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2021

NONTRADITIONAL STUDENT ATTITUDES ABOUT  
EMERGING ADULTHOOD

by

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THESIS

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EMERGING ADULTHOOD

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## **Dedication**

I would like to dedicate my thesis to my Mom and to my Nina, who struggled so that I may have the opportunity to make it this far and achieve my academic dreams. You made the most important impact in my life and stressed how important academics would be for me in my future. I would not be here if it were not for you both being my biggest supports. Thank you for believing in me.

Thank you to my closest friend, Brittany, who helped me through my academic pursuit despite the hardships of stress and doubt, I hope to do the same for you in yours. Many thanks to wonderful friend Isabel who also aided me in my academic endeavors.

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ABSTRACT

NONTRADITIONAL STUDENT ATTITUDES ABOUT  
EMERGING ADULTHOOD

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The present study assessed beliefs about adulthood, including meeting one's own criteria for adulthood, among nontraditional students based on different markers of nontraditional status. In addition, the study examined whether meeting multiple criteria of nontraditional status was associated with different attitudes about adulthood. Participants ( $n = 217$ ) consisted of students from the University of Houston-Clear Lake (UHCL) who answered questions about demographic characteristics, which were used to determine nontraditional student statuses, aspects of emerging adulthood, and aspects of established adulthood. Results indicated that students who met the criteria for some of the different nontraditional statuses, as well as students who met the criteria for multiple nontraditional statuses, reported feeling less like emerging adults and more like established adults than students who met the criteria for traditional statuses. These findings demonstrate that some nontraditional students may feel more established in adulthood than others, and theory regarding emerging adulthood may need to be refined to reflect the attitudes and experiences of nontraditional students.

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CHAPTER I:  
INTRODUCTION/REVIEW OF LITERATURE

**Emerging Adulthood: An Overview**

Emerging adulthood occurs between the ages of 18 and 29 and is best described as a period of life in which individuals find themselves with the opportunity to explore adultlike behaviors, such as becoming financially independent and accepting one's responsibilities (Arnett, 2000; 2001; 2003; 2007; 2011; Arnett et al., 2014). These individuals are found in industrialized and developing countries and experience changes in life directionality along with instability in many areas of their lives, including job changes, maintaining multiple roles, and changes in dependency status (Arnett, 2011; Mehta et al., 2020). The transition to adulthood contains an array of markers that are used to define adulthood, including biological, psychological, legal, and role-related milestones, with each marker holding different degrees of importance for an individual's definition of adulthood (Arnett, 2000; 2001; Settersten et al., 2015). While emerging adulthood differs due to cultural backgrounds and whether a region values individuality or interdependency (Arnett, 2009; 2011), the common goal during this period is to reach established adulthood (Arnett, 2012; Mehta et al., 2020).

**Postsecondary Students: Traditional and Nontraditional Status**

Much of the research examining emerging adulthood focuses on various markers used to define adulthood, such as marriage, childbirth, and stability (Arnett, 2000; 2001; Nelson et al., 2007), but these studies are predominantly composed of samples with traditional college students (Arnett, 2001; 2003; Nelson et al. 2007; Hall et al., 2016; Smith et al., 2015; Zorotovich & Johnson, 2014). According to Radford and colleagues (2015), only 26% of college undergraduates could be classified as traditional students in the 2011-12 academic year. As enrollment in higher education has increased, universities

have received an influx of nontraditional students (Chung et al., 2014; MacDonald, 2018; Radford et al., 2015; Tilley, 2014). To properly represent the current and foreseeable postsecondary student population, it is important to understand how students are categorized as traditional and nontraditional students.

### **Traditional Students**

Traditional college students are classified as the demographic majority of a region who have been historically represented at institutions of higher education, received a high-school degree, attend college full-time immediately after high-school graduation, work less than 35 hours per week, are financially dependent on parents/caregivers, generation-continuous, under the age of 25, and are absent of dependents (Arnett, 2000; Choy, 2002; Chung et al., 2014). In some cases, traditional college students struggle with adaptation to academic and parental expectations (MacDonald, 2018). Traditional college student definitions of adulthood have been represented in previous studies regarding emerging adulthood, as most of these studies include this population rather than nontraditional college students. Some studies have included nontraditional factors, such as employment status, but they do not include other statuses or details, such as student work hours or enrollment hours, that should be examined when determining nontraditional student status (Arnett, 2001; Arnett & Schwab, 2012; Nelson et al., 2007).

### **Nontraditional Students**

Historically, age served as the sole determinant of whether a student was classified as traditional or nontraditional, and, rather than being a majority in modern college environments, traditional students have become a minority in higher education as definitions of nontraditional students have become inclusive of other characteristics (Arnett, 2000; Chung et al., 2014; Tilley, 2014). During the 1995-96 academic year, at least 70% of college undergraduates met one criterion for nontraditional student status,

and, as of the 2011-12 academic year, approximately 74% of college undergraduates met at least one nontraditional student status criterion (Radford et al., 2015). It is difficult to define nontraditional student status due to the variety of criteria used in previous literature (Chung et al., 2014), but the majority of definitions include part-time enrollment, working 35 hours or more per week, living independently or cohabiting, being married, divorced, or widowed, being over the age of 25, having at least a one year gap between high school graduation and college enrollment, ‘taking time off’ or an enrollment drop of at least six months, having dependents, greater use of different modes of study or programs (e.g., online), evening, and/or weekend courses, and being demographically different from the majority group within a region (Choy, 2002; Chung et al., 2014; Dill & Henley, 1998; MacDonald, 2018; Radford et al., 2015; Tilley, 2014). Even with this shift in the students present on college campuses, nontraditional students remain underrepresented in emerging adulthood studies because of the limited consideration of characteristics other than age, marital status, and parental status (Arnett, 2000; 2001; Nelson et al., 2007).

It is possible that nontraditional students have not been included in the emerging adulthood literature because some have attained adult status through marriage or cohabitation, becoming financially independent, residing independently, age, and parental status/having dependents (Arnett, 2000; 2001; 2003; 2007; Choy, 2002; Chung et al., 2014; Radford et al., 2015). Given the unique circumstances of nontraditional students, including those within the age range of emerging adulthood, excluding nontraditional students from emerging adulthood studies may present an inaccurate description of the developmental period (Arnett, 2000; 2001; 2007; 2012; Arnett & Schwab, 2012).

For the reason that students can be classified as nontraditional using many criteria, some sources have determined the degree to which a student is nontraditional

based on the number of criteria a student meets (Choy, 2002). Of the criteria in the literature, six factors are consistently used to determine whether a student should be considered nontraditional, and these factors could be associated with attitudes about adulthood.

### ***Age***

It is commonly noted that traditional college student ages range between 18-25 years, and these ages coincide with emerging adulthood, which ends at approximately 29 years of age. This leaves space within emerging adulthood to include nontraditional students (Arnett, 2000; 2001; 2011; Arnett & Schwab, 2012). In recent literature, established adulthood has been used to describe individuals who are considered adults, and it includes ages 30-45 (Mehta et al., 2020). This suggests that nontraditional students who are 30-45 years old may feel that they have reached adulthood in some ways, but it is also likely that they do not feel they have fully reached established adulthood. Previous studies have included individuals in established adulthood to compare them with those in emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000), but these studies have not examined age-related challenges students may encounter, such as adaptability to school expectations, including use of unfamiliar technology (Dill & Henley, 1998). With the conceptualization of established adulthood in mind, as well as challenges that older students are faced with, it is likely that nontraditionally-aged students may feel more like adults than traditionally-aged students due to the criteria used to determine adulthood, and these students will have different attitudes about reaching adulthood.

### ***Ethnicity***

Postsecondary students are also considered nontraditional when their ethnic group has been historically underrepresented in higher education or makes them a demographic minority in the region of the institution in which the individual is enrolled (Chang et al.,

2014). Ethnic representation has been an issue in the emerging adulthood literature, with the majority of studies using predominantly Caucasian samples (Arnett, 2000; 2001; 2003; Hall et al., 2016; Nelson et al., 2007; Smith et al., 2015; Zorotovich & Johnson, 2014). One of the most representative studies of the emerging adult population in the United States is a poll conducted at Clark University in 2012 (Arnett & Schwab, 2012), which included a sample that consisted of 1,029 individuals aged 18-29 who were ethnically and regionally diverse. Arnett and Schwab found that, when compared to those who reported being White, emerging adults of underrepresented ethnic status had higher beliefs about a college education being important to success in life, increased involvement from participants' parents, and greater struggle for financial support to obtain an education. These differences in beliefs, experiences, and stressors compared to ethnic majority students may lead ethnic minority students to adopt adultlike attitudes and beliefs faster than their ethnic majority student counterparts. In addition, ethnic minority emerging adults' description of adulthood may vary from ethnic majority students because of family cultural practices related to household composition, parental involvement, and financial contributions (Arnett 2009; 2011).

### ***First-Generation Status***

First-generation status applies to students who are the first in their family to attend college, and these students are often from historically underrepresented or demographic minority groups (Chang et al., 2014; Garriott & Nisole, 2018; MacDonald, 2018). First-generation college students often fit with the transitional stage of emerging adulthood, as they can be traditionally-aged college students and live in a period of instability (Arnett, 2000). While exploring individuality in the new college environment, first-generation students may encounter cultural mismatch, lack of institutional support, lack of financial support, greater family expectations in contrast to continuous-generation

students, and lack of guidance within the college experience (Chang et al., 2014; Garriott & Nisole, 2018; MacDonald, 2018). Due to the challenges first-generation college students face, they may have attitudes regarding additional obstacles compared to their continuing-generation counterparts that may hinder their transition to adulthood, as becoming financially independent and living independently are more difficult for these individuals. Unfortunately, first-generation status is underrepresented in many studies of emerging adulthood due to the predominant use of traditional college student samples (Arnett, 2001; 2003; Hall et al., 2016; Nelson et al. 2007; Smith et al., 2015; Zorotovich & Johnson, 2014), which limits our understanding of how first-generation students compare to continuous-generation students.

### ***Employment Status***

Nontraditional student status due to employment has fluctuated in the literature as there have been recent efforts to include part-time vs. full-time employment status and specific hours worked per week (Chung et al., 2014). Many emerging adulthood studies have included whether participants are employed, but they do not specify whether individuals are employed part- or full-time (Arnett, 2001; Zorotovich & Johnson, 2014). Many studies of emerging adulthood have also failed to include employment status in general (Hall et al., 2016; Nelson et al., 2007). Employment status adds the stress of time management to the struggle to perform both the roles of student and employee diligently, especially if the student is struggling financially (Garriott & Nisole, 2018; MacDonald, 2018). A primary concern regarding employment status entwines with the concept of instability in emerging adulthood. Emerging adults are reported to have, on average, ten job changes within the period, thus, in accompaniment to role strain, these students undergo many changes before finding stability within the workforce (Arnett, 2012; Mehta et al., 2020). The consistent criterion for employment for traditional students is working

no more than 35 hours per week, and nontraditional students work over this cap and experience a higher work demand. This may contribute to additional academic performance stress compared to traditional students who are unemployed or work part-time and lead nontraditional working students to develop attitudes regarding the need to become flexible and incorporate skills of time management, thus increasing the potential to feel more adultlike to adapt compared to traditional students (Garriott & Nisole, 2018).

### ***Parental Status***

Family obligations vary for nontraditional students; however, one important factor in the transition to adulthood is becoming a parent (Arnett, 2000). Previous literature has shown that individuals who are parents report that they feel that they have reached adulthood (Arnett, 2000; 2001) and are usually excluded in recent emerging adulthood literature since this has become a consistent criterion. This is, in part, due to the restriction of opportunities and increased responsibilities the role grants in contrast to non-parent emerging adults (Arnett, 2012). Many nontraditional students are parents, which means they are balancing care for dependent(s) and maintaining satisfactory academic performance (Dill et al., 1998). Fulfilling multiple roles can result in role strain and difficulties with time management (MacDonald, 2018). Of the emerging adulthood studies reviewed, none report participants' relationships with children, such as whether parents are living with their children, children are financially dependent on them, or if they are the sole caregiver (Arnett, 2001; 2012). Simply reporting parental status may not be enough to determine if an individual should be included in emerging adult studies. Given findings in previous literature and how parenthood has been strongly associated with feelings of reaching adulthood (Arnett, 2000), nontraditional students who are parents may be more likely to report feeling that they have reached adulthood compared to traditional students who do not have dependents.

### ***Romantic Relationship Status***

Nontraditional students include those identified as individuals who cohabit with romantic partners or identify as married, divorced, or widowed (Chung et al., 2014; Radford et al., 2015). Romantic relationship status is an important criterion in emerging adulthood, as entry into a stable romantic relationship is considered a sign of adulthood, and emerging adult romantic relationships tend to be unstable (Arnett, 2000; 2014). Similar to becoming a parent, marriage/cohabitation is a heavily weighed criterion in the transition to adulthood (Arnett, 2000), and some emerging adults may report different feelings about being adultlike if they are in a stable romantic relationship (MacDonald, 2018). Considering marriage and cohabitation have previously been associated with attitudes of feeling adultlike, nontraditional students who meet this relationship status may correspond more with established adults than traditional students.

### **Students Meeting Multiple Criteria**

Nontraditional students often have multiple roles or characteristics which meet different criteria for nontraditional student status (Chung et al., 2014; Dill & Henley, 1998). Nontraditional students may fall under multiple criteria due to role demands, such as nontraditional parental and relationship status, or nontraditional employment status and mode of study. Many students encounter concerns within these criteria as well, such as many ethnic minority students who face additional challenges in the college environment, including a lack of belongingness, ethnic familiar mentors, and institutional support (Clark et al., 2012). However, studies that are more representative of some aspects of the American emerging adult population will still underrepresent emerging adults with multiple nontraditional student statuses (Arnett & Schwab, 2012). In some cases, research has labeled nontraditional students by ‘how nontraditional’ they appear based on how many criteria are met, with ‘minimally nontraditional’ meaning one

criterion is met and ‘highly nontraditional’ meaning four or more criteria are met (Choy, 2002; Horn, 1996). Apart from the specifics of which nontraditional statuses are met due to role demands, it would not be surprising that multiple nontraditional statuses are accompanied by additional responsibilities and the need for adaptability and flexibility (MacDonald, 2018). This may lead to role conflict for nontraditional students and difficulties with time management and other challenges that traditional students do not typically face (Dill & Henley, 1998).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to assess beliefs about adulthood among nontraditional students due to different markers of adulthood, including whether the students feel that they meet their own criteria for adulthood. In addition, the study examined whether meeting multiple criteria was associated with different attitudes towards adultlike behaviors. I hypothesized that students who identified as nontraditional due to parental and/or romantic relationship status would feel more adultlike than other nontraditional criteria. I further hypothesized that students would feel more adultlike as they met more nontraditional criteria.

## CHAPTER II: METHODOLOGY

### **Participants**

Participants ( $n = 217$ ) consisted of students from the University of Houston-Clear Lake with ages that ranged between 18-58 ( $M = 25.25$ ;  $SD = 7.64$ ). The majority of participants identified as cisgender female (77.80%), followed by cisgender male (19.40%), nonbinary (1.90%), and transgender female (.50%). When selecting which ethnic group(s) participants best identified with, 38.60% selected Hispanic/Latinx/Spanish, followed by White/Caucasian (36.50%), African American/Black (14.50%), Asian (6.60%), Indian/Native American (1.20%), and/or Arab American/Middle Eastern (.80%). Most participants reported that they were associated with the College of Human Sciences and Humanities (87.6%), followed by the College of Science and Engineering (10.1%), undecided (1.4%), and the College of Business (.9%). Regarding living situation while attending school, 85.70% of participants reported that they lived in an off-campus apartment or house. The majority of participants (65.40%) stated that they were not the first in their family to attend college, while 33.60% reported that they were the first member of their family to attend college. For romantic relationship status, 35.90% of participants reported that they were single, and not currently dating, followed by those in a committed relationship but not cohabiting or married (23.50%), married (18.40%), cohabiting, but not married (14.70%), casually dating (6.50%), separated (.50%), and divorced (.50%). Regarding parental status, the majority of participants reported that they did not have any children (72.80%), and the remaining participants reported that they either have a child who resides in their home full-time (24.80%), have a child who resides in their home part-time (1.80%), or other (.90%, i.e., have adult children, dependent situation not clarified). The majority of the

sample also reported being employed (64.70%), while 35.30% were not employed. Of the 64.70% who reported being employed, 25.60% were classified as full-time (i.e., responded with working 35-hours per week or more) and 36.80% were classified as part-time (i.e., responded with working less than 35-hours per week).

### **Procedure**

Participants were sampled through the University of Houston-Clear Lake's SONA online research participant pool. Participants were required to be 18 years of age or older and were awarded 1 credit hour regardless of withdrawal from, or completion of, the study. Upon clicking on the study link provided in SONA, participants were sent to a webpage on Qualtrics that provided information about the study, as well as overall directions for participation. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, directions regarding answering questions and skipping questions if needed, potential risks and benefits, and contact information of the researcher and principal investigator. To ensure credit hour obtainment, participants were instructed to send a screenshot of the portion of the survey they stopped on, or the completion page if the questionnaire was completed, to the researcher's email. Participants were then asked to provide consent to participate, and those who chose to continue in the study were able to view the questionnaire on most digital devices. Specific directions regarding various portions of the questionnaire were listed respective to the section and repeated when carried over to continuous webpages. Participants were able to exit the questionnaire and resume participation if they opened the study's link on the initial device used to access the questionnaire.

## **Materials**

### **Inventory of the Dimensions of Emerging Adulthood: The IDEA Measure**

Originally composed by Reifman and colleagues (2007), and sometimes referred to as the views of life survey, the IDEA is a 31 item survey that is composed of phrases that assess an individual's agreement with experiencing the phrase in their current period of life (e.g., "*time of many possibilities?*"). Items were answered on a 5-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*), and allowed participants to only select one answer per item. Items were divided into 6 subscales ( $\alpha = .72 - .83$ ) using averages: Identity Exploration, Experimentation/Possibilities, Negativity/Instability, Other-Focused, Self-Focused, and Feeling "In-Between." Test-retest reliability from the original study ranged from .64 - .86 between all subscales except for the Feeling "In-Between" subscale (.37).

#### ***Identity Exploration***

The Identity Exploration subscale ( $\alpha = .79$ ) consisted of 7 items related to how an individual explores what they identify with during this period (e.g., "*time of defining yourself?*", "*time of deciding on your own beliefs and values?*").

#### ***Experimentation/Possibilities***

The Experimentation/Possibilities subscale ( $\alpha = .83$ ) consisted of 5 items related to how an individual experiences opportunity during this period (e.g., "*time of open choices?*", "*time of trying out new things?*").

#### ***Negativity/Instability***

The Negativity/Instability subscale ( $\alpha = .82$ ) consisted of 7 items related to how an individual experiences negative effects of transitioning and instability during this period (e.g., "*time of many worries?*", "*time of feeling restricted?*").

### ***Other-Focused***

The Other-Focused subscale ( $\alpha = .72$ ) consisted of 3 items related to how individuals view others during this period (e.g., “*time of responsibility of others?*”, “*time of commitments to others?*”).

### ***Self-Focused***

The Self-Focused subscale ( $\alpha = .77$ ) consisted of 6 items related to how individuals view time for themselves during this period (e.g., “*time of personal freedom?*”, “*time of focusing on yourself?*”).

### ***Feeling “In-Between”***

The Feeling “In-Between” subscale ( $\alpha = .79$ ) consisted of 3 items related to how an individual experiences the feeling of transitioning between adolescence and adulthood (e.g., “*time of feeling adult in some ways but not others?*”, “*time of being not sure whether you have reached full adulthood?*”).

### **Transition to Adulthood Markers Measure (ADULT and PA)**

Modified from the “Criteria for the Transition to Adulthood” questionnaire (Arnett, 1994), the present study measured perceived criteria for adulthood using Mayseless and Scharf’s (2003) “Markers of Adulthood.”

The measure, labeled as ADULT, was modified to 39 items, removing sex variations from family capabilities and sex-based biological/age-related transitions to a singular, neutral variation. This measure was reported on a 5-point scale about how important it was to the individual to meet the specific criteria listed (1 = *not important at all*, 5 = *extremely important*). The survey consisted of 7 subscales ( $\alpha = .60 - .91$ ): Individualism, Emotional Maturity, Norm-Abiding, Family Capabilities, Role Transitions, Age Transitions, and Other.

To assess participants' perspective about whether they met the criteria for adulthood, 21 items were adapted from the ADULT measure and labelled PA (Personal Adult). Participants responded "yes" or "no" to indicate whether they believed they met their own criteria for adulthood. PA removed items from ADULT that consisted of age milestones, having children, marital status, and legal milestones, as many of these were addressed in the demographic portion of the measures used within the study. For this reason, subscales role transitions, age transitions, and other have been removed from the PA portion. Items about sexual relationships were also removed from PA due to potential issues with interpretation, participant discomfort with the nature of the questions, and the scope of the study. This portion consisted of 4 subscales ( $\alpha = .56 - .77$ ) from the ADULT version of the measure: Individualism, Emotional Maturity, Norm-Abiding, and Family Capabilities.

### ***Individualism***

Individualism consisted of 5 items in both the ADULT ( $\alpha = .60$ ) and PA ( $\alpha = .63$ ) portions of the measure pertaining to themes related to individuality and freedom that are gained and associated with adulthood (e.g., "*support self financially*").

### ***Emotional Maturity***

Emotional Maturity consisted of 6 items in both the ADULT ( $\alpha = .69$ ) and PA ( $\alpha = .62$ ) portions of the measure pertaining to flexibility in the regulation of emotions (e.g., "*learn always to have good control of your emotions*").

### ***Norm-Abiding***

Norm-Abiding consisted of 8 items in the ADULT portion ( $\alpha = .77$ ) and 6 items in the PA portion ( $\alpha = .56$ ) of the measure pertaining to rule regulation, such as conforming to lawful behavior, as well as common perceptions of the social norm in western culture (e.g., "*avoid becoming drunk, using vulgar language, drunk driving*").

The 2 items removed from the PA variation consisted of themes related to sexual activity (e.g., “*use contraception if... not trying to conceive a child*”, “*having no more than one sexual partner*”).

### ***Family Capabilities***

Family Capabilities consisted of 4 items in both the ADULT ( $\alpha = .88$ ) and PA ( $\alpha = .77$ ) portions of the measure pertaining to family support in different aspects, such as financially and caring for children (e.g., “*capable of keeping family physically safe*”). In Arnett’s (1994; 2001) measures, as well as Mayseless and Scharf’s (2003) version, these items were duplicated to cater to both men and women as separate versions, but the phrasing was changed to be gender-neutral in the present study.

### ***Role Transitions***

Role Transitions consisted of 7 items in only the ADULT portion ( $\alpha = .91$ ) of the measure pertaining to traditional milestones associated with adulthood, such as full-time employment, marriage, and having at least one child (e.g., “*settle into long-term career*”).

### ***Age Transitions***

Age Transitions consisted of 5 items in only the ADULT portion ( $\alpha = .77$ ) of the measure pertaining to biological milestones, originally categorized as biological transitions (Arnett 1994), as well as age markers associated with legal adult behaviors in western culture (e.g., “*reached age 18, 21*”, “*obtained divers license*”).

### ***Other***

Other consisted of 4 items in only the ADULT portion ( $\alpha = .69$ ) of the measure pertaining to miscellaneous items used in previous versions of the measure: make lifelong commitments to others, not deeply tied to parents emotionally, have had sexual intercourse, and completing military service. Some items have been used in previous

versions of the measure in various categories, while other items, like military service, are newer additions.

### **Demographics**

Demographics included self-reports of age, gender identity, sexual orientation, race/ethnicity, college enrollment (e.g., “*College of Business*”), first-generation or continuing-generation status, commuter status, romantic relationship status, parental status, and employment status. All questions included a textbox “other” option, while some included longer textbox options following questions that asked participants to specify if the question applied to them. Participants were encouraged to answer additional demographic characteristics provided within the questionnaire, however only those relevant to the study are reported. Specifically, questions about age, ethnicity, first-generation status, employment status, parental status, and romantic relationship status were included in the demographics and used to determine nontraditional student statuses. All statuses were dichotomized based on criteria used to establish traditional student status and nontraditional student status in previous literature.

#### ***Age***

Age was dichotomized as traditional student age (18-25) and nontraditional student age (26 and older).

#### ***Ethnicity***

Ethnicity was dichotomized as ethnic groups traditionally represented in higher education (i.e., Caucasian, Asian) and ethnic groups traditionally underrepresented in higher education (i.e., any ethnic group other than Caucasian and Asian).

### ***First-Generation***

First-generation status was dichotomized as continuing-generation (i.e., not the first in the family to attend college) and first-generation (i.e., first in the family to attend college).

### ***Employment Status***

Employment status was dichotomized as part-time (i.e., less than 35 hours per week) and full-time (i.e., 35 hours per week or more).

### ***Parental Status***

Seeing that parents may have a biological or adopted child but not have consistent parental responsibilities (i.e., little contact with child, child does not reside with parent), the current study assigned nontraditional parental status to students who reported having a child reside with them at least part-time. Thus, parental status was dichotomized as absent of parental responsibilities (i.e., no children, little to no contact with child(ren)) and providing parental responsibilities (i.e., child who resides in home at least part-time).

### ***Romantic Relationship Status***

Romantic relationship status was dichotomized as not being involved in a current committed romantic relationship (i.e., single, casually dating) and being involved in either a current or previous committed romantic relationship (i.e., cohabiting, married, divorced, separated).

### ***Multiple Nontraditional Statuses***

To examine the role of multiple nontraditional student statuses, the number of nontraditional student statuses reported by participants were added together to create the variable “nontraditional roles”, with a higher score for the variable indicating that a participant met the criteria for more nontraditional student statuses.

### **Data Analysis**

Pearson and Point-Biserial correlations were estimated in SPSS to examine associations among each specific nontraditional student status, the number of nontraditional student statuses, and each of the subscales from the IDEA, ADULT, and PA measures. Multiple linear regression analyses were also estimated in SPSS for any significant bivariate associations to examine the relations among the indicators of nontraditional student status and subscales from the IDEA, ADULT, and PA measures after controlling for additional nontraditional statuses.

## CHAPTER III:

### RESULTS

#### Descriptive Statistics

*Table 1*

*Descriptive Statistics of Nontraditional Statuses and Measure Subscales*

Descriptive	Descriptive Statistics		
	%	M	SD
Nontraditional Student Status			
Age Status	32.1		
Ethnicity Status	51.6		
First-Generation Status	33.6		
Employment Status	43.2		
Parental Status	26.3		
Romantic Relationship Status	57.6		
Nontraditional Roles		2.28	1.57
IDEA Subscales			
Identity Exploration		3.38	0.53
Experimentation/Possibilities		3.20	0.64
Negativity/Instability		3.10	0.60
Other-Focused		2.75	0.77
Self-Focused		3.30	0.53
Feeling “In-Between”		3.25	0.81
ADULT Subscales			
Individualism		4.07	0.61
Emotional Maturity		4.17	0.56
Norm-Abiding		4.04	0.71
Family Capabilities		4.34	0.80
Role Transitions		3.20	1.13
Age Transitions		3.23	1.01
Other		2.29	0.91
PA Subscales			
Individualism		3.45	1.27
Emotional Maturity		4.93	1.33
Norm-Abiding		4.94	1.10
Family Capabilities		2.61	1.42

Most participants (88.90%,  $M = 2.28$ ,  $SD = 1.57$ ) met at least one criterion for nontraditional status. Over half of participants met the criterion for nontraditional romantic relationship status (57.60%), followed by nontraditional ethnic status (51.6%), nontraditional employment status (43.20%), first-generation status (33.60%), and nontraditional age status (32.10%). Less than a third of the sample met the criterion for nontraditional parental status (26.30%).

The average responses for most of the IDEA subscales ranged between neutral to agree ( $M = 2.75$ - $3.38$ ,  $SD = 0.53$ - $0.81$ ). Similarly, average responses for most of the ADULT subscales approximated slightly important attitudes ( $M = 2.29$ - $4.34$ ,  $SD = 0.56$ - $1.13$ ). Average responses for the PA subscales indicated that participants met many of their own criteria for adulthood ( $M = 2.61$ - $4.94$ ,  $SD = 1.10$ - $1.42$ ).

## Correlations

Table 2

*Correlations Across Nontraditional Student Statuses and Adulthood Marker Measures*

Correlations	Nontraditional Student Status						
	Age	Ethnicity	FG	ES	PS	RRS	NR
<b>IDEA Subscales</b>							
Identity Exploration	-.14*	-.18	.01	-.06	-.13	-.20**	-.15*
Experimentation/Poss.	-.23**	-.06	-.19**	-.09	-.27***	-.22**	-.29***
Negativity/Instability	-.23**	-.08	-.03	-.23**	-.10	.04	-.17*
Other-Focused	.34***	.06	.02	.08	.41***	.37***	.38***
Self-Focused	-.19**	-.02	-.12	-.13	-.25***	-.11	-.21**
Feeling “In-Between”	-.49***	.04	-.11	-.28**	-.40***	-.24***	-.40***
<b>ADULT Subscales</b>							
Individualism	.19**	.18**	.10	.14	.16*	.01	.23**
Emotional Maturity	.11	.15*	-.13	.02	.08	-.04	.06
Norm-Abiding	.10	.21	.08	.12	-.02	-.14*	.10
Family Capabilities	.18**	.25**	.11	.14	.22**	.10	.24***
Role Transitions	-.02	.22**	-.10	.01	-.03	-.03	.03
Age Transitions	-.07	.04	-.09	-.05	-.16*	-.21**	-.16*
Other	-.03	.11	-.09	.01	-.07	-.15*	-.05
<b>PA Subscales</b>							
Individualism	.56***	-.01	.05	.40***	.45***	.28***	.48***
Emotional Maturity	.14*	.04	-.15*	.14	.17*	-.03	.07
Norm-Abiding	.13	.12	-.03	.11	-.003	-.14*	.03
Family Capabilities	.51***	.10	.23**	.59***	.48***	.19**	.58***

Note. \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ ; FG = First-Generation, ES = Employment Status, PS = Parental Status, RRS = Romantic Relationship Status, NR = Number of Nontraditional Roles

### Age

Age was significantly correlated with all subscales of the IDEA measure. Students who were classified as being of nontraditional age reported lower Identity Exploration ( $r = -.14$ ,  $p < .05$ , small effect), Experimentation/Possibilities ( $r = -.23$ ,  $p < .01$ , small effect), Negative/Instability ( $r = -.23$ ,  $p < .01$ , small effect), Self-Focused ( $r = -.19$ ,  $p < .01$ , small effect), and Feeling “In-Between” ( $r = -.49$ ,  $p < .001$ , medium effect) beliefs

and higher Other-Focused beliefs ( $r = .34, p < .001$ , medium effect) than students who were classified as being of traditional age.

Age was significantly, and positively, correlated with two ADULT subscales, with nontraditionally-aged students reporting higher levels of Individualism ( $r = .19, p < .01$ , small effect) and Family Capabilities ( $r = .18, p < .01$ , small effect) than traditionally-aged students. All other correlations among age status and ADULT subscales were not significant: Emotional Maturity ( $r = .11, p = .12$ , small effect), Norm-Abiding ( $r = .10, p = .16$ , small effect), Role Transitions ( $r = -.02, p = .80$ , small effect), Age Transitions ( $r = -.07, p = .30$ , small effect), and Other ( $r = -.01, p = .86$ , small effect).

Age was positively, and significantly, correlated with three PA subscales, with nontraditionally-aged students reporting a higher level of Emotional Maturity ( $r = .14, p < .05$ , small effect), as well as Individualism ( $r = .56, p < .001$ , large effect) and Family Capabilities ( $r = .51, p < .001$ , large effect), than traditionally-aged students. Norm-abiding was the only PA subscale that was not significantly correlated with age ( $r = .13, p = .06$ , small effect).

### ***Ethnicity***

Ethnicity status was not associated with any of the IDEA subscales: Identity Exploration ( $r = -.18, p = .60$ , small effect), Experimentation/Possibilities ( $r = -.06, p = .38$ , small effect), Negativity/Instability ( $r = -.08, p = .22$ , small effect), Other-Focused ( $r = .06, p = .37$ , small effect), Self-Focused ( $r = -.02, p = .83$ , small effect), and Feeling “In-Between” ( $r = .04, p = .53$ , small effect).

For the ADULT subscales, students who belonged to an ethnic group that is not traditionally represented in higher education reported higher levels of Individualism ( $r = .18, p < .01$ , small effect), Emotional Maturity ( $r = .15, p < .05$ , small effect), Norm-

Abiding ( $r = .26, p < .001$ , small effect), Family Capabilities ( $r = .25, p < .001$ , small effect), and Role Transitions ( $r = .22, p < .01$ , small effect) compared to participants who belonged to an ethnic group traditionally represented in higher education. Ethnicity status was not associated with Age Transitions ( $r = .04, p = .58$ , small effect) and Other ( $r = .11, p = .10$ , small effect).

Ethnicity status was not significantly correlated with any PA subscales: Individualism ( $r = -.01, p = .91$ , small effect), Emotional Maturity ( $r = .04, p = .52$ , small effect), Norm-Abiding ( $r = .12, p = .08$ , small effect), and Family Capabilities ( $r = .10, p = .13$ , small effect).

### ***First-Generation***

For the IDEA subscales, participants who identified as first-generation students reported lower levels of Experimentation/Possibilities ( $r = -.19, p < .01$ , small effect) compared to continuous-generation students. First-generation status was not associated with Identity Exploration ( $r = .01, p = .84$ , small effect), Negativity/Instability ( $r = -.03, p = .64$ , small effect), Other-Focused ( $r = .02, p = .76$ , small effect), Self-Focused ( $r = -.12, p = .09$ , small effect), and Feeling “In-Between” ( $r = -.11, p = .11$ , small effect).

For the ADULT subscales, none of the other ADULT subscales were significantly associated with first-generation status: Individualism ( $r = .10, p = .16$ , small effect), Emotional Maturity ( $r = -.13, p = .06$ , small effect), Norm-Abiding ( $r = .08, p = .22$ , small effect), Family Capabilities ( $r = .11, p = .11$ , small effect), Role Transitions ( $r = -.10, p = .16$ , small effect), Age Transitions ( $r = -.09, p = .19$ , small effect), and Other ( $r = -.09, p = .17$ , small effect).

For the PA subscales, first-generation students reported lower Emotional Maturity ( $r = -.15, p < .05$ , small effect) and higher Family Capabilities ( $r = .23, p < .01$ , small effect) than continuous-generation students. The remaining PA subscales were not

significantly associated with first-generation status: Individualism ( $r = .05, p = .47$ , small effect) and Norm-Abiding ( $r = -.03, p = .67$ , small effect).

### ***Employment Status***

For the IDEA subscales, students who fit the criteria of nontraditional employment status reported significantly lower levels of Negativity/Instability ( $r = -.23, p < .01$ , small effect) and Feeling “In-Between” ( $r = -.28, p < .01$ , small effect) compared to traditionally employed students. The remaining subscales were not associated with employment status: Identity Exploration ( $r = -.06, p = .50$ , small effect), Experimentation/Possibilities ( $r = -.09, p = .27$ , small effect), Other-Focused ( $r = .08, p = .34$ , small effect), and Self-Focused ( $r = -.13, p = .14$ , small effect).

None of the ADULT subscales were associated with employment status: Individualism ( $r = .14, p = .11$ , small effect), Emotional Maturity ( $r = .02, p = .82$ , small effect), Norm-Abiding ( $r = .12, p = .17$ , small effect), Family Capabilities ( $r = .14, p = .11$ , small effect), Role Transitions ( $r = .01, p = .91$ , small effect), Age Transitions ( $r = -.05, p = .55$ , small effect), and Other ( $r = .01, p = .88$ , small effect).

For the PA subscales, nontraditional employment status was associated with higher levels of Individualism ( $r = .40, p < .001$ , medium effect) and Family Capabilities ( $r = .59, p < .001$ , large effect) compared to traditional employment status. Employment status was not associated with Emotional Maturity ( $r = .14, p = .09$ , small effect) and Norm-Abiding ( $r = .11, p = .20$ , small effect).

### ***Parental Status***

For the IDEA subscales, nontraditional parental status was associated with lower levels of Experimentation/Possibilities ( $r = -.27, p < .001$ , small effect), Self-Focused ( $r = -.25, p < .001$ , small effect), and Feeling “In-Between” ( $r = -.40, p < .001$ , medium effect) compared to traditional parental status. In addition, nontraditional parent status was

associated with higher levels of Other-Focused ( $r = .41, p < .001$ , medium effect) compared to traditional parent status. Parental status was not associated with Identity Exploration ( $r = -.13, p = .06$ , small effect) and Negativity/Instability ( $r = -.10, p = .14$ , small effect).

For the ADULT subscales, nontraditional parent status was associated with higher levels of Individualism ( $r = .16, p < .05$ , small effect) and Family Capabilities ( $r = .22, p < .01$ , small effect) and lower levels of Age Transitions ( $r = -.16, p < .05$ , small effect) compared to traditional parent status. The remaining ADULT subscales were not associated with parental status: Emotional Maturity ( $r = .08, p = .27$ , small effect), Norm-Abiding ( $r = -.02, p = .74$ , small effect), Role Transitions ( $r = -.03, p = .65$ , small effect), and Other ( $r = -.07, p = .29$ , small effect).

For the PA subscales, nontraditional parental status was associated with higher levels of Emotional Maturity ( $r = .17, p < .05$ , small effect), Individualism ( $r = .45, p < .001$ , medium effect), and Family Capabilities ( $r = .48, p < .001$ , medium effect) compared to traditional parental status. Parental status was not associated with Norm-Abiding ( $r = -.003, p = .96$ , small effect).

### ***Romantic Relationship Status***

For the IDEA subscales, nontraditional romantic relationship status was associated with lower levels of Identity Exploration ( $r = -.20, p < .01$ , small effect), Experimentation/Possibilities ( $r = -.22, p < .01$ , small effect), and Feeling “In-Between” ( $r = -.24, p < .001$ , small effect) and a higher level of Other-Focused ( $r = .37, p < .001$ , medium effect) compared to traditional romantic relationship status. Romantic relationship status was not associated with the remaining IDEA subscales: Negativity/Instability ( $r = -.10, p = .14$ , small effect) and Self-Focused ( $r = -.11, p = .09$ , small effect).

For the ADULT subscales, nontraditional romantic relationship status was associated with lower levels of Norm-Abiding ( $r = -.14, p < .05$ , small effect), Age Transitions ( $r = -.21, p < .01$ , small effect), and Other ( $r = -.15, p < .05$ , small effect) compared to traditional romantic relationship status. Romantic relationship status was not associated with Individualism ( $r = .01, p = .94$ , small effect), Emotional Maturity ( $r = -.04, p = .54$ , small effect), Family Capabilities ( $r = .10, p = .14$ , small effect), and Role Transitions ( $r = -.03, p = .71$ , small effect).

For the PA subscales, nontraditional romantic relationship status was associated with higher Individualism ( $r = .27, p < .001$ , small effect) and Family Capabilities ( $r = .19, p < .01$ , small effect) and lower levels of Norm-Abiding ( $r = -.14, p < .05$ , small effect) compared to traditional romantic relationship status. Emotional Maturity was not associated with romantic relationship status ( $r = -.03, p = .65$ , small effect).

### **Nontraditional Roles**

For the IDEA subscales, having more nontraditional roles was associated with lower levels of Identity Exploration ( $r = -.15, p < .05$ , small effect), Experimentation/Possibilities ( $r = -.29, p < .001$ , small effect), Negativity/Instability ( $r = -.17, p < .05$ , small effect), Self-Focused ( $r = -.21, p < .01$ , small effect), and Feeling “In-Between” ( $r = -.40, p < .001$ , medium effect) and higher levels of Other-Focused ( $r = .38, p < .001$ , medium effect).

For the ADULT subscales, having more nontraditional roles was associated with higher Individualism ( $r = .23, p < .01$ , small effect) and Family Capabilities ( $r = .24, p < .001$ , small effect) and lower Age Transitions ( $r = -.16, p < .05$ , small effect). The number of nontraditional roles was not associated with Emotional Maturity ( $r = .06, p = .38$ , small effect), Norm-Abiding ( $r = .10, p = .13$ , small effect), Role Transitions ( $r = .03, p = .65$ , small effect), and Other ( $r = -.05, p = .42$ , small effect).

For the PA subscales, having more nontraditional roles was associated with higher Individualism ( $r = .48, p < .001$ , medium effect) and Family Capabilities ( $r = .58, p < .001$ , large effect). Number of nontraditional roles was not associated Emotional Maturity ( $r = .07, p = .28$ , small effect) and Norm-Abiding ( $r = .03, p = .67$ , small effect).

## Regressions

Table 3

### Regression Across Nontraditional Student Statuses and Adulthood Marker Measures

Regressions	Nontraditional Student Status					
	Age	Ethnicity	FG	ES	PS	RRS
<b>IDEA Subscales</b>						
Identity Exploration	-.07	.05	.09	-.06	-.001	-.13
Experimentation/Poss.	-.08	-.003	-.19*	-.02	-.06	-.16
Negativity/Instability	-.29*	-.03	.06	-.15	.11	.01
Other-Focused	.18	.06	.03	-.03	.14	.31***
Self-Focused	-.12	.10	-.01	-.04	-.17	.14
Feeling “In-Between”	-.27*	.03	.02	-.15	-.14	-.18*
<b>ADULT Subscales</b>						
Individualism	.18	.08	.03	.02	.13	-.13
Emotional Maturity	.13	.14	-.09	-.05	.06	-.03
Norm-Abiding	.15	.29**	.13	.03	-.12	-.11
Family Capabilities	.04	.21*	.04	.05	.15	.12
Role Transitions	.05	.21*	-.06	.01	-.08	.04
Age Transitions	.19	-.05	-.06	-.04	-.24*	-.20*
Other	.23	.10	-.10	-.03	-.13	-.22*
<b>PA Subscales</b>						
Individualism	.47***	.02	-.06	.24**	-.02	.15*
Emotional Maturity	.04	-.02	-.21*	.10	.21	.01
Norm-Abiding	.30*	.18*	-.003	.01	-.18	-.12
Family Capabilities	.20*	.08	.13*	.42***	.19*	.15*

Note. \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ ; FG = First-Generation, ES = Employment Status, PS = Parental Status, RRS = Romantic Relationship Status, NR = Nontraditional Roles

### Age

For the IDEA subscales, nontraditional age remained significantly associated with lower Negativity/Instability ( $\beta = -.29, p < .05, R^2 = .07$ ) and Feeling “In-Between” ( $\beta = -.27, p < .05, R^2 = .20$ ) when analyzed alongside other nontraditional student status variables. Nontraditional age was no longer significantly associated with the remaining IDEA subscales after controlling for other nontraditional statuses: Identity Exploration ( $\beta$

= -.07,  $p = .57$ ,  $R^2 = .01$ ), Experimentation/Possibilities ( $\beta = -.08$ ,  $p = .51$ ,  $R^2 = .04$ ), Other-Focused ( $\beta = .18$ ,  $p = .11$ ,  $R^2 = .11$ ), and Self-Focused ( $\beta = -.12$ ,  $p = .31$ ,  $R^2 = .05$ ).

None of the ADULT subscales remained significantly associated with age status after controlling for other nontraditional student status variables: Individualism ( $\beta = .18$ ,  $p = .12$ ,  $R^2 = .07$ ) and Family Capabilities ( $\beta = .04$ ,  $p = .76$ ,  $R^2 = .05$ ).

For the PA subscales, nontraditional age remained significantly associated with higher Individualism ( $\beta = .47$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $R^2 = .32$ ) and Family Capabilities ( $\beta = .20$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $R^2 = .32$ ), but the association with Emotional Maturity did not remain significant after controlling for the other nontraditional student status variables ( $\beta = .04$ ,  $p = .72$ ,  $R^2 = .03$ ).

### ***Ethnicity***

Of the significant correlations for the ADULT subscales and nontraditional ethnicity status, Norm-Abiding ( $\beta = .29$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $R^2 = .08$ ), Family Capabilities ( $\beta = .21$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $R^2 = .05$ ), and Role Transitions ( $\beta = .21$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $R^2 = .04$ ) retained significance when analyzed alongside other nontraditional statuses. Individualism ( $\beta = .18$ ,  $p = .13$ ,  $R^2 = .01$ ) and Emotional Maturity ( $\beta = .16$ ,  $p = .06$ ,  $R^2 = .03$ ) did not remain significantly associated with ethnicity status after controlling for other nontraditional student statuses.

### ***First-Generation***

First-generation status remained significantly associated with lower levels of the IDEA subscale Experimentation/Possibilities ( $\beta = -.19$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $R^2 = .03$ ) after controlling for other nontraditional statuses.

For the PA subscales, first-generation status remained significantly associated with lower Emotional Maturity ( $\beta = -.21$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $R^2 = .04$ ) and higher Family Capabilities ( $\beta = .13$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $R^2 = .02$ ) after controlling for other nontraditional student statuses.

### ***Employment Status***

Nontraditional employment status did not remain significantly associated with the IDEA subscales Negativity/Possibilities ( $\beta = -.15, p = .11, R^2 = .02$ ) and Feeling “In-Between” ( $\beta = -.15, p = .07, R^2 = .01$ ) when analyzed alongside additional nontraditional student statuses.

Both the PA subscales Individualism ( $\beta = .24, p < .01, R^2 = .04$ ) and Family Capabilities ( $\beta = .42, p < .001, R^2 = .14$ ) remained significantly associated with employment status after controlling for other nontraditional student statuses, such that nontraditional employment status was associated with higher levels of both subscales.

### ***Parental Status***

Nontraditional parental status was no longer associated with IDEA subscales Experimentation/Possibilities ( $\beta = -.06, p = .62, R^2 = .002$ ), Other-Focused ( $\beta = .14, p = .21, R^2 = .01$ ), Self-Focused ( $\beta = -.17, p = .14, R^2 = .02$ ) and Feeling “In-Between” ( $\beta = -.14, p = .18, R^2 = .01$ ) after controlling for other nontraditional student statuses.

The ADULT subscale Age Transitions ( $\beta = -.24, p < .05, R^2 = .03$ ) remained significantly associated with parental status after controlling for other nontraditional student statuses, such that nontraditional parental status was associated with lower Age Transitions. ADULT subscales Individualism ( $\beta = .13, p = .28, R^2 = .01$ ) and Family Capabilities ( $\beta = .15, p = .19, R^2 = .01$ ) did not remain significantly associated with parental status after controlling for other nontraditional student statuses.

Only the PA subscale Family Capabilities ( $\beta = .19, p < .05, R^2 = .02$ ) remained significantly associated with parental status after controlling for other nontraditional student statuses, such that nontraditional parental status was associated with higher Family Capabilities. Individualism ( $\beta = -.02, p = .87, R^2 = .00$ ) and Emotional Maturity ( $\beta = .21, p = .08, R^2 = .02$ ) did not remain significantly associated with parental status.

### ***Romantic Relationship Status***

IDEA subscales Other-Focused ( $\beta = .31, p < .001, R^2 = .10$ ) and Feeling “In-Between” ( $\beta = -.18, p < .05, R^2 = .04$ ) remained significantly associated with romantic relationship status after controlling for other nontraditional student statuses, such that nontraditional romantic relationship status was associated with higher Other-Focused and lower Feeling “In-Between.” Identity Exploration ( $\beta = -.13, p = .16, R^2 = .02$ ) and Experimentation/Possibilities ( $\beta = -.16, p = .08, R^2 = .03$ ) did not remain significantly associated with romantic relationship status.

ADULT subscales Age Transitions ( $\beta = -.20, p < .05, R^2 = .06$ ) and Other ( $\beta = -.22, p < .05, R^2 = .06$ ) also remained significantly associated with romantic relationship status after controlling for other nontraditional statuses, with nontraditional romantic relationship status associated with lower Age Transitions and Other. Norm-Abiding ( $\beta = -.11, p = .21, R^2 = .02$ ) did not remain significantly associated with romantic relationship status.

PA subscales Individualism ( $\beta = .15, p < .05, R^2 = .02$ ) and Family Capabilities ( $\beta = .15, p < .05, R^2 = .03$ ) remained significantly associated with romantic relationship status after controlling for other nontraditional statuses, such that nontraditional romantic relationship status was associated with more Individualism and Family Capabilities. Norm-Abiding did not remain significantly associated with romantic relationship status ( $\beta = -.12, p = .18, R^2 = .02$ ).

## CHAPTER IV: DISCUSSION

The current study examined beliefs about adulthood and perceptions of different markers of adulthood among nontraditional college students. The study also assessed how meeting multiple nontraditional student status criteria is associated with attitudes about adulthood. Overall, nontraditional statuses, including having multiple nontraditional statuses, were associated with lower levels of characteristics of emerging adults and higher levels of aspects of established adulthood regardless of whether students felt that they were adultlike, and many of these associations remained significant after controlling for other nontraditional statuses. The hypothesis that nontraditional parental and romantic relationship status would be associated with feeling more adultlike than other nontraditional student statuses was partially supported. The results suggest that multiple characteristics should be included when defining nontraditional college students, and nontraditional college students who meet multiple criteria for nontraditional statuses may face unique challenges in higher education.

### **Age**

In addition to high levels of beliefs about independence and self-sufficiency, nontraditionally-aged students reported greater focus on others, including family capabilities, and less focus on themselves compared to traditionally-aged college students. This focus on others may be related to caring for dependents, such as children and/or elderly relatives, as well as supporting coworkers or romantic partners (Horn & Carroll, 1996). Older students are more likely to have dependents to care for and additional responsibilities compared to traditionally-aged college students (Bozick, 2007; Wood, 2013), and, as a result, nontraditionally-aged college students may not be able to focus on themselves due to their additional responsibilities. In addition, nontraditionally-

aged college students reported more emotional maturity than traditionally-aged college students, though nontraditionally-aged college students reported similar beliefs about the importance of emotional maturity in defining adulthood compared to traditionally-aged college students. This difference may reflect greater life experience among older college students compared to traditionally-aged students, which may help these students to manage additional strains that occur when academics are added to other adult roles (Arnett, 2012; MacDonald, 2018; Mehta et al., 2020).

Many associations among age and beliefs about adulthood were no longer significant after additional indicators of nontraditional student status were included in the analyses. Despite its consistent inclusion in the literature, age may be a less relevant marker of nontraditional college student status than other criteria. While age may have been an important determinant of underrepresentation in higher education in the past (Arnett, 2000; Chung et al., 2014; Tilley, 2014), other indicators of nontraditional college student status, such as those within the present study, may represent the challenges of adult roles and responsibilities to a greater degree than age alone (Ross-Gordon, 2011).

### **Ethnicity**

Students whose ethnic group is traditionally underrepresented in higher education had few differences in beliefs about adulthood compared to students whose ethnic group is traditionally represented in higher education, and the differences that were present were related to holding multiple roles (i.e., family capabilities, transitions, and being self-sufficient). One plausible reason for this outcome may be the cultural demographics of the sample, which was recruited from a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI). The majority of participants in the current study reported identifying as Hispanic/Latinx/Spanish, and Latinx groups often share collectivistic family and cultural values, which contrast with the individualistic values common within the United States (Arnett, 2009, 2011; Gouveia

et al., 2003; Shkodriani & Gibbons, 1995). Some students in the current sample may use individualistic markers to define adulthood but remain within primarily collectivistic households, which could result in conflicting beliefs and perceptions about adulthood.

Students from ethnic groups that are traditionally underrepresented in higher education also reported greater beliefs about emotional maturity being an important indicator for reaching adulthood compared to students from ethnic groups that are traditionally represented in higher education, though this association did not retain significance after other nontraditional statuses were included in the analyses. Since racial and ethnic minority students often feel greater stress about obtaining a college degree than ethnic majority students, ethnic minority students may adopt adultlike attitudes to cope with their stress (Arnett & Schwab, 2012). Emotional maturity may also be valued more among racial and ethnic minority students, particularly those from collectivistic environments (Arnett, 2009, 2011; Gouveia et al., 2003; Shkodriani & Gibbons, 1995).

In addition to multiple roles and emotional maturity, students from ethnic groups traditionally underrepresented in higher education reported higher beliefs about norm-abiding behaviors as markers of adulthood compared to students from ethnic groups traditionally represented in higher education. Ethnic minority students may prioritize fitting in with socially and legally acceptable behaviors. Similar to other results, this difference may be related to collectivistic cultural values, but it is also possible that ethnic minority students are more concerned about the consequences of violating norms compared to ethnic majority peers (Schreier et al., 2010; Yaakobi & Williams, 2016). Thus, ethnic minority students may place greater emphasis on norm-abiding both because of collectivist values and as a means to increase the likelihood of success during the transition to adulthood (Gouveia et al., 2003; Shkodriani & Gibbons, 1995).

## **First-Generation**

First-generation students reported lower beliefs about emerging adulthood being a time of experimentation and/or possibilities than continuous-generation students. First-generation students often feel they have limited opportunities while in college due to having stressors continuous-generation students do not, such as feeling less prepared for college, needing additional assistance and guidance for academics and enrollment, and less room to explore academic options, on top of first-generation students being at greater risk of dropping out compared to continuing-generation students because of these additional stresses (Garriott et al., 2015; Gibbons & Woodside, 2014). In addition to these obstacles, first-generations students are more likely to be from low SES backgrounds than continuing-generation students, and students from low SES backgrounds can feel pressure to limit changes in degree plans and course attempts that is not experienced by students from higher SES backgrounds (Garriott et al., 2015).

First-generation students also reported being more capable of supporting a family compared to continuous-generation students, and this association remained significant after controlling for other nontraditional statuses. This may be due to the additional roles many first-generation students adopt, such as limiting finances, time, and opportunities in other areas of their life to support a family (Stieha, 2010). The additional roles faced by first-generation students compared to continuous-generation students may also at least partially explain the lower level of emotional maturity reported by first-generation students, as these additional roles are likely related to increased stress among these students (Garriott et al., 2015; Garriott & Nisole, 2018; Gibbons & Woodside, 2014; MacDonald, 2018; Stieha, 2010).

## **Employment Status**

Students who reported working full-time reported lower beliefs about emerging adulthood as a time of instability or feeling between developmental periods compared to students who reported more traditional employment. Unlike traditional college student peers, full-time working students may feel that they have limited opportunities to change their current occupation (Garriott & Nisole, 2018; MacDonald, 2018). Full-time working students may also experience greater stability in employment, which may influence beliefs about the transitional nature of emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2012; Mehta et al., 2020).

Students who were employed full-time reported being more capable of supporting a family and individualism compared to students reporting more traditional employment. These associations are likely due to the financial independence provided by full-time employment, as several of the items for these measures included financial considerations (Garriott & Nisole, 2018). While students who are employed part-time would also potentially have some level of financial independence, it is unlikely that the income earned by these students would be similar to that of a student working full-time, and it is likely that these salary differences would impact beliefs about the ability to be independent and responsible for the care of others.

## **Parental Status**

Students who met the criteria for nontraditional parental status reported higher beliefs about focusing on others and lower beliefs about experimentation, focusing on the self, and feeling between developmental periods during emerging adulthood compared to students who met the criteria for traditional parental status. Since students caring for dependents must focus on the needs of their family while completing their education, this likely impacts the opportunities these students are presented with, such as experimenting

with different identities and being able to focus on their own interests (Cruse et al., 2019; Horn & Carroll, 1996). The differences in beliefs about emerging adulthood were no longer significant after including other nontraditional college student statuses in the analyses, and this is surprising given the emphasis on parenthood as a marker of adulthood (Arnett, 2000; 2001; Nelson et al., 2007). These results could reflect the greater proportion of students who met the criteria for nontraditional parental status in the current sample compared to previous samples, and future work with additional samples of nontraditional college students could clarify the findings from the current study.

Students who met the criteria for nontraditional parental status also reported lower beliefs about the role of age transitions as markers of adulthood compared to students who met the criteria for traditional parental status, and this difference may be related to the biological nature of the measure (Arnett, 1994). While age is a common determinant of adult roles and responsibilities (Arnett, 2000; 2001; Nelson et al., 2007), students who are parents may recognize that indicators of adult status other than age are more meaningful. The responsibilities that come with caring for dependents are not only a clearer indication of the adoption of adult responsibilities but would also influence the beliefs a student has about markers of adulthood (Cruse et al., 2019; Horn & Carroll, 1996).

Students who met the criteria for nontraditional parental status reported greater individualism, emotional maturity, and family capabilities than students who met the criteria for traditional parental status, and differences in family capabilities remained significant after including other nontraditional college student statuses in the analyses. These differences likely reflect the responsibilities that parents have, such as needing to provide for dependents, as well as the characteristics needed for both effective parenting and academic success, including appropriate emotion regulation (Arnett, 2012;

MacDonald, 2018; Mehta et al., 2020). These findings also indicate that students who are parents are more likely to see themselves as adults, which likely influences their beliefs about both emerging adulthood and established adulthood. These results are not entirely surprising, as parenthood has long been considered a marker of adult status and was anticipated among students who fall under nontraditional parental status (Arnett, 2000; 2001).

### **Romantic Relationship Status**

Students who met the criteria for nontraditional romantic relationship status reported lower beliefs about identity exploration, experimentation, and feeling between developmental periods, as well as higher beliefs about being focused on others, during emerging adulthood compared to students who met the criteria for traditional romantic relationships, and differences in feeling between developmental periods and focusing on others remained significant after including other nontraditional statuses in the model. Similar to students who are parents, students in committed romantic relationships likely feel greater responsibility for meeting the needs of another, specifically their romantic partner, rather than prioritizing their own interests (Arnett 2000, 2001; Cruse et al., 2019; Nelson et al., 2007; Shulman & Connolly, 2013). In addition, the findings may indicate that the experimentation and exploration that are often possible during emerging adulthood are less important to students in committed romantic relationships and may influence other beliefs about emerging adulthood and established adulthood.

Students in committed romantic relationships reported lower beliefs about norm-abiding behaviors and the items in the “other” measure as markers of adulthood compared to students who were not in committed relationships, and only differences in the “other” items remained significant after including additional nontraditional college student statuses. Students in committed romantic relationships likely selected partners

similar to themselves, and similarity in romantic partner characteristics is a known influence on participation in behaviors such as substance use and other risk taking (Beisswanger et al., 2003; Fischer & Wiersma, 2012; Shulman & Connolly, 2013). Continued participation in risky behaviors while feeling more adultlike due to being in a committed romantic relationship could lead students in committed romantic relationships to view the social norms included in the study as less important for defining adulthood. Similarly, students in committed romantic relationships may be more likely to recognize that adulthood can be defined in different ways due to their own experiences, which would explain less agreement with the items included for the “other” measure.

Students in committed romantic relationships reported less norm-abiding and more individualism and family capabilities than students who were not in committed romantic relationships, and only the difference in family capabilities remained significant after including additional nontraditional college student statuses in the analyses. The difference in norm-abiding provides additional support for the role of romantic partner characteristics in both behaviors and beliefs about adulthood (Arnett, 2000; 2014; Beisswanger et al., 2003; Shulman & Connolly, 2013). Further research examining committed romantic relationships in emerging adulthood would clarify these associations. Feelings about individualism and family capabilities may indicate that students in committed romantic relationships, much like students who are parents, feel more prepared for these aspects of adulthood and, as such, are more adultlike (Arnett 2000, 2001; Bozick, 2007; Shulman & Connolly, 2013; Wood, 2013). However, unlike students who are parents, students in committed romantic relationships who have not become parents may not feel that they need to meet social norms related to adulthood to be established adults.

## **Nontraditional Roles**

As the number of nontraditional statuses a student reported increased, almost all beliefs about emerging adulthood decreased, with the exception of being focused on others during emerging adulthood, which increased as the number of nontraditional statuses increased. These findings are consistent with the differences identified between students who did and did not report meeting criteria for specific nontraditional student statuses. Many of the nontraditional statuses included aspects of caring for others, which would impact both how students viewed caring for others and opportunities for exploration and experimentation during emerging adulthood (Arnett 2000; 2001; Bozick, 2007; Horn & Carroll, 1996; Nelson et al., 2007; Shulman & Connolly, 2013; Wood, 2013). These findings are also consistent with results indicating that students who meet the criteria for some nontraditional student statuses have limited opportunities to participate in exploration and experimentation (Garriott et al., 2015; Garriott & Nisole, 2018; Gibbons & Woodside, 2014; MacDonald, 2018). Given these findings, universities may need to adapt programming to support nontraditional students, particularly students who meet the criteria for multiple nontraditional student statuses, so that nontraditional students can participate in academic or professional opportunities while remaining focused on the needs of others in their lives.

For beliefs about adulthood, beliefs about individualism and family capabilities increased as the number of nontraditional student statuses increased, and beliefs about age transitions decreased as the number of nontraditional student statuses increased. These results are also consistent with differences identified for many of the specific nontraditional college student statuses, which further indicates that nontraditional college students believe independence and supporting a family are more meaningful indicators of adulthood than societal definitions (Arnett, 1994; 2000; 2001; Bozick, 2007; Nelson et

al., 2007; Wood, 2013). It is, therefore, not surprising that the individualism and family capabilities reported by participants increased as the number of nontraditional college student statuses increased. As students meet more criteria for nontraditional college student statuses, they may be more likely to feel that they have attained established adulthood (MacDonald, 2018), and universities need to determine how to best support the unique needs of students whose beliefs about adulthood and status as adults differs from that of the population they are most prepared to serve.

### **Limitations, and Future Directions**

There are considerable limitations in the current study. First, while the majority of the subscales used had good or acceptable reliability, a few of the subscales had poor reliability. Additional research is needed to determine why the reliability for these subscales was lower than those of the other subscales. In addition, the measures used in the study may have been more applicable for use with traditional college students. The measures used within the present study were modified for use with nontraditional college students, but future studies may benefit from further refinement of subscale items or incorporating additional subscales that better represent nontraditional college students' beliefs about adulthood. Future research should also attempt to have greater representation of some nontraditional statuses than the current study. The current study also could not examine more complex associations among the nontraditional college student statuses, such as moderation, and future research should attempt to test these types of associations. Finally, researchers should consider the role of culture in beliefs about adulthood and use of qualitative approaches may help to identify cultural considerations.

The aim of the current study was to examine nontraditional student statuses that have not been considered frequently in previous literature. Students who met the criterion

for a specific nontraditional status, as well as those who met criteria for multiple nontraditional statuses, reported lower characteristics of emerging adulthood and higher beliefs consistent with established adulthood. These findings demonstrate that nontraditional college students may feel more like established adults compared to traditional college students, particularly when they meet the criteria for multiple nontraditional statuses. Theories about emerging adulthood may need to be adapted to better describe the characteristics, beliefs, and challenges faced by nontraditional college students.

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