and prereflective intentions.

There is a broad, contextual aspect that affects the process of defining a person. Frie (2011) asserted that our identities are “ascribed to us by the multiplicity and fluid nature of contemporary life—by cultural, social, economic, and political contexts” (p. 57). There is an ongoing interplay between individuals and society that occurs during daily life. Frie (2011) concluded that: “Identity is a part of an ongoing, open-ended process of contextualization, reflection and self-interpretation and is grounded in our prereflective self-awareness and embodied, in practical activity” (p. 57).

Cultural identity also plays a part in shaping personal identity and “is dependent upon many factors, which may include membership in a particular community, language ability, race, or ethnicity” (Frie, 2011, p. 58). Individuals define their cultural identity by association with a particular group or groups that share similar cultural norms and activities within the group. Personal differences, context, and the responses of others also are influencing factors. Likewise,
external forces impact the formation of an individual’s identity. These include “political, social, or economic forces” (Frie, 2011, p. 58). However, the problem of human identity is much more complex than the above authors propose to focus on. Both external and internal factors ought to be taken into consideration when addressing this issue. Human beings face the need to understand themselves, their life experiences, and the influences of external forces in shaping their identities (Mahler, 2008; Mezirow, 1991). A deeper understanding of personal and social influences can in turn, offer insight into the motivations behind individual actions and the subsequent responses from a person’s social group.

**Physical place and affiliation.** The defining characteristics of what is meant by *old* are based upon a mix of calendar years and individual and social circumstances that serve to define a person’s identity. These characteristics seemed to embody aspects of Laslett’s (1991) fourth age. For example, research by Rowles (1993) indicated that people develop an identification and attachment to a physical place and develop a social affinity with those living in their neighborhood. Fogel (1992) cited several psychological benefits associated with an individual staying at home. These included maintaining a sense of stability and independence, familiarity with one’s environment, and a place where meaningful events took place during one’s life. This constant is closely intertwined with the social contraction that occurs as a person ages (Rosow, 1970).

Social homogeneity is another factor that relates to the life cycle. Various scholars discuss relationships between environmental factors and a person’s social and economic status. Rosow (1985) argued that people associate with others based on their social status, interests, and income by virtue of retirement from earned work. Smith (2009) purported that in situations “in which people might feel stigmatized, family and friendship/neighbour ties might take on greater significance and source of support within the immediate community” (p. 27). Those with limited resources, for instance, placed higher importance on relationships with immediate family and neighbors.
Smith (2009) contended that “Those with greater resources have the freedom to engage in activities elsewhere and hence have a more attenuated form of attachment to neighbourhood” (p. 27). Older adults with greater financial resources have a greater level of personal autonomy and can obtain support outside of their neighborhood and immediate family. The result can have an effect on one’s social and economic status and offer increased opportunities to access community resources.

Societal Roles

The world’s population is increasingly becoming older as the baby boomer generation progresses into old age. According to population data from the United Nations (2012), 19 percent of America’s population will be over 60 years of age in 2012 and 27 percent in 2050. These figures are comparable the projected figures in the most developed regions of the world with 22 percent in 2012 and 32 percent in 2050. There are broad social, economic, and political implications associated with this aging phenomenon that affect the U.S. and a large portion of the world’s nations.

The relationship between a person’s calendar age and their societal roles are closely intertwined. Some scholars maintained that a “dichotomy of biology and the social is firmly entrenched within sociology but there have been recent calls for the ‘settled division of labour between the ‘biological and social sciences’ to be questioned” (Benton, 1991 as cited in Pilcher, 1994, p. 485). In this regard, Pilcher (1994) argued that Mannheim accounted for “the biological, organic human in recognizing that the biological rhythm of human existence plays a part in social change and social progression” (p. 485).

It also becomes evident when discussing the societal roles of older adults. In our society, adults typically become increasingly disengaged during the course of aging. There are a number of individual and societal reasons for this social isolation. An individual can become socially disengaged due to age-related physical problems, including loss of mobility and illness. There are also family-related issues. Aging parents may have limited contact with their children due to
increased mobility within our society. In some instances, this problem is alleviated when older adults live near or with their children. Social activities and services offered by local organizations also help mitigate this problem. Table 3 illustrates the consistency of living arrangements for persons approximately 60 years of age. The data presented by Cheng and Heller (2009) demonstrated the consistency in the housing situations among those living in Europe, North America, and the most developed regions of the world. The number of adults approximately 60 years of age living alone, is significantly higher than those living in Africa, Latin America and Carribean, and the less developed regions of the world.

Table 3

*Living Arrangements (%) of Persons Approximately 60 Years of Age Around the World*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>With spouse only</th>
<th>With offspring</th>
<th>With others</th>
<th>Alone</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Most developed regions</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less/least developed regions</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Africa</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asia</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Europe</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latin America and Caribbean</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North America</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data, calculated from UN Population Division (2005) which pooled surveys from different countries, are based on selected countries within each region for which data are available; only US data are available for North America. Oceania is not included here as only data for Fuji available, which is far from being representative of that region.

*Includes other relatives and non-relatives


Table 4, based on Wilinska and Cedersund’s (2010) research in Poland, illustrates the diversity in the roles of older adults in three areas: society, family, and the marketplace. They represent thematic clusters derived from the Polish media, illustrating the benefits and the problems associated with aging. The relationships described in Table 4 illustrate inter-relationships that likely exist in Western developed nations, such as the United States.
Table 4

*Thematic Clusters Identified in Discourse of Ageing in Studied News Magazines in Poland*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aging and older people in the society</th>
<th>Older people in the family</th>
<th>Older people in/on the market</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aging society</td>
<td>Grandparents</td>
<td>Pensioners as a consumer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Longevity</td>
<td>• conventional</td>
<td>group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural activities</td>
<td>• unconventional</td>
<td>Non-pensioners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Every day of experience of aging</td>
<td>Parenting in later life</td>
<td>Pensioners of special care</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Old age and older people</td>
<td>Care</td>
<td>protection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Post-war baby boomers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pension system</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Some, however, perceive older working adults to be a threat to the social order. The words of Inglehart (1997) offered insight regarding these apparent contradictions; he reasoned that: “When dealing with human beings, there is a continual interaction between subjective and objective factors—between culture and environment” (p. 55). Potential intergenerational conflict can be grounded in the “context of shared expectations and obligations regarding the ageing of individuals and the succession of generations” (Bengston & Oyama, 2007, The Problem of Generations, para. 2). In this vein, Bengston and Oyama stated:

The three sets of normative expectations and obligations characterize the traditional contact across generations:

(1) biosocial generation and socialization norms reflect the involvement of families and public education in the socialization of each successive generation;

(2) norms of gerosocial succession are associated with the availability of resources in the form of financial and emotional support provided to the younger generation by older generations in families and in public transfers involving the passing of older generations in death or retirement;
(3) there are also norms regarding geriatric dependencies, which reflect the expectation that family caregiving and public support from welfare programs will be provided for the old [Italics added]. (Bengston & Oyama, para. 2)

On the societal level, the underlying motivations reflect desires to maintain the status quo and the innate human tendency to resist change. Longino (2005), for example, has stressed that “the large birth cohort has already altered the social structure as it [the baby boomer generation] advanced through its youth and middle years” (p. 82). A consequence of the boomer’s growth in numbers has been many staying in the workforce later in life with younger persons having to wait longer for promotional opportunities (Longino, 2005). This corresponded with Laslett’s (1991) notion of the third and fourth ages in which extended human longevity may not equate with decrepitude. People are living longer and, due to advances in the medical field, are capable of living active, healthier lives in their later years. The result is a clash between established age-associated norms and current realities. In essence, the definition of what constitutes middle age, too, has changed.

Furthermore, periods of societal change can be turbulent and can present a challenge to the previously accepted societal norms. Human conduct can often seem irrational and outward actions may not align with stated purposes: “What goes on inside people’s heads is as important as what goes on outside them” (Inglehart, 1997, p. 55). In this regard, understanding the underlying motives and thoughts that influences the behavior of individuals is important to make meaning of their lived experiences.

Roles and behaviors of different groups begin to change in the face of resistance from those favoring the status quo. These apparent contradictions can become the seedbed for intergenerational conflict. Fogel (2000) argued that: “Severe inequality in the distribution of spiritual resources results in part from changes in the structure of the economy and social institutions through which immaterial resources are transferred “ (p. 179). The occurring changes in the economic sphere have a corresponding affect in the realm of intergenerational relationships. Because of these changes, social institutions have been unable to adequately meet
the physical and spiritual needs of an older population that is healthier and living longer (Fogel, 2000). This scenario becomes the basis for intergenerational conflict over allocation of societal resources. At the heart of the issue is the need for policies assuring “that one generation will not be made to suffer a disproportionate share of the burden of financing a lifetime of self-realization” (Fogel, 2000, p. 179). The question becomes a matter of how much goes to whom and when. The allocation of limited financial resources comes to the forefront during times of fiscal constraint, and policymakers are faced with decisions that favor one societal group over another.

**Ageism.** Butler (1975) stated “ageism can be seen as a process of systematic stereotyping of and discrimination against people because they are old, just as racism and sexism accomplish this for skin colour and gender” (p. 35). Butler (2005) contended that while attitudes are evolving, “ageism is deeply embedded in society in many areas” (p. 86). There are broad societal implications behind Butler’s statements. “Separately or together, ageism and age segregation mark sharp distinctions between self and other” (Bytheway, 1995 as cited in Hagestad & Uhlenberg, 2005, p. 344).

By virtue of the global growth of the world’s elderly population, we see parallels between age-related issues in the U.S. as well as other countries (United Nations, 2012. In Poland, for instance, Wilinska and Cedersund (2010), for instance, identified role-related problems when older adults in Poland assumed roles perceived as inappropriate for their age. The problem of ageism is also evident in our society. Hagestad and Uhlenberg (2005) called attention to this issue when they emphasized that, “At a time when large numbers of people reaching old age are healthy and educated, structural lag in the major social institutions deny the old opportunities for productive engagement in the larger society” (p. 347). Grefe (2011) identified two fundamental causes of ageism, rooted in the social and emotional aspects of our lives. The first reason was “segregation of age groups in our social life reinforces stereotypical and categorical perceptions of older adults” (p. 104). The second effect was our fear of death and the health issues associated
with aging, which “contribute greatly to social avoidance of and emotional distance from the elderly” (p. 104).

Ageism in the workplace is detrimental to an organization’s effectiveness and violates ethical standards (Rauschenbach, Göritz, & Hertel, 2012). This type of behavior becomes apparent in workplaces where empirical evidence often contradicts perceptions of coworkers. These authors reported potential, long-term workforce ramifications when they asserted that: “In light of the further aging of the workforce and further growth of the service sector, the age stereotype might lead to skill shortages” (Rauschenbach, Göritz, & Hertel, 2012, p. 517). Finally, the presence of ageism becomes a consideration when baby boomers make career plans for the later part of their lives, the next topic of discussion.

**Career and Life Planning**

**Personal and societal roles.** Changes in society’s perception relating to ageing and retirement have resulted in some boomers remaining in the workforce longer and starting new careers that will extend into their seventies or later. Freedman (2011) expressed the conflicting sentiments and growing shift in thinking among the boomer generation when he stated: “The road doesn’t go on forever. . . . [along with] an appreciation that it might go on for quite a while” (p. 91). This reflects a double opportunity resulting from both increased longevity and a desire to leave a legacy that extends beyond a person’s life. People can become “increasingly preoccupied by leaving a mark” (Butler, 1970, p. 123) as they age. Therein, lies another paradox of life: we are living longer and also realizing that life on this earth does not continue forever. This is a time not restricted to calendar years—people can perform multiple roles simultaneously. There again is the source of conflict between individuals, their peers, and society: individuals acting in roles that are not generally associated with their age.

Super (1980) defined career in the broadest sense as “the combination and sequence of roles played by a person during the course of a lifetime” (p. 282). Super found that people take on different roles during their lives and theorized “nine major roles and four principle theaters.
may be used to describe most of the life space of most people during the course of a lifetime” (p. 283). Super’s nine roles included: (1) child, (2) student, (3) person of leisure, (4) citizen, (5) worker, (6) spouse, (7) homemaker, (8) parent, and (9) pensioner; they mirror Laslett’s (1991) four life ages. Super maintained that people often play multiple roles simultaneously, fulfilling these in four theaters: (1) the home, (2) the community, (3) the school, and (4) the workplace. These roles and theaters of activity formed a composite picture of the scope of a person’s life activities, according to Super, and included both the personal and societal aspects of one’s life. Furthermore, he asserted: “It is in role shaping, as well as in choice of positions and roles, that the individual acts as the synthesizer of personal and situational role determinants” (Super, 1980, p. 285).

The relationships between individuals and others are characterized by a give and take. Societal norms and expectations play influencing roles when individuals make decisions regarding roles and the theaters in which they will play these roles. When people play several roles simultaneously, Super (1980) pointed out, this can result in performing one role better at the expense of the other. This can become more evident during a period when either a person or an age group’s roles are in the process of changing.

**Career development.** Arthur (2010) defined career as “the evolving sequence of a person’s work experiences over time” (p. 4). This definition reflects the reality that a person’s career choice is an on-going process occurring in response to individual and workplace changes. Van Maanen and Schein (1977) described career development as a “lifelong process of working out a synthesis between individual interests and the opportunities (or limitations) present in the external work-related environment, so that both individual and environmental objectives are fulfilled” (p. 36). These authors argued that a person’s career is not a one-time decision. An individual makes career-related decisions throughout their life course in response to changes in the work environment and their personal circumstances. Career-changes can be the result of shifting personal priorities including the birth of a child, divorce, health issues, or loss of
employment. Furthermore, the nature of employer/employee relationships has changed. The notion of a person working for a single employer their entire career is becoming outdated. “The traditionally recognized career contract between an employee and employer no longer guarantees lifelong employment in exchange for loyalty and performance” (Mahler, 2008, p. 5). This was the result of a combination of social and economic changes and a changing workforce. The effect is employers and employees can no longer plan on long-term relationships.

People tend to choose a vocation based on a personal hierarchy that includes life style preferences, personal interests, values, and interpersonal skills (Holland, 1959). Holland’s (1978) typology theory classifies all individuals into six different personality types, each correlating with a different interpersonal and work environments. The assumption is that all “things being equal—that congruence of person and job environment leads to job satisfaction, stability of career path, and achievement” (Holland, 1996, p. 397).

Table 5 compares traditional and contemporary approaches to career development and new realities regarding careers and their role in a person’s life. The traditional approach towards career development and planning took a linear approach in which employees spent their entire career working for one employer. They continued to move up the corporate ladder “as long as they perform to rule, until reaching their level of incompetence, and there their progress was stopped” (Baruch, 2004, p. 63). The approach towards career development began to change in the 1970s when “it was clear that organizations began to need new ways to manage people and their development across the system” (p. 63). This led to the development of the cross-functional model that expanded the employee’s career options to include other options within an organization. In the 1990s, a refined career development model was advanced by Peiperl and Baruch (1997), which, included career progression in several organizations. The resulting contemporary approach was expertise-based, and emphasized the importance of balancing one’s personal and professional lives. The contemporary approach to career planning and management reflects the aspirations of the boomer generation who oftentimes are making career changes as
jobs increasingly have become outdated and new ones emerge as well as are planning their encore careers, which include elements of personal values, fulfillment, giving back to the community, and earning wages.

Table 5

*Traditional and Contemporary Approaches to Career Development and Management*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Traditional Approach</th>
<th>Contemporary Approach</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Linear: Choose an occupation, select an organization, move up a career ladder through promotions and salary increases; career loyalty is rewarded with increased status and long term-rewards (e.g., pension, vacation)</td>
<td>Nonlinear: Apply talents in multiple ways, “occupational, industrial, management, entrepreneurial” (Arthur et al., 1999, p. 2), across multiple employers and organizational boundaries; status and rank not as important as opportunity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning is critical to success; career development is based on a rational approach to insure person/environment match and efforts to build a stable workforce, usually in the best interest of the organization</td>
<td>Planning and spontaneity are both important to success; career development is often based on use of “trial and error” experimentation, self-organizing, learning, and adaptive skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stability is payment for high levels of performance and loyalty; new skills are learned within the organization; performance does not always equate with continual learning</td>
<td>New skills and continual learning add value to individual and organization even after relationship ends; transferable skills, innovative ideas, and flexibility are driving forces in success</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationships and skills tend to be bound within one organization, occupation, or profession</td>
<td>Personal networks and skills are developed across multiple organizations and occupations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lifestyle and family needs are secondary to accommodate organizational goals</td>
<td>Family and lifestyle needs are considered somewhat less detrimental to career</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Long length of service is considered a critical indicator of potential worth</td>
<td>Career mobility is considered normal and skills gained elsewhere are welcomed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Learning is organizationally driven and guides the employee’s professional development needs.

Learning happens anywhere, is internally motivated, and the individual is responsible for guiding his or her own professional development.


There are two additional trends to consider in the career planning and development equation. The first trend is individuals can expect to have longer and healthier lives. The result is adults desiring to work longer can expect to remain productive in the workforce later in life. This also opens up the possibility for older adults to continue to contribute their time and efforts in community volunteer work. The second current trend to consider is:

The presence of computer and communication technology and the value placed on "soft skills", rather than physical strength, in the workplace provides broad new opportunities for continuing work later in life for those who have up-to-date skills. In contrast, though, those without the skills that are in demand will have fewer options in their older years, just as they did during their younger years. (Poulos & Smith Nightengale, 1997, p. 56)

There are also other considerations. Poulos and Smith Nightengale (1997) emphasized the fact that, “Increasingly, there is not always a clear-cut demarcation between one’s working years and one’s retirement years; more often there is a gradual reduction in work or a change in work status or occupation or even a career change” (p. 56). These additional trends have implications for educational and governmental policy makers and those involved in career development and life planning. The prospect of a longer, healthier life provides a job pool of older adults with a wealth of life and work experience. The increased demand for relevant skills enhances the value of lifelong learning and points to the need for higher education to offer innovative programs designed to meet the needs of our nation’s graying population.

**Self-efficacy.** Williams (2010) defined self-efficacy as “perceived capability to perform a behavior” (p. 417). A person’s evaluation of their self-efficacy is based on four primary sources of information, according to Bandura (1982), which include prior attainments, vicarious
identification with the attainments of others, persuasive comments from others that convince them they possess certain abilities, and a person’s physical state (p. 126). Bandura asserted that a person’s appraisals of abilities “influence their thought patterns and emotional reactions” (p. 123) in the course of their interactions with others. Bandura went on to say that, “Perceived self-efficacy is concerned with judgments of how well one can execute courses of action required to deal with prospective situations” (p. 122). Inaccurate judgments can result in negative personal consequences with the realization that one’s perceived abilities do not correspond to actual abilities. Conversely, an individual’s appraisal of his or her self-efficacy can influence the amount of time and effort they will exert in performing a task. A person’s self-efficacy plays an important part in one’s educational and career choices, and career change decisions. Bandura (1982) verified that the “level of perceived self-efficacy correlates positively with the range of career options seriously considered and the degree of interest in them” (p. 136).

**Towards a transformative retirement.** The possibility of working later in life due to increased longevity offers the prospect of boomers starting new careers in their sixties and working for ten or more years thus affecting their retirement plans. A person’s passage from full-time, paid employment to retirement is a major life event “and may have significant effects on aging well and the sense of belonging” (Nolan, 2011, p. 326). Lach (1999) pointed out that, “As more people get used to living longer, the word ‘commitment’ will take on a new meaning in one’s personal life and in the office” (p. 20). Increased longevity affects personal commitments to family as well. There exists the prospect of adult children in their 70s facing the responsibility of caring for their parents in their old age. Consequently, society may see an increase in the number of multigenerational households where children spend more years caring for their parents than their parents spent raising them (Lach, 1999).

Planning for retirement is a complex process because of the magnitude of changes that can occur in a person’s life. New retirees may have a sense of uncertainty due to changes in their personal routines. At the heart of one’s planning is the big question of whether a person is ready
to retire. Malayter (2004) emphasized preparing and planning for unexpected changes in a retiree’s health, investments, and post retirement activities. The planning process can be complicated further during times of economic downturn.

A new retiree’s sense of uncertainty becomes more problematic if a person has been “asked” to retire due to organizational downsizing. Companies offer financial incentives to older adults considering retirement because these workers can be replaced with younger, lower paid employees (Malayter, 2004). This has presented a problem for many boomers. Changes in the labor market, government policy, and increased longevity will require consideration of new routes to retirement that require individuals to consider options that will include work, occupational training, and volunteer activities in the community.

Figure 2 is the Decision-making Model for Transformational Retirement developed by Malayter (2004; 2009), which reflects a hierarchy of needs somewhat akin to Maslow’s (1987). The bottom level represents basic physiological needs. Even when individuals believe they have a secure retirement plan in place for their later years, ensuring that one has adequate finances for retirement can be a daunting task, especially during times of economic downturn. Employers can become insolvent and unable to fund pensions and planned retirement income can drop substantially due to circumstances beyond one’s control. This can result in older adults becoming financially dependent on their family or government programs (Nolan, 2011).
There are two other financial factors to mention. The first is the state of this nation’s social security system. Changes are necessary in order for this system to remain solvent. The second factor, as mentioned earlier, is that a significant portion of the baby boomer generation has not saved enough to pay for retirement (Huntington, 2007). Exacerbating this phenomenon is people are living longer and having to save enough to support themselves for an extended period of years. Physical health issues can be a concern as a person ages and it affects one’s quality of life. Unexpected medical issues can seriously affect individual and family finances. A retiree’s health insurance plan and Medicare can help to mitigate financial stress stemming from health-related problems.

The second level of Malayter’s (2004) *Decision-making Model for Transformational Retirement* relates to emotional needs, geography, and need for meaningful work. Malayter (2009) suggested that people who are contemplating retirement experience emotional challenges
associated with shifting roles related to ending employment and “the loss of societal role definitions” (p. 99). Engagement in the community and relationships with family and friends typically takes on a new level of importance once a person retires. This can pose a challenge for persons as they age because older adults can experience difficulties maintaining social relationships with younger generations (Nolan, 2011). Family-related lifestyle trends for the boomer generation appear to be different from prior generations. Research indicated baby boomers have fewer children and are less likely to be married (Poulos & Smith Nightingale, 1997). In addition, these authors found boomers have a greater tendency to live alone in their later years and have fewer adult children who are able to provide assistance and support.

The third level of Malayter’s (2009) model involves the need for self-esteem, which includes both spiritual and intellectual requirements for a person. A person’s involvement in college classes can provide opportunities for social involvement, satisfy the need for intellectual stimulation, and gain work-related skills to begin a new career. Lee and Shehan (1988) asserted, “The self-esteem of older persons is positively affected by education, income (for males), health and frequency of interaction with friends” (p. 15). Moreover, Malayter (2009) pointed out: “Spirituality typically refers to the human quest for a sense of meaning, purpose, and moral purposes in relation to real life experiences” (p. 104). In other words, retirement and later life becomes a time of reflection when we reflect on our past life. This becomes a time when a person comes to grips with his or her mortality. “As a growing group of individuals move through middle age, they are much more likely to confront the inescapable reality that we don’t live forever” (Freedman, 2011, p. 33). This invariably leads individuals to consider the legacy they will leave behind. In this vein, Freedman stated that we can “focus on nurturing the future, on caring and responsibility that extends from one generation to the next” (p. 96).

The fourth and final level of the model relates to companionship. According to Malayter (2009), “The companionship components of transformational retirement have two distinct areas, significant relationships and community engagement” (p. 106). The upper-level requirements of
Malayter’s (2009) model have a great deal of significance because addressing these areas will improve the overall quality of a retired person’s life. Life after retirement can take on the characteristics of the third age as described by Laslett (1991), who contributed a Shakespearian perspective in the following statement:

To live as you wish to live after your sixty-fifth, seventieth and especially your eightieth birthday you still have to have something of the quality ascribed to Shakespeare by Mathew Arnold. *Self-school’d, self-scanned, self-honour’d, self-secure.* (p. 5)

Retirement for baby boomers offers both challenges and promises. Thorough planning can help prepare for the unexpected. The strength and resiliency of those who comprise the boomer generation give testament to their ability to adapt as they have adapted to earlier changes. They were agents of change as they emerged into adulthood in the tumultuous sixties and now face the challenge of transforming the meaning of retirement.

**The Need to Work in Later Life**

There exist a segment of older adults for whom the later years of their lives will not be characterized by leisure—out of need or personal choice. For some, it is a matter of maintaining a lifestyle similar to when they were younger, working adults. This segment of the boomer generation will “personally maintain (to the extent their incomes allow) their creature-comfort indulgence” (Howe & Strauss, 2007, p. 47). Furthermore, in an earlier work by Strauss and Howe (1991), they reported that if it were not for the fact that boomer households were two income households, their “incomes would be well below what the Silent [Generation] earned at like age” (p. 307). Given the high divorce rates for this generation, some are facing financial distress in their later years because spousal incomes are no longer combined. Thus, there are two distinct reasons why many boomers will feel forced to work in their later years: life style maintenance and survival. Poulos and Smith Nightingale (1997) pointed out:

In 2005, there will, for example, be about 1.3 million more 45 to 54 year old disadvantaged adults than in 1995 and 1.4 million more 55 to 70 years. In contrast, there will also be about 200,000 more 20-24 year olds and about three-quarters of a million fewer disadvantaged 25 to 34 year olds. (p. ii)
Financial exigency will require a large segment of the baby boomer generation to continue working beyond the traditional retirement age of 65. Early retirement simply will not be an option for them. Furthermore, Setterson and Lovegreen (1998) found that:

Several factors have also created the possibility that older adults may work, or need to work, throughout the last third of life: reduced morbidity (which makes later years healthier ones), the lifting of the retirement cap in most occupations, [and] new policies to accommodate workers with disabilities. (p. 521)

This, in turn, creates an environment where significant numbers of older persons need to work, and the services of this population will benefit society. In order to realize the full potential of this phenomenon, Settersten and Lovegreen (1998) pointed to the need to change our conception of the division of roles and activities over the course of a person’s lifespan. “Key demographic parameters, particularly longevity and fertility, have created the potential for new ‘time budgets of adulthood’” (p. 520). In addition, Dychtwald and Flower (1990) found because work is becoming less physically demanding, people are able to stay in the workforce longer and continue working well into their 70s. Additionally, government policies relating to Social Security benefits offer financial incentives for delaying receipt of these benefits (Gustman & Steinmeier, 2002). Changes in the work environment may require that older workers obtain additional training to update their skills. These authors stressed the need to re-examine what constitutes retirement and suggested looking at new ways “to interweave work and nonwork throughout our adult years” (p. 183). This will involve shifts in thinking regarding life phases allocated for work, family, and education (Dychtwald & Flower; Settersten & Lovegreen, 1998). A key impetus in the change process is the involvement of older adults in the higher education system. Higher education and the role it will play in an aging society will be the focus of the literature that follows.
Higher Education and Older Adults

Enrollment Statistics and Trends

Middle aged and older adults are attending college in increasing numbers. Recent statistical data showed that 6.9 percent of adults 40 to 49 years of age, 3.4 percent of adults 50 to 64 years of age, and .4 percent of adults over 65 years of age attended college classes in fall 2007. Statistical data also revealed that 7.1 percent of adults 40 to 49 years of age, 3.6% of adults 50 to 64 years of age, and .3 percent of adults over 65 years of age attended college classes two years later, in fall 2009. The total enrollment figures of the three age groups were 1,971,153 for 2007 and 2,254,087 for 2009 (U.S. Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics, 2010 as cited in Synder & Dillow, 2012, p. 293). This data indicated a steady increase in the number of students between the ages of 40 to 64 years attending college classes.

However, according to the American Council on Education (ACE), adults 50 years of age and older are less likely to enroll in for-credit classes than students under the age of 25. The ACE study also revealed that: “While only 33 percent of students under the age of 25 attend community colleges, half of the college-going adults aged 50 and older do so” (2008, p. 3). Furthermore, researchers in this same study also reported that 25% of young adults 50 years and older attended public four-year institutions while 43% of young adults attended classes in this type of institution. This data suggested that older adults are more likely to attend two-year and public institutions than their traditional age counterparts are.

Individual and Collective Influences

Lindeman (1926) once said: “Evolving personalities follow the path of learning in an attempt to adjust themselves to a world in which knowledge leads to power, power leads to self-expression, freedom and creativity, creative freedom leads to enjoyable experience” (p. 147). Higher education is affording baby boomers opportunities for personal fulfillment and to make meaningful contributions to society. Increasingly, members of the boomer generation are going to college to improve the quality of the second phase of their lives. An examination of the
literature indicates five major environmental influences affecting the motivation of adults to attend lifelong learning classes: (1) self-efficacy, (2) societal stereotypes, (3) governmental policy, (4) higher education opportunities, and (5) prior education experiences. Each constitutes part of the larger picture of the boomer generation and their access (or lack of access) to higher education.

Conversely, Cross (1981) identified three types of barriers that limit older adult access to higher education: attitudinal, situational, and dispositional. Broek and Hake (2012) described each of these as follows:

*Institutional Barriers.* These include lack of necessary entry qualifications; the absence of relevant programmes; lack of discretionary fees for low income groups; inconvenient locations with particular reference to rural areas; inflexible time schedules of courses.

*Situational barriers.* These include the inability to pay course fees; lack of time due to family responsibilities and/or employment; lack of public transport; inconvenience of locations of available courses, etc.

*Dispositional barriers.* These include bad experiences with previous education; lack of confidence in individual capabilities; the feeling that one is too old to learn; a sense that learning is good but not for ‘our kind of people’; lack of awareness of positive returns to learning, etc. (pp. 399-400)

These types of barriers are consistent with the findings of other researchers. They describe the problems older adults can encounter in their efforts to access education. Each of these factors describes the promises and the challenges facing older adults in the pursuit of higher education. The nature of these access issues suggests that higher education institutions will need to adopt a learner-centered approach that is “attuned to the specific characteristics of learners” (Broek & Hake, 2012, p. 400).

**Personal Circumstances Impacting Higher Education Enrollment**

Luppi (2009) maintained there is a predisposition for adults to learn throughout their life. According to Villar, Triado, Pinazo, Celdran, and Sole (2010), older adults have different reasons for participating in education programs. Their study examined older Spanish students’ evaluations of University Programme for Older Adults (UPOP). The findings offered insights
about the motivation of older students and the strengths of this program. They discovered that the quality of lectures and lecturers, program content, personal gains relating to cognitive gains, and developing new relationships were the primary reasons for student satisfaction. From these results, the researchers learned that the motivations for older adults attending college reflected a combination of personal circumstances including age, marital status, and prior education, and that relevant programs were important considerations.

The American Council on Education (2008) reported three major motives for older adults to return to school: “learning to learn, learning to connect, and learning to work” (p. 3). Improving one’s social and economic status are important motivations for attending college classes. Research by the American Council on Education indicated that older adults are accessing higher education to start new careers and upgrade their work skills. Therefore, as Cross (1981) has pointed out, matching program design with user motivation and expectations is an important consideration, if higher education is going to meet the needs of older adult learners. Education leaders involved in the American Council on Education report entitled Mapping New Directions: Higher Education for Older Adults made four recommendations: 1) research existing programs in their schools and the community, and gaps and opportunities, 2) rethink program delivery formats, 3) adapt current programs and services to accommodate needs of older students, and 4) expand outreach programs to this age group (American Council on Education, 2008, p. 4).

Cross (1981) has maintained that the passage of years does not necessarily pose a hindrance to learning. Long held perceptions about seniors, no doubt, will change over time as this group becomes increasingly involved in society and higher education. Fischer (n.d.) described lifelong learning as involving the learner’s active involvement in gaining and using knowledge and skills to solve problems in the context of their lives. These can encompass a wide range of issues including changes in employment status to quality of life concerns occurring after their earned work phase of life. McCombs (1991) reported in Motivation and Lifelong Learning that the motivation to learn is normal and can be “enhanced and nurtured by quality supportive
relationships, opportunities for personal choice and responsibility for learning, and personally relevant and meaningful learning tasks” (p. 120). This is consistent with Withnall’s (2006) assertion, pointing to the need for changing the policy discussion from the “policy maker and practitioner perspectives on education towards learning and ensure . . . the voices of older learners themselves, hitherto largely ignored, can emerge” (p. 30). The common thread stressed in this research is the importance of learner involvement determining the types and contexts of programs that are intended to meet their needs.

One’s prior education is another motivating factor for older adults and can be an impetus in a person’s decision to avail himself or herself of further educational opportunities. Manheimer and Snodgrass (1993) purported those with more prior education will be more inclined to pursue additional education. More importantly, research indicates that a person’s educational level may decrease the effects of cognitive impairment as we age. For example, Jorm, Henderson, Scott, Christensen, MacKinnon, and Korten (1994), in their study, Does Education Protect against Cognitive Impairment? A Comparison of the Elderly in Two Australian Cities found increased education levels resulted in a “reduction in disability due to cognitive impairment” (p. 362). This study compared the cognitive impairment levels of older adults in the cities of Hobart and Canberra, Australia, where the education levels were much higher and the impairment levels much lower in Canberra.

Furthermore, like with any age group, it is important that lifelong learning is relevant to the needs of older adults. For example, classes offered to baby boomers can emphasize the acquisition of facts and consider the emotional and spiritual aspects of adult learners. According to Lindeman (1926), there is a distinct relationship between a person’s intellect and their emotions. He emphasized, “It is useless to discuss feelings and emotions as if these were aspects of personality separable from thinking and reasoning” (p. 104). Learning is not an isolated accumulation of facts and concepts. Therefore, it is important for educators to consider a learner’s life experiences, how these experiences affect one’s emotions, and, in turn, the student’s
perceptions of subject matter. Learning involves the redefining of one’s self as we move through our life journey. Consequently, older adults bring to the learning environment a wealth of life experiences that enrich their learning experience.

**Societal Expectations and Higher Education Enrollment**

The literature relating to baby boomer access to higher education addresses issues that reflect changes taking place at the societal level. The roles of society’s older adult population are in transition. Stereotyping, however, still remains and is evident even in the description of college students in the 46 and older age group that have been labeled “Last Chancers”, as pointed out by Hagedorn (2005). The American Council on Education (2008) and the United Nations (1999) promoted the need for recognition of the older population’s value and potential for meaningful contributions to society. Freedman (2007) stressed this as well when he stated:

> Defying conventional wisdom, Laslett views the development of the third age as an individual and societal triumph, “the crown of life.” At the heart of his thinking is the simple insight that individuals at this juncture have, for a protracted period and in large numbers, both experience and time. (p. 105)

The United States has entered into a period where we need older adults to meet societal needs on many levels. Older adults are responding in different ways, including voluntary community service, returning to the workforce, and returning to college to improve their work-related skills. Enrolling in college classes also has wider societal ramifications. Continued involvement in adult education can qualify older adults to become effective agents of change. Adult education can “empower the individual to think as an autonomous agent in a collaborative context rather than to uncritically act on the received ideas and judgments of others” (Mezirow, 1997, p. 8). Providing increased access to adult education, including higher education, offers the prospect of facilitating a transformative process that has been set in motion by the boomer generation.

Increased older adult access to higher education benefits individuals and society by preparing adults for retirement, raising literacy levels, and offering programs that facilitate
preparation for new careers (Peterson & Masunaga, 1998). The American Council on Education (2008) has maintained that, “Older adults represent such a large, influential population (and voting bloc) is itself a compelling reason to educate this group” (p. 27). The question: “Who will pay for the cost of educating older adults?” is a recurring issue. Furthermore, the American Council on Education found that “expense is consistently cited as a barrier in older adults’ pursuit of higher education” (p. 27). This becomes a particularly sensitive issue in an environment of fiscal constraint, currently affecting government, education, and private sectors in our country. Connecting programs to specific areas of need is essential. Funding options that are available include tuition waivers, private grants, tax credits, and institutional financial aid (American Council on Education, 2008). Lastly, promoting higher education policies that empower middle aged and older adults to live productive, fulfilling lives with dignity can, no doubt, benefit society and individuals who comprise a growing segment of our nation’s population.

**Summary**

Generation is the key concept that has chronological, behavioral, and societal implications. As a group, the baby boomer generation is living longer and is healthier than previous generations, which offers potential benefits to society while at the same time posing new challenges.

The relationship between a person’s calendar age and his or her societal role is closely intertwined. Age-related societal norms play an integral role in the aging process. They affect how individuals or age-specific groupings interact with each other (Neugarten et al., 1965; Settersten & Hagestad, 1996b). The large numbers of baby boomers transitioning into old age and their approach towards aging is challenging the status quo and created opportunities and challenges for governmental policy makers in this country. Research by Settersten and Hagestad (1996b), and Foner (1996) maintained that while societal norms still serve as a means mechanism for social control, their influence is becoming increasingly flexible.
Another important dynamic in the current aging process is that many older adults are delaying retirement and/or returning to work after retiring. Some are doing so out of financial necessity while others are working for the purpose of starting new, more fulfilling careers (Freedman, 2011). Poulos and Smith Nightengale (1997) found the lines between a person’s working life and retirement often becomes blurred. Individuals can have periods of time where they alternate between full time and part time employment, schooling, leisure, and unpaid volunteer activities. Baby boomers are returning to college for a number of reasons including financial considerations, enhancing career prospects, and enriching their lives. This reflects the changing concept of retirement and the roles older adults are playing in our society.

Several studies informed this inquiry in important ways. For instance, Laslett’s sociological theories relating to aging and the changing roles of middle-aged and older adults in society provided a framework for creating the interview questions. The works of Foner, Neugarten, and Settersten and Hagestad, as they relate to social norms, appreciably enlightened my study about baby boomers’ perceptions of themselves, and their interactions with others. The research of Leidly and Dardling-Fisher informed this inquiry about the subject matter relating to generativity versus stagnation. Butler’s research relating to baby boomers’ capacity to contribute or not contribute to society informed this study regarding the struggles of baby boomers in the second half of their lives. Erickson’s theory of human development and Holland and Super’s theories of career development illuminate, to an extent, the life experiences of those participating in this study. Research conducted by Dychtwald and Flower; Freedman; Howe and Strauss; Poulos and Smith Nightengale; and Malayter informed this study regarding baby boomer retirement. The research of the American Council on Education; Broek and Hake; Cross; Villar, Triado, Pinazo, Celdran, and Sole; and Withnall provided enlightenment regarding the issues facing baby boomers when deciding to pursue higher education.
CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to uncover the structures of experiences of the American baby boomer generation who aspires for continued education and career change in a contemporary fast-paced changing American society. Specifically, the motivational factors of Alaskan baby boomers returning to college are explored with regard to their individual experiences. With this in mind, the following are the research questions are addressed in this study:

- What is aging and how is it viewed and experienced by Alaskan baby boomers as they pursue higher education and change careers?
- What are the motivational factors behind their educational, career, and life decisions?

This inquiry provides additional insights into how adult learners—and baby boomers in particular—make their decisions regarding the choice of higher education programs and “second” careers. These insights can inform higher educational policy makers, faculty, and student services personnel to accommodate the needs of diverse bodies of the adult student population in the United States. This chapter elaborates on methodological assumptions and techniques that best suit the purposes of this study.

Theoretical Framework of the Study

This study is positioned within the interpretive or qualitative (interchangeably) paradigm and more specifically, classical and contemporary phenomenology. Qualitative research as “a situated activity that locates the observer in the world” and that “qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” instead of passing judgment based on pre-selected criteria.
Qualitative researchers endeavor to see life through the eyes of those whom they observe. They undertake qualitative inquiry because of its unique position by:

1. Recognizing … human experiences that are not approachable through quantitative approaches
2. Focusing on the wholeness of experience rather than solely on its objects or parts
3. Searching for meanings and essences of experience rather than measurements and explanations
4. Obtaining descriptions of experience through first person accounts in informal and formal conversations and interviews
5. Regarding the data of experience as imperative in understanding human behavior as evidence for scientific investigations;
6. Formulating questions and problems that reflect the interest, involvement, and personal commitment of the researcher
7. Viewing experience and behavior as an integrated and inseparable relationship of subject and object and of parts and whole. (Moustakas, 1994, p. 21)

The focus of human science research is on the persons and the phenomena through the eyes of the subjects studied. The study of humans does not fit into a neat and tidy package where one size fits all. Each person is unique. For this reason, qualitative researchers endeavor to understand life from the perspectives of those involved in a study. Qualitative researchers are “bound not by tight cause-and-effect relationships among factors, but rather by identifying the complex interactions of factors in any situation” (Creswell, 2007, p. 39). Primary data was gained from interviewing the participants and analyzing the interview data (Creswell, 2007; Denzin & Lincoln, 2003).

Having roots in the human science system of inquiry, phenomenology has a rich history of development. Founded by Husserl (1859—1938), phenomenology has taken various directions of its development in human and social sciences. Husserl conceived of phenomenology as “a science of pure possibilities carried out with systematic concreteness” (as cited in Moustakas, 1994, p. 28). His version of phenomenology became known as ‘transcendental.’
Phenomenology: Traditions and Strands

One of the most recognized authorities in today’s phenomenology, Max van Manen (1990), emphasized interpretation of “texts of life” in a phenomenological approach (p. 4). This approach is oriented towards the examination of a person’s lived experiences through an interpretive lens. A phenomenological description is “always one of interpretation” (van Manen, 1990, p. 31). A researcher’s interpretation opens up the possibility of other complimentary descriptions that offer deeper insights into the observed lived experience.

Moustakas (1994) is a significant advocate of this approach that is comprised of two components: intentionality and intuition. Two elements of intentionality are noesis and noema (Conklin, 2005; Moustakas, 1994). Noema is what is experienced, and noesis describes the way the noema has been experienced (Ihde, 1977; Moustakas, 1994). Conversely, intuition is the innate ability to understand without conscious thinking. Moustakas (1994) described intuition as “the beginning place in deriving knowledge of human experience, free of everyday sense impressions and the natural attitude” (p. 32).

Moustakas (1994) emphasized that while the above characteristics are areas of intersection between phenomenology and other qualitative approaches to human science research, differences exist. Each of these “common bonds” will serve to guide my research (p. 21). Moustakas (1994) pointed out that using the transcendental (Husserlian) phenomenological approach involves “disciplined and systematic efforts to set aside prejudgments (known as the Epoche process)” when starting the research process (p. 22). Furthermore, the phenomenological approach emphasizes the use of “intuition, imagination, and universal structures” to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the experience being described” (p. 22). Moustakas stressed the importance of the researcher maintaining an attitude of openness and naivety regarding the phenomenon being observed.

Schutz (1954) represented the tradition of contemporary social phenomenology. Schutz posited an important principle associated with social sciences—and phenomenology in
particular—when he stated the “primary goal of social sciences to obtain organized knowledge of social reality” (p. 261). In addition, Schutz (1954) asserted that human beings are born into their environment and have a responsibility to discover their place in their social setting: “individuals have knowledge of these various dimensions of the social world in which they live” (p. 263). Schutz (1954) insisted that a person’s knowledge of his or her world is specialized and fragmentary. Individuals alone cannot see the entire societal picture and it is largely for this reason that social scientists organize the fragmented knowledge of various social groups into a wider, more coherent picture.

Wilson (2002) highlighted three general suppositions originally put forward by Schutz (1962), relating to how social scientists create models of human behavior. These focus upon: (1) logical consistency in the social scientist’s constructs that differ from those of the individual living their daily life, (2) these constructs are subjective interpretations, and (3) the constructs created by the social scientist “should be understandable by the individual social actor and his or her fellows” (Wilson, 2002, Schutz’s Methodological Position, para. 3). Social phenomenology combines the philosophical discipline of phenomenology with the social science discipline of sociology. The two distinct disciplines are complimentary to one another.

This position is further extended by Ferguson (2006) who affirmed that philosophy “remains a rich source of description and reflection that is central to a proper sociological understanding of modern society; and sociology yields insights essential to the historic project of philosophical inquiry” (p. 1). The disciplines of sociology and philosophy are not separate specialties, but closely related to one another: “the relation of phenomenology and social theory, then is to be viewed not externally as a partial contact between two fundamentally different academic practices but, rather, internally as an aspect of the many-sided discourse of the modern experience” (Ferguson, 2006, p. 8).

Epoché, one of the key notions of phenomenology, is addressed by Schutz (1962) as follows:
The suggestion may be ventured that man within the natural attitude also uses a specific époque, of course quite another one than the phenomenologists. He does not suspend belief in the outer world and its objects, but on the contrary, he suspends doubt in its existence. What he puts in brackets is the doubt that the world and its objects might be otherwise than it appears to him. We propose to call this époque the époque of the natural attitude. (p. 229)

The individual, then, instead of denying the social world’s existence, affirms it and seeks to understand how the environment contributes to individuals’ understanding of their lived experiences. In this vein, providing “thick” descriptions will be an important part of describing the lived experiences of the study’s participants.

Phenomenological “thick” description plays an important part in describing the lived experiences of research participants. In this regard, Ponterotto (2006) stated “’thick’ description involves understanding and absorbing the context of the situation or behavior” (p. 539). Denzin (1989) distinguished between the four distinct attributes of “thick” description:

(1) It gives the context of an act; (2) it states the intentions and meanings that organize the action; (3) it traces the evolution and development of the act; (4) it presents the action as a text that can then be interpreted. A thin simply reports facts, independent of intentions or circumstances that surround an action. (p. 33)

‘Thick’ description encompasses both the individual and social dimensions of an individual’s interactions of self and others (Denzin, 1989). This study pays particular attention to the interaction of individual participants with their life worlds.

Mishler (1979) maintained, “human action can be understood only within its own context of socially grounded rules for defining, categorizing, and interpreting the meaning of our conduct” (p. 8). The purpose of this study is to understand the lived experiences of the participants in their respective social realms. In this regard, a constructivist perspective contributes to the theoretical orientation of phenomenology (Creswell, 2007). Cohen, Duberley, and Mallon (2004) confirmed that the social world is not a “fixed or objective entity” but rather is “constructed by individuals through their social practices” (p. 409). Burr (1995) echoed this argument by outlining the four principle suppositions of social constructionism: (1) a critical stance towards taken-for-granted knowledge, (2) our knowledge of the world is historically and
culturally situated, (3) knowledge is sustained by social processes, and (4) knowledge and social action go together (as cited in Cohen et al., 2004, pp. 409-410). Through the course of this study, the life experiences of the participants have been examined in the light of their perceptions of reality. The sociological theories of Laslett, Neugarten, Settersten, Hagestad, Erickson, Holland, and Super that are discussed in chapter two are considered in the renditions of the lived experiences of this study’s participants.

Phenomenological Research Processes

This study employs a phenomenological approach drawing from both classical phenomenologists (Husserl, 1962; Schutz, 1954) and contemporary phenomenologists (Fergusson, 2006; Moustakas, 1994). Central to all phenomenological approaches is the notion of “lifeworld.” According to Becker (1992), phenomenology has as its foundation two key assumptions. The first is experience, which is a “valid and fruitful source of knowledge,” and the second is “our everyday worlds are valuable sources of knowledge” (pp. 10-11).

The researcher plays a central role in phenomenological inquiry by asking questions that will elicit participants to candidly tell their stories. The questions asked of the interviewees are typically broad and general in order to facilitate their construction of meaning (Creswell, 2007). This study focuses on questions about the experiences of baby boomer students living in the Anchorage, Alaska, area. The questions were intended to discover what it is like to be an older student and one’s views of aging. The interview questions were designed to elicit participants’ “thick” descriptions of their everyday lives while they are attending college and preparing for new career opportunities.

Participants in this study were encouraged to talk at great length about different experiences in their lives as they relate to attending college and their perspectives on aging. Similarly, in this study, I encouraged the participants to talk about the support they have received from family, friends, college instructors, and employers. I also wanted to hear about the
challenges participants faced juggling the different parts of their lives that include family, schooling, and work.

Phenomenological researchers study the life experiences of ordinary people in the contexts of their everyday lives. Phenomenologists are concerned with “understanding social and psychological phenomena from the perspectives of people involved” (Welman & Kruger, 1999, p. 189). Put another way, the phenomenological research method is one “in which researchers attempt to understand the meaning of events and interactions to ordinary people in particular situations” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003, p. 23). van Manen (1990) argues there are four important parts to a person’s lifeworld including “lived time, lived space, lived body, and lived human relation” (p. 18). However, as van Manen (1990) pointed out, some aspects of an individual’s life experiences are difficult to describe and they require “subtlety and sensitivity” (p. 18). “Objectivity,” an elusive term in qualitative research, means that the researcher is “oriented to the object” and “in a sense a guardian and a defender of the true nature of the object” (van Manen, 1990, p. 20). In contrast, subjectivity suggests we have an intense interest in the object of our study while avoiding “getting captivated and carried away by our unreflected preconceptions” (van Manen, 1990, p. 20). These statements are consistent with Moustakas’ (1994) characterization of human science inquiry and its focus on seeing life through the mind’s eye of the person, tempered by the realization that the researcher may have different perceptions of reality. Subsequently, this study endeavors to present descriptions of the study participants’ lived experiences in a “unique and personal way” without being carried away by my own preconceived notions of their realities (van Manen, 1990, p. 20).

There are four important processes comprising the phenomenological research process: epoch, phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation, and the synthesis of meanings and essences (Moustakas, 1994). Individually, they address a specific aspect of the phenomenological process. Taken as a whole, they embody a disciplined approach that adds procedural rigor to the research process. Giorgi (2006) reminded us how Husserl stressed that
methodological procedures were necessary to advance “philosophical knowledge” (p. 354). In this vein, Giorgi (2006) stated:

The adoption of the disciplinary attitude brings the proper sensitivity to the analysis and it provides a perspective that enables the data to be manageable. The data will always be richer than the perspective brought to it but it is the latter that makes the analysis feasible. (p.354)

The procedures described next represent an adaptation of Husserl’s philosophical method to social science research. The utilization of these accepted processes serve to improve the quality of my research and enhanced my insights about the lived experiences of the research participants.

**Epoche**

“Bracketing,” or “epoche,” is the process in which the researcher “engages in disciplined and systematic efforts to set aside prejudgments regarding the phenomenon being investigated” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 22). Merriam and Associates (2002) explained that “bracketing, or the process of epoche, allows the experience of the phenomenon to be explained in terms of its own intrinsic system of meaning, not one imposed on it from without” (p. 94). Researchers deliberately set aside their conceptions about the phenomena for the purpose of encouraging participants to present their realities from their own perspectives. LeVasseur (2003) maintained that this can be accomplished by the researcher suspending notions temporarily in order to cultivate a “persistent curiosity” (p. 418) in order to gain a fuller understanding of the phenomena being examined. Furthermore, Giorgi (2006) asserted that bracketing is necessary “so full attention can be given to the instance of the phenomenon that is currently appearing” (p. 355). This view is consistent with Moustakas’s (1994) argument that bracketing is “a preparation for acquiring new knowledge” (p. 85) and thereby considering phenomenon, as though one is seeing it for the first time. Bracketing, stemming from an intense curiosity about the participant’s circumstances, serves as a vehicle to encourage interviewees in this study to freely describe their experiences without my undue influence as the researcher. “Bracketing” is a technique that I
used in keeping a self-reflective journal throughout the study and in conducting the interviews with the participants.

**Phenomenological Reduction**

Merriam and Associates (2002) emphasize that phenomenological reduction is “the process of continually returning to the essence of the experience to derive the inner structure or meaning in and of itself” (p. 94). Phenomenological reduction involves seeing and “listening with a conscious and deliberate intention of opening ourselves to phenomena as phenomena” and followed by a reflective process “aimed at grasping the full nature of a phenomenon” (Moustakas, 1994, pp. 92-93). This process is part and parcel of any phenomenological inquiry, including this study, which aims at reflecting on the experiences of each individual in order to gain a deeper understanding of his or her life. The reflective process also includes thinking about the experiences of the entire group of participants as a whole for the purpose of deepening the understanding of the observed phenomena.

Horizontalization is a part of the phenomenological process that involves assigning equal values to all data obtained during the research (Merriam & Associates, 2002). The result is the researcher’s freedom to see data in terms of their own value, thereby freeing the mind to cluster the data “into nonrepetitious themes” (Schaefer, 2009, p. 87). Phenomenological reductions have the effect of making “it possible for the mind to discover its own nature; originally lost in the world, the mind can find itself by means of these reductions” (Kockelmans, 1967, p. 222). Herein, the affect is such that the mind begins to see the observed phenomena as part of a unified whole. Through seeing the connections between the individual phenomena, the researcher begins to understand how the individual parts relate to the larger picture. The process of reflective listening and giving equal credence to each interviewee’s statements was invaluable in the data analysis process.
Imaginative Variation

Phenomenological researchers use imaginative variation to describe how an experience occurred. This involves the researcher reflecting on the context in order to expand the number of possible meanings (Creswell, 2007). Giorgi (2006) stated that the purpose of imaginative variation is “to discover essential characteristics of the phenomenon being investigated” (pp. 355-356). Its “aspects of or qualities that make a phenomenon what it is and without which the phenomenon could not be what it is” (van Manen, 1990, p. 107). This process “enables the researcher to derive structural themes from the textual descriptions that have been obtained through phenomenological reduction” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 99). This freeing process becomes a place where the researcher can take an expansive approach in the quest to understand the deeper meanings of the phenomena under observation. Resulting from this stage of analysis, I was able to look beyond the obvious to search for deeper understandings.

Synthesis of Meanings and Essences

The potential numbers of insights coming from observing a phenomenon are virtually unlimited and, the result is that “the essences of any experience are never totally exhausted” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 100). An understanding of the fundamental nature of the phenomena represents “the essences at a particular time and place from a vantage point” of the researcher and comes from “exhaustive imaginative and reflective study of the phenomenon” (p. 100). The final process of analysis in phenomenological studies involves “the intuitive integration of the fundamental textural and structural descriptions into a unified statement of the essences of the experience of the phenomenon as a whole” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 100). This, in turn, leaves the door open for future examination of the phenomenon. Engaging in this fourth process resulted in presenting the many observations and insights gained from my interviewees together as a complete, unified whole.

As previously mentioned, these four elements are common to all phenomenological approaches. The main rationale for conducting phenomenological studies is the presentation of
lifeworld experiences. In this regard, Barritt (1986) argued: “In human science study, the goal of research is not the discovery of new elements, as in natural scientific study, but rather the heightening of awareness for experience which has been forgotten or overlooked” (p. 20). Thus, phenomenology “aims at gaining a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of our everyday experiences” (van Manen, 1990, p. 9). Phenomenology does not attempt to provide theories or explanations about daily occurrences, but instead “offers the possibility of plausible insights that bring us in more direct contact with the world” (van Manen, 1990, p. 9). The central interest of this study was to enter the worlds of baby boomers returning to college and present their reality as seen through their eyes.

Data Sources and Collection Procedures

The participants in this study were selected according to the qualitative research tradition that uses purposeful sampling (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). The selection of the participants primarily involved word-of-mouth contacts to obtain referrals from participants, higher education colleagues, and members of the community. The snowballing technique was also employed. The practice of snowballing involved the recruitment of potential participants by those currently involved in the study. Selected participants included both men and women, and young, middle, and older boomers. They met the following criteria: (a) born between 1946 and 1964, (b) a resident of the greater Anchorage, Alaska area for at least two years; (c) a primary motivation for attending classes was based on work or career related considerations, and (d) an undergraduate or graduate student enrolled in a higher education institution in the Anchorage area.

Interviews

Major data for analysis and interpretation came from the interview of eleven participants meeting the above stated criteria. That is, the participants for this study resided in the Anchorage region where approximately half the state’s population lives. Their age ranged between 49 and 63 years old. I was interested in this fourteen-year age range in order to explore the boomer generation’s transition from the so-called “middle age” to the next phase of their lives. Morrissey
and Higgs (2006) noted that the “aim of [the] phenomenologist is to uncover the nature of human experience while maintaining the integrity of the perception of the individual” (p. 163). Selecting a small sample ensured an in-depth exploration of the lives of the participants. I presented rich and “thick” descriptions as part of my data analysis to provide multiple layers of insights into their life experiences.

In-depth, semi-structured or unstructured interviews provided major data for analysis and interpretation of this study. The intent behind using loosely structured interviews was to encourage “the subjects to freely express their thoughts around particular topics” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003, p. 3). The interviews were approximately one hour in length and follow-up conversations with participants were made in cases of not obtaining sufficient data for analysis during the first round of interviews (see Appendix A, Informed Consent Form). The interviews were recorded with the participants’ consent and transcribed by the researcher. It is “incumbent upon researchers to seek methods that fit with the philosophy and methodology of their research question and to choose methods that fit with the research topic and assumptions” (Byrne, 2001, p. 831). The data sources and methodology for obtaining data for this study are consistent with the stated research purposes and questions (see the discussion above).

**Documents and Artifacts**

The participants of this study also were asked to provide additional data sources (pending their agreement) that might supplement the themes identified because of their interviews. These additional sources of data shed light on personal “representations” of their perception of aging, and on how they saw their roles as older adults in their pursuit of higher education. The documents and artifacts consisted of letters, essays, awards, photographs, personal diaries, scrapbooks, memorabilia, and other articles (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003).

**Observational Notes**

I kept observational and reflective notes of the research journey throughout the data collection and analysis processes. These notes were part of what Creswell (2008) called “field
notes” (p. 235). They included impressions of the interviewee, their non-verbal responses to questions, clothing, and the setting (Creswell, 2008; Bogdan & Biklen, 2003).

**Data Analysis Strategies**

Following the above description of the phenomenological processes, my intention was to “make sense out of text and image data” (Creswell, 2003, p. 190). This meant isolating and merging, at the same time, the processes of phenomenological bracketing, reduction, and imaginative variation (see the discussion above). I made an effort to move “deeper and deeper into understanding the data, representing the data, and making an interpretation of the larger meaning of the data” (Creswell, 2003, p. 190).

The initial data review consisted of examining observational notes and interview recordings shortly after each interview. This preliminary analysis consisted of a one to two page document that served to provide a broad overview of each interview while initial impressions were still fresh in my mind. The main themes from these documents were compiled and compared with those that emerged from analysis of the interview transcripts. Creswell (2007) found Moustakas’s “modification of the Stevick-Colaissi-Keen method as providing the most useful, practical approach” (Creswell, 2007, p. 159). This same data analysis approach was used in my study. Creswell (2007) described these procedures as follows:

1. Describe the personal experiences with the phenomenon under study.
2. Develop a list of significant statements.
3. Take the significant statements and then group them into larger units of information.
4. Write a description of ‘what’ the participants in the study experiences with the phenomenon. This is called a ‘textural’ description.
5. Write a description of ‘how’ the experience happened. This is called ‘structural description.’
6. Write a composite description of the phenomenon incorporating both the textural and structural descriptions. (p. 159)

As mentioned earlier, “thick” description is an important aspect of the phenomenological analysis process because it involves going beyond the superficial elements of a phenomenon to gain an in-depth “understanding and absorbing the context of the situation or behavior” and
“ascribing present and future intentionality to the behavior” (Ponterotto, 2006, p. 539). Thick descriptions were used throughout the analysis.

I transcribed the interviews by hand. The study’s participants were protected by pseudonyms and secured codes known only to the principal researcher. In addition, there was a manual self-examination of the data to identify different emerging themes coming from the interview transcripts. The final comprehensive analysis and interpretation of the data began once all interviews were finished and transcribed (Becker, 1992).

Typical data analysis in qualitative studies includes the steps of coding and themes identification. However, as the above discussion indicates, phenomenological research follows its own specific steps of analysis. In other words, precautions are made to move from the process of bracketing, through a phenomenological reduction, to an imaginative variation, and, finally, the intuitive integration of the fundamental textural and structural descriptions that lead into meaningful structures of experience identification. As this study moves to the next stage, these processes are described in length and detail.

**Researcher’s Self in Phenomenological Inquiry**

Over my years as a college instructor and human services professional, I have had extensive interactions with the older adult population living in the Anchorage area. During our conversations and formal interviews as a human service professional, they gave details about what it was like to grow old. If I were to sum up their dominant sentiment, it would be in the statement that “aging is not for cowards.” In addition, I have done prior research in adult education and aging because of my desire to understand the challenges facing older adults starting new careers in the later years of their lives. I am fully aware of several areas where my life experiences will intersect with the participants in this study. However, there are also aspects of my life that will diverge from those I will be interviewing. Moreover, there is the realization that my path through higher education in the middle years of my life has been in many ways different.
from the study’s participants. The areas of intersection and diversion have been constantly negotiated in my reflective notes taken throughout the study.

I am an Alaskan baby boomer who returned to college, in my case, to prepare for an encore career. I am part of the same generation as those I interviewed. In addition, like those involved in this study, I was (at the time this study was conducted) a university student. This goes beyond the matter of financial considerations because equally important to me is the desire for finding personal fulfillment in the next phase of my life’s journey. I returned to college during midlife to begin graduate studies and again in my sixties to begin work on a doctoral degree. Additionally, like the study’s participants, I am a resident of the region, having lived and worked in the Anchorage/Mat Su area for over 20 years.

Even though we are of the same generation, there were subtle differences due to some participants being members of the younger boomer population while others, like me, were members of the older boomer generation. For some, motivation came from a desire to meet other people. Some of those I interviewed were taking classes to improve prospects in their current career while others were doing so for other reasons, such as enrolling in classes for personal enrichment reasons and for whom future career prospects may be secondary. There were those in this study attending college for the first time in their lives.

My personal and professional experiences provided me with a certain degree of credibility to speak on behalf of those I interviewed. Regardless of my background, it was necessary for me to “bracket” my own life experiences, including my previous work and research on older adults, and perspectives on aging, adult learners, and similar issues that were central to this study in order to minimize my researcher bias and to keep an open mind about the phenomena of my investigation (Creswell, 2007). Gilgun (2005) noted that “social scientists observe, interact with, transform, and are transformed by other human beings” (p. 260).

The researcher’s addressing, negotiating, and questioning his or her own assumptions with regard to what is being researched is often referred to as ‘reflexivity’ in qualitative research
The process of reflexivity is an important part of obtaining a deeper understanding of the phenomenon under observation: “a lived experience does not confront me as something perceived or represented; it is not given to me, but the reality of the lived experience is there-for-me because I have a reflexive awareness of it, because I possess it immediately as belonging to me in some sense” (Dilthey, 1985, p. 223).

The researcher’s relationship is inseparable from that which they observe and report. The resulting interaction produces insights reflecting the experiences of the researcher and the research participants. I saw the imperative of doing these same things through the course of this study. Following these processes is part of the rigor associated with phenomenological research within the education discipline. Similarly, the phenomenological methodology and the discipline of qualitative research complemented each other throughout the course of this study.

**Ethical Issues and Strategies for Validating Findings**

This study’s participants were selected and treated according to the ethical standards of conducting qualitative research (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Every attempt was made to protect the anonymity of the participants and to keep the collected data confidential. From the beginning of the study, each participant was given a pseudonym. Each interview and each additional piece of data had a secured code known only to the principal researcher. The records of audio interviews will remain stored in a locked cabinet for at least seven years and destroyed afterwards if no longer needed. All computer files used for this study will be kept on a secure server. Upon request, the dissertation director and other committee members can have access to data, which will be protected by pseudonyms and secured codes known only to the principal researcher. Interview transcripts were given to the participants for verification of accuracy. On the day of the interview, each participant was given a consent form to review and sign. Necessary documents were approved and filed with the Benedictine University IRB.

Validation strategies related to qualitative research focus on whether the data provided by the participants are “accurate, can be trusted, and is credible” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; as cited in
Triangulation, member checks, peer debriefing, and thick descriptions were used to ensure validity (Creswell, 2008). Building trust and rapport with the study participants was critical to ensure that they felt comfortable during the interview process to disclose personal information about their lives. Personal contact with interviewees was important and was accomplished through phone conversations or brief, informal conversations with them. In addition, it was likely, that being referred by another participant increased the comfort level for those who were referred. Member checking with interviewees confirmed the accuracy of their responses. Validation also involved collecting data from multiple sources (Creswell, 2007). In this study, data came from the face-to-face interviews, documents, and artifacts provided by the participants, as well as my extensive reflective observational notes. The use of a modified Stevick-Colaissi-Keen data analysis approach ensured analysis procedures were consistent with the phenomenological research approach.

Qualitative research is intentionally subjective and deals with a small number of participants to gain an understanding of their individual life experiences concerning specific issues or problems. Qualitative studies intend to focus on particular individuals or groups of people with the purpose to paint a holistic picture of their experiences (Moustakas, 1994). Subsequently, this study aimed at presenting a picture of the baby boomer college students’ experiences in Alaskan higher educational institutions. The legitimacy of this study is based on the need to learn more about baby boomers attending college, their life experiences in the midst of significant societal change, and their perceptions of aging and their shifting roles in the American society (Cheng & Heller, 2009; Foner, 1996; Freedman, 2011; Longino, 2005).

**Summary**

The writings by William Stafford and May Sarton encapsulate my life journey and possibly the journey of others as they progress through their lives. The works of Parker Palmer and other Christian Quaker authors have provided a philosophical grounding for the middle and
later years of my own life. Their writings embody the existentialist and social justice themes that form my philosophical roots.

I believe we begin our lives with deeply rooted aspirations regarding our purpose in life. We often cannot articulate it to others or to ourselves. We have an “inner knowing” that becomes the impetus for our discovering and pursuing our dreams. In our search for meaning in life, we may encounter opposition from those closest to us. Parents, siblings, and spouses may not understand why we are pursuing the goals we are after. Yet, we continue pursuing our dreams despite the detours. This opposition often reflects the inner conflicts we encounter as we fulfill our life’s mission. Life continues, tragedies happen, and all the while, we age, slowly at first, but eventually with ever increasing rapidity. The participants in this study brought to the interviews a wealth of life experience. Each had their own unique story to tell about their past, their present, and future dreams. My hope was—through the course of their relating their educational experiences—threads of their lives were revealed with clarity.

*The Way It Is*

There’s a thread you follow. It goes among things that change. But it doesn’t change.
People wonder about what you are pursuing.
You have to explain about the thread.
But it is hard for others to see.
While you hold it you can’t get lost.
Tragedies happen; people get hurt or die; and you suffer and get old.
Nothing you can do can stop time’s unfolding.
You don’t ever let go of the thread. (Stafford, 1998, p. 42)

The words of another poet, May Sarton (1974) offer hope, comfort, and encouragement to those who continue to persist. This study was about the different “faces” each person has worn during their process of self-discovery and their feelings about the aging process.

*Now I Become Myself*

Now I become myself. It’s taken Time, many years and places;
I have been dissolved and shaken,
Worn other people’s faces,
Run madly, as if Time were there,
“Hurry, you will be dead before—” (p. 156)

We spend our lives frantically trying to achieve the dreams and aspirations of others.

There comes a point where something wonderful is birthed as we continue the process of discovery. The process of preparing this study has given me time for pause and reflection. This comes with a weight of responsibility to faithfully present the thoughts, hopes, dreams, and feelings of the people involved in the study.

Now to stand still, to be here,
Feel my own weight and density!
The black shadow on the paper
In my hand; the shadow of a word
As thought shapes the shaper
Falls heavy on the page, is heard.
All fuses now, falls into place
From wish to action, word to silence,
My work, my love, my time, my face
Gathered into one intense
Gesture of growing like a plant. (p. 156)

However, at some point, as we approach the second half of our lives, there is the prospect of acceptance of the aging process. Opportunities for personal fulfillment open up and we can echo May Sarton’s words at the close of this poem:

Now there is time and Time is young.
O, in this single hour I live
All of myself and do not move.
I, the pursued, who madly ran,
Stand still, stand still, and stop the sun! (p. 156)

This study is a process of discovery of the meaning of the life experiences of this study’s participants. The phenomenological processes of epoche, phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation, and the synthesis of meanings and essences provided the philosophical and methodological framework to facilitate an understanding of their life experiences. I enjoyed and found the next step in this journey to be meaningful and insightful.
CHAPTER IV

ALASKAN BABY BOOMERS’ PROFILES:

WHO ARE THEY?

The profiles of the eleven Alaskan baby boomers that were interviewed are presented in this chapter. They embody many of the characteristics that define the baby boomer generation. The process of selecting and interviewing the participants is consistent with ethical standards for conducting qualitative research (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Before the start of the interview, each participant was assigned a pseudonym to ensure confidentiality. All of the participants expressed appreciation for the opportunity to describe their life and educational experiences in the second half of their lives.

The participants included a broad age spectrum of the baby boomer generation. The ages ranged from 49 to 63 years of age. For the purposes of this study, I appropriated MetLife’s (2003-2012) criteria to describe the Baby Boomer generation as follows: seven participants were classified as Younger Boomers (49 to 54 years of age), two were classified as Middle Boomers (55 to 61 years of age), and two were classified as Older Boomers (62 to 67 years of age). There are six females and five males in this study. The marital status of the participants includes one single person who was never married, two were divorced, one was widowed, and six were currently married. All participants are residents of the greater Anchorage area and are enrolled in higher education programs offered by colleges and universities located in the Anchorage area. Nine of the baby boomer students have previously taken or are currently taking classes at a public college or university. Ten of the students are currently attending college, while one is a recent college graduate. Their current educational levels ranged from a freshman undergraduate to a graduate student. Eight of the participants are undergraduate students; two were graduate
students, and one recently completed his graduate degree program. Ten of the participants re-
enrolled in higher education programs while two began college studies for the first time. Eight
participants are working full-time while three have part-time employment. Demographic
information can be found in Table 1 below.

Although not a criterion selected for this study, it is useful to note that five participants
had some affiliation with the military. Given there are two military bases in the Anchorage area
this is not all that surprising. Two participants are retired military while one other was a formerly
in the armed forces but did not serve long enough to be eligible for retirement benefits. One
person in this study is attached to the Alaska National Guard and is eligible to receive partial
retirement benefits when they reach retirement age. In one instance, the spouse is retired from
active duty in the armed forces.

Table 6

Overview of Study Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Baby Boomer Class</th>
<th>Marital Status</th>
<th>Education Level</th>
<th>Employed Full Time</th>
<th>Employed Part Time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Annie</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>Younger</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Undergraduate - Sophomore</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calice</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>Older</td>
<td>Widowed</td>
<td>Undergraduate - Senior</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charlene</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>Younger</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Graduate - Masters</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darice</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>Older</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Undergraduate - Sophomore</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fred</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>Younger</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Undergraduate - Senior</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jacqueline</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>Younger</td>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>Undergraduate - Freshman</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jeff</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>Younger</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Undergraduate - Senior</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The profiles that follow provide a concise picture and portray the unique story of each of the participants. The participants are introduced as a group to provide a detailed picture the phenomena being studied. The interview excerpts included in this chapter highlight the unique experiences of the participants, their views of aging, and their higher education experiences. The profiles are presented in alphabetical order according to the pseudonyms assigned to them.

**Annie**

Annie is a Younger Boomer in her early 50s, married, and currently enrolled in a bachelor’s degree program at a private university. Annie’s children are grown. Annie graduated from high school in the late 1970s. Before enrolling in her current academic program, Annie attended classes at a community college. She had a positive experience in this setting, stating:

> Then my previous experience with the community college took me back to a school environment and because I had to start paying for my school, I took it more seriously. But I also had a good time, got to know new people, and got to be a little more appreciative of the education system.

Annie enrolled in her present academic program eight years ago. Annie works full-time in the health care sector and attends evening classes. She has been with her present employer for about seventeen years and expects to remain there until she retires. Her husband also works. The family’s dual income is characteristic of many married American baby boomers (Strauss & Howe, 1991).

Currently a sophomore, Annie has been taking classes over the past seven years. Unexpected medical issues hindered progress in completing her degree program. Her primary
motivations for taking classes are for “personal satisfaction and growth” and to be competitive for job openings with her current employer that require a college degree. Annie remains committed to completing her degree because she believes it will improve her current and future career prospects. She spoke candidly about the challenges associated with balancing the responsibilities of being a wife and a mother, completing college coursework, and pursuing a human resources career in the medical field. Annie described her challenges by saying:

There are times when I go home and that’s where [I] start feeling like I’m not being supported by my husband . . . and it’s like I still have to do my homework, . . . do the laundry, and . . . get up in the morning and go to work . . . You get tired and I think sometimes I need just one more ounce of energy to get through that. That’s where I feel like I’m getting older and, honestly, to see the younger coming up behind me.

Despite the challenges, Annie views aging in a positive light. She sees aging as an opportunity to share the experience and wisdom gained through the passage of years with the younger generation. Annie looks forward to spending more time with her family once her degree program is completed.

Calice

Calice is an Older Boomer in her early 60s and currently working on her bachelor’s degree in journalism at a private university. She graduated from high school in the late 1960s. She has been living alone since her husband passed away ten years ago after a struggle with brain cancer. The couple did not have any children. She began her college studies at a public university several years ago while working for an Anchorage area newspaper. Calice is currently employed as a secretary to the president of a non-profit organization. Because of scheduling conflicts, Calice discontinued her studies and enrolled at a private university after beginning work at her present position. Two years after Calice’s husband passed away, she resumed her college studies. She did so at the encouragement of her college advisor. About this experience, she stated:

He passed away in 2003 and it took me about two years to get moved past that. And one day I was talking to an advisor and she says, ‘Why don’t you go back to school?’ I said,
‘I’ve been toying with it, you know’. We went and got my public university transcripts, got a degree plan, and said, ‘Well that’s what I’ll do.’ That’s what I am doing.

Calice spoke during the interview of the physical and time-related challenges she faces as an older student. She described her challenge graphically as: “Working all day, coming home, being dead tired, having to get on the computer that I am on all day long” and, then, working for several more hours. Despite her circumstances, she radiated an infectious, youthful, and exuberant outlook towards life throughout the interview. Due to her college studies, Calice shared regrets that she has been unable to find time to become involved in community activities, something she highly values. Her plans include working at her present job as long as they will allow her. A non-working retirement is not part of her plans. Instead, she intends to remain active and engaged as long as her health permits. When asked about age-related experiences, she laughed and said, “My hair is turning grey. That’s why I became a blond because it’s easier to cover it. That’s honest. It’s true, it’s true.”

Charlene

Charlene is a Younger Boomer in her mid-50s and married to a faculty member at an Anchorage area higher education institution. The couple has grown children who live in other states. Charlene and her husband now enjoy being grandparents. She graduated from high school in the late 1970s and earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in the early 1990s. The couple’s grown children have all gone to college.

Children have always been an important part of Charlene’s family life. With her family constantly moving due to her husband’s military career, she served as a source of strength and stability for the couple’s children. The other half of this mother-child relationship equation is that her children also were a chief source of motivation to her own educational efforts. Regarding this, Charlene stated:

I would say my children were a big motivation. I stopped going to college when my children were born. I was about halfway done with my bachelor’s degree, and I stayed with them until they were in primary school. At that point, I decided to continue and pursue finishing my undergraduate degree. They were a big motivation for me. I wanted
them to see that education was important to me, and they knew it was important to their dad.

Currently employed as an academic advisor at the same institution as her husband, Charlene is working on her Master of Education degree. She has found fulfillment in her studies and increased satisfaction in her current position. As Charlene continues to move forward in her academic program, her focus is on both her present situation and looking beyond Anchorage to making meaningful future contributions in the education field when she and her husband retire and relocate to another area of the state. When asked for her views on aging, Charlene observed that:

I was always the youngest person for the longest period of my life doing anything. And all of a sudden, now, I’m much older than the average person I now interact with normally in classes is. It’s a big change. It’s a strange feeling.

Throughout the interview, Charlene laughed as she described her educational experiences and expressed optimism about her future life and the key part that education-related activities have in her future plans.

**Darice**

Darice is an Older Boomer in her early 60s, married, and a college sophomore in a bachelor’s degree program. Darice’s children are grown. Her husband works full-time and the couple plan to retire in a few years. After finishing high school in the late 1960s, Darice went to work and attended classes offered by her employer as well as enrolled at a community college. Children then came along and Darice discontinued her college studies. She resumed college after her children completed high school. Currently a federal civil service employee working in the area of accounting, she is acquiring skills to improve her current and future employment prospects. Darice’s attitude towards aging and learning are embodied in the following statement:

You are only as old as you feel but sometimes you look that age [especially] when you go to class and people are apparently much younger than you. *[Laughter]* It does make a difference but you just have to go with the flow. You just have to try your best. You don’t have to keep up. Especially today, you don’t have to try to keep up with a 20 year old. You just do the best that you can and just use the brain that you have.
Darice expressed the realization that she is aging and was comfortable with this and the physical limitations that accompany the aging process. While she admits having slowed down, she reports having no apparent health problems. She stated:

I think I can do everything most everyone else does. I mean I don’t have arthritis or any other types of that stuff. Praise the Lord. I’m very seldom sick. I really don’t have any illnesses [and work] nine hours a day.

Fred

Fred is married, a Younger Boomer in his early 50s, and a college senior in the process of completing a Bachelor of Science degree in education, training, and development. Fred has twelve children with two currently living at home. Fred graduated from high school in the early 1980s. He had not taken college classes prior to enrolling in his current degree program.

Fred was candid during the interview about the challenges associated with working long hours, attending college, and the financial constraints connected with raising a large family. He is committed to being actively involved in the lives of his children. Fred was a military reservist who volunteered for active duty deployment. He saw this as an opportunity to gain eligibility for educational assistance in conjunction with his service time overseas. Additionally, Fred saw other benefits that went beyond the financial aspect. Reflecting on his life decisions, he stated:

Everything in life accumulatively affects a decision. It was the right time for me—not only financially. I was humbled overseas. I was almost killed a couple of times. And I wanted to be able to stay home with my family. So how would I do that? I have to go to school.

He saw the interconnectedness between life events and decisions made in response to the circumstances that are part of life’s fabric. Fred applied this perspective to his own educational experiences and saw the benefit of adversity in a person’s life. He was motivated to attend college by a desire to learn and improve his earnings prospects. Fred’s educational experiences were characterized by a determination to persevere despite the challenges he faced.

When asked his views on aging, he explained that they are changing continuously and stated, “It means wisdom. It means adding upon knowledge and I am more rational. My
emotional side is not so out of control, but my rational and reasoning side is heightened.”

Implicit in this statement is Fred’s perception of the aging process as one of personal growth. Fred does not plan to retire in the traditional sense. He envisions spending the second half of his life in three major realms: working, visiting his children, and helping others.

**Jacqueline**

Jacqueline is a Younger Boomer in her early 50s and a college freshman in the process of completing a bachelor’s degree. She graduated from high school in the late 1970s, joined the Air Force shortly thereafter, and served in active duty for eight years. Other than required training courses, she did not pursue any further educational opportunities because they were not required. Recently divorced, Jacqueline found herself in the position of having to support herself alone after nearly three decades of marriage. This life-changing experience served as an impetus for her enrollment in college. About her divorce, Jacqueline went on to say:

> Everything we had done up to this point was geared towards his military retirement. He was the breadwinner. He had college; he had done all his college while he was active duty. He had done his associate’s through the Air Force; he had done his bachelor’s, his master’s degree before he retired. So, everything was geared towards that and I did not have any of that because I was the parent who took care of the kids.

All of her children are adults and no longer in the home. She is working as a civilian civil service employee for the Air Force. Jacqueline is taking one class at a time and paying for her studies out-of-pocket. One of her challenges is paying for living expenses exacerbated by not having received a pay raise in three years. Jacqueline’s cost of living continues to go up while her wages remain the same. She also expressed concern regarding her employment situation due to a possible reduction in work hours as a result of anticipated federal budget reductions. Her hope is that her educational efforts will result in career advancement and improved earnings despite the present uncertainty in her employment situation.

When asked her views on aging, she responded, “Everyone thinks in their mind that they don’t age.” She pointed out that her physical body has begun to remind her of its age-related limitations. Her perception of no longer being young was reinforced after the divorce and her
children leaving home. In addition, her awareness of being older than her co-workers and supervisor drove home the reality of her age. Jacqueline revealed her future plans might include marriage; she recently became engaged. When asked about the ideal way she would spend the final ten years of her life, she replied:

I would want to have something to do—whether it was a little job or volunteer. You wouldn’t want to sit around and do nothing. That’s bad for people. Something where you interact with people—something where you have to get up in the morning and do something with somebody or for somebody.

She does not envision a future life with an abundance of personal possessions. Instead, her focus is on remaining active and serving others.

**Jeff**

Jeff is married, a Younger Boomer in his early 50s, and a college senior in the process of completing a Bachelor of Science degree. He retired from the military after twenty years of active duty. His grown daughter lives at home and attends classes at the same private university as her father. His earlier ventures into college after high school were characterized by learning for the sake of learning. He joined the military after he ran out of money to pay for his college classes. This afforded him opportunities to continue his educational pursuits. His learning motivations changed after he retired from the military. He noted life in the military was more structured and this served to limit his options. After retiring from the military, he was faced with the need to earn a living and embark upon a new career. For Jeff, obtaining a college degree means advancement, increased earnings, and a better retirement.

He described aging as “feeling the ills of life.” Jeff’s wife has a rare autoimmune disease, which he expressed as a source of concern due to the need for medical insurance to treat this condition. However, despite his wife’s illness, Jeff expressed optimism about the future. His sentiments regarding aging were summed up when he said:

I don’t feel that at 50 life is over. It’s really, to me, beginning. Things are opening up new today that I didn’t have opportunities for when I was younger. I guess that is what age is to me—just a number.
Jeff envisions aging as an opportunity for personal growth and, eventually, the prospect of greater personal freedom. He expressed his wanting to do whatever he wants, whenever he wants in the later years of his life. This desire for freedom also has its expression in the boat Jeff and his wife currently enjoy.

**Joshua**

Joshua is married, a Younger Boomer in his late 40s, and in the process of completing a master’s degree in aeronautical science. He has seven children and his wife is not working. He graduated from high school in the early 80s. After high school, he used his ROTC scholarship to pay for his bachelor’s degree. Joshua then earned a master’s degree while serving active duty in the Air Force. Joshua returned to college several years ago to take advantage of his VA educational benefits, including a $2,000 per month housing allowance, after losing employment. Joshua is enrolled in a second master’s degree program at a private university.

Currently re-employed as a commercial pilot, Joshua intends to use the knowledge and skills gained in his current degree later on in life. He expressed an interest in remaining in the aviation field. The additional skills and knowledge gained, he believes, will enable him to gain successful employment should he become physically unable to fly.

Joshua described the aging process in this way:

> I guess it is all part of the adventure. The first thing to age is that I get hurt easier. I take longer to heal. I gotta slow down in some of those aspects. Otherwise, I would say it’s part of life’s progression—the adventure of life and the family just growing, just going day-to-day, month-to-month, and plateau-to-plateau. That’s all the thing is.

He takes a relaxed approach towards life. No major concerns—health, financial, or otherwise—were vocalized. Joshua described an idyllic retirement with the following remarks:

> The ideal retirement does not involve a whole lot of trips to the doctor. [Laughter] Some of that we can control; some of it we cannot so that part of the adventure will unfold as the time comes. Otherwise, [it’s] just lots of family time.

Joshua envisions spending the later years of his life traveling and spending time with his children. Giving back to others in the form of “mentoring others in marriage, in parenting, and
“family life” is a strong preference, according to Joshua. He did not rule out the possibility of work. However, he does not foresee having to do so out of financial necessity. Joshua’s remarks embodied his personal values as they relate to his academic, personal, and professional goals. During the interview, Joshua exuded a quiet confidence about the future. The focus of his efforts both academically and professionally was to do well. Titles and achievements are unimportant to Joshua. Personal convictions and family, however, took precedence over career advancement.

**Maurine**

Maurine is divorced, a Younger Boomer in her early 50s, and a college junior in the process of completing a bachelor’s degree at a private university. She is majoring in human services. Maurine is attending college full-time and working part-time. During the interview, Maurine talked about her earlier challenges as a young wife and mother. Her growing children were important to her and she sacrificed personal goals for the sake of the children. After a period of personal renewal following her divorce, she decided to return to college. Maurine shared that her “motivation for going to school at this time of my life was I became a displaced homemaker” in midlife. She realized a degree was necessary for future success in the human service field. Maurine’s children serve as a continuous source of encouragement and inspiration to her academic endeavors.

In addition to taking night classes, Maurine teaches classes part-time to female inmates at a local women’s correctional facility on matters related to making life changes in preparation for returning to the workforce upon their release from prison. Maurine draws on the lessons learned over the course of her own life. In addition, to make ends meet financially and pay for college, she works two other jobs—for a catering service and house sitting.

Throughout the interview, Maurine expressed confidence in her ability to achieve her educational and professional goals. Maurine has positive memories of her prior educational experiences, which were important in shaping her perception of herself and gaining self-
confidence. She discovered she possessed the intelligence and ability to write. This represented an important step in her personal growth. About this, Maurine remarked:

My most memorable learning experience in my past was learning that I was intelligent. I did not know that I was and so when I went back to school in my 20s, I found out I was capable and that, to me, that was very crucial. I needed to know for myself. I enjoyed learning, I enjoyed the instructors, and I really enjoyed writing and the feedback that I would get back from the papers that I would write.

She also talked about the importance of personal responsibility and caring for the well being of others in the community who are less fortunate. Maurine believes everyone has the capacity to contribute in one-way or another. Maurine sees aging as a positive event in a person’s life. She stated, “While I don’t like the pain that I went through, I like the wisdom I gained because of it.” Maurine plans to carry this perspective into the later years of her life and to continue working throughout her life. A retirement characterized by leisure is not part of her thinking. Giving to others and her role as a grandmother will be a central part of her later years.

**Mike**

Mike is single, a Middle Boomer in his late 50s, and a college senior who is in the process of completing a Bachelor of Science degree in global logistics and supply management at a public university. Mike does not have any children. Mike graduated from high school in the early 1970s and went to college right after high school. As he looked back at his earlier years, he observed that he lacked focus, stating:

I remember in junior high school, I was a member of the junior honor society. And I believe [I was] in the honor society in high school as well. I was caught up in the environmental movement in the 70s as well and that probably prompted me to go into business or a political science or liberal arts degree field with the hopes of maybe starting up a recycling center for Anchorage. Again, I was not focused enough to stay with it. I changed majors each year and, finally, even with working part-time back then, I finally wound up dropping out after two and a half to three years.

Mike discontinued his earlier college studies and embarked on different business ventures that included a photography and event planner business. His subsequent efforts to gain employment were unsuccessful. It was at that point that he realized his need to obtain “some credentials, which would allow me to seek some gainful employment.” Another important
motivation in recent years was the radical improvement of his health due to the loss of 91 pounds as the result of a diet and exercise program. Because of his newly transformed health and with the encouragement of a licensed massage therapist, Mike resumed his college studies with renewed purpose. Then, sixteen months ago, Mike suffered a massive heart attack and miraculously survived. His religious faith and encouragement from friends were important factors that contributed to his recovery. He underscored the importance of his religious faith with the Celtic cross he currently wears.

I have been wearing this since my personal health transformation. It is a Celtic cross. It reflects some of the things I have experienced, some of my values. Being part Irish on my mother’s side and noticing that many of the people in the medical and health fields in my life have had some Celtic type ancestry, being Scottish, Irish, or Welsh, for example. They have been very helpful in my health transformation in my life, and I am a Christian so there is the cross aspect of it.

Mike’s religious beliefs have sustained him throughout his life journey. They will continue to do so as he persists with his education efforts. His heart attack also gave him reason to pause and consider the fact that he was aging. He confided:

Since my heart attack now I realize I got to be careful in my physical activities even though I continue to work out in my gym as much as I can for my health. I’ve now realized that a better use of my time would to utilize my older age role in society and my past experiences to help teach younger people.

Looking to the future, Mike plans to continue working, though at a slower pace. He treats his education as an investment and hopes his efforts will result in an improved quality of life. He wants to be able to “spend more time pursuing scholarly pursuits, in reading and writing, and just kicking back and enjoying life” without the concern for how he is going to pay his bills.

Robert

Robert is married and a Middle Boomer in his late 50s. He recently completed his master’s degree in human resources. Robert graduated from high school in the early 1970s and attended college at three different universities before completing a bachelor’s degrees. Regarding his undergraduate studies, Robert stated:
I went to high school in Taiwan and was attending college in Taiwan three years, too. Then I came over here to study at the public university in Anchorage. So I got three years [of] college in Taiwan and three years [of] college in the public university so I say, ‘I got six years of college, but I didn’t get a degree.’

However, six years of college without a degree did not deter Robert. He talked about working split shifts when employed as a school bus driver and how he would spend the time between shifts in the school bus working on his undergraduate college assignments. Robert expects to find full-time employment in the human resources field now that he has completed his graduate degree. The sentiments expressed by Robert during the interview expressed an underlying optimism and belief about the value of his higher education experience.

Robert started his late midlife educational journey with certain goals that focused on financial considerations. As his educational journey progressed, however, he began to discover on a deeply personal level that the value of higher education went beyond potential financial rewards. His main academic challenge has been learning to write in English. Robert stated he was good in math, science, and reading English. He is in good health and his current wife has been supportive of his educational endeavors.

Robert does not consider himself as old. He exercises regularly, watches his diet, and has no major health issues. He endeavors to live a more balanced life. Robert observed that he has slowed down, tends to be adverse to risk, and is “not as aggressive as he used to be.” As he ages, he plans to gradually work less and have more time for other activities.

Summary

All of the individuals interviewed continue on a journey of discovery about themselves, their relationship with others, and the world around them. They are gaining knowledge and skills to prepare them for advancement in their chosen fields of endeavor. “To be old is a glorious thing when one has not unlearned what it means to begin” (Buber, 2002, p. 59). In the middle years of their lives, the baby boomers in this study are experiencing personal fulfillment in their studies and their interactions with others. Most of them went through difficult life experiences
including loss of employment, illness, divorce, and the death of a loved one. In the midst of their challenges, they found purpose and meaning for their lives. The following words of William Stafford (1988) seem to capture the essence of how each person in this study attempted to remain true to self and follow their core values through the course of their lives.

There’s a thread you follow. It goes among things that change. But it doesn’t change. . . .
Nothing you do can stop time’s unfolding.
You don’t ever let go of the thread. (p. 42)

This study is about their life experiences, their core values, and the impact of their decisions on their lives and those around them. Each person went through transitions as they progressed through life. The baby boomers in this study described their changing roles. They were asked to look beyond their present circumstances to discuss their envisioned future. As Super (1980) points out, a person’s roles change over the course of their lives. In each instance, the participants in this study not only changed roles but also often played multiple roles simultaneously while pursuing their studies. Furthermore, as Super contends, “It is in role shaping, as well as in choice of positions and roles, that the individual acts as the synthesizer of personal and situational role determinants” (Super, 1980, p. 285).

The following chapters unfold the participants’ lived experiences that, through them, illuminate the conceptions of aging and life changing events as baby boomers pave their ways to higher education. The individuals introduced in this chapter were given the opportunity to tell their stories in order to shed light on how they perceived aging and their roles in today’s American society, as well as how they made decisions regarding their choices of higher education and “second” careers. The readers are invited to turn over the page and listen to how the Anchorage area baby boomers speak their minds.
CHAPTER V

NOW I BECOME MYSELF: BABY BOOMERS ON AGING IN AMERICA

The educational experiences of the eleven Alaskan baby boomer college student participants are an inextricable part of their lives. Likewise, the events leading up to their educational endeavors had direct and indirect effects on their decisions to begin these journeys into higher education. These encounters were as varied as the lives of each of the individual participants. Each participant’s involvement in their educational studies comprised a series of events and relationships that influenced their perceptions of aging and played a part in their initial decision to enroll or, for some, to re-enroll in college. The participants of this study do not conceive of their social world as “fixed or objective,” but rather as “constructed” by their own social practices (Cohen, Duberley, & Mallon 2004, p. 409). They view their transitioning careers as a “combination and sequence of roles” that they play during the course of their lives (Super, 1980, p. 282). The baby boomers’ lived experiences presented in this study reveal the complexity of their varied and changing roles throughout their lives. Their personal journeys into higher education clearly demonstrate both uniqueness and commonality of these paths. Significantly, the stories of these individuals illuminate their renewed sense of self and the world around them. May Sarton’s poem Now I Become Myself speaks to the participants’ enhanced self-awareness directly:

Now I become myself. It’s taken
Time, many years and places;
I have been dissolved and shaken,
Worn other people’s faces,” (1974, p. 156)

The baby boomer college students in this study found themselves in circumstances that were unique to their own lives while at the same time possessing commonalties with some or the
majority of participants. The following pages present the description and analysis of the life experiences of these individuals.

Four important phenomenological processes comprising the phenomenological research process: epoch, phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation, and the synthesis of meanings and essences were used in the analysis (Moustakas, 1994). Data analysis procedures consisted of using a modified Stevick-Colassi-Ken method recommended by Moustakas (1994). This process began after the interviews concluded.

A preliminary list of themes and codes based on my initial observations of each person was developed. This included impressions of their body language: tone of voice, posture, and their clothing. The preliminary list was refined further after reviewing the interview transcripts. Time was spent reflecting on the experiences of each baby boomer in order to gain a deeper understanding of their life. Through seeing the connections between each participant, I have an understanding how the experiences of each person fit into the larger picture. Further refinement involved the examination and re-examination of major themes and the development of subthemes. The list of themes and subthemes formed the basis for the analysis. Imaginative variation was used describe the “how” the participants’ experiences occurred and through subsequent reflection expand the possible number of meanings (Creswell, 2007). During the process of writing, further themes emerged. The process of analysis continued until a point of saturation was reached. At that point, the coding and analysis procedures were completed. Through the synthesis of meanings of meanings and essences the many observations and insights gained are presented as a unified whole.

Two broad themes become the focus of this study based on the two research questions this study sought to answer. The first theme relates to aging from the participants’ perspectives: what aging or being “old” means, how they viewed aging, and their experiences with aging as they pursued higher education and changed careers. The second theme relates to the underlying motivations behind their decisions to pursue higher education and their career-related and life
choices. These broad themes continued to develop throughout the interviews. Within these broad themes, there were themes unique to each research question. Through the analysis, a deeper understanding about different aspects of their lives emerged.

The themes depict pieces of each participant’s larger life experience. All of the themes together serve to provide a “synthesis of meanings and essences” of the phenomena being investigated, namely aging, and relevant to it issues. These meanings and essences include the “what,” “how,” and “why” aspects of the participants’ experiences. Thick descriptions are an important aspect of the analysis and any qualitative study. The thick descriptions used in this study capture “the thoughts and feelings of participants” and the “complex web of relationships among them” (Ponterotto, 2006, p. 543)

The participants were asked questions intended to evoke their understanding of how they perceived aging and how they experienced aging in the course of their pursuit of higher education and career change. They were invited to speak candidly during the interviews about their life experiences as baby boomer college students and the events that led them to their current place in life. They openly discussed their understanding of what it meant to age and how they viewed the aging process. They willingly discussed their own personal experiences as they aged. The baby boomers also talked about their relationships with others and the effect these interactions had on their perceptions of their own aging.

In addition, the baby boomers were asked to describe the underlying motivational factors behind their educational, career, and life decisions. They discussed how they faced the question of whether they should pursue higher education at this point in their lives. How they arrived at their respective decisions differed to some degree. For some, it was their first exposure to higher education. For others, it was resumption after several to many years of delays. In two instances, participants returned to college to pursue graduate degrees. Their reasons for their involvement in post-secondary education varied. However, career, financial, and family considerations were common reasons.
How do baby boomers respond to aging? What does it mean to them to get old? What distinguishes them from other adults who go through similar experiences? Let us listen to the Anchorage baby boomers as they speak their minds.

What does Aging Mean?

The baby boomers college students who participated in this study have accomplished a lot such as raising children and are no longer spending their time and earnings to support and educate them. Their parenting and work responsibilities mainly defined their roles in the earlier part of their lives. In the past, “individuals moving beyond midlife might have proceeded directly into the social institution called retirement” (Freedman, 2011, p. 34). However, that has changed and today’s individuals are “for the most part on their own, in uncharted waters, facing fundamental questions about what’s next and what matters” (p, 34). The participants of this study provided various responses to what aging meant to them. Based on their responses, six subthemes were identified: 1) Baby Boomer? Are We Really Different?; 2) Am I Really Old? Changing Roles and Relationships; 3) Physical Health: Young in Mind, Old in Body; 4) Wisdom and Experience: I Want to Share with Others; 5) Ageism: Now You See it, Now You Don’t, and 6) The Technology Curmudgeon

The participants did not answer the questions related to aging primarily in theoretical or philosophical terms. Instead, they chose to answer the aging questions in terms of the daily realities of their own lives. Individually, each subtheme painted a picture of one aspect of their lives. Taken as a whole, they provide a mosaic representing their life experiences. Table 7 shows the themes related to the question, “What does aging mean to you?”
Table 7

Subthemes for “What does Aging Mean to You?”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Baby Boomer? Are We Really Different?</th>
<th>Am I Really Old? Changing Roles &amp; Relationships</th>
<th>Physical Health: Young in Mind, Old in Body</th>
<th>Wisdom &amp; Experience: I Want to Share with Others</th>
<th>Ageism: Now You See it, Now You Don't</th>
<th>The Technology Curmudgeon</th>
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**Baby Boomer? Are We Really Different?**

Not all participants of this study thought of age in terms of chronological years. Instead, their perceptions of aging were largely based on a combination of factors that composed the matrix of their lives. All had a general idea of the age group that makes up the baby boomer generation. Some had a general idea of the characteristics commonly associated with baby boomers while others had not given it any thought. Another aspect of their thought process was to think in terms of their relationship with other generations and their roles in society. Most of them expressed traditional values that reflected the importance of marriage, family relationships, and responsibility for one’s actions. Boomers “still see themselves as the embodiment of moral wisdom” and “are stirring to defend values (monogamy, thrift, abstention from drugs)” (Strauss
& Howe, 1991, p. 312, 315). This study’s participants also exhibited the characteristics of personal resilience in the face of adversity balanced by interdependence with others.

For example, Annie, who meets the age definition of a younger boomer, commented about being a baby boomer focused on the larger societal context. Mannheim (1927/1952) had promulgated a dimension of generation that concerned social location which refers to “certain definite modes of behavior, feeling and thought” (as cited in Pilcher, 1994, p. 483). While Annie recognized the age related aspect of generation, she also realized there existed other characteristics that differentiated generations.

She is a human resource professional in the medical field and recognizes the existence of a labor shortage. Her comments revealed important dynamics associated with the baby boomer generation when she stated:

I thought that I was on the cusp of the baby boomers [laughter]. I think just from what I know as far as working in the health care environment, that there’s a huge gap between the baby boomers and the current people coming out because they’re less children being born. I think that the movement of where my family, like I said, I’m number seven, where our parents were having more children and its getting down to where we are going to have a harder time replacing people in the environment and all that knowledge and expertise is going out as the baby boomers go out of the work environment, if they can with the economy. . . . I think with the baby boomers it’s going to have a big impact upon work and economy shortages, especially in the health care environment. That’s what we are finding anyway. So yeah, I would say I think that I am at the end of the baby boomers.

Annie identified the approximate age range for the baby boomer generation. She also identified the issue of lower birth rates for younger generations and the fact that many baby boomers need to continue working. This participant noted that many baby boomers are healthy enough to remain in the workforce. As for herself, she expressed the hope that she could “hang in there long enough to be able to succeed at what I am trying to do for myself and my family.”

There was the realization that even though she was looking towards retirement in the future, that she still had contributions to make in the workforce. She also understood the fact she was still needed by her employer.
Implicit in Annie’s statements is a personal dichotomy between her drive to accomplish her goals both for herself and for her family. This is consistent with the societal changes of increased longevity and improved quality of life. Annie is at the stage in her life where she is fully engaged in her career while looking towards the latter years of her life and her role of being a grandmother in contrast to being a mother raising children. All the while, she is working with younger adults who are entering her profession. Annie made mention of the generation gap when she commented, “[I] know for a fact about the gap, about the baby boomers and the new generation, and I know there are the X, Y generations.”

Calice, unlike Annie, is on the higher end of the age range thus meeting the definition of an older boomer. When asked if she considered herself a baby boomer, Calice’s enthusiastic response was:

I am proud to be a baby boomer, very, very much. There [are] a lot of us out here. I think grey power is great. We’ll all get together, we’ll have another one of those sit-ins, we’ll have something. We’ll protest something. Youth. [Laughter]

Calice expressed a non-conformist outlook of the counterculture movements in our country prevalent in the 1960s and 1970s. During the interview, Calice communicated fairly conservative family and religious values. At the same time, she enjoys music of the Rolling Stones and states she would go to one of their concerts if they came to Anchorage. Despite seeing her generation as being unique, she also saw similarities between the different generations. She questioned whether, in fact, there were any real differences between the generations. Calice asserted:

Socrates said that all the young men were rabble-rousers and everything was dying back in his day and it’s all because of the new generation. And that has been said about every generation that ever lived. There are differences between generations that are perceived, but I wonder how real those differences are. Because when the next generation is in my place, they are going to say the same darn thing about the generations that are younger than them. . . . But, then again, I remember my parents saying the same thing in the 60s.

Calice’s perception of the younger generation is that they behave the same way the boomer generation behaved when they were younger. She reminisced that her parents said the
same thing about younger baby boomers that her generation is now saying about the following generations. She saw herself in the younger adults she interacts with at work. Still independent, Calice also recognized the importance of relationships with others while allowing them to discover life for themselves.

When Jacqueline, a younger boomer, was asked if she considered herself a baby boomer, she responded that she recognized she was by virtue of her chronological age. Jacqueline stated:

I was born in the right time, if you go by the time period. I fall into the right category. As you said earlier, we were all born right about the same time and we’re all aging at the same time so issues about Medicare and Medicaid I pay attention to more now because I am now falling into the group where that is all coming due at the same time. I never thought much about being a baby boomer when I was younger. It never struck [me] as being one of those things. But, yes, I do fall into that age.

Jacqueline realized that she was aging and would be facing the question of how she would be spending the latter years of her life. In terms of social differentiation, her comments mainly focused on two factors: social behavior and technology. Jacqueline grew up in rural area and had limited opportunities to become involved in a great deal of partying. She found no significant social differences between the current younger generation and her own generation. She saw a great deal of commonality between herself when she was a teenager and the current younger generation. Jacqueline indicated the biggest social differences between her generation and the younger generation today was:

The younger folks today, they party a lot. . . . When I was in active duty air force, the folks out there did a lot of drinking and smoking. The younger folks today do not do a lot of smoking, but do a lot more drinking and socializing than I ever had. It’s more socially acceptable to do so these days.

Maurine, another younger boomer, responded this way to the same question:

I consider myself on the edge of being a baby boomer, not fully a baby boomer. I was raised in Boulder, Colorado, in the 60s so my formative years [were] in the heat of the hippie movement. So when I think of baby boomers I think of the whole hippie 60s generation going on so I don’t actually know to be quite honest what the term means [laughter]. . . . Baby boomers, I don’t even know what it means. I remember reading it in textbooks and such for our generation.
Maurine’s response revealed an understanding of baby boomers based on age and social characteristics. She, like other younger baby boomers interviewed, considered herself to be on the fringe of this generation based on her age. She ascribed baby boomer behavior with the hippie generation. This was a perception other participants in this study shared. Maurine was then asked, “How do you relate to older and younger people?” Maurine’s answer focused on her desire to be self-sufficient, expressing it in these words:

I think that [the] self-sufficient part comes into play because my father is no longer alive. My mom’s taken care of financially. . . . I want to be able to take care of myself so I [will be able] to take care of her. . . . The same thing for my kids – I don’t want to be a burden to my kids. I don’t want to be that way. I want to be able to take care of myself, to carry my own weight. At least put it that way. It’s not a high expectation, not a dependency. I just want to carry my own weight, be accountable for my own.

Maurine stressed the importance of each generation taking care of themselves. They are not to be a burden on the others. Maurine’s comments indicated that her parents and her children also exemplified this virtue. Implicit in her statements was the desire to remain independent in her old age. This was a theme expressed by many others in this study. During the course of the interviews, every baby boomer expressed their intention to live independently. Maurine’s comments reflected her vision for a society characterized by a healthy independence. At the same time, she believed individuals should have the resources to care for others if there is a need.

Lastly, Mike, meeting the age definition of a middle boomer, when asked if he considered himself a baby boomer, responded:

Well I know that baby boomer terminology is more of an academic concept. I’ve never given it that much thought. I try not to see myself as a segment apart from younger people, older people, older than myself. I do fit in that category in terms of statistics. But I’ve never just given it that much personal thought, never really have.

Mike viewed the term baby boomer more as an age differentiator instead of as a descriptor of a group’s sociological characteristics. His thinking was to avoid arbitrarily separating out society into different age groups. His response was somewhat different, however, when asked: “As far as how you relate to younger generations and older generations, do you notice any difference in terms of values?” Mike responded by saying, “In terms of value, yes.
More of the younger generation tends to be more liberal than myself.” He then expressed the opinion that the younger generation appears more concerned with appearance of what goes on in events rather than their substance.

Ten of the baby boomers in this study identified themselves as meeting the age definition of a baby boomer. Three associated the baby boomer generation with the counter-culture revolution of the 1960s. Others, on the other hand, saw the wildness that characterized the youth of the 1960s with youth in general and not associated with a particular generation. The participants realized that even while seeing some differences between themselves and the younger generation, they were also seeing themselves as though looking in a mirror.

Am I Really Old? – Changing Roles and Relationships

Relationships with family, friends, and associates had an effect on their understanding of aging. The relationship between a person’s chronological age and their relationship with others were closely related. All of the baby boomers interviewed reported their interactions with others, directly or indirectly, influenced their perceptions of themselves and how they viewed the aging process. There existed internal contradictions between the perceptions of how they perceived themselves and how others saw them. The relationships between the participants and those they associated with represented a continual interaction between subjective and objective factors” (Inglehart. 1997, p. 55).

Calice’s encounter at the drive-through window of a local fast food restaurant, for instance, drove home the reality that she was aging. This seemingly mundane encounter gave Calice reason to reflect on differences between how she saw herself and how others saw her. She described this specific event when she was asked what it meant to be old and if she had ever thought of herself as being old. Calice relayed her experience in the following way:

I never did until I went to Taco Bell. This is true [laughter]. I pulled into Taco Bell and some guy comes out and he’s [Asian]. He’s barely speaking English and I can’t understand him. I keep leaning out the car window, trying to understand him and another guy comes to the window who is also Asian but speaks more clear English who translates and says, ‘He wants to know if you want a senior discount.’ And I said, ‘Sure, why not?’
Calice’s wrinkled face conveyed to the person at the drive-through window the distinct impression that she was older. The humor of the language differences between Calice and the server and their dissimilar age perceptions were not lost on Calice. The encounter at the drive-through window brings to mind how we view ourselves during our teen years. On the inside, we see ourselves as becoming adults while the pimples on our face serve as a reminder of our youth. The appearance of wrinkles can remind of us that we are aging. Calice’s acceptance of the senior discount represented a tacit acceptance of her aging while continuing to act young on the inside.

Jacqueline’s interactions with coworkers, too, helped her to see that she had begun to age. She observed this by saying:

Because I work mostly with young people, that tends to drive it home once in awhile too—though most of them don’t think of me as old as I am. If I am asked to give my age, most of them are shocked or act that way pretty well. I’m not sure which. You usually don’t think of yourselves in those terms until later.

Jacqueline, like others, had never thought of herself as being old until she had the realization that most of her coworkers were younger. On one hand, she said most of them seemed surprised to learn of her real age. She also indicated surprise in how she has responded to her younger coworkers. Jacqueline works in an environment where she functions as a kind of surrogate mother, described her work interactions and relationships in this way:

The colonel is younger than I am. I’m maybe one of five in a squadron of a hundred that are among the older people. Everyone is younger than we are—from teenagers to mid to late 40s . . . . So when they ask how many kids do I have, I usually tell them 102 [italics added] because I count the entire squadron plus my own two because some of them act like kids [laughter] . . . . It is a different way of looking at things than when I was married [laughter].

In her interactions with her coworkers, Jacqueline was reminded of her own children and their behavior. Her experiences bring to mind Super’s theory of the various roles that a person plays in a given situation or at a given time. According to Super (1980), a person plays a variety of roles over the course of their lives and will play these roles in different theaters or venues. In
this instance, her primary role is that of a worker in the work setting. The secondary role she plays is that of a parent and in the home environment. The internal incongruence experienced by Jacqueline, appears to stem from playing the role of a parent in the workplace theater, a role she normally associated with the home. She also reminisced about her pre-divorce role of parent and housewife. Her experience at work has given her reason to consider how her life has changed. Furthermore, thinking about her role as a divorcee reminded her of the reality of her potential future role as a pensioner. Jacqueline confided:

Like I said, now that I’m divorced it’s different. Because it is going to affect me more in terms of retirement, in health care, and all those things I didn’t have to think about before.

A recent divorce in the middle years of her life gave Jacqueline reason to consider the ramifications of this life-changing event in light of the passage of years. Her current situation collided with her traditional beliefs of being married to one person the rest of her life, raising children together, and spending her “golden years” of retirement with this person. Jacqueline’s experience, while different in terms of specific details, reflects the changes each baby boomer eventually will experience as they begin their slow, inexorable journey to old age and retirement.

Similarly, the realization that she was aging occurred to Charlene, another younger boomer, in three different theaters of her life: school, work, and family. Charlene’s relationships with other students in her graduate degree program gave her reason to reflect on the fact she was beginning to age. As she explained:

It means it’s quite a reversal in my life because it means when I first married, my husband was several years older than me. I was always really young at any function we ever went to. Now it seems like life has caught up. I am at an age where I have grandchildren. All of a sudden, I do consider myself much older. It’s an odd situation to be in where, even at this university, a lot of our students are 30 and 35 that are in our graduate program. So I consider myself older than many of the people that are taking classes even at the graduate level.

Charlene’s various interactions with others have served as reminders of the fact that she is aging and that life is one, continual transition from one phase of life to another. She is no longer the young person that she once was. This is a bittersweet moment for Charlene, because
now she is seeing herself as older. Moreover, this involves an implied saying “good bye” to what has been familiar and “hello” to the next phase of her life. While, this person has visions of what this new phase looks like, an element of uncertainty exists. Charlene’s subsequent comments expressed the unsettled feeling that resulted from this realization.

Where I was always the youngest person for the longest period of my life doing anything and all of a sudden now I’m much older than the average person I now interact with normally in classes. It’s a big change. It’s a strange feeling.

She expressed a dichotomy between her own perceptions and those of others who see her as being much younger. Charlene’s realization of her age appeared more of an internal reality because often others did not see her as old, stating: “Sometimes I’m much older than people realize.” Throughout the interview, Charlene presented a persona of youthfulness and a bubbling enthusiasm for life while realizing on the inside that she was indeed aging.

For Jeff, another younger boomer, the realization of his aging came through his not having as many family-related responsibilities. He observed: “I don’t have as many social restrictions on me the older I get.” The release from the parenting role offers the prospect of spending more time on activities that he enjoys. The end of parenting represents a prelude to retirement in which he expects a further release from earlier responsibilities. This baby boomer sees the prospect of ever-increasing opportunities for personal fulfillment.

In a similar way, Maurine’s description of her interactions with her grandchildren caused her to reflect on how her relationships with her children have changed. Earlier in life, she was in an active parenting role with her young children. These relationships were full-time because she was a stay-at-home mom. Now, the children are grown and they have their own children. Maurine expressed her changing roles in this way:

Cleaning isn’t as important as being with kids. Just things that I did just because I thought I had to do them and I had three kids and whatever. To me it’s time and our kids and maybe it’s just a beauty of being a grandparent. . . . I love being a mom, too. It’s even cooler in the grand parenting [laughter]. Because I’m a part-time. It’s part-time but I take it seriously. I really do. I really take it seriously because my grandparents offered me the love and support, security, and significance that my parents did.
For Maurine, there was the realization of the passage of time due to her becoming a
grandparent. Maurine reminisced about the nurturing relationship she had with her grandparents
and its commonality with her own parents. The addition of grandchildren in her life has helped
her find renewed purpose through having nurturing opportunities in the latter years of her life.

As is evident by listening to the experiences of this group of baby boomers, transitions
occur and surprise a person as they age. The process of aging can be so gradual that we are not
aware of it until someone brings it to our attention. Wrinkles in our face tell others that we are
aging even while we may see still see ourselves as young. A change in a person’s setting, such as
moving out of the home into the workplace, likewise, may place a person in unfamiliar roles.
Invariably, these baby boomers found themselves in a place of adjusting to their new
circumstances and seeing themselves in a different light. These changes can create an element of
uncertainty in a person’s life. Despite a notion of what the future may hold in their changed
circumstances, an element of uncertainty exists. In this vein, Settersten and Lovegreen (1998)
pointed to the need to change one’s conception of the division of roles and activities over the
course of one’s lifespan. This, in turn, offers the prospect of fulfillment in unforeseen ways as a
person transitions from one life phase to another.

Physical Health: Young in Mind, Old in Body

According to the baby boomers in this study, people go about their daily activities not
thinking about whether they are old or not. It just gradually creeps up on a person. Changes in a
person’s body serve as reminders that a person is not as young as they thought they were. Ten of
the eleven participants believe that physical changes were a determinant in their perception of
aging. Often, they acknowledged there were gentle reminders, such as loss of hair, wrinkles on
one’s face, or aches or pains that have a minor impact on the person’s life. On the surface, these
changes may appear superficial to the casual observer, they can, nevertheless, have a significant
impact on individuals’ perceptions of themselves.
When asked to relate his aging experiences, Fred’s immediate response, as a middle boomer and similar to most others, was to relay changes occurring in his body; he stated, “Yes, I’m gaining more weight. Yes, I’m getting more wrinkles. Yes, my bones hurt [laughter]”. He went on to describe a gradual decline in physical strength over the years. While Fred continued to exercise, he made adjustments to reflect the changes in his body. A younger boomer, Jacqueline, too, spoke of the dichotomy that exists between a person’s mind and a person’s body, and their perceptions of themselves as they age. Her comments were: “Most people tend not to think of themselves as old, at least in mind. After awhile, you[r] body begins to tell you that you can’t do things. Then you go . . . ‘Okay, I guess I am old’”.

Darice one of the older boomers in the study, maintained that a person is: “Only as old as you feel. But sometimes you look that age” [laughter]. In other words, a person may feel young and be active but discover they have begun to age when they look in the mirror—or reality sets in. Calice, another older boomer like Darice, elaborated further on this notion saying, “I don’t think my mind is ever gonna get old. It’s just the rest of me that’s just falling apart slowly. I would like to have a facelift but I can’t afford it” (laughter). Calice’s comments revealed that bodily changes typically occur gradually so the hints of aging are subtle; they go unnoticed—until one looks in the mirror. Moreover, in each person’s comments, there was the unspoken intent to live to the fullest and, to a certain extent, disregard the norms society places on a person as they age. Dychtwald and Flower (1990) have noted that because work is becoming less physically demanding, people are able to stay in the workforce longer. This has afforded baby boomers and the silent generation extended opportunities to ignore cues their bodies may be sending. To a certain extent, however, changes in their bodies served as enforcers of the very norms they sought to disregard through the inability to perform at the same level as younger peers. These dynamics, in turn, are likely to continue during the process of redefining the social and cultural norms for this age group.
On the other hand, for some participants, there were times when the reminders were less subtle. One of the younger boomers, Annie, for instance, stated: “[I am] tired all the time. I’m tired.” She mentioned fatigue in two consecutive sentences as if to emphasize her continuous state of exhaustion. It was a constant reminder to Annie that her body was telling her to slow down. That act of articulating her state of fatigue was a way of reminding Annie to listen to her body. There are times, however, when people choose to ignore the reminder because of life’s responsibilities. Calice further explained, “It means aches and pains I never had before”\[laughter\]. Despite her physical ailments that include chronic neck problems, she continued to work full-time and pursue her studies—often until two or three in the morning. Calice attempts to conceal the extent of her exhaustion and physical ailments from others with her cheerful, positive demeanor. She continues to play the role of a worker while her body keeps telling her she may need to retire earlier than she would like.

Robert offered his insights related to health issues and aging from a wellness perspective. This baby boomer is in his late 50s and exuded a picture of excellent physical and mental health. Robert came to the interview with a noticeable spring in his step. He spoke of the steps he takes to maintain his physical health. Robert stressed, “If you have the healthy habits, eat [a] healthy diet, exercise regularly, . . . people . . . [don’t] age that fast. For me, I’m thinking I am not too old. I’m not too old.” He asserted there is a distinct relationship between individuals’ perceptions of their age and their mental and physical health. This affected his outlook on life and how he perceived his future career prospects. However, Robert also maintained that it does not come easy, declaring:

You have to work to keep yourself in shape \[laughter\]. Mentally, physically in shape, if you still want to live \[laughter\]. If you’re going to live longer, you’re going to work longer—that’s what it’s all about.

Robert realized that despite his excellent health, he does not plan to pursue physically demanding jobs in the future. This baby boomer understood the value of education in shaping a person’s career and lifestyle for their later years. He noted that “education will help me get into a
non-physically demanding job.” Robert equated a person’s longevity and future success with one’s efforts to maintain one’s health. This perspective has implications when considering a person’s future role in society. Robert saw himself as remaining actively engaged, even if it involved working less. Through his educational efforts, Robert has gained the tools necessary to embark in a new career in human resources. This represented a change from the physically demanding job of running a restaurant. Individuals who maintain their health and expand their career skills will have the increased ability to contribute and live a richer, more meaningful second half of their lives.

However, a person’s body may speak louder with the onset of an unexpected, serious health condition. Mike, for example, considered himself in good health before his recent heart attack in his later 50s. He stated:

I did not give this much thought prior to my heart attack about 16 months ago. I had improved my health so much. I felt young, I was thinking young, . . . I didn’t see myself as really that much older even though I knew chronologically I was. I didn’t feel too much out of place in a community of people that were one and maybe two generations younger than me.

Mike expressed that before his heart attack he perceived himself as being young and found himself very much a part of a student body consisting mainly of younger adults. He then related how a massive heart attack changed his thinking about aging, responding:

I’ve really slowed down because of a lack of energy and fatigue, probably because of heart medications that I’m on . . . I have to refocus and reprioritize on what’s really important to maintain my daily schedule first. And one of the problems is that I am not able to do a lot of projects, which would allow me to leap forward past my daily maintenance schedule quite often.

A serious health issue can be the impetus to bring about a change in individuals thinking about themselves and how they will live their lives. For Mike, this would involve balancing his need to work and provide for the latter years of his life versus focusing solely on the necessity to take steps to improve his health. Mike’s heart attack gave him reason to pause and consider his future employment prospects. He is facing the possibility of having to work due to financial need. Mike’s circumstances reflect a broader pattern in which a significant portion of the baby
boomer generation are required to work beyond the traditional retirement age of 65 to make ends meet financially (Poulos & Smith Nightingale (1997). Conversely, this creates an opportunity for Mike to benefit society through the services he will be providing. Mike realizes that he has a lot to offer others. The question, for him, was how would he go about helping others.

The participants considered themselves to be generally in good health despite the varying degrees of health issues they experienced. Chronic fatigue or exhaustion was the most common health problem and was reported by seven of the participants. Despite their health issues, all were continuing to pursue their education and career goals. The changing nature of work, coupled with advanced education, affords baby boomers opportunities to continue working latter in life.

During the course of the interviews, seven of this study’s baby boomers expressed their intentions to continue working in varying degrees during the latter years of their lives. The personal attributes associated with Laslett’s (1991) fourth age including “dependence, decrepitude, and death” were not a part of their thinking (p. 4). The baby boomers think in terms of remaining engaged in society and working. Their planned workforce involvement is discussed further under, “Retirement – What’s That?”

I am wiser and have a lot of experience: I want to share with others.

The accumulation of wisdom and experience were perceived as a positive, age-associated quality by eight baby boomers in this study. The participants expressed a desire to share with younger and older generations the accumulated wealth of their lived experiences. Villar (2012) defined generativity as “the concern to nurture, guide and ensure the wellbeing of future generations and, ultimately, to leave a lasting legacy” (p. 1094). The participants reported exhibiting these qualities in the primary theaters of their lives— their home, place of employment, and school. They expressed this sentiment in different ways over the course of the interviews.
The value of her many years and life experiences has given Annie, for example, a wealth of knowledge and insight that she is more than willing to share with the younger generation. Annie expressed this desire to mentor people in society and younger adults at work, stating:

However, there are some that are willing to accept that and there are some that still don’t want to listen. They just want to do their own thing. A lot of them come in there and feel like they already know everything. I’ve experienced that because I had a teenager and now I have adult kids. It’s just one of those things. Are they going to want to be teachable. I sometimes think people see us as being old, older, or aged.

Annie has made a case for the value of older adults in society. She spoke from her own experiences raising a teenager and in her current role as an experienced professional in her career field. She realized that her role has changed. Annie, now, feels she is the one whose value is being questioned. There is a note of irony in Annie’s comments. This was a learning experience for her. She discovered through this experience that those younger than her would have to learn the same lesson themselves. There is an element of identification with older adults despite being more than a decade away from the traditional retirement age of 65. The words of Laslett (1991) come to mind in reference to Annie’s perceptions of aging by both young and old alike; he stated:

There can be no doubt whatever that dependence and decrepitude have always been inseparably associated with becoming old, however active, useful and healthy many people have been. . . . Such association can never have been more than partially justified as a general description of any particular age (p. 5).

Though her time for raising children has passed, Annie continued to see herself as able to nurture others—provided they give her the opportunity. Annie found she is able to draw on her experience as a parent and seasoned worker to apply lessons learned when interacting with younger workers in her office, serving as a mentor, trainer, or support system to them.

Calice expressed similar sentiments to Annie but from a more detached perspective, asserting: “We have learned the best way to accomplish certain tasks from our experience and our knowledge. And we see young people doing it all backwards because they haven’t quite got it all together—so we get impatient”. Calice was reflective about the apparent lack of willingness of the younger generation to learn from the experiences of prior generations. She also realized her
generation was the same way towards those who were older. Calice went on to describe how she has changed with the passage of years:

I think I’ve gotten a lot smarter in my older age. I’m serious, in general, I’ve gotten more settled and more calm and a lot . . . calmer than I used to be. I take my time, I kinda think about things before [I act on] them. When I was a younger person I was like, ‘I’m out the door.’ Of course, I have a lot more to pull on, like experience and education.

Calice’s work affords her opportunities to share and draw on her experience to help others during the course of a day. She explained that her educational experiences have added to her understanding of the world around her and those she interacts with on a daily basis. There was an acknowledgment of having learned a great deal over the years as well as the tempering affect those lessons have had on her life as she reflects back to her younger years. Calice maintained a lively sense of humor throughout the interview. Beneath the frequent laughter was a calm person who had come to a point of acceptance of herself and her aging.

Charlene added further weight to Annie and Calice’s comments about the older generation’s desire to share with the younger generation. She stated, “My significance in society is that right now I have a good background to help others. I really do consider my role as serving people. I’m glad when I can make suggestions that can help people”. As an advisor in an educational setting, Charlene is able to draw on her prior experiences as a mother and apply lessons learned to help students seeking her assistance.

Robert, too, spoke of how the passage of years has resulted in his becoming more thoughtful about decisions he makes. A combination of education and the unspoken realization that his options are slowly becoming limited has given Robert a different perspective on life.

I think the biggest difference right there, the transition from the middle age to the older age, I would say you think more for [your] age, I think more for my personal experiences, I think more about what I should do. More conservative I would say.

The result is a person who is more accepting of his circumstances and of others in his life. Robert’s education will afford him opportunities to share his life’s experiences in the work
environment. As Robert continues to age, other opportunities to share will be available to him due to his Chinese heritage, which holds its older members in high regard.

Additionally, Mike spoke of the importance of sharing one’s experiences with others when he said: “I’ve now realized that a better use of my time would be to utilize my older age role in society and my past experiences to teach younger people.” Even though Mike has never had children of his own, he nevertheless wants to spend the latter years of his life helping others to learn from his experiences. Unspoken was a desire to leave a legacy for others that would outlive him.

Moreover, Fred spoke from a more personal perspective. He talked about how he has changed through the passage of years, reflecting in this way:

Ask me ten years ago and ask me twenty years ago and the answers would all be different. Now, it means wisdom, it means adding upon knowledge and I am more rational. My emotional side is not so out of control but my rational and reasoning side is heightened.

Fred expressed the realization that his views and his behavior continue to change over time. The consequence of these changes is that he sees himself as more rational, having more control of himself. The passage of time has tempered him further because of the realization that those he encounters are changing even as he has changed.

Robert expressed sentiments similar to Fred when he observed changes in how he made decisions and responded to life’s circumstances. Robert commented:

I’m not as aggressive as I used to be. Ten or twenty years ago, I don’t think, just go, and just react. But right now, when I want to do something, I think first, [asking myself], ‘Well, what’s the outcome? What will it be?’

Robert’s adversity to risk was a result of a combination of accumulated experiences and an acceptance of his limitations.

In addition, Fred expressed sentiments he shared for those older than himself in this way:

All the things my parents said are all true [laughter]. The word old and the word older means wisdom and I respect it more. . . . At the age of 16, I met with an older gentleman who was 86 years old and was going to the Olympics and he was my mentor. I loved the man and I started thinking, ‘Why. That’s the kind of wisdom that I look for.’
This value of the older generation is something Fred wants to impart to those who are younger. He realizes that as he ages, he has a responsibility to draw upon his prior experiences and share the lessons he has learned with the younger generation.

Eight of the participants spoke of how the passage of years has resulted in gaining insights and experiences that can benefit others. They expressed an understanding and an acceptance of their limitations as well as a willingness to allow others to learn for themselves. Conversely, most participants expressed a willingness to mentor others for the purpose of helping them avoid the mistakes they made.

Baby boomers in this study were in the third age of their lives and expressed an innate desire to share what they have learned with other generations. Their wanting to share with others is an instinctive human tendency to leave a heritage that will outlive them. This is part of the life cycle. At the beginning of a person’s life, parents and others share their experiences and lessons learned in order to promote the development of the younger generation. Erickson (1950) asserted that “generativity then, is primarily the concern in establishing and guiding the next generation . . . productivity and creativity” (p. 267). Now, in their latter years, the circle is complete as they look for opportunities to give back to others who are younger. The baby boomers in this study have all weathered their personal storms and appeared to emerge stronger and wiser. The benefits of lessons learned from these personal victories positively can affect society. Slater (2003) affirmed possessing “a sense of generativity is important for both the individual and the society” (p. 57). As Freedman (2007) contended: “Defying conventional wisdom, Laslett views the development of the third age as an individual and societal triumph, ‘the crown of life’” that due to increased longevity, offers expanded opportunities to benefit others (p. 105).

**Ageism: Now You See It, Now You Don’t**

Ageism can be seen as a “process of systematic stereotyping of and discrimination against people because they are old, just as racism and sexism accomplish this for skin colour and
gender” (Butler, 1975, p. 35). And while attitudes are evolving, “ageism is deeply embedded in society in many areas” (Butler, 2005, p. 86). There are broad societal implications behind these statements. Six of those involved in this study believed age related discrimination was an issue and one felt strongly that it was not an issue.

A younger boomer, Charlene, for one, felt that ageism is an issue, but is not something she thinks about a great deal. She responded in this way:

I’m surprised that I do feel age discrimination but I don’t know it’s something I just think about. Even a job prior to this, people hired were much younger than I was and when I came on here—no one’s really young that works here except for a few people. It’s not a big issue here as far as age, but I do know that out in the workforce, if I were to move on, I would say that I would be competing with people that were 20 years younger than me.

Charlene based her view of ageism on her past experiences where younger people were hired instead of her. Charlene also noted that her current higher education coworkers are mainly older adults like herself. Kraus (1995) pointed out that “Attitudes influence our choices of with whom we will interact and of the situations we will enter” (p.71). Charlene is in a work environment where she associates with those who hold age related values that are compatible with hers. Her statements pointed to the fact that certain employers in other work environments might be more inclined to hire older people.

A middle boomer, Mike’s perspective was different. He reported encountering age related discrimination when seeking employment. Compounding the problem were his efforts to improve his employment related skills in preparation for starting a new career in the later years of his life. His inability to obtain full-time employment served to exacerbate his financial problems, as he stated:

I think being an older unemployed person until about a month ago was very difficult. Prior to my heart attack, I was able to work only temporary, part-time jobs for about two years. I could not get full-time employment . . . I could work but I really didn’t want to apply for a lot of physical jobs in order to protect my heart. That meant that I had to apply for more sedentary type of work. And I realized that most of the people employed in sedentary work seemed to be either younger people or were more females than males it seems.
Darice, an older boomer, concurred with Mike’s analysis. She believed that it is more difficult for older men to obtain employment than older women. The reason she offered, in a somewhat amusing yet serious way, was that women have an easier time hiding their age because they can use hair dyes and makeup. Furthermore, it was Darice’s opinion that ageism is more prominent in hiring practices than it is with existing employees. She found that once an older person was hired, age discrimination was not a major problem.

Mike elaborated further on the topic of age discrimination as it relates to online job applications in this way:

I noticed, too, on employment applications that are online now that you can’t leave any text blocks out . . . I didn’t have any recent successful job experiences that I could relate to because, again, a computerized job application process focused upon generally the last five or ten years of your work experience and, of course, as I mentioned, I have about 30 plus years work experience. That was definitely a challenge. Then again, my medical situation that’s in conjunction with my age has been a challenge as well.

Jeff, on the other hand, did not believe age discrimination was an issue. He reported:

[I] never felt age discrimination at all. In fact, just the opposite. I think I’m at that age now where people look to me for wisdom. Where I work, most of the people I am with are probably . . . Twenty-eight is probably the youngest . . . in my department and some even older than me. People look to me for wisdom. I do see where people—the older and older you get—you’re not looked to . . . [in] that way, so I’m looking forward to that time in life. But right now, I think this is almost one of the perfect ages for me.

As a younger baby boomer, age is apparently not an issue for Jeff. He actually sees his career options expanding instead of decreasing, finding his age related experiences to be an asset rather than a barrier. He believes that his colleagues respect him because of his wisdom and expertise. He reported that as a personnel manager, he rarely encounters age related discrimination. He attributes this to the legal protections the state has in place to ensure discrimination does not occur, given a person’s age is not learned until they are hired.

Mike’s comments revealed how age related employment discrimination could occur in the hiring practices. While employers cannot ask a person to divulge his or her age, they can estimate an applicant’s age based on their work history. Calice pointed out that armed with a
person’s employment history, an employer could find reasons to disqualify a candidate based on certain qualifications while appearing to avoid the age issue altogether.

There is also another factor to consider. This relates to the type of work a person is capable of performing. In a knowledge-based economy, the number of jobs that are sedentary is increasing. This lends itself to employing older, trained adults who possess the necessary skills for a particular type of work. In a recent conversation with Calice, for instance, she acknowledged that there are certain fields of work where age can be an advantage. She cited the field of education, her own career field, where she is thriving because of the wealth of experience she brings to her work and is highly valued by her colleagues.

Conversely, Robert expressed two seemingly contradictory perceptions regarding age related discrimination in America. His initial response, when asked about age discrimination, was to say:

No, no, no, I would say age discrimination not here. If I wanted to pursue the teaching career, opportunities are limited but other things—working for public sector or private sector, management job—I still have chance to find it. I will say so. No, I mean—not age discrimination. I’m not worried about that part.

In this vein, Robert went on to say, “Companies still want to hire those [who are] elderly because they are more reliable.” However, Robert did recognize that age-related discrimination exists in employment hiring practices, later commenting:

Actually, I don’t think I’m old. But sometimes when I go looking for jobs, I think, well, they are looking for people of certain age. I think 20 or 30 years ago, I still [would] be able to do that. But employers, they have different perspective about you. That’s what I think about age. I would say . . . this, “When you’re getting older, you have more wisdom. . . . From the employer perspective, they look at your age. They are thinking about something. . . . Even though they don’t say it. They probably look at old and say, ‘Oooh, he’s 80 years old.

Robert’s unspoken sentiment was that while age discrimination is an issue for others, it is not a problem for him. This is attributed, in part, to his excellent physical health and expanded career options due to his college education. Another factor is Robert’s Chinese cultural heritage which views age as a positive quality. Robert’s assessment of age discrimination is tempered by
his belief that “when you’re getting older, you have more wisdom.” This reflected a moment of clarity for Robert about his age-related limitations. He was realizing the need to balance desires against physical limitations. As we age, we remain young in mind and old in body, according the baby boomers in this study. Robert’s statements, while seemingly contradictory, are consistent with research regarding social norms in society. One’s self-assessment, coupled with social norms, can provide rationale for excluding types of work that would be detrimental to one’s personal well-being. Settersten and Hagestad (1996b) indicated that social norms tend to be more loose and flexible and “their influence may instead be secondary in nature and more flexible than researchers had assumed” (p. 612). Furthermore, according to Foner (1996), “a combination of informal age norms and formal age rules continues to make age a relevant element of social structure” (p. 222).

Ageism appears to be relevant to most of the participants’ experiences. Evidently, ageism may not have been of concern to five participants, at least in part, because their family’s projected retirement incomes were ample and secure. This could change, however, if their circumstances were to change due to unforeseen circumstances, including loss of employment, divorce, or death of a spouse. In the case of the other three participants, age discrimination was not seen as an issue, perhaps in part, because they were younger baby boomers.

The Technology Curmudgeon

Technology was a common age-related issue brought up over the course of the interviews, primarily as it related to their educational, career, and personal experiences. The participants reflected on the changes in technology, past and present, as they made efforts to adapt to these changes. In this process of adjusting to the new technological realities, they still were keeping one hand on the old while taking steps to adopt the new.

Annie found there were times when the current benefits of technology could be a source of conflict between herself and younger peers in her place of work. Out of necessity, she had to adapt because she used current technology in her job. In this vein, Annie pointed out:
Keeping up with the change, like I said the technical part of it is sometimes difficult for me because it’s not been one of my interests . . . the computer stuff. I’ll learn it, I’ll learn it and I will do what I have to do but don’t ask me to do anything . . . special—I’m not one to do that. Find somebody that is better [laughter]. [I] think that I’m getting to the point that I’m just about ready to start going the other way now. I’m getting closer to the retirement [laughter]. That’s what I’m saying. I’m willing to give up and let them take on a lot of the extra stuff.

Embedded in Annie’s comments is the realization that she is aging and, at some point, sooner rather than later will be retiring. Unspoken was an inherent sense of personal satisfaction. She achieved a great deal and would at different junctures of the interview express a willingness to share what she has gained during her career. Annie was willingly stepping aside to allow others the opportunity to grow and develop. In a sense, she, too, was acting like parents whose children had come of age and was willing to step back and afford her children the opportunity to spread their wings and discover life for themselves. It was as though Annie had one foot in the present and the other beginning to move into the next phase of her life. Annie had invested several years of her life working for her current employer and had begun the process of letting go of the familiar. The rapid pace of technological change was serving as an impetus to facilitate the transition in her life.

Charlene encountered technological changes while acting in the roles of worker and student. She found herself adjusting to the new technology in three theaters of her life: home, work, and school. The technological changes occurring at work served the dual purposes of forcing her to adapt to change and increasing her understanding of the value of the technology. At home, this baby boomer found she had to use technology during her graduate studies in conjunction with the online courses she was taking. Charlene reflected about her earlier college experiences and the current state of affairs, stating:

One thing that’s amazing to me is that when I first started going to college, nobody had computers. That’s been many, many years ago, of course, but nobody had computers when I was finishing my bachelor’s degree . . . . Everybody [today] is so technically advanced that it’s a little bit of a shock to see people in the classroom and they actually have their books on a cell phone.
Charlene reflected on the advances in technology over her lifetime and the resulting
generational implications. She observed how students currently read class texts on their cell
phones. Charlene, on the other hand, was more comfortable having the physical book in her
hand. She told me:

So there are some odd things with technology and, for me, I’m more comfortable with a
real book whereas the younger generations, as we put it, is more comfortable reading
from a note pad or a little cell phone. I know that’s the way everything is going, that
everyone is going to be reading all of their books electronically, but I still like to read a
book [laughter].

Charlene then went on to share an experience she had when helping a student that
graphically illustrated the technology chasm that can exist between generations, which was:

I was telling a young lady the other day (she just didn’t quite understand how to get the
electronic sources). I was trying to explain to her that, ‘You can go over to the state
university and check out a real book [italics added] because we are part of the
consortium.’ Students today in a lot of classes, they don’t want to get a real book [italics
added] out of a library or a hard copy.

This situation revealed an apparent disconnect that can occur between generations over
the use of technology. Clearly, Charlene associates “real book” with physical copies. For
younger students, “real books” are the e-books they currently use. She was attempting to convey
to this student the value of older methods as a viable alternative to the newer technology in use.

Then, in a note of irony, Charlene observed that, “oddly enough, my job is testing people
electronically most of the time, so it’s an odd world.” Unspoken was Charlene’s inner conflict as
she sought to understand the younger student’s hesitancy to adopt older methods to complete her
assignments. Charlene was asking the student to adapt to old ways of doing things even as she
was attempting to adjust to the new. When expressing this aloud, Charlene discovered her
internal dichotomy over her advocacy of the value of older methods, she was using for school
versus current technology to test her students in her job.

In contrast, Jacqueline focused on generation-related implications to the role of
technology in everyday life. She remembers earlier experiences with her daughter’s constant use
of the cell phone to maintain continuous contact with her friends. Jacqueline contrasted the
Influence of technology on her daughter’s life with her own experience. She takes a more pragmatic approach using electronic devices in ways that meet her needs, saying:

“I like to read a book [laughter]. And yes, I have a Nook. I have an electronic book because that way I don’t have to pile books around my house. I like to read paperbacks. I like to flip pages back and mark a paragraph I like more than others. I have some of the toys. I have the cell phone and all of that but it’s a way to keep in touch with my kids. I own it. I’m the one that runs it. It doesn’t run me.

Jacqueline then continued her humorous self-deprecation in regards to her relationship with technology when she shared these observations:

“Today’s world is more technology based. I think for some of the older people it’s harder to get into. I understand enough to be extremely dangerous. I have to go find someone and ask, ‘How do I make this work?’ I can do a little with it. My fiancé got after me because I got lost a couple of times in Anchorage. Well, I always get lost. I can’t find my way out of a paper bag. It’s the standard for me. I just take a little longer route. I got a GPS to keep him happy. I don’t use the silly thing since I got it. It’s plugged in. It’s in the car but I am not smart enough to make it work.

There is the recognition that the latest technology is part of the society Jacqueline lives in. Her concession to this reality is to ask for help when having problems. She is required to use computers, the Internet, and other devices in the course of her work and her studies. She has the electronic devices for personal use as well. The difference with Jacqueline is that convenience is the primary motivator. In contrast, she sees her daughter and much of the younger generation using technology more for social purposes.

Likewise, technological changes were challenging for Maurine when she returned to college after more than two decades as she relayed her experiences:

“The really big difference is that the first semester was the biggest challenge because the technology difference from 25 years ago. If I had gone right after high school that would have been even more than maybe 30, 40, a long time ago [laughter]. Because I didn’t have that background I want to go to the library, I still want to hold the book in my hand and all that was in the Internet and my brain just would not accept it. It took a big transition for me to get that all the information was inside the Internet, and there . . . [were] ways to retrieve it.

Maurine expressed uncertainty over her understanding of how to use current-technology as she ventured back school. Changes in technology were a challenge facing Maurine as she resumed college. The Internet had moved to the forefront. The use of electronic texts was
increasing. She expressed the desire to put her hands on a physical book—a sentiment expressed by others in this study. This has required a change in her thinking. She was facing the challenge of adapting to new ways of doing things. Even while she was doing so, she continued to remember and hold on to how things were.

The costs associated with purchasing and utilizing all the latest technological gadgets was an unspoken consideration. Maurine was on a limited budget due to having to pay for her schooling out of her own earnings. She was starting life after leaving a difficult situation and had limited financial resources.

Robert, too, discussed his observations about the pace of technological change and his adaptation to it. He observed:

Changes are so rapid. I cannot keep up with that. I’m still using my old phone, [and] my old computer. I’m using [them for] almost 10 years. [I am using] my personal computer still [laughter]. . . . But I do go library, go to the bookstore looking for [information about] some new technology, tablet and [I] eventually get on the Internet and get some new information—the Google search.

Robert realized that at some point he would need to purchase a new computer and a new cell phone. However, he is unwilling to adopt the newer technology until he understands how it works. There was also an element of practicality to his approach. Implicit was the fact that his older computer and cell phone were suitable for his existing needs. He was not going to change just for the sake of changing. Furthermore, Robert was not a stranger to current technology. He utilized it often while completing his master’s degree program in business the preceding year.

Over the course of the interviews, five participants discussed their need to adapt to technology and how it served as a generational differentiator. In a sixth instance, one person, Fred, noticed a generational difference between himself and someone who was older. About his older instructor, Fred remarked:

This individual is older and was over 60 years old and does not know how to work with computers. Now, my understanding of training is that you need to know what technologies are out there for teaching in order to help those in the learning environment. The instructor’s lack of how to use the technology was a distracter.
His impression was this instructor’s lack of technical expertise negatively affected the learning environment in a class he had taken. He expected the instructor to be knowledgeable in the latest technology. However, this comment did not reflect a lack of respect for members of the older generation, in general, by him. Comments by Fred later in his interview would reveal the exact opposite.

Technological changes have served as a differentiating factor between generations. They encountered a world that increasingly utilized the latest technological advances in the home, the workplace, and their schooling. Palmer (2004) wrote that “We are constantly engaged in a seamless exchange between whatever is ‘out there’ and whatever is ‘in here,’ cocreating reality” (p, 47). Baby boomers’ efforts to adapt reflected a mix of practicality and necessity. They tended to adopt technology to the extent their circumstances required them to do so. Their involvement in college classes and job requirements were the two prime motivators for using current technology. Social interactions, while important, were not a paramount consideration for these participants.
CHAPTER VI

PURSUIT OF HIGHER EDUCATION:

BABY BOOMERS SPEAK THEIR MINDS

In addition to exploring the baby boomer college students’ experiences and views of aging, this study examined the experiences and motivations related to their educational, career, and life decisions. Resulting from the data analysis are the following six themes pertaining to the participants’ quest for higher education and the related issues: 1) Life Transitions and Changes; 2) More Education? You Better Believe It!; 3) Pursue a New Career: Perhaps; 4) Going to College: There are Challenges; 5) Values: Getting Back to One’s Roots; and 6) Retirement – What’s That?

Different life events shaped the participants’ motivation to college classes. Slowey (2008) purported that “Life chances, and associated opportunities for participation in learning at any age, are shaped – if not largely determined – by powerful socio-economic factors” (p. 22). Moreover, five primary motivations were identified relating to their enrollment in college and broader educational, career, and life decisions, which include: 1) career and employment considerations; 2) the need for financial security; 3) personal development; 4) support from family; and 5) support from friends and colleagues. Acknowledging the complexity of their life experiences and the multiple motivations that guided their various decisions and actions, their motives will be examined within the larger context of their life experiences and discussed throughout the major themes.

The participants’ career field and their employers were an important influence. Of the eleven participants, seven were motivated to attend college because they wanted to expand their career options, while six desired to improve job-related skills for their specific jobs, and, for five persons, higher education was seen as a means for obtaining their credentials for a new career.
Financial security was another important motivator of all eleven baby boomers. This involved a combination of increasing earnings for the purpose of growing their retirement benefits or savings, and increasing their supplemental earnings prospects upon retiring. Personal development and growth was important because of the changes in how participants viewed themselves as well as their commitment to learning. Participants reported family, friends, and colleagues were invaluable sources of support when deciding to begin and/or continue their educational endeavors and consider other career options. Table 8 provides an overview of the educational, career, and life motivations of the study’s participants. They are examined in more detail in the pages that follow.

Table 8  
Education, Career, and Life Motivations

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Life Transitions and Changes

Experiences in a person’s earlier phase of life often influence future decisions and subsequent actions. The baby boomer college students discussed personal circumstances from
their past, their present lives, their current situations, and expected future transitions. They repeatedly discussed transitions into new roles. These transitions required making adjustments so they could move forward with plans that were consistent with their new roles and life decisions.

For example, Annie’s comments during her interview about her earlier life experiences offer a description of her transition from teenager in high school to young adult to mother. These proved to be the first in a series of events that would delay the completion of a college degree. About these experiences, Annie remarked:

I got married right out of high school and had a child and that is the route that I went. It did put me back as far as my education goes. When my child turned two, I went ahead and went to college, a community college, for about a year and a half, and worked on some business courses. So that helped me to get started with a career and then I have also been seeking a degree for several years now, I would say going back to 2005, as time and finances permit. That has allowed me to continue my education for my degree, and I am still working on that.

A journey that started in Annie’s early adult life is continuing as she moves towards retirement. There were three major sets of life changes and transitions mentioned related to her educational and career pursuits. The first major sequence of life changes involved her graduating from high school, getting married, and having a child all within a short period. The second transition occurred shortly thereafter when Annie’s child turned two years old. This transition reflected changing priorities that were occurring in her family. There was a need for Annie to devote more time to augment her career-related skills. At that point, Annie began to take college classes, which took time away from her family. The third transition that she mentioned took place in her early to mid 40s when Annie went back to college to resume her education for career-related reasons. Her prior life transitions laid the groundwork for her plans in the latter years of her life. Annie’s roles have been shifting from parent and career professional in the human resources field to grandparent and, eventually, retiree.

Calice’s prior experiences were of a different nature than Annie’s. The death of a loved one is a major life transition that often affects a number of decisions a person makes. Calice had two major transitions in a two-year period, which she spoke about in this way:
And when I got to [my current job], my husband had a brain tumor and we knew that. He lived for about one year after I started working there. Of course I didn’t take any classes. My [employer pays for] one free class a term for its staff. He passed away in 2003 and it took me about two years to get moved past that. And one day I was talking to an [academic] advisor and she says, ‘Why don’t you go back to school?’ I said, ‘I’ve been toying with it, you know.’ We went and got my transcripts, got a degree plan, and said, ‘Well that’s what I’ll do.’ That’s what I am doing.

Calice had made a career transition knowing her husband was seriously ill. He died a year after she began her new position. Calice and her husband were very close to each other. The fact they did not have children only accentuated her sense of loss. After two years, she resumed her pursuit of a bachelor’s degree. Encouragement from an adviser helped cement her decision to resume taking college classes. Her decision reflected a transition from the role of a wife caring for a terminally ill husband to a widow focused on moving forward with her life. Taking classes helped meet, a need for increased social interaction and afforded her an opportunity to continue pursuing her interests in journalism. Calice persists with her studies and plans to increase the amount of time she devotes to community related activities while continuing to work full-time.

Jeff’s prior experiences are different from the others discussed so far. He spoke of his studies in a calm, matter-of-fact manner. His demeanor was one who did not have a care in the world. Jeff’s financial and personal circumstances did not interfere with his ability to pursue educational opportunities. He enjoyed learning for the sake of acquiring new knowledge. College was affordable because the military was paying for his education. When asked about his higher education experiences, Jeff replied:

Upon graduating from high school in 1979, I went to community college for a year. After that year I switched over to more of a trade school for a year, ran out of money, joined the military, spent 20 years in the military and through the military just continued to pick up classes wherever I could—not from a degree perspective but from a learning perspective.

Jeff started his military career in law enforcement and subsequently switched to the human resources field. This would also become his chosen field when he retired from active duty in the armed forces. He explained this during the course of the interview.
While in the military I spent almost five years as a cop, got out of that, and joined a career field called Manpower and spent my last ten years in the military doing nothing but data work so I became a nerd. Got out of the military, got a job just doing data work in an HR function.

Jeff’s approach towards his studies mirrors his progression through life. Jeff began his college studies upon graduating from high school. When finances became an issue, he joined the armed forces. His past approach towards learning lacked a specific career-related emphasis. Jeff’s focus would change after he retired from active duty. Retiring from the military represented a life and career transition. Jeff spoke of how his life in the military was highly structured. The military had made many of his life decisions for him. Jeff had decisions to make that would affect the rest of his life. He realized the choices were largely his and his alone. Though he was working in the same general career field, his job and career had changed because he was now working in the civilian sector. He would now focus his academic pursuits on improving his career and earnings prospects. His decision to resume his college studies would be part of his planned transition into retirement.

Mike graduated from high school in the early 1970s. He relayed some of his early educational experiences over the course of his interview. He reflected on being an honor student graduating from high school in the midst of the societal upheaval occurring in the 1970s. Mike’s early years revealed a baby boomer in the process of attempting to find himself at time when many traditional values were being questioned. He admitted to having a combination of good and bad experiences. Approximately thirty years later, Mike would return to college with a new sense of purpose and focus. Mike’s perspective on life and society had changed. His personal values were more conservative. His return to higher education was motivated by the desire to enhance his employment marketability and improve his retirement savings due to changes in the financial markets that resulted in a substantial loss of Mike’s savings. He spoke about his motives in this way:

I had discovered I had lost most of my retirement investment monies. . . . And, trying to re-enter the workforce, I found it was difficult and so the other incentive to return to
college is hopefully to acquire some credentials, which would allow me to seek some gainful employment. . . . I realized that I would no longer have a retirement to fall back upon and I was already in my early 50s at that time.

Mike returned to college to enhance his career skills hoping to obtain meaningful employment in the future. His educational efforts are part of a circle in Mike’s life. The earlier phase of his life was characterized by a lack of focus and a general sense of purpose. Over the years, he accumulated enough savings to allow himself to maintain a slower pace. Through the passage of years, Mike also changed inwardly. He has resumed his college studies with a renewed, albeit different, sense of purpose.

There were elements of commonality relating to the educational, career, and life transitions revealed by numerous participants. Annie began college as a young mother to gain some work-related skills. Calice lost her spouse after a battle with brain cancer. She resumed her higher education pursuits after a period of adjustment to this loss. Jeff made the transition from the military to civilian life. Mike’s transition was one of a renewed life focus triggered in part by depletion of his retirement savings. Schlossberg, Lynch, and Chickering’s (1991) research pointed out that “the person whose sense of identity derives from homemaking may find the very foundations of life shaken when children leave home or the spouse dies” (p. 38). In each instance, these women demonstrated resilience and began making changes in their identities. Taking college classes was an important part of this change process for all three of them.

More Education? You Better Believe It!

Motivations for attending college for the baby boomers in this study reflect a combination of reasons. They involve a combination of past, present and future considerations. Family members, friends, work and work relationships, higher education institutions and their policies, faculty and staff, and events in a person’s life can motivate a person to pursue and continue with their education.

Charlene’s husband, for example, was an important source of influence and support that helped her to pursue a graduate degree as she expressed here:
My husband is a big influence in my life. He finished his doctorate from Duke University years ago. My children also have graduate degrees. And my son also graduated from Georgetown. It’s kinda of a thing in our family [laughter]. Education seems to have been where the Lord has put us a lot, in education. The motivation I guess – there’s been no one thing that’s motivated me. It’s been a group of things that have motivated me to continue education.

Charlene’s husband obtained his advanced degrees and, in turn, encouraged her to pursue a college education that began with a bachelor’s degree and progressed to her current master’s degree program. Her family relationships have been an important influence in setting the trajectory for the rest of Charlene’s life. Charlene’s motivations for pursuing her current graduate degree program were twofold: advancing her present career and making meaningful contributions in the latter years of her life. About this she said:

In the current phase in my life, the big motivation is kind of a thought for the future. Eventually, I want to leave Anchorage. We own land in rural Alaska and maybe [I will] work half-time or maybe part-time with their school district up there. And there’s a lot of areas since I have a background in fine art, maybe work part-time in their education [system] with their students in art or maybe work in their testing areas, but that’s the future. But I’m trying to prepare for a future beyond Anchorage. We all seem [to] be preparing for something more.

Charlene has always maintained a forward-looking perspective, which has involved looking for ways to serve others. She has always perceived herself as being an integral part of the community where she lives. Her cheerful, yet unassuming demeanor belies the fact she cares a great deal for others. Charlene does not strive to be in the spotlight. She is content in contributing quietly behind the scenes. Charlene’s plans for her future life in rural Alaska are an important source of motivation for her. She envisions staying active and being involved in the community. Her interest in education in this rural setting is an important motivation.

Another baby boomer, Fred, discussed the importance of providing for his family of twelve children. Two remain in the home at this time. His desire to adequately provide for his family was important. Fred stated:

My family—I want to make sure my family has everything they need. I’ve noticed in my employment and my job seeking, if you have a degree, you can get into certain, particular jobs. I was knowledgeable but that was not good enough. They wanted to see that four-year bachelor’s. Now I have been looking seriously into becoming a correctional officer.
They told me just recently—about two weeks ago—that they would give me $2 per hour more just because I have the degree.

In this vein, Fred related how his wife’s support was an important unspoken motivator and contribution to his success in college. “If it wasn’t for her, with the large family dynamics I have, I wouldn’t have done it.”

Through the course of his education, Fred considered different career options that would reflect his career interests. He came to the interview after working a twelve-hour night shift as a security person for a private organization. Fred talked about future benefits with a potential employer—a new correctional center, which recently opened in Wasilla, Alaska. As this prison expands its inmate population, more guards will be required. The state-run institution encourages its officers to obtain college degrees through increased wages. This benefits both the institution and the correctional officer.

Inner drive is also an important motivator for Fred. Excited about the prospect of completing his degree in the near future, Fred used these words:

What a wonderful thing is just around the corner. That’s what motivates me now. I’ve got only five more classes now. It was really difficult. But now I’ve got a research paper for my next course and I feel like I can do it because it is so much easier.

Fred discussed the time, energy, and sacrifices that he and his family invested in his effort to achieve the goal of earning his degree. He expressed an exuberant confidence in his ability to attain this goal. Throughout his educational journey, his religious beliefs and his relationships with others, many with the same convictions, reinforced his resolve to complete his education.

Not surprising, Jeff’s retirement from the military proved to be a focal point in both his professional life and educational endeavors. Life in the military provided Jeff with structure and a measure of personal security. Afterwards, he found employment working in the human service field and quickly learned the importance of a college degree. About his newfound perspective, Jeff commented:
I quickly learned I was not going anywhere without a degree. So slowly I decided it was time to use some of those past college credits, came to the current school, got a review done, and found out it wasn’t going to take me that much longer for my degree. In fact, I am coming out with a dual major. I just decided it was time.

Career goals and career advancement then became important incentives to resume his educational efforts. So too, his employer provided further motivation in the form of tuition assistance.

It was the career progression-type movement. The company I work at obviously has a tuition assistance [program]. They didn’t pay a lot but they did pay for a couple of classes a year. That helped in that motivation. But it was clear that, if I wanted to move up in the company, I needed a degree.

A combination of opportunity for career advancement and employee tuition assistance was the key motivating factor in Jeff’s educational decision. There was yet another motivation that came from discovering the practical application of his studies to his present work. Jeff talked about an ethics class and its impact on his current position.

Business ethics was a class I just took. [It] was one of the most memorable classes I will ever take from Mr. C. And just the way he taught the class, I’ve already instituted changes at work from the classroom participation. It really just broadened everything I am learning about in this environment.

The practical elements of Jeff’s learning experiences were important motivations that supported his continued engagement in the educational process.

Maurine’s motivations for returning to college reflected a combination of goals and transitions in her life. Her decision to re-enroll was solidified after a period of recovery from her divorce. Maurine confided:

My motivation for going to school in this time of my life was I became a displaced homemaker at the age of 45, I believe. It took me about three years to get any kind of bearing and recovering from being divorced. And then I knew I needed to do something bigger and better with my life so that’s why I ended up seeing if I could get back into school and if I can do it [laughter.] I knew I needed a degree to be successful and to take care of myself.

Maurine found herself approaching midlife as a divorced single woman who had devoted much of her life’s efforts to being a mother and wife. She found that while she had much life experience, employers were requiring a college degree. Without this credential, Maurine knew
her future earnings prospects would be limited. Furthermore, Maurine has envisioned her pursuit of a master’s degree as the first part of a continuing education plan for the future. About this commitment, Maurine went on to say:

The further I get into just finishing a bachelor’s, the more I realize the fine tunings that come through a master’s and possibly a doctorate. That’s going to be a large chunk of my energy, my time so as far as the forward motion, mentally to go there, and the rest of the life.

In addition, Maurine’s children have been a source of support and motivation as she began her current educational efforts. She elaborated on their influence in this way:

I wouldn’t be able to do school now without the support that I have. A really great example would be my son who is 23, who is about ready to graduate with his civil engineer degree and I have to take algebra (college algebra), and he became my tutor. They [my children] really motivate me. They’re very proud of me and to hear that they’re proud of me touches my heart.

For Maurine, motivation came from an inner resolve to move forward with her life and succeed. This reflected a high degree of personal healing that has occurred within her. Another source of motivation was the women at the women’s prison whom she taught and where she felt a sense of responsibility and the desire to be a source of hope.

A significant influence was [that] I have been involved in the women’s correctional facility here, the women’s prison . . . for the last 5 ½ years and teach [courses on] practical change for jobs and really what that involved. [This] showed me all my personal experiences that were painful, that were healed, and life [had become] better. I was able to go in and work with women who were incarcerated, and take . . . [my] personal experiences of pain to bring hope into their lives.

Maurine used the inmates as a motivation to share her painful experiences and assist with her recovery. As a result, she was able to find new meaning and purpose in life. Her personal transformation, in turn, has become a source of inspiration for the inmates as they struggle to redefine themselves and discover new purpose for their lives. The process sharing her life experiences serves to remind her of from where she came and where she is now. Maurine’s struggles revealed for her the greatness that she already possessed. Through self-responsibility, self-reflection, and healing, Maurine hoped this same greatness would emerge in the lives of
others, including the inmates whose lives she touched: “One day you finally knew what you had to do, and began” (Oliver, 1992, p. 114).

As noted with Charlene and Fred earlier, spouses often can be a source of motivation for a person to go back to school. This was the case with Robert as well. His second wife encouraged him to sell the family-owned restaurant and complete a college degree. He disclosed to me:

I was very supported by my wife. I divorced six years ago. I remarry about four or five years ago. My second wife [was] very supportive. My first wife always want[ed] me to work [and make] more money. But my second wife said ‘Well, the restaurant is too hard. That doesn’t make too much money. Get it closed.’ Then, we close[ed] the restaurant and [I] decided to go to college. [I] said, ‘Sure why not?’

Robert’s spouse played an important role in his decision to return to school as he was approaching sixty years of age. His face beamed as he spoke of her willingness to make financial sacrifices in the interest of improving her husband’s quality of life. In addition, Robert had the influence of his Chinese cultural heritage. This served to provide the inner drive that sustained him through the challenges of obtaining a college degree.

For Robert, non-completion of his degree did not appear to be an option. Chinese culture holds education in high esteem because of its personal, social, and economic value. In this situation, his cultural heritage includes social norms that encourage and value lifelong learning.

Health and living a healthy lifestyle was also another motivation for Robert. This also reflects his wife’s encouragement to maintain his good health. His wife was concerned about the detrimental effects on Robert’s health due to owning and running a restaurant. It was at her behest that he sold the business and resumed his graduate studies. Robert’s comments described leaving his current occupation in order to begin preparation for a new one. The result was his health improved. He is excited about the prospect of starting a new career in human resources.

The interviews with the study’s participants revealed one primary, over-arching motivation that influenced every person’s decision to go to college. Career-related considerations were primary because of the potential financial benefits participants expected to accrue from their
educational investment. This was not surprising, however, given that career-related motivation was also one of the criteria used in selecting this study’s participants. The baby boomers began their involvement in higher education with the knowledge that the returns on their investment would take time. They also realized there was risk involved and that there would be challenges to face. The participants also realized that there was a possibility they would not see the expected financial gains in the near future. However, they continued to persist in their efforts with the full expectation that they would succeed. These are described in the next section.

**Pursue a New Career? Perhaps**

The baby boomers in this study gravitated towards remaining in their current career fields. There were variations to this notion though. Career-related considerations were central to their higher education endeavors. However, it was more a question of how the education applied to the participants’ career aspirations. Table 9 summarizes their higher education decisions as they relate to their career choices. The baby boomers reported three main reasons: 1) expanding current career options, 2) improving skills for their current job, and 3) obtaining credentials for a new career. Those giving the first reason did so because, while they were content with their present career field, they also wanted to gain additional credentials that would expand their options within their career field. The second reason referred to using their education to improve their skills and knowledge within their present job. The third reflected participants’ desire to enter into an entirely different career field. Eight baby boomers reported two career-related reasons influenced their decision to attend college while three had only one reason affecting their decision. For two of these three participants, the reason for going to college was to obtain credentials for a new career. The fact that eight participants had more than one reason seemed to reflect their desire to keep their options open.
Table 9

Higher Education Choices Related to Career Decisions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Expand Current Career Options</th>
<th>Improve Skills for Current Job</th>
<th>Obtain Credentials for New Career</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Annie</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Calice</td>
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<td>x</td>
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<td>Charlene</td>
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<td>Darice</td>
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<td>Fred</td>
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<td>Jacqueline</td>
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<td>Jeff</td>
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<td>Joshua</td>
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<td>Maurine</td>
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<td>Mike</td>
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<td>x</td>
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<td>Robert</td>
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<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For instance, stability is an important part of Annie’s career aspirations. Annie values stability in her employment. She expressed her intention to stay with her current employer until she eventually retires. She summed up her current career aspirations when she stated: “I think if I maintain where I am at, that I’m happy with that and just finish my schooling and just continue to grow and see where that leads me.” Annie went on to say:

I’ve work hard to get where I am at. I think with my education, increasing my education, even if it’s just to the bachelor’s level, I don’t know if I would want to go any further than that but that also remains to be seen. I might once I get through this bachelor’s degree. I’m not sure if I want to do leadership either because I’ve seen so much with leadership. . . . I have watched other leadership give a lot of their life up and I am not willing to do that.

Annie has worked hard to achieve her present position. Over the course of her time with her current employer, she has come to realize that advancement into leadership comes at price that she is unwilling to pay. She realizes a move into leadership would be detrimental to her family life. She spoke of how her family has suffered because of her time away from home due to her career and educational efforts. Behind her statements is the underlying realization that her
roles in life are beginning to transition from that of career woman and college student to retiree and grandmother. Her job and her schooling were increasingly seen as a means towards an end and that end is not further advancement with her employer.

Charlene, on the other hand, views her current higher education endeavors as a means for improving her current and future career prospects in the education field. She is presently working as an academic advisor and is involved with testing students. However, unlike Annie, she aspires to move into a leadership role in her chosen vocation, stating:

My plans for the future are to perhaps work in a leadership role in education in some kind of situation that the Lord prepares [laughter]. You’re always kind of wondering what it will be but you have an idea. My idea is I enjoy art and I enjoy working with people. God put me into a computer situation where I’m testing people using servers, some things like that on GMAT exams and all kinds of exams that people take.

Charlene expressed a desire to expand her career options in her current field. She has discovered that because of her graduate studies, she has been able to make meaningful contributions during staff meetings and that people are listening to what she has to say. She also realizes that she and her husband will move at some point in time to a rural community. Charlene plans to use her career experiences to help others in her new community. There is a strong sense of continuity in Charlene’s life characterized by concern for the needs of individuals and their communities. While the knowledge and skills she gains help in her current position, she plans to use them when the couple retires to a rural community in Alaska.

As a younger boomer, Joshua spoke candidly about the events leading to his current course of study. While serving in the Air Force, Joshua served as a pilot. Upon retiring from active duty, he obtained employment as a commercial pilot for a freight company. Then in the summer of 2010, Joshua lost his job due to the economic downturn. Joshua exuded an air of confidence as he described how he considered his options. This baby boomer was at peace despite appearances of his world falling apart. His story continues:

In choosing what degree I would do, I initially took a couple semesters taking counseling courses at community college but not pursuing a specific degree rather just trying to supplement my current master’s I already had. . . . Then after that first year of doing
those classes, I found out about the [another university’s] program that they had on base. Also, looking at that point, if I am going to use something, what would I do if I ever got medically disqualified from flying?

Joshua’s loss of employment gave him reason to pause and consider his options if he was unable to fly commercially in the future. While he had completed a master’s degree in counseling, he knew that he wanted to stay in a career closely connected with the aviation field. It was at that point he enrolled in a master’s degree program in airport management. The credentials obtained from pursuing this degree would provide Joshua with a backup plan should he become unable to fly.

Another commercial freight company subsequently hired Joshua and he remains employed full-time. He currently remains enrolled in his academic program because it will give him career options later on. This participant decided what he wanted to do and chose a program that corresponded with his interests. His choice of programs also represents a desire to keep his career options open within the general field of aviation. Underlying Joshua’s thinking is the realization that he is aging and that his roles in society will be changing at some point in the future. Joshua remains in good health and does not expect this to change anytime soon. A backup plan is in order because he has a wife and still has four children at home.

Like several other baby boomers, Mike’s re-entry into college in midlife came after a hiatus that began when he was in his 20s. This represented a shift from the role of a person working a schedule that afforded him a great deal of time for other pursuits. The economic downturn changed that for Mike and he became a college student once again. His choice of degree programs reflected changed career aspirations that would allow him to improve the quality of life for his latter years. Mike’s situation reflects a person who has adapted to a series of unexpected life events. His bachelor’s degree in Global Logistics and Supply Management will give him the tools and credentials he needs to accomplish his career aspirations. As he approaches 60 years old, he sees himself facing the prospect of working more rather than less.
Going to College: There are Challenges

Returning to school later in life can present challenges. These challenges were related to the baby boomers’ decision to go to college and their experiences while attending college. There were three significant challenges discussed by the baby boomer students: policies and practices of educational institutions, time constraints, and lack of self-confidence/fear of failure. Two additional challenges, health and finances, were experienced by slightly less than a majority of participants. In most instances, the participants experienced more than one challenge. Furthermore, circumstances creating one challenge also contributed to another challenge. For example, health related challenges could reflect a combination of factors including stress or a person’s overall health. In two instances, starting over in life, and going to school reflected financial challenges on a larger scale. Financial challenges were not entirely due to school related expenses. Also significant is the fact that six of the eleven baby boomers interviewed experienced two challenges or less. Jeff was the one participant reporting no challenges related to his enrollment in college. In his situation, however, his spouse did have a serious health problem. Jeff pointed out that this did not have a significant impact on his educational or career endeavors. Financial constraints were mentioned by only three baby boomers. This can be attributed, in part, to the fact that many may have access to employer sponsored tuition assistance programs, veteran’s benefits, and federal student aid. Table 10 below presents a matrix of the indicators of the challenges facing the baby boomer college students in this study. They are discussed in order of their relative importance beginning with institutional policies.
And then there are the institutions! Policies of different educational institutions were identified as challenges by seven baby boomers in this study. There were four institutional-related policies that participants reported had affected their educational plans and influenced their choice of higher education institutions. The first policy matter the participants most commonly noted relates to the institution’s course scheduling policies. Scheduling policies were also a reflection of a school’s recruitment emphasis, the second most common challenge cited by participants. The second policy was an institution’s obvious focus on recruiting and serving mainly traditional age students. The third policy issue related to the transfer of college credits between institutions. The fourth and final policy issue was offering programs that meet the needs of adult students.

Table 10

**Summary of College-Related Challenges**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Institutional Policies</th>
<th>Time Constraints</th>
<th>Lack of Confidence</th>
<th>Health</th>
<th>Financial Constraints</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Annie</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
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<td>Calice</td>
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<td>Darice</td>
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<td>Fred</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jacqueline</td>
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<td>Jeff</td>
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<td>Maurine</td>
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<td>Mike</td>
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<td>Robert</td>
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<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>7</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

And then there are the institutions! Policies of different educational institutions were identified as challenges by seven baby boomers in this study. There were four institutional-related policies that participants reported had affected their educational plans and influenced their choice of higher education institutions. The first policy matter the participants most commonly noted relates to the institution’s course scheduling policies. Scheduling policies were also a reflection of a school’s recruitment emphasis, the second most common challenge cited by participants. The second policy was an institution’s obvious focus on recruiting and serving mainly traditional age students. The third policy issue related to the transfer of college credits between institutions. The fourth and final policy issue was offering programs that meet the needs of adult students.
Table 11

**Institutional Policies Affecting Baby Boomer Education Decisions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Class Schedules</th>
<th>Recruitment Emphasis</th>
<th>Credit Transfer</th>
<th>Suitable Programs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Annie</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Calice</td>
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<td>Charlene</td>
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<td>Darice</td>
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<td>Fred</td>
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<td>Jeff</td>
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<tr>
<td>Joshua</td>
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<td>Maurine</td>
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<td>Mike</td>
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<td>Robert</td>
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<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
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</table>

The data in Table 11 reflects the school policies that influenced their choice of higher education institutions. In each instance, one or more of the institutional policies that addressed their educational requirements governed the participants’ institution decision. The experiences of four baby boomer college students as it relates to college choice will be discussed next.

Annie chose to enroll in a private, non-profit institution instead of the area’s public university. The public institution focused on the recruitment of the younger student population, according to Annie. She had a high regard for the public university but felt more comfortable attending a school where students more closely represented her age group.

So anyway I would say I have great perception of the school. I love the school I’m going to. I didn’t fit in [the public university] here where my son is going. I felt more comfortable and more at ease as an adult learner in this environment than I would in the other environment. I know there . . . [are] adults that go to that school but I just felt more comfortable at this one.

Darice expressed a similar sentiment to Annie’s about her choice of schools. She had attended classes at the public university and did not feel comfortable there. She stated:

I just like the way the maturity at the [private university] that made me feel very comfortable. When I tried [the] public university and then I went to [this school], as an older person I fit in at [the private university], while I did fit in at [the public university].
A university’s recruitment and retention policies and the composition of the student body were important to this study’s participants. They preferred attending classes with adult learners who were closer to their age. Those attending this particular private institution also gave high marks to the instructors who understood the challenges facing older learners. In this vein, Darice stated, “It was an awful experience for me when I went [to the public university]. I tried talking to the teacher and he wouldn’t even listen to me, and he wasn’t a young instructor”. Darice felt the school’s instructors did not understand the needs and circumstances of baby boomer students with families and careers.

A university’s class scheduling policies was the deciding factor in Calice choosing to end her studies at a university earlier in her life. She reported:

I was a student at [the public university] when I was in my 20s. I was a journalism student and to make a long story short after a couple of years, I could not get [the public university] to offer my upper level journalism courses at night. . . . Having the degree would be nice. But I wasn’t going to quit my job as a journalist to go back to school and earn a degree and still have trouble making an income because I had to go to school in the daytime. What are you going to do? So, I did not go back.

Calice was enrolled in a degree program in journalism. She worked full-time for a local newspaper in a career she loved. In order to continue in her program, she had to choose between quitting her job and quitting school. She chose the later. Calice subsequently changed career fields and resumed her journalism studies at another school. Her higher education experience illustrates an important characteristic of older learners who encounter different types of institutional barriers when attempting to access higher education (Cross, 1981; Broek & Hake, 2012). In this instance, the barrier was the public university’s inflexible and limited (daytime only coursework) scheduling policy.

Though she is currently a graduate student, Charlene, also, mentioned her experiences while taking undergraduate courses from several different universities, which illustrate how school policies unintentionally impede a student’s progress in completing their degree. Her family moved a great deal because her husband was serving in the armed forces. The result was
that Charlene accumulated credits from several universities before actually receiving her degree.

She explained the problem in this way:

I have so many college credits. I kinda know what works now but I did then, too, but, unfortunately, [there were] changes in core classes. They may not be as bad as they were but I don’t know that for sure. . . . They were all good universities. They all just have their own specifics that they consider core classes. They don’t like to share [laughter].

So when [I] did . . . finally graduate with my bachelor’s of fine art, I had almost double the number of college credits you need and that’s because the core classes in one university were totally different. So one place had a huge humanities class that they sort of made up themselves [laughter]. And it was a requirement. Well, I did that. When I went to the other university, because I didn’t graduate there, it really didn’t count for their core classes. But it went on and on. . . . It’s just each university had different requirements so I have a very good BA [laughter]. Fortunately [laughter]. Many courses in it.

Revealed in these comments by Charlene was the problem of many schools not accepting credits for general education and/or major core classes from other institutions. She had accumulated many more credits than were necessary for her undergraduate degree. Charlene stated in a humorous way that she became a “well rounded person” in the process. Her current institution takes a generous approach when accepting credits from other schools.

Charlene’s situation is hardly unique. Anchorage is the home of two large military bases. Those serving and their dependents move around a great deal. Completing a college degree can be a challenge when institutions are reluctant to accept credits from other institutions to meet graduation requirements. There are also broader implications for non-military students and baby boomers wishing to complete their degrees later in life. Charlene’s advice was to encourage adult learners to persist despite their circumstances and complete their college degrees. There is a practical side to her advice. As an academic advisor at a local university, Charlene has first-hand experience working with college students and helping them to decide which courses to take; she often will guide them to courses that other institutions are most likely to accept later on.

Likewise, Mike’s situation is an example of a person returning to college later in life. He, like Charlene, had accumulated college credits much earlier in life. He left due to a lack of motivation and wanting to work instead. Mike was a free-spirited, young adult with lots of
energy and interests, and a lack of focus. He returned to school in his 50s for the purposes of
improving his earnings potential and increasing his retirement savings. Mike chose the public
university because the school offered a degree program in his chosen field in Global Logistics
and Supply Management. He stated:

I think the first challenge that I realized was that of all the credits I had accumulated
when I was in college about thirty-six years earlier, not all of those were transferrable,
but many were. The academic advising that I received, as friendly and polite as it was, it
did not gear me towards fully utilizing most of those transfer credits going into a
bachelor’s degree. I also picked a field that being specialized had its own set of
requirements which made it more difficult to use some of those transfer credits. That has
resulted in prolonging my stay at the university right now in order to get my bachelor’s.

Because of his age, time was of the essence and Mike needed to complete his degree as
quickly as possible. The time clock of aging was ticking. He needed to recoup a return on his
higher education investment. The delay in completing his degree was increasing the cost
associated with improving his earnings potential.

Evidently, the participants of this study chose institutions that were best suited to their
needs. Key criteria mentioned by participants were schools offering programs that met their
needs and offering classes at times and locales that were convenient for their schedules. A
supportive learning environment was also an important consideration. This would involve taking
classes with other students who had similar educational goals and interests. In this vein, study
participants believed that the focus of this public university in the Anchorage area was on
recruiting and serving students from the younger segment of the population. This was not a
deliberate act intended to discourage baby boomers from enrolling. Rather it was a combination
of factors that included lower tuition and the presence of residential dormitories on the campus
grounds that largely encouraged primarily traditional age students to enroll.

The great balancing act: Career, college, and family! The relationships between the
study’s participants and others are characterized by a give and take. Societal norms and
expectations played influencing roles when they made decisions regarding roles and the theaters
in which they played these roles. When people play several roles simultaneously, as Super
(1980) pointed out, this can result in performing one role better at the expense of the other. A theme expressed by six baby boomer college students was the challenge of time constraints associated with balancing the responsibilities of different roles they were expected to play.

Annie, for example, expressed her frustration over meeting the challenges of a career, taking classes, and being a wife and mother. She had her hopes and dreams and it felt like her varied responsibilities were delaying their fulfillment. The addition of schooling on top of a demanding career cut into the time she has available for her family.

I felt that my family didn’t support me. I don’t know if it was my own sense that [they] didn’t or it was because I wasn’t at home as much as they would like me to be. But work also took a lot of my time. I think they say that they support me but I’m kind of sensing that they would like me home. But they are just going to have to deal with it for now [laughter]. Until I finish. Hopefully, it won’t be too much longer.

Annie’s comments about the lack of employer appreciation revealed the added frustration she encountered while working.

I used to work 16, 18 hours and get paid for eight, and it’s overwhelming and it’s exhausting. And it’s also, I think, that sometimes . . . you’re not cared about, you’re not valued, and if you give an inch, they are going to take a mile.

The lack of tangible support from family members and her employer has served to increase her stress levels. In a sense, Annie felt like she was pursuing her education alone and embarking on her educational efforts at the wrong time in her life. Her personal goals and quest for personal fulfillment through education and enhancing her career-related skills were important motivators. Annie reflected:

I kind of did my life backwards. So hopefully I will graduate before I retire [laughter]. But if not, it’s just going to be a success for myself—an accomplishment. It will be even if I don’t need to use it [laughter].

Annie revealed a level of frustration with her life’s circumstances. In her mind, school is associated with an earlier part of one’s life. Instead, life got in the way and now she is in the process of playing catch up. Given the challenges faced, Annie questioned whether there would be financial rewards from her efforts before she retires. She was concerned about investing years of hard work and time only to discover there was no pot of gold at the end of the rainbow.
However, she hopes to recoup her educational investment when she retires. Later in the interview, she discussed working at least part-time after retirement. Annie expressed no regrets about her decision to pursue a college degree. Throughout the interview, she presented herself as being highly goal oriented. Earning a college degree when her children were older has been one of those goals. In the final analysis, Annie-revealed that the sense of accomplishment would be a sufficient reward.

Calice identified time constraints are a major challenge in her educational pursuits, expressing it in this way:

[I study until] two in the morning. I have literally done this 2 or 3 o’clock in the morning. You get on a roll. I want to finish. I want to finish. I want to finish and keep on going until I pass out or say, ‘Okay, I got to go to bed. I got to go to work in the morning.’ The steepest challenge is making time, making time and sacrificing a lot of things. Like I have boxes back here. That’s from my move last year. Whose got time . . . [for] this? I just finished a course. I’m taking one course a term and it’s like I don’t have any time.

Her statements bring to light the challenges facing a single, 63 year-old college student who works full-time and goes to school. Calice deals with chronic neck problems that limit her physical abilities. Revealed in the above statements was a high level of intensity that characterized much of this researcher’s interactions with her. She was very passionate about life and her body would not cooperate at times. Calice repeated, “I want to finish” three times to emphasize her persistent desire to complete her degree.

It is significant that her degree program is in her former career area—journalism. She expects writing to be an important activity once she completes her degree. Calice explained that the demands of school have resulted in her curtailing other activities, including writing and community activities. She enjoys her work because it involves a great deal of interaction with faculty, staff, and students. It affords her opportunities to become involved in the lives of others. This compensates for the lack of family relationships. She also has a few close friends with whom she socializes. Calice has expressed no plans of slowing down. Instead, she intends to rearrange her life to include activities she enjoys.
Furthermore, Fred’s response shows the daunting nature of the challenge of pursuing a college degree when a person has a family and a demanding job.

When I’m working [laughter] 84 hours one week, nobody knows what I have to go through. Eighty-four hours a week and I’m going to school three times a week—that same week. I’m getting two hours sleep every other day so some days I don’t sleep 24-48 hours. . . . I have to get sleep when it’s available to me.

Fred’s interview came after he had just completed a twelve-hour shift working as a security guard. While he was exhausted from working a long shift, he was excited about being able to talk about his experiences as a baby boomer college student. He expressed the challenge of the responsibilities of working long hours, supporting his large family, being a husband and father, and going to class three nights a week. There were expressions of fatigue, determination, and exuberant triumph over his circumstances. His religious faith and the support of his wife have been important factors in Fred’s success. Fred set his life’s goals early in life. While there have been obstacles, he has discovered ways to overcome them and eventually reach his goals. This early tendency has been evident throughout his life and has carried over into his higher education experience. While Fred would express frustration during the interview, he also realized his decision to attend college was made with the full knowledge that it was going to be difficult. He was a man on a mission.

In her early 50s, Jacqueline began college for the first time. Over the course of a marriage spanning nearly three decades, she was a source of support to her ex-husband while he completed his education. Now, she was alone and starting her college studies without the support of a spouse. Instead, her support has come from others in her life. Jacqueline shared how she managed her school and work in this way:

I only take one class at a time per semester. I work ten-hour days right now. I’m at work from 7 until 5. One class is about all I can manage with my work schedule. Plus it’s all I can afford. I’m the world’s oldest freshman and I will be one forever [laughter]. It’s going to take me awhile. I’m afraid when I get close to my [it may not] do me any good at that point but we will see [laughter].
Jacqueline found that taking one class at a time works best for her. The demands of her job and schooling have proved to be a challenge. Jacqueline reported that her employer has been supportive by allowing her to leave work early on class nights.

On class night, I get to leave a half hour early so he’s very good about that. My previous colonel was also very good about me leaving early enough so I could grab food before I got to class and always asked about my classes and how am I doing and what I am taking next. They have been very encouraging and all that.

Support from fellow students and instructors have eased the transition into college life for Jacqueline. Yet, she is still in the process of making the transition from being a wife and a mother to being a single adult worker and college student.

The challenge of time constraints and the seemingly unrelenting pace due to having to balance family, career, and academic responsibilities was expressed in different ways by these baby boomer college students. Five participants reported time-related challenges that required balancing the demands of family, career, and education. This pointed to the significant impact that pursuing a college degree can have on the lives of baby boomers.

The self-confidence crisis. A significant challenge faced by five baby boomers was a lack of self-confidence in their ability to succeed in college. This was evident in one form or another with most of those interviewed in this study. These participants began their present educational efforts with some degree of fear and trepidation, wondering if they were going to “make the grade.” In this vein, Williams (2010) defined self-efficacy as “perceived capability to perform a behavior” (p. 417). Prior education success reinforced their perceived ability to succeed in their current educational pursuits. As they progressed in their studies, their self-confidence grew and they began to see themselves in a better light. Their struggle to believe in themselves became a transformative process for each of them. The experiences of four baby boomers that dealt with self-confidence issues will follow.

Before enrolling, a major challenge Annie faced was a lack of confidence in her ability to succeed in college. She had experienced success in her career and yet was struggling to believe
she would also find success in her academic pursuits. Annie described her lack of self-confidence when she first enrolled in a government class:

I would say, yes, it’s sometimes stressful because once I get enrolled and registered I’m like, ‘Oh, my God! Can I do this?’ . . . However, this class has helped me just in the short time, just the two times we’ve been to class helped me to want to understand the government system.

Annie attributed her lack of confidence, in part, to a lack of recent exposure to the courses’ subject matter. Annie faced the same fear, however, when taking other classes. She found that support from the class instructor and other students helped her overcome her fear.

Annie also talked about her general lack of confidence in her ability to succeed in school, stating:

Some of the challenges that I have had is my own confidence—a lack of confidence to go back to school. It took me awhile to get the courage to go back to school as an adult learner. I think that math is not one of my best subjects and that was one of the biggest things that I’m trying to get over that hurdle now. It’s still not one of my best subjects.

Annie’s lack of confidence was a challenge that she was able to overcome. She persisted in her inward battle while balancing her studies with a demanding career and the needs of her family. As mentioned earlier, she questioned her family’s support and at times felt unappreciated by her employer. These relationships served to add to the intensity of her struggle. However, she was able to tap into her inner strength to persevere. Her self-confidence grew as she persisted in her studies. This came with time and, while she discussed struggles with math, Annie was working to get over that hurdle. Later in the interview, she revealed an important key in her ability to rise above her challenges when she stated: “God has helped me through so much of these challenges that I mentioned in the past because I don’t know where I would be at this time.”

Notably, at different junctures of the interview, she expressed her desire to share with others the lessons she has learned over the course of her life.

Charlene also related her fears when starting her graduate degree program. Her fear was rooted in a concern over not being able to measure up. Charlene explained:

My fear was that I’m going to show that I am not intelligent or something, which is kind of silly. But you’re afraid to begin with because you don’t know what to expect in a
graduate level paper. I had success at the undergraduate level papers but I was expecting it would be . . . Everything is about three times the length of the undergraduate papers.

The fear expressed by Charlene was one of not appearing to be intelligent enough. She admitted this was “kind of silly” because one does not know what to expect when writing a graduate level paper. Following these comments, Charlene made one brief statement that summed up how she overcame this fear, saying: “The perception is that I can do it now after having success.” The other participants expressed this sentiment when they discussed their fear of not measuring up.

Also, Charlene faced a lack of confidence in her academic abilities due to age-related differences with her peers, and remarked:

It’s an odd situation to be in where—even at this university—a lot of our students are 30 and 35 that are in our graduate program. I consider myself older than many of the people that are taking classes even at the graduate level.

It’s a lot and I was afraid to start again when you’re quite a bit older but I enjoy people at whatever age they’re at. It’s just been a reversal in my life [laughter].

Charlene felt out of place and was having to adjust to being a student in her mid 50s. Unlike her undergraduate studies, she did not have the responsibility of being a mother to young children. In its place though, she had a career and was preparing for retirement. This was in marked contrast to the other students in her program. They were much younger and still in the phase of their lives where retirement was not a part of their thinking. In the midst of her struggles, she received support from her spouse and children. Charlene also related how her faith in God was a part of the reason she was able to overcome her fear of “measuring up”.

Fred, too, was challenged by the fear of failure, which he faced and conquered during the course of his studies. He disclosed:

I was afraid of failing. This is very important—the fear of failing. In the year 2001, I broke that barrier. I knew I could beat whatever is at the top. . . . I’m happy with my accomplishments. I don’t think pride is a good thing to have but I think it hypes up self-esteem in yourself so you can encourage yourself and move forward.
Fred’s statement portrayed conflicting feelings he had about himself. He had this deep concern over his ability to succeed. Fred places high expectations on himself and looks for answers when he does not meet them. An inner drive to succeed was a personal characteristic that emerged throughout Fred’s interview. He talked about the obstacles he encountered and candidly spoke about his successes in achieving his goals. Fred mentioned the support he received from others in achieving his goals: his wife, other family members, and his faith in God.

Maurine, too, was afraid to enroll in college because she did not know if she would be successful. Maurine explained it in this way:

My biggest challenge to begin with was I called ‘Feel the fear and walking through it.’ I was petrified and I didn’t know if I was capable [of doing college work]. I wanted to. I would start . . . but my home, my children always put it off to the side.

Maurine’s philosophy was to confront her fears and take steps to conquer them. She wanted to go to school earlier in life, but because of her responsibilities as a parent, the opportunity to do so was not there. Timing can be everything when a person faces a challenge. By working through her earlier struggles, she had gained the inner strength necessary to move on with the next phase of her life. Maurine was now a middle aged, single person with the responsibility of supporting herself. Returning to college was a part of her transition into a meaningful career in human services. Now her circumstances had changed and she had the opportunity and motivation to return to college. Maurine explained in detail the process she went through when confronting this fear.

I had to walk through the fear and I knew I wanted to do it. But it still took going and thinking. I [originally] was going to do online and . . . [trying it] for a whole year. [Then if it was] okay, trying another avenue at the school, and looking at other colleges and who would take my credits, and actually doing the enrolling and all the paperwork which was a lot to be done. But it kept solidifying that I was making real movements towards making the idea become real.

Maurine shared the triumph she felt when she gathered the courage needed and finally took the steps to re-enroll in college:

But I still had one foot out. I did not know if I would be able to walk all the way through it. Even when I got through the registration, I put off buying my books until the last
minute because that was going to be the final validation that I was really going back to school. And when I finally did that and put the bag in my truck, I just cried. I didn’t realize how bad I wanted to go back. It was something I had pushed down inside of me just to be a wife and a mom. I was doing it. It was something I really, really, really, really wanted to be doing.

The acts of registering for class and purchasing her books were tangible steps Maurine took to overcome her fears. The actions affirmed the reality of conquering those fears. Then came a moment of clarity where she realized how much she wanted to be in school. The depth of this desire was expressed with her emphatically repeating the word “really” four times. This moment of success would be the impetus for Maurine’s future successes in college and life. It marked a significant transition:

God gave me a good brain and intelligence and that’s what I need to do now in order to be in the field that I can be in and use my mind. Use my mind more than my physical strength.

Through her relationship with God, Maurine realized a significant life transition had occurred. Her role as a wife and a mother with dependent children were over. Maurine was in the process of redefining herself as an independent person who would meet life on her own terms. This, in turn, would benefit others in the long term because she would focus her energies on helping others emerge from difficult circumstances. She was looking to the future and the promise of fulfillment through a meaningful career in human resources. She felt that it was time for her to begin using her gifted mind for the benefit of others. Throughout the interview, Maurine discussed the importance of giving to others. Her expectation is that by attaining a college degree she will open new doors for serving others. Maurine’s story shows how education can be an important component in personal transformation.

Five baby boomers in this study expressed fears about their ability to succeed in college. As they continued in their studies, their self-confidence increased due to their successes. Support from family and friends and their religious faith were important sources of strength and support as they overcame their fears.
And then, there are health issues. Health issues can manifest themselves alone or in conjunction with other challenges that baby boomers encounter. The normal, minor aches and pains that people encounter can be more of a nuisance than a real hindrance. Four baby boomers in this study, however, related how health issues have affected their ability to achieve their higher education goals. The health issues of three baby boomers are discussed, illustrated how their health has affected their quality of life and delayed completion of their degrees.

Annie, for one, described the extent of her health related challenges. Her story illustrated the stress that baby boomers may encounter when they resume their higher education pursuits later in life.

Quite few years ago I was working way too many hours, being stressed out, feeling like it’s not good enough, being just overwhelmed all the time, and not feeling appreciated. That stresses you where you come to a point where it affects your health. Not getting enough sleep, not being able to sleep at night because you can’t shut it off, just being at work for way too many hours, you don’t see the daylight really and just kind of overwhelmed and stressed out all the time. That did have a big impact on my health. My mental, my emotional, my spiritual, everything, and my physical health.

The onset of these health issues coincided with Annie’s return to school in 2005. The combination of long hours at work and her other responsibilities had affected her health. Then, three years ago, Annie fell on an icy parking lot and tore both of her rotator cuffs. Two stints of surgery and a round of physical therapy later, she was able to resume her studies. This has delayed her graduation by two years. Annie’s health experiences also had a significant effect on her family. Her family was baffled about what they could do to help her with the health problems. Annie believed stress contributed to her health problems as she was trying to balance so many commitments—school, work, and family—all at one time.

Calice, too, had age related health issues, which added to the stress of completing her college degree. She is an older baby boomer who is generally in good health. Chronic neck issues have become problematic for Calice, as she reported:

I cannot lift things, I cannot lift anything over five pounds. . . . I have done dumb things when the doctor told me I could not do them anymore. I have three discs that are completely gone in my neck. I have bone spurs and arthritis in my neck, which causes
excruciating pain in my arm and down in my shoulder. If I do something dumb, I pay for it, big time. I mean really big time.

Calice’s wish for a complete body transplant reflects the circumstances of baby boomers whose bodies begin to manifest signs of wear and tear. The pain that can came from ignoring her physical limitations affected her ability to study and work and her overall quality of life. She has learned to accept her physical limitations and continues to function at a high level.

Likewise, Mike faced a life threatening health issue that affected many different areas of his life. Sixteen months ago, he suffered a massive heart attack. Despite the setback, he still considers himself to be in good health and is taking steps to improve his health. He recognizes his limitations and realizes the healing process takes time. Mike disclosed:

Even though my health is still pretty good other than the surviving of a massive heart attack, I think that I’ve had to slow down. I don’t seem to have as much energy or drive as I did. I still want to pursue my educational goals of getting my bachelor’s degree.

Remarkably, Mike is back in school and working part-time. Adjustments were necessary because of reduced energy levels due to medications he is required to take. As a single person, he has had to draw upon his network of friends and those in his church for support and encouragement. Going to school, working part-time, and recovering from a major illness can pose a challenge for anyone, regardless of their age. The awareness of one’s mortality becomes heightened after a significant health event like what Mike experienced. He continues to pursue his studies knowing that the process has become more difficult due to his health issues.

**Values: Getting Back to One’s Roots**

A person’s values are an inner compass that provides direction for a person’s life. They are the taproot that gave these baby boomers the motivation to pursue their dreams and aspirations for the middle and latter years of their lives. The participants spoke about their values throughout the course of the interviews. Before the interview, the researcher invited participants to bring personal items that were especially meaningful to them to supplement the research topics under discussion. Some brought personal affects while others chose to talk about possessions
they normally have with them. They are, in a tangible manner, a reflection of their personal values.

The iPhone that Annie carries with her throughout the day has special significance to her and tells a great deal about her values. When the researcher looked at the iPhone and the picture that serves as its background, Annie was asked about its meaning to which she replied:

There is my grandbaby. He’s a cutie. I put him on as my screen saver so when I turn my phone on, I look at it, because I can’t see him every day. That was kind of a heart wrencher. I didn’t think it would be but really, I had to ask for forgiveness for the feelings that I was feeling. Because I was feeling a little bit jealous that my son-in-law’s family was going to be watching him grow and I’m not.

The picture represented her family and spoke to how she carries her family members with her wherever she goes. The iPhone, in essence, is a tangible connection between Annie and her family. There was a note of sadness when she spoke of her grandson’s parents moving out of state and the loss of physical connection. Her comments serve as a vivid reminder of Alaska’s remoteness. The nearest large city in the lower 48 states is over 1400 miles away. The terms “Outside” or the “Lower 48” are terms Alaskans use to describe the rest of the country. These expressions serve to explain how Alaskans often feel about the relative isolation from the rest of country and from loved ones living elsewhere.

The iPhone also provides Annie a way to pause, reflect, take pictures, and reconnect with God’s beauty, as she commented:

I use my phone more for pictures. I take lots of pictures. I love to take pictures and I see things. . . . Over the past several years, every year it seems like I enjoy and see God’s beauty of his creation and more. I am more aware of it driving to work each morning. I see the colors on the snow and you start to appreciate it a lot more. I do, anyway. Whereas before, you could just drive 50 times a day and never really notice them. Now, when I see something, I take a picture.

According to Annie, taking pictures is an opportunity to reflect and see herself in a different light. God is an important part of her life. Annie was concerned that her busy schedule negatively affects her relationship with those she holds dear. In a small way, the iPhone helps her mitigate the negative effects of her busy life and provides a communication channel that enables
her to remain in contact with her family. Throughout Annie’s conversation about the iPhone, never once did she mention her employer. While not mentioning her employer specifically, her relationship with the company is important. Annie has worked for her current employer for 17 years. She values this relationship because she has derived fulfillment from her work. Annie’s wistful comments about her grandchild expressed regret over loss of time with those she holds dear. In summation, there were three personal values expressed by Annie: relationships with career, family, and God.

In response to the meaning of a picture that was hanging in her office, Charlene said:

This is actually a gift that came to me. It’s a beautiful painting. It’s entitled “The Denali for ____”. And my father-in-law was an artist. And I actually met my father-in-law before I met my husband. . . . One day he called and said he called me because my husband would be gone on one of these long things. We liked each other. He was a neat person. [During that conversation] he says, ‘Charlene, if I could give you anything, what would you like?’ I said, ‘Dad, I don’t know anyone who does Denali like you do. If I ever had something, I would like a Denali some day. Some day I would like to get one of your Denali paintings. And I never expected to get it like this.

Charlene values relationships and readily engages people in conversations about things that interest them. This picture is an indication of the importance she places on family relationships. I saw this in the manner in which she spoke in endearing terms about her late father-in-law and the way in which she engaged the interviewer in conversation before the interview. Her face glowed as she spoke about him. This painting revealed her appreciation for art and beauty and the person who created this work of art. She talked a great deal about gravitating towards those with the same interests. The story continued when she expressed her surprise and delight over receiving the painting. Behind the painting with all of its beauty was the relationship with the person who gave the painting, as Charlene shared with me.

The sensitivity for the needs of others revealed Charlene’s concern for others and an appreciation for the gifts each person possesses. These were evidenced through her daily interactions with others and those she advises in her career as an advisor. Her future aspirations of working within the education system of a remote Alaskan village were another expression of
her concern for others. Charlene’s values can be summed up in her concern for others, valuing relationships, and a love for art.

Fred discussed the security badge he wore to work. He explained that its significance went beyond the job itself. Fred was philosophical and self-reflective when he spoke about the badge and the uniform he was wearing and how it exemplified the way he conducted his life.

I’m going to describe to you this badge and tell you that it’s a means to an end. And I work in my security company uniform. The badge represents one of the steps we have to take in life in order to get what we want. Every day we are going to have a new badge. We need to learn how to work with it and see how it fits into place. We have to do a re-evaluation constantly of our lives and even until the day we die . . . . I think it’s important that we always remember that we can grow and change and learn. This little badge can become something like a diamond. That’s my goal.

Fred’s personal values reflected the significance he placed on periodic reflection of one’s goals, sense of purpose, and values throughout the course of one’s life. He stressed the importance of continuous personal growth and development. Fred emphasized these themes throughout the course of the interview. In his words:

For me, I have my church, family and education, leader, occupation, organization, self-worth, and being well-rounded in music. I look at those areas and they are important to me. If we look at the most important things in our lives then we can accomplish many things . . . . I did that for many years and now I am just spreading myself out and re-evaluating myself to see how I am doing. That seems to work out pretty well.

Fred went on to explain that he believed that God works behind the scenes in seemingly insignificant events of a person’s life.

I think that God has a plan for us and that everything . . . . [including] those things that seem insignificant. . . . are really a foundation to help build us. We don’t understand it until after the fact. As I look back at it now, I say, “Wow, that’s what made me what I am today.” And I feel better and I’m glad I went through that experience as hard as it may be.

Fred spoke of his religious beliefs being the foundation for his values. They form a framework for finding meaning in this life and the events that make up his life. He expressed other important values throughout the course of the interview, including family relationships, achieving goals, and service to others.
Jeff was unable to bring to the interview one prized possession that he identified in his own process of aging and represented one of his key personal values.

The one thing that I have right now that kind of defines me is my boat. It’s something that I could never afford when I was younger. I couldn’t get there, I couldn’t do anything. As an aging thing, that’s the thing that I can afford and it’s something we do. Most of our past time is spent on that, in that, or around that. It’s not associated with school, but it is associated with aging.

Jeff’s comments about the boat revealed a great deal about his past, present, and future. A boat was something that he had wanted since he was a child. Purchasing the boat had been deferred until later in his life. The boat and the activities associated with maintaining it and time that he and his family spend on the water takes up most of his free time. It will also be the focal point of his retirement. Implicit in his statements was the value placed on family relationships and his spouse in particular. Earlier in the interview, he spoke of his concern for his wife and her medical condition. The boat also speaks of freedom from the responsibility of having to work for the purpose of earning money. The boat also connoted the ability enjoy life on his terms. He saw it as an expression of his desire for freedom for the latter years of his life and the place he would spend most of his time.

Maurine brought to the interview her personal planner filled with lots of business cards. The opening page was two pictures combined: the top half was a picture of Jesus; the bottom half was a picture of a little girl bending over looking at something in the sand at the seashore. When the interviewer asked her about it, she explained its importance. Maurine’s explanations revealed insights into her belief system and what was important to her.

To me, that opening page is everything I believe in. That’s who I am [laughter]. And where I belong and where I began in this, and what I unfold is short term and long term goals. I bring my life into what I value, which is my spirituality, my relationships, my academics, my financial, my physical, and my work. Each one of those I have broken down to week-to-month goals and I believe in them. I also believe we have to break them down into plans, into steps.

Humor punctuated Maurine’s comments about her life experiences. Her demeanor reflected a sense of confidence in her abilities and optimism for the future. They also are a
reflection of a person who values the importance of an ordered life. Key attributes of her life perspective include the importance of fulfilling one’s responsibilities to themselves and others.

When the interviewer asked specifically about the picture of the little child on the beach, Maurine revealed her values of parenting and faith in God, responding:

> I would say it was a parent with love for my children, parenting, people. To me, that’s how my faith unfolds. It’s when I become that child dependent on my heavenly father. When I look at that, the creation, and I do love freedom and I do love the beach and the innocence of that child. . . . Despite my flaws and my flesh and my mistakes and my imperfections that will never be perfect in this world, I just cannot allow that or other people’s judgment of that to stop me moving. I’m not going to stop loving because of the church’s expectations or anybody in authority or who I’m working under or for or any of that . . . for no I’ll never match everybody’s expectations. But, I’m not going to let that stop me.

Maurine spoke of coming to a place of accepting herself with all of her flaws and weaknesses. She has become comfortable with her own skin. This frees her to accept others even when they do not understand or accept her.

> It’s a very rewarding feeling to know that life shook you out a bad break and your heart got shattered and you gathered it and you got strength and you got the help of people.

> It’s a belief system. It’s my faith and it’s also my kids are a great inspiration and encouragers. And then there’s two or three other people in my life that [say,] ‘But you’re doing it!’ They get me going when I say, ‘I can’t do it anymore, I want to quit, this is too much of a sacrifice, I’m sacrificing so much of my other life I rather be doing, I don’t want to.’ They keep cheering me on. [They say,] ‘You did it. You did it.’

Maurine balances her virtue of independence with an expressed need for people and the support and encouragement they offer. She emphasized the importance of giving and, as a person does so, others will help when the need exists. This rhythm of sowing and reaping, engagement in community activities, and family relationships appear to be Maurine’s key personal values.

Culture was an important part of Robert’s values. He brought to the interview an acupuncture book written in Chinese. Included with the book was a small pen-like device that he used to apply pressure on certain parts of his body. Robert explained:

> Acupuncture is very good. I bought a book about how to do it by yourself. . . . I had high pressure in my eyes, taking the eye drops. Right now I’m using this book and do that with my own hand. I don’t need a drop anymore. It’s very good. It’s a self care for your own self. Very good. You don’t use needles. The Chinese doctors use needles. I don’t.
I use this (pointer). . . . They tell me where . . . [to use the pointer so] you do it by yourself. Then I do it myself and it’s okay. I feel so good.

Robert spoke of a recent visit to China in which he went to a Chinese doctor who treated him using acupuncture. He was amazed because the problem went away. He purchased a do-it-yourself acupuncture book, which uses the same approach without needles. Robert admitted, “I don’t trust Chinese doctor. I only see Western doctor. This totally changed my viewpoint. Very good—because this worked out.”

The process of earning college degrees resulted in a change in thinking for Robert. As a result, he was able to see his Asian heritage in new light and saw the value of acupuncture and Asian medicine. His college experiences provided a foundation for reintegrating former cultural values with those of his new home in America. Robert expressed the important place of the Chinese culture in his life.

The culture, the culture. In Chinese culture, there’s respect for intelligence. People use knowledge. . . . They respect it in society. Asian people respect authority, so people always want to get higher degree and attend, I think. Higher degree means more money and more power.

Robert’s cultural background was an important influence in his decision to resume his education. The importance of education was and is a central part of his personal values.

Three significant values emerged during interviews with the baby boomer college students in this study. Ten participants mentioned the value of family relationships in different ways. Calice, for example, spoke with deep affection about her late husband. Jeff spoke of concern for his wife’s health issues. Others spoke of planning to spend their later years visiting their children and grandchildren. Additionally, all eleven participants expressed the importance of giving to others while eight individuals spoke of their religious beliefs being important in their lives.

**Retirement – What’s That?**

Table 12 presents a matrix of the indicators testifying to the baby boomers’ plans for retirement. Their choices reflect a variety of circumstances and priorities that characterize the
baby boomer population. Eleven participants plan to spend more time with family, loved ones or friends. This included more time with their adult children and grandchildren. Howe and Strauss (2007) pointed out that “as parents [baby boomers] they have developed very close individual relationships with their children” (p. 45). In this vein, Malayter (2009) stated that, “The companionship components of transformational retirement have two distinct areas, significant relationships and community engagement” (p. 106). Ten of eleven baby boomers expressed their intent to slow down and devote more time to activities they find to be fulfilling. Seven participants planned to become involved in some type of community service.

Work was included in the retirement plans for seven baby boomers. One baby boomer, Calice, plans to continue working full-time while incorporating other fulfilling activities into her life. The others plan to gradually reduce the amount of time spent in paid work. While paid employment may be a component of their lives, it is not their entire focus. This was consistent with the research of Poulos and Smith Nightengale (1997) who pointed out that, “there is not always a clear-cut demarcation between one’s working years and one’s retirement years; more often there is a gradual reduction in work or a change in work status” (p. 56). Seven baby boomers also indicated travel plans are in their future. The discussion that follows is a closer examination of the future plans of selected participants.
Through much of the interview, Annie expressed a longing to slow down and have more time for her family. However, she does not want to give up working entirely. Annie described her concept of retirement as:

Retirement, for me, would to be able to do whatever I want to, less time working. I don’t know if I can completely give it up. That remains to be seen. I might change my mind in the next few years [laughter]. I have one grandson I love.

Annie went on to mention the importance of spending more time with her grandchildren.

Anyway, as my oldest daughter doesn’t want to have any kids. She has no desire to have any kids. So it’s okay. I’m not going to get any grandchildren from her-and my grandson moved away. But I want to be able to enjoy my grandchildren. . . . It is because I have such great memories of the times that I got to spend with my grandparents. And they are no longer around. I think that’s very important for the grandchildren.

Annie indicated she has only one grandchild. However, she is hoping for more. She stressed the importance of the grandchildren having time with her because this was a meaningful part of her own childhood. Annie also wants to travel. Alaska’s remoteness comes up when discussing travel. Advances in communication and improved air service have alleviated some of
the problem. Her comments reflect a situation common to many Alaskans: they live here and their families are far away.

One of my biggest things is I love family and every time we go somewhere I want to be able to go where my family is—taking my mothers and my sisters. I know my husband just likes to say, ‘Hey let’s go to Hawaii, just us’. I do enjoy that but I, if I am going to spend the money to go somewhere, I want to go see family because as you know up here in Alaska, you don’t just jump in a car and drive somewhere.

Annie’s picture of retirement includes a mixture of time with family, travel, work, and a slower pace of life. Family, especially grandchildren will be important. The slower pace will also afford opportunities to build richer relationships with her loved ones. The timing of her retirement is connected to her husband’s retirement plans. Up to this point, the couple’s roles have been primarily that of wage earners and parents. Their roles will change to pensioners, grandparents, and part-time wage earners. With two incomes from retirement, finances are not expected to be a significant problem. Annie’s expressed intention to work at least part-time reflects a desire to work for the purpose of personal fulfillment rather than financial need. She has maintained a busy schedule for the past several years and indicated that stopping work altogether is not an option. The additional income from wages will provide money for other activities the couple find fulfilling. Annie and her husband will be facing adjustments in their relationship as they progress with their retirement plans.

Jeff’s retirement will consist of work—on his terms. Approaching life, this way is consistent with the way he has approached education. Jeff is motivated by the joy of learning. He talked of the importance of freedom in the latter years of his life. He values freedom to choose when, where, how, and if he wants to work. Jeff’s boat will be the focal point of his retirement activities. He will have time to fish and spend time out on the water relaxing and traveling whenever he sees fit. He described his ideal retirement as:

My ideal retirement is to just go on my boat and go wherever it takes me. Not having to turn it around and getting back to work and getting anywhere to do anything. If I want to take it out and go down to Seattle, I will do that. If I want to go to Valdez, I’ll do that. And not have any restrictions on when I need to be back and where I need be when I need to be there. That’s my ideal retirement.
For Jeff, money will be a minor consideration. His main concern will be his wife’s health issue. Work will involve doing tasks in order to help others, according to Jeff.

Yes, I mean, but it will be a different kind of work. For me, I have a wood shop, I’m a pretty good craftsman but I do it for hobby, I don’t do it for money. So if I’m able to do that when I’m retired and provide that for people and give them a service, maybe get a little spending money here and there or do it just for the joy of doing it, which is what I do now. I don’t do it for money, I do it for the joy and if I am able to retire and sustain myself, I will do that kind of a thing and give that to people. . . . That would be my work when I retired.

Calice, unlike Jeff, does not have life of leisure included in her plans for the future. Finances are a consideration. Calice’s circumstances are similar to those of many other baby boomers who simply cannot afford to retire. Calice is fortunate because she enjoys her work. Her plans do not include leaving Alaska. Her current residence is a duplex. She rents the other side to help pay the mortgage. Her future plans reflect her family situation.

My plans for the future are to continue to work for my employer for as long as I am physically able and I should also say mental [laughter]. They can’t get rid of me too quick. Seriously, I would continue to work for my employer doing as I am doing now. Going back to the life cycle transition, I don’t think there is such a thing for me. I’m sure it’s different for others. They raise their kids and send their kids off to college. That’s a transition and I don’t have that.

Calice and her late husband did not have any children. She has made adaptations to her lifestyle that will provide outlets for finding fulfillment as a single person. Once she completes her degree, she expressed interest in becoming more involved in the community and perhaps doing some writing. Indirectly this reflected her pursuit of an unfulfilled dream for a career in journalism. Her future plans were succinctly expressed when ask about the ideal way she would spend the final ten years of her life. The perfect scenario would include enjoying time with her late husband. Because that is not a possibility, she stated that:

A perfect way I would spend the last 10 years of my life: golly, doing what I’m doing now. Just to be healthy, which would involve working some way. Retirement is not in my vocabulary. Just isn’t. Unless I got sick. That’s not even like retirement. I don’t even want to think about it.
When Calice was asked what her ideal retirement would consist of, she answered in the following way:

[Laughter] I don’t have one. My ideal retirement wouldn’t really be retirement. It would be having time to write the books I really want to write. And that’s still working. I got to be out in the world. I just can’t stay home. I have to be out, I gotta do something. I don’t know if those books will ever get written. My ideal retirement would be zapping out lots and lots of stuff, lots of cool stuff that would get published. But other than that, I would keep working.

Calice’s latter life decisions shed light on a person whose life circumstances were different from what she had hoped. Her focus is on living and finding fulfillment in relationships and her work reflects a desire to remain productive and engaged. Calice is a close, personal friend of Darice, who also participated in this study. Both of these baby boomers plan to see each other regularly. Serving others in the community will be an important part of her plans. It would also consist of having time to write all those books she has always wanted to write. Being old and infirm is not part of her plans. This reflects the apparent duality of aging: a desire to live a youthful life to its fullest while our aging bodies try to convince us to think differently.

Another young boomer, Charlene has no plans to retire in the immediate future. When she does, it will involve using her education investment to work in some sort of leadership role within education. Her plans beyond Anchorage include living in a rural area where she can share her love for art with others. Charlene would like to become involved in education wherever she and her husband choose to retire. The choice of a rural setting reflects their love for the outdoors. The couple owns two acres of land in rural Alaska.

My ideal retirement is a small little house in maybe rural Alaska or maybe somewhere else like Laramie, Wyoming, in a small, one floor house with two bedrooms at the max and being able to go out and interact with people but not having to get up everyday if I don’t have to. Being able to make a choice, having enough money. I don’t want to be a wealthy person. That’s not been part of my life although it should have been [laughter].

Charlene’s retirement goals do not include having a great deal of material wealth or possessions. Her ideal retirement will involve a less hectic life style and living in a rural setting
where she can have relationships with others. She went on to say that these relationships would include sharing her love for art.

For instance, my thoughts are perhaps being a part of a community where I could share art with young people or something like that would be my ideal retirement, which is very odd. It doesn’t sound retired but it sounds retired to me.

Throughout the interview, Charlene spoke of her faith in God and an outward focus that emphasized relationships and serving others. This is an integral part of her future plans.

Joshua’s primary retirement focus will be spending lots of time with his family. This is a reflection of his conservative social and religious values.

That’s going to be [my spouse] and I traveling around in a mobile home . . . living two months with this kid, 2 months with that kid, two months with this kid, two months with that kid, two months with that kid. Each kid gets every seventh year off. Yeah ideal retirement is we don’t have any financial concerns. What we have based on retirement from employment covers our expenses, we don’t have to work, I’m not saying we don’t work, but we don’t have to just to make ends meet.

This baby boomer has had a successful career in the aviation field. His current education endeavors will give him other options if the need arises. Joshua’s focus throughout his working years has been to earn enough to adequately provide for his family without sacrificing quality time with his wife and children. He has deliberately foregone career opportunities that would detract from this focus. His retirement plans indicated Joshua’s continued focus on his family.

Like Calice, retirement is not a word in Maurine’s vocabulary. Central to her plans for later life are the twin virtues of self-sufficiency and giving to others. Relationships with her children and grandchildren are important. She provided a broad picture of her plans for the future and a vision of how people should spend the latter years of their lives.

I don’t believe in retirement. I don’t believe in the fallacy that the word retirement means that you do whatever you want to do and it’s all about you. My idea of a retirement would be in a place [that] I’d still be giving back to the community. I’d still be giving back to the world. I’d still be giving back to the generations below me. I would still have the same enthusiasm but I think it would be in a mellower, loving, kinder, in a gentler form. I will rock babies, I don’t care. I don’t see myself ever stop loving.

In the above statements, Maurine focused on giving and her desire to love. She will be looking for opportunities. She indicated that with aging she has mellowed. The result will be a
more nurturing form of love. This evoked thoughts of being a grandparent that shares years of accumulated wisdom. The enthusiasm is still there. The difference reflects the tempering affects of having gone through difficult experiences that are inevitable over the course of one’s life. Her statements indirectly reflected the pain she experienced while recovering from her divorce and her experiences working with prison inmates.

Maurine discussed retirement and the problem of isolation that older people encounter as they age.

I think one of the greatest things [retirement] does is it’s an isolation barrier. Our culture is teaching us not to be living in community with each other. We’re not supposed to need people. When I say self-sufficient it’s not that I don’t want to need people. I want to give. I want to take care of my personal needs, my personal financial needs. I never want to live out of community.

Maurine pointed out that one problem people face as they age is loneliness stemming for being isolated from the rest of society. Her solution is for people to reach out and care for one another. We are also to be self-sufficient. Continuing with her education without doubt will be a part of Maurine’s plans. The “fine tunings” she will experience while in school will contribute to refining her goals and interests. She endeavors to strike a balance between independence and being part of the larger community. Furthermore, Maurine did not envision retirement being a time when a person becomes self-indulgent.

It is because I think the fallacy of retirement—that you’re supposed to be playing golf all the time and drinking martinis on the beach—would bore me to death [laughter]. I don’t think we’re made that way. I think it’s that ongoing, inflow out. It makes the world go round. By giving I get. That’s the way it works.

Robert, like many other baby boomers in the study, does not foresee himself having a retirement that does not include working. When asked about what his ideal retirement will look like, Robert stated:

You are financially sound. You [will] still be able to work part-time and still get some income. And there’s really, no completely do nothing, I would say. Keep working. But I don’t want to work that hard. Probably working 40 hours, then working 20 hours [laughter].
Robert’s retirement will consist of financial soundness. Work will be an important part of the picture. He plans to work less as he gets older. The income derived from work will contribute to his financial stability. Robert pointed out this is part of a worldwide trend. Due to low birthrates, there is a labor shortage and older people can fill vacant jobs in the workplace. In this vein, he relates an experience he had while driving a school bus while taking college classes.

That is the trend in the United States, too. I was a school bus driver in a school yard that the people retire from city, from state. They got the pension, but not enough. They have to work part-time there. They are 60, 70, the oldest there is 81 years old. Eighty-one, still working there because not enough money. Then they need to get another job to support themselves or their family.

Robert worked with older adults who could not afford to be idle due to inadequate pensions or retirement savings. Robert pointed out the potential benefit for an older person going to college is: “Education can help me get into a not physically demanding job.” His education has provided Robert the skills necessary to obtain employment in work that will improve the quality of life in his later years.

Regardless of the study participants’ involvement or lack of involvement in the workforce after retirement, attending college classes is plays an important role in their reaching their retirement goals. The American Council on Education (2008) reported that “learning to work” (p. 3) was an important motivation for attending college classes in then second half of a person’s life. Improving one’s social and economic status are important motivations for attending college classes.

**Reflections on Data Analysis**

The baby boomers in this study can be said to be reliving what Laslett (1991) calls “the third age” of their lives. As mentioned earlier, the third age is one of personal satisfaction—when a person is largely free of responsibilities associated with such responsibilities as, for instance, raising children, and earning wages (Laslett). During the interviews, most baby boomer college students revealed being free of the responsibilities of raising children. Those with children still in the home had children that were beyond the early years of their development. The few children
who are still at home were working and going to college themselves. In every instance, at least one of their children had left the home and was living independently. There was a great deal of conversation about being a grandparent instead of a parent. This reflected a change in their roles that Laslett (1991) refers to as one of the third age. Most participants in this study focused a great deal on the conversation of life “after children” as being personally fulfilling. Children were included – but within the framework of being grandparents to their children’s children.

The two participants who did not have children considered their personal satisfaction coming from spending time with close friends and performing unpaid community service that benefit members of the younger and older generations. Examples of serving others included mentoring younger adults and spending time visiting the elderly living assisted living homes. The cumulative result of a lifetime of the participants’ experiences can present them with opportunities to share with younger persons. Their life experiences have also given them compassion for the elderly.

Activities normally associated with the baby boomer age group included delaying retirement, full or part-time employment, obtaining additional work-related training, starting new careers, and leisure activities. Again, this was the case with those participating in this study. Much of this is due to the reality of their increased longevity and improved health. This offers the prospect of baby boomers realizing their dream of remaining productive into their later years and redefining what constitutes being old. The baby boomer college students who participated in this study represented a diverse age range of this generation. Their educational goals and future aspirations were a reflection of an age group that saw themselves as able to continue to contribute to the well being of society.

Career-development was a significant motivation for pursuing higher education in the second half of their lives. The participants in this study are part of a larger, national trend. Schaefer (2010) pointed out that “The increasing demand made on higher education by adults is accentuated by the Baby Boom generation” (p.69). They chose institutions offering classes and
programs that were compatible with their busy schedules. Like their younger cohorts, balancing the many responsibilities in their lives while attending college was a challenge. Unlike other nontraditional students, however, the care of younger children living in the home was not a concern. Individuals make career-related decisions throughout their life course in response to changes in the work environment and their personal circumstances. The participants instead were concerned about the approach of retirement and old age. They were also concerned about competition in the workplace from highly educated younger adults entering the workforce. In this vein, there was an unspoken sense of needing to accomplish their career-related educational goals faster.

Physical and mental fatigue was common with the participants. They indicated this was mainly due to their full schedules that included attending school and working. Despite their busy lives, family relationships remained important. While there were questions and concerns about their futures, they were nevertheless moving forward with the belief that their lives have purpose and meaning. All of the baby boomers in this study were aware of the fact they were aging. Their bodies had a way of reminding them of this fact through assorted ailments. Most baby boomers’ future plans included working less and spending more time with family or loved ones. Their educational journeys have taken them down paths they expect will lead to personal fulfillment.
CHAPTER VII

REDEFINING AGING:
DISCUSSION, RECOMMENDATIONS, & REFLECTIONS

This chapter provides a comprehensive summary of the study, reflections on the research process, and recommendations for future research. The findings of this study embody the experiences of a generation of adults coming to maturity at a time marked by unprecedented growth in the world’s aging population. The experiences of the baby boomer college students conveyed the experiences of unique individuals in the midst of their midlife educational pursuits. While unique individuals in their own right, they also embody the characteristics of American baby boomer generation.

Redefining Age: Discussion

What is aging and how is it perceived by American baby boomers residing in Alaska? Their views of aging expressed by those involved in this study consistently saw aging as an opportunity to find personal fulfillment doing those things they enjoy including more time with family, involvement in community activities, and less time involved in earned work. Longino (2005) pointed out that “with increasing levels of education and income, people have more choices available after retirement” (p. 81).

Furthermore, the participants of this study have largely finished raising their children. Their parenting and work responsibilities mainly defined their prior roles. Baby boomers are facing an in-between period of their lives in which they are neither young nor old. Many are going to school and working. The phenomenon of baby boomers working later in life represents a shift in population demographics (Maestas & Zissimopoulos, 2010; Toossi, 2006). Research indicated there are three distinct financial reasons baby boomers may be forced to work in the
later years of their lives: 1) life style maintenance, 2) survival (Poulos and Smith Nightingale, 1997), and lack of adequate retirement savings (Huntington, 2007). Strauss and Howe (1991) discussed baby boomer households having two incomes and, if this had not been the case, their “incomes would be well below” what the previous generation had earned (p. 307). These motivations are evident through the experiences of this study’s participants.

The baby boomers’ circumstances are challenging because they have to balance their higher education efforts with other facets of their lives. In this sense, they are like other younger adults who also face similar demands. The distinction between themselves and younger cohorts is their accumulation of life experience and wisdom from which they can draw. The participants of this study indicate that support from family, instructors, co-workers, and other students help sustain their educational endeavors. Their testimonies echo Ryder (1965), who pointed out that peers play a substantial role in the establishment of [new] group norms and may do so without the support of “institutional authorities” (p. 854).

The increased numbers of baby boomers attending college reflects changing norms regarding education. Cross (1981) affirmed that the passage of years is not a hindrance to learning. Furthermore, those adults with prior college education are more inclined to pursue higher education later in life (Manheimer & Snodgrass, 1993). Some scholars find that those in this age group are motivated to return to college because of financial considerations, enhancing career prospects, and enriching their lives (The American Council on Education, 2008; Cross, 1981; Luppi, 2009; Manheimer & Snodgrass, 1993; Villar, Triado, Pinazo, Celdran, & Sole, 2010). This study’s participants clearly expressed that changes in their work environment were an incentive for obtaining additional training to update their skills.

The same participants are cognizant of the fact they were returning to school at a time when they were also thinking of retirement. Freedman (2011) points out that individuals who passed through the middle years of their lives “proceeded directly into the social institution called retirement” (p. 34). However, the conception of what constitutes retirement has changed. Most
of the baby boomers in this study report their retirement plans include a mix of less paid employment, spending more time with family and friends, community service, and leisure activities. The lines between what constitutes a person’s working years and retirement years are becoming somewhat blurred. This reflects the changing concept of retirement and the changing roles of older adults in society (Poulos & Smith Nightengale, 1997).

van Manen (1990) argued there are four important parts of a person’s lifeworld including “lived time, lived space, lived body, and lived human relation” (p. 18). This study presents the everyday life experiences of a group of baby boomers as they continued their educational endeavors. van Manen (1990) pointed out that some aspects of an individual’s life experiences are difficult to describe and they require “subtlety and sensitivity” (p. 18). Listening to the baby boomers as they relayed the events that make up the matrices of their lives went beyond the hearing of the words and in a sense stepping into their lives. Moustakas’ (1994) characterized human science inquiry as having its focus on seeing life through the mind’s eye of the person. This is tempered by the realization that participants had different perceptions of reality than me.

The participants are aware of their bodies aging. They continue to be actively engaged in the workforce and going to college to improve their earnings prospects and ultimately the quality of their lives in the later years of life. The baby boomers in this study described the realities of changing expectations of themselves as their bodies aged. They reported that while they were generally in good health, minor problems would serve as reminders. Reminders of their aging also occurred in the course of interactions with others. Children growing up, leaving home, and visiting grandchildren were poignant, yet happy, reminders that their lives were changing. The participants also had different career aspirations than their peers in the workplace.

The baby boomers realize that while they may be engaged in their careers, they also realize that one foot is already beginning to step into retirement. This resulted in the lowering of their career expectations. Their aspirations reflect an ever-shrinking window of opportunity due to the passage of time. While their current career prospects may be shrinking, they see new vistas
of opportunities emerging for the second half of their lives. Fulfillment derived from being a parent and pursuing a career will be replaced with increased time with family, travel, and community activities. The baby boomers will continue to work during retirement for wages in varying degrees. Some will do so out of financial necessity while others will earn wages because they want to work.

**The Baby Boomers Speak Out: Recommendations for Policymakers**

During the interviews, participants were asked the following question: “Suppose you have a chance to address educational, community, and governmental leaders. What kind of advice would you give them with regard to the aging population?” The baby boomers were posed this question at the end of their interviews. They were told this was an opportunity to express concerns about policy issues important to them and other baby boomers like them in the Anchorage area or beyond. Their responses expressed concerns for the older generation and how to address their needs. There was a tacit realization that they are becoming the people of whom they were concerned.

For instance, Calice, an Older Boomer, speaks first to older people and offers advice on how to live the final phase of their lives. She spoke about the importance of keeping a cheerful, positive attitude as a person ages. This baby boomer sees aging as a time where a person can continue to grow and expand even when things are not going as expected. Calice recommended older adults reach out to their communities and get involved. “It you are physically ill and you don’t feel good at all, that’s different. You gotta deal with the medical side of it.” Otherwise, they should get out. Community leaders and policymakers should help create opportunities for older adults to become involved and contribute to the well-being of the communities where they reside.

Furthermore, Calice encouraged her audience of older adults to get involved in the community. Isolation and spending one’s final years alone should not be an option. She spoke from the experience of living alone and being a widow. Calice is familiar with the dynamics of
aging and living alone. She has taken steps to offset her aloneness. She has her close friends and
the nature of her work requires her active involvement with students and staff. Giving and
sharing with others, including the younger generation, are her prescription for successful aging.
Calice’s educational efforts keep her engaged with others desiring to learn. She lives a full life.
Calice then spoke to governmental leaders and stated: “They ought to have a grandparents
program where the older people work with those of the young age. . . . The young people can
learn a lot from the old people, and the old people can get a lot of energy from the young people.”

Unspoken in the above comments is the fact that Calice does not have any children or
grandchildren. Because of this, she is sensitive to the needs of other older adults who may not
have grandchildren to nurture. She advocated for an intergenerational approach that involved the
establishment of community programs that encourage generations sharing with each other. This
was a theme that emerged earlier in the interviews when participants spoke of drawing on their
wisdom and experience for the benefit of others. Creating a sense of community is important.
Governmental policy makers should work with communities to support initiatives that will
facilitate citizen participation in intergenerational programs. In this vein, it is recommended that
educational leaders create learning settings that promote increased interaction among the younger
and older generations.

She also offered the following advice to educators whose recruitment and programming
policies focus on traditional age college students, ignoring the needs of adult learners: “If you
want to have graduates, you’ve got to offer classes when your older generation can take them.”

Older adults are continuing to work into the later years of their life. Retirement
characterized by leisure is not an option for many baby boomers. Instead, they are returning to
school to enhance or learn new career skills. University officials should be cognizant of this
dynamic and advocate on behalf of older students to promote access to academic programs that
will help augment their work skills.
Charlene, on the other hand, advocated encouraging adults to continue learning and begin new careers in the latter years of their lives. Her statements are consistent with her family’s emphasis on higher education and learning. She related the experience of a woman in her late 60s who was graduating from college and assuming subsequent employment in a new career.

My daughter graduated from the University . . . and when she graduated there was a 68-year-old lady who graduated with an RN degree with her. My first thoughts were, ‘What are you going to do?’ . . . And you know, that lady has contributed and she enjoys being an RN in her 70s so my goodness, we can keep going. If God puts that in your heart to do, then pursue it. Don’t be judgmental like I was. This poor lady is a wonderful person and still works as an RN.

Charlene revealed her own biases when admitting to her critical opinion of the older woman going to school and starting a new career. Unspoken was Charlene’s tacit recognition of society’s age related norms and the fact this person had violated them. In the end, she winds up applauding the woman who is now in her 70s. Charlene recommended that policy makers do the same and recognize the value of education and personal renewal as a person ages. A person is never too old to learn and make valuable contributions to society.

Jacqueline, also, presented her observations about education and had the following advice for policymakers:

Most programs are geared towards the younger set, towards anywhere from high school to mid 20s to low and mid 30s. You don’t see a lot of educational programs for older people. . . . I have to compete against all the younger kids. And if you had to decide between someone who’s younger and someone who’s older, [they are] giving them a grant or giving them some kind of financial aid, even though they’re not supposed to. They are going to lean towards the younger person because [they are] going to be able to get more out of it in the longer run than someone my age.

Jacqueline spoke to the need for educational leaders to increase their emphasis on recruiting middle and older-aged adults for their schools. This baby boomer perceives there was a bias towards providing financial aid to younger students. Implicit in her statement is that society places a higher value on the younger generation than those that are older. This participant pointed out that those in her generation also have the motivation and ability to learn. Jacqueline
spoke of the need to review current financial aid policies and programs to ensure older adults are receiving their fair share of educational assistance.

Still, Robert had a slightly different perspective regarding education and the elderly. He believes that government policy makers should make the education of older adults a higher priority. He spoke of how the current education system places a higher priority on the younger generation.

Elderly education is more important than early education [laughter]. Government should put more money in there. Get some funds for their part and for people in old age. They can rejuvenate themselves to do something back to the society again. They can improve themselves, not become a burden to society, not become dependent on government welfare or pass the experience to the younger generation.

Robert’s statements reflected a concern echoed by different participants throughout their interview regarding the Anchorage area public university, and the school’s focus on recruiting and serving younger students. Robert pointed to the need for recognition of the contributions older adults can make. He also spoke of how promoting education will benefit the younger and older generations alike.

Jeff’s advice embodied the comments of others in his advocacy for increased interaction between generations. There is recognition of the benefits that could accrue for different generations as they learn from one another. The promotion of community programs would serve to create a greater sense of community, according to Jeff.

I’ve always thought that as people aged they get ignored. I’ve seen my grandma and people as they . . . got elderly, they were just kind of discarded by society. When they are, in fact, our best source of learning . . . Young people don’t spend time with old people. You talk to them, you get their experiences, and you can do nothing but grow from that. . . . Old people have a value in society.

Jeff went on to discuss the cost of education. He has been fortunate because his employer pays for part of the cost of tuition and books. This is not the case for baby boomers. He identifies cost as a barrier that discourages older adults from pursing education. This participant speaks of the problem of student loans and the amount of debt that students amass. This poses a problem for older adults living on reduced income.
I think that’s a hindrance for getting to school as they have no way to it or they’re in debt for the rest of their life. If I had to go to school at this age and pay for it myself completely—and the cost of education isn’t cheap—I wouldn’t want to be carrying this kind of debt further on in life at this age.

His policy recommendations are two-fold: using community resources to promote opportunities for members of all generations to interact and learn from one another; and making education affordable for older adults with limited incomes.

There is a consistency in the policy changes recommended by these baby boomers. They speak of promoting intergenerational interaction through community programs. Older adults have the motivation and ability to contribute and learn. This is spoken loud and clear. Government and education policymakers should renew their efforts to encourage older adults to enroll in higher education, because of the benefits to society as a whole and the older generation in particular. They also speak of the need to ensure that higher education institutions are even-handed in their recruitment and scheduling policies and in providing financial aid. A big part of the equation is the cost of going to college. Like younger students, older adults should not have to burden themselves with large education loans as a prerequisite for starting in programs.

**Recommendations for Policymakers and Scholars**

Research by the American Council on Education (2008), Dychtwald and Flower (1990), and Freeman (2007, 2011) demonstrated that older adults have a great deal to contribute in the latter years of their lives. Over the course of their lives, adult learners such as Alaskan baby boomers, have gained a wealth of experience and wisdom. There is a need for governmental and educational policymakers to recognize their value and promote policy initiatives that will enable society to realize the benefits of having an experienced older population (American Council on Education, 2008; United Nations, 1999). The phenomenon of a large older population is not going away anytime soon. Therefore, it is prudent for the education, government, and business sectors to coordinate their efforts in promoting education programs that will train older adults to fill current needs in the labor market (American Council on Education, 2008).
Recent demographic data show a steady increase of the number of adults 55 years of age and older remaining in the workforce later in life (Toossi, 2006; Maestas & Zissimopoulos, 2010). At least one participant in this study pointed to the labor shortage in this country and how older adults could address this need. The offering of training programs targeting the needs of employers and older adults could serve to ameliorate the dual needs of improving career skills for older adults and employer needs for qualified workers. Nine of the participants are enrolled in degree programs related to their present careers. Two are studying in programs relating to different career interests. Ageism, while not considered a significant issue by the participants, points to the need for student services professionals and vocational counselors to assist in efforts to prepare older adults for re-entry into the workforce.

The American Council on Education (2008) maintained that the sheer numbers of adults who comprise the baby boomer generation is in itself, “a compelling reason to educate this group” (p. 27). The baby boomers in this study revealed three areas where institutions could improve their service to older adults: recruitment focus, course scheduling policies, and credit transfer policies. The experiences of this study’s participants confirmed what some scholars had already observed. For instance, the findings of this study were consistent with the research of Cross (1981), Broek and Hake (2012), and Slowey (2008), which identified three types of barriers that limit older adult access to higher education. These are: institutional barriers, situational barriers, and dispositional barriers. Institutional barriers are mentioned regarding the lack of flexibility in course scheduling. Younger nontraditional students encounter this barrier as well. The participants discussed situational barriers, which included class offerings not scheduled at times when older students were available. This also included the inconvenient location of the courses. The third barrier is dispositional in nature. This manifests itself in the public university’s policies and practices that appeared to focus on younger students, often disregarding the needs of adult learners. The result is that some participants did not feel welcome at the school. Consequently, they chose other options even when the cost of the classes was higher.
There is a need to encourage educators to implement institutional policies encouraging baby boomers to attend college. Understanding the reasons older adults choose to attend college is an important part of the equation. Villar, Triado, Pinazo, Celdran, and Sole (2010) found that the quality of instruction, content of programs, and opportunities for open relationships were important considerations when older adults evaluate their college experiences. The participants of this study attend classes at schools that offer classes at times that are compatible with their busy schedules. Furthermore, the private universities they attended in the Anchorage area encourage older adult enrollment in their programs. Consequently, the study’s participants give these schools high marks for the quality of the instructors and their lectures. They find the course content was relevant because it related to real life experiences. Participants reported satisfaction with the relationships they developed in and out of class. The implication is that the area’s public university appears to have missed a significant opportunity to serve a growing segment of the population.

Furthermore, the American Council on Education (2008) found that “expense is consistently cited as a barrier in older adults’ pursuit of higher education” (p. 27). Many older adults are living on reduced fixed incomes. This places older adults desiring to improve their earnings potential through acquiring additional skills in a predicament. They can be faced with the choice of accepting lower paid employment or incurring debt in the hope that their education will result in the increase of their earning power. Poulos and Smith Nightengale (1997) pointed out baby boomers may feel forced to work later in life due to lifestyle maintenance or survival considerations. According to Settersten and Lovegreen (1998), financial exigency will require a large segment of the baby boomer generation to continue working beyond the traditional retirement age of 65. While this scenario poses a problem, it also creates opportunities for policymakers to explore innovative approaches to address the problem.
Recommendations for Further Research

This study provides insights into the lives and experiences of eleven Alaskan baby boomer students who pursued higher education for employment related considerations. The small number of participants suggests the need for further studies that include larger numbers of baby boomers. This will present a broader picture of the challenges and successes of students in this generation. Studies should also include an examination of those baby boomers attending college for purely life enrichment purposes because the focus of this study was on their career-related motivations and decisions.

Seven baby boomers in this study are classified as Younger Boomers (49 to 54 years of age) while two are Middle Boomers (55 to 61 years of age) and two are Older Boomers (62 to 67 years of age). The age spread of the baby boomer generation suggests the need for further studies that compare the life and education experiences of persons within each of these baby boomer age groups. There are six females and five males in this study. Furthermore, gender specific studies, focusing on the life and education experiences of baby boomer students, would be a recommended area of study.

There are other areas of research needed to provide a broader understanding of the baby boomer’s pursuit of education. For example, further research describing the types of programs in which persons in this generation are currently enrolled would provide guidance to educational planners who are deciding what types of programs to offer. In this vein, it is recommended that each state’s post secondary commissions conduct comprehensive surveys of the government, business, nonprofit, and education sectors in their respective to determine the programs that target this generation. These surveys would provide the research that would become the foundation for an in-depth report on how each state can best meet the education needs of their baby boomer population.
Finally, other potential areas to study would be an examination of the differences in baby boomer college enrollment patterns by regions in this country. A comparison of baby boomer education enrollment patterns with other regions of the world will provide additional insights.

**Reflections and Finale**

The eleven Alaskan baby boomers spoke about the experiences and events in their lives as they ventured into higher education in the middle years of their lives. They shared life experiences that were common to baby boomers in the rest of America. They encountered age related changes, including children leaving the home, divorce, death of a loved one, and health issues. Those involved in this study began their education journey motivated by a desire to improve their earnings prospects. They spoke of the events leading up to their enrollment in college courses. Through the course of their studies, the participants faced challenges that encompassed different aspects of their lives. They also understood their challenges and found ways to rise above them. Along the way, they discovered a strength and resilience in themselves that enabled them to persist in achieving their life’s plans. In the end, the majority of the participants did not pursue careers in new fields of work. Instead, their life course directed them to remain within careers they were already pursuing.

The participants also had hopes and dreams about how they wanted to spend the latter years of their lives. As they reflected on their lives, the baby boomers realized that even while they are involved in their careers, studies, and other activities, they understood that they had one foot in the present and the other foot stepping into retirement. All realized they were aging. All but one baby boomer envisioned a slower pace of life as part of their retirement plans.

All realize they had more to contribute to society. They are not expecting or looking for any special favors. Instead, they are looking for ways to contribute and make this world a better place. These baby boomers are concerned about the younger and older generations and their needs. They are extraordinary people doing the ordinary things that make up the matrix of their lives. Those around them are benefiting from their efforts and the example they set.
It’s Freedom

Freedom, freedom,
freedom, freedom
To be contented of prisoners of love
Or to reach to reach beyond our reach
To reach for the stars
Or go about the business of
Becoming what we already are.
Freedom, freedom, freedom, freedom
Freedom, freedom, freedom
Is what you thought you heard
Freedom, freedom, freedom
Is not just one big word.
Freedom, freedom,
A perfect healing sound
Freedom, freedom is what you gotta have
Freedom, freedom, freedom
is good both night and day
Up and down and all around and all the way
Freedom, freedom, must be won.

Lyrics excerpted from “It’s Freedom (The Freedom Suite),”
Duke Ellington, Second Sacred Concert (1968)

The song, It’s Freedom, speaks of the hopes, dreams, and aspirations of baby boomers in the second half of their lives. People begin their lives with great expectations – wanting to change the world and do great things with their lives. Many of them, however, wind up spending much of their lives performing the seemingly familiar tasks of paying bills, raising families, and working in non-descript occupations. They do so by choice and discover personal freedom in the act of doing the ordinary. They keep the cosmos moving in the universe in the doing of everyday things.

To the casual observer, the lyrics of the song in print may seem somewhat disjointed because the reader is not hearing the lyrics being sung according to music. Also missing is the sound of the instrumental accompaniment. When these are added, the music comes alive and new dimensions of beauty and understanding of the lyrics emerges. So it is with the lives of those involved in this study.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A

INFORMED CONSENT FORM
Dear prospective participant:

You are invited to be part of the study, *Redefining Aging: A Phenomenological Study of Alaskan Baby Boomers' Pursuit of Higher Education*, conducted by Rolf Numme, a doctoral candidate in the Higher Education and Organizational Change (HEOC) program at Benedictine University. The purpose of this study is to uncover the structures of experiences of American baby boomers who aspire to continue their education and change careers in a contemporary, fast-paced changing American society. Specifically, the motivational factors of Alaskan baby boomers returning to college will be explored with regard to their individual experiences. I seek to address the following research questions: What is aging and how is it viewed and experienced by a small group of Alaskan baby boomers as they pursue higher education and change careers? What are the motivational factors behind their educational, career, and life decisions?

Your participation in this study is strictly voluntary and you can withdraw from it at any time with no penalty to you. The study does not have any known or potential risks. You are invited to participate in an individual interview, which will last approximately 60-90 min at a location of your choice. You will be asked to respond to a series of questions pertaining to the research purposes. Follow-up interviews may be requested depending on the research needs and purposes. The interview will be audio- and/or video-recorded and transcribed. The transcription of an interview will be presented to you for verification of accuracy.

For confidentiality purposes, the interview transcripts and all files pertaining to your participation in this study will be stored in a locked cabinet for ten years and destroyed afterwards if no longer needed. All computer files will be kept on a secure server. I will also maintain a copy of the data on a password-protected computer. Your actual name will be known only to the principal researcher (me). The interview will be given a secure code and a pseudonym will be assigned to your name to keep all the information fully confidential. Excerpts from the interview may be included in the final dissertation report or other later publications. However, under no circumstances will your name or identifying characteristics appear in these writings. If, at a subsequent date, biographical data were relevant to a publication, a separate release form would be sent to you.

This study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board of Benedictine University. The Chair of the IRB is Dr. Alandra Weller-Clarke who can be reached at aclarke@ben.edu; or at (630) 829 – 6295.

This study is being conducted in part to fulfill requirements for my EdD degree in HEOC at the graduate school of Benedictine University in Lisle, IL. I would be grateful if you would sign this form on the line provided below to show that you have read and agree with the contents.

If you have questions regarding this study, please feel free to contact me at rwnumme@hotmail.com; or at (907) 376-9021. You can also contact my dissertation director Dr. Nancy Bentley at nancywbentley@yahoo.com; or at (708) 357-6632.

You will be tendered a copy of your signed consent form. Please acknowledge with your signatures below your consent to participate in this study and to record and/or videotape your interview.

Thank you.
I consent to participate in this study

Name: __________________________ Date: __________________________

[Signature] __________________________

I give my permission to record this interview

Name: __________________________ Date: __________________________

[Signature] __________________________
APPENDIX B

DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY
The purpose of this survey is to obtain background information about prospective participants. Each participant will be provided a secure code to protect his or her anonymity. None of this information will be directly identifiable except through the participant code assigned by the researcher. None of this information will be shared with third parties.

**Background/demographic information:**

1. Current age:
2. Highest level of educational attainment:
3. Year graduated from high school:
4. Institution enrolled in:
5. Enrolled: Full Time Part Time
6. Years involved with current college program:
7. Current level in college: Freshman Sophomore Junior Senior Graduate Student
8. Major and degree program:
APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW GUIDE
1. Please tell me a few words about your educational background prior to becoming a student at this age.
2. What were the most memorable experiences of your education in the past? What motivated you in your educational pursuits in the past?
3. What does it mean to you “to age”? Please elaborate on your answer.
4. What does it mean to you to be “old” or an “older” adult? Have you ever thought of yourself in such terms? If so, then how and why? Please elaborate on your answer.
5. Please describe as many experiences as you can that reflect your “aging.”
6. What have been the epiphanies (if any) in your life that best describe your transitioning from one age cycle to another?
7. Have you ever experienced challenges related to age issues? If so, then what were they?
8. How can you best describe yourself in regards to your current age?
9. Do you consider yourself a “baby-boomer”? If so, then what does it mean? Please elaborate on your answer.
10. What motivated you to enter college?
11. Please describe any significant influences in your decision to attend college.
12. Have you been supported in your efforts to attend college? If so, then how? If not, then why not?
13. Please describe any challenges that you might have encountered while enrolling in or attending college.
14. Please describe your personal successes while in college and what experiences have been most meaningful to you.
15. Has your enrollment in college classes changed your perceptions about yourself and your personal circumstances? If so, then how and why?
16. Has it changed your view of your role in society? If so, then how and why?
17. Please describe your plans for the future.
18. Thank you for bringing some personal items to the interview. Could you, please, comment on their meaning and significance?
19. Suppose that you have a chance to address educational, community, and governmental leaders. What kind of advice would you give them with regard to the aging population?
20. Is there anything that I have not asked you that would be important for me to know regarding your college and life experiences and views on aging?
VITA

Rolf W. Numme was born in Port Chester, New York, the son of Rolf and Mildred Numme. He attended Carroll College in Waukesha, Wisconsin, starting in the fall of 1965 and graduated with a Bachelor of Science Degree in the spring of 1969. He earned a Master of Public Administration in 2003 and a Master of Business Administration degree in 2006, both from City University of Seattle. While completing the two graduate degrees, he continued working for the State of Alaska in the human service field and taught college classes for City University of Seattle from 2004 until 2008. In 2006, he began teaching classes for Wayland Baptist University and, in 2009, he retired from the State of Alaska. He entered the Doctor of Education program at Benedictine University in January 2009 and graduated in May of 2013.

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